

Enhancing the Language and Business Culture Awareness of Study Abroad Students

By Antoinette Tessmer and Sandhya Shanker

Executive Briefing: Intercultural awareness constitutes an integral element in pre-departure orientations in a study abroad program. This article presents the design and administration of a business culture survey to participants in the Global Finance Studies program at Michigan State University. The results support the need to broaden business culture awareness among participants.



The Broad College of Business at Michigan State University offers a summer study abroad program (Global Finance Studies-GFS) for junior and senior students in Finance. Students spend four weeks in Namur, Belgium where they take Global Finance courses. Students are also provided opportunities to meet with local business and political leaders and experience the Belgian corporate culture. During their stay in Namur, students are integrated as members of the local community and are expected to demonstrate good communication skills as well as good citizenship.

Intercultural awareness has become the *de facto* requirement for any individual engaged in international business. Companies are increasingly training their executives and managers to understand a country's business culture when interacting with their foreign counterparts. A survey conducted in 2011 by Forbes Insights Newsletter and Rosetta Stone showed that 68% of the managers surveyed expressed the need for cultural awareness training before taking up foreign assignments (Forbes Insights & Rosetta Stone, 2011). Addressing a similar need for business students committed to studying abroad, a required pre-departure training is offered in the form of a 10-hour French for Business Workshop, over a period of five weeks, with a focus on French survival skills and French business culture. Each two-hour session starts with a one-hour focus on French business culture (in English) followed by one hour of French language practice. A business culture survey focusing on Belgium is administered at the beginning of the workshop and after the study abroad program. The questions are based on both national as well as organizational culture in Belgium, as addressed by five dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010):

- 1) Power Distance: degree to which an employee will accept that a superior has more power than he/she has;
- 2) Uncertainty Avoidance: ability of an individual to live without formal rules, and thus with ambiguity;

3) Individualism-Collectivism: degree of concern that an individual is likely to have of him/herself and of the group as a whole; measure of how group-oriented an individual is;

4) Masculinity-Femininity: measure of whether a culture tends towards a male culture (work goals, assertiveness) or female culture (personal goals, nurturing): measure of male and female roles in society;

5) Long-Term Orientation: extent to which a society shows a pragmatic future-oriented perspective rather than a conventional historical or short-term point of view.

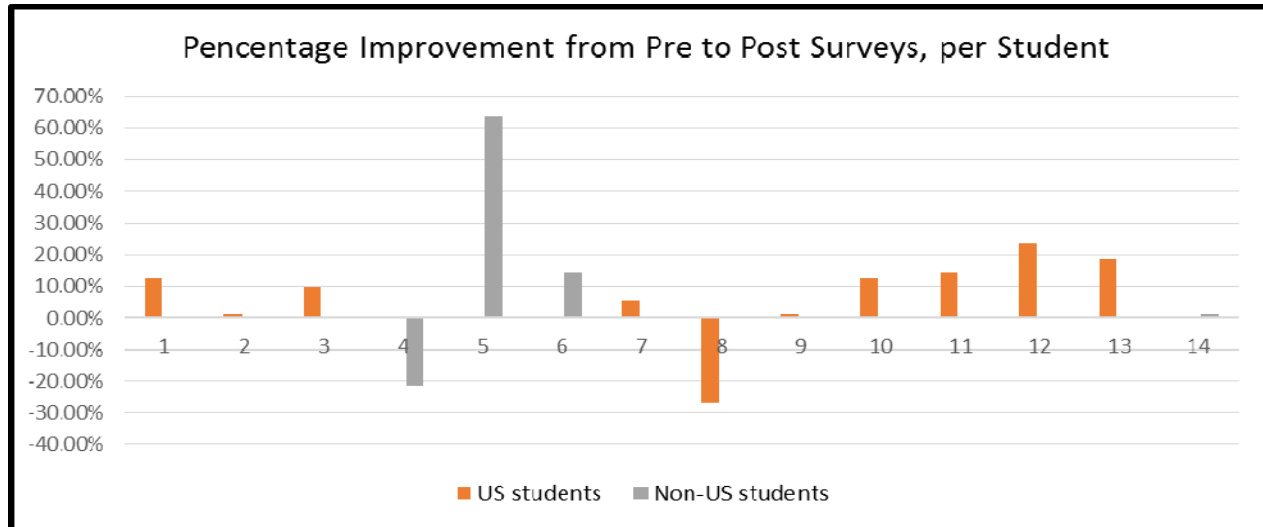
The authors created a set of 29 multiple-choice questions that addressed important cultural issues (both business and social) related to Belgium and that have an important bearing on business students in general. These questions were sent to Belgian business representatives who were asked to provide culturally appropriate responses. The responses were collected and served as answer keys. A final list of questions was categorized under each of Hofstede's five dimensions: Power Distance (8 questions); Uncertainty Avoidance (10); Long-Term orientation (4); Masculinity-Femininity (3); Individualism-Collectivism (4).

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 shows the percentage improvement from pre to post surveys, per student. The horizontal axis identifies the students. The vertical axis shows the percentage of improvement.

The scores of nine out of fourteen students improved after the study abroad program. The authors believe that such improvement can potentially be attributed to the pre-departure training, a four week experience in French speaking Belgium, and two required on-site cultural assignments:

Fig. 1: Percentage of Improvement from Pre to Post Surveys, per Student



- My Hour Alone: students are asked to step outside of their cultural comfort zone for one hour, on their own and report on what new experiences they had and new knowledge they gained.

- Field trip Reflection Papers: students reflect on their cultural learning after three field trips and make connections with business culture.

The authors conclude that pre-departure training enhanced by face-to-face interactions with native speakers, together with opportunities to reflect on cultural issues contributed to the students' improved performance.

Among others, Fig. 2 illustrates an obvious improvement on two dimensions by the non-US (Chinese) participants: Individualism/Collectivism and Masculinity/Femininity. According to Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov (2010), Chinese are highly Collectivists with a low Individualism score of 20 on the Hofstede's national scale relative to a score of 91 for the US and 75 for Belgium. Future studies should be conducted to justify such a significant change in cultural awareness for this particular dimension. Could the study abroad experience have contributed to this change in cultural perception? With regard to the Masculinity/Femininity dimension, the Chinese students improved significantly more than their US counterparts. China's score on this dimension is 66 while Belgium is 54 and the US is 62 (Hofstede, G.).

While both China and the US lean toward a masculine society characterized by people who are success oriented, it still remains to be examined as to why the

Chinese students succeeded at better understanding this dimension in the Belgian contest. Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov (2010) state that this dimension has been the most controversial in his paradigm simply because of its multiple interpretations. We started with the assumption that national cultures penetrate organizational cultures, but a review of studies shows that when operationalized in business, this dimension becomes a matter of personal belief (Soares et al, 2007). The authors conclude that personal beliefs (rather than national culture) could have influenced differently Chinese as opposed to US students.

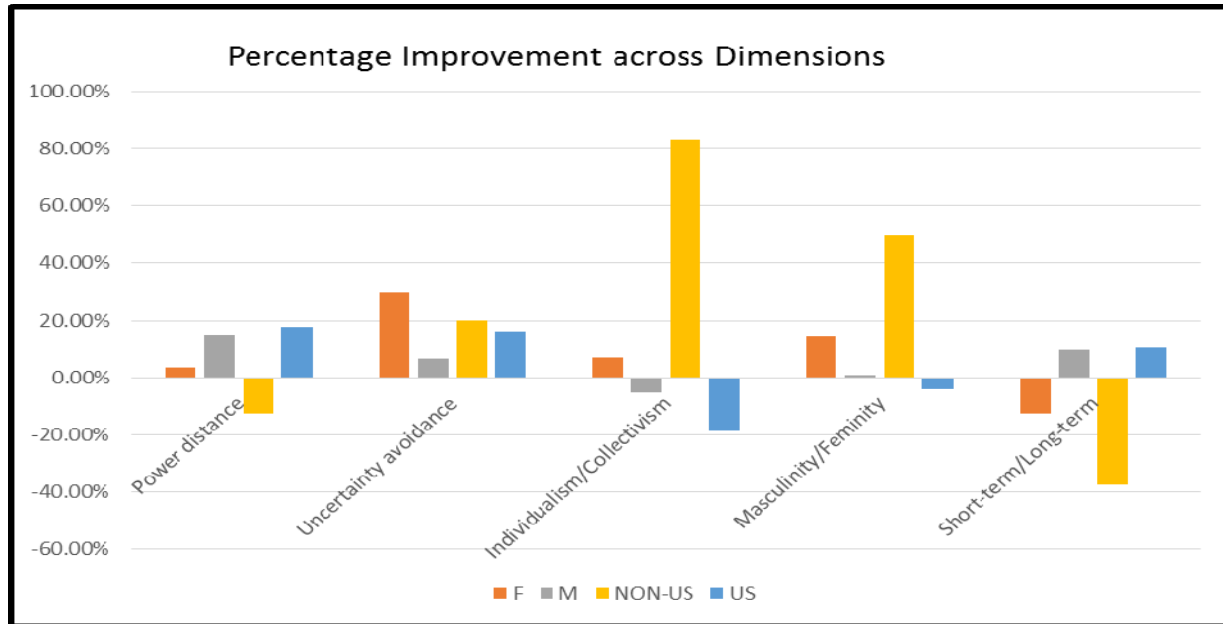
Conclusion

In the results reported, it was observed that, in general, student scores on the post-study abroad survey improved. We also observed a significant difference between US and Chinese students in their understanding of a different culture. However, as studies dealing with cultural dimensions indicate, operationalizing culture is a complex process. We wish to pursue this research with future Study Abroad groups not only to observe how students in study abroad programs perceive a target culture but also to develop a more effective pre-departure training across dimensions.

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Fig. 2: Percentage Improvement across Dimensions



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