Exploring the Benefits Short-Term Graduate Study Abroad Programs Provide to Professional Graduate Business Students and Business Employers

Evguenia Layton
Clemson University, stevejanelayton@hotmail.com

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EXPLORING THE BENEFITS SHORT-TERM GRADUATE STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS PROVIDE TO PROFESSIONAL GRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS AND BUSINESS EMPLOYERS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership

by
Evguenia Passiouk Layton
December 2019

Accepted by:
Dr. Pamela A. Havice, Committee Chair
Dr. Michelle L. Boettcher
Dr. Tony Cawthon
Dr. Paul Paparella
Dr. Helen Diamond Steele
ABSTRACT

The continuous growth in demand for professional graduate programs and employers’ desires to seek talent with international experience has influenced a growth in graduate students engaging in short-term, faculty-led graduate study abroad programs (Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018; Ramakrishna, Sarkar, & Vijayaraman, 2016). A number of research studies have been done on undergraduate study abroad experiences; however, not much focus has been given to the benefits of graduate study abroad programs for professional graduate business students (Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Kamdar & Lewis, 2015; Petzold & Moog, 2018; Womble, L. et al., 2014). The purpose of this study was to identify experiences of professional graduate business students in short-term graduate study abroad programs that are beneficial to both students and employers. The intent of the study was to help provide valuable information that would guide the development of future short-term graduate study abroad programs within the business field.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my children, my husband Steve, and my parents: my mom, Evguenia, and my dad, Guennadi. The ongoing support, encouragement, belief in me, and unconditional love has given me strength and clarity throughout this process. To my children, Viktoria and Vladimir—nothing is impossible. Always believe in your strength and perseverance.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Chapter I provides the significance, purpose and background of the study that shaped the research questions. This chapter also introduces the conceptual framework and methodology that informed the design of this study, and a description of the research site. To maintain trustworthiness of the study, my positionality, and assumptions and limitations of the study are covered.

Significance of Study

The history of recognizing the importance of study abroad experience for United States (U.S.) undergraduate students dates to the early 1920s, when professor Kirkbride launched the Delaware Foreign Study Plan at the University of Delaware (Walton, 2015). In addition to enriching student experience through cultural awareness and sensitivity, early study abroad programs also gave students the opportunity to attain practical and academic knowledge that was not available domestically (Walton, 2015). As economic borders expanded over the last century, so did the need for global minded citizens (Sakamoto & Chapman, 2012; Wang, et al., 2014). Today, over two-thirds of academic institutions in the U.S. offered some level of study abroad programs and over 300,000 students participate in such programs (Niehaus & Wegener, 2018; Walters et al., 2017).

Globalization is impacting a range of professions: business staff and senior leadership (Loh et al., 2011; Ramakrishna et al., 2016), nursing (Ruddock & Turner, 2007), as well as student affairs (Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018; Slantcheva-Durst &
Study abroad experiences have shown to benefit students across disciplines through the development of global awareness, cultural sensitivity, social aptitude, as well as personal and professional growth (Wang et al., 2014; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018; Geyer et al., 2017). However, the rising cost of tuition, as well as time limitations of students with full time jobs and families, has changed the way study abroad programs are delivered (Loh et al., 2011; Niehaus & Wegener, 2018; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018; Ramakrishna et al., 2016). My study focused on short-term graduate business study abroad programs and the benefits they provide to part-time graduate business students and business employers.

A number of studies have been done on undergraduate study abroad experiences (Kamdar & Lewis, 2015; Petzold & Moog, 2018; Womble, L. et al., 2014). These studies have focused both on students and program design (Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Perry, Stoner & Tarrant, 2012), but little focus has been on the benefits of graduate study abroad programs for professional graduate business students (Lightfoot & Lee, 2015; Ly, Vickers, & Fernandez, 2015).

The demand for professional graduate programs continues to grow. In a recent Association Collegiate School of Business International (AACSB) questionnaire, 82% of AACSB accredited business schools indicated they offered at least one MBA program (Romano, 2018). Working professional students represented almost twice the number of full-time students who completed the survey (Romano, 2018). Furthermore, in a continuously expanding global market, more employers looked for international
experience along with relevant professional experience when recruiting graduates (McMurray et al., 2016).

The above trends reflected a growth in graduate students engaging in short term, faculty-led, study abroad programs as part of their graduate studies (Dirkx et al., 2014). Thus, there are more faculty developing and leading professional graduate study abroad programs without much literature to inform them on the type of experience that would provide the most benefit to professional graduate business students, and ultimately their business employers.

**Purpose Statement**

Previous research studies focused on the importance of cultural experience and international exposure during undergraduate studies (Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Wang, et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2009; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). More recently, qualitative research studies have emerged around the effects of short-term study abroad programs for graduate students within Higher Education programs (Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; DuVivier, 2017). These studies have focused on the importance of better understanding and how to support the growing population of international students in higher education.

In a conference paper, Daniel, Xie, and Kedia (2014) presented that U.S. executives believe they need more employees with international experience to grow their business and that business schools are not emphasizing international business enough in the curricula. A 2013 Workplace Forecast survey, conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), found that U.S. Human Resource (HR) professionals
need cross-cultural knowledge even if they do not work for an international organization. SHRM concluded that managers with international experience will have advantage in the growing global market. Daniel et al. (2014) stated “universities need more information to have a better grasp of what knowledge and skills corporations, industries, and governments need from their workforce in order to synchronize the needs with their educational product/service” (p. 2).

The study focused on understanding the experiences professional graduate business students expect to have during their short-term study abroad programs and whether these experiences impacted their professional and personal growth. In addition, this study explored the benefit that short-term graduate study abroad programs have on business employers of participating professional graduate business students. The purpose of this study was to identify specific experiences of professional graduate business students in short-term, graduate, study abroad programs that are beneficial to both students and business employers. The intent of the study was to provide information to guide the development of future short-term, graduate, study abroad programs within the business field.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

- What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth?
• What do business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experience?

Conceptual Framework

Three theoretical frameworks informed this study, experiential learning (Dewey, 1938), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962; Creswell, 2007; Powell & Kalina, 2009). Dewey’s (1938) theory discussed how one’s past, current, and future experiences contribute to their learning. Thus, all experiences impact an individual’s ongoing decision-making and informs the idea that experiences of study abroad programs contribute to a student’s lifelong learning (Perry et al., 2012).

The process of asking a graduate student to critically reflect on their short-term study abroad experience and to analyze what they learned in this experience directly relates to Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning theory. Lev Vygotsky developed the theory of social constructivism (Powell & Kalina, 2009). The main construct of this theory is that the essential part of an individual’s learning occurs through social interactions. The theoretical frame of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962; Creswell, 2007; Powell & Kalina, 2009) supported the design of this study by collecting students’ perception of their entire study abroad experience, without limiting the participant to reflect on any one specific situation. Social constructivism theory states individuals give meaning to everything (subjects or things) they encounter in order to understand the world that they live in (Creswell, 2007; Powell & Kalina, 2009). Through social constructivism, the meanings continue to evolve through continuous interaction with
other individuals and guided by “cultural norms that operate in individual’s lives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Using these three theoretical frameworks allowed for a deeper, more holistic understanding of the research questions. The conceptual frameworks for this study are discussed in more depth in Chapter II.

**About the Research Site**

The study was conducted at a large, land grant, public, Tier 1 research institution located in the southeastern part of the United States (U.S.). According to the institution’s website, in Fall 2018, student population included approximately 18,000 undergraduate students and 4,500 graduate students, with over 1,200 students (undergraduate and graduate) studying abroad each year (“About Clemson University”, n.d.).

**Methodology**

This study used a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive phenomenological design approach. This approach permitted the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how the phenomenon of short-term study abroad programs benefit professional graduate business students’ personal and professional growth, while also attempting to understand the benefits of these experiences to business employers. A semi-structured interview approach allowed for participants to freely share personal interpretations of their experience without being limited to questions that might have missed a key element. Such an approach allowed for details to be found in “people’s understandings and interactions” (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, p. 14). The methods for this study were guided by a similar study conducted by Ly et al. (2015) that utilized Sekaran and
Bougie’s (2010) exploratory approach to collect information from multiple stakeholders. More information about the methodology used in this study is discussed in Chapter III.

**Positionality Statement**

To maintain the trustworthiness of this study, it is important to share the positionality of the researcher (Guba, 1981). The researcher’s personal and professional ties to living and traveling abroad, along with her academic business background, fueled her interest in conducting this study. The researcher’s current professional role is involved with graduate short-term study abroad programs, which resulted in her desire to better understand the benefits of these programs. A full positionality statement is included in Chapter III.

**Trustworthiness of Study**

To maintain the ethical integrity of this study, trustworthiness was addressed using Guba’s (1981) four criteria—truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Truth value is concerned with ensuring the accuracy of findings (Guba, 1981). To test credibility, member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Guba, 1981) was utilized by sharing the transcript of the interview with each participant to ensure accuracy of the data collected (Krefting, 1991).

Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect individual’s privacy through anonymity and reduce the risk of any emotional harm as a result of distributing the findings of the study (Merriam, 1998; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). A more in-depth description of the trustworthiness of this study occurs in Chapter III.
Definition of Terms

The following are operational definitions of terms used throughout this study:

- **Short-term study abroad program:** For the purpose of this study, a short-term study abroad program was defined as a faculty led academic program lasting 1-3 weeks that is delivered in any country outside of where the academic program originated (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017).

- **Long-term study abroad program:** For the purpose of this study, a long-term study abroad program was defined as faculty led program lasting 4 weeks–1 year that is delivered in a country outside of where the academic program originated (Currie, Matulich, & Gilbert, 2004).

- **Professional graduate business student:** An individual who was enrolled in a graduate business degree program while maintaining a full-time career.

- **Business student:** An individual enrolled at a university’s College of Business, pursuing a business degree program that was designed to prepare its participants for a non-research-oriented career.

- **Business employer:** An organization that employs more than one individual and is developed with the intent to sell goods or services to generate income (U.S. Department of the Treasure, 2019).

- **Exploratory study:** Attempting to better understand individuals’ experiences by conducting open-ended interviews (Neuman, 2014).

- **Global mind-set skills:** Awareness and understanding of multiple cultures, social and business practices, economies, and political nuances (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, & Klute, 2012; Wang et al., 2014; Senyshyn & Smith, 2019).

Conclusion

Chapter I provided an overview of the significance, purpose, and background of the study that shaped the research question. A brief discussion of conceptual framework and methodology, as well as trustworthiness, study limitations, and the researcher’s positionality that informed this study, were introduced in this chapter. A deeper
discussion on all these topics is included in Chapter III. The following chapter provides the literature review that helped identify a gap in the literature this study attempted to fill.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter II discusses the literature review used to inform the significance of this study. This review helped identify a gap in the literature this study fills. This chapter covers background information, study abroad benefits, and employer’s views of study abroad programs. This chapter will also discuss in more depth the conceptual framework for this study.

The purpose of this study was to explore the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs to both professional, graduate, business students and business employers. The literature review focused on topics such as personal and professional benefits of international experience, increased use of short-term study abroad programs in higher education, current and future skills needed for employability, and trends in graduate short-term study abroad programs. Research questions that guided this study included the following:

- What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth?

- What do business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experience?
Background Information

As the current global market continues to expand, employers have increased their demand for employees with global-mindset skills (Ramakrishna et al., 2016; McMurray et al., 2016). Over the past several decades, there has been an opening of national boarders allowing for easier travel and business collaborations between countries (Arthur, 2000, Loh et al., 2011). Companies have had easier access to consumers and a workforce population from multiple countries (Arthur, 2000, Tomcikova, 2016). Arthur (2000) reported “The future world of work requires workers who are globally minded in their approach to career development” (p. 3). Globalization effected all sizes of businesses, including small businesses (Tomcikova, 2016). Even small businesses can recruit talent and conduct business around the world (Tomcikova, 2016). As a result, academic institutions are seeing a growth in professional graduate programs, and in the number of students participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs (Romano, 2018; Dirkx et al., 2014, Loh et al., 2011).

To help facilitate global collaboration and cultural awareness between students, the Institute of International Education (IIE) was founded in 1919 (Institute of International Education, 2019). Over the years, IIE has collected data from U.S. higher education institutions to better understand the trends in study abroad participation; but over the last 100 years, the focus has been on undergraduate education. For the first time in IIE history, the Institute launched a Graduate Learning Overseas (GLO) project in 2017 (Institute of International Education, 2019). The Open-Door survey (Institute of International Education, 2019) conducted by IIE, showed graduate students made up 12%
of the total study abroad student participation in 2017. The GLO project acknowledged the current structure of data collection creates challenges in capturing a true representation of graduate students (Institute of International Education, 2019). GLO acknowledged there exists a gap in understanding the benefit of study abroad experience for graduate students.

Study Abroad Benefits

Broader research studies on the benefits of study abroad programs have found such experiences improve students’ cultural sensitivity, increase adaptability and improve employability (Doyle, 2009; DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Niehaus & Wegener, 2018; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018). The study conducted by Paige et al. (2009) found that participating in a study abroad “is one of the most important experiences students can have during their undergraduate years” (p. 13). Paige’s et al. (2009) findings indicated that study abroad experiences increased students’ global engagement, impacted career path, and influenced their choice in academic degree selection. Geyer’s et al. (2017) study found that participating in a study abroad program can positively affect a student’s ability to take on leadership roles.

Though most literature has been primarily focused on undergraduate studies, the growing number of graduate students studying abroad has influenced the emergence of recent studies that look at the benefits of graduate study abroad programs (Walters et al., 2017, Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2003). In a survey of 15 graduate students, DuVivier and Patitu (2017) found graduate students attributed their growth in personal and professional development to their study abroad experience. Personal and professional growth
included gaining adaptability skills, confidence in presenting to a foreign audience, and “expanded higher education world-view…and requirements of their future work” (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017, p. 8). Similarly, Slantcheva-Durst and Danowski (2018) found graduate students attributed their study abroad experience to personal growth through self-reflection and building professional relationships with their peers. Graduate students utilized their study abroad trip to better understand the intricacies of their industry in another country and reflected on how this could inform their profession back home (Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018).

Current literature on graduate study abroad focuses primarily on student affairs programs with little focus on business studies (DuVivier and Patitu, 2017; Slantcheva-Durst and Danowski, 2018; Witkowsky and Mendez, 2018). Though limited, studies that reflected on graduate business study abroad experience implied that business students valued experiential learning through company visits and business-related projects (Ramakrishna et al., 2016; Reilly, et al., 2016). In a study of 1,365 business students, Ramakrishna et al. (2016) found that one of the most important aspects of a study abroad program to business students was visiting foreign businesses. The same study found graduate students valued experiential learning more than lectures as part of their study abroad experience. Students wanted to visit locations that are rich in local culture (Ramakrishna et al., 2016). In addition to company visits, another study found that Master of Business Administration (MBA) students used their experiences to address sustainability issues in the visiting location with innovative ideas (Reilly et al., 2016). To boost critical thinking, Reilly et al. (2016) suggested students visit a variety of
businesses, such as multinational organizations, entrepreneurial companies, and craft markets. In a study of 22 Executive MBA (EMBA) students, Paul and Mukhopadhyay (2003) found that participants gained better understanding of international business issues as a result of their study abroad experience. In analyzing the benefits of study abroad experiences for graduate students, Randolph (2011) suggested that visiting another country, even for a short period, is the most optimal way to gain global experience and skills.

Potential Drawback of Study Abroad

One of the challenges for study abroad educators is to not fall into the trap of developing abroad experiences that feed into colonial behaviors (Ogden, 2008), where U.S. students do not want to explore the local culture. Ogden (2008) suggested conducting on-location orientation with local students, not scheduling study abroad programs when local campuses are on a break, and naturally nudging U.S. students toward local student study halls by not providing in-dorm internet. Ogden (2008) concluded that “As international educators, we should not be satisfied with simply exposing students to different experiences, but we should be satisfied only when our students are engaged and motivated to pursue experiences that lead to transformative personal growth” (pg. 50).

Short-Term Study Abroad Programs

Among study abroad options in colleges, short-term study abroad programs have become increasingly more popular (Perry et al., 2012, Loh et al., 2011). Short-term study
abroad programs allow students to participate while maintaining full-time jobs and family obligations (Perry et al., 2012; Geyer et al., 2017; Walters et al., 2017; Ramakrishna et al., 2016). Though some prior literature suggested that traditional semester, or year-long, study abroad programs were more effective than short-term (Kehl, & Morris, 2008; Dwyer, 2004), others argued that short-term study abroad can be just as effective if the learning experience is experiential and transformative in nature (Perry et al., 2012; Ramakrishna et al., 2016, Walters et al., 2017).

Geyer et al.’s (2017) research study found short-term study abroad programs can be as effective, and in some cases more effective, in impacting students’ career aspirations and leadership skills than long-term study abroad programs. On career aspirations, Geyer et al. (2017) found short-term (1-6 weeks) study abroad experiences had a statistically significant impact on leadership development, but long-term experiences did not have a significant impact. A possible explanation of the findings was that students enrolled in short-term study abroad programs are already in leadership roles and are restricted by time to participate in long-term study abroad programs (Geyer et al., 2017). The most recent study conducted by Slantcheva-Durst and Danowski (2018) found even short-term experience abroad had direct impact on “honoring students’ skills to navigate life, travel, and professional conduct” (p. 221).

Employer’s View of Study Abroad

According to “Forbes 2018 Global List” (Forbes, 2018), 60 countries were home to 1,866 publicly traded companies, with the U.S. taking the lead in housing 30% of these companies (Touryalai et al., 2018). U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projected over 2.5
million job openings in the business field by 2024 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) reported business majors continue to dominate as the most in-demand majors by employers (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). In a global market, employers have access to business graduates beyond the United States. With a growing demand for employees to have international exposure, more institutions are recognizing the importance of providing cross-cultural skills as part of the academic experience (Orahood et al., 2008).

There is limited, and conflicting, literature on assessing the specific value employers place on an employee’s student study abroad experience for employability compared to other student achievements (Trooboff et al., 2008; Harder et al., 2015; Bird & Mendenhall, 2016; Mol, 2016). Several sources found in the literature limited the discussion to employer’s preferences when hiring for entry level positions (Trooboff et al., 2008; Harder et al., 2015). The results of these sources suggested the employers’ main preference is the degree earned, followed by foreign language knowledge and then study abroad experience (Trooboff et al., 2008; Harder et al., 2015).

With a continuously growing global labor market, companies have access to qualified talented employees beyond their country’s border (Khilji, Tarique, & Schuler, 2015). As a result, recent studies have found study abroad programs have greatly increased in demand among undergraduate and graduate students seeking to develop leadership skills and move toward their career goals (Geyer et al., 2017; Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018, Loh et al., 2011).
Conceptual Framework

The intersectionality of theoretical frameworks of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Creswell, 2007) informed the conceptual framework for this study. I explored how these theories aligned in understanding the learning experience of short-term study abroad programs. Particularly how the alignment of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), through critical reflection of one’s experience, “serves as a source for shifts in students’ worldview” (Perry et al., 2012). Descriptions of each theory are provided below.

Experiential Learning

The Experiential Learning theory was developed by Dewey (1938) as a way to connect to a person’s past experiences with the ability to address current and future issues. Dewey’s (1938) theory disrupted the traditional way to educate students through imposed, pre-determined standards, subjects, and methods, by suggesting students should learn through experience. The past, current, and future experiences of people contribute to the individual’s learning (Dewey, 1938). Thus, all experiences impact an individual’s ongoing decision-making and informs the idea that experiences of study abroad programs contribute to the student’s lifelong learning (Perry et al., 2012). Study abroad programs allowed students to step outside of their comfort zone and develop knowledge from new experiences (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017). Wang et al. (2014) compared needing to go abroad to gain global skills, to learning how to swim by getting in the water, rather than reading about it in a book.
Dewey (1938) emphasized simply having an experience is not enough, the quality of the experience is what contributes to the learning process. The challenge for the educator was to provide a meaningful experience that will inform and enrich future experiences (Dewey, 1938). Though “every experience is a moving force” (Dewey, 1938, p. 31), only quality experiences invoke inquisitiveness, created desire to push beyond one’s current norms, and spark new knowledge. In facilitating quality experiences, educators have to recognize the important role of how internal (mental) and external (physical environment) experiences play in the learning process (Dewey, 1938).

Experiential learning is not only valued by academic institutions, but by corporate organizations as well (Gentry, 1990). The benefit of experiential learning was using critical reflection to extract knowledge that can inform the individual on how to deal with future experiences (Gentry, 1990; Dewey, 1938; Stone & Petrick, 2013), but experiential learning is subjective, and should include “teacher-facilitated experiences that are focused on real world problems…for producing knowledge” (Perry et al., 2012).

A potential challenge to facilitating experiential learning, through students’ meaningful engagements with a foreign environment, is working with students with a colonial perspective (Ogden, 2008). Ogden described colonial students as U.S. students who are products of consumerism, and travel with the expectation of living in the same comforts they are accustomed to at home (2008). An example of these expectations included being housed only with other U.S. students, having a three-day weekend, and widely available internet service (Ogden, 2008). Colonial students present a challenge to
facilitating experiential learning abroad because they did not want to engage with the new culture, rather they prefer to observe it (Ogden, 2008).

**Transformative Learning Theory**

The origin of transformative learning theory is rooted in the study of women returning to further their education or re-enter the workforce after taking an extended leave from such commitments (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow credited the development of his transformative learning theory to the influences of Freire’s study of conscientization, Gould’s study of consciousness raising, as well as his wife’s experience as an adult learner (Mezirow, 2009). A key focus of transformative learning was on adult learning, not children (Hooper & Scharf, 2017).

Mezirow (1997) defined transformative learning as “the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (p.5). According to Mezirow (1997), over many years adults collect a breadth of experiences that are “frames of reference that define their life world” (p. 5). These frames of references are assumptions that shape the understanding of experiences one goes through (Mezirow, 1997). Perry et al. (2012) stated that transformational learning theory is concerned with how the individual understands and explains the experience they went through. Perry et al.’s statement supports Walters et al.’s (2017) findings that “transformative learning acknowledges the complexity of adult learning and considers preexisting thought as well as feelings that learners bring into the teaching-learning environment” (p. 108). According to Mezirow (1997), we learn in four ways—elaborate an existing point of view, establish new points of view, transform a point of view, and transform an ethnocentric habit of mind.
The most relevant example to study abroad experience is learning through transforming a point of view. Learning through transforming a point of view is going through an experience in a foreign culture that prompts critical reflection of one’s original perception of that culture (Mezirow, 1997). Walters, Charles, and Bingham (2017) stated “the learning then progresses through introspection, critical reflection, and dialogue to develop a new frame of reference” (p. 107). Study abroad experience, along with reflection, contributes to adult learning in a meaningful and transformative way (Stone & Petrick, 2013).

One criticism of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory was that it implied an “idealized and rational process of reflection” (Malkki, 2010, p. 43) and did not analyze “the prerequisites and challenges to reflection” (p. 43). Utilizing transformative learning requires relying on participants’ commitment to honestly and continuously critique personal perceptions and being open to new viewpoints (Brown, 2006). Brown (2006) stated that learning through transformation requires not simply agreeing with other views, instead investing in “deeper and richer understandings of our own biases, as well as where our colleagues are coming from on particular issues and how each of us differently constructs those issues” (p. 709). Malkki (2010) did acknowledge that Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning theory was “the most sophisticated conceptualizations of reflection, within a larger frame of a theory of adult learning” (p. 42). Transformative learning theory was an appropriate theoretical framework for this study given that professional graduate business student participants were adult learners who were enrolled in faculty-led short-term study abroad programs.
Social Constructivism

Constructivism embodies two variants; cognitive/radical and social/realist (Liu & Matthews, 2005). Liu and Matthews (2005) stated that social constructivism originated from Vygotksy’s work and plays a “central role of the social environment in learning” (p. 388). The Social constructivism theory states individuals give meaning to everything (subjects or things) they encounter to understand the world they live in (Creswell, 2007). Through social constructivism, the meanings continue to evolve through continuous interaction with other individuals and guided by one’s cultural norms (Creswell, 2007).

According to Amineh & Asl (2015), social constructivism theory assumes human interaction creates understanding and develops meaning.

Social constructivism is criticized for embodying realism (objective reality) and relativism (multiple realities), which are opposing perspectives (Andrews, 2012). According to Andrews (2012) both perspectives create limitations to the use of social constructivism in qualitative research. Andrew (2012) suggested the realist position “ignores the way the researcher constructs interpretations of the findings” (p. 42) and relativism “leads to the conclusion that nothing can ever be known for definite” (p. 42). Social constructivism focuses on how individuals create meaning out of ongoing interactions between individuals (Andrew, 2012; Creswell, 2007), which directly informs the conceptual framework of this study.

Conclusion

Chapter II provided the foundation to the purpose of this study through exploration of existing literature on benefits of study abroad programs, growing demand
for short-term study abroad program, as well as employer’s views on the importance of study abroad experiences. This background knowledge informed the research questions of this study: (1) What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do students attribute to their professional and personal growth? (2) What do employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experience? In addition, the researcher provided an expanded discussion of the conceptual framework for this study.
CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

Chapter III discusses the research design used to address the research questions which guided this study. The design answers the following questions: (1) What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth? (2) What do business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experience? This chapter also covers sampling, data collection, trustworthiness strategies, researcher positionality and data analysis methodology.

Methodology

This qualitative study used an exploratory, descriptive phenomenology design approach. The qualitative study approach allows the researcher to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them” (Savenye & Robinson, 2005, p. 67). Savenye and Robinson (2005) reported qualitative studies are interpretive and descriptive in nature and are free of researcher’s manipulation. The purpose of a qualitative study is to get a deeper insight into the reason behind human behavior (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). Phenomenology describes an individual’s interpretation of a phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Moustakas (2011) stated phenomena “are the building blocks of
human science and the basis for all knowledge” (p. 3). The combination of exploratory and descriptive research designs helped better understand the phenomenon of a study abroad experience, students’ personal interpretation of their experience with the phenomenon, and employer’s reaction to students’ experience (Kothari, 2004).

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions: (1) What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth? (2) What do business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experience?

Conceptual Framework

Experiential learning (Dewey, 1938), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962; Creswell, 2007; Powell & Kalina, 2009) are the theoretical frameworks that informed this study. An individual’s experiences along with reflective thinking impact their ongoing decision-making and informs the idea that experiences of study abroad programs contribute to the student’s lifelong learning (Perry et al., 2012). The theoretical frame of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962) supports the design of this study in collecting students’ perception of their entire experience. Students’ meaning of their surroundings while abroad evolves throughout continuous interactions with other individuals and are guided by “cultural norms that operate in individual’s lives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21).
Table 3.1 shows how the conceptual framework was reflected through the research question and the data collection process. This table illustrates how each theoretical framework was linked to each research question and informed the interview protocol. Experiential learning (Dewey, 1938) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962) both informed the first research question which focused on the short-term study abroad experiences professional graduate business students attributed to their professional and personal growth. Interview questions designed to gather data on practical experiences were informed by the experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1938). Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962) informed interview questions which focused on social experiences. Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1975, 1997, 2009) informed the second research question designed to discover what business employers perceived to be the benefit of student employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs. This theoretical framework guided the design of interview questions that focused on how short-term study abroad experiences, both social and practical, benefitted the employer.

**Institutional Review Board**

To inform the full study, a pilot study was completed in Spring 2019. IRB approval was granted by Clemson University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The approval letter is included in Appendix A. Amendments to the interview protocol were submitted to IRB for additional approval. An amended approval letter can be found in Appendix B.
Table 3.1. Mapping of conceptual framework to research questions and interview protocol.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Protocol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiential learning (Dewey, 1938)</td>
<td>What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth?</td>
<td>• Please describe why you decided to participate in a short-term graduate study abroad program as part of your graduate school experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What experiences in the short-term study abroad program impacted your contribution to your employer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Please describe how [the employee’s] experience in the short-term graduate study abroad program contribute to your organization?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What specific experiences in a short-term study abroad program would you consider valuable enough to approve a leave of absence for the employee?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1975, 1997, 2009)</td>
<td>What do business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate experience?</td>
<td>• Please describe the value that employees with international experience bring to your organization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.1. Mapping of conceptual framework to research questions and interview protocol. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Protocol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1975, 1997, 2009) (continued)</strong></td>
<td>What do business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate experience?</td>
<td>• How do you feel about working professionals, who are pursuing graduate degrees, requesting study abroad participation to be considered as part of their organizational talent development? &lt;br&gt; • Please describe the experiences of your (student) short-term graduate study abroad program that were most meaningful to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962)</strong></td>
<td>What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth?</td>
<td>• Please elaborate on how you think your experience in the short-term graduate study abroad program contribute to your personal growth? &lt;br&gt; • Do you work with any international clients? &lt;br&gt; • What experiences, if any, have an impact on your soft skills? &lt;br&gt; • How do you feel about short-term vs long-term study abroad programs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sampling Method

The results of this study began to address the gap in the current body of knowledge around the benefits of short-term study abroad experiences for professional graduate business students and business employers. Therefore, I used criterion sampling as part of my purposeful sampling strategy to reach the desired group and sample number. Purposeful sampling allowed for key individuals to provide detailed information needed to address the research question (Suri, 2011). Criterion sampling, as a part of purposeful sampling strategy, allows me to select a sample group based on predetermined criteria (Patton, 1990; Emmel, 2013).

For my pilot study and full study, a list of student participants was obtained from my site’s study abroad office. The selection criteria included working professional, part-time students who participated in a short-term study abroad program as part of their graduate business degree program. Student selection criteria was driven by the first research question of my study, which focused on graduate short-term study abroad experiences for professional graduate business students and business employers. Use of purposeful sampling was allowed to select only those students who fit the following criteria: a) were working full-time while attending graduate business school part-time, and b) participated in a short-term graduate business study abroad as part of their graduate business program. Professional graduate business student participants were recruited via e-mail directly from the researcher. For the pilot study, participants were also asked to provide contact information for their employer who approved the leave time for their study abroad experience. The list of business employers provided by the student
participants made up the second sample group. Selection criteria for business employers included the following: a) managerial responsibilities for one or more individuals, b) ability to hire, c) ability to approve leave of absence, and d) ability to approve academic program participation. The employers were sent a separate recruiting e-mail directly by me. A copy of the student and employer recruiting e-mails can be found in Appendix C and D.

A pilot study was conducted in Spring 2019 to test interview questions and analysis process prior to the full study. The results of the pilot study informed the decision to not match students and employers as a dyad for the full study. There is further discussion on how the pilot study informed my final study later in this chapter. A copy of the pilot study, along with results, can be found in Appendix E.

**Data Collection**

Due to participants either no longer living within a reasonable driving distance, or due to their schedule constraints, data was collected through phone interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using a third-party service. The interview process was designed to be open-ended and exploratory to allow the participant freedom to share any information they felt was important (Ly et al., 2015).

Interview questions were designed utilizing Dewey’s (1938) purpose of experience learning theory and Perry’s et al. (2012) interpretation of how Dewey’s work can be used to develop questions that address critical reflection needed for the learning process to occur. Perry et al. (2012) identified eight items participants need to respond to in collecting evidence of reflective thinking. Perry et al. (2012) stated “perceptions of
their ability to actively question, carefully consider, challenge firmly held beliefs or ideas, implement processes that change their typical way of doing things, and to consider alternative ways of handling situations” (p. 680). The interview questions were designed to guide the participant on the topic of the study but allowed for flexibility of the participant to expand on the topic.

Interview questions for professional graduate business student participants focused on the reasoning behind the student’s decision for participation in a short-term graduate study abroad program, what the experience was like, and how (if at all) the experience contributed to the student’s personal and professional growth. Additionally, professional graduate business student participants were asked what type of international experiences they would look for in a candidate’s employment application.

Interview questions for business employer participants focused on understanding specific types of international experiences (if any) that were important to the individual and their organization. To facilitate critical reflection, employers were asked what type of short-term study abroad experiences would be considered valuable enough to approve a leave of absence for the student participant. For those employers who have approved such experiences, a discussion around the impact (if any) it had on the organization directly was facilitated.

Table 3.1 shows the details on how the interview protocol was linked to the conceptual framework and research questions. In addition, interview questions for professional graduate business students and business employers, along with notes, can be found in Appendices F and G.
Data Analysis

The data for this study was collected via phone interviews, which were recorded and then transcribed. To derive meaning from the data, theme construction concept was used (Merriam, 1998) by “consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said…” (p. 178). To construct themes, units of data (Merriam, 1998) which are “any meaningful segment of data” (p. 179), were identified in each transcript. The purpose of this study guided the decision making behind which words or sections of the transcript were identified as meaningful (Merriam, 1998). The units of data from each transcript were compared to identify a possible commonality that could be grouped together and analyzed for patterns to identify themes (Merriam, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The specific terms for the themes were informed by the data itself, the current literature, as well as my positionality (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I manually coded and sorted all transcripts. A sample of the coding process can be found in Table 3.2. A sample of the codebook can be found in Appendix H, and an additional sample of transcript coding is included in Appendix I.

Table 3.2 includes an excerpt from an interview transcript with a professional graduate business student participant. This excerpt was first highlighted for themes that stood out, a yellow highlight was used for personal growth theme, and a green highlight for professional growth. Once the themes were identified, they were reviewed for sub-themes to identify specific experiences which supported the overall themes. In this example, networking and experiential learning were the sub-themes that emerged.
Table 3.2. Sample of transcript coding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Transcript Excerpt</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>“It was kind of personal and professional. On the personal side, just the networking with my cohorts because it was a smaller group, you got to know them pretty well. And learning from their professional experiences. We had people from different industries and different professional roles. So, kind of gaining their insights to different problems in really just the same class. We’re studying the same material, but we all have different opportunities to bring knowledge to the table based on our experience. So that for me just... That was very meaningful just to expand my network. And then more so professionally, being able to work with the local companies. I thought that, that was the most value add for the classes that we had. Not to mention, you can learn something in class, but being able to interact with local companies and apply that in a way that could be meaningful for them.”</td>
<td>- Personal growth</td>
<td>- Networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Professional growth</td>
<td>- Experiential learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trustworthiness of Study

To maintain the ethical integrity of this study, trustworthiness was addressed using Guba’s (1981) four criteria: a) truth value; b) applicability; c) consistency; and d) neutrality. Truth value is concerned with ensuring the accuracy of findings (Guba, 1981). To test the credibility of the data, member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Guba, 1981) was utilized by sharing the transcript of the interview with each participant to ensure accuracy of the data collected (Krefting, 1991). Participants did not request any changes to their transcript.

Applicability refers to generalizations that allows for findings to be relevant in any setting (Guba, 1981). I collected data on individual experiences with a phenomenon by identifying similarities in experiences through themes. This process allowed for a degree of generalization (Guba, 1981). To find themes, truth statements (Guba, 1981) were identified in collected data. Truth statements are words or phrases that independently can be applicable in any context (Guba, 1981). Truth statements were compared for similarities to construct themes (Guba, 1981). The similarities in findings can create “working hypotheses that may be transferred from one context to another depending upon the degree of ‘fit’ between the contexts” (Guba, 1981, p. 81). A sample codebook can be found in Appendix H and examples of transcript coding is included in Appendix I.

Consistency criteria focuses on the reliability of the results to produce meaningful data (Guba, 1981). In phenomenological studies, human error can result out of “fatigue and evolving insights and sensitivities” (Guba, 1981, p. 81). Thus, some degree of
variation in human responses is acceptable as long as this variance is trackable (Guba, 1981). Notes were taken after each interview to document any thoughts and interpretations the researcher made that could influence how data was collected or analyzed. The purpose of these notes was to establish an audit trail (Guba, 1981) to ensure consistency in data collection and interpretation. Notes are included in Appendix J.

Neutrality criteria is addressed through stating the researcher’s positionality and addressing the researcher’s personal connection to the research study (Guba, 1981). During interviews, I was consciously aware of not inserting my predisposition into the discussion. In addition to revealing my positionality, a journal was kept throughout the study to document my reflections, interpretations, and any changes to my thought process that resulted from collected data (Guba, 1981).

Table 3.3 provides an example of notes taken after each interview was concluded. The notes allowed for me to reflect on what went well, challenges experienced, as well as changes that could be implemented with future interviews.

Sample of journaling is provided in Table 3.4. This table illustrates thoughts and ideas that came to my mind throughout the data collecting process.

In addition, pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect the individual’s anonymity. This practice reduced the risk of emotional harm because of distributing the findings of the study (Merriam, 1998; Johnson & Christensen, 2004).
Table 3.3. Sample of researcher’s notes after an interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Researcher’s Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>- It was a bit difficult to get meaningful answers at the beginning of the interview. Participant gave general answers, such as “[The study abroad program] was offered as part of a class…” as the answer to the reason for participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program. I had to be careful to reword my questions to prompt more detailed answers without influencing the answer. Something clicked for Sally halfway through the interview process, it was noticeable because she exclaimed “Oh” as I was asking another question. I paused to allow Sally to freely share what came to her mind. The response ended up being very meaningful. I need to take more time to pause in future interviews. Allowing time for participants to think through their experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4. Sample of researcher’s journaling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Journaling</th>
<th>Sample of Journal Entry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7/31/2019</td>
<td>- With each interview I find questions that I wish I had asked or listed in my IRB proposal. I am trying to find the right balance from not guiding the conversation in a set direction, while also trying to get participants to expand on the topic. I do not want to introduce a bias.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positionality Statement

To strengthen trustworthiness of the study, it was important to address the researcher’s connection to study abroad programs, and her broader interest in international studies. As an immigrant who came to the United States (U.S.) during middle school years and having gone through most of my academic life in the U.S., I have been very surprised by the lack of international experience among my fellow
classmates. I have always been drawn to the complexity of corporate businesses and the impact globalization continues to have on the growth and success of any business. However, I was also perplexed on how corporate leaders were supposed to navigate the cultural differences of their teams and business partners without any personal international experience. I found myself unable to explain simple life experiences to my friends, such as the type of housing and grocery-buying differences in my native country. Therefore, I decided to start taking my friends with me when I would go back to visit.

This passion of exposing friends to other cultures, as well as my personal interest in business administration, has grown into a professional role that gives me an opportunity to develop graduate study abroad programs for professional graduate business students. As an academic leader and without any prior experience in developing study abroad curriculum, I leaned on my colleagues who had experience developing study abroad programs. I found most colleagues only had experience with developing undergraduate study abroad programs. My business experience, as well as both business undergraduate and graduate degrees, was telling me that a graduate study abroad experience for professional graduate business students needed to be different.

Due to the profile of graduate students that the graduate study abroad programs would target, I brought a corporate leader with me to the initial visit of the study abroad program site. With combined efforts of academic knowledge and direct business experience, we embedded consulting-like projects into the business, graduate, short-term, study abroad program. These projects required students to not just tour companies, but to work directly with the leadership of local companies while abroad. The experiential
consulting project was unique to the traditional undergraduate study abroad experience of my institution, which had included a lecture on the foreign company and perhaps a tour of the facility. We launched this study abroad program the following year and it has been successfully attracting professional graduate students for four years.

Though we collected student feedback at the end of the study abroad program, there was not enough empirical evidence to suggest its benefit to professional graduate business student or business employers. I wanted to formalize my research and identify themes in professional graduate business student and business employer feedback that could help contribute to academic research and help guide the development of future graduate short-term study abroad programs.

**Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted in spring of 2019 with the purpose to inform the full study. By first conducting the pilot study, I was able to test the interview process, interview questions, and to identify any unanticipated roadblocks to conducting a full study. The data collected in this pilot study began to uncover themes between the professional graduate business student’s and business employers’ critical reflection to the purpose and benefits of short-term study abroad programs. These themes were the following: (a) cultural/social development, (b) professional differentiator, (c) personal development, and (d) experiential learning.

Though the professional graduate business student and business employer perspectives differed on how these four themes were important to them personally, their answers were mutually reflected on all four of the themes. I found the overall design of
the study allowed for the collection of meaningful data. The findings addressed the research questions of the study and provided implications for future research studies in the area of graduate short-term study abroad programs and stakeholders.

The completion of the pilot study informed the need to make some modifications prior to completing the full study. These changes were the following: (a) modify interview questions to accommodate for the possible lack of face-to-face interview; (b) amend questions to allow for a deeper discussion on desired experiences for a graduate short-term study abroad program; and (c) change participant selection criteria for employer participants. These modifications will require IRB notification and review. Specific changes to interview questions can be found in Appendix D and E and the full pilot study is included in Appendix F.

Conclusion

This chapter covered research designed and conceptual framework of this study. A connection between the theoretical framework, research questions, and interview protocol was presented in Table 3.1. Validity of the study was addressed through discussion of Guba’s (1981) four criteria for establishing Trustworthiness, as well as through my positionality statement. This chapter also included details of the pilot study that was conducted to inform the full study (also included in Appendix F).
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

Introduction

This study was designed to explore the benefits short-term graduate study abroad programs provide to professional graduate business students and business employers. Through individual interviews, this researcher looked at the key characteristics of short-term graduate study abroad programs that first attracted professional graduate business students to enroll and then explored what value study abroad experiences had on students’ personal and professional development. This study also explored the value that employers placed on employee’s international experience. Specifically, what key characteristics of short-term graduate study abroad programs for employees would be deemed beneficial to employers? The intent of the study was to provide information to guide the development of future short-term, graduate, study abroad programs within the business field. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth?

- What do business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experience?

This investigation provided more clarity to the needs of professional graduate business students, as well as business employers. With a global-minded skill set, what key skills are valued in employees and are those skills acquired through a short-term
graduate study abroad program? The results of this study uncovered key characteristics that could be implemented in future short-term graduate study abroad programs to maximize mutual benefits to professional graduate business students and business employers.

By utilizing a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive phenomenological design to address research questions, a deeper understanding of how experiences of short-term graduate programs can impact students’ professional and personal growth, as well as benefit employers, was achieved. Open-ended interview questions allowed for participants to freely share their thoughts and experiences. The exploratory nature of the study did not limit the researcher to any specific characteristics, rather allowed for flexibility to identify a multitude of benefits of short-term graduate study abroad experiences.

To inform this study, a pilot study was completed in spring of 2019. The IRB approval of the pilot study can be found in Appendix A. A description of the pilot study, along with changes implemented to interview questions and selectivity of employer participants, can be found in Chapter III. A full pilot study is included in Appendix F. Specific changes to interview questions can be found in Appendix D and E. The pilot study identified challenges with employer participant selectivity and required the expansion of selectivity criteria for employer participant. This eliminated the original requirement for employer participants to be the direct employer of the student participant. The revision allowed students to recommend any employer they felt was relevant to the
study who met the criteria. An amended IRB was submitted prior to the full study. The approval from IRB to continue with the full study can be found in Appendix G.

Participants

Professional graduate business student participants were identified through a list provided by the research site’s study abroad office. Selection criteria included part-time graduate students, working professionally, who participated in a short-term graduate study abroad program as part of their graduate business degree. Student participants were recruited through direct e-mail from the researcher. Business employer participants were identified by student participants, who recommended an employer based on selection criteria shared by the researcher. Criteria for employer participants included the following: (a) possession of hiring power, (b) power to approve leave of absence to participate in a short-term graduate study abroad program, (c) being a leader of a business unit, and (d) directly managing employees.

Fourteen qualified professional graduate business student participants were identified, out of which six participants responded to the e-mail. Out of the six participants, one declined the invitation and two expressed interest but never followed through with scheduling an interview. The remaining three student participants provided contact information for employer participants that fit the requested criteria. Out of the three recommended employer participants, all accepted the invitation and completed the interview process. In summary, this study included three professional graduate business student participants and three employer participants. Themes were consistent with each
participant, with no new data emerging. Additional participants were not necessary due to reaching thematic data saturation (Bowen, 2008).

To ensure participants’ anonymity, and to reduce any risk of emotional harm from sharing findings, pseudonyms were assigned (Merriam, 1998; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). An audit trail, to ensure data collection consistency, was established through note taking after interviews were conducted (Guba, 1981). To strengthen neutrality, a journal was kept to document interpretations, reflections, and any changes in my thought process that could introduce bias into the interview process (Guba, 1981).

Professional graduate business student and business employer participants’ demographics are represented in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2, respectfully, followed by a brief narrative on each participant. Years of experience for student participants ranged from 15 years, being the lowest, to 30 years as the highest. Out of the three student participants only one had prior undergraduate study abroad experience. Though none of the three student participants had experience in international travel for business, all three have traveled internationally for leisure.

Professional Graduate Business Student Participant Profiles

Mary. Mary was a working professional student, with over 15 years of professional experience in advertisement, who completed her graduate degree while working full time. Over her career, Mary had risen to a senior level position within her field. Though Mary had leisurely traveled internationally prior to participating in the short-term graduate study abroad program, she did not have any prior study abroad
Table 4.1. Demographics of Professional Graduate Business Student Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Participant Type</th>
<th>Years of Work Experience</th>
<th>Undergraduate Study Abroad Experience</th>
<th>International Travel (Leisure)</th>
<th>International Travel (Business)</th>
<th>Found Benefit in Study Abroad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2. Demographics of Business Employer Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Participant Type</th>
<th>Years of Work Experience</th>
<th>Undergraduate Study Abroad Experience</th>
<th>International Travel (Leisure)</th>
<th>International Travel (Business)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
experience. The short-term duration, program content, and experiential characteristics of the graduate short-term study abroad program attracted Mary to enroll.

Mary’s employer, at the time of her short-term graduate study abroad program, did not have clients outside of North and South America. However, her management team anticipated the value in her experience, and she felt encouraged to participate. Upon her return, Mary felt her employer saw the benefit in her experience and utilized it in their client retention.

When Mary transitioned to a larger organization, one where international experience was a necessity, she believed her study abroad experience helped set her apart in being selected for the position. Though she had not done international assignments, Mary credited her graduate study abroad program as helping her deal with international aspects of her employer. Mary felt the short duration did not hinder the benefits of the program, rather it allowed her to manage school and work.

Nancy. After over thirty years of professional experience in Accounting and Finance, Nancy wanted to gain international education as part of her graduate business degree. Though Nancy has a passion for traveling, she did not have an opportunity to participate in a study abroad program during her undergraduate degree. Nancy’s international experience was limited to leisure travel.

Duration and company visits were characteristics of the study abroad program that attracted Nancy to the short-term graduate study abroad program as part of her graduate degree. Unlike leisure travel, Nancy credited working with a diverse group of individuals as the most meaningful experience of the graduate study abroad program.
Specifically, Nancy enjoyed hearing different perspectives on global issues. Her mind was opened to new ways of thinking that she had not considered before. Nancy believed this graduate study abroad experience brought the most benefit to her employer. She was able to look at challenges within her organization in a different way and was able to propose unique solutions.

Nancy felt supported by her supervisor to take time-off in order to participate in the short-term graduate study abroad program. She believed the structure of the short-term graduate study abroad program allowed her to dedicate herself to the academic program, while still finding time to contribute to her employer.

Though Nancy’s professional role did not have international requirements, she felt her experience broadened her point of view. Nancy’s study abroad experience was an opportunity for her to grow personally and professionally.

**Sally.** Sally was the only student participant who had previous study abroad experience as an undergraduate student. Though Sally’s profession is in the legal field, she attended a graduate business program to expand her knowledge and skills into the business field. At the time of the interview, Sally had transitioned to proprietorship of her own business, overseeing business operations, talent recruiting, managing staff, marketing, and client acquisition.

In addition to academic study abroad experiences, Sally had extensively traveled for leisure. Her decision to participate in a short-term graduate study abroad program, as part of her graduate degree, was based on the topic of the study abroad class. The
graduate course offered a short-term graduate study abroad experience in the same legal field as Sally’ profession.

Though duration played a role in Sally’s decision, it was the networking opportunity, and seeing how her profession operated in other countries, that drew Sally to enroll in the short-term graduate study abroad program. Sally credited the networking opportunity her graduate study abroad program provided to her ongoing success as a professional. That networking included the leading faculty of Sally’s graduate study abroad program who also had experience in her profession. Additionally, Sally’s graduate study abroad program visited a country where she could practice a language she had studied in high school and college.

Unlike other professional graduate student participants, the duration of the study abroad program was not Sally’s main concern. Sally was mostly interested in visiting the specific professional locations outlined in the program and seeing how her practice was conducted in a foreign country.

Business Employer Participant Profiles

Demographics of employer participants are seen in Table 4.2, followed by a profile narrative for each participant. Years of professional experience ranged from 13 to 25. Two of the three employer participants had prior undergraduate study abroad experience. All three employer participants had both leisure and business international travel experience. The responses from all three employer participants suggested that they found study abroad experience beneficial.
Gary. Gary was a business employer, with over 20 years of professional experience in product management and marketing that Sally had recommended as a participant of this study. Though Gary did not participate in a short-term graduate study abroad program during his graduate degree, he did participate in a foreign exchange program during his undergraduate studies. Over the years, Gary had traveled internationally for business and leisure.

As an employer, and the head of an international organization with approximately a thousand employees, Gary felt strongly about the importance of international travel. In addition to cultural awareness, Gary stressed the value of having some proficiency in any foreign language. He did not discount the importance of exposure to a foreign culture, even if it was for a short amount of time. According to Gary, any international experience helped develop the individual to be a more open-minded person.

Gary valued hands-on experience, specifically if an employee would bring an applicable skill back from their travel abroad. In fact, Gary suggested he would give an assignment to his own employee who would request to enroll in a short-term graduate study abroad program. He emphasized that it is not the title of the program, as it is the experience that is important to him.

Mike. Mike was an employer participant recommended to the study by Mary. As the only participant with multiple undergraduate and graduate study abroad experiences, with long and short-term durations, Mike had a lot to say about the importance of studying abroad. Mike’s study abroad experiences included a semester-long undergraduate study abroad program, and two short-term graduate study abroad
programs. He was not working at the time of either of the experiences. Though Mike found value in all of his study abroad experiences, he did share his view on the differences between them. The undergraduate, semester-long, program was beneficial in really getting to know the country Mike was in, but the short-term study abroad programs provided quick immersions into a culture, business operations, and maybe some language.

Mike’s international travels did not end in graduate school; he took on a role at a large organization with approximately 7,500 employees with a strong international presence. He has since traveled abroad both for business and leisure. When evaluating new applicants for his organization Mike looked for any international experience, including short-term study abroad programs, as a professional differentiator among a stack of applications.

Mike’s final thoughts on international exposure was that it broadens one’s horizons, provides the ability to look at business problems from a different perspective, and helps generate ideas on how to improve within your organization.

Matt. Matt was another employer recommendation to come from Mary. With over twenty-five years of professional experience in the human resource field, Matt was the most seasoned employer participant in the study. Though Matt had not done any study abroad programs as part of his undergraduate or graduate degrees, Matt did participate in a seven-week professional development program abroad, mid-way through his career. Matt credited his years of experience, as well as the hands-on design of the program, for getting the most benefit out of the professional development abroad
experience. Due to this professional experience, Matt was able to immediately think how his organization could benefit from what he was learning abroad. He felt this is something not always possible for undergraduate students.

One of the most meaningful experiences Matt had during that seven-week program was the ability to network with professionals in the same field as him. The experience also provided Matt with rejuvenation of his career and a broader prospective to approaching business challenges. A necessary skill when working for a global organization like Matt’s. Because Matt’s organization took a holistic approach to evaluating new applicants, having international experience was not always necessary. However, having international experience is an additional skill Matt felt separated applicants.

**Coded Themes**

Data collected through interviews was coded by identifying meaningful segments, which were guided by the purpose statement and research questions of the study (Merriam, 1998). Selected segments were analyzed for commonality out of which themes were identified. Meaningful segments for professional graduate business students were coded to the following themes:

a) Professional growth

b) Personal growth

c) Reason for participating
A second round of coding was conducted to look for commonalities among meaningful segments used to code for the three themes. During a second round of coding the following sub-themes emerged:

a) Cultural sensitivity  
b) Global awareness  
c) Experiential learning  
d) Networking  
e) Professional differentiator

Table 4.3 illustrates coding process of data collected from professional graduate business students. The first round of data coding resulted in identification of three main themes: (a) personal growth, (b) professional growth, and (c) reason for participating. The second round of coding was conducted to identify segment commonalities within each of the three main themes. During the second round of coding, sub-themes emerged under each main theme. Two sub-themes emerged under the personal growth theme: a) experiential learning and b) networking. Two more sub-themes were identified under the professional growth theme: a) cultural sensitivity and b) global awareness. Professional differentiator emerged as the sub-theme under the theme of reason for participating. Example of transcript coding can be found in Appendix I.

When analyzing data collected from business employers, the following themes were identified:
Table 4.3. Main Themes and Sub-Themes Derived from Professional Graduate Business Student Data.
a) Skills needed
b) Meaningful experiences
c) Value in international experience

A second round of coding was conducted to look for commonalities among meaningful segments used to code for the three themes under business employers. During a second round of coding the following sub-themes emerged:

a) Cultural sensitivity
b) Global awareness
c) Language skills
d) Networking
e) Experiential Learning
f) Professional differentiator

Table 4.4 illustrates coding process of data collected from business employers. The first round of data coding resulted in identification of three main themes: a) skills needed, b) meaningful experience, and c) value in international experience. The second round of coding was conducted to identify segment commonalities within each of the three main themes. During the second round of coding sub-themes emerged under each main theme. Three sub-themes emerged under skills needed theme: a) cultural sensitivity, b) global awareness, and c) language skills. Two more sub-themes were identified under meaningful international experience theme: a) experiential learning, and b) networking. Professional differentiator emerged as the sub-theme under the theme of value in international experience. Example of transcript coding can be found in Appendix I.
While analyzing data collected from professional graduate business students, I was able to answer Research Question One, looking at the similarities in what attributed to professional and personal growth through a short-term study abroad program. Three thematic codes emerged for students: (a) professional growth, (b) personal growth, and (c) reason for participating.
Main Themes: Students

The three main thematic codes that emerged from data collected from professional graduate business student participants were the following: (a) professional growth, (b) personal growth, and (c) reason for participating.

Professional Growth

All three professional graduate business student participants discussed how their experience in the short-term graduate study abroad program contributed to their professional growth. Some of the meaningful segments or words that informed professional growth as a main theme were the following: (a) better solution, (b) I got to go/do/see (as it relates to profession), (c) different perspective (as it relates to business), (d) professional, (e) further develop (as it relates to business), and (f) any discussion referring to different approach to business practices or points of view.

Nancy, a professional graduate business student participant, with the most professional experience and not international business travel experience, did not have an opportunity to participate in a study abroad program while completing her undergraduate degree. However, her passion for travel, desire to integrate international experiences into her academic program, and the short duration of the study abroad opportunity prompted her to enroll in the short-term graduate study abroad program as part of her academic experience. When asked how her experience in the short-term study abroad program contributed to her professional growth, Nancy shared that “It makes you look at things [from a] different perspective…. So you are able to see their side of things a little better to come up with better solutions.”
Similar to Nancy, Sally who had completed a long-term undergraduate and short-term graduate study abroad programs, believed that her short-term study abroad experience contributed to her professional growth. Though various experiences contributed to Sally’s professional growth as an attorney, it seemed that visiting courtrooms and gaining a deeper understanding of the origins of common law was very impactful on Sally’s professional growth as an attorney.

This passion came through Sally’s comments:

We actually got to go into the courtroom… I got to see the places where some of those original cases would have been litigated, and the fundamental starts of some of our laws. For an attorney, that is an incredible experience.

For Mary (who did not participate in any undergraduate study abroad programs and had not traveled internationally for business), interacting with foreign companies during her short-term graduate study abroad program contributed to her professional growth. Mary shared: “Professionally, being able to work with local companies… was the most value add for the classes that we had.”

In addition to the prestige of the program, the main reason Mary made the decision to enroll in a short-term graduate study abroad program was to develop her professional skills. This was evident through Mary’s following statement—“being able to work with local companies [to] further develop my business strategy internationally, that was what really appealed to me.” Mary found the U.S. approach to doing business was different from those in other countries. She explained:

We [US companies] come in and think ‘How can we scale… make more money… [be] more efficient, faster?’ And that’s not always the case. Then you
go to different businesses [while abroad] where maybe they are happy with the size that they are, they [foreign companies] are not looking to grow rapidly.

Whether it was through gaining a new point of view, deeper understanding of profession, or ability to work directly with foreign companies, all three professional graduate business students experienced professional growth as part of their short-term study abroad experience.

Personal Growth

Personal growth was another main theme that emerged while reviewing collected professional graduate business student data. All three student participants discussed personal growth through various experiences in their short-term study abroad program. When coding student feedback, words or phrases used include the following: (a) personal, (b) personally, (c) meaningful to me, (d) different perspective (as it relates to people), (e) gaining knowledge, (f) helpful, (g) experience for me, (h) changes your, and (i) opens your, were some of the meaningful segments and words that informed personal growth as a main theme.

Mary attributed personal growth to interacting with her study-abroad cohort and “learning from their professional experiences”, class structure, and navigating traveling on her own. She explained:

Personally, I liked the [class] content, I was happy spending eight hours a day in class because that is what I was there for. I was there to learn, I was there to gain knowledge... I took a lot from [the study abroad experience]. Really just being able to say I went to Oxford, the course material, the networking, and even personally just traveling on my own. Even just navigating all that on your own was a great experience for me.
For Sally experiencing new cultures, practicing language skills and the overall experience of traveling abroad contributed to her personal development.

Sally shared:

I think travel is always good just because it changes your perspectives and opens your perceptions to different ideas, different thoughts to different concepts and different ways of looking at things… I took French when I was in high school and college… There is certainly the language development aspect, that you are getting to utilize your skill set with a foreign language. That is important, even if it is just conversational language skill. I think that was helpful.

For Nancy it was participating in meaningful discussions with a diverse group of individuals that contributed to her personal growth. According to Nancy:

I think just being able to discuss things with people who were so different and getting different perspectives was the meaningful part for me… I think [the interactions] make you look at things in a different perspective, so you are more relatable to the people around you that aren’t necessarily like you.

Through interview discussions with professional graduate business students on their short-term study abroad experience, personal growth emerged as one of the main themes. Though each participants’ feedback was unique, they all referred to at least one experience that contributed to their personal growth.

Reason for Participating

The third main theme that emerged from student participants’ collected data was reason for participating. Though one of the interview questions specifically asked professional graduate business students for their reason to participate in a short-term graduate study abroad program, toward the end of the interview process more general reasons emerged that may not have been part of their initial answer. Meaningful
segments and words that were used to identify this theme included the following: (a) I like to, (b) good way for me, (c) it was a way for me, (d) drove me to, (e) enroll/participate/explore (as it relates to study abroad program).

For Nancy, her initial response was her love for travel and desire to combine travel with education as the reason for participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program. Another initial reason was that Nancy did not participate in an undergraduate study abroad program. Nancy shared:

Well, first of all, I like to travel. So, it was a good way for me to be able to do that and integrate it with my education. And since I was an older student, nobody really did travel or study abroad when I was in undergrad, so it was a way for me to get that international education as part of my graduate degree.

Toward the end of the interview process, Nancy shared that she was able to participate in the short-term study abroad program because her employer wanted to see “employees succeed and gain education”. Based on other comments that Nancy made in the interview, it led me to interpret that statement as her desire to be a successful contributor to her organization and her desire to expand her academic knowledge. I interpreted that both contributed to Nancy’s reason for enrolling in a short-term graduate study abroad program as part of her graduate degree.

Sally’s direct answer to the question on why she enrolled in a short-term graduate study abroad program was consistent throughout the interview. The reason for her enrolment in the short-term study abroad program was “the prestige of the college” and “actual content of the classes”. Sally acknowledged that she could travel for leisure anytime, thus the educational value that she believed she would gain from the short-term
study abroad trip served as one of the reasons for her enrollment. At the end of the interview, Sally discussed how she encouraged a co-worker, who was considering participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program, to enroll in the program. Her comment she shared with him was “I can travel anywhere but I am not going to be able to study anywhere”.

Reason for participating was a main theme that emerged when analyzing data collected from professional graduate business students. Common meaningful segments among all three student participants identified this theme. This theme helped to inform the results of the study to better understand why professional graduate business students chose to enroll in short-term graduate study abroad programs.

**Sub-Themes: Students**

A second round of coding was conducted to look for commonalities among meaningful segments used to code for the three themes (professional growth, personal growth, and reason for participating). During a second round of coding, the following five sub-themes emerged: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) experiential learning, (d) networking, and (e) professional differentiator, among professional graduate business student participants. For additional information, see Table 4.3.

*Cultural Sensitivity*

One of the sub-themes that emerged from further analysis of coded meaningful segments and words was cultural sensitivity. Specific words and meaningful segments used to identify this sub-theme were the following: (a) diversity, (b) different
nationalities, (c) companies were diverse, (d) people were different, (e) cultural sensitivity, (f) everything we do is affected by (as it relates to people or practices), (g) cultural backgrounds, (h) customs, and (i) traditions.

Nancy was one of the three professional graduate business student participants who discussed gaining cultural sensitivity, as a result of participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program, in detail. Nancy shared:

I don’t have a lot of diversity in my background… The group [fellow study abroad participants] was so diverse… we had people from different nationalities, different ages, and companies we went to were very diverse. I think just being able to discuss things with people who were so different and getting different perspectives was the meaningful part for me.

Similar to Nancy, Sally also found learning about cultural differences an important part of her short-term graduate study abroad program. She recalled in class, “we talked about how in business and in litigation, how it’s very important to understand cultural differences.” Sally shared the impact of gaining cultural sensitivity has had on her professional career:

I have clients with different cultural backgrounds… understanding better about their customs and traditions … has been tremendously helpful because I can then be more culturally sensitive, and that’s incredibly important to clients.

Throughout the interview process, all three professional graduate business student participants mentioned, or discussed in length, cultural sensitivity as a result of their short-term graduate study abroad program. All three participants seemed to have gained cultural sensitivity through direct interactions with other local individuals in social settings, interactions with a diverse group of students in classroom setting, or interactions with individuals in a business setting.
Global Awareness

Another sub-theme emerged upon further review of the three main themes—(a) professional growth, (b) personal growth, and (c) reason for participating—was global awareness. Specific meaningful segments and words that were identified for this sub-theme were the following: (a) eye opening (as it relates to global business, economic or political issues), (b) challenges, and (c) issues (as it related to labor, immigration, and economy).

In addition to gaining cultural sensitivity, Nancy expanded her global awareness through “eye opening” discussions on topics of immigration and labor challenges. She recalled:

I never thought about England having an immigration issue as far as labor. It never dawned on me that was an issue. Then you come back here [U.S.] and we talk about immigration all the time... we’re going to have [labor] problem, and nobody looks at it from that perspective.

In addition to Nancy, Mary also acknowledged realizing “the difference between an American business perspective, and then international perspective” while participating in her short-term study abroad program.

Global awareness emerged as a sub-theme for all three professional graduate business participants. This sub-theme was mostly apparent when participants discussed how they became aware, through short-term graduate study abroad participation, of how business, or local culture, was impacted by global-scale issues. In Nancy’s interview, these issues were primarily related to the impact that immigration had on labor issues.
Experiential Learning

Experiential learning emerged as a sub-theme when meaningful segments and words such as: (a) hands on, (b) company visit, (c) go into, (d) work with local companies, and (e) consulting project were used to analyze the coded main themes: (a) professional growth, (b) personal growth, (c) reason for participating.

Mary was surprised by the different business mentalities of companies that her short-term graduate study abroad program visited. She attributed the experiential learning to expanding her professional mindset and not assuming business strategies are the same globally. She recalled having that realization during her company’s visits abroad:

That’s [difference in business strategies] something you kind of have to take into account when you’re looking at international markets… which before I would’ve assumed we [Mary’s company] could just run our American plan internationally and it’ll work every time, and that’s not the case.

Mary felt that completing a project for a foreign company was beneficial to her: “I did a consulting project for an international company… that was the most meaningful experience and really the biggest draw for that specific program for me”.

Though specific experiences were different for professional graduate business student participants, all three emphasized the benefits of experiential learning as a key experience to their short-term study abroad programs.

Networking

Another sub-theme to emerged from further analysis of professional graduate business students’ interviews was networking. The words or meaningful segments used
to uncover networking as a sub-theme were the following: (a) networking, (b) expand my network, (c) developed significant bonds, and (d) built relationship.

Mary emphasized networking as a meaningful experience as it related to her professional development. Mary explained, “that was very meaningful just to expand my network.”

Sally highlighted the ability to network during her short-term graduate study abroad experience as a meaningful experience, one that had long lasting benefits to her profession. The two impactful networking opportunities to Sally were her professor, who had direct experience in her field, and her study abroad classmates. She developed close bonds with students in her study abroad group, sharing that traveling together “developed more significant bonds with people rather than the ones that I was simply making by sitting in a classroom.” She found these networks “amazingly helpful” both while in the program, as well as in her career. For example, she benefitted from receiving clients as a result of the network she built through her short-term graduate study abroad program.

Nancy also found networking as an important part of her short-term graduate study abroad experience. She felt she “built relationships” and “it opened up new avenues” for her.

Throughout the interview process it became apparent that networking was an important part of the short-term graduate study abroad experience to professional graduate business student participants. Therefore, it was not surprising when networking emerged from thematic coding as a sub-theme of the findings.
The final sub-theme that emerged from analyzing professional graduate business student participants’ interviews was professional differentiator. Meaningful segments and words used as a coding method that helped identify this sub-theme included the following: (a) selling-point internally, (b) made me more interesting, (c) stand out, (d) better represent, (e) broader perspective, and (f) value(s/d).

Throughout the interview process, it became apparent professional graduate business student participants wanted to distinguish their desire to participate in the short-term graduate study abroad program as a tool to acquire skills, and experiences, that they would not have been able to gain from a personal tourist visit. The sub-theme that emerged from these discussions was gaining professional differentiation, as a result of participating in the short-term graduate study abroad program. Both sets of participants, professional graduate business students and business employers, defined professional differentiation as a unique set of skills, or experiences, that are not common among average business professionals.

At the time of the interview, Mary had transitioned to a different employer from the one she was with at the time of her short-term graduate study abroad program. Mary shared how her study abroad experience provided her with a professional differentiator that both employers valued:

Even with my previous employer, [short-term study abroad program] was an opportunity they like[d] to kind of call out to clients, like ‘Hey look, we have someone that has … international experience.’ So it was a selling point internally, even if didn’t have a global footprint… Versus now I’m at a company where we have a global footprint, and I think that the experience that I had
through the study abroad program really adds another dimension to my skillset… made me a little more interesting… stand out a little bit when you’re in the interview process.

Mary shared that during the hiring interview process, one of the first questions she received was about her experience in the short-term study abroad program she had participated in as part of her graduate degree. Mary attributed her graduate study abroad experience to being a professional differentiator for her.

Sally had a slightly different approach to attributing her short-term study abroad experience to differentiating herself professionally. As a sole proprietor, Sally believed cultural sensitivity had been a professional differentiator to her clients. She explained, “Understanding better about [my clients’] customs and their traditions or being able to at least know enough to say ‘Okay, I need to be aware of those issues’ has been tremendously helpful. I can be more culturally sensitive, and that’s incredibly important to clients.” Throughout her interview Sally referred to the impact her study abroad experience had on her clients. More so, how the cultural awareness she acquired made her more sensitive to her clients’ views and needs. She attributed her ability to relate better to clients, as a result of her study abroad experience. To Sally, the professional differentiator was her ability to better represent her clients.

Summary of Main Themes and Sub-Themes: Students

While each professional graduate business student participant’s story was unique to their personal short-term study abroad experience, as well as their individual professional roles, they shared strong similarities in the different attributes they experienced in the three main themes: (a) personal growth, (b) professional growth, and
(c) reason for participating. Further review for commonalities among meaningful segments and words within the three main themes, resulted in identifying the following five sub-themes: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) experiential learning, (d) networking, and e) professional differentiator.

Main Themes: Employers

The second research question was designed to understand the benefits business employers gain from their employees enrolling in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their graduate degree. In analyzing data collected from employers, three main themes emerged: (a) skills needed, (b) meaningful experiences, and (c) value in international experience.

Skills Needed

One of the main themes that emerged from analyzing business employer participants’ data was skills needed. The meaningful segments and words used to identify this main theme were the following: (a) understanding of, and (b) having.

Gary, who had participated in an undergraduate exchange program and had extensive international business experience, opened the discussion by stating that understanding cultural differences is a “very, very big deal”. In addition to cultural sensitivity, it became apparent in the discussion that Gary’s organization was also in need of employees with foreign language skills.

Mike, who had participated in long-term and short-term study abroad programs throughout his undergraduate and graduate degrees, also discussed the importance of
possessing cultural understanding and sensitivity skills when working within his organization. In addition to understanding how others conduct business, or what life is like in a foreign country, Mike focused on the importance of having global awareness skills to be successful within his company.

When discussing skills Matt’s organization looks for in employees, cultural awareness and well-rounded were used interchangeably. Matt, who had over twenty-five years of professional experience, but no formal undergraduate and graduate study abroad experience, referred to the need for individuals with international experience because they, “can think differently in terms of how we solve problems. They are more open minded, have diversity of thought, diversity of background.”

All three business employer participants began their interviews with first sharing the skills needed to be successful within their organization. Though the discussions varied slightly, the commonalities in meaningful segments and words within data identified skills needed as one of the main themes.

Meaningful Experiences

Another theme, meaningful experiences, emerged when attempting to understand what specific characteristics of a short-term graduate study abroad experience employers saw as a benefit to their organization. The emergence of this theme resulted from identifying commonality among the following meaningful segments and words: (a) bring back, (b) how to help organization, (c) understand (d) doing something different, and (e) learn.
Gary expressed that the specific experience would depend on the position, division, or location of the participating individual. He also stated any employee’s experiential learning experience that can be applied directly to his organization would be deemed valuable.

Similarly, Matt prefaced that meaningful experiences might vary by the role of the individual participating in the short-term graduate study abroad program. However, what unified these experiences was the ability to apply practical learning to help improve their organization. Matt suggested study abroad participants who could critically reflect on their experience, or “putting themselves in the shoes” of an individual in a similar role for a company abroad, helped the employee think about differences and similarities between the two cultures. According to Matt, this practice helped the individual become a “stronger, well-rounded employee”.

Mike’s statements also echoed the common themes found in data collected from Gary and Matt’s interviews. Mike suggested specific experiences that his organization would consider valuable would depend on the study abroad participant’s organizational role. However, experiential learning/business application would unify those experiences.

Mike stated:

[A meaningful experience is] something that would allow the individual to learn more about business best practices or the ways in which people think about, or go about, doing business in that specific country… or… they can bring back and apply. How they think about the problems of doing business or how they navigate the regulatory environment in those areas, I think that would be the type of experience that would be valuable… Short-term, applicable insights that they can then bring back and make whatever projects or endeavors they’re working on more effective.
In summary, Mike viewed gaining meaningful experiences from a study abroad program in two ways: a) needing to get boots on the ground and b) being a more holistic person.

Value in International Experience

The third main theme that emerged from business employer data analysis was value in international experience. Some of the meaningful segments and words that helped identify this theme were the following: (a) having international experience, (b) well-rounded individual, (c) someone that can think differently, and (d) open minded.

Employer participants were asked what they saw as the value for an employee to invest time in gaining international experience. Data gained from these questions provided insight into the value employers place on international experiences. In referring to the value that international experience provided, Mike shared:

It’s just that additional experience that makes the candidate stronger because they think about things differently. They’ve experienced things differently, and they’re going to be able to adapt into a global company.

Gary also emphasized the value of international experience in today’s business environment. Gary viewed the value of international experience as:

The more international you are in nowadays business world, the better. And if you can do it through an organized setup like a graduate study program, I think it would be very, very beneficial. Because you can do lessons learned from over here and that graduate program that would only get better. And if somebody can do that, I think that’s a novel thing.

Analysis of data collected from business employer participants revealed that all three participants saw value in international experience. Some business employer participants
differentiated between the value placed on various experiences, and others stated that value of experience is determined by participant’s professional role.

Sub-Themes: Employers

Commonalities among meaningful segments and words used to code for the three main themes (skills needed, meaningful experience, and value in international experience) resulted in the emergence of five sub-themes: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) language skills, (d) networking, (e) experiential learning, and (f) professional differentiator (See Table 4.4).

**Cultural Sensitivity**

One of the sub-themes to emerge from further analysis of coded meaningful segments and words was cultural sensitivity. Specific words and meaningful segments used to identify this sub-theme were the following: (a) diversity, (b) different nationalities, (c) people were different, (d) cultural sensitivity, (e) everything we do is affected by (as it relates to people or practices), (f) cultural backgrounds, (g) customs, and (h) traditions.

In his description of cultural sensitivity, Gary did not limit it to only personal behaviors, rather he emphasized cultural business practices as well. He explained:

…Let’s say you are a U.S. subsidiary and you have your headquarters, for example, in Germany. Not only [is] working together within your own company [is] difficult, because [now] the headquarters [is] in that certain country, [but because] they [also] have certain benefits, vacations, and job security that are very difference from U.S…. These are kind of the difference and they are creating a lot of frustrations. It is important for a person in the U.S. to really understand how [Germans] do things, why [Germans] do things so there is no frustrations.
Gary emphasized that his organization sees a lot of frustration among employees who lack cultural sensitivity skills.

In his discussion of cultural sensitivity, Matt prefaced that his organization needs individuals with cultural sensitivity and global awareness skills because it is a global organization. He shared:

I believe that more well-rounded background and experiences in terms of being able to identify with different cultures, identify with people from different cultures versus someone that has never left [their state]… helps someone prepare for that diverse environment they are going to work in… Because [my organization] is a global company and regardless of what your role or assignment is going to be, you are going to interact with people across the globe and people from different backgrounds.

Upon further review of commonalities among main themes within business employer data, cultural sensitivity emerged as one of sub-themes. All three participants discussed the importance of cultural sensitivity directly.

**Global Awareness**

Another sub-theme that emerged upon further review of the three main themes was global awareness. Specific meaningful segments and words that were identified for this sub-theme were the following: (a) global economy, (b) global culture, (c) impact of inputs from abroad, (d) geopolitical landscape, and (e) trade relations.

As part of the discussion on what is needed to be successful in today’s global market, Mike emphasized having global awareness as a necessity. Mike explained:

It is really impossible for me to think about how I can do business generally without people that have an understanding of the global economy [and] the global
culture. Everything that we do is affected by either inputs from abroad, other people abroad competing with us, [or] the broader geopolitical landscape.

In Mike’s explanation, it became clear he valued one’s understanding of how people lived in various cultures, as well as understanding global circumstances that impact business decisions.

Similar to Mike’s view, Matt also shared the need for participants to have knowledge beyond cultural sensitivity. Matt emphasized the importance of:

…Understanding the economics of the country that they are participating with, understanding any type of U.S. trade relationships, understanding [if] our company have any type of supply chain in or out of that country today? What are they learning and how it … relates to what we do as a company?

In addition to understanding global impacts, such as trade relations, Matt also included customary norms as part of global awareness. Employees who learned these norms helped his organization better operate in that part of the world.

Language Skills

Though not as blatantly apparent as other sub-themes, language skills still emerged as one of the sub-themes of this study. Key word used to identify this theme was foreign language.

Gary shared that having a high foreign language skill level was not essential; but, having a mediocre foreign language skill would be valued within his organization. Like Gary, Matt stated that in addition to cultural sensitivity and global awareness skills, his organization valued language skills.
Networking

Another sub-theme that emerged from further analysis of business employers’ interviews was networking. The words or meaningful segments used to uncover networking as a sub-theme were the following: (a) networking, (b) built relationship, (c) real engagement, and (d) meaningful impact.

Outside of valuing application of operational improvement as a result of participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program, Mike did not discount the impact of networking as part of a short-term study abroad experience. Mike suggested that graduate study abroad participants should network with similar professional graduate business students in the visiting country, business clients, and perhaps even alumni of the same graduate study abroad program to gain more genuine feedback on business practices of that country.

Finally, Matt mentioned that networking and building relationships during international experiences created lasting and meaningful impacts. Mike shared that networking created:

...kind of an intimacy where you get some of the more... real engagement... what it’s really like to do business there? What are some of the challenges that you have as a person who does business in this country? I think those are the kind of things that you could take back from a broader exposure standpoint.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning emerged as a sub-theme when meaningful segments and words such as the following—(a) how to, (b) apply, (c) go into, and (d) employ here—
were used to search for commonalities among the three main themes (skills needed, meaningful experience, and value in international experience).

In addition to gaining cultural awareness, Gary wanted his employee/student participants in the short-term graduate study abroad program to bring back concrete ideas on how to help grow their organization through process improvement, or newly discovered business opportunities. Gary described (referring to someone who is going to participate in a short-term graduate study abroad program):

You are going on a trip and hey, you are not there only for the enjoyment…[look for] certain things in your different country they have already that has not made it to the U.S. yet? [Are] there certain things that we as a company could benefit from? … You go over there for this cultural experience, but then at least come back and say ‘Hey, this is an opportunity that we need to get into’.

From the discussion under this sub-theme, what stood out as valuable to the employer was not the specific experience but how the employee/student would apply it to the organization back home.

**Professional Differentiator**

The final sub-theme to emerge was professional differentiator. The key words that helped identify this sub-theme were the following: (a) pull more weight, (b) thinking outside, and (c) stand out.

All three business employer participants discussed that having international experience served as professional differentiator. According to Mike:

…someone who’s spent time abroad, done things abroad, that candidate just automatically pulls more weight for me because I can use that as a proxy that person is thinking outside their smaller community…Say they are a mechanical
engineer, fine they can do that great. But the thinking about how their goal fits into the broader organization, and people that go study abroad are generally the type of people that think about how they fit in the world in a broader sense.

Similarly, Matt shared that regardless of duration or type of international experience, simply having traveled abroad, and getting exposed to other cultures, is valued at his organization. One difference in Gary’s discussion was that he emphasized language skill, in addition to having general international experience, as a man professional differentiator for his company.

Summary of Main Themes and Sub-Themes: Employers

Analysis of data collected through employer interviews generated three main themes: (a) skills needed, (b) meaningful experience, and (c) value in experience. Deeper review of the segments selected through these codes revealed emergence of the following sub-themes: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) language skills, (d) networking, (e) experiential learning/business application, (f) professional differentiator.

The second research question of this study looked at what business employers perceived to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs. First, the findings supported that short-term graduate study abroad programs provided valuable experiences to employees. Second, specific benefits were identified through coding and detecting sub-themes among meaningful data segments (Merriam, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Though all three business employer participants identified specific benefits as they related to their individual organizations, the overall data consistently fell within the
identified themes. Based on the findings, it appeared an employee’s international experience, in any form, was valued by employers regardless of organization. Within the international experience employers believe cultural sensitivity and global awareness are skills needed for employees within their organization. When evaluating international experiences for benefits related directly to the organization, employers wanted to see examples of experiential learning. Specifically, employers want to see a practical experience where the study abroad participant can directly apply to improving their organization’s operations or customer relations. Finally, all three employer participants agreed that any international experience sets an employee or employee candidate apart from others.

Overlapping Sub-Themes Between Student and Employer Participants

In the data collected from this study, I identified overlapping sub-themes, under each research-question-informed theme, between the professional graduate business students and business employer participants. Themes identified in student participant interviews were informed by the first research question, which focused on identifying professional graduate business study abroad experience that students attributed to personal and professional growth. These themes were the following: (a) personal growth, (b) professional growth, and (c) reason for participating. Second round of coding student participants’ interviews produced five sub-themes: (a) experiential learning, (b) networking, (c) cultural sensitivity, (d) global awareness, and (e) professional differentiator.
The second research question informed themes identified through employer participants’ interviews. These themes focused on an employer’s perception of the benefits short-term professional graduate study abroad experiences for employees. The themes that were identified for business employer participants included the following: (a) skills needed, (b) meaningful experience, and (c) value in international experience. Second round of coding business employer participants’ interviews produced six sub-themes: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) language skills, (d) experiential learning, (e) networking, and (f) professional differentiator. The sub-themes, under each research-question-informed theme, for both student and employer participants overlapped in similarities.

Both employer and student participants discussed sub-themes cultural sensitivity, global awareness, and personal development as being important skills. Employer participants discussed that these skills were needed, while student participants said these skills were learned in their short-term graduate study abroad program. As an example, Mike (business employer participant), stated that it was, “really impossible for me to think about how I can do business generally without people that have an understanding of the global economy, the global culture”. Similarly, when discussing the benefit of her short-term graduate study abroad experience, Mary (professional graduate business student participant) shared: “I think just being able to see firsthand the difference between an American business perspective, and then international perspective… Before [attending short-term study abroad program] I would have just assumed…our American
play will work internationally every time, and that’s not the case. And you were able to see that with the different businesses and interactions you had there”.

Student participants attributed experiential learning and networking to personal growth, while employer participants identified these as meaningful short-term study abroad experiences. Sally (professional graduate business student participant) shared that participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program provided an opportunity for her to, “network with other students, develop more significant bonds with people rather than the ones that I simply make by sitting in a classroom. I still keep in contact with those folks”. Mike (business employer participant) also shared the importance of networking while participating in a short-term study abroad program. Mike suggested: “Meet with actual current students and learn from current students who may also be working professionals in that environment. Because I think that kind of intimacy is where you get some of the more real engagement”.

Finally, professional differentiator was a common sub-theme for both sets of participants as the value of short-term graduate study abroad experience. Both business employer participants and professional graduate business student participants discussed having international experience as a professional differentiator. Matt (business employer participant) stated that for his organization, “having international experience, period, whether it is through an educational program, study abroad program, a job, an internship, we do see that as a benefit”. Matt’s statement was mirrored by professional graduate business participants. Mary’s belief that, “I think that the experience that I had through the study abroad program really adds another dimension to my skillset”.

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Overlapping sub-themes (shown in orange, salmon, and beige colored boxes) under each research-question-informed theme (shown in white boxes) for professional graduate business students and business employers are represented in Figure 4.1 below. This figure illustrates the similarities in sub-themes between professional graduate business student and business employer participants.

The overlapping sub-themes that emerged from this study suggested there is an alignment in employers’ perceived benefits and professional graduate business students’ actual experiences in short-term graduate study abroad programs.

Figure 4.1. Overlapping Themes for Professional Graduate Business Students and Business Employers.
Conclusion

This study explored the benefits short-term graduate study abroad programs provide to graduate business students and business employers. Data was collected through open-ended interviews. This data collection method allowed professional graduate business students to reflect on their short-term graduate study abroad experience, and business employers to analyze what international experiences bring the most benefit to their organization.

This chapter reported findings of the study and identified common sub-themes that provided answers to both research questions. These sub-themes were the following: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) experiential learning, and (d) professional differentiator. In addition, the results for each research question identified overlapping themes between professional graduate business student and business employer reported benefits. Findings of this study contributed to closing the gap in the current body of literature on the benefits short-term graduate study abroad programs provide to professional graduate business students and business employers.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

As the current global market continues to grow, many employers need employees with global-mindset skills (Ramakrishna et al., 2016; McMurray et al., 2016). This trend in the marketplace has influenced an increase in the number of students participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their graduate degree (Romano, 2018; Dirkx et al., 2014).

Though there is an emergence of studies on graduate study abroad experiences (Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2003; DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018), few have focused on graduate business studies (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018). A thorough literature review produced little information on the employer’s perceived benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs, rather those studies identified focused on employer’s preferences when hiring for entry level positions (Trooboff et al., 2008; Harder et al., 2015).

This study was designed to address a gap in the current body of literature around the benefits of short-term study abroad experiences for professional graduate business students and business employers. Two research questions guided this study: (1) What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth? (2) What do
business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experience?

My investigation provided insight into what professional graduate business students and business employers perceived to be the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of graduate education. Consistent with prior findings on the benefits of study abroad experiences for students (Doyle, 2009; DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Niehaus & Wegener, 2018; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018), the findings of this study also identified cultural sensitivity, global awareness, personal development and professional differentiators as benefits to study abroad experience. Findings of my study could inform the design of future, short-term, graduate, study abroad programs to maximize benefits to professional graduate business students and business employers.

This qualitative study used an exploratory, descriptive phenomenological design approach. Open-ended interview questions allowed participants to provide unrestricted feedback. The exploratory nature of the study allowed the researcher to look for an array of benefits from short-term study abroad programs. In this chapter, I provide the limitations to my study, discuss major findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Assumptions and Limitations

There were limitations identified and assumptions made with this study. First, this study was conducted at a single research site, a research-intensive university. The research site offered four short-term graduate study abroad programs, out of which two
programs were geared toward business professional graduate business students (Clemson.edu/studyabroad).

This was a qualitative study, with an intent to understand a deeper meaning behind social behavior. Quiros, Faria, and Almeida (2017) stated, qualitative methodology intends to “produce in-depth and illustrative information in order to understand the various dimensions of the problem” (p. 370). Due to the limited number of participants in this qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalized to all business professional graduate business students or business employers.

Only female professional graduate business students chose to participate in the study. These participants recommended only males as business employer participants. This created a one-sided gender representation of the findings. Since data was collected via phone-interviews, lack of non-verbal communication created a barrier to gaining additional meanings to verbal answers that participants provided.

The researcher had a professional affiliation with the business short-term graduate study abroad program and was familiar with student participants. Given the familiarity with the researcher, student participants could have tried to tailor their messages to impress the researcher. Assumptions were made that participants provided honest responses to the interview questions. As a qualitative study, the researcher was the data collection instrument who not only collected the data but also interpreted data, which could threaten credibility criteria. To strengthen the credibility of this study I employed a number of strategies to increase trustworthiness in the study. These strategies included member checking and peer reviewing. Though limitations were identified, the findings
of this study have many practical implications for developing short-term graduate study abroad programs for business professional graduate business students.

**Major Findings**

Two research questions guided this study:

- What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth?

- What do business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experience?

The results of this study determined that both professional graduate business student and business employer participants found benefits in short-term graduate study abroad programs. Three themes that emerged from student participant data analysis were the following: (a) professional growth, (b) personal growth, and (c) reason for participating. For employer participants, the main themes that emerged were the following: (a) skills needed, (b) meaningful experiences, and (c) value in international experience. Additionally, analysis of data identified several overlapping sub-themes between the two participant groups. This overlap suggested alignment in mutual benefits for both groups. The overlapping sub-themes were the following: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) experiential learning, (e) networking, and (f) professional differentiator.
Benefits of Short-Term Graduate Study Abroad Program: Students

The first research question that guided this study explored the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad experiences on students’ personal and professional growth. Consistent with previous research studies (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Geyer, 2017; Loh et al., 2011; Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Ramakrishna, Sarkar, & Vijayaraman, 2016; Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2003), the results of this study produced two main themes: (a) personal growth and (b) professional growth as the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs.

Personal Growth

One of the themes that emerged in my study from professional graduate business student participants was personal growth. Student participants discussed personal growth as one of the benefits of participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program. Upon deeper analysis of the data, two sub-themes emerged: (a) experiential learning and (b) networking.

In my study, professional graduate business student participants shared how they personally grew through direct experiences of visiting foreign companies, conducting consulting-like projects while abroad, and through general direct interactions with individuals. Networking was also an important component of personal growth to professional graduate business student participants within my study. These findings are consistent with studies conducted by DuVivier and Patitu (2017), Ramakrishna et al. (2016), and Slantcheva-Durst and Danowski (2018). In DuVivier and Patitu (2017), where participants reported personally growing through direct experiences of making
decisions abroad without knowing how that would impact outcomes, business visits were most valued by short-term study abroad participants in Ramakrishna et al. (2016) research study. Similar to my study, one major finding of a study conducted by Slantcheva-Durst and Danowski (2018) was the importance of developing meaningful relationships while participating in a short-term study abroad program.

Professional Growth

Professional growth was another theme that emerged in my analysis of data collected from professional graduate business student participants. All three student participants felt that one of the benefits of participating in a short-term graduate study abroad experience was growing professionally through gaining cultural sensitivity and global awareness. As a result, cultural sensitivity and global awareness emerged as sub-themes for my study.

Professional graduate business student participants felt that learning and understanding the local culture was an important part of their short-term graduate study abroad program when it was applied toward gaining experience or knowledge. Gaining cultural sensitivity and global awareness during their short-term graduate study abroad program helped professional graduate business student participants in my study better support their clients and approach business problems from different point of views. These findings are consistent with results of other studies (Wang, Peyvandi, & Coffey, 2014; Ramakrishna et al., 2016; DuVivier & Patitu, 2017) that determined cultural learning and global awareness were benefits of short-term study abroad experiences.
Reasons for Participating

Reasons for participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program emerged as a theme among professional graduate business student participants in my study. The sub-theme that was consistent among all student participants was professional differentiator. All professional graduate business student participants felt that one of the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs was gaining skills that made them stand out professionally. Professional graduate business student participants felt the experiences and skills gained during their short-term graduate study abroad program gave them a professional advantage over their peers who did not have similar experiences. Professional graduate business student participants in this study felt that having their short-term study abroad program listed on their resume gave them a professional differentiation over other candidates.

This supports Geyer et al. (2017), DuVivier and Patitu (2017), and Loh’s et al. (2011) prior studies on the effects of study abroad experiences. The findings of which indicated students who participate in study abroad programs benefit from an increase in career aspirations and strengthened leadership skills (Geyer et al., 2017), become more professionally confident (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017), and gain skills that improve their professional marketability (Loh et al., 2011).

Benefits of Short-Term Graduate Study Abroad Program: Employer

The second research question that informed my study focused on exploring the benefits short-term graduate study abroad programs provide to employers. The findings of my study identified three key themes: (a) skills needed, (b) meaningful experience,
and (c) value in experience. Further analysis determined six key sub-themes: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) language skills, (d) experiential learning, (e) networking, and (f) professional differentiator. These sub-theme findings were consistent with prior literature focused on employer attitudes toward study abroad and general international experience of employees (Trooboff et al., 2008; Arthur, 2000; Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2003; and Harder et al., 2015).

Skills Needed

One of the themes that emerged from business employer participants was skills needed. Upon further analysis of meaningful segments and key words within this theme, three sub-themes were identified: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, and (c) language skills.

All three business employer participants in my study emphasized the importance of having cultural sensitivity as a skill set in a global market. Employer participants felt having cultural sensitivity allowed the individual to be more effective in working with clients as well as avoiding internal organizational conflicts.

My findings are consistent with Trooboff’s et al. (2008) study that found cultural sensitivity, and ability to communicate well cross-culturally, to be part of personal qualities and skills important to employers. Harder’s et al. (2015) study results suggested that cultural awareness is needed in order to build relationships, a necessary skill that I discussed further under the networking sub-heading. More broadly, Arthur (2000) suggested that having cultural understanding is an important skill needed for today’s global environment. The findings of my study emphasized that employers look for
cultural sensitivity in employees. My findings support Arthur’s (2000) claim that “knowledge of other cultures is increasingly becoming a foundation for success in the global workplace” (pg. 7).

Global awareness became a clear sub-theme of my study as business employer participants consistently shared the need for employees to better understand how a global economy impacts business practices. Mike was the most vocal participant on the importance of having a global mindset. To emphasize that all employees should have this skill, Mike said, “It is really impossible for me to think about how I can do business generally without people that have an understanding of the global economy [and] global culture…”.

Such feedback echoes the findings of studies such as Trooboff et al. (2008) and Harder et al. (2015). The findings of Trooboff’s et al. (2008) study showed that employers place fairly high value on skills within intercultural/global criteria. One of these skills was understanding global economics and political trends (Trooboff et al., 2008). Harder’s et al. (2015) research study findings on employer’s perceived importance of global skills for employees were mixed. The same study found that the majority of employer respondents did indicate that global skills were necessary for employee’s growth within an organization (Harder et al., 2015).

All three business employer participants mentioned language skills as a needed skill for a globalized business environment, as well as a professional differentiator. Gary was the most vocal on emphasizing the importance of having any level of foreign language competency. Though Gary felt that cultural sensitivity was still the most
important skill set, multiple language competency was the second most important skill. Gary felt a professional graduate business student could pick up some level of foreign language even on short-term, two-three-week, study abroad experiences. Mike’s response mirrored Gary’s, he also felt that a short-term study abroad trip would allow the participant to not only get an immersion into a new culture but pick up some level of foreign language as well.

Matt mentioned that having multiple language skills would result in a professional differentiator for his organization. Due to his business having an operational presence in multiple countries around the world, Matt believed an individual who had a cultural experience, foreign travel and foreign language skills would support his business’ future strategic expansions.

These findings were similar to those of Paul and Mukhopadhyay’s study (2003) of two Executive MBA (EMBA) cohorts (21 students in each cohort) that participated in a study abroad program. Paul and Mukhopadhyay (2003) found that the EMBA participants reported they underestimated the importance of having foreign language skills when conducting business in a foreign country. In results of Trooboff et al.’s study (2008), employers value language skills when reviewing future candidates, especially those employers that operate in multiple countries.

Meaningful Experience

Meaningful experience was another theme that emerged from analyzing data collected from business employer participants. Commonalities among the segments of this theme produced two sub-themes: (a) experiential learning, and (b) networking.
Employer participants in this study suggested that participants in short-term graduate study abroad programs should visit other companies and look for learning experiences to help improve business practices within their current employer. Such findings are consistent with the study conducted by Trooboff et al. (2008). In this study, Trooboff et al. (2008) found employers value experiential learning as part of study abroad experience, regardless of the organizational level of the employee’s position.

Another sub-theme among business employer participants that emerged in my study was networking. Employer participants discussed the importance of networking and building relationships as part of professional graduate business student’s experience in short-term graduate study abroad programs. Networking abroad was part of a meaningful study abroad experience because employers relied on their foreign network connection for insight into local business practices, cultural differences, local markets, and other valuable information. In addition to identifying business opportunities, employer participants saw networking as a valuable part of the experience of a short-term graduate study abroad experience for professional graduate business students.

Prior research conducted by Harder et al. (2015) identified similar findings that employers value the ability of their employees to build relationships. A broader study that looked at skills needed to be a global-minded employee found that intercultural relationships are important to drive organizational success (Arthur, 2000).

**Value in Experience**

The final theme among business employer participants that emerged in my study was value in experience. When evaluating the value of short-term graduate study abroad
experience to business employers, a common sub-theme that emerged in my study was professional differentiation.

All employer participants of my study suggested employees and applicants that have participated in short-term graduate study abroad programs would stand out among others without similar experience. Specifically, seeing graduate study abroad experience on an applicant’s resume gets more attention than other resumes without any study abroad experiences. Employer participants in my study also suggested that a current employee participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program would stand out from others on the team who did not have similar experiences.

The findings in my study support prior studies that also found participation in study abroad programs provided professional differentiation (Harder et al., 2015). Harder et al. (2015) found that when employers evaluated candidates with similar professional experiences, they gave preference to candidates that have participated in a study abroad program.

Summary of Major Findings

The results of this study indicated that professional graduate business students experienced professional and personal growth as the result of participating in a short-term business graduate study abroad program. Professional graduate business student participants indicated that gaining better understanding of other cultures, as well as learning how global economies and politics impacted business practices, have contributed to their professional growth. This growth has allowed professional graduate business students to approach domestic business challenges from a different perspective.
Working within diverse groups, visiting local companies, and building relationships were experiences professional graduate business student participants attributed to their personal growth within their corporate organizations. Professional business graduate students valued these experiences because they opened their minds to different points of view on business practices and other cultures. Finally, all professional graduate business student participants indicated one of the main reasons for participating in a short-term graduate study abroad program was to gain professional differentiation within their current and future business employment.

What was interesting to discover was the similarity in findings among business employer participants and professional graduate business student participants of this study. Employers also indicated that professional and personal growth are benefits of participating in a study abroad program. As a result, these experiences provided the participant with professional business differentiation. Business employer participants indicated that cultural sensitivity and global awareness are skills necessary to be successful in a global business market. When evaluating short-term graduate business study abroad programs, business employer participants looked for meaningful experiences that included experiential learning and networking opportunities. These experiences were believed to help bring value to the business organization by improving operations, supporting strategic business goals, and helping make informed business decisions in foreign markets.
Findings of this study supported prior research results on the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs to graduate students. This study contributed to expanding the body of knowledge in the short-term business graduate study abroad topic.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

The unique contribution of this study to the current body of knowledge was simultaneously exploring the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs to professional graduate business students as well as business employers. The analysis of this study identified five mutual sub-themes between student and employer participants that can inform the development of future short-term business graduate study abroad programs to maximize the benefits to both parties. These sub-themes were (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) experiential learning, (d) networking, and (e) professional differentiator. Figure 5.1 demonstrates both the themes and sub-themes for each participant group. The major themes that emerged for each participating group are represented in white boxes, while the overlapping sub-themes are identified in colored boxes.

The discovery of overlapping sub-themes should support faculty and academic administrators, tasked with developing short-term graduate study abroad business programs and to develop experiences that will maximize the benefits to both professional graduate business students and business employers. The findings of this study indicated that short-term graduate study abroad programs should include opportunities for cultural development through participation in diverse groups and interactions with local environments. Networking opportunities should be built into the short-term business
Figure 5.1. Overlapping Themes and Sub-Themes for Professional Graduate Business Students and Business Employers.

Graduate study abroad experience. Such opportunities could include working in groups, hosting social events with diverse groups of participants, interacting with local business leaders, and ensuring that faculty leading the short-term graduate study abroad program have relevant experience within the subject of the program.

Global awareness can be facilitated through company visits and learning about business practices directly from local business leaders. As indicated by one student participant of my study, classroom discussions on impact of global economy on businesses are also valuable. In-class discussion could include how acquired global and cultural experiences through the short-term graduate study abroad program can be applied to domestic business practices.
Experiential learning within short-term graduate study abroad programs was one of the key findings of this study, as a benefit to both business student and business employer participants. Faculty and academic administrators leading short-term graduate business study abroad programs can facilitate experiential learning through hands-on projects completed for foreign companies. Even touring companies abroad provides practical experience to professional graduate students. Through these tours, business student participants can observe best practices that can help improve business operations for their current and future employers. An additional suggestion for experiential learning is to challenge professional graduate business students to identify projects, or tasks, that their current employer would want them to pursue as part of their short-term graduate study abroad program. Such projects would not only provide students with applicable hands-on experience but would deliver direct benefits to the employer.

Short-term graduate study abroad programs that incorporate cultural and global awareness, experiential, and networking experiences would contribute to setting professional graduate business student participants apart from their peers within their current and future organizations. Assigning a study abroad leader with professional experience in the subject matter of the program, either through research, consulting, or direct work experience, would further strengthen business students’ learning experiences abroad. Study abroad leaders with professional experience could better relate to professional graduate business students’ desires to quickly implement learned content directly to their business practices. Additionally, the study abroad leader’s professional network in the business industry could help expand students’ networking opportunities.
Though findings of this study indicated that short term graduate business study abroad programs benefit professional graduate business students, there is no evidence to suggest the need for implementing an institution-wide policy that would require all students to participate in such programs. All professional graduate business student participants in this study self-selected their graduate short-term study abroad program based on their individual interests. These participants indicated their desire to experience cultures outside of the United States, as well as gain confidence in traveling internationally. Assumptions cannot be made that all professional graduate business students would desire to travel abroad. However, based on the findings of this study, professional graduate business programs should consider embedding cultural and global awareness pedagogy into non-study abroad curriculum. This would provide all professional graduate business students with the opportunity to learn a skill set that is valued by employers in today’s global market.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The literature review conducted for this study revealed a limited number of research studies available within the area of short-term graduate study abroad programs and even fewer about business graduate students. Though growth of short-term graduate study abroad programs is prompting a rise in new research studies on this topic (Romano, 2018; Dirkx et al., 2014; Institute of International Education, 2019), few focus specifically on business studies (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018). Even less sources are available in the literature on the discussion of benefits employers see from supporting a student/employee
to attend a short-term graduate study-abroad programs (Trooboff et al., 2008; Harder et al., 2015).

Future qualitative and quantitative research on the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs to professional graduate students and employers would continue to fill the gap that currently exists in the literature. Exploring the differences in benefits of short-term graduate study abroad program participation within various industries would be enriching. Taking the results of this study and developing a larger, quantitative study that can better generalize the benefits of short-term study abroad programs for professional graduate students. Better understanding what working professional students learn within short-term graduate study abroad programs that they do not learn from leisure travel would build on the findings of this study.

Future studies could explore the role, if any, gender plays in short term graduate study abroad participation as well as in international business travel assignments. The demographics of this study’s participants revealed that none of the female professional graduate business students had traveled internationally for business. However, all male business employer participants indicated that they had traveled internationally for business. Finally, comparing and contrasting the perceived benefits of short-term study abroad programs between undergraduate and graduate business students could help inform faculty that develop undergraduate and graduate business study-abroad programs.

Conclusion

This study explored the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad experiences to professional graduate business students and business employers. Through open-ended
questions, this study explored what specific experiences within the short-term graduate study abroad programs do professional graduate students attribute to professional and personal growth and employers attributed as a benefit to their organization. Additionally, this study explored what each participant considered to be a reason and value of participating in the short-term graduate study abroad program. This study was guided by two research questions:

- What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do professional graduate business students attribute to their professional and personal growth?

- What do business employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experiences?

The purpose of this study was to contribute to filling the gap in the literature on benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs to professional graduate business students, as well as business employers. This study provided insight into why professional graduate students decided to participate in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their graduate studies. The exploratory nature of this study allowed student participants to share various experiences that contributed to their professional and personal growth as part of their participation in short-term graduate study abroad programs. Additionally, this study identified what employers considered to be benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs, what experiences were valuable for employees to participate in as part of a short-term graduate study abroad program, and the overall value employers placed on such experiences.
In addressing the first research question, three themes emerged within data collected from professional graduate student participants: (a) professional growth, (b) personal growth, and (c) reason for participating. Additionally, five sub-themes were identified: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) experiential learning, (d) networking, and (e) professional differentiator.

In addressing the second research question, three themes emerged within data collected from employers: (a) skills needed, (b) meaningful experiences, and (c) value in international experience. Deeper analysis of the themes produced six sub-themes: (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) global awareness, (c) language skills, (d) networking, (e) experiential learning, and (f) professional differentiator.

A review of sub-themes for each set of participants revealed five overlapping similarities. Both employer and student participants found cultural sensitivity, global awareness, experiential learning, and networking as contributing factors to professional and personal growth. Additionally, both professional graduate business student and business employer participants suggested that gaining professional differentiations was the main value of short-term graduate study abroad programs.

There was a lack of overall academic literature involving professional graduate business student participants, employer participants, and studies exploring benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs within the business field. The results of this study begin to fill that gap. The findings of this study also helped provide practical implications to support the development of future short-term graduate study abroad programs designed for professional graduate business students. As globalization
continues to evolve and enrollment in short-term graduate studies continue to grow, it is important for academic institutions to understand which short-term graduate study abroad experiences produce maximum benefits to professional graduate business students and their current and future business employers.
APPENDICES
Appendix A

IRB Approval

Dear Dr. Havice,

The Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the protocol “Understanding the Benefit that Short-Term Graduate Study Abroad Programs Provide to Professional Graduate Students and Their Employer” using exempt review procedures and a determination was made on February 8, 2019, that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as **Exempt under category 2** in accordance with federal regulations 45 CFR 46.104(d).

No further action, amendments, or IRB oversight of the protocol is required except in the following situations:

1. **Substantial changes made to the protocol that could potentially change the review level.** Researchers who modify the study purpose, study sample, or research methods and instruments in ways not covered by the exempt categories will need to submit an expedited or full board review application.

2. **Occurrence of unanticipated problem or adverse event; any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects, complications, and/or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance immediately.**

3. **Change in Principal Investigator (PI)**

All research involving human participants must maintain an ethically appropriate standard, which serves to protect the rights and welfare of the participants. This involves obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality of data. Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three (3) years after completion of the study. The Clemson University IRB is committed to facilitating ethical research and protecting the rights of human subjects. Please contact us if you have any questions and use the IRB number and title when referencing the study in future correspondence.

Best,

Amy

Amy Smitherman
IRB Coordinator

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE
Clemson University, Division of Research
391 College Avenue, Suite 406K-1., Clemson, SC 29631, USA
P: 864-656-6460
http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/
Confidentiality Notice: This message and any attachments contain information which may be confidential and privileged. Unless you are the addressee (or authorized to receive for the addressee), you may not use, copy or disclose to anyone the message or any information contained in the message. If you have received the message in error, please advise the sender by reply e-mail and delete the message.
Hi Jane,

I appreciate you following-up on the amendment request. I have been conducting interviews for a vacant position in the IRB office and we are behind on reviews.

Your proposed changes will not change the exempt determination under category 2. You may implement the changes.

Best,
Nalinee

Nalinee Patin, CIP
IRB Administrator
OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE
Clemson University, Division of Research
391 College Avenue, Suite 406, Clemson, SC 29631, USA
P: 864-656-0636
www.clemson.edu/research

This message and any attachments contain information which may be confidential and privileged. Unless you are the addressee (or authorized to receive for the addressee), you may not use, copy or disclose to anyone the message or any information contained in the message. If you have received the message in error, please advise the sender by reply e-mail and delete the message.
Dear (name of professional graduate student),

My name is Jane Layton and I am a doctoral student at Clemson University’s Educational Leadership program. I am conducting interviews as part of a research study to better understand the benefit that short term graduate study abroad programs have on the student’s professional and personal growth, as well as how the student’s employer benefits from the student’s participation in short-term graduate study abroad programs.

The study involves an interview with the student (employee) who participated in the short-term graduate study abroad program as well as a separate interview with the student’s employer who approved the student’s participation. Your time commitment would not exceed an hour, which will include both the interview and your review of the interview transcript for accuracy. Participation is completely voluntary and both parties can withdraw from the study at any time.

Your and your employer’s participation in this study would provide valuable information that will guide the development of future short-term graduate study abroad programs to better support personal and professional lit of students and maximize the return on investment to the employer.

If you are willing to participate in this study and willing to share your employer’s contact information for a separate invitation to the study, please complete a brief demographic survey below and read the Informed Consent form attached.

**Demographic Survey:**

1. Please list other study abroad experiences
2. Please list non-study abroad international experiences and indicate if the trip was leisure or business
3. Indicate your years of professional experience (round number):

Thank you for your time and participation.

Kindest regards,

Jane Layton
Doctoral Student, Clemson University

Attachment
Appendix D

Employer Recruitment E-mail

Hello (name of student’s employer),

My name is Jane Layton and I am a doctoral student at Clemson University’s Educational Leadership program. I am conducting interviews as part of a research study to better understand the benefit that short term graduate study abroad programs have on the student’s professional and personal growth, as well as how the student’s employer benefits from the student’s participation in short-term graduate study abroad programs.

(name of graduate student) has provided your contact information as his/her manager who approved their participation in the short-term graduate study abroad program. In addition to interviewing the student, I would like to also interview the student’s manager to better understand why employers chose to support their employee’s participation in such programs, and what benefit could the employee’s experience provide to the organization. Your time commitment to the study will not exceed an hour, which will include the interview as well as your review of the interview transcript for accuracy.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw from the study at any point. I am also happy to provide you with an e-mail outlining the study, and the Informed Consent letter, so that you can review it prior to making the decision to participate or not.

If you are willing to participate in the study, could you please answer the following demographic questions?

1. Which study abroad programs have you participated in?
2. What international professional experience do you have?
3. How many years of professional experience do you have overall?
4. How many years have you been in your current role?

Thank you for your time and participation.

Kindest regards,

Jane Layton
Doctoral Student, Clemson University
Appendix E

Pilot Study

Description and Purpose

For this pilot study, I conducted two interviews. One interview was with a former professional graduate business student who participated in a short-term study abroad program during his graduate academic studies while he was working full time. The second interview was with a business leader who had managed several individuals who pursued graduate business degrees and participated in short-term study abroad programs during their academic studies. To recruit participants for this pilot study, I sent a direct recruiting e-mail to the first three students on the sample list. This e-mail asked for willingness to participate in an interview for this study and included the type of questions that would guide the interview process. The recruiting e-mail for students and employers can be found in Appendix A and B.

Due to time sensitivity of the pilot study, I selected the first individual who responded to be in this pilot study. One other student responded positively, but much later than the first individual; thus, I responded with gratitude and requested a later interview date so that he could be included in the full study. One student responded and declined to participate in the study. I followed the same process with employers. The student who was selected for the pilot study provided contact information for a manager who played a role in the student’s involvement with the short-term study abroad program, but was not the individual who directly approved the leave of absence. I selected the first employer to respond as the participant in the pilot study.
The purpose of the pilot study was to assess the practicality of the interview questions, to collect and analyze the data needed to address research questions of this study. The pilot study also allowed me to practice interview skills and identify any barriers that I might not have anticipated in designing the study.

**Trustworthiness of Study**

To maintain the ethical integrity of this study pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect the individual’s anonymity. This practice reduced the risk of emotional harm as a result of distributing the findings of the study (Merriam, 1998; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). To maintain credibility of this study, member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) was utilized by sharing the transcript of the interview with each participant to ensure accuracy of the data collected (Krefting, 1991). This practice gave participants the opportunity to correct or expand the information that they provided.

**Research Question**

This study addressed the following research questions: (1) What experiences within a short-term graduate study abroad program do students attribute to their professional and personal growth? (2) What do employers perceive to be the benefit of employees participating in short-term graduate study abroad programs as part of their academic graduate program experience?

**Conceptual Framework**

The intersectionality of theoretical frameworks of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), and Social Constructivism (Vygotsky,
1962) informed the conceptual framework for this study. Dewey’s (1938) theory discussed how one’s past, current, and future experiences contribute to their learning. Thus, all experiences impact an individual’s ongoing decision-making and informs the idea that experiences of study abroad programs contribute to the student’s lifelong learning (Perry et al., 2012).

The process of asking a graduate student to critically reflect on their short-term study abroad experience and to analyze what they learned in this experience directly relates to Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning theory. The theoretical frame of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962) supports the design of this study in collecting students’ perception of their entire experience, without limiting the participant to reflect on any one specific situation. Lev Vygotsky’s (1962) social constructivism theory states that individuals give meaning to everything (subjects or things) they encounter in order to understand the world that they live in. Through social constructivism the meanings continue to evolve through continuous interaction with other individuals and guided by “cultural norms that operate in individual’s lives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21).

Institutional Review Board

This pilot study was completed in Spring, 2019 to inform the full study. The IRB approval was granted by Clemson University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix C).
Methodology

My study used a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive design approach to gain a deeper understanding of how short-term study abroad programs benefit the graduate student’s personal and professional growth, while also attempting to understand the benefits of these experiences to the employer. A semi-structured interview approach allowed for participants to freely share personal interpretation of their experience without being limited to questions that might have missed a key element. Such approach allowed for details to be found in “people’s understandings and interactions” (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, p. 14). The methods for this study were guided by a similar study conducted by Ly et al. (2015) that utilized Sekaran and Bougie’s (2010) exploratory approach to collect information from multiple stakeholders.

Participants

This study began to address the gap in the current body of knowledge around the benefits of short-term study abroad experiences for professional graduate business students and business employers; thus, criterion sampling was used to reach the desired group and sample number. Criterion sampling is part of purposeful sampling strategy that allows the researcher to select a sample group based on predetermined criteria (Patton, 1990; Emmel, 2013). Purposeful sampling allows for “key informants in the field” (Suri, 2011, p. 66) to provide detailed information needed to address the research question.

For this study, a list of student participants was obtained from the research site’s study abroad office. The selection criteria included working professional students who
participated in a short-term study abroad program as part of their graduate business degree program. Student participants were recruited via e-mail directly from the researcher. Participants were also asked to provide contact information for their employer who approved the leave time for their study abroad experience. The list of employers provided by the student participants made up the second sample group. The employers were sent a separate recruiting e-mail directly by the researcher.

Due to the specific profile of participants, and the sensitive nature of collecting contact information of students’ employers, the sample pool was restrictive. One participant from each sample group (professional graduate business student and employer) was included in the pilot study to help inform any changes that would be needed to implement the full study.

**Data Collection**

Due to participants either no longer living within a reasonable driving distance, or due to their schedule constraints, data was collected through phone interviews. Both interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using a third-party service. Interviews lasted between thirty and forty minutes. The interview process was designed to be open-ended and exploratory to allow the participant the freedom to share any information they felt was important (Ly et al., 2015).

Initial interview questions were designed utilizing Dewey’s (1938) purpose of experience learning theory and Perry’s et al. (2012) interpretation of how Dewey’s work can be used to develop questions that address critical reflection needed for the learning process to occur. Perry et al. (2012) identified eight items participants need to respond to
in order to collect evidence of reflective thinking. Perry et al. (2012) stated “perceptions of their ability to actively question, carefully consider, challenge firmly held beliefs or ideas, implement processes that change their typical way of doing things, and to consider alternative ways of handling situations” (p. 680).

My interview questions were designed to guide the participant on the topic of the study but allowed for flexibility for the participant to expand on the topic. The pilot study identified limitations on how the original questions were structured, which ultimately created constraints to participants’ responses. After the pilot study, I made changes to the original questions to allow for a more informative discussion. The original interview questions for professional graduate business students and business employers, along with notes and changes made after the pilot study, can be found in Appendix D and E.

Data Analysis

The data for this study was collected via phone interviews, which were recorded and then transcribed. To derive meaning from the data, a theme construction concept was used (Merriam, 1998) by “consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said…” (p. 178). To construct themes, units of data (Merriam, 1998) which are “any meaningful segment of data” (p. 179), were identified in each transcript. The purpose of this pilot study guided the decision making behind which words or sections of the transcript were identified as meaningful (Merriam, 1998). The units of data from each transcript were compared to identify a possible commonality that could be grouped together and analyzed for patterns to identify themes (Merriam, 1998; Ryan & Bernard,
2003). The specific terms for the themes were informed by the data itself, the current literature, as well as my positionality (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Findings

The pilot study was designed to reflect the purpose and structure of the full study. The full study aims to begin filling in the gap that exists in academic literature around the benefits of short-term study abroad programs to both professional graduate business students as well as employers. By first conducting the pilot study, I was able to test the interview process, interview questions, and to identify any unanticipated roadblocks to conducting a full study. The data collected in this pilot study began to uncover themes between the professional graduate business student’s and business employer’s critical reflection to the purpose and benefits of short-term study abroad programs. These themes were the following: (a) cultural/social development, (b) professional differentiator, (c) personal development, and (d) experiential learning. Below, I discuss each theme.

Cultural/Social Development: In the interview, the professional graduate business student continuously mentioned the importance of learning about other cultures, both from social interaction and business practices. The professional graduate business student provided explanation for why exposure to other cultures was important. Mark stated:

I interact with folks, I wouldn’t say on a regular basis, but probably on a bi-monthly basis that were operating in different parts of the world. So, it is nice to be able to have that sort of insight.
The business employer participant shared very similar feedback on why cultural and social development was a benefit of short-term study abroad programs. Richard explained:

I think the big thing is human relationships... so, to me the more important part is, can they go into someone else’s office, in a different culture, and be comfortable that they know how to present themselves, they know how to present the product or service that they’re trying to sell, and that they can make a connection with whoever is sitting across the table?

**Professional Differentiator:** A key word I found to stand out for both participants was “differentiator”. Both used this word to describe the benefit of a short-term study abroad experience in graduate school as a way improve employability. When asked why the professional graduate business student decided to participate in a short-term study abroad program during graduate school, Mike responded:

For a number of reasons, one I would say it is a clear differentiator in the space that I’m working in amongst my peers to have that second level of education and then have some study abroad experience. It certainly sets you apart from the rest.

Richard’s response was similar when asked if international experience was important to have for an applicant. The employer reflected a similar thought process:

As more and more people pursue higher level degrees...you need something to differentiate yourself... having international experience really pops out to me because I think it is valuable for business.

**Personal Development:** Though this theme emerged, it was indirect to my interview questions. I have modified the questions for the full study to gain a better understanding of what participants mean when they reference personal development as a benefit. The professional graduate business student participant mentioned personal
development specifically in two areas—personal benefit of participating in a study abroad program, and as a benefit to organizations through the employer. The professional graduate business student linked participation in a study abroad program as an employee to organization’s investment in individualized talent development by stating:

Well, and honestly I would imagine that it is cheaper for the organization and more effective to allow each individual to find what helps them develop their own personal skills and professional skills, rather than investing in kind of one size fits all class training for various skills… the employees are approaching you to say here is what I am really interested in building, here is what I want to invest myself and develop. Well, of course they’re going to be invested and actually follow through and be a better individual for some.

Richard referred to personal development as more of improving soft skills. Modification to the question was made after the pilot study to allow for a deeper discussion of what is meant by improving soft skills as a result of participating in a graduate study abroad program.

**Experiential Learning:** When asked what characteristic participants looked for in a short-term graduate study abroad program, one common theme surfaced. Both the professional graduate business student and business employer looked for experiences outside of the classroom. Specifically, both mentioned experiences with other businesses as an important benefit of short-term graduate study abroad program. Richard spent several minutes on this topic, leading me to believe that he found experiential learning particularly important. The employer shared:

What I want [study abroad participants] to do is make sure that they are putting themselves in a business setting versus maybe just going and taking classes or whatnot… It’s, can you get into some industry and get some level of exposure to
how business is done in that region? That’d be a key takeaway for me, and that would be a win from my perspective.

Though the professional graduate business student and business employer differed on how these four themes were important to them personally, their answers mutually reflected on all four themes. I found the overall design of the study, initially tested through this pilot study, allowed for the collection of meaningful data. The findings addressed the research questions of the study and provided implications for future studies in the area of graduate short-term study abroad programs and stakeholders.

**Discussion and Implications**

After completing the pilot study and reviewing the data, it became clear the results of the study would not provide specific characteristics that both parties are looking for in a short-term study abroad experience. Instead, the initial findings implied both professional graduate business students and business employers are looking for broader experiences. Each believed study abroad experiences enhanced an individual’s growth in a way they both find beneficial. In lieu of specific characteristics, this pilot study identified common themes that could provide guidance to academic leaders involved in developing such programs, thus meeting the purpose of the study.

The results of my study, along with some empirical studies of faculty’s teaching goals (Niehaus & Wegener, 2018), could inform further research studies. Additional studies could look at identifying commonalities and differences between what recipients (graduate students and employers) are expecting from a short-term study abroad program and what facilitators (faculty leading study abroad program) are delivering.
The completion of the pilot study informed the need to make some slight modifications prior to completing the full study. These changes were (a) modify interview questions to accommodate for the possible lack of face-to-face interview; (b) amend questions to allow for a deeper discussion on desired experiences for a graduate short-term study abroad program; and (c) change participant selection criteria for employer participants.

Reflection on Process

Conducting the pilot study helped highlight areas of weakness that I had as a novice researcher as well as the need to refine my research interview skills. I have conducted many interviews, but never from the lens of a researcher with the limitations of IRB requirements as well as the importance of not introducing personal biases into the interview process. The pilot study was crucial in helping me identify unanticipated challenges, such as adapting to phone-interviews without the benefit of face-to-face rapport building. I also realized I underestimated the sensitivity of asking students to engage their direct managers to participate in this study.

Interview Process

I fully anticipated to conduct face-to-face interviews. Because of the logistical nature of possible participants, I quickly realized these individuals could have changed positions since their graduation and moved away. I had to adapt how I would record the interview since my intended recording device (my phone) would be serving as a communications tool. In order to stay within my approved IRB data storage
requirements, I had to find a recorder that would allow for password protection storage while also have the capability to transfer data securely to my computer.

With phone interviews, I lost the ability to sense the energy of the individual because I could not observe their body language. The lack of personal connection led to awkward pauses and transitions to the next topic. However, I also gained the benefit of flexibility and convenience of scheduling the interview.

Reflection on Construction of Interview Questions

In conducting the professional graduate business student interview, I realized the student had changed several professional roles since participating in the graduate short-term study abroad program. I wanted to make sure the data collected was not skewed by the current role and new perception the professional graduate business student might have on the benefits of the short-term study abroad program. I added a clarifying question asking the professional graduate business student to reflect back to the impact their experience in the short-term study abroad program had on the professional role they had at the time of enrollment. I also added a question to gather some specifics about the role the professional graduate business student was in at the time of participation in the graduate short-term study abroad program. All original and edited professional graduate business student interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

One major limitation I encountered was the hesitation from professional graduate business students to involve the individual employer who was directly involved in approving their leave of absence. However, they were very eager to provide a contact for a colleague who held a superior, or managerial role, that the professional graduate
business student felt was instrumental in supporting their participation in a short-term graduate study abroad program. I modified the original question for the employer participant without losing the core purpose that directly informs one of the research questions of the study. The modified question prompted the employer to reflect on graduate short-term study abroad experiences they would consider valuable enough for their employee to participate. All original and edited employer interview questions can be found in Appendix E.

Other slight modifications to professional graduate business student and business employer interview questions included more specific questions as well as broader discussion-like questions. Original interview questions and post pilot study modifications can be found in Appendix D and E.

Conclusion

The pilot study will inform the full dissertation study that will be designed to understand the benefits of short-term graduate study abroad programs to graduate, working, professional business, students as well as business employers. Modifications made to selection criteria of employer participants as well as modifications made to interview questions will require IRB notification and approval of the proposed changes.

A number of studies have been done on development and benefits of study abroad programs, much of the focus has been on undergraduate students. Globalization, and increase in graduate student enrollments, is fostering the expansion of studies into graduate study abroad programs, including short-term study abroad programs (Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018; DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Niehaus & Wegener, 2018). At
the present time the current literature discussing graduate study abroad programs focus on Higher Education and Student Affairs disciplines. Scant literature is available to better understand the benefits of short-term study abroad participation among graduate business students, and more specifically professional graduate business students.

This study seeks to fill the gap in the current literature within the area of graduate short-term study abroad programs. The findings of my study will provide practical implications for college faculty and administrators involved in development of graduate short-term study abroad programs for graduate business programs.
Appendix F

Student Participant Interview Questions with Post Pilot-Study Revisions

1. Please describe why you decided to participate in a short-term graduate study abroad program as part of your graduate school experience.
   a. Possible follow up question—what specific characteristics about your short-term graduate study abroad program appealed to you at the time of program consideration and why.

2. Please describe the experiences of your short-term graduate study abroad program that were most meaningful to you.
   a. Why were they most meaningful?

3. Please elaborate on how you think your experience in the short-term graduate study abroad program contributed to your personal growth. What about your professional growth? How?
   Added post pilot study: Do you work with or any clients that are international?

4. Please explain how your experiences in this short-term study abroad program impacted your contribution to your employer.
   Added post pilot study: What were the experiences and what impact did they have? —soft skills? How did the experience impact your role at that time or helped with moving to next role?

The following were added as the result of the pilot study:
5. If you were hiring someone with the same experience, what would you look for?

6. How do you feel about short-term vs. long term study abroad experiences?

7. What about your professional role at the time of enrollment in the short-term study abroad program contribute to your ability to participate in the short-term study abroad program?

8. What other information pertaining to our discussion would you like to share?
Appendix G

Employer Participant Interview Questions with Post Pilot-Study Revisions

1. Please describe the value that employees with international experience bring to your organization.

2. Please describe why you decided to approve (student/employee’s name) participation in a short-term graduate study abroad program as part of their graduate school experience.

As a result of conducting the pilot study this question was revised to:
If one of your team members, who is pursuing a graduate degree, is requesting an approval for a leave of absence to participate in a study abroad for several weeks or a month, what specific characteristics would you look for in their experience that you would consider valuable enough to approve that amount of leave of absence?

3. Please share how their experience in the short-term graduate study abroad program contributed to their professional growth and to the organization. (*will not use if not relevant to participant*)

4. What types of short-term graduate study abroad experiences would you recommend to a working professional graduate student that would be beneficial to your organization?

5. When reviewing job applicants, what type of international experience do you look for?

6. How do you feel about working professionals, who are pursuing graduate degrees, requesting study abroad participation to be considered as part of their organizational talent development?

7. Please share any additional information that you believe would be helpful to our discussion.
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<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Conceptual Framework</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student's short-term graduate study abroad program experience that attributed to professional and personal growth</td>
<td>• Personal growth&lt;br&gt;• Professional growth&lt;br&gt;• Reason for participating</td>
<td>• Cultural sensitivity&lt;br&gt;• Global awareness&lt;br&gt;• Experiential learning&lt;br&gt;• Networking&lt;br&gt;• Professional differentiator</td>
<td>• Experiential learning (Dewey, 1938)&lt;br&gt;• Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997)&lt;br&gt;• Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962)</td>
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<td>What employers perceive to be the benefit of short-term graduate study abroad programs to employees</td>
<td>• Skills needed&lt;br&gt;• Meaningful experiences&lt;br&gt;• Value in international experience</td>
<td>• Cultural sensitivity&lt;br&gt;• Global awareness&lt;br&gt;• Language skills&lt;br&gt;• Networking&lt;br&gt;• Experiential learning/business application&lt;br&gt;• Professional differentiator</td>
<td>• Experiential learning (Dewey, 1938)&lt;br&gt;• Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997)&lt;br&gt;• Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962)</td>
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### Example of Transcript Coding

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<th>Transcript Excerpt</th>
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<td>Mary</td>
<td>“It was kind of personal and professional. On the personal side, just the networking with my cohorts because it was a smaller group, you got to know them pretty well. And learning from their professional experiences. We had people from different industries and different professional roles. So, kind of gaining their insights to different problems in really just the same class. We’re studying the same material, but we all have different opportunities to bring knowledge to the table based on our experience. So that for me just… That was very meaningful, just to expand my network. And then more-so professionally, being able to make some good connections. I thought that, that was the most value add for the classes that we had. Not to mention, you can learn something in class, but being able to interact with local companies and apply that in a way that could be meaningful for them.”</td>
<td>Personal growth, Professional growth</td>
<td>Networking, Experiential learning</td>
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<td>Nancy</td>
<td>“I think really just the discussion with different people. I mean, I know that’s not pinpointing one experience, but I think because the group was so diverse in general, we had people from different nationalities, and we had people from different ages, and then the companies we went to were very diverse. So, I think just being able to discuss things with people who were so different and getting different perspectives was the meaningful part for me.”</td>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td>Cultural sensitivity</td>
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| Mike                  | “It is really impossible for me to think about how I can do business generally without people that have an understanding of the global economy, the global culture, other things like that in today’s day and age, because there is really very few, if any, decisions that we make that are going to be purely region-specific or U.S.-specific, whatever it may be. Even in our world where our textile division is 90% sales in the U.S., everything that we do is affected by either inputs from abroad, other people abroad competing with us, the broader geopolitical landscape, which as we all know is in a time of transition, to put it nicely.”

“So, I think having that sensitivity to not only there’s a big world out there where there is a bunch of great ideas you can pull from, but to [say] ‘Hey, people do something different somewhere else, maybe we can employ some of that.’ But also, as we work with international partners, either from a supply standpoint or as we try to go into sales internationally, having people that actually have real understanding of the way people do things in China, or the way people do things in France, or wherever it may be; that’s where we’re going. There is no way to put a value on it.” | • Skills needed  
• Meaningful experience | • Cultural sensitivity  
• Global awareness  
• Experiential learning |
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<td>Matt</td>
<td>“...Obviously, when we’re recruiting individuals and we’re looking at a resume, having international experience, period, whether it’s through an educational program, study abroad program, a job, an internship. One &amp; another one benefit for several reasons. One, it is just a more well-rounded student or a more well-rounded individual with different experiences as well as we look at the complexity of our organization and our businesses. Having someone that can think differently in terms of how we solve problems. They are more open-minded, they have diversity of thought, diversity of background.”</td>
<td>Skills needed</td>
<td>Cultural sensitivity</td>
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<td>Meaningful experience</td>
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<td>Value in international experience</td>
<td>Professional differentiator</td>
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