Does Exchange Really Matter?

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1. Introduction

Hong Kong claims itself the Cosmopolitan City of Asia. Being very “internationalized” is thus a tradition she is very proud of, to which she is definitely committed. As a result, tertiary institutions also step up their effort to encourage students to go overseas to study, work, play and explore. Annually, in CityU alone, we have nearly 1,000 students being “internationalized”. Initially when the exchange quota was small, returnees did experience better academic improvement and career maturity, clear outcomes of exchange. However as the floodgate is opened, employers and administrators alike, begin to question the outcome if not the wisdom behind, because the impact of exchange on the students was neither profound nor lasting. After all, is it still true that, in this age of technology-driven information explosion, “Reading 10,000 books is not as good as travelling 10,000 miles”? It boils down to pre-departure preparation of the students for the intellectual and cultural challenges ahead, on top of logistic arrangements.

2. Employers’ Perspective

Exchange and overseas exposure are so common now that they are no longer a critical factor in the selection of fresh graduates, especially when no special difference is found. The traditional expectation of better English, self-confidence, mastery of current affairs, personal composure as natural and expected results of exchange no longer hold true. The impact of one academic semester is naturally not as obvious as that of a full degree, whether at bachelor or master level. Once again, the key point is how to make exchange matter.

3. Why do you want to go for exchange?

The most common reasons students have in mind when they go for exchange are a combination of the following:

(1) Enhancement of English proficiency
(2) Better personal maturity
(3) International exposure
(4) Cultural sensitivity
(5) Better learning culture/habit
(6) Career competitiveness
(7) Happy tour/memory
The above are legitimate and reasonable expectations. However, without necessary preparation and change in mind-set before the trip, you may return disappointed and empty-handed, with only digital memories of the places you have visited as a long-stay tourist.

4. **How to prepare for your exchange?**

The preparation for exchange comprises two components, survival and developmental. For the former, here is a useful check-list: travelling document, student visa, finance, residence, travelling, life and travel insurance, medical care, academic regulations and course enrolment.

On the developmental side, if you want to enhance yourself as a student of higher learning, a matured person and successful careerist after your return, here are some suggestions which will be further elaborated in the following paragraphs.

(1) Immerse yourself totally in quality English whilst in HK.
(2) Develop your critical, creative, conceptual and contextual thinking skills.
(3) Brush up your mastery of world affairs/news.
(4) Understand the culture, economy, society and politics of the host country and city.
(5) Develop a deep and proactive learning strategy.
(6) Enhance your understanding of HK and Chinese culture.
(7) Cultivate personal interest and hobby.

5. **English Immersion**

In spite of popular belief to the contrary, I do think that the English proficiency of our students has a reasonable foundation, and all that is needed from them is a lot of hardwork to brush up! The most effective strategy to enhance your English is to immerse yourself in quality English – read, write, speak, listen and even think in English.

- Read aloud in English everyday for 15 minutes and record it to check your progress.
- Keep a diary and make sure you write at least two hundred words a day. Concentrate on personal reflection rather than activity description.
- Read a good novel or poetry written by outstanding authors of the host country before your exchange.
- Read newspapers and quality magazines, then try to summarise the content AND cultivate your own viewpoint.
- Listen to TV and radio news 3 times a day, morning, noon, evening.
- Develop an English speaking group or use English in your project discussion.
- Talk to exchange students especially those from your target host country and socialize with them.
Without a change in learning strategy and habit, you will be more confident in using the English you have, rather than enhance your “database”. Try the above even for a few weeks, you will be surprised by your progress.

6. **Thinking Skills**

The ability to think is the single most important skills you need to develop in higher education. Thinking is a skill, a habit as well as a strategy which needs regular practice. Here are six useful books:

- J. Adair : Effective Decision Making
- F.F. Armesto : Ideas That Changed The World
- C. Rohmann : The Dictionary of Important Ideas and Thinkers
- 薛偉良 : 思維鍛鍊法
- 薛偉良 : 系統思維
- 薛偉良 : 系統思維 II 關係思考

The above books can help you to master both the process and content of thinking that will be useful for interaction with people of the host country and your academic studies. They are available at the reception counter of SDS at 6/F, Amenities Building, opposite to Wei Hing Theatre. Finally, keep a small note book of your ideas, and issues you have explored. Over time, you will become an “interesting and knowledgeable” person to the people of your host country.

7. **Current Affairs and Internationalization**

Being a global citizen can be manifested at different levels starting with a good understanding of the basic development trends as well as the major events affecting the host country, region, context and the world. Reading newspaper and magazines, watching TV, listening to radio are a must. SDS offers current affairs workshops in their Personal Success Programme, and runs a weekly sharing group on Mondays 5:30 – 6:30 pm at Y5402 from Week Three to Week Thirteen every semester. In addition, a 5 session talk-series by Mr. Tsang Chung Wing of HK Economic Daily is offered starting first Sunday in February. All the five 3-hour talks, designed for students on overseas exchange and internship, have FULL house attendance, showing its obvious popularity.

Internationalization or global citizenship at a higher level means a better understanding of the past of the whole world, including past history, economic development, famous people, key events, strength and weakness, origin of its culture and people. Such a comprehensive understanding will give you a very good context to understand the host country. Without this background your understanding will be very shallow and sketchy. In addition, this learning process is definitely very interesting and worthwhile. Your horizon will be broadened as a result.
Here are a few books, also available at SDS counter, you may find interesting:

- C. Patten : What Next?
- 報羅甘迺迪 : 霸權興衰史 1500 – 2000
- 房龍 : The Story of Mankind 人類的故事
- 宮崎正勝 : 世界史圖解
- OUP : A Dictionary of Modern History
- Economist : World in Figures 2009
- Economist : World in 2009
- 劉必榮 : 國際觀的第一本書
- J. Baggini : Making Sense: Philosophy behind the Headlines

After reading general world history, you still have to know the history of the host country.

The next level of internationalization is your humanitarian concern for the suffering of the “exploited, suppressed and poverty-stricken” so much so that you might wish to join non-governmental organizations like Red Cross or Oxfam to serve in the under-developed countries, or dig deep in your pocket for donation in case of natural disaster relief.

Finally, internationalization can enhance your choices in life. You can choose where you want to live, work and study. It will help you in your workplace, where you have to relate with people from different cultures and countries.

8. Personal Maturity

Being alone by yourself in a different city away from home is the single most effective driving force in your development as a person, research on the impact of higher education has concluded. You have more quality time with yourself, thus you will come to know yourself much better, and self-understanding is the basis of personal maturity. In addition, you will be able to reflect more meaningfully about your past, present and future. You are in charge of every minute and hour of your life now. You can ponder on what sort of person you would like to be, how would you plan your career and how would you serve your family and community, questions that you have no time for in HK may suddenly become so near and dear.

Leisure reading, including novels, poetry and self-improvement books will give nourishment for your “soul” or “spiritual development”. Here are a few suggestions:

- 李鵬 : 一生應認識的 23 個人
- G. Corey : I Never Knew I Had a Choice
- R. Pausch : The Last Lecture
- M. Albom : Tuesdays with Morrie
- A. de Saint-Exupery : The Little Prince
R. Bach : Jonathan Livingston Seagull 天地一沙鷗
P. Coelho : The Alchemist
E. Fromm : The Art of Loving
J. Powell 包約翰 : Why Am I Afraid to Love? 為什麼我不敢愛
P. Bronson : What Should I Do With My Life?
J.D. Salinger : Catcher in the Rye
V. Frankl : Men’s Search for Meaning
H. Hesse : Siddhartha
傅佩榮 : 哲學與人生

The above books are available at the counter of SDS, 6/F, Amenities Building for long-term borrowing.

In addition, SDS also offer personal growth workshops and talks through Personal Success Programme which is offered in the first two months of every semester.

9. Understanding Hong Kong and China

It is quite likely you will be asked such questions during your exchange:

Tell me something about HK.
Is HK only a business centre?
How far is “one country, two systems” implemented in HK?
How similar or different is HK from China?
What is the relationship between HK and China?
Is HK a democratic, free and capitalist city?
How cosmopolitan is HK?
How common is English in HK?

All the above questions require a very good and in-depth understanding of HK, China and East Asia before you can engage in a meaningful conversation over say a meal. Short answers perhaps you can give, but in-depth critical exchange, and in English, is not that easy. So some intellectual preparation before departure is necessary.

Again the following books can be of help:

魯迅 : 狂人日記、吶喊、徬徨、阿 Q 正傳
曾仲榮 : 香港：誰邊緣化了你？
李敖 : 北京法源寺
曾仲榮 : 中國國情第一課
曾仲榮 : 中國國情新一課
曾仲榮 : 經濟投資七堂課
蔣夢麟 : 西潮
If you need a quick glance of Chinese Culture try to read 論語、道德經、易經和心經. Without a basic appreciation of the above classics, the pillars of Chinese heritage, you cannot really claim to be Chinese at heart.

10. Effective Learning Strategy

Learning-to-learn, life-long-learning and happy learning are the buzz words in education in HK now. Our life as it develops is a comprehensive learning experience as we have to cope with the many changes in different dimensions of and stages of our life as our life blossom over time. However the emphasis here in higher education is more on academic, cognitive and intellectual development, for which the following two constructs can help you to better understand them.

Bloom’s Taxonomy on Outcome of Learning:

- Recall what you have learnt
- Comprehend the structure and function
- Apply
- Analyse
- Synthesise
- Evaluate

Perry’s Intellectual Development:

- Dualism: the world is black and white
- Multiplicity: many ways to understand one issue
- Relativism, contextual, conditional: knowledge is not absolute
- Relativism committed: you make your choice in that particular situation

Here are a few learning habits you may wish to develop:

1. Find your intellectual interest.
2. Spare time everyday for thinking.
3. Prepare for class and revise immediately afterwards.
4. Read widely and critically.
5. Develop your own construct and conclusions.
6. Make learning and thinking a habit and source of happiness/satisfaction.
7. Apply what you have learnt in your daily life and share them with people around you.

11. Career Implication

An overseas exchange can affect your ultimate life choices: career, further study, country of residence and even life partner. We have witnessed students who have eventually
moved overseas, taking different fields of study and careers all over the world, UK, Singapore, Canada, USA, Australia, Taiwan and the Mainland.

Normally career planning, in the stricter sense of the word, means your first job and series of jobs throughout your life. It comprises the following stages for a new careerist:

(1) A good understanding of your own aptitude, personality, values and interest so as to answer this question: what kind of life do you want to live and how can your career contribute to that?

(2) The second step is to understand the employment market from four perspectives:
   - The general trend in graduate employment
   - The different industry sectors
   - The different types of organizations
   - The different types of occupations

(3) Familiarise yourself with the graduate resources available in CityU and in HK including websites, newspapers, magazines, personal advice, psychological tests, career talks, job search skills training etc. So you can pick the talks, internship, tests, workshops you need, to find the vacancy opportunities, equip yourself with the necessary job-search skills or get the necessary practical experience in your chosen career.

(4) After you have done the above, you can prepare your job search plan to get the dream job, and to plan your professional development with a longer time-frame, say of five years. A plan remains a plan on paper if you do not act on it!

12. So What’s Next

To sum up, an exchange experience overseas can affect you as a maturing person, an aspiring careerist, a life-long learner, and a potential intellectual or professional. After the exchange, try to recollect what you have learnt, in terms of knowledge, skill, attitude, values, habits and living style. Most importantly, basing on the above, try to change an old habit or adopt a new one, one that will make a meaningful and fundamental impact on your life. Afterall, exchange should be a “transformative” learning experience and should not be an extended overseas TOUR!