

Adapting International Immersive Education Experiences to Online Education Platforms

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International study travel within the tertiary education framework provides students invaluable formative experiences. The current COVID-19 pandemic has put a halt to these excursions, side-lining the valuable learning outcomes that are specific to international immersive study opportunities. This paper explores how the benefits of these trips could be transferred to an online teaching environment. The potential to increase collaborative cultural exchange through media and technology coursework contexts will be discussed. Potential barriers are also considered. The discussion paper draws on the experiences of the authors as lecturers involved in preparing and executing study trips situated in Japan prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: hybrid classroom, culture shock, international study

Introduction

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) New Colombo Plan (NCP) provides tertiary students with unique international study opportunities. This is presented as funding for international study programs, either for individuals or groups, of varying duration. The program targets strategic partner nations in the Indo-Pacific region to cultivate soft power through international engagement in the education industry (*About the New Colombo Plan*, 2022). From the student's perspective, The NCP program centres around encountering the novel environment as a form of professional development, building competencies in targeted destination cultures during their study visit. The destination countries all have unique languages, cultures, and social structures that challenge students to adapt to their surroundings. Winkelman (1994) discusses the potential to learn and grow in the face of culture shock as adaptive behavioural transformations. Affective stressors activated by novel environments lead to accommodation of culture, environment, and acceptance of personal deficit as a component of participation gap through personal adjustment (Alder, 1975; Pacheco, 2020). The positive outcomes for students who participate in the NCP program extend far beyond the aims of study trip experience. Byrne frames these skills as designed

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outcomes of international mobility that ‘...explicitly ties student mobility to Australia’s foreign policy outcomes’ (Byrne, 2016, p. 128), suggesting that

...cumulative insights, experiences, and friendships generated by the NCP at an individual and institutional level will provide new and enduring pathways to mutual understanding, respect, trust, and collaboration between states. (Byrne, 2016, p. 108)

The manifestation of soft power through socio-cultural skill cultivation experienced during NCP trips imbue broader socio-cultural growth beneficial to students beyond the agenda embodied in the NCP program. The skills students develop are helpful in negotiating a wide range of unfamiliar circumstances they will face in their future; such as new work cultures or novel aspects of local multicultural society. This is highlighted in reporting from the International Education Association of Australia, which collated recent NCP survey data to reveal that ‘The most useful elements of these experiences were “cross-cultural communication skills” and “professional and personal networks” for 77 per cent of participants.’ (ASR, 2018 in: Tran & Rahimi, 2018, p. 11)

COVID-19 brought these trips to a halt in Australia with hard borders in place since early 2020. DFAT shifted to modified grant offerings for the 2022 NCP, requesting plans designed for either partial or full virtual delivery (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021). This adjustment faces the reality of the pandemic but raises questions that urgently need attention. Our questions speak broadly to the feasibility of such a shift in trip design, and the possible benefits to the students and staff. This discussion paper aims to consider how the benefits of traditional NCP trips might be transferred into an online shared learning experience. We consider three main challenges to this modified delivery opportunity. These consist of barriers regarding co-located virtual education, assumptions related to the extant traditional NCP program, and the virtual opportunities overlooked in the traditional NCP program. These issues are considered in balance with situated learning in the novel environment.

Focus on Japan

This discussion paper focuses on NCP Mobility short trips to Japan, which requires trips to be for a minimum of 14 days duration (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018). Due to its unique language and culture, Japan is considered a more challenging study destination, particularly as the NCP Mobility Program has no requirement of language or cultural competency in order to visit a country. Japan presents a strong opportunity to develop skills associated with adaptation in a novel environment. Authors Walls and Norris, of Charles Sturt University (CSU) and University of Tasmania (UTAS) respectively, have arranged multiple trips to Japan utilising the NCP Mobility funding scheme for students not engaged in language study. As a foundation to discussion we will firstly reflect on previous trips arranged through authors Norris and Walls, with connections to author Zara-Papp of Saitama University, a host for both participant Australian institutions in Japan.

Methodology

A participant-observation approach of reflexive discussion between authors informs this research, along with literature and policy review related to ethnography and soft power in education particular to international study programs. The authors are all expatriates working and living in communities abroad, all of whom have lived, studied, and or worked in Japan. This lived experience informs our writing as university teaching staff reflecting collectively on our experiences in field work with students in Japan. We also bring into conversation our experiences of Japan as it pertains to culture shock, orientalism and occidentalism, which has an opportunity to be accommodated in the design of international teaching and learning experiences. Many aspects of our in-country fieldwork experience have much in common with ethnographic studies of student cohorts (Alder, 1975; Brennan & Schulze, 2004; Durr, 2014) and the learning practices of special interest communities (Fukada, 2019; Gee, 2004, 2007, 2018) often found in fandoms or hobby groups. The authors present this publication to stimulate ongoing research discourse pertaining to quality design of international collaborative teaching and learning, with attention to the pivot in design and delivery methods instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Educate, Motivate, Accommodate: Teaching Adaptation

While there are differences between the trip plans and cohorts from UTAS and CSU, both travel projects have significant alignment in how they seek to teach adaptation. The trips themselves were significantly different on the surface, but both engaged with practice-led pedagogy. For Norris' trips, the focus was on interactive observations of practice in media production. For Walls' trips, the focus was on advancing creative practice through site-specific research. Students had no requirement to understand or study Japanese language but were encouraged to embrace culture during their study trip. All were given pre-departure briefings to help them understand some of the basic issues that they would face and some important tips to help them negotiate base elements of culture. Trip plan documentation and pre-departure learning modules were provided to orient students to the specifics of their travel programs. In-country orientation was also provided to build basic competencies, such as mindfulness and observation to comprehend customs and behavioural expectation settings. Pre-departure learning did not include any contact with the host university or their students.

The trips both approached the learning opportunity through practice-led pedagogy. Norris' trips focused on professional engagement and observation of media and journalism workplaces. Walls' trips focused on cultural engagement and opportunities to study and practice intangible cultural heritage and artforms. Figure 1 and Figure 2 provide a graphic comparison of the main learning objectives between the trips designed by Norris (UTAS) and Walls (CSU). The main difference in broad learning outcomes was that Norris' trip was designed to have a media industry-oriented skills development and networking outcome, while Walls' was designed to build site-specific cultural knowledge. Each of these addresses components of culture shock as well as addressing the 'soft power' objectives of the NCP program. Notably,

“...increasing the number of Australian university undergraduates with Indo-Pacific capability.”
 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021, p. 5)

Figure 1

Norris' Fieldwork Learning Outcomes

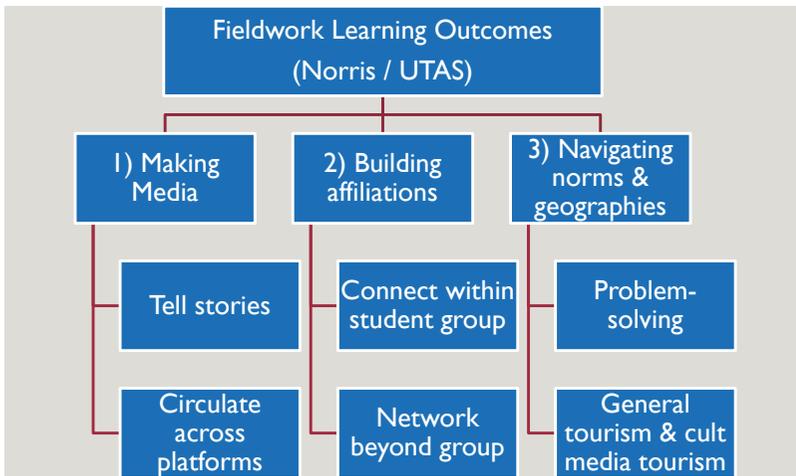
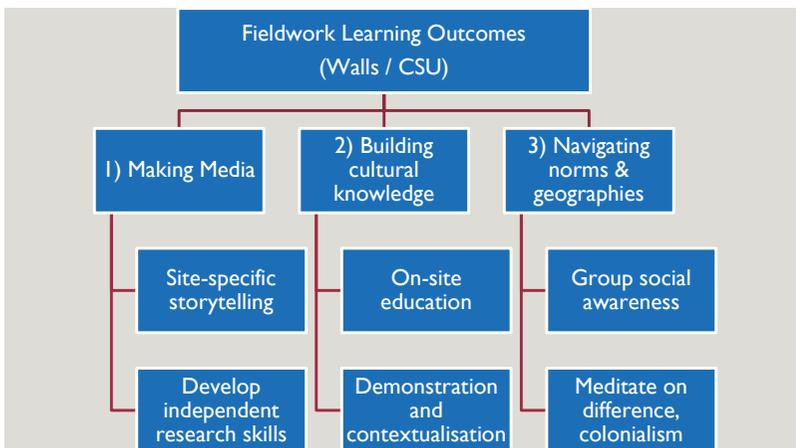


Figure 2

Walls' fieldwork learning outcomes



Both trips sought to follow a similar model to educate, motivate, and accommodate as a means to confront and convert cultural participation gaps and culture shock into a set of experiences that build students' competencies. Both Norris and Walls have local cultural knowledge and language skills that allow them to assist, inform, and educate students throughout the study trips. By sharing knowledge built through years of experience, students see the educator as a model of adaptation success. Guided experiential learning opportunities complemented by agency and freedom to practice learned experiences helps students become motivated to find their own way of negotiating the travel destination. Finding their own competencies through experiential learning fosters opportunities to accommodate new behaviours and knowledge in an immersive learning environment.

International Travel as a Rite of Passage

Leaving home is a significant ritual in the transition from youth to adult. The act of going overseas is seen as a demonstration of independence through self-sufficiency and worldliness. Study trips form a critical bridge to support students in enacting these rituals as a rite of passage within a safe, supervised context. Tran and Vu (2017) connect this rite of passage to the idea of adopting a set of student responsibilities, both personal and communal, across academic and social dimensions. International group study excursions organically provide opportunities to meet and get to know fellow students, modelling networking capacity. It allows students to have more concentrated time together to share ideas, allowing for sharing and broadening of views. That they reflect on a shared specific and unique experience binds them socially by design, creating an affinity space (Gee, 2007, 2018). The experiences designed into the trips cultivate opportunities for shared learning and for recreation that is heavily influenced by the place these things occur in, creating a once-in-a-lifetime experience that students value.

Culture Shock, Japan, Colonialism

The pressures that go hand-in-hand with the pleasures of an international study trip encourage the development of critical learning around cultural exchange, diplomacy, general tolerance, and practice of mindfulness. Japan is a challenging destination, with a unique language, a wide range of cultural customs, and many situational etiquette regimes. This creates a palpable participation gap that needs to be addressed through teaching soft skills and identifying cultural exclusion. Conversations around exclusion and how it relates to colonialism are important, as each nation has its own issues regarding treatment of international visitors and migrants. Winkelman directly confronts this issue of treatment as a part of ethnocentric superiority, suggesting:

Cultures are ethnocentric, and their members typically view the own cultural ways as superior. Psychological preparation for this outsider status is essential, because most people immersed in a foreign culture will experience a negative evaluation of their differences and a rejection by the members of the host culture. (Winkelman, 1994, p. 124)

The expectation that a student may bring to their trip experience is confronted quickly, compounded by what Winkelman characterises as a negative evaluation process that can be detrimental to wellbeing (Winkelman, 1994). The belief that novel environments do not need understanding is a soft reflection of colonialism, and the reality of a world that is hard to comprehend is itself a great teacher – but a firm one.

Problematic Cool Japan

The issues that make Japan difficult for Australian students to negotiate are in part manufactured. The Japanese Government's *Cool Japan* initiative promotes an outward image of accessibility, while Japan itself offers a contrastingly opaque culture (*Declaration of Cool Japan's Mission*, 2014). Particularly as Australia is a relatively young country, Japan's rich history is itself a defining counterpoint. The diverse and complex traditions, customs, and rituals present in modern Japan are copious and hard to grasp. On a short NCP Mobility trip, for students who are entering Japan for the first time, their expectations of experience are confronted by the bitter-sweet contrast between the *Cool Japan* initiative and its associations with consumerism and colonialism – all of which appeal to short-term visitors – and the experience of being in Japan. *Cool Japan* promotes Japan's highly recognisable exported cultural ephemera (cartoons, manga, etc.) as emblematic identifiers that create a promise of cultural understanding (Abel, 2011). *Cool Japan* links into elements of popular and otaku cultures that are disconnected from and contrary to the substance of the country they ostensibly represent. At its essence, as a government policy with broadly commercial, tourist-oriented goals, *Cool Japan* can be criticised as promoting cultural consumption over cultural understanding. While it may not be an intention of the *Cool Japan* initiative, it has the result of engaging with orientalist tendencies, the outcome of which is an assumption that culture shock will somehow be digestible and playful. Culture shock in this context is formed not only by the novel environment, but its conflict with Japan's cultivated external representation. This clash between Japan and its external self-consuming image, and the expectation deficit this provokes, gives space for important conversations about ethnocentricity and colonialism in travel. As a rite of passage, travel is a practice that can be capitalised on to create positive social understanding of a world in which different models of multiculturalism exist. Immersion creates opportunities to generate new understandings of novel cultures that combat issues linked to ethnocentric expression (Brennan & Schulze, 2004). Students report a significant increase in ability in areas that can be helpful to general professional development. In *Career outcomes of learning abroad: national report* (2020), Potts details the developmental benefits to international study program participants with regard to general professional skills:

In terms of the development of important employability skills, around 95 per cent of respondents rated their learning abroad experience as important or very important for developing their ability to interact with diverse individuals, communication skills and the capacity to adapt and learn quickly...85 per cent of respondents indicated that learning abroad had a positive impact on developing skills to support their professional role. (Potts, 2020, p. 7)

Nihonjinron v. Cool Japan

What makes the international study experience profoundly complex in Japan is the clash between internal romanticisation of nationalist ethnocentric discourse – *nihonjinron*, or discourses of ‘Japanese-ness’ and its disparity with the external *Cool Japan* agenda, which offers popular culture (manga, anime) as a distillation of national culture. The two positions are not equal, similar, or resonant. Sugimoto (1999, p. 82) suggests that *nihonjinron* represents ‘...a set of value orientations that the Japanese are supposed to share.’ *Nihonjinron* implies that one must be Japanese to engage on the discourses of Japanese-ness. Shani (2019) furthers this understanding, suggesting that foreign-ness excludes a person from meaningful participation in Japanese culture or society. *Nihonjinron* and *Cool Japan* are equal yet opposite fetishisations of culture that push against each other, one for foreigners and one for Japanese, creating separate sets of expectations that divide visitors from citizenry. The result is not only culture shock, but a distinctly manufactured participation gap that excludes foreigners. This is supported by recent quantitative research by Stockwell (2021), who notes that even among the youth of Japan, multiculturalism as outcome of increased immigration is seen as a threat to society. Particularly in the case of short study trips, the clash between *Cool Japan*’s promise and Japan’s internal offerings are patent, even where they are not explicit. For students who are intrigued by Japan’s projected image, the NCP Mobility trip presents a guided opportunity to experience a foreign destination that is difficult to understand.

The culture shock clash between *Cool Japan* and Japan itself affects students studying in Japan on a more fixed basis as well (Hennings & Mintz, 2015). The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) established the goal of attracting more than 300,000 international students by 2010 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2010). There has thus been a central encouragement of national universities to widen the number of English language courses to attract international students. These initiatives seem to support the overall soft power agenda of *Cool Japan*, with a preference to invite students for relatively short periods of time (two years, one or two semesters, one month) instead of offering joint degrees for in-depth studies. Since 2010, Associate Professor Zilia Zarpapp has strategically established the undergraduate and graduate *Contemporary Art and Media in Australia I-IV* lecture series and the *Seminar in Visual Communication Design and Media Art in Australia and Asia I-IV* seminar series at Saitama University with the explicit aim to facilitate Australian-Japanese academic educational and research exchange via immersion in cultural and art project participation. To this initiative, the visiting groups of the NCP projects fitted perfectly, and offered bilateral soft power opportunities. This paper will now reflect on pre-pandemic trips organised between the authors in the contexts of these programs.

Reflections on Previous Fieldwork

In focusing on trips to Japan, the three authors reflect on experiences both as teachers and as former international students with long-term associations with Japan. Norris and Walls have taken multiple cohorts

to Japan under the DFAT NCP Mobility trip program as lecturers. Norris and Zara-Papp have both previously studied in Japan under the government funded *Monbukagakusho* competitive scholarship scheme. The authors collectively have experience both with short and long-term study in Japan, from perspectives of both educator and student. Their experiences of learning in a novel environment are formative to methods of teaching and learning employed during NCP mobility and other reciprocal teaching experiences, such as guest lectures. Firstly, the rationale behind the similar orientations in practice pedagogy for site-specific learning will be explored through reflections from Norris and Walls as trip designers.

Reflections on Trip Design – Norris

The University of Tasmania cohort's in-country study trips to Japan provided an opportunity to demonstrate how particular field work practices can provide an entry-point into overcoming various language and cultural barriers. The field work aims built upon the teaching studies scholars (Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012; Magnifico et al., 2018) whose goal is to:

... bring together research and theorising on networked collaborative learning in UGC [User Generated Content] affinity spaces, to explicitly call out new tensions emerging from recent efforts to make these spaces more equitably available to students and to outline next steps in developing theory and interventions that critically navigate these tensions and propel the literacy field forward. (Magnifico et al., 2018, p. 146)

The six fieldtrips to Japan drew upon this literature to develop an understanding of two key literacies:

1. the formal and informal ways students develop mobility skills in-country by critically reflecting on previous assumptions and knowledge of the region, and
2. the benefits of adopting a 'participatory culture' (Jenkins et al., 2009) based fieldwork approach, defined as informal mentorship structures, support for creating and sharing work, affinity-based assessment work, and finding in-country organisations and activities with relatively low barriers to participation to match student language level.

Students completed intensive workshops in a variety of creative media industry settings. At Japan's national broadcaster, NHK studios, students developed peer and professional networks through on-site demonstrations and discussions on the application and use of new technology such as 8K broadcasting and preparations around broadcasting Japan's Olympic events. This was complemented through similar on-site workshops at commercial media producers such as TBS studios – a major broadcaster of news, TV, film and related content which involved hands-on Q&A sessions with Takafumi Tsugawa (Editor, Foreign News Department) and Akira Yamanaka (Director, TBS). Work integrated and experiential learning opportunities in Japan's cultural industries also extended to popular culture areas such as manga and anime, where students had on-site visits to manga and anime studios such as Studio Hisekutta, with follow up workshops

on creating manga held at Saitama University with Studio Hisekutta chief artist/writer Junya Inoue and facilitated by Zara-Papp.

The students' creative engagement in Japan and aspects of its media industries were demonstrated through three key learning outcomes:

1. make research-led media,
2. develop peer and professional affiliations and networks, and
3. navigate alternative cultural norms and places in-country.

Through analyzing the relationship between these three areas and the expectations and experiences of students the fieldwork showed how students are engaging with Japan (and more broadly Asia) in unconventional and surprising ways that challenge assumptions around more established pathways for acquiring media literacy and mobility in Asia. The value of integrating on-site visits and hands-on industry work achieves the important goal of embedding work integration and experiential learning within curriculum. This was chiefly achieved by the fieldwork's focus on in-country government, commercial, and community organisations suited to short-term field work broadly aligned to learning objectives and needs of the cohort.

Reflections on Trip Design – Walls

Trips designed at CSU fostered independent creative practice through site-specific research. Emulating postgraduate creative coursework project supervision allowed students creative freedom within a concentrated research opportunity. Centred on place-making through cross-cultural intersubjectivity (Dürr, 2014), the students were required to undertake research before, during, and after the fieldwork. This allowed students to select a study area prior to departure, seek out information in Japan, and further their study on return to Australia. The trips incorporated a range of urban and regional settings. This provided students a diverse set of experiences regarding architecture, civic planning, commerce, local cultures, and amenities at different population densities across localities. The trip was designed to allow students to build basic competencies during the first destination before moving on to other parts of the country (such as using public transportation, negotiating waysignage, etc.). As more and more regions and destinations were encountered, more information and depth were provided, and more independent study time was allotted. This allowed students to refine their ideas iteratively as they felt more capable of independent navigation, both in terms of environment and culture.

Organised learning opportunities were a mix of private sessions limited to the student group; and public cultural learning opportunities and experiences. For example, students received a lecture in traditional Japanese theatre forms from Saitama University's Professor Tove Bjork prior to partaking of Kabuki and Noh theatre. A private lecture in Shintoism at the Meiji Jingu Intercultural Research centre was followed

by a large group *kigansai*, a blessing ceremony. At each destination, the process was the same. Students were given access to specialists to teach them something about culture. Students then explored that culture with their new knowledge through experiences open to the general public. The lectures helped students understand unique elements of Japanese culture, and the knowledge imparted combatted participation gap for students during experiential learning. The point of this was to provoke an engagement with a culture beyond their borders and experience so as consider how they process this as a foundation for research and creative output. Their own sense of displaced habitus and ethnocentrism were explored alongside orientalism and notions of colonialism. The culmination of this learning was in how each student allowed their negotiation of culture as input to their creation of an artistic work or performance. Student projects were required to link to the student's specific study discipline, their in-country experiences, and reflections through research undertaken in country and abroad. Students were allowed to freely explore how visiting a new culture affected and impressed them. They were given the latitude to ask questions, explore places, and find meaning through unique encounters with ateliers and artists.

The CSU field trips presented an educational travel experience and a soft agenda of seeking to combat ethnocentric cultural rigidity. Engendering graduates with skills that integrate mindfulness and adaptation creates a mindset beneficial to the cohort. Students were required to constantly research and engage with creative prototyping, while developing a set of values and understandings that changed as they travelled. This meant that their creative endeavours became a part of the journey, developing in different places with new knowledge iteratively. Their work was effectively linked to their feelings of displacement and excitement in-country as a kind of diarised creativity. The importance of interactions and observations of genuine culture may have been limited by participation and knowledge gaps, but education helped free the students of awareness of these. The process of journey-learning allowed them to find their own site-specific creative ambitions.

Reflections on Fieldwork

The fieldtrips combined educational experience, travel event, and field trip. They required students to document and record their experiences. This linked documentation to site-specific activities and observations. Their observations and notes facilitated progressive reflection that benefitted from accumulating information and skills in the places they visited. By seeing themselves as developing the ability to meaningfully interact with the environment of Japan, and noting this progressively in documentation, students were able to process increasingly challenging pressures and demands in negotiating environment and culture. The greatest challenge for students was to a degree self-imposed – to seek an understanding of Japan through the grant they had been awarded and the studies they were conducting. This mirrors the broader experience of media studies as Ruddock notes:

Media students face a daunting task: saying something meaningful about complicated cultural phenomena, in the face of limited time, resources (books, access to specialized, individualized training) and scholarly experience. (Ruddock, 2017, p. 25)

The students' experience during the fieldtrips was heavily influenced by how mobile media and social media in particular are used for group communications. These tools were used to engage and share information in the foreign and unfamiliar world around them. For many the negotiation of media content and technology was intricately wrapped up in the experience. Considering the focus of the NCP Mobility program on Australian students between 18-28 years (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021), and the overall skew in undergraduate cohorts of 17-20 years at time of commencement (Department of Education, 2020), the students embarking on these international trips are young and may not have extensive international travel experience. They may not have strong social competencies for dealing with novel environments. Considering this in the context of Japan as a challenging destination – where English is not the native language – meant that socio-cultural participation barriers were considerable for some students. Addressing these challenges in many cases involved the use of media technology and content.

For some, their life-changing coming-of-age type experience was also structured around the need to communicate both in-country and back home. In-country, negotiating the language barrier through using mobile media and apps such as google translate, or non-verbal communication was crucial for many students. Additionally, the issue of navigating foreign cityscapes and its transport systems similarly revolved around the effective use of mobile phone apps such as map software. An outcome of the fieldwork was for students to reflect on how they interpreted and evaluated these media technologies and content during their stay. For media studies pedagogy the interplay between theory and practice for students during their fieldwork was immensely significant. All students acknowledge the interplay between media (mobile phone and digital content creation) and their acts of participation and communication in 'real spaces' in Japan.

Summarising Pre-COVID-19 Trips

Shared by trips organised through these two different degree programs, is a three-pronged strategy to a) educate, b) motivate, c) accommodate. Giving students access to information, meaningful experiences, and helping them to find means of adjustment in a new environment helped students to learn new skills around adaptation while accepting ways of living outside their own ethnocentric identity. Students were able to develop soft skills that are transferrable into professional areas, embodying soft power principles designed into the rationale for the NCP trip scheme. Using a practice pedagogy that enforces experiential learning combines unique experiences tailored for students with the ability to see their lecturer as a model for and teacher of negotiating novel environments. This also allowed students to see that there is a pathway to cultural adaptation.

Integration of International Students at Saitama University – Zara-Papp

Since the Spring semester of 2020 starting on April the 1st 2020, Saitama University, as almost every other university in Japan and worldwide, has gone primarily into online teaching mode. The study tours of the NCP also came to a halt as well as the international student transfers. These situations obviously had their major drawbacks academically as well as psychologically and it took their toll on students and researchers alike. Currently, Saitama University allows international students to take classes online via Zoom while they are at their home countries. There are three types of classes offered: real time online, on-demand online and hybrid real time online / real time classroom for the local students. Depending on the subject, the constitution of classes will vary; in the case of English-taught Liberal Arts subjects, the classes are a reasonably even skew between Japanese and international students from diverse time zones in Europe, North America, and Asia. Some are 8, 10 or even more hours ahead of Japan Standard Time, making real time classes very difficult to conduct. Australia, in terms of geography, is ideally positioned for real time classes in collaboration with Japanese universities, given that the time difference is maximum 1-2 hours depending on the time of the year.

Japanese students highly benefit from having joint online classes with Australian universities, and joint courses could be developed. Norris and Walls have already contributed during the pandemic with online classes to Saitama University courses in different formats including on-demand recordings, real time lectures, discussions, and online workshops. While COVID-19 restrictions were not as severe in Japan as they were in Australia, for example, the Japanese students still suffered from isolation, lack of stimuli and lack of student social life. These guest lectures seemed to be beneficial for the students to “travel” a little bit outside of the four walls of their quarantine. These experiences point toward the possibility of foregoing logistics of having to physically invite Australian researchers to Japan, with all the costs and time consumption implied, and have a diverse international instructor body provide new content to the Japanese students. As a step further, this could be developed reciprocally, that is, involving Australian students in the process, and have a two-way educational exchange with both Japanese and Australian content and even collaborations, workshops and projects between the students.

A benefit of the online environment is its equalising factor. Removing a physical location of study allows students to build a culture unique to the learning environment. Fukada suggests a problematic specific to Gee’s affinity space in its prescribed sense of ‘community’, indicating demarcation between who is in and outside of that group or space (Fukada, 2019; Gee, 2004). The online environment creates a new space in which all enrolled members are a natural part of the community. As such, blended learning and online virtual learning should be relied on to build communities for students regardless of capacity for physical field trips. The issues regarding this are complex in relation to traditional structures and cultures within tertiary education. In the next section we consider some of these issues.

Design for Blended Learning

Online technologies used for education, communication, and administration have the capacity to accommodate hybrid and online international exchange programs. How can online education tools be leveraged to stimulate social interaction and debate between cohorts from distinct participant cultures? How can the experience allow students to face elements of culture shock in a less intense but useful way? The benefits of in-person developmental stimuli need to be adapted as best as possible to the online learning space. While culture shock is a firm overstimulation connected to places and their customs, languages, etc.; the online learning space can be customised and populated with material to meet the needs of learning objectives without overstimulation. Using the educate, motivate, and accommodate model, it is possible to set cultural discourse goals that will allow students to organically interact and gain knowledge and social motivation from one another. Considering this in a practice-based pedagogy, students could be directed to communicate using media creation skills, for example via familiar social media formats they commonly engage with. Designing the online learning space to emulate these commonplace interactions is achievable. The benefit of social platforms being that their ubiquitous interface dictates how communication occurs and has to a degree created an international set of cultural norms toward content creation. Stepping outside the traditional academic space to look for tools that can reduce the burden of communication system and enhance the impact of communication meaning could help students begin to show each other quotidian elements of their specific spaces and places. Having user-generated content can spark social interaction and debate, and lead to creative exchange and international co-creations, particularly of curated media sets. If the point of exchange is cultural, it is possible to use media to demystify elements that are impossible to understand fully during a normative short-stay study visit. It also creates opportunity for this kind of discourse to be bi-directional. In the current NCP model, particularly in the Mobility program, it is common to simply design a trip to benefit the students being funded to travel, not to give any benefit to schools being visited. NCP's soft power initiative is a one-sided affair that could stand some modernisation to consider a more bilateral diplomacy (Tran et al., 2021).

There are several barriers to engagement in the context of a blended or online-only NCP experience. Apart from issues of language, the more basic issue of international collaboration as a costed virtual activity is a significant concern. The budget for a virtual trip would need to focus on subsidising resources at Australian and international partner universities. This does not explicitly align with the singular intentions outlined in the *New Colombo Plan Mobility Guidelines 2022* which stipulates:

The NCP Mobility Program provides funding to Australian universities to deliver Mobility Projects that provide Australian university students with Indo-Pacific mobility experiences. NCP funded Mobility Projects support Australian university undergraduates to participate in study, internships, mentorships, practicums and research in up to 40 Indo-Pacific locations. (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021, p. 6)

While there is mention of organisations and host universities in the documentation regarding funding guidelines, the funding is provided against a budget on a per student basis for Australian students. It is therefore by design not intended for an integrated online program that facilitates immersion or exchange in an online space shared with students or staff of a host university. The level of agreement and goodwill between partner institutions would need to be significant. Given the short turnaround time between funding decisions and the need to undertake NCP Mobility activities, it would require significant resource allocation to ensure across borders that activities could be practically designed and take enrolments. It is likely that a plan would need to be made in advance for either a special elective, or a special syllabus within existing subjects, with an agile bilateral response to funding outcomes required. The more likely solution would be to capitalise on existing subjects with modification for shared delivery. These would not be designed to specifically activate the objectives typical to the NCP program, nor would they allow for the suggested practice-led pedagogical strategies discussed in this writing. Beyond the issues with the funding model itself, there are a range of logistics that create persistent issues for international exchange. Online participation would need to occur at a time of year to study where both national program schedules are in session. Traditional considerations such as credit for subjects across different systems of credit and different degrees are an issue, as are related requirements for language competency. Further, the need for staff with skills to work bilingually, in the subject area, and in partnership with key stakeholders across participant universities is outside the remit of design and workload expectations of the average Australian lecturer. Currently, staff at Australian universities who opt to work with DFAT's NCP scheme report overall that they do not receive workload to accommodate such trips, as they sit outside normative teaching duties (Tran et al., 2021). That such an activity could rest on a particular staff member who may at any time move to other roles or duties, either within an organisation or beyond, creates vulnerabilities to invested time and resource, as does the insecure nature of NCP funding, which may be requested for up to three years, but typically is rewarded for a singular instance of travel at short notice. In short, there is so much required, and so little turnaround time to expend funds once they are awarded, that even pre-pandemic NCP trips were hard to manage. The common practice of not providing hours for development, teaching, or travel to staff leading NCP field trips (Tran et al., 2021) implies that these trips do not functionally work well, and are not significantly valued by the universities as an education experience. In an online offering, the level of structure required would demand a more concentrated development resource for both partner universities. The funding allowed and the model encouraged simply seems out of step with the mode being deployed, the level of goodwill within universities, and the agenda of delivering set degrees. This is particularly strained at present; as the pandemic has caused significant financial loss to Australian universities (Lane & Long, 2020). These losses have strained resources and capacity for extracurricular programming. It is unlikely that in this situation, staff would be in a position to apply for grants under the NCP scheme.

While DFAT funding has good intentions in its temporary post-COVID program alterations, a more robust solution will be required for ongoing viability. While the traditional NCP trip was shoe-horned into

academic programs prior to the pandemic, in the current climate, that is less likely to be feasible. While meaningful interactions across borders can bring significant benefits to students, the business of tertiary education is possible without this additional offering. There needs to be some enticement beyond the limited fiduciary input that NCP grants bring, as the funds are not enough to construct a rigorous post-pandemic experience. The more embedded this becomes to the degrees of the participant universities, the more likely there is to be a perceived and realised value in the work required to develop and maintain an online international study program. However, with impermanent and short-notice funding key to the program, it is highly problematic in its present form.

The importance of global outreach teams and strategy elements of university management are critical in creating a more sustainable model for international online collaborative learning. The casual nature of the DFAT's NCP Mobility program attracts individual lectures with trip ideas that align with their existing international contacts and knowledge, rather than a robust strategy that can be managed and shaped by an international partnership. Research into how the changes to DFAT's NCP Mobility program are affecting applications and international engagement is required. Not only because the changes to the program are occurring in light and in the midst of a pandemic, but also because that pandemic has led to a sweeping reduction in staffing across the Australian university landscape. The practical attention needed to construct any kind of extra-curricular program based on one-off funding seems out of step with the needs of the moment. As online delivery would itself become a novel environment, the culture shock of the NCP post-COVID-19 may be in the unfamiliar space of negotiating how to activate meaningful virtual interactions.

Conclusion

Recent research on the impact and challenges of NCP and related programs have focused primarily on cultural diplomacy issues (Iwabuchi, 2015; Lowe, 2015) or language studies approaches. Tran, Bui & Nguyen (2021) have offered a particularly useful discussion on the motivations, impacts and challenges facing NCP programs showing that while these programs can have a significant impact for student engagement in Asia, these opportunities come with a host of challenges in designing, maintaining, and optimising learning and pastoral care supports. Building on this type of research, our aim in this article is to raise the need for further longitudinal transnational research to address the challenges and barriers to participation faced by the inevitable shift towards an online or hybridised international experience. The cohorts from the universities discussed in this article demonstrate how particular field work practices can provide entry points for students to overcome various language and culture barriers. Building upon the existing research and data from our own NCP fieldwork, we are advocating for the need to bring together further research and practice which adapts previous models of in-country fieldwork with networked participatory learning. As tertiary education providers adapt to the ever-shifting challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, new modes of delivery need to be robust and effective for students, while being agile for educators and institutions. The issues raised in this writing and other research suggest that this

balance requires attention through research to develop practical approaches to address the motivations, impacts, and challenges of offering NCP programs in online or hybridised ways.

Given the strained nature of staffing and budgets prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are several factors that have an effect on funding feasibility of the current NCP offering. The loss of international students and some domestic students has caused significant financial damage, triggering broad staff reductions in Australia's tertiary education ecosystem (Duffy, 2021; Kelly, 2022). There has also been a dramatic reduction in course offerings (Zhou, 2020). As a result, there are less staff to cover day-to-day duties. With staff stretched thin in the aftermath of budget and staff reductions, alongside reduced and restructured course offerings, it is a tumultuous moment in which to functionally design a program for a new method of delivery. If duties outside essential teaching are not supported by institutional funding, it could be extremely difficult to justify such additional workload. In addition, as funding from DFAT comes at short notice, it sits somewhat outside traditional expectations of setting up staff teaching allocations in advance, creating administrative demands that are difficult to accommodate. In short, the NCP program itself needs some reconsideration to meet the level of agility the tertiary sector is currently able to accommodate.

An online or hybridised offering also forces all activities into a schedule that needs to be rigid for the sake of all participants. The sophistication of the offering would be limited to the capacity of participants to command the media and platforms of the education space. This suggests that there would be benefit in allocating media specialists into the education design process to ensure that online experiences can be crafted with clear intention. While we have been teaching more online during the pandemic, the pedagogies of teaching practice, and those useful in international study trips, may not adequately serve the online delivery mode of a post-pandemic teaching environment. The pre-pandemic benefits for staff and students in the NCP Mobility scheme do not map to the present situation. The challenge is in considering the benefits of these trips and seeking to engineer online interactions that can generate similar outcomes. Research is required to study and test post-pandemic learning environments and techniques. The support of future NCP Mobility program rounds and similar activities require that their modification to hybrid or full online delivery be investigated for feasibility.

The challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education systems worldwide nonetheless also showed significant opportunities and possibilities for a culture shift in online and virtual teaching. Due to its global presence, these opportunities are being recognized in tertiary education facilities in diverse cultural settings regardless of geographic location. In our current case study, our focus is on the Australian and Japanese national higher education systems, and future possibilities of cooperation have been identified for these sectors. One example would be the potential increase of bilateral soft power in the Asia-Pacific region with significant cost and mobility issues. In Japan, national universities could offer more international courses with invited guest lecturers from Australia on an ongoing basis. This could include

activities such as workshops, academic projects, and student collaboration in the virtual teaching space. Such collaborations would strengthen the international profile for participant institutions.

Until recently, Australian guest lecturers needed to coordinate their schedule and local teaching duties as well as travel and lodgement costs in order to reach Japan for international lecturing. The current pandemic, however, showed that equally successful teaching content can be presented to the Japanese student body virtually using online conferencing applications. This aspect could be incorporated into future syllabi of both Japanese and Australian universities, while potentially also offering the opportunity to the local students of both countries to participate in each other's lectures, contributing to the internationalisation of tertiary education both in Australia and Japan simultaneously. It could potentially create ongoing formalised relationships between universities that address the points that the New Colombo Plan seeks to stimulate. The pandemic has revealed opportunities for individuals and institutions that may otherwise have taken several years to organically arise out of technology use in blended and virtual learning.

Transformations in learning through virtual settings have been swiftly adopted due to COVID-19 between 2020-2022. Even though many are returning to face-to-face learning in 2022; the virtual learning tools that came to prominence during the pandemic will persist rather than retreat. They have proven themselves to be a valuable addition to the teaching toolset, capturing a wider demographic of potential students. This can easily be extended to a space of intercultural and international collaborative learning. The willingness of universities to consider such programming is a matter of initiative and appetite. Creating interest and appetite within the tertiary sector is best stimulated through research.

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