

10 Things Advisors Should Know About Working with University Study Programs

University Study programs are not for everyone.

They require students to be independent, comfortable with ambiguity, have the ability to quickly adapt to uncertainty, and to find their own answers using the resources available to them.

Academic flexibility is essential.

Host universities often don't release the final class schedule until a month or two before the semester begins, and some classes may not be open to visiting students until they've met personally with the instructor after arrival. Similarly, some classes may fill or get cancelled. Students should pre-select twice the number of classes they actually plan to take, to avoid frantic "Subject: URGENT!!!!" emails to their advisor(s) during the first week, when students are already going through the challenges of cultural adjustment. Students should also keep all syllabi and related course materials in case they need to obtain approval for classes after their return to UMN.

Different countries use different terminologies than the US.

It's important for students (and advisors) to understand these differences. Does the student know what a "course" is in the UK? What about a "paper" in New Zealand? Or a "subject" in Australia? How about a class that's taught in "Semester 1?" Will it be offered the semester the student is abroad? The answer depends on whether the host university is in the Northern or Southern Hemisphere.

Similarly, grades and credits are awarded on different scales.

A 20-credit class at Lancaster University in the UK is roughly twice as much workload (10 US credits) as a 20-credit class at the University of Glasgow (5 US credits), also in the UK. A grade of 22 at Lancaster is excellent, while that same 22 is an "F" at Queen Mary, even though both schools are in the UK. Students should work with the Learning Abroad Center to understand conversions, and grade and credit conversions for all *University Study* programs will be posted online by the end of Fall 2015.

University Study programs are based on teaching methods and pedagogies of the host country.

They are not taught on a US-based model. This may mean attending lectures is completely optional. This may mean there are no assignments until the 10th week of the semester. This may mean there is no syllabus, but rather a reading list to prepare from. This may mean the final exam counts for 100% of the final grade. It's important for students to be aware of the differences and to prepare for them.

University Study programs are excellent options for students with traditionally "difficult" majors.

By attending a large, comprehensive university abroad, students are able to take classes in a broad range of academic fields that most study centers and faculty-led programs don't offer. Even the most obscure major can usually find relevant coursework on University Study programs.

Students are required to maintain full-time status while they're abroad, and all classes must be taken for a letter grade.

This means at least 13 credits per semester, and no S/N grades. It doesn't matter if students don't "need" the credit to graduate, and it doesn't matter if they want to take a lighter courseload so they'll have extra time to travel. It also doesn't matter if local students are allowed to take classes S/N, or lighter than full-time courseloads. Academic expectations abroad for UMN students are the same as they are here at home.

Students who participate on University Study programs perform about the same academically abroad as they do at UMN.

Data collection from 2012 to present shows that students participating on University Study programs graduated with almost exactly the same GPA (3.31) as they had before they went abroad (3.34), and most of the decrease can be attributed to a small number of under-performing outliers. The vast majority of students do well on University Study programs, provided they put forth the expected time and effort.

Students with special health, emotional, medical, chemical dependency, or mental health issues will need to develop strategies ahead of time for dealing with their conditions abroad.

Unlike a faculty-led or center-based program, students will likely not have daily interaction with an instructor or student support professional, and there will be no one checking on their wellness. While resources are available both at home and on-site to support whatever the student needs, it will be up to the student to seek out and utilize those services.

University Study programs give students unique levels of freedom and opportunity to explore the host culture and develop important life skills.

Being placed alone in a foreign environment forces students to develop independence, self-reliance, problem-solving skills, communication skills, cross-cultural adaptability, and other valuable career-building skills in unique ways from other study abroad program models. Greater challenge with less support allows students to move through the stages of student development at a rapid pace.

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