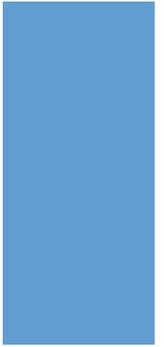# Beyond the numbers: enhancing the quality of learning in study abroad programs

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Forms of 'study abroad'

- AKA 'temporary' or 'credit mobility'

- Australia: 'student exchange programs'

- EU: Erasmus programme

- USA: 'study abroad programs'

Globalisation & Study Abroad

- 'Democratisation' of Study Abroad (Lewin, 2009) involves significant increases in funding

- The 'democratisation' movement is related to diminishing prospects for the 'monolingual, monocultural' graduate (Luker 2006)

- But does/can study abroad really help students become 'global citizens'? If so, how?

Great expectations

Career benefits

- **Students' beliefs**: 90% of UK ERASMUS students believe that SA is advantageous for their careers (Sussex Centres 2004; also Van Hoof & Verbeeten 2005, USA; Young & Harper, 2004, UK/Australia)

- **Employers' beliefs**: 70% of multinational and 55% of national employers in the UK highly value SA (QETI & IEAA 2006; also see , Archer & Davison 2008 UK; Trooboff, Van de Berg, Rayman 2008, USA)

Social/cultural benefits
- SA is represented a a transformational experience, which can strengthen people-to-people and institutional relationships (DFAT, Australian Govt, 2014, New Colombo Plan)

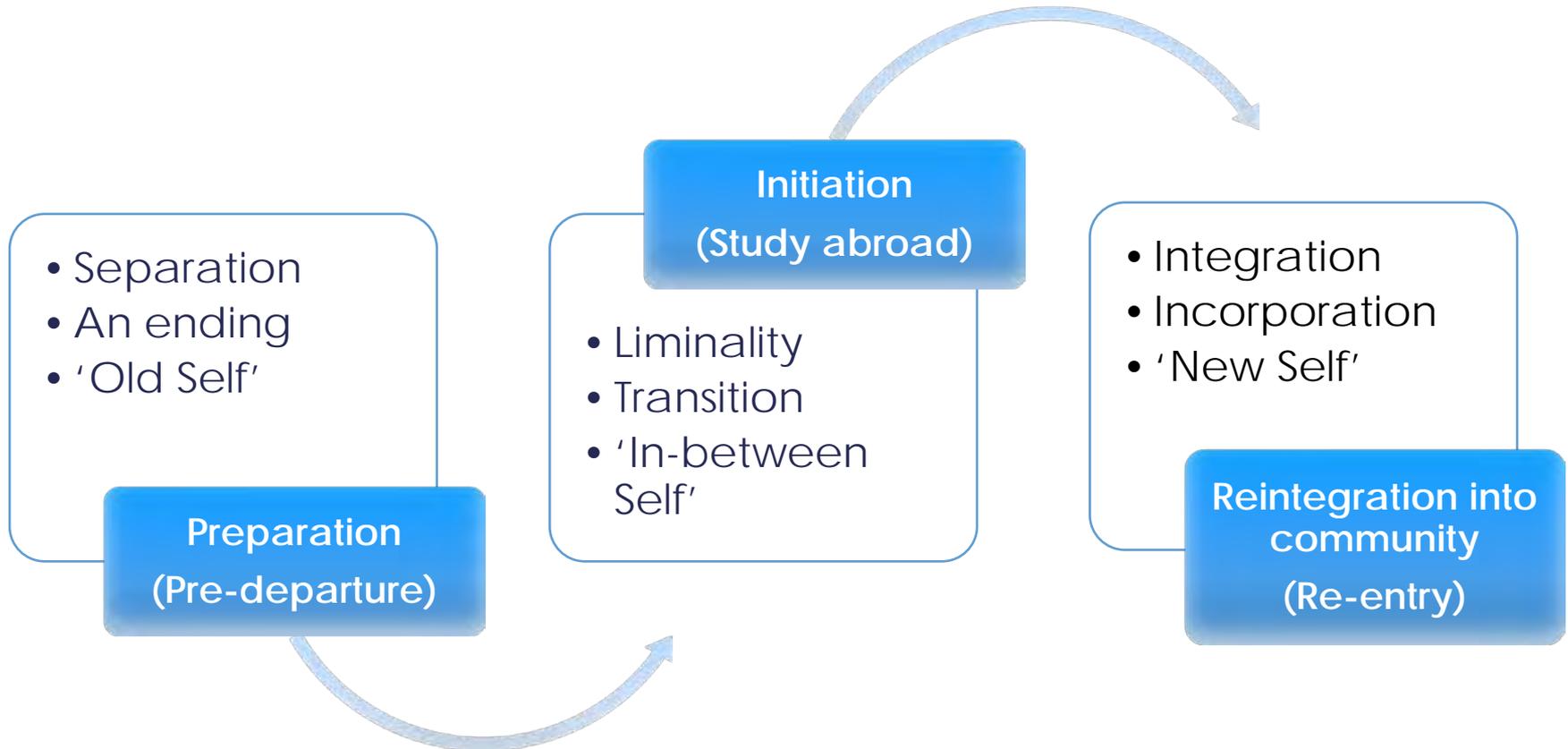# A critical reading of the Study Abroad literature

- Personal development/transformation (McName & Faulker, 2001; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Van Hoof & Verbeeten 2005)

  → But – students' 'epiphanies' can be 'fake or temporary' (Mernard-Warwick & Palmer, 2012:132)

- Further, studies reveal mixed results for the impact of SA on:
  - cultural understanding (Dolby, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Schuerholz-Lehr, 2007; Williams, 2005),
  - linguistic development (Goldini, 2013)
  - academic benefits (Gore, 2005; Van Hoof & Verbeeten 2005),
  - 'global citizenship' (Clarke et al, 2009; Jessup-Anger, 2008; Mernard-Warwick & Palmer, 2012)

- **As students 'grapple with emotional responses to the unfamiliar' they need guidance to make deeper connections between intercultural experiences and course theory related to identity, diversity and equality'** (Jackson 2011: 80)

Study abroad as a 'rite of passage'

(Beames 2004; Gothard et al, 2012; Van Gennup, 1960)

Initiation
(Study abroad)

- Separation
- An ending
- 'Old Self'

Preparation
(Pre-departure)

- Liminality
- Transition
- 'In-between Self'

- Integration
- Incorporation
- 'New Self'

Reintegration into community
(Re-entry)

WRIT3060 *(Reflective writing: documenting the international experience)*

A course of experiential, reflective, critical & creative learning

Pre-departure (In class)
- Preparation
- Critical (re)examination of expectations
- Practice blogs

Abroad (Online)
- Experiential learning
- Reflective, individual blogs
- Group discussion with feedback from lecturers

Return (In class)
- Integration
- Travel writing
- Annotated bibliography (critical reading)
- Reflective essay
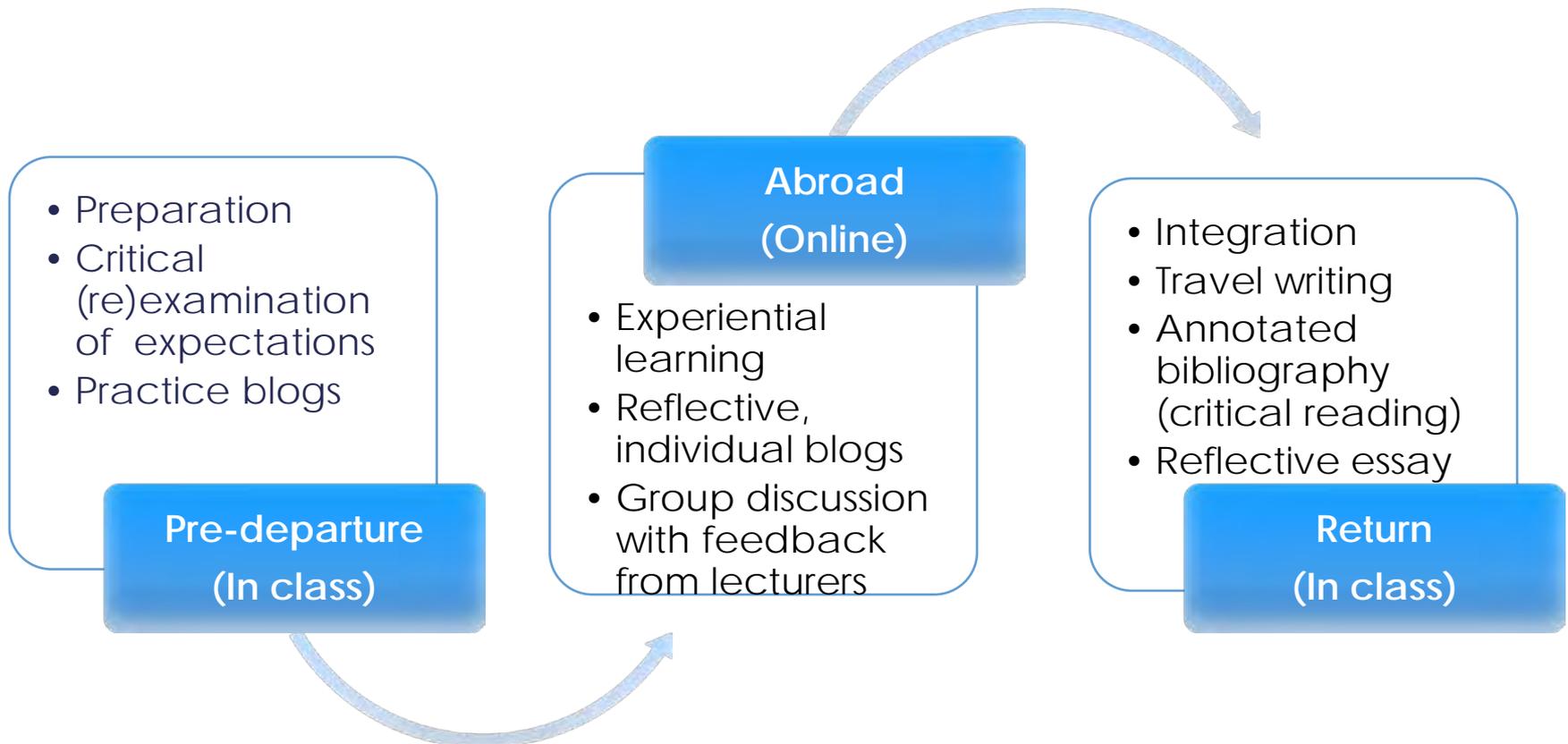
Our study

The context
Australian research intensive university

Methodology
Explanatory Design: Participant Selection model (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007) – foregrounds qualitative (narrative)data

Methods
- Survey sample:
  - Survey sent to 278 students returning from study abroad
  - 94 respondents
- Narrative interviews (Riessman, 2006)
  - 21 students selected from survey respondents (11 non-WRIT3060/ 10 WRIT3060 students)

Interview themes

1. Pre-departure: expectations v. realities

Students NOT taking the course
- Greater sense of feeling underprepared*

  I was completely unprepared… I didn't have any experience preparing me for exchange (S2)

- Surprised by initial culture shock

  I didn't think I'd be struck down by culture shock but yeah it was shocking (S2)

Students taking the course
- Greater sense of excitement & purpose

  I'd always wanted to go to France ever since I was about 10. So it was really good to finally achieve that goal … and live something that I'd dreamed about for so long

* Also found in survey

Interview themes

2. Study Abroad: Personal Development

Strong theme in *all* students' interviews*

- More confident socially/'outgoing' (19 interviewees)
  [I have] a greater degree of confidence in my ability to adapt to a different environment (S26)

- More independent (14 interviewees)

- More 'open minded' (15 interviewees)
  Just dealing with people from such varied backgrounds [I've developed] more of an open mind (S11)

- More 'mature' and/or 'grown up' (8 interviewees)

- A stronger sense of self and confidence to act on that
  I do things that I want to do - not necessarily what's expected of me. I feel like if I keep doing that then I'm going to end up in the right place (S3)

- Ability to deal with uncertainty and unexpected challenges
  I have more problem-solving abilities (S2)

 * Also found in survey

Interview themes

2. Study Abroad: Cultural/national identity

For many Australian students (course and non--course
- Pride in Australian **national identity** – reinforcement of cultural stereotypes
    - *I thought we were the best country in the world. So I did that trip to America and then I sort of did that around the world thing and I just thought we were the best country* (S5)
    - (superior) outdoor sunny lifestyle, e.g. *we're clean, we've got great beaches, great weather* (S5)

But for Australian course students, more **awareness of privilege**
- *I've had a very privileged life to live in Australia. I guess you take that for granted a lot of the time. So that was really important just coming to appreciate what I have* (S21)

For **international course students**, awareness of exchange as experience of **'third culture'**
- *I've got Asian features and I'm half Korean. So they just speak to me in Korean … but my speaking isn't that great. Then people are like, who the hell is this? A Korean or what? I'm confused too* (S24)

Interview themes

2. Study Abroad: Intercultural understanding

Strong themes across *all* students' interviews (course and non-course)

- Predominantly interacting with other international students
- Intercultural exchanges based on a sense of Self and Other, with
  - 'Australian' ways of interacting seen as superior, 'normal' or standard
  - *We had to make the Swedish people come out of their shell a bit ... we knew that they were reserved [they had to] stop being so Swedish* (S1)
- Strengthening, rather than challenging preconceived cultural stereotypes
  - *Germans: much more direct, less room for ambiguity, less emotional* (S27)
  - *Japanese are more conservative and reserved* (S22)

But prevalent in students who took the course

Heightened appreciation of cultural contexts, identities, ways of being

- *I became more open to people from other backgrounds. I got to know them first before I stereotyped them. I became more accepting of other ways of life* (S13)

Interview themes

3. Re-entry: Re-adaption / integration

The majority of participants in *both* groups found re-adaption difficult, experiencing sadness and/or frustration, which lasted weeks, months or was ongoing

Students not taking course

- absence of a way to celebrate the exchange experience & bring it into life in Australia
- disconnectedness between exchange & life at home, exchange seems 'like a dream', an 'unreality'
  - *When you come back home, everything is the same. It's like nothing has changed* (S8)
  - *I've come back and slotted in exactly where things left off* (S10)

Students taking course

- appreciated post-exchange classes as a 'reflective community', where they collaboratively made connections between experience & theory
  - *I think I got most out of WRIT once I got back … forcing me to to reflect in greater depth* (S26)
  - *WRIT gave me a place to think about the exchange process… it built on my whole degree, tying everything together* (S21)

Interview themes

3. Re-entry: Impact on future directions

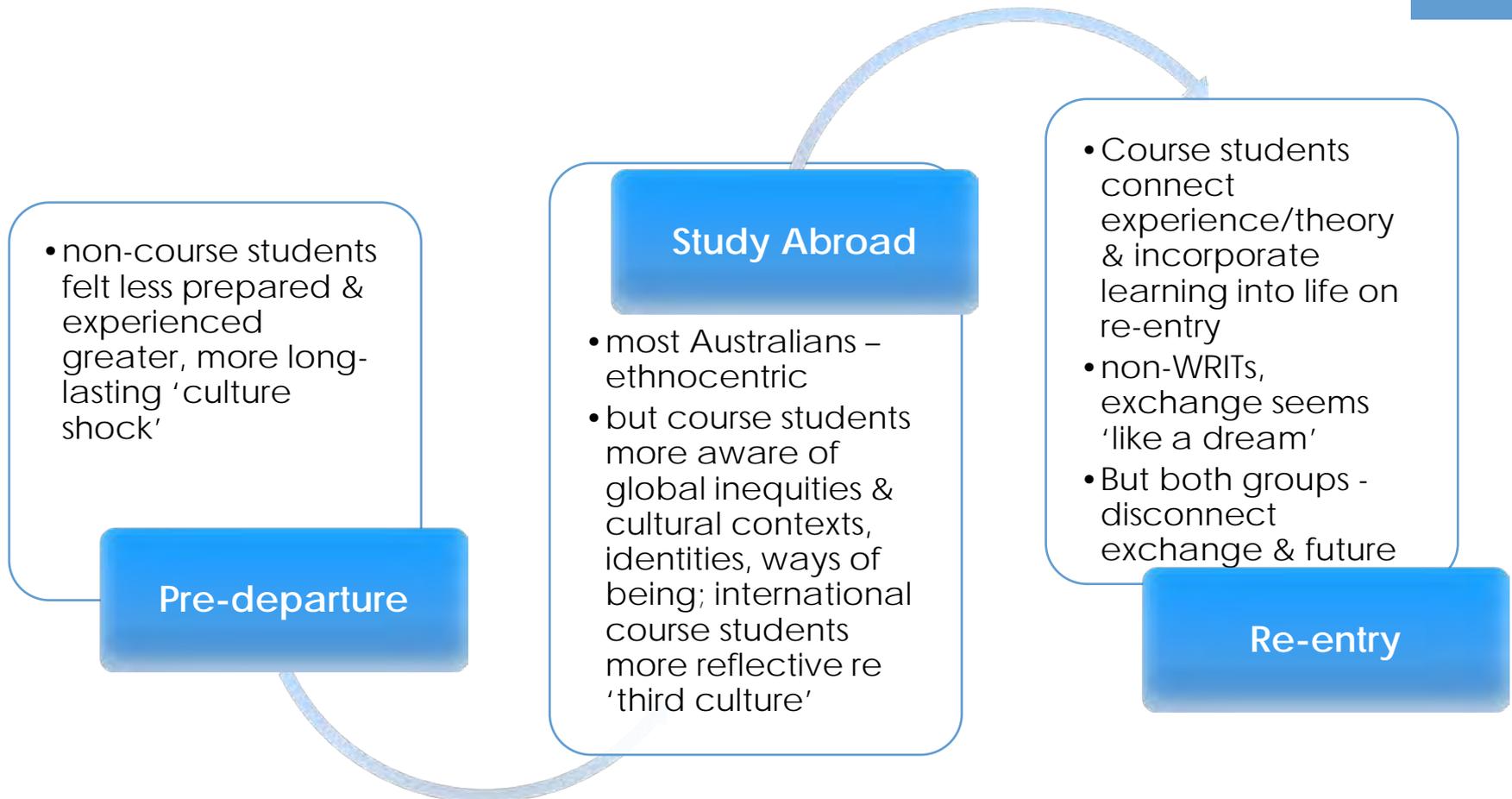**Strong theme across *all* students' interviews (course & non-course)**
- Disconnect between exchange experience and future – inability to apply the exchange to imagining the future
  - *In terms of my study and career goals … I'm not sure what I'm doing* (S27)

- For some, experiences overseas challenged their previous goals or desired pathways, making them less certain about the future
  - *I don't really know what I want to do in my future career now* (S13)

Students who took the course
- Appreciation of skills learned through exchange & the course, but inability to apply these to imagining concrete future outcomes/direction
  - *The skills that we've learnt throughout WRIT … in terms of my future career I'm not too sure how much of an effect it'll have* (S21)

- But, all course students felt that the course should be offered to all students who study abroad

Summary

All students articulated personal development through exchange. However…

Pre-departure

- non-course students felt less prepared & experienced greater, more long-lasting 'culture shock'

Study Abroad

- most Australians – ethnocentric
- but course students more aware of global inequities & cultural contexts, identities, ways of being; international course students more reflective re 'third culture'

Re-entry

- Course students connect experience/theory & incorporate learning into life on re-entry
- non-WRITs, exchange seems 'like a dream'
- But both groups - disconnect exchange & future

Implications

This study suggests students **gain more from studying abroad** if it is framed as a 'rite of passage', with support & guidance to:

a.   develop **realistic expectations**; 'expectancy violation' can lead to stereotyping and impact negatively on learning (Burgoon & Ebesu-Hubbard 2005)

b.   **critically reflect** on their experience; 'learning from [intercultural] experiences ... emerges from our capacity to construe those events and then reconstrue them in transformative ways' (Bennett & Salonen 2007: 46)

c.   **integrate** their experience upon re-entry, through further creative & critical reflection in a supportive community

BUT – in future iterations of **WRIT3060**, we will focus more on:

I.   **challenging ethnocentrism** (esp. Aust. students)

II.   More attention to the experience of 'third culture kids' (esp. international students)

III. connecting exchange to **future** careers/global citizenship

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