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## E.M.B.A. International Field Studies: A Comparative Perspective

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# E.M.B.A. International Field Studies: A Comparative Perspective

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*John S. Cotner and Darlene Brannigan Smith*

## **Abstract**

Almost 80% of EMBA programs include a significant international study experience. The content and process, though, vary considerably in length, location, and method. To provide insight to the scope, format, of different approaches, the researchers conducted extensive interviews with 40 EMBA program directors. Results of the investigation are presented providing information that EMBA directors, faculty and administrators may find useful in improving the quality and effectiveness of their international field studies.

## **Introduction**

Increasingly, Executive MBA (EMBA) programs have incorporated an international field study (IFS) as an integral part of their program. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of all EMBA programs now include a structured international business 'travel' experience for their participants (Executive MBA Council 2001 Membership Directory). These overseas learning experiences complement other program elements and serve

both academic and organizational purposes within the overall EMBA program.

Consistent with a program's learning objectives, an international field study enables EMBA students to better understand motives for, and degrees of, global participation by a wide variety of organizations—smaller local firms as well as large multinational enterprises (MNEs). Further, similar to an expatriate manager's experiences, exposure to new cultures and the businesses operating within these markets not only broadens students' perspectives but also enhances their critical thinking and decision making skills.

Organizationally, the international field study serves to strengthen the bond among all the students participating in a lock-step program. Substantial anecdotal evidence from students and program directors over a ten year period suggests that after the return from a positive international experience, the entire EMBA class is much more cohesive and mutually supportive, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience for the remainder of the program.

Although the primary objectives of international field studies may be similar across EMBA programs, the content and process of these programs vary considerably. These notable differences led us to examine the extant literature where we found limited information on the use of international field studies or the delivery format used. This void in information

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was a motivating factor underlying this investigation, which is designed to provide insight to approaches taken by EMBA programs toward international field studies. It specifically addressed the following questions:

- How do international field studies vary in terms of length, location, method of learning, etc.?
- What are the various types of delivery methods and how frequently are they used?
- What is the nature of the learning experience in international field studies? To what extent do IFSs present a varied, multi-dimensional aspect to the learning opportunities experienced by participants?

The next section of this paper presents a framework we found useful for planning and executing an international field study. The extent to which international field studies incorporated the multiple dimensions identified in this model and the variability in trip formats was then examined. The methodology used is described, results are presented, and observations and conclusions are offered. The information presented herein will be useful to EMBA program directors, faculty, and school administrators in improving the quality and effectiveness of their EMBA programs.

## **A Planning Framework for an International Field Study**

To assure a positive experience, the front-end planning for an international field study must begin months before the travel part of the 'course' begins. EMBA program faculty and administrators must make numerous decisions that affect the integrity and quality of the IFS. First is the issue regarding which country or countries to include in a field study. Second is the decision about content, organizations to visit, and supplemental activities to be incorporated. Without a clear rationale for selection of countries, organizations, and activities, the field

study may be poorly focused and ineffective as a learning experience. A useful multi-dimensional model for planning an IFS is shown in Figure 1 (Kashlak et. al., 1998) at the end of this article. The dimensions of this model are discussed briefly below.

### **The Macro-Environmental Dimension**

The first dimension in planning an IFS is macro-environmental, or country-level. A critical issue for organizations doing business in developing countries is the assessment of unique risks (Wells, 1998). An EMBA international field study offers a rare opportunity for participants to experience associated with developed and emerging countries. Many of these risks are from the external, economic, and political environment in the country. These influences include:

- The relative stability of the host country's foreign exchange
- The cultural distance between home and host country
- In-country firsthand the contrasts in risks political risk, and associated host government restrictions on business operations.

Moreover, the contrast of external environmental influences on business decisions between developed and emerging countries is critical to convey to EMBA students (Daniels and Radebaugh, 1996). Therefore, organizing an IFS to include visits in both emerging and developed countries will provide an EMBA student with a more robust perspective for understanding cultural distance and relative risk.

Although sometimes a logistical challenge, the experience of many EMBA programs demonstrates that meshing these contrasting experiences is feasible within the typical 10-day to two-week program. Examples of this include linking countries in Eastern and Western Europe, and an Asian program that combines more developed countries like Japan,

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Hong Kong or Singapore with emerging countries like China, Vietnam, Malaysia or Thailand.

### **The Organization-Specific Dimension**

The second order of planning for the IFS must be on the types of industries and organizations to be visited within the selected countries. It is valuable to differentiate between firms that have a primary focus on products from those that concentrate on services. One important reason for this is the added service dimensions of intangibility, perishability, and simultaneity of production and consumption (Czinkota and Ronkainen, 1990).

To assure exposure to the differing environments, concerns, and practices that derive from product versus service orientation, an IFS should include visits with both manufacturing (product) and service organizations. In addition to the manufacturing-service dichotomy, it is also advantageous to include visits with non-profit and 'charity' organizations along with for-profit businesses. These non-profit organizations provide a different and important perspective on the social, economic, and cultural aspects of the countries.

### **The Organizational-Strategy Dimension**

The third dimension of planning the IFS is the types of international strategies employed by the organizations visited. Most organizations employ one of four primary strategies in their operations, and it is quite useful to compare these in the international context. Some firms follow a global strategy, deriving benefits from economies of scale and scope. Because their strategic purpose is to maximize the collective organization, these firms will have a longer-term strategic orientation and do not depend upon immediate tangible profits and markets (Hout et. al., 1982).

Not all industries that compete internationally, though, exhibit the market interdependencies fitting the global profile. To remain competitive, many firms must be more responsive to local environments, thus constraining global maximization (Doz and Prahalad, 1984). Product or service requirements may differ substantially from one geographical region to another, making global standardization impossible. Moreover, scale or scope economies across markets may be constrained by governments' protectionist policies. These factors necessitate local context-sensitive strategic decisions (Roth and Morrison, 1990). The resulting multidomestic strategy addresses the market in each country individually, rather than attempting to gain maximum cost advantages from global integration.

Increasingly, new technologies, unanticipated competition, and the redefinition of industry boundaries confront firms in many industries (D'Aveni, 1994; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994; 1996). Resultantly, competitors in these industries have combined the global approach with the multidomestic approach into a transnational strategy. Telecommunications service and pharmaceutical manufacturing are examples of industries in which firms must implement a transnational approach. Both of these industries must be particularly responsive to host country regulations and cultural differences. Yet, because of increasing competition, heightened customer sophistication, and worldwide industry consolidation, firms in these industries must also develop cost-based competencies.

Finally, to complete the firm-level strategy learning experience for EMBA students, international field study organizers should include visits with domestic firms in the countries visited that are pursuing a host-country or regional strategy. However, many of these organizations must also compete in their local markets with foreign firms that are pursuing a multidomestic or global strategy. Thus, these firms offer unique

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learning opportunities for students. An example of this would be *Sodiamac*, a regional home improvement center (based in Santiago, Chile) competing directly in Chile with *Home Depot* (a U.S. multidomestic firm).

To examine the extent to which international field studies incorporate this multi-dimensional perspective in their learning activities, and to gain a better understanding of different formats for such trips, the researchers collected and analyzed information from a variety of EMBA programs. The following section overviews the two-phased approach to data collection.

## Research Methodology

### Phase I: Interviews and Pilot Study

In the first phase, the investigators conducted a 'pilot' study of 22 EMBA programs in the United States and two other countries. The primary scope of this research was to identify the alternative "delivery" methods or formats used by the various EMBA programs and to pretest a survey instrument. This involved personal interviews with several EMBA program directors followed by the completion of the preliminary questionnaire.

The information obtained from this pilot study was presented as part of a Workshop on International Field Studies at the Annual Conference of the Executive MBA Council (Executive MBA Council, 2000). In group discussions EMBA directors from the U.S. and several other countries shared their models, experiences, successes, and challenges with international field studies.

The interviews and workshop discussions identified three general "delivery" models. For differentiation, these three approaches are referred to herein as the 'site

visit,' the 'international residency,' and the 'live-case.' Each of these is described briefly below.

The 'site visit' approach consists largely of visits to facilities and management briefings with a variety of organizations in selected foreign countries. Successful field studies taking this approach often include visits with product and service firms, and local and foreign organizations employing different strategies, as well as non-profits, education institutions, and government agencies. Visits sometimes extend to key suppliers and customers of these organizations—emphasizing strategic alliances and supply chain management.

The second general type is an 'international residency' that emphasizes in-class 'lectures' in the host country. These lectures may be from professors, business executives, and government officials in the host country, as well as joint presentations employing both foreign and U.S. faculty. Sessions and activities that include both U.S. and foreign students (working together) can be especially valuable learning experiences for all participants. An example of this is groups of US students participating in a simulated negotiation exercise with groups of Chinese MBA students regarding establishing joint ventures in China.

The third basic model is a 'live case' wherein EMBA students provide 'consultation' to organizations located in the host country. Programs using this international 'live case' approach usually include this experience near the end of the EMBA program—as part of the capstone project or course. This furnishes an opportunity for direct and immediate applications of EMBA learning in a challenging environment, and provides valuable service to the client organizations. Schools employing this approach emphasize that it is critical to work closely with a host institution in locating appropriate client organizations, obtaining data, and facilitating on-site meetings with management.

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All three of these approaches have benefits and limitations, and the choice of model among the EMBA programs depended on several factors, including:

- The specific learning objectives of the IFS 'course'
- The content, context, and design of other courses and elements in the EMBA program
- The experience and preferences of the program faculty and administration
- Strategic alliances with universities in the host countries.

### **Phase II: Survey of EMBA Program Directors**

Based on the knowledge gained from the pilot study and the EMBA Conference workshop, the researchers developed a revised questionnaire that was used in structured interviews with EMBA program directors. The process for that, and the information gained through analysis of the collected data, is presented in the following sections.

Approximately 150 colleges and universities have Executive MBA programs and are members of the Executive MBA Council (EMBA Council Membership Directory, 2001). Membership information indicates that 78% percent of these programs include some type of 'international field study' in their program curriculum. For this study, the researchers selected a sample of approximately 40% of all EMBA Council member programs.

In selecting the sample, the researchers included 16 EMBA programs that were rated highly in an article in *U.S. News and World Report* (*U.S. News Online*, 1998). Also included were a number of EMBA programs that had unique program characteristics of which the researchers were aware—because of direct acquaintance with the program directors and information obtained at numerous Executive MBA Conferences. In addition, the researchers made an effort to insure representation across

several dimensions of EMBA programs, including geographic location, size of university and EMBA program, private/public university, and number of years of experience with an IFS. Considering all these factors, the researchers selected 60 EMBA programs for inclusion in the sample in Phase II of this research. This large sample included 56 programs in the United States and four programs in other countries, and contained schools that are representative of EMBA programs across all the dimensions noted above.

The data used in the analysis was collected via structured telephone interviews with EMBA program directors. To ensure consistency and completeness in gathering the data, the researchers developed a detailed questionnaire that was used consistently as a 'script' for these interviews. The data was then organized and analyzed. The following section presents the research findings.

### **Results of the Research**

The results are structured along several dimensions. First, a profile of the respondents is provided along with a general description of their field studies. Their approaches to delivering the IFS are presented, and the extent to which trips incorporate multi-dimensional learning activities is then examined. Lastly,, additional findings pertaining to trip planning, participation, and student satisfaction are summarized.

#### **Sample Profile**

Usable responses were obtained from 45 of the 60 EMBA programs contacted, yielding a response rate of 75%. Of these 45 programs, five schools either were either no longer offering IFSs or were in the early planning stages for their first international trip, and were not included in the analysis. Thus, the detailed responses provided a usable pool of data for 40 EMBA programs—38 from the US and two from other countries. These

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40 programs demonstrated the following general characteristics:

- Program Length 18-24 months  
(mean = 20 months)
- Size of Class 25-70  
participants (mean = 50)
- Program Tuition \$30,000-\$87,000  
(mean = \$45,000 in 1998)

### General Profile of International Field Studies

Table 1 summarizes some of the other key characteristics of the international field studies. Eighty percent (80%) of the EMBA programs included one international travel experience for their participants and 20% of the programs included two or more international field studies. Course titles associated with international field studies varied widely, and included, for example, Global Business Issues, International Business, International Residency, International Practicum, International Field Study, International Environment of Business, Comparative Management, Global Environments and Strategies, and The Global Executive.

Academic credit for the IFS was given by 78% of the programs in the study, with the average credit being three semester credit hours (range from 2.5 to 9 credits). Of the programs offering academic credit, 85% assigned a letter grade for the course, while 15% used a pass/fail grading policy.

EMBA programs spend an average of about \$2700 per student (range \$1800 to \$4000) on the international travel portion of the IFS 'course' (in 1998). More than half (53%) of the programs include the total cost of travel in their program tuition (except for some meals and miscellaneous 'personal' items). Some 21% of

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**Table 1**  
**Summary Characteristics of IFS**

#### Required or Optional:

- 83% Required participation
- 17% Optional (an average of 38% of students participating)

#### Placement in Program:

- 45% Toward the Middle
- 43% Toward the End
- 12% Middle and End (in programs having more than one trip)

#### Academic Credit:

- 70% Separate 'academic' course for credit
- 25% 'Stand-alone' element of program (frequently optional)
- 5% Integrated into multiple program courses

#### Costs to Participants:

- 53% Included in E.M.B.A. program tuition
- 26% Participants billed separately, non-inclusive
- 21% Inclusive, except airfare

#### Primary Planning Responsibility:

- 74% Program Director (2% outsource)
- 18% Director and Faculty
- 8% Faculty

#### "Guest" Participation:

- 46% Guests are not invited
  - 31% Spouses and "significant others" invited
  - 21% Any one guest invited
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the schools include a portion of the travel cost in tuition, with the student normally responsible for airfare. About 26% of the programs separated the cost of the IFS from program tuition, billing students separately for the IFS travel. In most of these cases, the international travel part of the EMBA program was optional.

Length of the international trip ranged from five days to 14 days, with the average being 9.5 days. Although a few schools visited only one city, most travel itineraries included visits to more than one city and country, averaging two countries and 2.5 cities per trip. Allowing for travel time between countries, this provided an average stay of about three days in each city visited.

### **Delivery Formats**

Data indicate that programs can and do take a number of approaches in delivering the international study portion of their programs. The most widely employed format is the 'site visit.' Half of all programs emphasized 'on-site' visits with management and tours of a variety of organizations. The second most popular approach is a 'hybrid' approach with 25% of IFSs including both site visits and classroom style lectures and presentations—gaining some of the benefits of both types. Few programs used exclusively a live case / consulting format or a residency approach. Summary data on the format and content of the international field studies and events are given below in Table 2.

### **Incorporation of Multi-Dimensional Learning Experiences**

Table 3 summarizes the extent to which international field studies provided contrasting experiences between emerging and developed economies, manufacturing and service oriented firms, and local versus international companies and strategies. Details are provided below.

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**Table 2**  
**Delivery Formats for IFS**

- 50% Site visit (students visit multiple organizations)
  - 13% Residency (in foreign city/country – classroom style lectures)
  - 25% Hybrid (site visits and residency)
  - 12% Live case consulting project (students do an in-depth study of organizations in the foreign country – usually at the end of the program as a part of 'capstone')
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**Table 3**  
**Multi-Dimensional Perspectives in IFS**

#### Macro-Environmental Dimension:

- 58% Emerging Economies
- 42% Developed Economies

#### Organization Type:

- 52% Manufacturing
- 27% Service
- 21% Government/Non-Profit

#### Organizational Strategy & Scope:

- 77% International / Global firm
  - 23% Local / Regional firm
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### **Macro-Environmental Dimension**

Most programs reported taking a regional focus in a given year. The areas visited, by percentage, included Western Europe (42%), Latin America (24%), Asia (19%), Eastern/Central Europe, (4%), and South Africa (2%). A majority of trips (58%) have included at least one country that would be characterized as an 'emerging market.' This may be one of the

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factors that explain why almost 43% of the programs worked closely with a host-country university in coordinating site visits and identifying speakers. Experience suggests that confirming site visits, factory tours, and management briefings in these lesser-developed countries is especially challenging without a local contact to facilitate the arrangements.

### **Organization-Specific Dimension**

The majority of site visits have been with manufacturing (product) firms. These firms represented 52% of all visits, compared to 27% with service-oriented firms, and 21% with government agencies. Because many developing countries have a greater manufacturing orientation, this is not surprising. Even so, EMBA directors suggest that a larger percent of service and government visits are likely to be included in future trips.

### **Organizational Strategy / Scope Dimension**

Relative to organizational strategies, pilot testing indicated that respondents could not easily identify whether organizations visited employed a global, multi-domestic or transnational strategy. Thus, in Phase II, respondents were asked only to indicate the relative percentage of visits to local firms versus global / multidomestic organizations. Findings showed that a significant majority of the site visits were with organizations pursuing a global or multidomestic strategy. On average, though, 23% of site visits were with local firms that focused on the host-country or regional market. This provided opportunities for students to learn first-hand about indigenous markets, competitors, and industries. Examples of these 'locals' include executive recruiting services in The Netherlands, cement manufacturing in Hong Kong, fried chicken processing in Thailand, and appliances (white goods) assembly in Argentina.

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**Table 4**  
**Sample Activities Included in IFS**

#### **Business Setting:**

- Management briefings with local and U.S. businesses, universities, and government agencies
- Case study presentations with foreign business managers
- Consulting Projects
- Guided tours of organizational facilities and manufacturing 'plants' – ranging from cement factories to wineries to electronic 'clean rooms'
- Tours of unique local operations, such as shipping ports and flower markets
- Visits and tours in hospitals, orphanages, and community service organizations
- Visits to charities and their 'community – focused' programs

#### **Academic Settings:**

- Lectures by U.S. and host-country faculty
- Joint classes with M.B.A. students attending foreign universities, including collaborative assignments between foreign and domestic M.B.A. students (building 'virtual' international teams)
- Business 'game' competition among U.S. and foreign student teams
- Case analysis (with/out foreign students)

#### **Cultural Infusion Activities:**

- Scavenger hunts
- Receptions, wine tasting, and small group dinners with foreign students
- Guided city tours and visits to local cultural events, attractions, and markets (87% of programs included cultural sightseeing, though most were optional)
- Organized group dinners with local cuisine and 'shows'

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## Overview of Learning Activities and Events

International field studies have offered opportunities for EMBA students to participate in a variety of events, ranging from business site-oriented visits, classroom-setting activities, and cultural-infusion events. Some are more 'traditional' while others are more 'experimental' in nature. Examples of these activities are provided in Table 4.

The data revealed that, on average, students participate in approximately 17 planned events during their IFS. There was, though, significant variability in this. The minimal number of planned events reported was six (in the shorter trips) and the maximum number was 30 (found in the longer trips). Adjusting for travel time, this equates to an average of about two planned events per day in the foreign country—more on 'business' days, fewer on weekends. Table 5 summarizes the average number of planned events by type of activity.

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**Table 5**  
**Average # of Planned Events in IFS**

Type of Activity	Average # of Events
Site Visits / Management Briefings	7 (Range 0-15)
Organizational Presentations	4 (Range 0-12)
Academic Lectures	3 (Range 0-12)
Other Activities (cultural events, special dinners)	2

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After returning from the international field study students generally made debriefing presentations, wrote self-reflections, sent memos

to their management relating their experience and learning opportunities to their firm, finished course projects related to entry-level strategies, and/or developed business plans for a foreign entity.

## Planning and Participation

When asked about the primary responsibility for planning and coordination of their IFS, approximately 72% of the EMBA directors indicated they and their staff had this responsibility. In contrast, faculty assumed the primary responsibility for arranging the IFS in only 8% of the programs. In 18% of the programs, EMBA directors worked jointly with faculty in arranging the trip. Only about 2% of the programs surveyed used an outside service for planning and coordination of the IFS.

An average of more than four college personnel accompanied an EMBA class on their international trip. This consisted of 1.6 staff/administrators plus 2.6 EMBA faculty. Interestingly, there was significant variability in these numbers, from a low of one faculty member with no staff to as many as nine faculty plus three staff. As might be expected, programs employing the 'live case' format included the highest faculty/student ratio.

More than half (54%) of the programs allow guests (normally one per student) to accompany the class on the international trip. Of these, 31% permit a spouse or 'significant other' adult guest, while 21% welcome any guest (e.g., child, adult, sibling). The other 46% of the programs do not permit guests, generally under the philosophy that guests detract from the 'business' purpose of the field study.

## Participant Satisfaction:

Perhaps the most important aspect of an IFS is whether the students find it to be a valuable learning experience. According to the EMBA directors surveyed, EMBA students

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generally gave their international field studies very high marks on satisfaction. Using a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being 'completely satisfied', the mean average reported student satisfaction score was 8.9 (range from 7 to 10, with a modal value of 9).

The message from this response is clear. International field studies are perceived as a real value-added component of Executive MBA Programs. Responses to an open-ended question indicate that the international field study experience affords a number of learning opportunities and benefits to EMBA students, including:

- An avenue for applying what is learned in other E.M.B.A. coursework.
- Hands-on training in, and understanding of, cultural diversity.
- An enhanced understanding of important dimensions of doing business in a global market.
- A means of exploring the complexities of strategy planning in a foreign market.
- Practical experience in assessing global opportunities and risks.
- An opportunity to think outside one's "comfort zone," and to see how "change" is being managed in foreign markets.
- A better understanding of the perspectives of foreign businesses doing business in the United States.

## Discussion and Conclusions

International field studies are an integral part of the vast majority of Executive MBA programs. Most of these international travel experiences include direct exposure to an emerging market, and contain a diverse mix of visits to manufacturing, service, and non-profit organizations. While there is a strong orientation to global companies, students generally have opportunities to visit with and learn about local firms and industries as well.

This investigation was descriptive in its design. It provided useful comparative information about formats, types of activities, cost structures, etc. It did not seek to identify the underlying rationale for planning and delivering international experiences. More investigation is needed to assess the extent to which the planning process is "strategically" focused or more "tactically" based.

Discussions with Program Directors during the pilot study suggested that some programs generally take a "convenience" approach to planning their field studies. One reason frequently stated for selection of countries to visit was the ease (and time) of travel. Another was the cultural similarity to the home country, thus making it less challenging for EMBA students to adapt to the foreign culture and environment. In some cases, an existing linkage with a host country university or inter-university research collaboration was an important determinant. While the logic behind these decision drivers is not flawed or inappropriate, per se, it may not necessarily lead to the most robust learning experience.

This study does not provide clear insights to the underlying rationale behind the selection of activities, events, and visits. For example, even though the GPD of the United States is 78% service driven, only 27% of the learning opportunities focused on visits to or presentations by service organizations. Is the strong manufacturing orientation of international field studies based on the trend of US based companies outsourcing their manufacturing operations to these markets? Or, is the preponderance of manufacturing oriented visits due to the economic base of these economies being primarily manufacturing driven, with site visits reflecting this reality? In addition, only 23% of learning activities focused on local / domestic organizations. Yet, to remain competitive, managers need to be more responsive to local environments and competition. Should IFS focus more on domestic firms? How is learning

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enhanced by offering learning opportunities that focus exclusively on companies pursuing local or regional strategies? These areas represent questions that warrant further research.

Another area of research not yet tackled is the assessment of learning outcomes in international programs such as international field studies. Our data suggests that EMBA Programs measure student satisfaction, but satisfaction may not be the most appropriate tool for assessing learning outcomes. This area is ripe for further research in light of the increased demand for global experiences in programs and the corresponding demand by accreditation bodies (e.g., AACSB) for the identification and assessment of learning outcomes (AACSB Proposed Eligibility Procedures and Standards for Business Accreditation, Version: 12 September 2002, pp. 17-17; 55-58).

The findings presented in this paper support the notion there is no 'right' approach to conducting international field studies. All three of the major delivery formats (i.e., site visits, residency, live case) have proved successful and beneficial to the participants. More important than the specific model employed is that the IFS program be well designed and executed in order to provide a robust perspective for understanding different environments, practices, strategies, and relative risk. EMBA Program Directors may benefit from taking time to reflect on their approach to planning and delivering international field studies.

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Figure 1

Planning Model for E.M.B.A. IFS

Content Dimensions

