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Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in the Indo-Pacific: A Village Stay Model

In the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programmes described here, university students collaborate with eco-resorts and local villagers to create a commercially viable and culturally experiential village stay.

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Summary

This ongoing Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programme began in Fiji in the mid-2010s and was most recently extended to include Indonesia. The project, to establish a commercially viable village stay aligned with a resort, has operated in conjunction with several universities in Australia and the USA and has received external funding. Through outbound mobility programmes, and using an established business toolbox, students work with existing village group structures (i.e. youth, women, elders and church groups) to create a collaborative venture (a cultural immersion and educational stay) between the village and a local eco-resort. To date, five enterprises including four in Fiji and one in Indonesia have been created. Student evaluations attest to the transformational nature of the WIL programme in providing a unique business acumen and global skill set that can position graduates to live and work in the Indo-Pacific region. The long-term goal is to enable an operational system that can be adapted to include multiple village–resort partnerships, producing a replicable business model (and associated tourism toolkit) that can be applied throughout the developing world.

Background

Our Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programme focuses on developing university students' capability to conduct business, specifically (though not exclusively) in the Indo-Pacific region, through the creation of a sustainable ecotourism venture (a cultural and education village stay). In partnership with nearby eco-resorts, cohorts of university students have worked with local communities to establish village stays that have resulted in the following commercial websites:

- <https://seruaisland.com> (Serua village, Viti Levu, Fiji);
- <https://fijianhomestays.com> (Naiseuseu village, Beqa Island, Fiji);
- <http://sosostays.com> (Soso village, Yasawa Islands, Fiji);
- <http://nacevavillagestay.com> (Naceva village, Beqa Island, Fiji); and
- <https://indonesianhomestays.com> (Braja Harjosari village, Lampung, Indonesia).

Several universities have been involved, notably the University of Georgia (USA) and four Australian institutions (with funding provided by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Colombo Plan): Central Queensland University (QLD), La Trobe University (VIC), University of Newcastle (NSW) and University of the Sunshine Coast (QLD).

Concept

This WIL is a university-level course that applies the principles of service learning (McCormick *et al.*, 2013), in which cohorts of (typically ten to 12) students develop entrepreneurial skills by establishing a commercially viable

and sustainable tourism opportunity. Specifically, the students create a plan or model for tourists to experience a 'culturally authentic' stay in a village near their eco-resort. The basic building blocks of the course are sustainable education, service learning, entrepreneurship and outbound mobility. All of these are key initiatives in higher education today, in part because of their impact on promoting student engagement (McCormick *et al.*, 2013) which, in turn, has been linked to such positive learning outcomes as timely college completion, achievement in general education classes and gains in critical thinking (Kuh, 2008). Tarrant *et al.* (2022), for example, demonstrated that Deep Learning, a well-documented and substantiated measure of student engagement (Laird *et al.*, 2008), was significantly higher for sustainability courses offered via study abroad than for all other combinations of campus/non-study abroad and/or non-sustainability education courses.

Learning outcomes and skills

Today's employers seek graduates with global skills, not simply a global mindset; accordingly, institutions of higher education recognize a need to foster the global competencies of their students. This global skill set includes not only the business acumen of developing an entrepreneurial commercial product, but also the nurturing of intercultural collaborative partnerships (going beyond basic cultural awareness). Accordingly, the WIL was designed to meet the following desired learning outcomes: (i) to promote strong collaboration of university student cohorts with community groups (village youth, women and elders) that demands a balance of Western and Indigenous decision making; (ii) to expose students to the cultural nuances of ecotourism provision through creating and executing a business plan in collaboration with each (student, village and resort) stakeholder; and (iii) to develop an entrepreneurial website (including a booking/reservation system) that meets the commercial and sociocultural needs of both the eco-resort and the village.

Model

The WIL model enables tourists staying at the eco-resort (or otherwise) to spend 24 hours (including an overnight) in the local village as guests of the community. Since many indigenous villages are annexed to commercial-operated eco-resorts (providing labour for the hospitality industry), the same locals who serve meals, change bedding and maintain the resort will also host the tourists in their own community for the homestay. Not only does this encourage tourist–host relations (thereby enhancing the tourism experience), but it also provides a cultural basis and connection for future repeat visitation by tourists to the resort. Such relationships are maintained and fostered over time through social media, meaning that tourists are more likely to return to the resort not necessarily because of the quality of the food, facilities and/or amenities, but because of the people-to-people relations and connections they have established with local residents.

To nurture trust and understanding, student cohorts spend their initial five days in-country in preparation for the WIL, including: (i) classes on language and culture/ways of life, social and natural history, and village customs and etiquette; (ii) informal socials with locals; (iii) seminars on community engagement and ecotourism development and planning (including ex-pat relations); and (iv) engagement opportunities/field trips to key local agencies and institutions such as local universities and consular office. This is followed by a week living and working in the village (as homestay guests themselves), where students divide into smaller teams to address the WIL programme plans (see below). The WIL also includes an ethnographic project to introduce students to traditional and contemporary ways of life, as well as time built in for informal activities and engagement with village residents (including cooking, cleaning, gardening, fishing, assisting in the local schools, and taking part in rituals such as kava socials). The final two or three days are directed to developing a stand-alone website (with a booking system integrated within the existing eco-resort reservation system). The resorts that are engaged are always small, locally owned and/or have strong eco-principles.

Applications and Goals

One of the key goals of the WIL is to promote people-to-people relations that nurtures mutual respect between two distinct (i.e. Western and developing) cultures – skills that are very difficult to acquire in a formal classroom environment. In doing so, the model also encourages repeat visitation to the eco-resort, providing an incentive for the resort to promote the village stay, despite a loss of one night's income. Likewise, the opportunity to offer a cultural immersive and educational village stay experience is an innovative and unique marketing position for the eco-resorts.

Second, the WIL has economic and cultural impacts for the village as it builds community resilience and contributes to the long-term viability of villages at risk. Accordingly, it empowers women (who manage the village

stays) by providing a source of economic independence and public leadership. Traditionally, most women in the villages are limited to working for nearby resorts in the hospitality industry, unlike the men who can also fish and farm and can earn cash from selling these products in the local markets.

Third, the WIL increases the number of work-ready graduates with experience in the Indo-Pacific region and promotes an entrepreneurial/multidisciplinary skill set that students can place on their résumé. Placing (typically) young, undergraduate students in a remote village to engage and collaborate with elders, youth, church and women's groups on commercial projects is a powerful and transformational experience, for both students and local residents.

Programme plans

The WIL programme requires sub-teams of two or three students to engage with the village and eco-resort on the following plans.

1. Community engagement plan:

- Western (i.e. democratic) approaches to engagement and decision making are fundamentally different from that in indigenous communities. Engagement in Fiji, for example, operates within a traditional (patriarchal and communal) system of *matagali* (clan or landowning unit) and village elders. Establishing norms and expectations of all parties (students, village groups and eco-resort) is key to successful engagement and participation. In the Fijian case, we are guided by an effective planning strategy known as FLMMMA (Fiji Locally Managed Marine Areas). The LMMA process (established across the Indo-Pacific region) ensures community interests are at the heart of any conservation effort and engages local communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies and researchers to protect and preserve coastal and marine areas (including fish catch and reef restoration).
- Similarly, engagement in Indonesia is based around *musyawarah*, a form of consensus-building through informal group discussion. Often this takes place in a context of religious, cultural and linguistic diversity. For instance, in Brajajarjosari village, descendants of Balinese and Javanese migrants live together with locals from South Sumata. Each group maintains a distinct identity and has its own language. Also the Balinese also are Hindu, while the majority of other residents are Muslim.
- Accordingly, our community engagement plan is adapted to local circumstances. It takes a bottom-up and socially just approach to ensure the village is both actively engaged in the creation of the village stay and positioned to maintain the village stay after the students depart.
- A second key aspect of the engagement plan is to establish clear expectations of both the village and the guests. Accordingly, students create a village stay letter (in both the native language and English) which identifies and describes village customs and etiquette. Such expectations include, for example, the behaviours of guests while in the village. Aside from culturally specific behaviours in Indonesia or Fiji, there are some common features. These include expectations of stooping when engaging with elders; avoiding touching the heads people, even children; and behaviour during rituals. Students also identify what tourists should bring (including appropriate clothing, no alcohol, etc.) as well as what guests should expect from the village (types of food, access to drinking water, meal protocols, sleeping arrangements, etc.).

2. Needs assessment plan:

- Students conduct a service-and-demand assessment in the village (i.e. what services are required, for whom, when, and how they should be delivered). Village support for the project is key to a successful outcome and, although formal negotiations (and approvals) with the village will have been secured well before the WIL programme begins, a needs assessment enables both students and locals to have a better understanding of one another's goals and aspirations.
- Potential target markets include:
 - i. independent travellers (notably flashpackers – higher yielding backpackers), many of whom are seeking a cultural-rich, authentic village experience (as a contrast to the sun-sea-sand tourism opportunity); and
 - ii. academic institutions (universities, colleges and high schools) seeking to provide cultural immersion study abroad/outbound mobility programmes.

3. Tourism and education plan:

- This plan identifies and describes the range of activities (cultural and educational) that tourists/guests will engage in during their homestay. It requires:
 - i. Documentation and mapping of important cultural and ecological resources within the village (such as artefacts, plantations, coral reef surveys, fish species, medicinal plants, etc.).
 - ii. Cultural interpretation of significant events (e.g. oral histories, indigenous concept of time based on historic occurrences such as hurricanes and deaths of chief, sharing and educating about Fijian etiquette, customs and cultures, etc.).

- iii. Identifying where, and with whom, such activities can occur. In Fiji, for example, farming and fishing are often conducted by a particular *matagali*/group of houses while other activities, such as weaving and cooking, are ubiquitous. A critical feature (and central to the successful operation) of this plan is to prepare and train individuals within the village to deliver such activities.
- iv. The creation of interpretation and educational materials is important for visitors to understand the cultural and social context of the village. This includes online materials for both village-stay guests as well as day visitors (including cruise ship tourists and backpackers, etc.).
- Key learning outcomes for selected activities are identified. The intent is to demonstrate how a village stay experience can fit within a school or university academic discipline and, more specifically, meet target course objectives.
4. Health and safety plan:
 - A comprehensive health, safety and risk assessment for both operating the village stay (cultural immersion, accommodations, meals) and delivering the educational and tourism activities is conducted.
 - Every house in the village is assessed, using a well-established inventory, on a 5-point scale. Photographs and contact details of each house are taken and only homes that meet a standard benchmark are accepted for the village stay. Assessments include the source of drinking water, sleeping arrangements (number of beds/mattresses, bedrooms), type (and functioning) of toilet (compost, inside/outside, flush or bucket), washing and cooking facilities, number (and ages and gender) of permanent inhabitants, security (locks on doors and blinds or walls between beds) and number of people who speak English, etc. A map and index of the houses are produced.
 - Any activity that does not meet specified health, safety and risk guidelines is not included in the village stay.
 - A village stay waiver and assumption of risk, identifying and describing all known risks, is created for all visitors to the village to sign.
5. Business and leadership plan:
 - This plan requires students first to understand the legal and liability issues surrounding the creation of a village stay programme; and second to determine an appropriate framework for a resort-village partnership vis-à-vis the legal and liability issues. In the Fijian context, and to meet legal guidelines, the focus of the village stay is education and cultural immersion (where the provision of accommodation is secondary to the primary objective of education).
 - Students also develop an accounting and financial system for administering and managing the village stay; that is, what visitors will be charged, how they will be charged, where the funds will go, what monies will need to be reinvested, what business investments will be required (e.g. bank account) and how this can be a green business operation.
 - In all cases to date, bookings are made through the eco-resort reservation systems, which collects fees from guests and transfers funds to the village. It is imperative that, per the Community Engagement Plan and the Needs Assessment, representatives from the village have an intimate understanding of both the accounting system and the flow of revenue. Often, villages do not have bank accounts and/or business registrations (for tax and/or commercial operations), rendering the role of the local eco-resort as critical.
6. Marketing plan and website development:
 - Students identify, collect and prepare all promotional materials (text, video, images) for the website and tourism marketing efforts.
 - A key component is to develop marketing materials that will reach target markets (identified in the Needs Assessment).
 - Students develop a fully functioning, stand-alone website with the booking system routed through the partner resort.

Conclusions

Given the structure of the WIL, future funding agents include: (i) NGOs and private philanthropic donors for social change in developing nations, particularly those focused on women's empowerment (e.g. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation); and (ii) governmental economic development initiatives (e.g. Pacific Regional Aid Program, the Australia New Zealand Partnership for Development Cooperation, etc.).

The success of the WIL is reliant not only on funding but also on identifying suitably prepared and engaged communities where the WIL model can be adapted and applied. This identification process is underpinned by establishing key networks in suitable communities. Establishing networks through local universities, consular offices and private philanthropic organizations has been central to the success of the programme thus far. Any expansion into other locations would need to be based on similar networks being first developed in new locations.

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