Building a Study Abroad Program with Disability Access as a Foundation

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Abstract

The UF in London Technological Applications for Disability Access is an innovative short-term study abroad program that uniquely integrates disability access with engineering technology. This groundbreaking initiative, the first of its kind at the University of Florida is the culmination of many years of efforts by the Disability Resource Center and the College of Engineering, in partnership with Learn International. The program aims to provide inclusive international experiences, ensuring that all students, regardless of ability, can participate fully. In this Program Model essay, we explore the program's framework and implementation, highlighting key insights from faculty and student experiences. Additionally, we share valuable lessons learned and discuss the future direction of the program, including plans for expansion, curriculum enhancements, and strategies to further bridge the gap between technology and accessibility. This reflection will offer guidance for institutions looking to develop similar programs, with a focus on sustainability and long-term impact.

Keywords

Accessibility, disability, inclusive, international, technology

Introduction

Disability access and inclusion are essential considerations in modern education. Yet, students with disabilities encounter significant obstacles when pursuing study abroad opportunities. In 2020/21, only 11% of U.S. study abroad students disclosed disabilities (IIE, 2022). At University of Florida (UF), this figure was a mere 3%. These low figures stem from physical, technological, and communication barriers abroad, limited program options, lack of information, and prejudicial stereotypes about disabilities (Roberts, 2009). These barriers

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deprive students with disabilities of opportunities essential to their personal and professional development growth, as well as of experiences crucial for them to build self-confidence, intercultural awareness, adaptability, independence, and problem-solving skills (Hameister et al., 1999; Roberts, 2009).

The UF in London: Technological Applications for Disability Access program was created not only for students who identify as having a disability but also for students interested in learning about disability access, inclusive design, and disability policy advocacy. This program provides an opportunity for students from diverse academic backgrounds, including engineering, public policy, and disability studies, to explore accessibility from a global perspective and become advocates for inclusive practices (see Table 1 below).

TABLE (1)

COURSE PROFILE

Course or Program Title and Numbers	Spring 2024: EGN 4932/IDS 4956 Technological Applications for Disability Access
Target Student Population(s)	Students with disabilities, students interested in learning about disability advocacy and policy, students interested in learning about the development and implementation of technology to promote disability access.
Content Focus, Field, or Discipline	Engineering; Disability Studies; Education; Sociology; Communication; Public Health
Credit-Bearing	Yes
Program Level	Undergraduate/Graduate (Masters)/Graduate (Doctoral)
Program Duration	Eight days
On-site Location(s)	London, United Kingdom

The program is the result of a collaboration between University of Florida Disability Resource Center (DRC), the Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering (HWCOE), and Learn International. It ensures that students, regardless of ability, can fully participate in international learning while also equipping future professionals with the tools to design accessible technology, shape policy, and promote inclusion in their respective fields. Together, we successfully launched the short-term faculty-led program with an inaugural cohort of 18 students in 2023, with the goal to expand inclusive study abroad

opportunities, empower students with disabilities to explore, learn and grow, and foster a more diverse and inclusive international education landscape.

Accessibility and Inclusion

A distinctive feature of this program, which sets it apart from other study abroad programs, was its commitment to accessibility. Traditional study abroad experiences often pose significant challenges for students with disabilities (Shames & Alden, 2005; Soneson & Fisher, 2011). However, this program went above and beyond to ensure that all participants could fully participate in the experience, regardless of their specific needs and accommodations. While it ensures that students with disabilities can fully participate, it also serves as a learning opportunity for students who wish to study accessibility challenges and solutions from a technological, social, and policy-driven perspective. The program's learning objectives include:

- Understanding universal design and its application in urban planning, product innovation, and technology development to create accessible environments,
- Examining global policy frameworks that influence disability rights and accessibility standards across different countries; and
- Engaging with local disability communities, schools, and advocacy organizations to explore how grassroots movements and institutional efforts shape accessibility reforms and drive systemic change.

In the last two cohorts, students who were wheelchair-users were not only able to participate but were also able to bring their personal care attendants, ensuring that they received the necessary support throughout the study abroad. Similarly, a student with hearing loss was able to fully engage in all activities, discussions, and learning opportunities without barriers with the assistance of a sign language interpreter. The program also accommodated a student with nonverbal autism spectrum disorder who was enrolled in UF Online, the University of Florida's remote distance learning program. The student was accompanied by their mother, who helped them to navigate the challenges of a new environment with the comfort and support of a familiar caregiver. These accommodations were integral to the program's design and reflected a deep commitment to creating an inclusive environment where all students could thrive.

Location

London was selected as the location for this program because it is a global hub for innovation, diversity, and accessibility initiatives. The city,

recognized for its many technological innovations that improve the well-being of its citizens with disabilities, provided an excellent environment for students to explore cutting-edge solutions in accessibility. London's rich history of advocacy and progressive policies related to disability rights offered students a unique opportunity to learn from leading organizations and institutions that are shaping the future of accessibility and inclusion.

Furthermore, London's diverse population and complex urban landscape provided real-world examples of both the challenges and opportunities associated with disability access in a major metropolitan area. The city's extensive public transportation system, iconic landmarks, and varied infrastructure allowed students to experience firsthand the practical implications of accessibility in different contexts, from historical sites to modern urban developments.

From an intercultural learning perspective, London's cultural heritage and international significance allowed students to immerse themselves in a multicultural setting. Students were able to engage with global perspectives and gain a broader understanding of the intertwining nature of technology, policy, and advocacy on a global scale.

Last but not least, London was easily accessible from Florida, an important consideration for students with disabilities. The availability of direct flights from several major airports in Florida reduced the stress and logistical challenges that can affect the international travel experience for students with disabilities. This ensured that more students could participate in the program, aligning with its goal of providing inclusive study abroad opportunities

Framework for Program Design

The program integrates George Kuh's (2008) High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs), which emphasize engaged, applied, and reflective learning experiences that have been shown to enhance student success. Specifically, this program incorporates key high-impact practices such as collaborative projects, global learning, experiential education, and community-based learning.

During the one-week exploration, students visited organizations advocating for people with disabilities, educational institutions, and companies leading advancements in smart technology, urban planning, public transportation, and consumer products. This intentional design not only facilitated deep engagement with the course material but also provided students with opportunities to explore London, gaining insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with disability access in urban environments. Through these interactions with faculty, peers, and local stakeholders, students

developed a richer understanding of the complexities of accessibility and the role of technology and policy in shaping more inclusive societies.

The initial program itinerary and course structure were based on the first two stages of David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through experience. Kolb's model uses a holistic four-stage cycle of learning: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation. In the first two iterations of the program, students began by engaging in concrete experiences, such as visits to organizations and technological companies, including Google, which are at the forefront of accessibility and urban innovation.

The course syllabus placed a strong emphasis on onsite learning and active participation, which accounted for 70% of the students' grades. During company visits and discussions, students were observed by the faculty leaders for their level of interest, engagement with speakers, and interactions with other participants. The onsite experiences were followed by opportunities for reflective observation, where students discussed and analyzed what they have encountered using the prompts from the course assignment titled "My Progression of Why" (we include a copy of this and other assignments, the course syllabus, and the program itinerary in the suppl. 1 Course Artifacts).

This reflective exercise accounted for 30% of their grades and was designed to help students delve deeper into their understanding and reasoning by continually asking "why" about a particular experience, concept, or observation. Students were encouraged to challenge and question their own underlying assumptions and observations and uncover a more profound understanding of the subject matter and their experiences. Students were given the freedom to choose their preferred form of presentation for the assignment. Some examples of student submissions included PowerPoint presentations, reflection essays, videos, and even a mural painted collaboratively by participants on campus.

These diverse formats fostered inclusive learning to make room for all kinds of learning styles. Additionally, students were able to express their insights creatively while demonstrating their knowledge and commitment to continuous learning. Each submission reflected the depth of understanding gained through the program, showcasing the students' ability to engage with complex concepts and articulate their experiences in meaningful ways.

Looking Ahead: Integration Experiential Learning for Deeper Engagement

The program aims to enhance student engagement by fully integrating the third and fourth stages of David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle—abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Building on the solid foundation of reflective observation and concrete experience, the program will introduce a hackathon project in 2025, co-hosted by the RIX Inclusive Research Institute at the University of East London (RIX, n.d.). This event will provide students with a platform to actively apply the knowledge and insights they have gained.

To support this enhanced learning experience, the program has been expanded to four weeks, blending virtual learning with hands-on experiential engagement. It begins with a week of virtual pre-departure preparation, equipping students with foundational knowledge on disability access, technology, and cultural contexts. During this phase, students will complete quizzes, participate in guided discussions, and engage in self-reflective exercises to establish a baseline understanding of key concepts before their arrival in London.

Following the virtual preparation, students will spend two weeks in London immersed in experiential learning. This includes site visits to accessibility-focused organizations, interactive workshops with industry experts, and active participation in the RIX Inclusive Research hackathon at University of East London. As a capstone project, the hackathon will challenge students to collaborate in multidisciplinary teams to develop innovative solutions for real-world disability access challenges.

The partnership with RIX Inclusive Research Institute plays a pivotal role in shaping course content by providing expert insight into disability access and technological innovations. Faculty and students engage with RIX professionals, who offer real-world case studies, research applications, and opportunities for hands-on involvement in accessibility projects. This collaboration ensures that students gain both theoretical knowledge and practical exposure to the latest advancements in global accessibility initiatives, while the experiential phase allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts, reinforcing their understanding through direct engagement.

The addition of a hackathon to support the conceptualization and experimentation stages will extend the program to two weeks in London. During the hackathon, students will work collaboratively to develop innovative solutions to real-world challenges related to disability access and technology. This hands-on project will encourage students to conceptualize their ideas and

translate their learning into practical, tangible outcomes. By engaging in this creative process, students will move from reflective observation to abstract conceptualization, where they will refine and build upon their ideas.

The final stage of Kolb's cycle, active experimentation, will be realized as students test and iterate on their solutions during the hackathon. This experience will not only allow them to experiment with their ideas in a controlled environment but also provide them with immediate feedback and opportunities for improvement. By incorporating these elements, the program will foster a deeper, more comprehensive learning experience that encourages innovation, critical thinking, and real-world application of their skills. Students will present their final ideas and/or products to a panel of judges comprising experts, stakeholders, and community members. This program evolution ensures that students will continue to engage deeply with the material while also taking ownership of their learning process, ultimately leading to more impactful and meaningful educational outcomes.

Upon returning from London, students will engage in post-program discussions and reflections, that encourage them to compare and contrast their pre-departure expectations with their real-world experiences. These discussions focus on global learning, cultural perspectives, and the future application of disability advocacy and technology in their respective fields. By incorporating this structured learning framework, the revised program ensures that students gain a more comprehensive, well-rounded educational experience that fosters both intellectual growth and practical application.

Revised Assessment Structure

The evolution of the UF in London: Technological Applications for Disability Access program introduces a more comprehensive assessment structure that moves beyond a heavy emphasis on participation and a single project. The new structure integrates a hackathon at the RIX Inclusive Research Institute, formative assessments in Canvas, and a multi-component grading rubric to provide a richer and more balanced academic experience. This new format aligns with best practices in experiential learning by ensuring students engage deeply with course content while demonstrating their knowledge in various formats. The revised grading breakdown includes four components: participation (structured engagement in experiential learning); hackathon (applied learning and innovation); final project (creative reflective assessment); and supplementary formative assessments. Each of these components is described below.

First, participation comprises structured engagement in experiential learning, and it counts for 50% of the final grade. Active engagement remains a

core pillar of the program, as direct interaction with industry experts, faculty, and peers is critical for understanding real-world accessibility challenges. Students' participation will be assessed based on the following components:

- Attendance at all sessions (lectures, site visits, and workshops) is compulsory.
- Each unexcused absence deducts 10% from the class average to underscore the importance of presence in all learning activities.
- Participation is evaluated using a clear rubric, measuring:
    - Active contribution to discussions and workshops,
    - Engagement in collaborative group work; and
    - Critical reflections during site visits.

This structured participation assessment mitigates subjectivity by ensuring students are graded based on observable contributions rather than perceived enthusiasm alone.

Second, the hackathon component comprises applied learning and innovation and counts for 30% of the final grade. The newly integrated hackathon at RIX Inclusive Research Institute at the University of East London (UEL) serves as the program's experiential capstone. This hands-on project fosters innovation, challenging students to apply knowledge gained throughout the course in real-world problem-solving. The hackathon will introduce the students to community organizations through RIX, under the mentorship of the Director of RIX, who is a UEL instructor and subject matter expert on accessibility. The hackathon spans the entire 10-day program, culminating in a final showcase evaluated on multiple criteria:

- Hackathon project and prototype development, where teams design a technology-driven accessibility solution for their community organization.
- Poster presentation, where students present the project's purpose, methodology, and impact.
- Final group presentation and Q&A with a panel of experts, which allows students to defend their project before a panel, demonstrating critical thinking and applied learning.

Third, the final project involves creative reflective assessment under the theme of "Progression of Why" and counts for 20% of the final grade. This component remains integral to the course, allowing students to synthesize their learning evolution in a creative format. Students may choose their preferred medium (podcast, video, artwork, essay, etc.), ensuring flexibility in self-expression. The reflection challenges students to critically examine their assumptions, insights, and growth over the course, incorporating structured

prompts that explore global perspectives on disability access. This ensures that the reflection assignments explicitly tie back to course learning objectives and provide a broader cultural and international context for students' insights. With a reduced weight (from 30% to 20%), this project remains meaningful but no longer carries disproportionate weight in the overall assessment. By integrating a global lens, students develop a more comprehensive and informed perspective on disability advocacy and accessibility worldwide.

The last component is supplementary formative assessments. In addition to the summative assessments highlighted above, we will also use supplementary formative assessments to enhance student readiness. To strengthen academic rigor and ensure students have foundational knowledge before arriving in London, pre-departure reflections and quizzes will be administered in Canvas. These formative assessments provide low-stakes opportunities for students to engage with the content before the experiential learning phase begins. These include:

- Baseline knowledge quizzes on disability access, technology, and policies on a local and global scale
- A module on intercultural communication and global learning
- Pre-departure reflections to document students' expectations and initial perceptions.
- Post-program discussions to evaluate how their perspectives have shifted.

By integrating the elements of experiential learning and redesigning the assessment structure, the program fosters innovation, critical thinking, and real-world application of skills. This evolution ensures that students not only engage deeply with the material but also take ownership of their learning process, leading to more impactful and meaningful educational outcomes.

Conclusion

The UF in London: Technological Applications for Disability Access program serves as a pioneering model for inclusive international education. Through a structured blend of experiential learning, global engagement, and real-world application, it empowers students to become leaders in accessibility advocacy, inclusive technology, and policy reform. This program is not solely for students with disabilities but also for those who aspire to become advocates, policymakers, engineers, and innovators in the field of accessibility. The interdisciplinary nature of the program ensures that participants gain the skills to challenge accessibility barriers on a global scale and implement meaningful change. As institutions worldwide seek to expand access and promote inclusive design, this program offers a scalable, replicable model for ensuring that

students from all disciplines engage in disability advocacy and accessibility solutions.

This program has garnered significant recognition in the field of international education, earning the 2024 Forum on Education Abroad Award for Excellence in Education Abroad Curriculum Design. Additionally, program leaders have been invited to present at prominent conferences focused on international education and disability access in higher education. These include the Diversity Abroad 2023 Global Inclusion Conference and the AHEAD 2024 Equity and Excellence Conference, as well as engagements with the NAFSA International Education for Persons with Disabilities (IEPD) Member Interests Group and the Forum for Education Abroad Faculty Engagement Community of Practice.

By sharing our experiences, we aim to foster meaningful discussions that challenge existing barriers and establish new standards for accessibility in study abroad programs. Our goal is to empower students with disabilities to explore, learn, and thrive in opportunities that were previously out of reach, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive international education landscape for all.

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List of Supplemental Materials

Suppl. 1: Course Artifacts, including Course Syllabus, Signature Assignment: Progression of Why, Program Itinerary, Sample Course Assignment 1, Sample Course Assignment 2, Sample Course Assignment 3

Author Biography

Pingchien Neo, PhD, is Director of International Engineering Programs at the University of Florida. She holds degrees from UC Berkeley, ETH Zürich, and earned her Ph.D. from UF in 2024. With industry experience across four countries, she began academia as a nuclear engineering lecturer. Now, she leads UF's global engineering initiatives, expanding student opportunities in study abroad, research, internships, and service learning. Her global outlook fuels her passion for empowering students through international experiences.

Cara Simon, MA, MSW, is Co-Founder and COO of Learn International, bringing over a decade of experience in study abroad, student exchange, and ESL programs. She holds two master's degrees, in Higher Education Administration and in Social Welfare. Having lived and worked in multiple countries, she deeply values global education. At Learn International, she leads strategic partnerships, student services, and health and safety, while also focusing on business development and team leadership to support transformative international experiences.

Jenna Gonzalez, EdS, MEd, is Director of the Disability Resource Center at the University of Florida, where she has over eight years of leadership advancing accessibility in higher education. In addition to her campus role, Jenna developed and leads the UF in London: Technological Applications on Disability Access program, offering students an international lens on disability rights, policy, and advocacy. She holds advanced degrees in Special Education from the University of Florida's College of Education.

Chris Lawlor, MSc, has lived and worked on four continents—North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. With a passion for immersive travel and cultural exploration, he believes that the best learning experiences occur beyond the familiar, embracing the idea that "travel is education." Chris works to develop international education programs throughout Europe, helping institutions and individuals create transformative global learning experiences. His expertise includes institutional internationalization, partnership development, and program design.