

STUDY ABROAD: A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Studying abroad no longer means simply taking classes in a foreign country for academic purposes. Nowadays, it can be defined as going to a different country with the authentic experience of doing more than just sightseeing and studying. This paper addresses and provides a detailed analysis on both the positive and negative aspects of studying abroad. Firstly, statistics regarding the trends in studying abroad are given out to raise the concern of why we should look more into this matter. The number of Vietnamese students participating in study abroad programs will be revealed. Secondly, general terminologies about studying abroad are mentioned, as well as two main types of studying abroad programs will be explained and elaborated. On that scope, an online survey consisting of 15 questions was given out to 24 individuals with the age ranges of 18 to 25, who participated or are currently participating in different types of study abroad programs. Thirdly, the survey findings reveal that there are mostly positive impacts on students pursuing studying abroad programs. On the same page, these results reflect the willingness of these young people to continue studying abroad further in the future. Finally, the author concludes that such life experience should be continually promoted, such positive outcomes of studying abroad should be taken advantage of, and alternatives of studying abroad like OJT or capstone projects should be recommended to gain more experience.

Keywords: Study abroad, Short-term study, Study tour, Cultural contact, Cross-cultural, Experience

Introduction

It is well established that improvements in education are associated with long-term improvements in economic performance. As a result, there is no surprise that education plays a highly critical role in the process of developing the economy of a nation.

Vietnam has been executing strategies to achieve further economic growth, one of which being the modernization of its education system. The goals of several current education reforms were already laid down in a government directive from 2005 on the “Comprehensive Reform of Higher Education in Vietnam, 2006–2020”. The government is trying to expand English-language education in Vietnam, and promote transnational cooperation and exchange with countries like Australia, France, the U.S., Japan, and Germany.

Vietnam has also acceded to international education agreements, such as the Asia-Pacific Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education. Study abroad of Vietnamese students and scholars is explicitly promoted, while the government simultaneously seeks to increase the number of foreign students and researchers in Vietnam.

Short-Term Programs

Short-term study abroad programs include all programs that are at most three months (one semester or less) in duration. However, at universities and colleges, the actual definition of

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short-term study abroad programs depends on the institution. Short-term programs could be faculty-led programs, summer semester programs with program providers, direct enroll programs during summer or winter terms, non-credit programs, or optional off-campus components of on-campus courses (still treated as faculty-led programs). Each of these programs offers different levels of support, depending on the program.

A semester abroad, a summer abroad, and other short-term programs offering elementary and intermediate target language instruction and “subject-matter” course work in English could be placed under this category. The typical four- to six-week summer course allows students a first exposure to language and civilization in its cultural setting while, in theory, acting as a possible springboard for longer and more in-depth overseas experience. Short-term language study of advanced level, much less frequent, might constitute a subgroup or serve as a bridge to subsequent levels in which the increased tie investment favors more in-depth goals.

Another type of a short-term study abroad program is the Study Tour, which includes field trips and other such site visits of limited duration for which the target language is English and housing is collective. Cultural encounters leading to adaptation are not a goal of this kind of study experience.

	Study Tour	Short-term Study
Duration	Several days to a few weeks	Summer programs, one semester and less
Entry target-language competence	Elementary to intermediate	Elementary to intermediate
Language used in course work	Vietnamese (mainly) and target language (i.e. English)	Vietnamese and target language
Academic work context	Home institution faculty	In house or institute for foreign students
Housing	Collective	Collective and/or homestay
Provisions for cultural interaction, experiential learning	None	None
Guided reflection on cultural experience	None	Orientation program

Figure 1. Short-term study abroad programs

Long Term Programs (Semester/Academic Year):

Long-terms programs differ from the previous category by its duration, which usually ranges from at least 1 semester to several academic years. The programs under this category could be divided into 2 levels based on the cross-cultural level of the participating students.

At level 1: Cross-cultural Contact and Encounter, the course work is organized on-site for the student group or in coordination with other foreign students. Typically, there would be mix classes in English with those in intermediate target-language instruction.

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	Cross-Cultural Contact	Cross-cultural Encounter
Duration	Semester/ Semester to academic year	Semester to academic year
Entry target-language competence	Elementary to intermediate	Pre-advanced to advanced
Language used in course work	Vietnamese and target language (i.e. English)	Predominantly target language
Academic work context	Student group or with other international students	In house student group
Housing	Collective, home stay visit, home stay rental	Home stay rental or integration home stay
Provisions for cultural interaction, experiential learning	None or limited	Optional participation in occasional integration activities
Guided reflection on cultural experience	Orientation program	Orientation program, initial and ongoing

Figure 2. Level 1: Cross-cultural Contact and Encounter

At level 2: Cross-cultural Immersion, participants do course work uniquely in the host language, organized in partial or complete direct local enrollment, with the target language replacing English in all circumstances, curricular and extracurricular. Students choose not to do traditional academic work but integrated directly in the host culture through service learning, independent projects or professional internships.

	Cross-Cultural Immersion
Duration	Semester to academic year
Entry target-language competence	Advanced
Language used in course work	Target language in all curricular and extracurricular activities
Academic work context	Local norms, partial or complete direct enrollment
Housing	Individual integration home stay
Provisions for cultural interaction, experiential learning	Required regular participation in cultural integration program, extensive direct cultural contact via service learning, work internship
Guided reflection on cultural experience	Orientation program, mentoring, on-going orientation or course in cross-cultural perspectives, reflective writing and research

Figure 3. Level 2: Cross-Cultural Immersion

Statistics on Vietnamese students' trends of studying abroad

According to the Vietnamese Ministry of Training and Education (MOET), in 2016, there are about 130,000 Vietnamese citizens studying abroad, which increased 15% compared to the previous year at 110,000. Japan is the most popular destination with about 38,000 students, representing 31% out of the total number of students studying abroad, followed by Australia

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(31,000 students; 26%), the U.S. (28,000; 23%), China (13,000; 11%) and the U.K. (11,000; 9%). These numbers are predicted to keep increasing over the years.

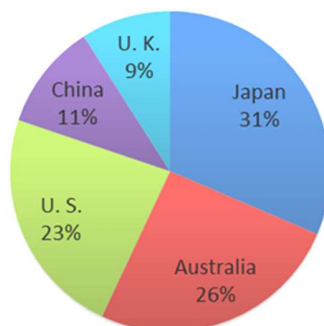


Figure 4. Distribution of Vietnamese students studying abroad

What is the meaning behind all these statistics? The underpinning theory this paper addresses is that studying abroad provides more pros than cons to those who participate in it. The pros include, not only intellectual growth when studying in a different culture, but also personal development gained by experiencing that culture. This paper, with its research findings, complements the theory above.

Methodology

The population of interest for this study was adult students who participated, or are currently participating in different types of study abroad programs. The sampling method implemented for this study was a self-selected convenience sample of 24 adult students with the age ranges from 18 to 24 who participated, or are currently participating in different types of study abroad programs. The data collection process involved sending the selected adults an online survey consisting of 15 questions, including nine multiple choices and six short answers. The survey begins with general questions about the participants' studying abroad programs, such as the program type, place, length, etc. Then, the survey follows with questions requiring the participants to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being Very little and 5 being Very much), how much they gain from the experience in terms of the following: academic, technical knowledge, culture, and personal development. After that, the survey conductor asks the participants to share what they like most and least about their studying abroad experience, followed by any additional thoughts. The participants are required to complete all questions truthfully and answers were usually received after one hour after the survey was given out. All research questions listed in the survey are shown in Figure 5 below:

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<p>Where did you study abroad/are currently studying abroad in? *</p> <p>Your answer _____</p> <p>Reasons for studying abroad *</p> <p><input type="radio"/> On my own freewill</p> <p><input type="radio"/> NOT on my own freewill</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Type(s) of your program *</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Student Exchange (short term-less than 3 months)</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Student Exchange (long term- 3 months and more)</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Study tour</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Full-degree</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Internship</p> <p>Are you currently living in Vietnam?/Do you plan to go back to Vietnam eventually? *</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>	<p>Reason(s) for the choice above *</p> <p>Your answer _____</p> <p>Overall, RATE your studying abroad experience *</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very bad <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> Very good</p> <p>Rate how much you gained from the experience (academic/knowledge, technical skills...) *</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very little <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> Very much</p> <p>Rate how much you gained from the experience (culture, soft skills, discipline...) *</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very little <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> Very much</p> <p>Rate how much you change after studying abroad *</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Very little <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> Very much</p>
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How did you change? *

Positively

Negatively

What do you like most about studying abroad? *

Your answer _____

What do you like least about studying abroad? *

Your answer _____

If you could choose again, would you still choose to study abroad? *

Yes

No

Any additional thoughts

Your answer _____

Figure 5. Research questions

Findings and Discussions

This study, like many others, has limitations of both the author and research methodology. The author is not able to devote years or a lifetime to study the research topic. The time available to investigate the research problem and to measure change or stability overtime was constrained by the due date; hence the author has the research wrapped up in less than three months. Other limitations of the research method might be due to the small sample size, which is rather small in this study. The small sample size might make it difficult to find significant relationships from the data, as statistical tests normally require a larger sample size to ensure a representative distribution of the population and to be considered representative of groups of people to whom results will be generalized or transferred. Nevertheless, given the constraints in both the time spent studying for the research and the sample size, the author tries her best to provide a diverse group of people to take the survey and interpret the survey results.

According to the survey results, the distribution of students studying abroad is shown in Table 1. The U.S. is the most popular destination with 13 students, representing 54% out of the total number of students studying abroad, followed by France (3 students; 13%), Germany and Australia (2 students-8.5% each), the U.K. Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, each with 1 student – 4%. The percentages did not resemble the statistics of the MOET as mentioned in the Introduction; however, they reflect the new trends in the study abroad market in Vietnam more recently as in 2017, interviewed parents said that the most favorable place for their kids to study abroad was the U.S. (47%), followed by Australia (40%), the U.K. (39%), and Germany (23%)

Table 1.

Distribution of students studying abroad

Country	Number of students	Percentage (%)
The U. S.	13	54%
France	3	13%
Germany	2	8.5%
Australia	2	8.5%
The U.K.	1	4%
Japan	1	4%
Taiwan	1	4%
Korea	1	4%

Of all the surveyed students, 79.2% participated or are currently participating in a Full-degree program, 12.5% in a Long-term student exchange program, 4.2% in a Short-term student exchange program, and 4.2% in an Internship program. No one claimed to participate in a Study tour. The results show that in recent years, Vietnamese students choose to participate in programs that could help them take the most advantages of their target language and culture. Not only did they want to continuously improve their foreign language but they also aim to experience the foreign culture at its best by taking the longer programs or direct enrolment, etc. Table 2 shows the results as follow:

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Table 2.
Distribution of program types

Country	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Full-degree	19	54%
Student Exchange – long term	3	13%
Student Exchange – short term	1	8.5%
Internship	1	8.5%
Study tour	0	0%

The majority of surveyed students (62.5%) are currently back from their study abroad program or choose to come back once their program ends, while only 37.5% decide to stay at their host country. The idea of a sacred motherland that Vietnamese are supposed to come back to no matter where we go is highly relevant in Vietnamese culture and somehow dictates their decisions, hence the results. For a list of in-depth reasons behind surveyed students’ decisions, take a look at Figure 8 below.

It is also clear that aside from the ‘motherland’ idea, the difficulties in getting Visas at the host country play an important role in students’ decisions to go back home, while the host country’s professional environment and job opportunities are what keep students from going back home.

Going back to Vietnam	Not going back to Vietnam
Program type does not allow to stay after the end date	Currently working after graduation
Vietnam offers more opportunities and the lifestyle is more suitable for me	Better professional environment
I want to live and work in Vietnam	Job opportunities
There are more suitable jobs in Vietnam	I plan to study more here
There are more opportunities in Vietnam and I want to contribute to my home country	Not sure why
My family is in Vietnam	I’m still deciding whether to stay here after graduation
The program requires to go back to Vietnam	Married to an American
Vietnam has more fun	I’m used to the new lifestyle
Close to my family	I want to work here
Difficult to get a Visa	
To work in Vietnam	
I like Vietnam better	
Vietnam is my mother land so I have to go back and contribute	
I want to develop my career in Vietnam	
My home country is still Vietnam	

Figure 6. Reasons for going back/not going back to Vietnam after the program ends

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Figures 7, 8, and 9 show the affects studying abroad has had on students. First of all, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being Very bad and 5 Very good, all surveyed students gave their study abroad experience a rating of at least 3, in which almost half of them (45.8%) voted 5 – Very Good. Then, in terms of how much students gained from their study abroad experience academically, with 1 being Very little and 5 Very much, almost all students (91.6%) rated 4 - Much (33.3%) and 5 - Very much (58.3%). Only one student voted 2 - Little, claiming to gain little from the experience. However, this individual is also the only one to participate in the short-term exchange program. As a result, it is no surprise that they did not have much time to learn new knowledge and technical skills given their limited time abroad. Next, still on the same scale, students rated much how they gained culturally, that is, how much they became aware of the new culture, or how much they developed their soft skills, etc. In this case, all surveyed students gave a rating of at least 3, with the majority (62.5%) claimed to gained very much in terms of cultural awareness and personal development. Finally, students were asked to rate the level of change in themselves after studying abroad. Again, 100% gave a rating of at least 3 and claimed that the changes are positive. None claimed them to be negative.

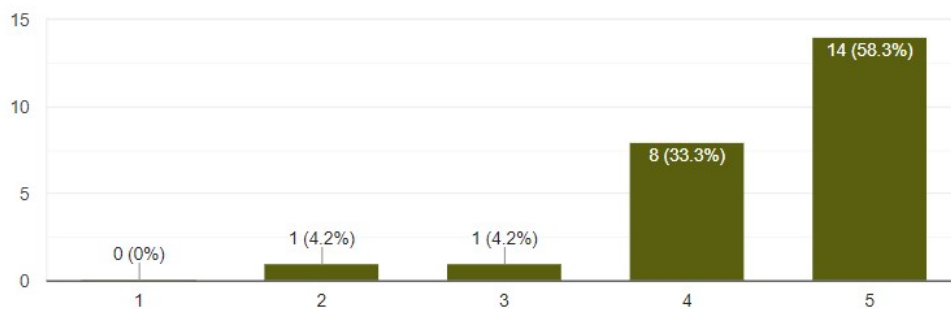


Figure 7. The overall ratings of students' study abroad experience

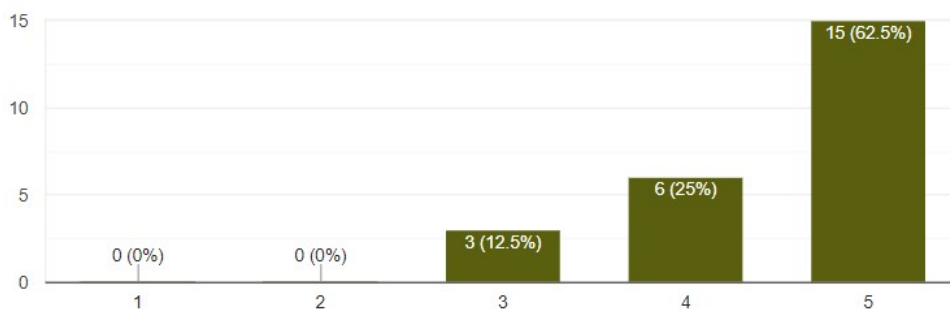


Figure 8. The ratings of students' academic gains from study abroad experience

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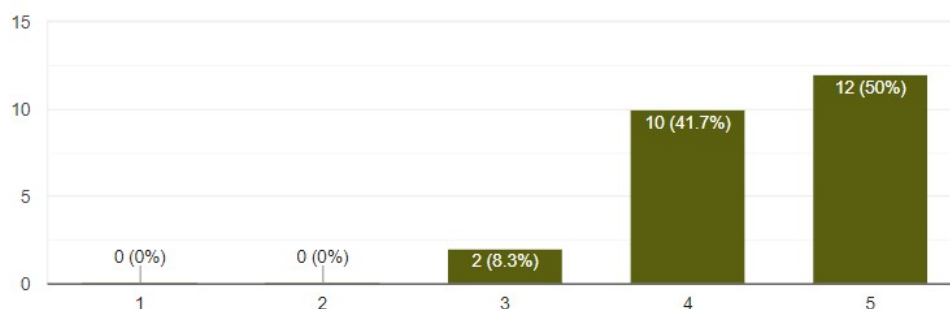


Figure 9. The ratings of students' cultural gains from study abroad experience

Last but not least, 100% of surveyed students answered 'Yes' when asked "If you could choose again, would you still choose to study abroad?" which provides a positive view at the case of Vietnamese students studying abroad. Students are confident their experience is worthwhile and willing to participate in the study abroad program again if given the choice.

Conclusion

This paper shows that there are mostly positive impacts on students pursuing studying abroad programs. Study abroad takes students on a new path, cross-continental and cross-cultural. Not only it helps students improve their foreign language, or receive the world's prestigious universities degrees, but it also gives them opportunities to experience a richer life. It gives access to new learning resources, new learning styles; it refreshes yourself, and changes your personal thinking and vision in a positive way. Past studies have found that the most impressive impact of study abroad experiences on students was the growth of their international or global perspective and personal development. Such life experience should be continually promoted, such positive outcomes of studying abroad should be taken advantage of, and alternatives like On the Job Training (OJT) programs or capstone projects should be recommended so that students who could not afford studying abroad can still gain similar experience.

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