

Factors Influencing Thai University Students' Decision in Participating in Study Abroad

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Abstract

Educators have long recognized that education abroad can be a path to job opportunities and personal growth. Pre-COVID, the number of students studying abroad had increased steadily year by year; this development was disrupted by the pandemic. As student mobility resumes post-COVID, there is a renewed interest in understanding the factors that motivate students to participate in studying abroad. This presentation shares the results of preliminary research conducted at a Thai university. The researchers surveyed 250 students to determine the factors that motivate them to study abroad as well as the obstacles that they perceive as preventing them from studying abroad. The top three factors were personal development, career development, and academic factors. International experience makes an impact on the CV as it does not improve only the students' language skills but seems to shape their global citizenship mind which is essential in the industry. The top three obstacles were expenses, curriculum factors, and language barriers. The majority of Thai students are self-funded for their education abroad so the expenses are one of the main factors in their decision as well as the relevant course should not expand the study time. Additionally, students expressed interest in a wide variety of experiences beyond the traditional semester abroad, including work and study, short courses, internships, and research opportunities. The findings of this study will be of interest to educators who are interested in understanding students' perceptions regarding studying abroad in order to increase student mobility and student satisfaction with the study abroad experience.

Keywords: International Education, Study Abroad, Exchange Mobility, Outbound Mobility, Student Exchange

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Introduction

Higher education institutions around the world have put internationalization and global citizenship as one of the main objectives. Many universities enhance their international mobility by seeking collaboration with partners, as well as promoting their image to attract international students (De Wit, 2002). The collaboration between partners allows students to go on an exchange program and get credits as a part of their study (Doyle et al., 2010) and exchange programs have promoted internationalization and student mobility. Moreover, the exchange between the partner universities creates the international atmosphere which has a positive effect on the students to be able to raise cross-cultural awareness, develop global citizenship and learning experience as well as to develop their personal growth (Mpinganjira, 2009). Nowadays, global competencies are highly expected in the industry so students have been encouraged to participate in study abroad. (Hunter, White & Godbey, 2006; Terrant, 2010) An outbound program has been among the strategies of many universities to develop students' global competencies (Asoaka & Yano, 2009).

However, the number of Thai students studying abroad is not large compared to the number from other countries in Asia. During 2012–2019, the number of students participating in study abroad slightly increased 32,916 from 28,339 students (16%). The destination choices are Australia, USA, UK and Japan respectively (Statista, 2021). Several indicated problems and obstacle factors preventing the student from studying abroad. The most common factor is the financial factors as well as the language barrier and the difference between cultures (Brustein, 2007). Moreover, studying abroad is considered an extracurricular activity that extends the time of the study. Support from the home university is one of the obstacles, consequently; the spotlight is on the inbound program due to the income (Doyle et al., 2010).

The Student Exchange Program at the International College has been very successful, especially in terms of inbound students, which include students who come to study for a semester as well as those who come for short periods of less than 12 weeks. According to the data from the activities organized in the academic year 2019, there were 380 inbound students for the semester program and 284 inbound students for the short-term program, for a total of 664 students. However, the number of outbound students was only 143, even though the college has tools to increase the number of outbound students, such as organizing study abroad programs, providing scholarships, and developing a global partner search system to facilitate the selection of schools and transfer credits. Nevertheless, the number of outbound students is still relatively low compared to the number of inbound students. The present study was designed to examine the factors influencing students' decision to participate in study abroad in order to have a proposed plan to develop outbound mobility.

Research Objective

1. To investigate the factors influencing MUIC students to participate in study abroad
2. To investigate obstacles factors preventing MUIC students from participating in study abroad
3. To propose an effective plan for an outbound program for MUIC students

Literature review

Several studies have identified the factors influencing students' decision to participate in study abroad as both motive factors and obstacle factors. A number of studies have discussed that students consider studying abroad as a tool for the future career opportunity. Daly. (2011) and Bourke (2000) mentioned that participating in an exchange program helps to increase the chance of employment after graduation. Moreover, it would develop the necessary skills for future jobs like problem-solving skills and systematic thinking skills.

Personal factors are one of the major considerations. Studying abroad is considered a great opportunity to live in another culture and see the world. (Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005) The participant can make a relationship with people from different cultures. (Clyne and Rizvi, 1998) Some students participate in study abroad for the reason of personal growth. Studying abroad helps to increase cross-cultural awareness as well as language ability. Winnicki and Marciniak, 2019 reported that exchange students tend to be more confident and be able to understand different cultures. Students also participate in study abroad to seek an adventure and step out of their comfort zone. (Bourke, 2000; Krzaklewska & Krupnik, 2005; Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Doyle et al. 2010; Winnicki&Marciniak, 2019) It also boosts up social status (Mpinganjira, 2009).

Parents' attitude toward study abroad also had an influence on the decision to study abroad. Word of mouth helps exchange programs mobility grow. The students who get a recommendation from friends and family tend to participate in study abroad (Wiers-Jenssen, 2003). Another significant factor that most affects students' decision is the financial factor. Despite the family's affordability, the information of estimated expenses is something to consider. Students also look for the availability of the scholarship and the possibility to have a part time job (Gust, Livett and Stone, 2006; Doyle et al., 2010).

The relevant courses drive the exchange mobility. Some students decided to not participate in study abroad with the reason that there is no course matched with their interest and their degree program (The Sussex Centres', 2004). Moreover, the time match is also one of the vital factors. Students would not like to spend the extra time on their study (Van der Meld, 2003). Consequently, the new type of exchange program has occurred, for instant short term exchange program, work and study program which are the extra curriculum program requiring a short period of time (Doyle et al., 2010). Support from home university as well as networking and collaborating with partner universities plays an important role in the decision factor (Doyle et al., 2010). Furthermore, the enthusiasm of the staff to promote the program affects the decision because students need the information of the program (Sussex Centre, 2004).

Obstacle factors of participating in study abroad

Several studies have reported the obstacle factors that affect the decision of participating in study abroad. One of the main barriers is the financial factor. Sussex Centre, 2004; Otero S & McCoshan, 2006; Doyle et al., 2010 have identified Finance as a barrier to study abroad as the exchange program is an add-on to the curriculum which requires extra expenses. Moreover, other expenses like cost of living will occur. (Van der Meld, 2003) The psychological factors have also been identified as the barrier of study abroad. The participants were worried about leaving their friends and family as well as living in an unfamiliar circumstance. (Doyle et al., 2010; Wiers-Jenssen, 2003) Mazzarol and Soutar,

2002 reported the limits of foreign language ability as the obstacles of student mobility. Most students tend to choose the destination country where English is the language of instruction. Students have the concerns of the interaction during the class if lack of language skill.

Lack of access to reliable information is significantly important. (Doyle et al 2010) According to the study of Van der Meld, 2003, found that students decided not to participate in exchange programs due to lack of information about the opportunity. The limitation of the relevant course is also a big concern because students are afraid that study abroad would affect their degree program. Some universities have a tight schedule, so participating in study abroad will extend their study time (Doyle et al., 2010).

Methodology

The questionnaire with a set of questions based on the literature review was designed to collect data on factors influencing students' decisions. The questionnaire was divided into four parts; the first part was the general information consisting of four items asking participants' gender, nationality, academic year, and major. The second part (two items) was designed to investigate the participants' 'intention to participate in Study Abroad. While the third part was developed to examine factors influencing the decision of participating in study abroad both the motive factors and obstacle factors and the last part (one item) asked the respondents for suggestions on exchange programs. This questionnaire was reviewed by three outside organization inspectors and approved by Mahidol University Central Institutional Review Board (MU-CIRB) before being used.

The QR code of the questionnaire was distributed to the participants at the Student Exchange Unit office and Co-working Space. The participants were 250 students selected by accidental sampling from 4,325 MUIC students, year 1-4 the academic year 2021. From all of the respondents, 76 % of them were female and 19.6 % were male. 4 % of the respondents prefer not to mention their gender while 0.4% specified themselves as bisexual.

Data were analyzed by SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to investigate the items in part 1- 3 of the questionnaire.

Finding

The survey reported 92.8 % of the respondents had a plan to study abroad while only 7.2% of them did not plan to study abroad.

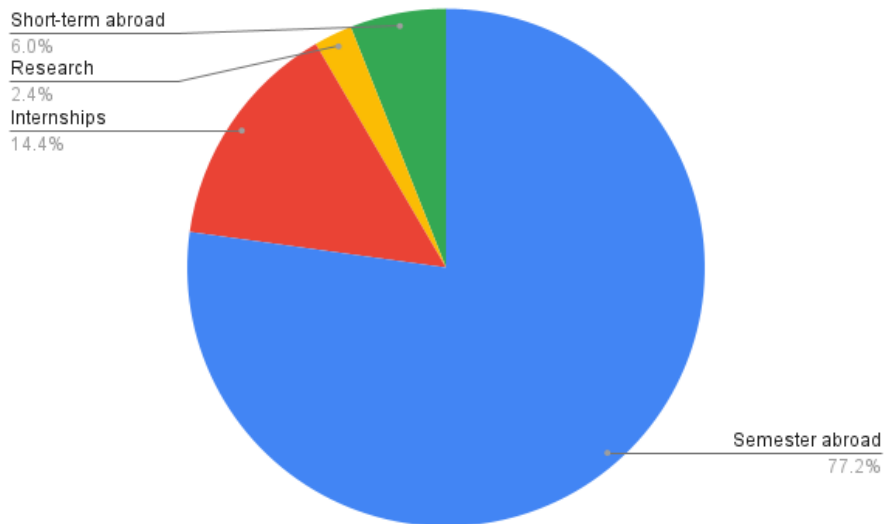


Figure 1: Intention to participate in study abroad

From figure 1 showing that the majority of the students (77.2%) were intended for the traditional semester exchange. Many respondents (14.4%) were into the internship program while some (6%) were interested in short-term abroad. Only a few students (2.4%) expected the research exchange program.

Motive factors to study abroad

Respondents were asked to rate how much each factor influenced their decision to study abroad. The factors were divided into six categories; career development, personal development, recommendation, financial aids, academic and support from the home institute.

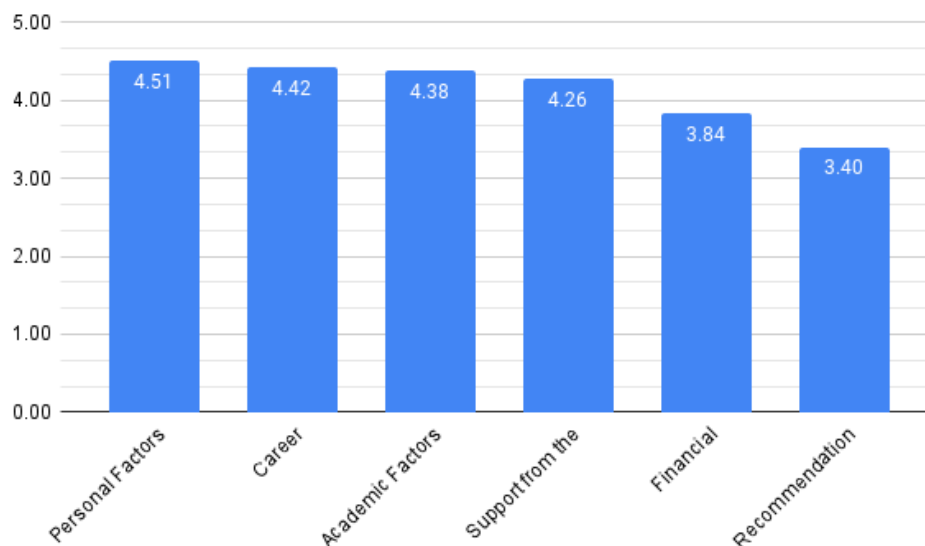


Figure 2: Factors influencing the decision to participate in study abroad

ITEMS	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Neutral (%)	Slightly important (%)	Not important (%)
Personal Factors					
It would be a good opportunity to travel.	66.8	21.6	10	1.2	0.4
It would be a good opportunity to live in another culture.	70.8	20.8	6.4	1.2	0.8
I would like to have relationship with people from different culture.	59.2	27.6	10.4	2	0.8
It would increase ability to communicate in a foreign language.	68.8	21.2	7.2	1.2	1.6
It would expand my knowledge beyond courses offered at MUIC.	61.6	26.4	10.4	1.6	0
Seeking independence and challenge.	62.4	27.2	7.2	2.4	0.8
Career development					
It would enhance my employability after graduation.	57.6	26	12	39.2	0.8
It would help me improve necessary skills for my future job.	61.2	26.8	10.4	1.2	0.4
Academic factors					
The quality of education in the host country.	56.4	31.6	9.2	1.6	1.2
There are courses that meet my interest.	51.6	33.2	11.6	2.8	0.8
There are relevant courses to my program.	55.6	30.8	11.2	1.6	0.8
Courses are conducted in English.	69.6	21.6	6.4	0.8	1.6
I do not have to spend an extra year or semester attending the program.	53.6	23.6	16	0.8	4

Table 1: The top three motivating factors influencing students' decision to study abroad (According to the survey)

Among the respondents, the most important factor influencing them to study abroad was the personal development factor (mean = 4.51) as the result showed that 70.8% of the participants realized studying abroad would be a good opportunity to live in another culture. More than half of them (68.8%) saw it as an opportunity to increase their language ability. Followed by the career development factor for the second significant factor (mean = 4.42). From Table 1, 61.2% of the respondents thought study abroad would help them to improve the necessary skill for the future job. The third factor was the academic factor (mean = 4.38) of which 69.6 % of respondents seeing the relevant course should be conducted in English. The fourth important factor is support from the home university (mean = 4.26) and the last two important factors are Financial aid factors (mean = 3.84) and recommendation from friends and family (mean=3.40), (See Figure 2).

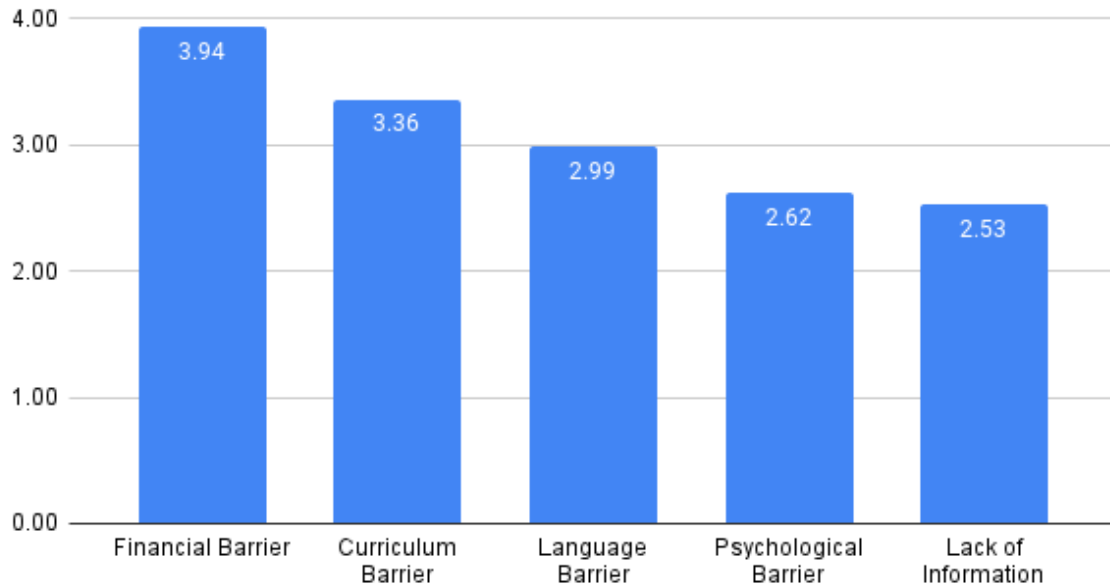


Figure 3: Obstacle factors influencing the decision to participate in study abroad

ITEMS	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Neutral (%)	Slightly important (%)	Not important (%)
Financial Barrier					
It would be too expensive for me to study abroad	27.2	33.2	26.4	7.6	5.6
I would need more information about the cost of the outbound exchange program	50	29.6	12.8	5.2	2.4
Curriculum Barrier					
Participating in the program may make my study longer.	20.8	28.8	27.6	12.8	10
There are no or few relevant courses.	22.4	22.8	30.8	15.2	8.8
Language Barrier					
I don't want to stay in a country where I do not know their language.	13.6	17.2	26.4	17.2	25.6
Language of instruction is not English.	26	17.2	27.6	11.6	17.6

Table 2: The top three obstacle factors influencing students' decision to study abroad (According to the survey)

Obstacles factors preventing students from studying abroad

The financial factors were reported as the most important barrier to study abroad. (mean = 3.94). From Table 2, the survey showed that half of the respondents (50%) would need more information about the cost of the outbound exchange program. Lack of information about the expenses of the program is a very important obstacle. The second significant obstacle was the curriculum (mean = 3.36) in which the respondents thought there are few relevant courses and studying abroad would extend their studies. The third factor was the language barrier (mean = 2.99). It is not the language competency but if the language of instruction was not English, it will be one matter of barriers (See Table 2).

Implication

The most significant motivating factor was the personal factor. In order to promote the exchange program related to this factor, universities should broaden the positive perspective of students toward the exchange program. Specifically, the experiences and benefits they would get from studying abroad. In point of career matters, studying abroad has been seen as a way students would improve their global competency which is highly required in the industry. Universities can push this harder by encouraging the students to engage themselves with the local community to actually shape the globalization skill and improve the necessary skill for the future job. Apart from those, universities should strengthen the collaboration with partner universities and seek more relevant courses and programs that would fit most of the students.

Similarly, to most of the previous studies, the result showed that financial factors were the significant obstacles to participate in studying abroad. The survey showed that the respondents would need more information about the cost of the outbound exchange program. At this point, we recommend the university to create a platform where the student can easily access the information including the average cost of living. There should be specific estimated expenses for specific destinations, not only broad general information. The information of the availability of scholarships both internal and external institutions also can be provided on the platform. Another issue with the financial factor was that it would be expensive for students to study abroad. The university should offer various types of exchange programs that would require less financial support for instant short-term exchange programs or work and study programs. The second barrier factor is the curriculum factor. The respondents thought studying abroad would extend their period of study time. In this case, the support for planning to study abroad can be provided so that the students can plan their enrollment ahead. The short-term exchange during their summer break can be one of the options for students to participate in the program during their break time. Language barrier also appears to be one of the important factors to prevent them from participating in study abroad. The limit of language proficiency is one point and another point is the language of instruction.

Limitation

The questionnaire was contributed to the participants at the Student Exchange Unit office where most of the students are interested in studying abroad and the data were collected at the International College. This becomes the limitation in terms of generalization of the results to all Thai universities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, most of the respondents indicated that studying abroad has been beneficial for their personal growth and future career path. Those positive experiences and benefits motivated them to participate in studying abroad. However, there are some obstacle factors pulling them to not participate in studying abroad. It turned out that the most significant obstacle is the financial factor. It is not because they cannot afford the expenses, yet they would like to get more specific information about the expenses that might occur. As most of the Thai students are self-funded for their studies, the information about the estimated expenses is matter for their decision. The condition of academic factors is also one major barrier. In terms of a few relevant courses can be found and the extra time they have to spend. From the findings, the university can increase student mobility by providing information on how to develop their own skill through studying abroad. Moreover, the university can reduce the barrier factors by supporting the required information and strengthening the collaboration with partners in order to have various fields of study. Additionally, students expressed interest in a wide variety of experiences beyond the traditional semester abroad, including work and study, short courses, internships, and research opportunities. The findings can lead to further study on the perception of students toward various types of study abroad.

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