

*Expectations and Experiences of Inbound Exchange Students:
Insights for Improving the University's Image*

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Abstract

The percentage of undergraduates on campus being international is a metric of university-specific key performance indicators in the domain of enhanced internationalization. More universities are recognizing this and trying to attract qualified inbound students. Recommendations from friends who attended the host institution and from staff in their home university are important factors for inbound students to consider when choosing a host university. Due to the significance of word-of-mouth's impact on inbound students' university preferences, this study investigated their expectations and experiences of inbound exchange. All 1191 inbound students at a university in Hong Kong were invited to complete a feedback survey near the end of their exchange studies. A total of 279 students (response rate 23.4%) completed the questionnaire. The results showed that 96.8% of the respondents indicated their exchange experience to be rewarding or very rewarding; 82.1% of the respondents rated their academic experience at the host university to be good or excellent; and 74.2% of the respondents enjoyed the non-academic aspects of campus life at the host university. The effectiveness of exchange experience in facilitating cultural awareness and understanding, adaptability to changes, being open-minded, and interpersonal and self-development was high (above four on a five-point scale). However, student services navigation and diversity of catering outlets to various ethnic groups were lower than the respondents' expectations. The findings were useful for education administrators to formulate strategies in enhancing inbound student satisfaction and further boosting up the university's image at the international level.

Keywords: Exchange-in students, Program evaluation, International exchange, Institutional research

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Introduction

To demonstrate an institution's internationalization development, the percentage of undergraduates on campus being international becomes a significant metric of university-wide performance measure in the domain of enhanced internationalization. More universities are recognizing this and trying to attract qualified inbound exchange students to study for a semester or an academic year. Previous research studies found that exchange abroad program brings numerous benefits towards inbound students themselves and host universities (Keogh & Russel-Roberts, 2009; Dörfer, 2015; Bell, 2016; Sarojna, 2017). The inbound exchange students provide tangible opportunities for cultural diversity on campus, expand capabilities for cross-cultural communication, and make international friends (Önen, 2017). They also add new perspectives to lecture discussions and classroom participation, in turn enriching curriculum learning experience and international flow of academic knowledge. Non-local students were previously found to have significantly higher score than local students in the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal scales of global perspective (Ng & Lee, 2019).

Recommendations from friends who attended the host institution and from staff in home university are vital factors for inbound students to consider when choosing a host university for exchange. Such word-of-mouth effects are becoming more important due to the increase in the advance of network technology and different forms of easily-accessible social media (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Because of the significance of word-of-mouth's impact on inbound exchange students' university preferences, it is necessary to thoroughly investigate their expectations and experiences of exchange program study. However, relevant research studies on inbound exchange students' views on academic and non-academic aspects of host universities are limited, particularly for Western and Asian undergraduates who enrolled in exchange programs at universities in Chinese regional areas (for instance universities in Hong Kong).

University image is commonly considered to be the stakeholder perception founded on impressions, beliefs and/or attitudes towards the higher education institution through the interaction stakeholders have had with the institution (Durate, Alves, & Raposo, 2010; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014; Pérez & Torres, 2017). Students are the primary and the most important stakeholder of universities (Aghaz, Hashemi, & Sharifi, 2015; Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2015). To create a successful and desired university image, it is essential to collect and analyze student feedbacks regularly for a better understanding of their expectations and experiences that drive satisfaction or dissatisfaction, thereby determining appropriate improvement strategies (Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2015; Khalifa & Mahmoud, 2016).

Among various types of student stakeholders, inbound exchange students coming from different overseas universities are the stakeholders that offer perception of academic and non-academic aspects of campus as seen through the eyes of international counterparts. It is therefore interesting to know what the expectations and experiences of the inbound exchange students are, so that higher education practitioners could take appropriate action to sustain and improve the image of universities. The purpose of this study was to supplement existing literature by examining the expectations and experiences of inbound exchange at a university in

Hong Kong. The findings would be useful for administrators and management for reference to formulate evidence-based strategies in enhancing inbound student satisfaction and further boosting up the university's image at the international level.

Method

Participants

All 1191 inbound students at a university in Hong Kong were invited to complete an online feedback survey near the end of their exchange abroad program. A total of 279 students (129 males and 150 females) voluntarily completed the questionnaire, with response rate of 23.4%. The students came from different regional areas including Europe (n=116), North America (n=72), Australia and Oceania (n=4), and Asia (n=87). They were undergraduate students in year one (n=25), year two (n=52), year three (n=157), and year four or above (n=45) in their home university during the period of exchange. The duration of their exchange study was one to two months (n=58), five months (n=193), and 10 months (n=28); and were affiliated with engineering (n=132), business (n=78), science (n=57), and humanities and interdisciplinary (n=12) disciplines at the host university.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire containing close-ended questions about their overall rewarding experience, academic experience, non-academic aspects of campus life on exchange. The effectiveness of exchange experience in facilitating cultural awareness and understanding, adaptability to changes, being open-minded, and interpersonal and self-development were also asked. In addition, there were two open-ended questions about their valued most exchange experience and the things that the host university could do to better support exchange students. The questionnaire was administered online via Qualtrics platform.

Procedure

The feedback survey was administered to the inbound exchange students near the end of their exchange abroad program. A survey invitation email plus three email reminders were sent to the students. The duration of survey lasted for around one month. The students took no more than 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

For the 279 inbound exchange student respondents in this study, when asked to indicate their levels of satisfaction in terms of overall rewarding experience, academic experience, and non-academic aspects of campus life on exchange, the students generally gave high ratings. The mean overall rewarding rating on exchange was $4.49 \pm \text{SD } 0.5$ (1 = very unrewarding, 5 = very rewarding); 96.8% of the students indicated their exchange experience to be rewarding or very rewarding. The overall mean rating on academic experience at the host university was $4.14 \pm \text{SD } 0.82$ (1 = very poor; 5 = excellent); 82.1% of the students rated their academic experience to be good or excellent. Regarding the non-academic aspects of campus life at the host university, the average enjoyable rating was $4.03 \pm \text{SD } 0.93$ (1 = not at all; 5 = a lot).

74.2% of the students reported that they enjoyed the non-academic aspects of the host university quite a lot or a lot.

A number of positive open-ended comments (n=274) were also received from the inbound exchange students about their academic learning and non-academic aspects of campus life on exchange. The academic aspects that the inbound exchange students enjoyed most for example were: more varieties of courses than their home university; being able to take courses that were not offered in their home universities; learning professional skills and knowledge that they lacked of in their home universities; stepping outside of their comfort zone to recognize practices and attitudes in the host country; well-arranged courses and interesting classes; easy in transfer credits; and opportunity in learning and speaking Chinese including Cantonese and Putonghua. The non-academic aspects of campus life that the inbound exchange students enjoyed included: beautiful campus; good campus culture; advanced library services; guarantee of on-campus accommodation during exchange; campus location away from city center; making new friends from different parts of the world; and good experience in extra-curricular activities (e.g. sport climbing team, hackathon, and international Christian community).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of exchange experience in facilitating their cultural awareness and understanding, adaptability to changes, open-mindedness to new experiences, and maturity and independence, and interpersonal skills enhancement was found to be high (mean rating above four on the five-point scale) (Table 1). The development on cultural awareness and understanding, ability of adaptability to changes, being open-minded to new experiences, mature and independent via exchange experience were rated effective or very effective by 80% or above of the students. Seventy-eight percent of the students indicated that the exchange experience was effective or very effective for interpersonal skills enhancement.

Please rate your exchange experience in terms of its effectiveness in helping you to: (5 = Very effective; 1 = Not effective at all)	Mean	SD
Become more aware of cultural differences of people I met	4.30	0.83
Better understand the people and culture of my host country	4.10	0.87
Be more able to adapt to changes	4.26	0.89
Be more open-minded to new experiences	4.40	0.83
Enhance my interpersonal skills	4.10	0.92
Become more mature and independent	4.25	0.90

Table 1: Rating on inbound exchange experience in terms of its effectiveness in six aspects.

Generally, the feedback survey results showed that the inbound exchange experience was perceived positive. However, a number of suggestions (n=103) from the inbound exchange students on what the host university could do to better support their exchange were received, bringing new initiatives about what universities should be improved. The first major area of suggestion was about student services navigation. The inbound exchange students were not familiar with where to access and/or how to navigate smoothly in the online platforms such as learning management system, portal, course registration system, and social media groups of the host university. For course registration system, the inbound exchange students recommended for an easier registration system and process.

In addition, the inbound exchange students were not certain which campus facilities were allowed for them to visit and use in particular for taking rest and study. The students mentioned that the means of campus wayfinding was not adequate enough. There should be a better wayfinding signage system on campus to indicate where to go (e.g. how to get to student halls) and an informative and updated campus wayfinding mobile app to help get around campus indoor (e.g. location of available study rooms) quickly.

The second area of suggestion was about on-campus catering choices. The inbound exchange students suggested more diversity of catering outlets to suit for various ethnic groups and taste habits, as the students were from different regional areas. They suggested having European dishes and campus bar for students hanging out after classes. They also asked for different vegetarian food choices for selection in campus canteens.

University image refers to the impressions, beliefs and/or attitudes of student stakeholders towards the higher education institution based on their interactions with the institution (Durate et al., 2010; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014; Pérez & Torres, 2017). Thus, the expectations and experiences of the inbound exchange students here offered significant insights for improving the image of university. To further boost up the university image at the international level for attracting qualified inbound exchange students, the university administrators and management should consider and digest all of these student comments and suggestions and take the necessary measures for improvement. For instance, the administrative and support staff for the exchange abroad program might compile a quick guide about student service systems and campus facilities that are available for inbound exchange students to visit and use. For catering choices, in short term, a list of restaurants and catering outlets around campus (e.g. the nearest shopping malls) might also be prepared for inbound exchange students to taste the home country's foods when they want. In addition, the university might conduct a comprehensive review and evaluation of the campus facilities and services, in particular focusing on the areas raised by inbound exchange students. For the student service systems like course enrollment, the university can examine the corresponding service systems in exchange students' home institutions, learn the good practices of student service systems from international counterpart universities, and then redesign and upgrade the existing systems in order to satisfy with the needs of student stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study investigated expectations and experiences of inbound exchange students coming from different regional areas and overseas universities who had completed an exchange abroad program at a university in Hong Kong. Generally, the inbound exchange students obtained good experience in both academic and non-academic aspects of the host university. They also perceived that such exchange experience was effective in facilitating their cultural awareness and understanding, adaptability to changes, being open-minded, mature and independent, and interpersonal skills enhancement. Some suggestions on what the university could do better to support their inbound exchange were identified. Two major areas of suggestions from the inbound exchange students were: student service systems and diversity of catering choices for various ethnic groups. Fuller understanding of these suggested aspects

provides insights into the dynamics of campus development that enable effective support for the diverse needs of students, thereby increasing university's attractive competitiveness. Overall, these experiences and expectations as seen through the eyes of inbound exchange students from international counterpart universities were of important concerns for the administrators and those responsible for university planning to continuously enhance university image.

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