

Exploring the Benefits and Challenges of International Student Exchange Programs: Perspectives from Student Teachers

Huynh Thi Thuy Diem*, Mai Phuc Thinh*, Tran Thi Mung*

School of Education, Can Tho University

This study explores the perspectives of student teachers from Can Tho University, Vietnam, on the benefits and challenges of engaging in student exchange programs. Utilizing a quantitative research approach, data was collected through a survey instrument consisting of multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions. The survey examined student teachers' perceptions of various advantages, including access to new knowledge, enhanced teaching skills, and valuable support from foreign partners and mentors. Additionally, it investigated challenges related to language differences, cultural norms, and time management. The findings shed light on the experiences of student teachers in exchange programs and reveal that one of the most significant reasons for their participation is the desire to expand their international networks and foster meaningful connections with students from other countries. These insights provide valuable guidance for educational institutions in developing effective strategies and support systems to optimize the participation and satisfaction of student teachers in these programs.

Keywords: International student exchange programs, internationalization, student teachers

INTRODUCTION

University degrees no longer guarantee employment in globalized labor markets. As university degrees have become more common and accessible, their perceived quality and value have declined (Tomlinson, 2008; Roy, Newman, Ellenberger & Pyman, 2019). Thus, employers are increasingly seeking graduates with additional employability skills like communication, problem-solving, and teamwork to improve their chances of finding meaningful work (Gale & Parker, 2017; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016).

Vietnam, in Southeast Asia, recognizes the urgent need for higher education internationalization and cooperation to meet the demands of a rapidly changing job market. With the world becoming more interconnected, Vietnamese higher education institutions are working to improve global learning experiences and student job prospects (Phan, Tran & Blackmore, 2019). International student exchange programs are a powerful tool for exposing students to global markets and fostering cross-cultural interactions (Ritz, 2011; Fakunle, 2021).

International student exchanges have many benefits. These programs allow students to study and work abroad and improve their professional skills (Wright & Cluke, 2010). They gain international affairs experience and prepare for global employment (Di Pietro, 2015). Immersion in native cultures and local life during exchange programs allows students to reflect, learn, and grow (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018; Gil & Reyes, 2020).

Vietnamese students face challenges and opportunities in international student exchange programs. Language barriers, unfamiliar classrooms, and cultural differences can hinder their academic success (Nguyen, 2011; Huong, Koo, Arambewela, & Zutshi, 2017). Thus, Vietnam-specific exchange program challenges and opportunities must be examined and addressed.

This article examines how international student exchange programs affect student teachers at Can Tho University, a top Vietnamese university. This study matters for many reasons. First, it examines how exchange programs affect student teachers, which advances international education. There is little research on student teachers' experiences and outcomes in international exchange programs. Thus, this study fills a research gap and illuminates student teachers' unique challenges and opportunities in international exchange programs.

Second, this study applies to teacher training. International experiences shape student teachers' professional development, which is important as teacher education becomes more globalized. International exchange programs can help teachers prepare for diverse and multicultural classrooms. This study could improve teacher training by highlighting the pros and cons of international student exchange programs.

The article answers these research questions to achieve these goals:

- How do Can Tho University student teachers benefit from international student exchange programs?
- What challenges do international exchange student teachers face?

The article addresses these research questions to shed light on how international student exchange programs affect Can Tho University student teachers, advancing international education and teacher training.

METHODS

Participants

This study included 56 Can Tho University student teachers who had participated in an international student exchange program. These participants were chosen for their program participation and survey availability. The number of participants was limited due to Can Tho University's new international student exchange programs. Some graduates' contact information was also unavailable. The International Cooperation Office and relevant faculties and departments assisted in participant recruitment.

Data Collection

This study used a survey questionnaire to collect data. Student teachers' views on international student exchange programs were collected in the survey. Multiple-choice and Likert scale questions were in the survey. The Likert scale allowed participants to rate statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Participants had time to answer the survey questionnaire between July and August 2022. Using contact information from the International Cooperation Office and relevant faculties and departments, the questionnaire was emailed to participants.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS for Windows 16.0. The analysis used descriptive and inferential statistics. To summarize the data, descriptive statistics like the mean (average score) and standard deviation were calculated. The range was calculated as $(\text{maximum} - \text{minimum})/n = (5 - 1)/5 = 0.8$ to calculate the average score from Likert scale responses. This helped understand participants' views on international student exchange programs. To find trends and patterns in the data, inferential statistical methods were used. These statistical analyses examined the perceived benefits and drawbacks of Can Tho University student teachers' international student exchange programs.

RESULTS

Demographic Description

The study's demographics are intriguing. The study included 57.1% men and 42.9% women. Participants were in various international exchange programs of varying duration. Participant program duration distribution: 32.1% of participants had a program duration of 1 week or less, 42.8% had 1–2 weeks, 16.1% had 2–4 weeks, and 9% had over 1 month.

78.6% of exchange students went to Thailand. Taiwan (8.9%), Korea (5.3%), Japan (5.3%), and the Czech Republic (1.9%) were other destinations. Exchange programs focused on Asian countries, with Thailand being the most popular.

The study participants had only participated in one international exchange program. The participants had little prior experience with international exchange programs, making their perspectives and experiences particularly valuable for the study.

Students' Motivations to Participate in International Exchange Programs

Table 1 provides valuable insights into the reasons behind students' participation in international exchange programs. The data reveals several key motivations that influenced the students' decision to take part in these programs.

Table 1. Reasons for students participating in international exchange programs

Reasons	Percentage (%)
Recommended by the faculty advisor	50.0
Want to expand relationships with international students	89.3
Desire to improve language skills	85.7
Want to promote Vietnamese culture	60.7
Want to share and discuss topics related to their field of study	67.9

Faculty advisors' advice influenced students' participation. Academic advisors advised 50% of students to join the exchange program. Faculty influence students' decisions and promote worldwide experiences.

Students were also encouraged to make contact with international students through international exchange programs. The majority (89.3%) desired to interact with international students in order to foster cross-cultural understanding and global networks. Interacting with different peers allows students to broaden their perspectives, improve their intercultural communication skills, and make lifelong friends.

85.7% of students sought to improve their language skills through immersion in a foreign language. In today's globalized society, students see the foreign exchange program as an excellent opportunity to improve their language skills, particularly English. In the immersion program, students can practice their language skills and gain confidence speaking with people who speak different languages.

60.7% of students wanted to share Vietnamese traditions and values with their international peers. This demonstrates cultural pride and a commitment to representing Vietnam abroad. By presenting their distinct cultural heritage, students promote global understanding and appreciation.

During the international exchange program, 67.9% of students wanted to talk and share their topic of study. This shows their enthusiasm to learn, get fresh viewpoints, and explore their academic field. Experts, specialized courses, and worldwide collaboration can boost students' academic experience and personal and professional progress.

Table 1 shows the many reasons students join overseas exchange programs. The desire to create foreign ties, enhance language skills, promote Vietnamese culture, and participate in scholarly discussions are among these objectives. Program organizers and instructors must understand these reasons to create meaningful and impactful foreign exchange experiences that satisfy students' needs and expectations.

Perceived Benefits of International Student Exchange Program

According to Table 2, international student exchange programs offer a range of benefits to participants, contributing to their personal growth, skill development, and global perspective. The following groups

summarize the similar benefits reported by the participants, along with their mean ratings and standard deviations.

Table 2. The benefits of international student exchange programs from students' perspectives

Category	Mean	SD	Ranking
1. Cultural immersion and understanding	4.00	1.186	5
2. International friendship building	4.00	1.217	5
3. Acquisition of independent living skills	4.21	1.258	1
4. Global perspective development	4.21	1.287	1
5. Improved critical thinking abilities	4.14	1.239	2
6. Easy adaptation to new environments	3.79	1.258	8
7. Acquisition of valuable future work skills	3.93	1.215	6
8. Vocabulary and English language skills acquisition/ progression	4.07	1.215	3
9. Teamwork skills enhancement	4.00	1.217	5
10. Opportunities for self-evaluation and self-improvement	4.04	1.232	4
11. Growth in maturity and confidence	3.89	1.227	7
12. Integration into a multicultural environment	4.04	1.232	4
13. Preparedness to become a global citizen	3.89	1.227	7

Cultural Immersion, Understanding, and International Connections

Students value cultural immersion, understanding, and international connections. These dimensions emphasize the importance of cultural engagement, cultural competence, and diverse friendships.

The average rating for cultural immersion and understanding among participants was 4.00 [1]. This dimension allows students to experience and learn the customs, traditions, and perspectives of a different culture. By engaging in local activities and residing in a foreign country, students develop a global perspective. The low standard deviation value of 1.186 suggests that participants valued cultural immersion and comprehension. This advantage was ranked fifth.

International Connections and Friendship Development highlights the significance of international friendships [2]. Through the formation of meaningful relationships, students acquire intercultural communication skills and a global network. These connections result in global citizenship, cross-cultural understanding, and future collaborations. Participants acknowledge the significance of international friendships, but the standard deviation of 1.217 indicates that individual experiences vary. This benefit came in fifth.

These two dimensions demonstrate international student exchange programs' transformative power. Students gain cultural competence, a broader perspective, and a greater appreciation for diversity through cultural immersion and understanding. International connections and friendships help students develop personal growth, global citizenship, and lifelong relationships. These dimensions show

international student exchange programs' richness and transformative potential in fostering intercultural understanding and global engagement.

Personal Growth and Skills Development

International student exchange programs boost personal development and skills. Participant mean ratings and standard deviations determined these benefits.

Independent living skills were rated 4.21 [3]. This involves learning the skills needed to live independently abroad. Participants improved their daily task management, adaptability, and cultural awareness. The low standard deviation of 1.258 suggests participants agree on the importance of these skills.

International student exchange programs value global perspective development, which received a mean rating of 4.21 [4]. This benefit includes a global perspective, understanding global issues, and global work. The low standard deviation of 1.287 indicates that participants value a global perspective.

Critical thinking improved by 4.14 [5]. Participants can analyze and evaluate information from diverse cultural contexts with improved critical thinking skills. While individual experiences may vary, the importance of skill development is clear.

Language skills development, with a mean rating of 4.07 [8], was another benefit. Participants learned and improved their English and vocabulary, which are essential for international communication. Language skills were important to exchange program participants, despite the standard deviation of 1.215.

Self-evaluation and self-improvement were valued at 4.04 [10]. This benefit allowed participants to assess their strengths and weaknesses, promoting self-awareness. Despite individual differences, these opportunities were valued.

International student exchange programs teach participants life skills, global perspectives, critical thinking, and language skills. These experiences foster self-development, cultural awareness, and global competence. The low standard deviations show that participants agreed, emphasizing the importance of these benefits in international student exchange programs.

Adaptability and Multicultural Integration

International student exchanges foster adaptability and multiculturalism. These benefits emphasize navigating unfamiliar environments and integrating into different cultures, according to mean ratings and standard deviations.

3.79 with a 1.258 standard deviation was adaptability in international student exchange programs [6]. This theme encourages adaptability in unfamiliar cultural and social settings. Adaptable exchange program participants are better prepared for challenges and opportunities. Adaptability matters.

Multicultural integration was rated 4.04 with a standard deviation of 1.232 in international student exchange programs [12]. Engaging and connecting with diverse cultures fosters cross-cultural communication and understanding. Participants can appreciate cultural diversity by actively seeking out diverse interactions. Multicultural settings foster globalization and intercultural competence. It was the fourth-most important benefit of the exchange program.

Low standard deviations indicate that participants valued both benefits. This consensus emphasizes adaptability and multicultural integration to create a supportive and inclusive environment for participants to thrive and engage with the host culture and community.

Future career preparation and confidence

International student exchanges foster adaptability and multiculturalism. These benefits emphasize navigating unfamiliar environments and integrating into different cultures, according to mean ratings and standard deviations.

3.79 with a 1.258 standard deviation was adaptability in international student exchange programs [6]. This theme encourages adaptability in unfamiliar cultural and social settings. Adaptable exchange program participants are better prepared for challenges and opportunities. Adaptability matters.

Multicultural integration was rated 4.04 with a standard deviation of 1.232 in international student exchange programs [12]. Engaging and connecting with diverse cultures fosters cross-cultural communication and understanding. Participants can appreciate cultural diversity by actively seeking out diverse interactions. Multicultural settings foster globalization and intercultural competence. It was the fourth-most important benefit of the exchange program.

Low standard deviations indicate that participants valued both benefits. This consensus emphasizes adaptability and multicultural integration to create a supportive and inclusive environment for participants to thrive and engage with the host culture and community.

Challenges Faced by Students in International Student Exchange Programs

International student exchange programs offer invaluable opportunities for students to immerse themselves in new cultures, gain academic and professional experiences abroad, and broaden their horizons. However, such programs are not without their challenges. Tab. 4 indicates the various challenges that students often encounter during their international student exchange journeys. These challenges can be grouped into several topics, each representing a distinct aspect of the exchange experience.

Table 4. Challenges of Participating in International Student Exchange Programs

Disadvantages	Percentage (%)
1. Language barrier	67.9
2. Weather conditions	32.1
3. Cultural customs and traditions	17.9
4. Working methods	21.4
5. Working hours	25.0
6. Food	25.0
7. Accommodation	10.7
8. Workload	14.3
9. Lack of expertise in teaching or working	75.0
10. Lack of new knowledge abroad	21.4
11. Insufficient teaching skills	25.0
12. Inadequate curriculum content	67.9
13. Lack of interaction between teachers and students in class	14.3
14. Lack of skills for laboratory work	28.6
15. Inadequate lesson planning	75.0
16. Limited interaction between teachers and students in class	89.3

Note: *N* = 56

Cultural and Practical Adjustments

International student exchange students must adjust to new cultural norms and daily life. Language barriers can make it hard for students to interact with the local community and school. This challenge (67.9%) emphasizes language preparation and support throughout the exchange program. Weather (32.1%) may also affect students' daily routines. Students must adapt to new cultural norms, social etiquette, and local customs to feel comfortable in their host country.

Academic and Professional Challenges

Academic and professional challenges arise from the exchange program. (21.4%) Students may struggle with working methods like research, assignments, and classroom participation. Managing a potentially higher workload (14.3%) and new working hours (25.0%) can also be difficult. Students may also struggle with teaching or working (75.0%) in unfamiliar educational and professional environments. Changing teaching styles, curriculum, and assessment methods is difficult. Teacher-student interaction is also low (89.3%), which can hinder learning and engagement. To overcome academic and professional challenges, students must be proactive in seeking academic support, building relationships with professors, and adopting a growth mindset.

Accommodation and Practicalities

Accommodation (10.7%) and practicalities may also be issues for students abroad. Contracts, housing, and foreign currency management can be difficult. Transportation and daily life, such as grocery shopping and healthcare, may also be difficult. Students must be resourceful, consult program coordinators or local resources, and be independent and adaptable to overcome these challenges.

Laboratory and Technical Skills

Laboratory work can be difficult for science and technology students. 28.6% of students struggled with lab skills. This emphasizes the need for technical training and support for experiments and research. To ensure students learn lab skills and safety, schools should provide comprehensive orientation and training.

International student exchange programs have many benefits but also many challenges. Cultural adjustments, academic and professional challenges, practicalities, and technical skill requirements are some of these challenges. Understanding and anticipating these challenges can help students prepare for a rewarding exchange experience. Institutions and program coordinators should provide adequate support, resources, and guidance to help students overcome these challenges and maximize their international student exchange experience. By proactively addressing these challenges, students can overcome barriers, improve cross-cultural competencies, and grow personally and academically abroad.

Discussion

The analysis of students' motivations, perceived benefits, and challenges in international student exchange programs shows how important these programs are for cultural understanding, personal growth, and academic development. This supports the idea that international exchange programs transform students. However, the context of Can Tho University, a prominent and prestigious Mekong Delta institution, provides new insights into the specific experiences and implications of such programs.

Being a central university, Can Tho University attracts student teachers who want to improve their teaching and gain international experience. These student teachers can observe and learn from different teaching practices, educational systems, and cultural contexts through international exchange programs. They gain a global perspective on education and pedagogy from this exposure. The research shows that international exchange programs help teachers grow professionally by exposing them to different teaching methods, classroom management techniques, and student-teacher dynamics. These experiences can make them more adaptable, culturally sensitive, and effective teachers in the future. Student teachers gain new knowledge and experiences through these programs that they can share with their future students.

Student teachers in international exchange programs may face teaching practice challenges, according to the research. Navigating instructional methods, cultural classroom management, and language barriers are these challenges. The research highlights these challenges to raise student teachers'

awareness of international challenges. This awareness can better prepare them to navigate and overcome these challenges, maximizing the benefits of international exchange programs.

Recommendations for Universities and Policymakers:

These findings suggest that universities and policymakers take steps to make international exchange programs successful.

- a. **Clear Policies and Guidelines:** Universities should set clear goals, procedures, and expectations for international exchange programs. Students can better understand program requirements and apply with clear guidelines.
- b. **Partner Institution Expansion:** Universities should actively collaborate with diverse partner institutions worldwide. Expanding the network of partner universities will give students more academic programs and destinations, enriching their international experience.
- c. **Financial Support:** Universities should provide enough money for exchange students. Scholarships, grants, and other financial aid can make international exchange opportunities more affordable and accessible.
- d. **Pre-departure Orientation and Support:** Universities should offer comprehensive orientation programs to prepare students for the challenges of exchange programs. This includes cultural sensitivity training, language preparation, and practical information about living and studying abroad.
- e. **Ongoing Guidance and Support:** Universities should provide strong support for international exchange students. This includes dedicated staff who can help students with any issues they may encounter during their program.

Strategies to Foster International Exchange Programs

Universities can use these methods to boost international exchange programs:

- a. **Raise Awareness:** Campus-wide events, information sessions, and online platforms should promote international exchange programs. Students will learn about these programs' benefits and opportunities.
- b. **Integration into Curriculum:** Universities can encourage students to participate in international exchange programs and ensure that academic credits earned abroad can be seamlessly transferred. International experiences will be highlighted in students' academic journeys.
- c. **Collaboration and Partnerships:** Universities should form strategic partnerships with international institutions, organizations, and local communities to improve the quality and diversity of international exchange programs. Academic, research, and cultural projects can result from collaboration.
- d. **Alumni Engagement:** Program alumni mentor prospective exchange students. Universities can create alumni networks and knowledge-sharing platforms to support current and future participants.

CONCLUSION

This article focused on Can Tho University student teachers' international student exchange motivations, perceived benefits, and challenges. International exchange programs promote cultural understanding, personal growth, and academic development. This research has limitations, despite its many benefits. These include sample size, representation, self-reporting bias, and university-specific cultural and contextual factors. To improve generalizability, address biases, and better understand students' international exchange experiences, future studies should use larger and more diverse samples and consider Can Tho University's cultural and institutional factors. Future research should use larger and more diverse samples, use qualitative methods to better understand students'

experiences, and assess university support systems. These efforts will help develop targeted interventions and support mechanisms to improve students' experiences and outcomes by better understanding international exchange programs' motivations, benefits, and challenges.

Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world." International student exchange programs can help student teachers improve their future classrooms and communities. These programs help student teachers become global citizens who can participate in a diverse and interconnected world by fostering intercultural understanding, personal growth, and academic advancement. To become global educators, universities and policymakers must prioritize and support international exchange programs.

References

- Di Pietro, G. (2015). Do study abroad programs enhance the employability of graduates?. *Education Finance and policy*, 10(2), 223-243.
- Curtis, T., & Ledgerwood, J. R. (2018). Students' motivations, perceived benefits and constraints towards study abroad and other international education opportunities. *Journal of International Education in Business*, 11(1), 63-78.
- Fakunle, O. (2021). International students' perspective on developing employability during study abroad. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 75(4), 575-590.
- Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2017). Retaining students in Australian higher education: Cultural capital, field distinction. *European Educational Research Journal*, 16(1), 80-96.
- Gil, M., & Reyes, M. (2020). International Short-Term Trips and the Development of a Global Mindset in Business Students. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 31(4), 358-379.
- Huong, L., Koo, F. K., Arambewela, R., & Zutshi, A. (2017). Voices of dissent: Unpacking Vietnamese international student experience. *International Journal of Educational Management*
- Nguyen, C. T. (2011). Challenges of Learning English in Australia towards Students Coming from Selected Southeast Asian Countries: Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia. *International Education Studies*, 4(1), 13-20.
- Nilsson, P. A., & Ripmeester, N. (2016). International student expectations: Career opportunities and employability. *Journal of International Students*, 6(2), 614-631.
- Phan, H. L. T., Tran, L. T., & Blackmore, J. (2019). Internationalization, student engagement, and global graduates: A comparative study of Vietnamese and Australian students' experience. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(1), 171-189.
- Ritz, A. A. (2011). The educational value of short-term study abroad programs as course components. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 11(2), 164-178.
- Roy, A., Newman, A., Ellenberger, T., & Pyman, A. (2019). Outcomes of international student mobility programs: A systematic review and agenda for future research. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(9), 1630-1644.
- Tomlinson, M. (2008). 'The degree is not enough': students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(1), 49-61.
- Wright, N. D., & Clarke, I. (2010). Preparing marketing students for a global and multicultural work environment: The value of a semester-long study abroad program. *Marketing Education Review*, 20(2), 149-162.

* Authors

1. Huynh Thi Thuy Diem, PhD: Senior Lecturer, School of Education, Can Tho University
Address: Campus II, 3/2 Street, Xuan Khanh Ward, Ninh Kieu District, Can Tho City
Phone number: 0918014848 - Email: httdiem@ctu.edu.vn

2. Mai Phuc Thinh, MA: Researcher, School of Education, Can Tho University

Address: Campus II, 3/2 Street, Xuan Khanh Ward, Ninh Kieu District, Can Tho City
Phone number: 0907492602 - Email: phuchthinhpq@gmail.com

3. Tran Thi Mung, MA: Officer, School of Education, Can Tho University
Address: Campus II, 3/2 Street, Xuan Khanh Ward, Ninh Kieu District, Can Tho City
Email: ttmung@ctu.edu.vn

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals and institutions that have contributed to the successful completion of this research article. We extend our sincere appreciation to the School of Education at Can Tho University for their support and resources throughout the study.

We are also thankful to the participants of this study, the student teachers from Can Tho University, whose valuable perspectives and contributions have made this research possible. Their willingness to share their experiences and insights has provided valuable data for understanding the benefits and challenges of international student exchange programs.

Furthermore, we would like to acknowledge the International Cooperation Office and the relevant faculties and departments at Can Tho University for their assistance in participant recruitment and data collection. Their support has been instrumental in ensuring the success of this research endeavor.

Lastly, we would like to express our appreciation to the reviewers and editors for their time, effort, and constructive feedback, which have helped enhance the quality and rigor of this article.

We are grateful to everyone involved in this research project and sincerely thank them for their contributions.