

The Role of Short-Term Study Abroad Programs in Enhancing The Undergraduate Student Experiences: A Case Study of FPT University

ABSTRACT

Amid a developed world like the present, all trade activities between countries are almost free of barriers, and all areas of life also develop on a large scale. Including transnational education and short-term study abroad programs is clear proof of such social progress. These programs offer many benefits to college students, especially in enhancing the valuable student experience. The article focuses on analyzing different aspects of the role of these experiences through the case study at FPT University. From there, analyze and offer development solutions so that these study abroad programs are increasingly promoting their effectiveness, and more young people gain experience and skills to develop comprehensively besides cultivating professional knowledge at university.

Keywords: benefit, experience, study abroad, students

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a modern society with outstanding development in many aspects, including education. In the orientation of tertiary education, the student experience is a significant factor that many universities and colleges need to aim for (Mupenzi, 2018). There are many different ways to enhance the undergraduate student's experience, and enabling students to participate in study abroad programs is one of the most effective and popular ways. By participating in these programs, students enhance their experience in using foreign languages and increase their understanding of other countries' cultures, but these programs also help students' life experiences become more enjoyable, more diverse. They contribute to equipping students with practical knowledge and skills for different journeys, working or studying in multicultural environments (according to Harris et al., 2019). That is why short-term study abroad programs such as exchange semester, semester abroad, intensive courses overseas, on-the-job training overseas, etc. are held a lot at universities and colleges worldwide in general and in Vietnam, at FPT University, in particular.

At FPT University, Vietnam, according to the Office of International Collaboration, most students have experienced at least one short-term study abroad program before graduating. Of course, this was true before the outbreak of COVID-19. The students of this university get to participate in these programs for different lengths of time, from one month, 3 months, 5 months, 6 months, even 1 year. The school also has many options for students in different majors, in countries like Thailand, The Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Korea, Japan, India, Australia, Netherland, Germany, etc. And primarily, these programs are held almost regularly and many times a year, so students can be proactive in choosing a suitable program at the right time merge with them to maximize the experience the student wants to achieve.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studying abroad has long been one of the topics studied by many scientists around the world in many different aspects. Since 2012, Twombly et al. have analyzed the great benefits of studying abroad in a new global century. The authors delved into the many benefits of studying abroad in this study.

Then, in 2007, Sasaki analyzed the positive effects of studying abroad on improving foreign language ability, specifically writing English. Alternatively, in the opposite direction and very practical, the difficulties encountered when studying

abroad have also been studied—according to Trilokekar and Kukar (2021), referring to being disoriented during one or more periods while abroad is one of the most challenging and unavoidable experiences of all international students.

In the following years, studies on the effectiveness of studying abroad for university students, specifically in enhancing the student experience, were also investigated. One of them is the study of Ruth et al. (2019), which addresses the long-term benefits of studying abroad in many different aspects, and one of the most worthy of mention is that students gain much experience in research work with many international students.

Moreover, we recently saw Chiocca (2021) study on experience and perspective change in a short-term study abroad program. Research has mentioned that when students participate in a short-term study abroad program, they focus on educational outcomes and the values brought by a memorable experiential trip. Alternatively, according to Humphreys and Baker (2021), short-term study abroad trips also help develop individuals' cross-cultural awareness; for example, in this study are Japanese students who study abroad for a short time.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, the author has used several methods, mainly qualitative and quantitative, specifically as follows: synthesizing information from studies, books, and articles on related topics to short-term study abroad programs and their benefits to university students; observing, interviewing, exchanging ideas with 28 students of FPT University who participated in these programs; conduct an analysis of the specific benefits of the program in enhancing the student experience; detect outstanding limitations in programs; categorize which problems are the leading causes; Compare and contrast the results of several other previous studies. Finally, practical solutions are proposed to help maximize the enhancement of student experience when participating in these short-term study abroad programs. The survey and research took place in three months at FPT University with survey questionnaires and different means such as Facebook, Zalo, Gmail, etc.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, at FPT University, short-term study abroad programs are highly appreciated by students participating in the program (according to information from the Office of International Collaboration of this school). Accordingly, students appreciate the program because of its values, one of which can be mentioned is the enhancement of practical experience for them when participating in the program. Agreeing with this view, Bell et al. (2021) mentioned that the experiences from these student mobility programs are precious and have lasting value for students, greatly helping to prepare for their future. Moreover, within the scope of this research paper, the author has gone into deeper explorations of the different angles of experience that students can gain from the program. Details include (1) Experience of foreign languages, (2) Experience of cultural exchange, (3) Experience of studying in an international environment, (4) Experiences of independent living abroad, and (5) Experiences of financial management in a country with a much higher standard of living than Vietnam. From these perspectives, the author surveyed 28 students who had attended at least one overseas program and obtained their satisfaction results, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Student satisfaction about experiences from short-term study abroad programs

| Aspects of experience | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Total Reply | Total Score | Average Level |
|--|---|---|---|----|----|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1. Experience of foreign languages | 0 | 0 | 3 | 10 | 15 | 28 | 124 | 0.22 |
| 2. Experience of cultural exchange | 2 | 5 | 3 | 11 | 7 | 28 | 100 | 0.18 |
| 3. Experience of studying in an international environment | 0 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 9 | 28 | 104 | 0.19 |
| 4. Experiences of independent living abroad | 1 | 3 | 1 | 12 | 11 | 28 | 113 | 0.20 |
| 5. Experiences of financial management in a country with a much higher standard of living than Vietnam | 1 | 1 | 3 | 10 | 13 | 28 | 117 | 0.21 |
| | | | | | | | 558 | 1 |

The above table clearly shows that the satisfaction level is achieved at a high level in many different angles about the student's experience. The total score is consistently above 100, in which the highest reaches 124, with an average level of 0.22. Specifically, in each aspect, based on the surveys that the author has made, they can be explained as follows.

With the aspect "Experience of foreign languages", up to 25 students (equivalent to 89.29%) have a high level of satisfaction with participating in the mobility program to help them get an environment to experience language practice regularly and effectively. This must be not easy to achieve if learning stops only in Vietnam. Next is the "Experience of cultural exchange", the level of student satisfaction in this aspect is somewhat more complicated. Overall satisfaction is relatively high, with a total score of 100. However, this is the lowest score among the five factors mentioned. 10 students (35.71%) choose very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, or neutral. In some programs, the program organizers have not been able to organize experiential activities for students such as city tours, field trips, presentations, cultural exchange, etc., to enhance cultural understanding for students.

Coming to the third aspect is "Experience of studying in an international environment", which is also in the general trend that the satisfaction level is relatively high, and especially, the total score is slightly higher than the previous aspect, reaching 102 points. Specifically, 12 students (42.86%) choose the level of dissatisfaction and the neutral level, in which the neutral level is higher than others. To explain this result, some students believe that the international environment abroad is not necessarily higher than at FPT University because they also study with imported programs from abroad at home university. , lecturers who have been trained in many countries worldwide, the program is entirely in English, etc.

Next is the aspect of Experience of independent living abroad; this aspect is very satisfied by students (12 students, accounting for 42.86%) and very satisfied (12 students, accounting for 39.29%). These students think that they already have an independent life even while studying in Vietnam. However, this independence becomes more meaningful and profound when they experience life far from their family, and immediate, regular support is almost impossible. Therefore, many students are very satisfied with these experiences; they help them become more mature when life, living, and studying are subject to self-control.

Last but not least, the financial factor has also largely influenced the decision to choose an international mobility program (according to Pagani et al., 2020). Answering the author's question, up to 82.14% were satisfied and very satisfied with the experience of financial management, especially at a much higher standard of living than in Vietnam. The remaining few are neutral or not satisfied because they have participated in short-term study abroad programs in countries where the standard of living is generally equivalent or not too much higher than in Vietnam, such as India, Thailand, The Philippines, etc.

As noted above, the variety of experiences students can get from short-term study abroad programs is relatively straightforward and exhaustive. However, there are still some limitations in the programs that FPT University has organized. In other words, students expect to experience more abroad through the program. They are experience from working part-time job, the experience from teaching assistantship for lower-level classes, the experience from volunteer programs, and the experience from real projects carried out by the school where students go to study such as projects in professors' labs, projects associated with businesses, startup projects, etc. With the question "Do you expect to be enhanced by a certain area of experience in international programs, what will it be?". The selection ratio is shown in Figure 1 below.

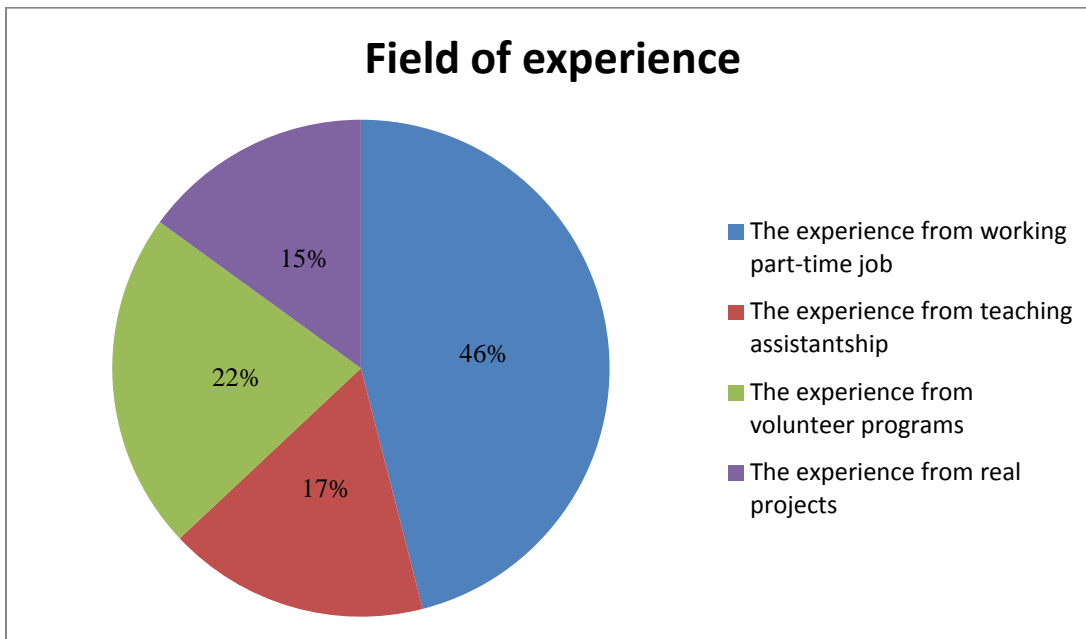


Fig. 1. Rate of choosing the field of experience that students want to increase in from short-term study abroad programs

The results from Figure 1 show that nearly half of the surveyed students (46%) wish to enhance their experience through part-time employment. This desire to work part-time is quite understandable by many students because it helps students increase their experience in the working environment, but it also helps students have more income to pay for their lives abroad. The great thing is that when students have more money, they can experience more things at school, in the country they come from. Thereby this amount of money will diversify their student life experience. This view has also been mentioned in the study of Take and Shorak (2018).

Next are the areas of experience in teaching assistantship, volunteer programs, and real projects with 17%, 22%, and 15% agreeing rates, respectively. In which, the experiences through volunteering activities are engaging by many students; however, in reality, not many schools are interested, especially for students who only come to study for a short time. On the home university side, usually, they are only interested in studying and students' lives - activities that bring most of the benefits to the students themselves. Also, because the length of the program is not too long, with the experiences of teaching assistants or participating in real projects at the school that students come to, have not been focused on. For that reason, students also expect that if they can participate in these study abroad programs again, they will have the opportunity to participate.

5. SOLUTIONS

Thus, in organizing short-term study abroad programs, educational institutions in general or FPT universities need to have new considerations and moves to improve the program's quality and significantly enhance the student experience. Based on the survey and analysis results above, universities and colleges can pay more attention to creating more conditions for students to work part-time at other institutions when organizing programs. The workplace might be companies, restaurants, eateries in the area where students stay. Of course, this also depends a lot on the country's visa policy where the student comes to study. For example, for The Philippines, if their visa is a student visa for more than 30 days, they can work part-time in this country (according to Cazorla, 2018). Alternatively, in Japan, before international students come to their home country to participate in an exchange semester, students can apply for part-time jobs in advance; many universities also introduce these jobs to international students. Because, according to Liu-Farrer (2020), this is entirely allowed by Japanese law.

In many countries, the labor policy for international students can be stringent, and students are entirely unable to find work on their own and work at businesses outside the school. In this case, many real projects at the school's labs, with real projects from outside companies, can be an effective solution for the desire to have working experience abroad when they have a short-term study program. In Singapore, many universities and colleges also have stipends for students to work on projects, the same way many schools still do for long-term international students at the doctoral level. This solution is a possible direction for the fields of study associated with laboratories, practical parts such as technology, electronic

engineering, etc. Enhancing practical experience through such practical projects abroad is an excellent step for students, especially those oriented to work abroad and work in an international environment or continue to study to a higher level (According to Panfilova et al., 2019).

It is possible to enhance the student experience through on-campus tutoring activities. Because, at a university, there are many different levels of study, home universities and partners can thoroughly choose the appropriate subjects and classes based on the learning results and aspirations of the students for students to try the role of teaching assistant. Besides registration, the program organizers can organize other activities to select the best and suitable candidates, such as teaching and training contests, online interviews or quizzes, testing students' understanding and ability in class, etc. Participating in that teaching will significantly improve their experience and knowledge because teaching is one of the best ways to review and improve understanding, according to Fiorella and Kuhlmann (2020).

As mentioned, volunteering is one of the advantageous ways to enhance the student experience while studying abroad. Then, universities can instead organize sports activities on campus, field trips for international students, competitions, etc.. They can ultimately link up with charities outside and in the area to allow students to join hands to support the community. Tree planting projects or environmental protection propaganda are the most practical examples for this category. Imagine, many years after this trip, the old students returned to the country they had been to study, revisiting the forests they had jointly planted. This is meaningful and is an excellent inspiration for environmental protection to society in general and young people in particular.

6. CONCLUSION

In the case of the study of short-term study abroad programs and their significant role in the undergraduate student experience at FPT University, the study presents different perspectives of the experience that students receive from the program. In addition, some of the most practical and possible solutions have also been proposed to increase the program's effectiveness, making the lives of many people like college students more beautiful and meaningful. Through that, many useful things will be equipped for them, preparing them for another new journey in their development career.

LIMITATION OF RESEARCH

The paper still has some limitations. Nevertheless, it will be improved shortly. Besides, the article is written from a view based on the results and documents of the researchers. Because the number of students participating in the survey is not much, many other objective opinions have not been clarified yet. The in-depth articles on this issue are not enough to complete this article better.

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