

## LEVELS OF SATISFACTION OF STUDENTS WHEN JOINING STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAMS ABROAD

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### Abstract

Studying abroad has become a trend in the world and Vietnam. When studying overseas in developed countries, students are able to improve their professional skills in foreign languages and experience new cultures with people from different countries and territories. From there, they can expand relationships in many countries prepare for an open future ahead. This study was completed from the results of comparing and contrasting research, previous and current documents, combined with actual surveys and interviews. In the study, a survey method was adopted utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data. The participants of the study were selected using criterion sampling method, and were composed of 24 students who had taken part in the exchange programs of FPT University. The data were collected using a survey form in distance through various platforms such as Gmail, Facebook or Zalo. Research results showed that student satisfaction was very high when participating in international student exchange programs. It was also found out that students' need to study abroad was hidden and should be exploited to provide opportunities for students to develop their inherent capacities, contributing to adequate education and training at the tertiary education level in order to narrow the educational gap between developed and developing countries, especially during significant education development worldwide.

**Keywords:** Professional skills; studying abroad; student exchange; student satisfaction; tertiary education

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## **1. Introduction**

It can be said that stepping into a country with a developed culture, education, and economy is a dream of many students (Kallmerten, 2018), especially those from developing countries like Vietnam. One of the prevalent cultural exchange programs is the exchange semesters of FPT University in countries such as the US, Australia, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia,... General-purpose of these programs is to create the opportunity for the school's students to study in classes with many international students, living in a new environment for one to two semesters; through which they can practice foreign languages, learn and experience new things about the culture in the most authentic way as well as acquire professional knowledge. According to Chi (2013), exchange programs abroad help a lot in helping students understand and absorb another culture. In addition, they can observe and participate in constructing a well-organized and effective education system which is almost impossible to achieve adequately through newspapers or books.

At FPT University, many programs are held every year for the same purposes. Many programs are available to students from many disciplines such as Information Technology, Economics, English Language, Japanese Language, Graphic Design, Multimedia Communication, etc. As mentioned above, they span from semester first to term ninth and are in many different countries. This diversity facilitates students in choosing the most suitable time and place for them to participate in the program, as long as during their lifetime as a student of FPT University, students have at least once studied abroad in this form of student exchange. Overall, most of the students participating in the program are very satisfied. However, some limitations of the programs make students not satisfied when participating in these international exchange programs. It can be said that the student care services that they receive are sometimes not as complete and immediate as when learning in Vietnam, which makes them so afraid and even wants to end the program earlier than planned. Besides, in some other cases, the study program lasts too long, causing other problems such as homesickness, additional costs (due to not being used to independent life in a faraway country). Short-term exchange abroad programs at universities in the region and around the world are pretty diverse, and each program is of great value to students with unique

characteristics, distinctive features with specific characteristics. Among them are the international short-term student exchange programs in Vietnam and typically can be said to be FPT University.

## **2. Literature review**

Student Exchange Programs are considered a student's particular process to allow them to live through and study abroad to experience a different culture with new relationships in other countries. According to Mphahlele (2017), "Findings revealed that exchange programs can enrich student immensely with an awakening awareness of other cultures." Besides, as stated in "Handbook of research on study abroad programs and outbound mobility" (Campbell, 2016), one of the best ways to learn a foreign language is to develop social relationships with native speakers and communicate with them. For the same reason, there are now quite a few universities in developing countries such as Vietnam, which strengthen the organization of these short-term study abroad programs. Although, according to Chwialkowska (2020), "some institutions require their students to spend a semester abroad as a prerequisite to earning a business degree", these programs are merely optional for students. Moreover, the fact shows that besides the great benefits for students when participating in the program, there are still some remaining problems. For example, the program's cost is relatively high; the content of the program does not match when studying abroad. In addition, for many students, another fairly common situation is homesickness when being away from home for a long time, according to Hendrickson (2011). Therefore, it is required that schools develop appropriate programs so that students feel satisfied when participating in the program. Good feedback about the program will attract more students to the program. Therefore, it requires the universities to build suitable programs for students to feel satisfied when participating in the program. There will be much good feedback about the program, and its attractiveness will get more students to programs.

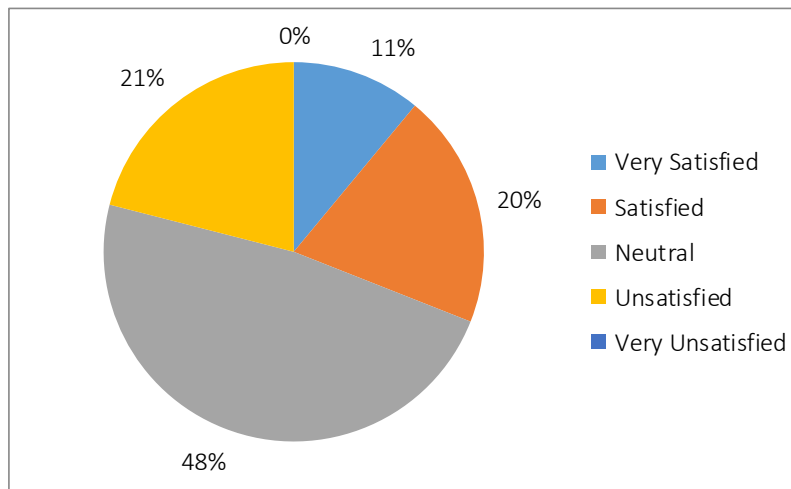
## **3. Methodology**

This study uses survey method based on a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data, specifically as follows: synthesizing information from studies and books with topics related to the content being studied; observing and interviewing, exchanging ideas

with 24 students who have taken part in the exchange programs; conducting analysis of specific difficulties and then synthesizing them to classify those problems of leading causes; compare and contrast the results of other studies. The goal is to propose practical solutions to help more students participate in these short-term study abroad programs and get high satisfaction with the program. The implementation period is in two months, at FPT University with survey forms developed by the researchers and provided via distance platforms, such as Facebook, Zalo, Gmail, etc.

#### 4. Results and discussion

According to Smith (2020), paying attention to international students' satisfaction in study abroad programs is a significant part of education. In order to better understand and have a better insight into the satisfaction level of students after participating in the exchange program abroad, the author has surveyed FPT University students and obtained remarkable general results, as shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1.** Levels of satisfaction of FPT University students when joining exchange programs abroad

Figure 1 clearly shows that none of the students chose the "Very Unsatisfied" level, which can initially be seen as good news for the University and the program organizers. However, the following numbers are worth considering thoroughly and learning from them. First of all, we can see, even though it is advantageous to participate in a study abroad program, as mentioned above, and it is common sense that students will also be delighted with

the program because it fulfills their dream of studying abroad. However, nearly half of the students surveyed answered "Neutral" 48%, in other words, students felt regular about a program that should have been expected and satisfied more than that. Next is the percentage of students who are satisfied and very satisfied with the program with a total of 33%. The percentage of satisfied students is equivalent to that of unsatisfied students, 20% and 21% respectively. Thus, it is clear that these exchange programs need a lot of review and adjustment to increase student satisfaction and meet the needs of students' expectations of the majority of learners.

According to Song (2013), international students will face many difficulties when studying abroad, such as encountering economic problems, being far away from their relatives, having different cultural backgrounds, etc. Besides, as stated in "Factors influencing satisfaction and revisit intention among international exchange students in Malaysia", price or fee is one of the most crucial aspects that affects on student satisfaction (Chelliah et al., 2019). Based on above-mentioned and to clarify the survey results about levels of satisfaction of FPT University students when joining student exchange programs abroad, the author continues to analyze the criteria used to survey students about the evaluation criteria for the program, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Criteria for measuring FPT University student satisfaction when participating in student exchange programs abroad

Survey Question	1	2	3	4	5	Total Reply	Total Score	Average Level
1. Program costs are reasonable	9	8	5	2	0	24	48	0.15
2. The content of studying at foreign schools is suitable for the program of FPT University	7	5	12	0	0	24	53	0.17
3. The program calendar is in line with the academic calendar of FPT University	7	6	6	4	1	24	58	0.18
4. There are many programs takes place every year for students to choose	6	9	7	2	0	24	53	0.17
5. The program organizers are very supportive	0	1	3	8	12	24	103	0.33

							<b>315</b>	<b>1</b>
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After collecting survey results on the criteria for measuring student satisfaction through 5 questions in the table above (Table 1), thanks to the application of a 5-point Likert scale from "very unsatisfied" (1 point), "unsatisfied" (2 points), "neutral" (3 points), "satisfied" (4 points), "very satisfied" (5 points), we clearly see that in general, the requirements achieve low or meager satisfaction, except for the criterion of the support of the organizers throughout the program, with an average level of 33%, in which, up to 50% of the respondents chose the very satisfying option, and no choice was very "Very Unsatisfied". This must be a positive response for the staff in the program organizers. However, in the remaining 4 questions, the trend is different; most of the choices fall from Very Unsatisfied to neutral, with the two questions about the reasonableness of the program's costs reaching the lowest with the score is 48, the average level is only 15%. This more or less clearly shows that the issue of cost is the biggest obstacle for students in choosing to study abroad for a semester. Therefore, we need to seriously consider this issue and work out specific, practical, and effective solutions to change this situation. Besides, the satisfaction of the program content, the curriculum, and the variety of programs are generally quite limited, with the average level at 17%, 18%, and 18%, respectively. It is outstanding that up to 50% of students choose the neutral option for the question about the program content. However, the total score still only reaches 53/315, which indicates a thorough understanding of the program. As much as the program content is not the students' responsibility, they can only evaluate it emotionally. The responsibility belongs to the School, which has the professional capacity in program design and organization.

## 5. Recommendations

The biggest problem is always the cost barrier; this has also been mentioned by Vernon et al in their study in 2017; the difference in prices in developed countries makes many students want but cannot participate in the program. Therefore, the University should adjust the fees, such as tuition, administration fee, accommodation fee, etc. At a reasonable cost, it is not much different from studying in Vietnam will be a practical and effective measure on this issue. The universities can adopt many forms, such as free tuition support or reduced tuition fees for students participating in the program. In addition, the schools can also support airfare

or accommodation costs, even full scholarships for excellent students. Like some other exceptional cases when studying at the school, the University can also apply financial support policies to provide students loans with low-interest rates when students register to participate in the program. Once these financial difficulties are resolved, the student's decision to join the program will undoubtedly be easy. Moreover, this financial support also helps students have more savings for personal living abroad, especially they have many conditions to participate in outdoor activities to experience in those attractive destinations. From there, students increase their satisfaction level when participating in the program.

Next is the issue of the content of these programs. Despite the differences in content, duration, assessment, orientation, or output standards between universities, the school needs to alliance with educational partners to have many similar subjects. After participating in the program, the number of subjects that students can count on should be maximized. Unlike 3+1 or 2+2 programs, higher education institutions can also come together to create curriculums specifically for these exchange programs. By doing this, the program will be perfect in terms of academics, ensuring training quality.

Furthermore, with exceptional cases, the school's academic departments have to consider each case to make appropriate adjustments, recognition policies, and appropriate course conversions for students when participating in the program. For example, at FPT University, typically, a semester lasts from four to five months, and during that time, students need to complete four to five subjects (twelve to fifteen credits). Thus, when participating in the exchange semester, the program organizers, specifically the International Collaboration Department, need to ensure that the number of subjects in which students can participate and recognize the exchange is equivalent to that of their children. Above, even more than one or two subjects are also acceptable (provided the course duration is guaranteed). This improvement will help increase student satisfaction when participating in the program as participating in a semester, or two of this exchange abroad will not affect the student's graduation progress.



**Picture 1.** FPT University students in an exchange program in Seoul, Korea

In addition to the cost and content of the program, the diversity of the program is also a big issue. According to Mills et al. (2010), the diversity of programs will greatly help in promoting students to participate in study abroad programs, and in this case, it needs to be taken into account by universities. Study abroad programs span students' four years of study, with many different semesters, further diversifying their options. Because beyond the cost issue, a student may not be able to participate in the program because the time is not suitable for the student due to personal problems or does not match the particular study path of the student. This diversity can also be referred to as the diversity of destinations for programs. The same program content, but we also need to organize it in many different partner units in many different countries. This diversity will enrich students' opportunities to study abroad because there are many different costs, including fees suitable for each family's budget. In addition, a



personal interest in countries will also be an excellent motivation for students to overcome barriers to participating in the program. Therefore, this diversity is necessary and effective in promoting the development of international student exchange programs and enhancing student satisfaction when participating in the program.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the adjustment of the program time. Because there is a big difference in the academic calendar between universities, the school needs to pay attention to the organization so that students can minimize having to study two overlapping programs when participating in the program, leading to absences from school for the first or last few weeks. Moreover, this must be pretty easy because, with the impact of COVID-19, students have been able to adapt to online learning and testing.

Besides, we recommend that choosing to participate in an exchange program abroad almost always includes this audience from a parent's perspective (Lee, 2015). Parents will be the ones to authorize and support the costs of their children participating in the program. Of course, parents' support, allow or prevent, indifference will more or less affect students' satisfaction when participating in the program. For example, when a parent does not fully understand the program, it will be challenging to get adequate spiritual and material support; students will go abroad to live and study for three to five months, but the money to live on is relatively meager. Then students will face deprivations, risks, and even adverse effects on their health and safety. Therefore, the school needs to be active in providing complete and accurate information about these exchange programs to parents to properly and fully understand the program. In addition, ready to support and advise parents, sometimes acting as a bridge between parents and their "children." This becomes even more important when students have gone to the other country, a lot of new things about that country that parents do not know but the program organizers know, even understand. Therefore, program implementers need to keep in touch with parents and students studying abroad. From there, it is easy to support students in unexpected situations and notify their families in a timely and complete manner. In short, when implementing the program, the school cares about partners, students, and their parents.

According to Marinege, F., & Carter, S. (2007), fear is one of the significant barriers affecting the decision to enroll in exchange semesters abroad. This will also significantly affect students'

satisfaction when participating in a specific study abroad program. Concerns about program costs, inappropriate training programs, program duration, or family support have all been presented and suggested solutions as above. So, why don't we consider in a more complete and detailed way and then develop a set of standards for planning and implementing short-term study abroad programs? In addition, we also need to identify and evaluate the risks in the program organization so that we can make thoughtful preparations, and Table 2 below will make it clear.

**Table 2.** Table of identification and assessment of risks

No.	The pain point of students	Risk	Possibility (Max=5)	Level of influence (Max=5)	Level of Risk	Solution
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	The program is not suitable for students	Students have difficulty in acquiring knowledge / can't complete the study program	2	4	8	<p>Work closely with partners to design and choose the most suitable program for students</p> <p>Communicating and advising students to choose the program that best suits their needs and abilities.</p>
2	Regulations and content of program redemption do not match / do not match	Students are not allowed to change subjects after finishing the program	2	5	10	<p>Update learning content regularly with the program development department to ensure subject change for students after participating in the program.</p> <p>Build the process vs decide to switch closely before implementing the program.</p>

3	Difference in schedule between the two schools, length of study time	Students are not allowed to change subjects in time for the semester after the end of the program -> Students are late, graduate on time	5	5	25	Working with partners to shorten the time to receive student transcripts after the program  Working with Training vs Program Development departments to support and accelerate student accreditation
4	Complicated study abroad application process	Students spend a lot of time and money to complete the application. If the application is rejected, the student will not be able to attend the program. The deadline to pay the visa is not on time, causing students to change their study schedule and flight schedule.	3	4	12	Learn more about the relevant study abroad procedures and processes to support students. Follow up and directly support students during the application process Work with partners, agencies and embassies to speed up and simplify the process for students.
5	Differences in culture and lifestyle between the two countries	Culture Inability - Culture Shock Effects on psychology and health in the learning process Conflict and trouble in life abroad	3	3	9	Learn and thoroughly inform students about each program (culture, cuisine, people, learning environment...) Follow up with students throughout the process to provide timely support when students have difficulties.

6	Students' independent living and self-management skills	Can't manage time, can't keep up with the school schedule Unable to manage finances - lack of money, cannot guarantee a standard of living Health is not guaranteed Lost my way, lost my things..."	4	4	16	Communicating and reminding students about getting ready for the trip. Organize Orientation for students before the trip. Follow up and promptly support students during the trip.
7	Laws of the host country	Guilty  Being fined by the police/government of the host country	1	5	5	Communicating and reminding students about getting ready for the trip. Organize Orientation for students before the trip. Follow up and promptly support students during the trip.
8	Natural disasters, epidemics, disasters	Directly affected by natural disasters, epidemics, disasters... There is no international program to participate in during the epidemic (global infection like COVID-19)	1	5	5	Follow the news to promptly support students in the event of an accident. Know the contact of partners, the Embassy and the authorities to best support students during difficult times. Implement international programs to strengthen students' globalization skills to replace international programs during the epidemic when it is impossible to go abroad.

## **6. Conclusions**

In summary, thanks to analyzing the data after the survey and assessment, we see that student exchange programs abroad are efficient, meaningful, and valuable for students. And FPT University has also been trying to organize these abroad programs in the best way, but there are still some issues as mentioned above. Therefore, the students participating in the program have not really appreciated the program as expected. This poses a big problem for schools in general and FPT University in particular in terms of designing and operating study abroad programs. The school needs to know how to get the most reasonable cost for students when organizing the program. Next are academic-intensive measures to enhance the effectiveness of the recognition or transfer of subjects of students who have studied abroad. In addition, the variety of programs and the duration of the program should also be carefully considered, selected, and arranged so that it is most convenient for students during their study in Vietnam and in another country.

## **7. Limitation of research**

The data collected are limited to one academic year, 25 exchange students and one university in Vietnam.

## **8. Conflict of interest**

No conflict of interest is noted in the paper.

## **9. Acknowledgement**

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