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An Investigation into the Benefits and Challenges of International Student Exchange Programs: Perspectives from Student Teachers

Huynh Thi Thuy Diem*^{}, Mai Phuc Thinh^{}
and Tran Thi Mung^{}
Can Tho University, Can Tho City, Vietnam

Abstract. 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 was 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; exchange programs; internationalization

1. Introduction

In today's globalized labor markets, having a university degree is no longer enough to guarantee employment. The rapid growth in the number of university graduates has led to a decline in the perceived quality and value of a degree, as educational credentials have become more common and accessible (Tomlinson, 2008). As a result, employers are increasingly seeking graduates with additional employability skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork, to enhance their chances of securing meaningful employment (Gale & Parker, 2017; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016).

*Corresponding author: *Huynh Thi Thuy Diem*, httdiem@ctu.edu.vn

Vietnam, a country in Southeast Asia, recognizes the urgent need for higher education internationalization and cooperation to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving job market. With the increasing interconnectedness of the world, Vietnamese higher education institutions are actively engaged in efforts to enhance the quality of global learning experiences and improve job opportunities for their students (Phan et al., 2019). To address these demands, international student exchange programs have emerged as a powerful tool for providing students with firsthand exposure to global markets and facilitating interactions in diverse cultural contexts (Ritz, 2011). International student exchange programs refer to structured educational initiatives that facilitate the exchange of students between institutions in different countries, allowing them to study, work, or engage in cultural immersion experiences abroad (Knight, 2012). In the context of this study, international exchange programs for student teachers at Can Tho University are short-term teaching exchanges facilitated by partner international universities.

International exchange programs aim to promote cross-cultural understanding, enhance participants' academic and professional skills, and foster global citizenship. The benefits of participating in international student exchange programs are manifold. Students who engage in these programs gain access to study and work opportunities that enhance their professional competencies and provide exposure to international environments (Wright & Cluke, 2010). They acquire real-world career experience and secure positions related to international affairs, effectively equipping themselves for the global job market (Di Pietro, 2015). Moreover, immersion in native cultures and local life during exchange programs allows students to reflect on their experiences, gain new insights, and undergo personal growth (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018).

However, while international student exchange programs present valuable opportunities, they also pose challenges for Vietnamese students. Language barriers, unfamiliar learning environments, and cultural differences can pose significant obstacles to their adjustment and academic success (Nguyen, 2011). Therefore, it is essential to examine and address the specific challenges and opportunities associated with these exchange programs in the context of Vietnam.

The objective of this journal article is to examine the experiences of student teachers who participate in international student exchange programs at Can Tho University, a prominent higher education institution in Vietnam. Our focus is on capturing the subjective experiences, perceived benefits, and challenges faced by student teachers during their participation in these programs. By delving into the specific context of Can Tho University, we seek to provide valuable insights that contribute to the existing knowledge base and enhance our understanding of the effects of international student exchange programs on student teachers.

This study is important and relevant for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the field of international education by exploring the impact of exchange programs on a specific group of students, namely student teachers. While previous research has investigated the effects of internationalization on students in various disciplines, there is a paucity of literature specifically examining the experiences and outcomes of student teachers in the context of international exchange programs. Therefore, this study fills a gap in the existing research and provides a

deeper understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by student teachers in international exchange programs.

Secondly, this study is relevant to the field of teacher training. As teacher education becomes increasingly globalized, it is crucial to examine how international experiences shape the professional development of student teachers. Research has shown that participation in international exchange programs can have a positive impact on student teachers by expanding their cultural awareness, developing intercultural competencies, and enhancing their ability to effectively teach in diverse and multicultural classrooms (Goodwin, 2020). Understanding the specific impact of international exchange programs on student teachers can inform the development of teacher training programs that better prepare future educators. By integrating international experiences and incorporating strategies to address the challenges faced during these programs, teacher training programs can effectively equip student teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to promote inclusive and culturally responsive teaching practices (Schleicher, 2012). This study aims to explore the benefits and challenges associated with international student exchange programs for student teachers at Can Tho University, in order to contribute to the enhancement of teacher training strategies and curricula. To address these objectives, the article aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are the perceived benefits of international student exchange programs for student teachers at Can Tho University?
- What challenges do student teachers face during their participation in international exchange programs?

By addressing these research questions, the article aims to provide valuable insights into the experiences of international student exchange programs on student teachers at Can Tho University, thereby contributing to the fields of international education and teacher training.

2. Literature Review

The Role of International Student Exchange Programs in Education

In recent years, the globalization of education has become a prominent phenomenon, driven by advancements in technology, increased mobility, and the growing interconnectivity of nations. It has brought about significant changes in the way education is perceived and delivered, transcending national borders and fostering a globalized learning environment (Berg & Schwander, 2019).

International student exchange programs have emerged as a crucial component of the global education landscape. These programs facilitate the movement of students across countries, allowing them to immerse themselves in different cultural, academic, and social contexts (Goldstein, 2022). By participating in such exchange programs, students gain unique opportunities for personal growth, academic enrichment, and the development of global competencies (Iskhakova et al., 2022; Atalar, 2020).

International student exchange programs play a vital role in promoting cross-cultural understanding and educational collaboration. They provide students with a platform to engage with diverse perspectives, traditions, and values,

fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual respect (Whatley et al, 2021). Through these exchanges, students are exposed to different educational systems, teaching methods, and research environments, broadening their horizons and expanding their academic repertoire.

Furthermore, international student exchange programs serve as catalysts for international collaboration and cooperation among educational institutions. They facilitate the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and best practices, encouraging partnerships between universities and promoting research collaborations on a global scale (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Such collaborations contribute to the advancement of scientific research, innovation, and the dissemination of knowledge across borders.

Benefits of Participating in International Student Exchange Programs

Participating in international student exchange programs offers numerous benefits to students, enhancing their skills and employability in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. These programs provide students with firsthand exposure to diverse cultures, traditions, and perspectives, fostering cultural competence and global awareness (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; Teichler & Janson, 2007). Through immersion in a foreign language environment, students have the opportunity to improve their language skills, enhancing their fluency, vocabulary, and overall language proficiency (Neumann et al., 2019). The exposure to different educational systems, teaching methods, and research environments broadens students' academic horizons, fosters critical thinking skills, and encourages intellectual flexibility (Loes & An, 2023).

In addition to academic growth, international student exchange programs promote personal development and independence. Students are required to step out of their comfort zones and adapt to new cultural, social, and academic environments, fostering valuable life skills such as problem-solving, adaptability, and intercultural communication (Berg & Schwander, 2019; Mikulec, 2019). The programs also provide opportunities for students to build an extensive network of international contacts, fostering the development of lifelong friendships, international connections, and professional networks (McManus, 2019).

Participating in international student exchange programs significantly enhances students' skills and employability in a global job market (Fakunle, 2021). The programs develop strong intercultural communication skills and the ability to collaborate effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds which are highly valued in today's globalized workplaces (Roy et al., 2019). Students also gain adaptability, resilience, and a global perspective, enabling them to navigate diverse and unpredictable settings (Hua et al., 2019). Language proficiency gained through immersion in a foreign language environment enhances students' competitiveness and opens up a wider range of career opportunities in international organizations and multinational companies (Fakunle, 2021). The experience of studying abroad through international student exchange programs demonstrates students' global mindset, adaptability, and openness to diverse perspectives, making them attractive candidates for employers seeking globally minded individuals (Gil & Reyes, 2020).

In conclusion, international student exchange programs provide students with a myriad of benefits, including the development of cultural competence, language proficiency, academic growth, personal development, and the enhancement of skills and employability. These programs play a vital role in preparing students for a globalized world by equipping them with the necessary skills and experiences to thrive in diverse and interconnected environments.

International Student Exchange Programs in the Vietnamese Context

In the context of Vietnam, the urgent need for international cooperation and higher education internationalization is driven by the demand for high-quality labor in today's fast-paced world (Nguyen et al, 2016). Recognizing the importance of internationalization, Vietnamese higher education institutions have actively engaged in efforts to enhance the quality of global learning experiences, integrate into the global arena, and improve job opportunities for students after graduation (Le, 2016).

International student exchange programs have proven to be beneficial for Vietnamese students, offering them opportunities to develop professional skills, improve English proficiency and access quality education (Huong et al, 2017). In other words, through international exchanges, Vietnamese students can gain exposure to different educational systems, teaching methods, and research environments, enabling them to broaden their perspectives and acquire knowledge and skills that are applicable in their home country (Brisset et al, 2010).

However, international student exchange programs also present challenges for Vietnamese students, such as language barriers, unfamiliar learning environments, and cultural differences (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013). Language proficiency, particularly in English, is often a significant hurdle for Vietnamese students, as it can impact their academic performance and social integration in the host country (Huong et al., 2017). Moreover, adjusting to a new educational system, different teaching methods, and cultural norms requires adaptability and resilience on the part of Vietnamese students (Huong et al., 2017).

Given the unique challenges and opportunities associated with international exchange programs in Vietnam, it is crucial to examine and address these factors to ensure the effectiveness and success of such programs. By understanding the specific needs and concerns of Vietnamese students participating in international student exchange programs, educational institutions and policymakers can develop targeted support mechanisms, language support programs, and cultural orientation initiatives to maximize the benefits and minimize the challenges faced by Vietnamese students.

3. Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 56 student teachers who had participated in at least one international student exchange program at Can Tho University. The sampling technique employed in this study was convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method where participants are selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. In this case, the participants were selected from the pool of student teachers who had

previously participated in international student exchange programs at Can Tho University. Due to the relatively new implementation of international student exchange programs at Can Tho University, the number of participants available for the study was limited. Additionally, some participants had already graduated, and their contact information was no longer available. To maximize the participation rate and ensure a diverse representation, the research team collaborated with the Office of International Affairs and relevant faculties and departments to obtain a list of student teachers who had participated in the programs. Using the provided list, the research team contacted the participants via email. The email invitations explained the purpose of the research, emphasized the significance of their participation, and provided a link to the online survey questionnaire. By using convenience sampling, the research team aimed to include a range of participants from different cohorts who had varying experiences and perspectives regarding international student exchange programs.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study was conducted through the administration of a survey questionnaire distributed to the participants via email. The questionnaire was delivered electronically to the participants between July and August 2022, allowing them sufficient time to provide thoughtful responses. To ensure a smooth and efficient delivery process, the contact information of the participants was obtained from the Office of International Affairs at Can Tho University. This office maintains a comprehensive list of students who have participated in international student exchange programs. Utilizing this list, the questionnaire was sent directly to the participants' email addresses.

To enhance the questionnaire's reliability, several steps were taken. First, the questionnaire was developed based on an extensive review of the existing literature on international student exchange programs and their impact on student teachers. This helped ensure that the survey items aligned with established constructs and concepts in the field. Second, the questionnaire included a mix of multiple-choice and Likert scale questions. The multiple-choice questions provided participants with predefined response options, allowing for quantitative analysis of specific aspects. The Likert scale questions, on the other hand, employed a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), enabling participants to express their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the participants' perceptions and experiences. Moreover, the questionnaire underwent a rigorous pilot testing phase involving a small group of student teachers and lecturers who provided feedback on the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the questions. This iterative process helped refine the questionnaire and ensure its reliability.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the SPSS for Windows 16.0 software. The analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. For descriptive analysis, the SPSS for Windows 16.0 software was utilized. Descriptive statistics, including measures such as the mean (average score) and standard deviation, were calculated to summarize the data collected from the survey

questionnaire. The mean score provided an indication of the participants' overall level of agreement or disagreement with the statements presented in the Likert scale. The standard deviation helped assess the degree of variability or dispersion within the responses. Specifically, to calculate the mean score, the Likert scale responses were assigned numerical values ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The average score was then determined by summing up all the responses and dividing the total by the number of participants. The range of the scale (0.8) was computed using the formula $(\text{Maximum} - \text{Minimum})/n$, where the maximum value was 5 and the minimum value was 1, and n represented the number of response options.

4. Results

Demographic Description

The demographic description of the participants in the study revealed interesting insights. The study included a total of male and female participants, with males comprising 57.1% and females accounting for 42.9% of the total sample. The participants were enrolled in various international exchange programs, each varying in duration. The program duration distribution among the participants was as follows: 32.1% of participants had a program duration of 1 week or less, 42.8% had a duration of over 1 week to 2 weeks, 16.1% had a duration of over 2 weeks to 4 weeks, and 9% had a program duration of over 1 month.

Table 1. Demographic Descriptions of Participants

| Characteristics | Number of respondents | Percentage |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| | n | % |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 32 | 57.1 |
| Female | 24 | 42.9 |
| Program duration | | |
| 1 week or less | 18 | 32.1 |
| Over 1 week to 2 weeks | 24 | 42.8 |
| 2 weeks to 4 weeks | 9 | 16.1 |
| Over 1 month | 5 | 9.0 |
| Exchange destinations | | |
| Thailand | 44 | 78.6 |
| Taiwan | 5 | 8.9 |
| Korea | 3 | 5.3 |
| Japan | 3 | 5.3 |
| Czech | 1 | 1.9 |

In terms of exchange destinations, the majority of participants (78.6%) traveled to Thailand for their international exchange program. Other destinations included Taiwan (8.9%), Korea (5.3%), Japan (5.3%), and Czech (1.9%). Notably, the focus of the exchange programs primarily revolved around Asian countries, with Thailand being the most popular destination.

It is important to highlight that all of the participants in the study had only engaged in an international exchange program once. This indicates that the participants had limited 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 2 provides valuable insights into the reasons behind students' participation in international exchange programs. The data revealed several key motivations that influenced the students' decision to take part in these programs.

Table 2. Reasons for students' participation in international exchange programs

| Reasons | Percentage (%) |
|--|-----------------------|
| Recommendation from the faculty advisor | 50.0 |
| Expansion of relationships with international students | 89.3 |
| Desire to improve language skills | 85.7 |
| Promotion of Vietnamese culture | 60.7 |
| Sharing and discussion of topics related to their field of study | 67.9 |

One prominent factor that influenced students' participation was the recommendation by their faculty advisor. A significant percentage of students (50.0%) indicated that they were encouraged to participate in the exchange programs based on the advice and guidance of their academic mentors. This highlighted the influential role that faculty members played in shaping students' decisions and promoting the value of international experiences.

Another strong motivation for students to participate in international exchange programs was the desire to expand relationships with international students. An overwhelming majority (89.3%) expressed their eagerness to connect with students from different countries, reflecting a genuine interest in fostering cross-cultural understanding and establishing global networks. The opportunity to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds offered students the chance to broaden their perspectives, develop intercultural communication skills, and build lifelong friendships.

Improving language skills was identified as a significant motivation for participation, with 85.7% of students indicating their desire to enhance their language proficiency through immersion in a foreign language environment. Recognizing the importance of language competency in today's globalized world, students acknowledged the international exchange program as a valuable opportunity to sharpen their language abilities, particularly in international

languages such as English. The program provided an immersive setting where students could practice their language skills and gain confidence in communicating effectively with people from different linguistic backgrounds.

Promoting Vietnamese culture emerged as another motivation for students to participate in international exchange programs, with 60.7% expressing a desire to showcase their country's traditions, customs, and values to international peers. This reflects a sense of cultural pride and a commitment to representing Vietnam on a global stage. By sharing their unique cultural heritage, students contributed to the promotion of cross-cultural understanding and appreciation among their international counterparts.

Furthermore, a considerable proportion of students (67.9%) expressed their interest in engaging in academic discussions and knowledge sharing related to their field of study during the international exchange program. This demonstrates their eagerness to expand their knowledge, gain new insights, and explore different perspectives within their chosen academic discipline. The opportunity to engage with experts, attend specialized courses, and collaborate with international peers could greatly enrich students' academic experience and contribute to their personal and professional growth.

In conclusion, the analysis of Table 2 highlights a range of motivations that drive students to participate in international exchange programs. These motivations include the recommendation of faculty advisors, the desire to establish international relationships, the aspiration to improve language skills, the interest in promoting Vietnamese culture, and the eagerness to engage in academic discussions. Understanding these motivations is crucial for program organizers and educators to design meaningful and impactful international exchange experiences that meet the needs and expectations of participating students.

Perceived Benefits of International Student Exchange Programs

According to Table 3, international student exchange programs offer a range of benefits to participants, contributing to their personal growth, skills development, and global perspective. The following groups summarize the similar benefits reported by the participants, along with their mean ratings and standard deviations.

Table 3. The benefits of international student exchange programs from students' perspectives

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

Personal Growth and Skills Development

International student exchange programs offered several benefits that contributed to personal growth and skills development. These benefits were determined based on mean ratings and standard deviations provided by the participants, reflecting their experiences and perceptions.

Acquisition of independent living skills emerged as a significant benefit, with a high mean rating of 4.21. This aspect encompassed the development of essential skills required for living independently in a foreign country. Participants had the opportunity to enhance their abilities in managing daily tasks, adapting to new environments, and navigating diverse cultural norms. The relatively low standard deviation of 1.258 indicated that a general agreement among participants regarding the importance of acquiring these skills.

Similarly, the development of a global perspective received a mean rating of 4.21, indicating its significance in international student exchange programs. This benefit encompassed the ability to adopt a broader worldview, comprehend global issues, and approach work from a global standpoint. The relatively low standard deviation of 1.287 showed a general consensus among participants regarding the value of cultivating a global perspective.

Improvement in critical thinking abilities was also identified as a notable benefit, with a mean rating of 4.14. This aspect highlighted the enhancement of critical thinking skills, enabling participants to analyze and evaluate information from diverse cultural contexts. While there may be some variation in individual experiences, the overall acknowledgment of the importance of this skill development is evident.

Language skills acquisition and progression, with a mean rating of 4.07, emerged as another valuable benefit. Participants had the opportunity to learn and improve their vocabulary and English language proficiency, which were essential for

effective communication in an international setting. The standard deviation of 1.215 indicated some variation in individual experiences, but overall, participants recognized the significance of language skills in their exchange program journey.

In addition, opportunities for self-evaluation and self-improvement were highly valued, with a mean rating of 4.04. This benefit provided participants with the chance to reflect on their strengths and areas for growth, fostering personal development and self-awareness. While there might be some variation in individual experiences, the recognition of these opportunities as valuable was evident.

The personal growth and skills development offered by international student exchange programs empowered participants to acquire essential life skills, develop a global perspective, enhance critical thinking abilities, and improve language proficiency. These experiences facilitated personal growth, cultural understanding, and readiness to navigate an interconnected world. The relatively low standard deviations indicated a general consensus among participants, emphasizing the significance of these benefits within the context of international student exchange programs.

Cultural Understanding and International Connections

Cultural understanding, and international connections were two closely intertwined dimensions that held great importance for students participating in international student exchange programs. These dimensions emphasize the value of engaging with different cultures, developing cultural competence, and building meaningful friendships with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Cultural understanding received a mean rating of 4.00, indicating its significant impact on participants. This dimension encompassed the opportunity for students to immerse themselves in a different culture, gaining a deeper understanding of its customs, traditions, and perspectives. By actively engaging in the local community and experiencing daily life in a foreign country, students broadened their horizons and developed a more global perspective. The relatively low standard deviation of 1.186 indicated a general consensus among the participants regarding the value of cultural immersion and understanding. This dimension ranked 5th among the listed benefits.

International network building, with a mean rating of 4.00, highlights the importance of forming friendships with students from different countries. By building meaningful relationships, students create a network of international contacts and expand their intercultural communication skills. These connections foster a sense of global citizenship, promote cross-cultural understanding, and provide opportunities for future collaborations. The standard deviation of 1.217 suggested some variations in individual experiences, but overall, the participants recognize the significance of international friendship building. This dimension also ranked 5th among the listed benefits.

Together, these two dimensions underlined the transformative power of international student exchange programs. Through cultural immersion and understanding, students developed a broader perspective, enhanced cultural competence, and a deeper appreciation for diversity. Simultaneously,

international connections and friendship building contributed to students' personal growth, global citizenship, and the formation of lifelong relationships. These dimensions reflected the richness and transformative potential of international student exchange programs in fostering intercultural understanding and promoting global engagement.

Adaptability and Multicultural Integration

Adaptability and multicultural integration were key aspects of international student exchange programs that contributed to a transformative experience for participants. These benefits, as indicated by mean ratings and standard deviations, reflected the importance of navigating new environments and integrating into diverse cultural contexts.

The ability to easily adapt to new environments received a mean rating of 3.79 with a standard deviation of 1.258, indicating its relevance in international student exchange programs. This theme emphasized the importance of being flexible and open-minded when confronted with unfamiliar cultural and social environments. Participants who could quickly adapt to new situations were better equipped to navigate the challenges and opportunities that arose during their exchange program. While there might be some variation in individual experiences, the overall recognition of the value of adaptability was evident.

Integration into a multicultural environment received a mean rating of 4.04 with a standard deviation of 1.232, highlighting its significant role in international student exchange programs. This benefit encompassed the ability to engage and connect effectively within a diverse cultural setting, fostering cross-cultural communication and understanding. Participants who actively sought opportunities to engage with individuals from different backgrounds could broaden their perspectives and gained a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity. Integration into a multicultural environment enabled participants to develop intercultural competence and navigate the complexities of a globalized world. This benefit ranked 4th among the listed benefits, indicating its importance to the overall exchange program experience.

The relatively low standard deviations associated with both benefits indicated a general consensus among participants regarding their importance, with limited variation in individual ratings. This consensus underscored the significance of adaptability and multicultural integration in creating a supportive and inclusive environment for participants, where they could thrive and engage with the host culture and community effectively.

Future career preparation and confidence

In the context of international student exchange programs, two significant aspects emerged, future career preparation and personal growth and confidence. These aspects represented the multifaceted benefits that students derived from participating in such programs.

Future career preparation entailed the acquisition of valuable future work skills. The mean rating for the acquisition of valuable future work skills was 3.93, indicating its significance in preparing students for their future careers. This component encompassed the development of skills highly sought after by

employers, such as teamwork, problem-solving, and intercultural communication. The relatively low standard deviation of 1.215 suggested a consensus among the participants regarding the importance of future career preparation. This benefit ranked 6th among the listed benefits.

Parallel to future career preparation, personal growth and confidence were integral to international student exchange programs. Students experienced growth in maturity and confidence, as reflected by a mean rating of 3.89. This aspect highlighted the transformative journey students embarked on during their exchange programs, leading to increased self-assurance and a broader perspective on their capabilities. The standard deviation of 1.227 showed some variation in individual experiences within this aspect. Preparedness to become a global citizen also received a mean rating of 3.89. This component signified students' readiness to engage with global issues, contribute to international communities, and embrace a global perspective. Both personal growth and confidence elements ranked 7th among the listed benefits.

In summary, the analysis of the data revealed the significant impact of international student exchange programs on future career preparation and personal growth and confidence. These programs provided students with the opportunity to acquire valuable skills for their future careers and undergo a transformative personal journey. By participating in these programs, students developed the necessary skills and mindset to succeed in the globalized world while gaining newfound self-assurance and a broader perspective.

Challenges Faced by Students in International Student Exchange Programs

International student exchange programs offered invaluable opportunities for students to immerse themselves in new cultures, gain academic and professional experiences abroad, and broaden their horizons. However, such programs were not without their challenges. Table 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

| Challenges | 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

One of the primary challenges faced by students in international student exchange programs is adapting to new cultural customs, traditions, and practical aspects of daily life. Students may initially experience a language barrier, making it challenging to communicate and fully engage with the local community and academic environment. This challenge (67.9%) highlighted the importance of language preparation and ongoing language support throughout the exchange program. Additionally, students might encounter differences in weather conditions (32.1%), which could impact their daily routines and require adjustment. Understanding and adapting to new cultural norms, social etiquettes, and local customs were also essential for students to feel integrated and comfortable in their host country.

Academic and Professional Challenges

Another set of challenges revolved around the academic and professional aspects of the exchange program. Students might encounter difficulties with working methods (21.4%), such as different approaches to research, assignments, or classroom participation. Adjusting to new working hours (25.0%) and managing a potentially higher workload (14.3%) could also pose challenges. Furthermore, students might face the challenge of lacking expertise in teaching or working (75.0%), as they navigate unfamiliar educational systems and professional environments. Adapting to different teaching styles, curriculum content, and assessment methods could be demanding. Moreover, limited interaction between teachers and students in class (89.3%) could hinder effective learning and engagement. These challenges highlighted the need for students to be proactive in seeking academic support, building relationships with professors, and embracing a growth mindset to navigate these academic and professional obstacles successfully.

Accommodation and Practicalities

Students might also face challenges related to accommodation (10.7%) and practicalities associated with their stay abroad. Finding suitable housing, dealing with contracts, and managing expenses in a foreign currency could be daunting. Navigating local transportation systems and understanding the logistics of daily life, such as grocery shopping or accessing healthcare services, may also present

challenges. Overcoming these challenges requires students to be resourceful, seek guidance from program coordinators or local resources, and develop a sense of independence and adaptability.

Laboratory and Technical Skills

For students engaged in scientific or technical fields, challenges might arise in laboratory work. Around 28.6% of students reported facing challenges related to the lack of skills for laboratory work. This highlighted the need for adequate training and support in acquiring the necessary technical competencies for conducting experiments and research. Institutions should provide comprehensive orientation and training programs to ensure students were equipped with the required laboratory skills and safety knowledge.

Participating in international student exchange programs offers numerous benefits, but it also presents various challenges for students. These challenges encompass cultural adjustments, academic and professional obstacles, accommodation and practicalities, and specific technical skill requirements. Understanding and anticipating these challenges could help students better prepare and equip themselves for a successful and rewarding exchange experience. Moreover, institutions and program coordinators should provide adequate support, resources, and guidance to help students navigate these challenges and make the most of their international student exchange journey. By addressing these challenges proactively, students can overcome barriers, enhance their cross-cultural competencies, and foster personal and academic growth during their time abroad.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the motivations, benefits, and challenges associated with international student exchange programs, particularly in the context of student teachers and their teaching experience. These findings provide valuable insights that can be compared and contrasted with the existing body of literature on the subject.

The motivations identified in this study align with previous research, which emphasizes the value of international exchanges in promoting cross-cultural understanding and academic enrichment (Goldstein, 2022; Iskhakova et al., 2022). Participants expressed a desire to expand relationships with international students, improve language skills, promote their own culture, and engage in academic discussions related to their field of study. These motivations reflect the students' eagerness to embrace diverse perspectives, foster intercultural dialogue, and develop global competencies, which is consistent with the literature.

Similarly, the benefits reported by participants in this study align with the documented advantages of international student exchange programs. The acquisition of independent living skills, development of a global perspective, improvement in critical thinking abilities, and progression of language skills were among the benefits identified (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; Teichler & Janson, 2007). These findings support the notion that international exchanges contribute to personal growth, cultural understanding, and the acquisition of valuable skills that enhance employability in a globalized job market.

However, the study also uncovered new insights specific to the context of student teachers and their teaching experience during international exchanges. The challenges identified, such as the lack of expertise in teaching or working, insufficient teaching skills, and limited interaction between teachers and students in class, highlight the unique difficulties faced by student teachers in navigating foreign educational systems. These challenges highlight the need for tailored support mechanisms, language support programs, and cultural orientation initiatives that address the specific needs of student teachers. The challenges identified in this study are consistent with the existing literature on the obstacles faced by students participating in international exchange programs (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013; Huong et al., 2017). Language barriers, cultural customs and traditions, and academic adjustments have been previously highlighted as common challenges. The current study reinforces these findings and underscores their relevance in the context of student teachers and their teaching experience abroad.

By integrating the study's findings with the existing literature, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities and outcomes of international student exchange programs, particularly within the context of student teachers at Can Tho University. Can Tho University holds a prominent position as a leading institution in training human resources for the Mekong Delta region, an area that faces numerous disadvantages and challenges. Therefore, examining the experiences and perspectives of student teachers in international exchange programs becomes crucial in addressing the specific needs of this region. The findings highlight the transformative nature of international exchanges for student teachers, aligning with previous research that emphasizes the personal and professional development outcomes of participating in such programs. The acquisition of independent living skills, the development of a global perspective, improvement in critical thinking abilities, and enhancement of language proficiency are all vital for student teachers who will play a crucial role in shaping the education system of the Mekong Delta region. These outcomes contribute to their preparedness to become global citizens and navigate diverse and interconnected educational environments.

Recommendations for Universities and Policymakers

Based on the findings and the specific context of Can Tho University and the Mekong Delta region, the following recommendations and strategies can be integrated to ensure the effectiveness and success of international exchange programs for student teachers:

- Clear policies and guidelines: Establish comprehensive policies and guidelines that outline the objectives, procedures, and expectations of international exchange programs. Include provisions for integrating international exchange experiences into the curriculum.
- Expansion of partner institutions and collaboration: Actively collaborate with a diverse range of partner institutions worldwide to offer a broader range of academic programs and destinations. Develop joint academic programs, research opportunities, and cultural initiatives.
- Financial support and scholarships: Allocate sufficient funding and resources to support student teachers financially during their exchange

period. Establish scholarships, grants, and other financial aid options specifically for student teachers participating in international exchanges.

- Pre-departure Orientation and Ongoing Support: Provide comprehensive pre-departure orientation programs that prepare student teachers for the challenges they may encounter during their exchange program. Establish robust support systems with dedicated staff members to assist student teachers throughout their international exchange journey.
- Promotion and Awareness: Actively promote international exchange programs to student teachers through various channels. Emphasize the integration of international exchange programs into the curriculum.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the motivations, perceived benefits, and challenges of international student exchange programs for student teachers at Can Tho University, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size and representation may limit the generalizability of the findings. The study focused on a specific group of student teachers from a single university, which may not fully capture the experiences and perspectives of student teachers from other institutions or regions.

Second, the reliance on self-reporting measures introduces the possibility of response bias. Participants may have provided socially desirable responses or may not have accurately recalled their experiences. Future studies could employ mixed-method approaches, incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups, to gain a deeper understanding of the nuances and complexities of students' experiences in international exchange programs.

Furthermore, the study's findings are specific to the context of Can Tho University and the Mekong Delta region. The cultural and institutional factors unique to this context may influence students' motivations, experiences, and challenges in international exchange programs. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other contexts.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the motivations, perceived benefits, and challenges faced by student teachers participating in international student exchange programs at Can Tho University. The findings highlight the importance of these programs in promoting cultural understanding, personal growth, and academic development among student teachers.

Despite the limitations, this research emphasizes the transformative potential of international exchange programs for student teachers. It underscores the need for universities and policymakers to prioritize and support these programs to enhance students' experiences and outcomes. By establishing clear policies and guidelines, expanding partner institutions, providing financial support, and offering comprehensive pre-departure orientation and ongoing support, universities can create an environment conducive to successful international exchange experiences for student teachers.

Moving forward, future research should aim to address the limitations of this study by employing larger and more diverse samples, incorporating qualitative

methods, and considering the specific cultural and institutional factors at play. This will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences in international exchange programs and inform the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms.

As Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". International student exchange programs have the potential to equip student teachers with the necessary tools and perspectives to make a positive impact in their future classrooms and beyond. By fostering intercultural understanding, personal growth, and academic advancement, these programs contribute to the development of student teachers as global citizens who can actively engage in a diverse and interconnected world. It is imperative that universities and policymakers continue to prioritize and support international exchange programs to cultivate a generation of educators who are prepared to navigate the complexities of our global society.

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Appendix. Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this survey about international student exchange programs. Your input is valuable in understanding the experiences and perspectives of students. Please answer the following questions:

Background Information

1. Gender

Male

Female

2. Program duration

1 week or less

Over 1 week to 2 weeks

2 weeks to 4 weeks

Over 1 month

3. Exchange destinations (short answers): _____

Reasons for Participating in International Exchange Programs

Please indicate the reasons influenced your decision to participate in an international exchange program:

Recommendation from the faculty advisor

Expansion of relationships with international students

Desire to improve language skills

Promotion of Vietnamese culture

Sharing and discussion of topics related to their field of study

Others (Please specify): _____

Benefits of International Student Exchange Programs

Please rate the following benefits of international student exchange programs based on your personal experiences:

(Use a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents "Strongly disagree" and 5 represents "Strongly agree")

- Cultural understanding
- International network building
- Acquisition of independent living skills
- Global perspective development
- Improved critical thinking abilities
- Easy adaptation to new environments
- Acquisition of valuable future work skills
- English language skills progression
- Teamwork skills enhancement
- Self-evaluation and self-improvement
- Growth in maturity and confidence
- Integration into a multicultural environment
- Preparedness to become a global citizen

Challenges of Participating in International Student Exchange Programs:

Please indicate the challenges you faced during your international student exchange program:

- Language barrier
- Weather conditions
- Cultural customs and traditions
- Working methods
- Working hours
- Food
- Accommodation
- Workload
- Lack of expertise in teaching or working
- Lack of new knowledge abroad
- Insufficient teaching skills
- Inadequate curriculum content
- Lack of interaction between teachers and students in class
- Lack of skills for laboratory work
- Inadequate lesson planning
- Limited interaction between teachers and students in class

Others (Please specify): _____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your feedback is greatly appreciated in enhancing the understanding and improvement of international student exchange programs.