

## **The Merit and Beyond; Portraying Student Exchange as Synergetic International Relations**

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### ***Abstract***

*The breakthrough on developing the synergy of international relations among countries is by fostering student exchange as the so-called worthwhile programs that link the bilateral relationship and cultural identities. These student exchange programs accentuate the mutual liaison among the countries. It, indeed, exerts influence on students both positively and unforgettably. This research was designed in qualitative method and researcher utilized inquiry strategy of phenomenological study. Three main informants were participated in this research because they experienced the student exchange in advance. Researcher gathered the data through in-depth interview. Specifically, there were four major themes found in the research, they were 1) The lifetime experiences, 2) The challenges and barriers, 3) The problem solving, and 4) The impacts and changes. These findings highlighted the primary goal of the student exchange program itself and also fostered interconnection among the countries in forging impacts for the students as well as the country they belong to.*

**Keywords:** *Student Exchange, Synergetic Impacts, and International Relations*

## **1. Introduction**

University students must be ready with all the things occurred in the future. Therefore, they need to graduate from the university by having all skills that can support their future career. Since a degree of university is no longer sufficient to secure the graduates for their future career especially for today's working labor markets (Tomlinson, 2008; Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016). It became more accessible for everyone to get education in the university, thus the value of the degree of the graduates has reduced its quality. This means that the graduates are demanded to have others skills too and they may not depend on the degree barely. These kinds of skills refer to the skills of employments where those skills include communication, problem-solving, leadership, teamwork, and so on. In other words, there should be a program where it can cover all the skills needed by the graduates to fulfill the demand of the job opportunity in the future (Wright and Clarke, 2010).

In response to those demands, Yun (2014) mentions that one of programs that can meet with it is a program of international student exchange. This program is powerful yet fruitful for those students to develop themselves by not having an inside education but also outside experiences. That program facilitates students with real-life interactions with many people from the globe, then students can learn the culture with a diverse

context. Yun (2014) adds that this student exchange program provides the facilities where students are linked each other, initiate the relationship between university from different countries where they are allowed to work and study together. This, of course, let the students experience the cultural immersion abroad. Chen and Yang (2016) say that international student exchange programs foster the students with cross-cultural understanding, academic and professional development, and global citizenship among participants.

Sobkowiak (2019) mentions that there are numerous advantages if the students participate in international student exchange programs because students who participate in these programs get an access to study and work opportunities that assist them to develop their professional skills and expose them to international environments. Furthermore, evolving the life between the environment where they belong to and the cultures where they are supposed to adapt with will allow them to reflect a life-time experience, have new insights, and grow as individuals. However, this student exchange will not only give precious opportunities but also challenge them. These are the challenges that may students have during the program, they are 1) the differences of the culture where the students may have culture shocks, 2) the language used during the program (language barriers), 3) the new environment that they

have during the program and many more. Therefore, it examines the needs and the challenges encountered in the exchange program.

Researcher aims to describe participants' life experiences when they do the exchange programs in other countries. Besides, documenting the merits and beyond as well as the challenges and barriers participants might have during the exchange program. This is of course essential for participants to have international experiences to shape their professional development. Since this can give positive impacts on those participants who involve in international student exchange program that can expand cultural awareness, intercultural competencies, and also increase their abilities in the context of diversity and multicultural environment (Lima, 2007; Jenkins, 2011; Ritz, 2011; Sobkowiak, 2019; Roy et al., 2019; Kim and Choi, 2020; Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva, 2020; Tarchi and Surian, 2022).

## 2. Literature Review

The program of international student exchange has many benefits to those who join it where it gives significant changes in terms of national boundaries and also fosters learning environment globally. Thus, it emerges the landscape of global education (Sobkowiak, 2019). It also facilitates them to move across

the countries and get themselves immersed with the cultural, academic, and also social differences as their impacts on the self-growth that participants might experience during the program. Sobkowiak (2019) adds that this international student exchange program does not only give the merit to the country itself but also to the individuals themselves. They can grow personally by having such valuable opportunities that can enrich their academic knowledge, gain new insight as well as to develop their competencies globally. The impacts will be owned by many parties. The country, of course, will gain the impact in term of the bilateral relationship. Then, the individuals are indeed having all the advantages.

In line with the statement above, considering the role of the international student exchange program, it is necessary and vital because it offers a form of cross-cultural understanding promotion, bilateral cooperation, and also institution collaboration (Iskhakova et al., 2022). Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva (2020) explain that it is as a platform for the students to have perspective diversely, to experience the numerous traditions from many countries, to increase their self-values, to get the mutual and punctual respect among people in that program, and to foster the intercultural and multicultural dialogue (Kim and Choi, 2020). Therefore, participants are

expected to utilize the benefits of this program as well as possible by involving themselves wholeheartedly. There are of course many distinguished systems in term of education, culture, point of view, environment, and academic life too. If they can manage themselves well, they can broaden all those merits to their country as well as their own selves. Besides, this relationship among the countries and also individuals may encourage the link between parties that can lead to promote the collaboration in the scale of global so that the participants own the best practices of the program. On the other words, this program is a functional platform that expose participants with firsthand way to the global cultures, traditions, competencies, so on.

Furthermore, one of the very significant impacts that participants may have in the international student exchange is that the language used during the program (McCabe, 2001; Jenkins, 2011). They are exposed by the various foreign language environments where they ought to use it in their daily life as the access of communication. This way, of course, will be helpful for the participants in improving their language skill, especially English. Since they use that language every single day, their language skills will improve a lot. Next, engaging in international student exchange programs also presents numerous advantages for those who participate,

enriching their abilities and employability in an ever more globalized and interconnected society. Alongside academic advancement, these programs encourage personal growth and self-reliance where participants are compelled to venture beyond their familiar surroundings and adjust to unfamiliar cultural, social, and academic settings, cultivating invaluable life skills like critical thinking, flexibility, and cross-cultural communication. Moreover, Chen and Yang (2016) state that these programs offer students the chance to establish a vast network of international acquaintances, nurturing lifelong friendships, and global connections.

### **3. Research Method**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

Researcher used qualitative research method by involving three participants who had different place and type of programs in experiencing the international student exchange programs. The researcher employed the Phenomenological Study as the chosen inquiry strategy for her research. As its function, this inquiry strategy basically used to describe the life experiences of individuals and it is of course appropriate with the purpose of the research. As stated by Creswell (2012), phenomenological research is a qualitative research method that aims to understand, characterize, and describe the essential core of a phenomenon where this strategy inquiry

entails investigating the personal encounters of individuals while disregarding any preconceived ideas held by the researcher. The primary objective of this study was to elucidate the viewpoints of three participants in relation to the international student exchange program in which they have taken part and to describe all the things related to the exchange program they participated by elaborating the challenges and barriers, merits, problems, impacts and changes participants obtained during and after the program.

### 3.2. Data Collection and Participants

Three participants were involved in this research as the main informants. They are still students in some universities in Indonesia. The researcher selected them as participants for this research based on their willingness and appropriateness to the research topic. Since they participated in an international student exchange, so they are the right people to describe their experiences about it. These are the details information about the participants:

- 1) The first participant joined YES program when she was still in senior high school. The Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program is a fully-funded scholarship program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. She was an alumna of YES program. She stayed in America for one year.
- 2) The second participant joined AIESEC program. AIESEC

is a non-governmental and not-for-profit organization that offers young individuals with internships focused on business development. It is an international organization that is run and led by youth. She got Australia at that time. She stayed in Australia for more less 6 weeks.

- 3) The third participant joined IISMA program. This program is created by our Indonesia Government, and it is one of Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka Programs. It is proposed by the Minister of education, Nadim Makarim. She did this program for more less six months or one semester. She got Korea as his place for international student exchange. It can be known that these three participants experienced the international student exchange with different program and country.

Researcher collected all the necessary data by conducting in-depth interviews. The interview used in this research was semi-structured interview where the researcher prepared some questions and the rest of the questions might be appeared during the interview session (Creswell, 2012). Researcher did the interview one by one with the participant at different place and different time. Since those three participants were not in the same place so the interview was also done in different ways, offline and online. Researcher did it because the first participant lives in Jakarta, so the interviews were done online by

utilizing the benefit of zoom meeting and also whatsapp chat. Meanwhile, the second and the third participant live in Medan, so the interviews were done offline. The interviews were conducted multiple times with each participant in order to gather sufficient data that aligned with the research questions. Consequently, the researcher continued the interview sessions until the data became saturated. Each interviewee was interviewed individually, with the researcher scheduling appointments and conducting face-to-face interviews. The timing and conditions of these interviews were depended on the situation and circumstances of the participants. It is important to note that the researcher did not require the use of English on the participants during the interview, it is entirely based on participants' willingness. Therefore, participants have their own right to use the language they are comfortable with during the interview. Then, researcher recorded the interview by using voice recorder in smartphone and also record the zoom meeting session by utilizing the feature of recording in that application.

### **3.3. Technique of Data Analysis**

After collecting data, researcher started analyzing the data. At this stage, researcher carefully reviewed all the data and ensure nothing was missed. If the data is in Bahasa,

researcher translate it first. Then, researcher listened to and wrote down the recorded data. She transcribed the data she got during the interview. Researcher then gave participants a chance to confirm the interview data she had written. If everything is correct or appropriate with what they had mentioned during the interview, then researcher continued to coding process where she categorized the data by identifying similarities and differences. She also reduced the unnecessary data. Next, she grouped the data into some major themes. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, researcher used member checking as a form of triangulation. Lastly, researcher examined the data to address the research questions (Creswell, 2012).

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness**

Ethical considerations play a vital role in qualitative research, particularly when exploring sensitive issues. According to Creswell (2012), the primary objective is to protect the identities and personal profiles of participants, as well as the institutions they are associated with. This precautionary measure is taken to anticipate any unforeseen consequences in the future. Respecting participants' privacy and ensuring their rights are upheld is essential in convincing them to participate in the research. Establishing a

trusting relationship between researcher and participants is crucial. Creswell (2012) emphasizes the importance of trustworthiness, which encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as well as the need to protect individuals' names and identities. This ensures effective communication and minimizes any potential misunderstandings. Ultimately, researcher must ensure the authenticity of the research data. In summary, both ethical considerations and trustworthiness are fundamental aspects of qualitative research. Therefore, every qualitative researcher should consider the ethics when they use it. Besides, qualitative researcher should keep the participants' trustworthiness in order both sides will get the benefit each other.

#### 4. Findings

The primary aim of this research is to describe the life experiences of participants about international student exchange. Based on the detail information about each participant involved in this research, it can be known that each participant has joined different type of program and they did the program in different country too. The international student exchange programs are YES program, AIESEC program, and IISMA program. Researcher highlights these four major themes of the data obtained from the participants. The

major themes are 1) The lifetime experiences, 2) The challenges and barriers, 3) The problem solving, and 4) The impacts and changes.

##### *The lifetime experiences*

Participating in international student exchange programs greatly improves students' skills and employability in the global job market (Wright and Clarke, 2010; Roy et al., 2019; Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva, 2020). These programs help participants develop strong intercultural communication skills and the ability to work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds, which are highly valued in today's globalized workplaces. Tarchi and Surian (2022) explain that participants also acquire adaptability, resilience, and a global perspective, which enable them to navigate diverse and unpredictable environments. Immersion in a foreign language environment also enhances participants' language proficiency, making them more competitive and opening up a wider range of career opportunities in international organizations and multinational companies.

Participating in YES program is such a dream comes true. I am forever thankful for that experience. I will never get the same feeling. It is the so-called my lifetime experience. I was very young at that moment; I was about sixteen years old. I got an

opportunity where I could stay in America, which is my dream country even until today I am twenty years old, for about a year. I got new parents, I stayed with them during my international life in America. I did a lot of things. I got many diverse friends from all over the world. I use my English every single time. I wish I could live a dream like that again in the future. **Participant 1**

I got an opportunity to be part of AIESEC program when I was in the fourth semester. I thought that I was lucky at that time because my English skill was not that good but I passed it. During the AIESEC program, I made new friends, I did many positive activities, and so on. I admit that being a part of AIESEC program in my college life is one of the best moments in my life that I will never forget because it is once in a lifetime. Lucky me, I could experience it. **Participant 2**

At first, I was pessimist that I could make it true because the requirements for ISSMA program were really hard. We need to have a certificate of English proficiency test like TOEFL or IELTS, and so on. I realize that my English skill is not really good but I keep practicing and using my English. I studied really hard and prepared all the things as well as possible. Then I did it. I must be grateful for this lifetime experience that it may not come twice in my life. **Participant 3**

Participants in international student exchange programs demonstrate a global mindset, adaptability, and openness to diverse perspectives, which makes them appealing candidates for employers looking for globally-minded individuals (Nilson & Ripmeester, 2016).

### ***The challenges and barriers***

Yun (2014) states that international student exchange programs can be challenging for participants due to language barriers, unfamiliar learning environments, and cultural differences. Proficiency in English, in particular, can be a major obstacle for students, affecting their academic performance and ability to integrate socially in the host country (Baklashova et al., 2016; Atalar, 2020; Bhatt et al., 2022).

Talking about the challenges and barriers I got during my YES program, I of course had some challenges and barriers in common like I should adapt with all new things including environment, people, language, norms, habits, weather, even food. I am a type of person who cannot eat western food but I should try to love it because I would live in America for not only a day but a year. I tried so hard to love the food even it was extremely hard for me. Then, I also should accustom myself with all new norms and habits. It was sometimes not easy for me to pray because muslims are minor in that country. The weather, indeed, was the most



thing that I was hard to adapt with because I was not strong enough with the winter season. I cried almost every day for a week at the very beginning of my arrival in that program. After that, I had so many culture shocks at the first time I was there but all people say it was a normal thing. For the language itself, it was not a big challenge for me because American English is what I learned for years started from I was still in primary school until now and the way American speaks English is still easy to understand so I am okay with it. **Participant 1**

Two challenges and barriers I experienced during my AIESEC program in Australia are weather and language then others are fine to me. First, it was totally hard for me to adapt with the winter season. Unlucky me, I went there at the end of the year so I got that winter season. It was so cold. I needed around a week to adapt with the weather so I bought many jackets and things like that to make my body warm. At last, what I miss the most from Australia is that winter season. Second, my barrier was the language, English. My English was not that fluent and Australian has a difficult accent; they speak so fast, and they also often use the words that I am not familiar with. Therefore, I always miss the information when I speak to them. I feel like they just mumble and I end up by getting nothing from what they speak about. Conversely, other

things than these two are okay for me because Australia is diverse country where we can meet many people from different countries and ethnics. Australia is the so-called multicultural country. Besides, for the food, I have no problem with western food because I love western food. **Participant 2**

I, of course, had many challenges in my ISSMA program. I dreamed to study in Korea because I love that country, I am a Korean drama lover so I put a target to pursue the IISMA program in Korea. Then I got it. I do realize that I should learn Korean language eventhough I would be in an international program and with international people too but I should know at least few words or sentences in Korea because the environment there is foreign with English where I should socialize with local people too. Hence, my challenges and barriers are the language. Then, the next one is the food. It is extremely hard to get halal food. I need to be really careful when I buy food from outside. When I have more time, I will cook by myself. The next one is the people. I wear veil and the people seem so strange if they see people wearing veil. They will look at me from the head all the way to my toe because they consider us as foreigners. Therefore, if they give us a side eye, it will be normal for those foreigners. Moreover, if they wear veil. After that, the environment in Korea is like hills. People there use public

transportation more often; they will walk to go somewhere. The land is up and down, so it is so hard for me to build a walk habit for the first week I lived there, I feel exhausted everytime I arrived home. Besides, the habit that people have in Korea, when they walk on the street, they will ignore all around them, and they will walk so fast. It is strange for us Indonesian because we have a habit to walk slowly and greet all people around us. Furthermore, I have no problem with the culture because I already have prior knowledge before, I come there, I learn it through Korean drama I watch every day. Besides, during the teaching and learning process in the class, I have no big issue to talk about because the people in the class are mostly international people so we learn together and help each other.

In short, participants must be adaptable and resilient in order to adjust to a new educational system, different teaching methods, cultural norms, and many other things. Therefore, Chen & Yang (2016) say that it is needed for each participant to have cross cultural understanding knowledge to ease them socializing in an international scale.

### ***The problem solving***

Those challenges and barriers above should be solved by the participants. They need to survive and enjoy the program well.

Therefore, problem solving is a must to have by the participants in order they can do and finish the program.

One thing I did to solve the problems I had during the program was that I socialize a lot. I communicate a lot about things I think hard to do with those people around me. At YES program, we had host parents who will take care and look after us during the program. Fortunately, my host parents are so kind, they are helpful. They always check on me by asking what I like or dislike, my difficulties, and so on. Therefore, I always communicate all things with them and they help me to solve the problems. Not only my host parents but also my friends and the neighbors are so kind to me. I felt so lucky to know them. Therefore, I could manage all the problems well because of them, and I could finish the program as well as I plan.

### **Participant 1**

My problems were the weather and language. The way I faced my problems when I was in AIESEC program in Australia was by getting used to the weather especially winter season. I tried to enjoy the weather. I bought some clothes that can help me with the weather. I stayed at home more than I went outside, things like that. Then, for second problem, I force myself to communicate a lot with native speakers, Australian. I practiced

and used the language. I listened to English speakers by having direct communication. I watched English content on youtube like podcast and so on. I also followed and learned a lot from somebody's account who are native from Australia and I tried to learn all the words that Australian used in their daily conversation.

### **Participant 2**

I managed my problems by doing these following things; I learned Korean language individually. Then I talk many things with my Korea friends. I ask many things related with Korean habits, norms, do's and don't's. I find a lot of information from youtube and also drama I watch. I cooked and prepared myself food. I accustomed myself by walking from campus to my flat and so on. One thing that I put on myself is not taking a heart by what Korean see from myself, I try to be ignorant people. I learn to understand that it is not that easy for them to accept new comers to their country and I should understand that. Last but not least, I socialize and make new friends with people around especially local people.

### **Participant 3**

From all things mentioned above, educational institutions and policymakers can develop focused support mechanisms, language assistance programs, and cultural orientation initiatives to maximize the

advantages and reduce the difficulties faced by participants in international student exchange programs (Lima, 2007).

### ***The impacts and changes***

International student exchange programs offer students numerous advantages. According to Ritz (2011), these programs help students develop cultural competence, language skills, academic growth, personal development, and enhance their employability.

For the last one year I was in America, I experienced many things that has shaped me to be who I am today. The impacts are indeed positive and they change me significantly. I learn how to respect others' norms and habits. I learn how to adapt in a new environment. I also make new friends with everyone, no matter what ethnics they have, where they come from, all people are the same. I learn the diversity. I learn new cultures. My happiness is beyond words. **Participant 1**

Eventhough the AIESEC program is just short time but the impacts I got on myself is unrestricted. Having no regret to participate in this program is all what I want to say because it changes me a lot. Building new relationship with many new fellows, learning new cultures and traditions, enhancing my English skills,

experiencing many things are just few things I can mention about this program. I cannot even mention them one by one. It feels like I become the best version of myself after joining that program. **Participant 2**

little did I know that I can be much better after participating at IISMA program. People have no idea on how much I thank for this program because it has facilitated me with many good things. The positive impacts I have encountered during IISMA program in Korea have brought about significant changes in my life, shaping me in a meaningful manner. I learn new things about cultures, traditions, habits, norms, and many more. I also change my perspective, get new insights, and enhance my level of empathy. **Participant 3**

In short, Wright & Clarke (2010) tell that international student exchange programs play a crucial role in preparing participants for a globalized world by equipping them with the necessary skills and experiences to succeed in diverse and interconnected environments.

#### **4. Findings and Conclusion**

Today's age, it is not enough for those graduates to have academic skills only. A title at the end of their name is no longer adequate to prove that they are possible to get the job they want, the rivalry does exist (Tomlinson,

2008). Therefore, international student exchange programs are essential for international cooperation and the internationalization of higher education. The demand for skilled workers in today's fast-paced world is driving the urgent need for these programs. Participants recognize the importance of internationalization and actively work towards improving the quality of global learning experiences (McCabe, 2001; Wright and Clarke, 2010). They also strive to integrate into the global arena and enhance job opportunities for students after graduation. International student exchange programs offer numerous benefits to participants. The programs provide opportunities to develop professional skills, improve English proficiency, and access quality education. Through these programs, participants gain exposure to different educational systems, teaching methods, and research environments (McCabe, 2001; Sobkowiak, 2019; Roy et al., 2019). This exposure broadens their perspectives and equips them with knowledge and skills that are applicable in their home country.

In addition, everyone may experience living abroad but participating in an international student exchange hits different level. It gives a lifetime experience that can give an impact positively and change somebody to be the best version of themselves

significantly. This one is the most highlighted thing by three participants. They all describe the same thing about the advantages of the international student exchange program. This equal point of view reveals a priceless value of the program itself. Eventhough those three participants experience dissimilar program but the mutual views are approved a hundred percent that international student exchange program is a must try for those who are at university level at least once in a lifetime. As it mentioned on the findings, three participants have different kind of programs and also do the program in distinct country. As result, they document different life experiences in terms of challenges and barriers. The first participant is a YES program awardee in America, the second participant is an AIESEC program awardee in Australia, and the third participant is an IISMA awardee in Korea. They also have culture shocks during the program but they can determine the solution as well (Ritz, 2011; Iskhakova et al., 2022).

To sum up, the merits are not merely for the individuals but also for both countries involved in the program. This link, of course, develops the synergistic impacts of international relations among countries that can be achieved through international student exchange programs. These programs are considered valuable as they connect bilateral relationships and cultural identities,

emphasizing the mutual connection between countries. The impacts of the programs give the synergetic international relations among countries. In other words, the relationship created through the programs results in a synergistic effect that surpasses the cumulative impact of their individual contributions. Therefore, those who desire to get the merits of international student exchange programs must be well-prepared. The process participants have in the selection stage of these programs is not that straightforward. They fight to get that opportunity. It is crucial to emphasize that hard work always brings fruitful results. This aligns with the advantages of the international student exchange program itself. The more participants dedicate themselves to the program, the more benefit they will get from it.

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