

Factors Affecting the Decisions of Foreign Students to Participate in an Exchange Program at Burapha University International College in Thailand

Waraporn Theerasak¹, Nuchjaree Pookkaman¹

Abstract

The exchange program has emerged as a prevailing trend for foreign students seeking opportunities not readily available in their home countries. Burapha University International College (BUUIC) has hosted a number of foreign students participating in the exchange program for over a decade. In order to optimize its role as a distinguished host institution, this qualitative study principally aims to examine the factors influencing foreign students' decisions to engage in an exchange program at BUUIC in Thailand and to delve into experiences exhibited by the students. Employing a semi-structured interview approach, data were gathered from 36 student participants. The findings indicate that society and culture, affordability, and facilities and services, rank as the foremost factors compelling foreign students to partake in an exchange program at BUUIC. A majority of respondents expounded that their experiences were superlative, bearing immeasurable value and contributing to indelible memories. Furthermore, they conveyed a sense of personal growth, perceiving themselves as having evolved into more refined individuals. The outcomes elucidated in this study offer practical insights for institutions of higher education, colleges, and universities for arranging exchange programs for foreign students.

Keywords: Decisions, Foreign Students, Exchange Program, International College, Thailand

Introduction

Engaging in an international exchange program is an experience described by higher education students and employers as a positive, enriching and valuable learning experience (Bracht et al., 2006; Engel, 2010; Nada and Legutko, 2022). Remarkably, moving and studying abroad offer students learning opportunities that might not be available in their home countries (Kennedy, 2010; Nada & Legutko, 2022). That is why universities increasingly seek to

¹ Lecturer of Burapha University International College
Corresponding Author Email: waraporn@go.buu.ac.th

develop international student mobility strategies and programs as part of their missions (Tadaki and Tremewan, 2013; Bryla & Ciabiada-Bryła, 2014) Universities also publicize their international student mobility programs to gain attention from prospective students who are interested in studying outside of their home country (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012; Bryla & Ciabiada-Bryła, 2014). Nevertheless, Asante and Apusigah (2019) reveal that the exchange program faced several challenges. Students encounter difficulties in adjusting to new cultures, including language barriers and unfamiliar traditions. This leads them to feel isolated and overwhelmed. In the same way, Smith and Khawaja (2011) show that international students joining overseas studies may face various obstacles, such as coping with acculturative stress and adapting to the environment of the host country. Besides, the research, of Yu and Zhang (2016), discovered that Chinese students from mainland China studying in Hong Kong encountered difficulties concerned with language differences, social interactions, political affiliations, and discrimination.

To address the gaps and minimize the challenges, a review and analysis of the relevant literature was conducted. There were several previous studies that explored the dimensions of international education. Among these previous studies, one of the approaches is to associate factors and students' perceptions of their decisions to pursue education abroad (Bodycott, 2009). That is, these studies aimed to understand why students choose to study in foreign countries.

To develop a better understanding of temporary-stay decisions made by exchange students, Daly (2011) presented, through her literature review, an analysis of how international, national, and institutional contexts may be associated with students' decisions. The international context is international education moved by international trade and relations, the need for graduates with international skills, and cross-cultural interactions. Institutional context includes the organizational culture, recognition of overseas study, and a credit transfer system. Lastly, individual factors are personal characteristics, travel interest and experience, discipline of study, career development, foreign language proficiency, personal relationships, and financial constraints.

According to Jupiter et al. (2017), the factors that influence students' choice of their destination to study abroad can be divided into three dominant factors: communication, location, and social factors. The communication factor is the online and offline communication between international students and the host university. Location factor refers to helpful information for students to choose their study destination, i.e. country, language, and cost of

living. Social factor is a social network between students and people who are from the home country and university. Information and support from these people are the element of trust that strongly impacts the decision-making process.

Alfattal (2017) studied the factors motivating international students to select California State University-San Bernardino. Four main factors including access, affordability, quality, and peace were found as a result. A similar study, Ching and Chayanuvat (2019) examined the factors that influence international students' decisions to study at Taiwanese universities. The findings showed that having financial assistance, learning about cultures, making new friends, and improving English and Chinese language skills were big parts of international students' decision-making. In the study, James-Maceachern and Yun (2017) conducted research to investigate factors influencing international students' decisions to choose an institution. They found that sources of information (the university's website and educational agencies), pull motivation items (reputation and academic programs and expenses and grants), and references (teachers, alumni, current students, and university personnel) were the major factors.

Similarly, Özoğlu, Gür, and Coşkun (2015) conducted a study to find out the factors influencing international students' choice to study in Turkey. Quality of education, affordability, scholarship opportunities, proximity to culture, religion, and ethnicity, and recommendations by others appeared to be the major factors. Besides, the researchers aimed to seek problems that international students encountered in Turkey. The results showed that the application process, visa and enrollment procedures, academic life, and social life were the challenges. Kirloskar and Inamdar (2021) looked closely at the literature and case studies related to factors influencing international student mobility in the U.S., UK, Australia, India, China, and European member states. The findings showed that there was a range of factors that the students considered. The factors include 1) the quality of the university, 2) university ranking, 3) the impact of Erasmus in Europe and the rest of the world, 3) visa issuance and immigration policies, 4) how welcoming the society is in general, 5) linguistic landscape, 6) political climate and geo-political realities.

Additionally, in 2015, Nakpathom and Pasunon examined the attributes of BUUC students' expectations in participating in the International Exchange Cultural Program. The most influential factors include 1) facility and hospitality affordability, 2) new experience and finance, and 3) restaurant and shopping arrangements. In addition, Zhang and Zhou (2018)

studied factors influencing Chinese students' decisions to study in Sweden. The results showed that international experience, expectations in career development, the reputation of the institution, and social culture were the most important factors.

In this context, it is noteworthy that Burapha University International College (BUUIC), located in the coastal area of Bangsaen, Chonburi province, has played a crucial role in hosting both full-time and exchange students from various countries. The Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) reports a steady rise in the number of international students in Thailand, with the country welcoming 25,110 students from 135 different nations in 2019 (Jampaklay et al., 2022). While BUUIC has provided an enriching and supportive environment, there is always room for improvement. Therefore, understanding the factors influencing foreign students' decisions to study at BUUIC, as well as their positive and negative experiences of the program, is crucial in ensuring their educational journey is as beneficial and rewarding as possible.

As a consequence, the researchers are interested in studying the following factors that might be influencing foreign students' decisions to study at BUUIC: 1) college reputation (ranking of the university and types of programs offered), 2) affordability (financial support, scholarship availability and amount, tuition fee, dormitory rate, and cost of living), 3) society and culture (safety, friendliness of local people, local lifestyle, variety of local food, and local culture and traditions), 4) facilities and services (Internet connection, transportation/shuttle, library, computer lab, language lab, kitchen lab, teleconferencing room, canteen, dormitory, laundry room, and fitness center), 5) individual preferences (a recommendation from friends and family, a recommendation from the home university, personal fulfillment, self-development, and travel interest), 6) language skills (English is spoken in the host country, desire to improve English language skills, and desire to learn the official language of the host country), 7) location (local attractions near the college, distance from airports, large cities, malls, hospitals, police stations, cultural diversity at the college and the local area, and local transportation infrastructure), and 8) visa assistance (Thai NON-ED visa application assistance, Thai NON-ED Visa renewal assistance, and an explanation of Thai immigration policies).

Objectives

1. To investigate factors influencing foreign students' decisions to participate in an exchange program at BUUIC.
2. To explore the foreign students' experiences participating in an exchange program at BUUIC.

Research Methodology

This study used qualitative research methodology. The in-depth opinions made by the student participants toward the aforementioned factors were studied and analyzed. The researchers planned the process as follows: 1) study and define the factors, based on the literature review, that might possibly affect the decisions of student participants to participate in an exchange program at BUUIC, 2) recruit the foreign students who participated in an exchange program at BUUIC and ask them to sign the consent form, 3) create a semi-structured interview form, 4) interview the student participants, and 5) analyze the data and summarize the findings. All procedures were carefully conducted in accordance with the ethical standard of the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2013. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Burapha University which was approved on May 30, 2022, and the approval number is HU058/2565(C1).

Participants

The researchers recruited the student participants through emails. The emails were sent to the coordinators of each BUUIC's partner institution. Then, the coordinator forwarded the emails to the students who participated in an exchange program at BUUIC. The students had the full right to make their decisions to accept or decline the invitation to join this study. Later on, 36 acceptances were returned from 8 BUUIC's partner institutions. There were 26 female and 10 male student participants. The partner institutions and the number of student participants from each institution are shown in Table 1. As seen in Table 2, the student participants were from various study programs. Please note that the informed study programs were taken by the students at their home institutions.

Table 1 The partner institutions and the number of student participants from each institution

Partner Institutions	Number of Student Participants
Appalachian State University, the USA	2
National Kaohsiung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan	1
Trisakti School of Tourism, Indonesia	12
Trisakti School of Management, Indonesia	1
STIPRAM, Indonesia	7
Chungnam National University, South Korea	1
Brock University, Canada	10
Kanda Institute of Foreign Language, Japan	2

Table 2 The student participants' study programs

Study Programs	Number of student participants
Accounting	2
Tourism Management	7
Hospitality Management	12
Economics	1
Risk Management and Insurance	1
Thai and English	2
Sustainability, Tourism, and Environment	8
Sports Management	1
Geography	1

Research Instrument, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Researchers employed a semi-structured interview and the interview questions were carefully designed and adjusted based on the comments made by three experts. The interviews were conducted via Zoom calls and the language of interviews was English. The content analysis method was applied to analyze the essence of the interview data. The interview focused on understanding the factors influencing the choices made by student participants to join the exchange programs at BUUIC and aimed to gather student participants' experiences studying at BUUIC and other opinions. Thus, the Participative Ranking Methodology or PRM (Ager et al., 2010 as cited in CIOÈ-PEÑA, 2020) was used to combine both numerical rankings and descriptive meanings provided by the participants. This allowed us as the researchers to gather insightful data. As a result, student participants were asked to rank

the level of importance for each factor and to explain why or how they made that rank. The following questions were addressed to the student participants.

1) In deciding to participate in an exchange program with BUUIC, how important were the following eight factors: college reputation, affordability, social and culture, facilities and services, individual preferences, language skills, location of the college, and visa assistance? Please rank the level of importance for each factor. For each factor, 1 represents not important and 5 represents very important.

2) Are there any other reasons that influenced your decision to participate in an exchange program at BUUIC?

3) When evaluating exchange programs, what information did you look for and where did you get the information from?

4) Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience at BUUIC?

Research Findings

The researchers organized the findings as follows: 1) ranking that the student participants made, 2) descriptive meanings of the rank, and 3) experiences and other comments.

The ranking that the student participants made

The factors affecting the decisions of student participants to participate in an exchange program at BUUIC were ranked by the student participants as shown in Table 3. The data found in the table is illustrated in order of significance. The three most vital factors include society and culture, affordability, and facilities and services.

Table 3 The factors affecting the decisions of foreign students to participate in an exchange program at BUUIC in Thailand

Ranking	Factors
1	Factor 3 Society and Culture
2	Factor 2 Affordability
3	Factor 4 Facilities and Services
4	Factor 6 Language Skills
5	Factor 5 Individual Preferences & Factor 8 Visa Assistance
6	Factor 7 Location of the College
7	Factor 1 College Reputation

The descriptive meanings of the rank

The student participants further explain their personal thoughts and reasons for why each factor is important and how each factor affect their decisions to participate in an exchange program at BUUIC.

Rank No. 1: Factor 3 Society and Culture

Student participants said that when studying abroad, it is critical to adjust to local customs and culture. Being a part of the exchange program allows them to open up, embrace other cultures, and experience an entirely new world. They also believed that having the ability to be fully immersed in society and culture is what makes studying abroad very special. They believed that it is crucial to make friends with local students to exchange personal experiences and that enriches their knowledge. It is important to find things or people that make them feel at home and comfortable as being abroad can be quite challenging and uncomfortable. Some Muslim student participants explained that they want to make sure that the host country has a Muslim-friendly society and culture and they want to consider the variation of food as well as the safety of Muslims.

Rank No. 2: Factor 2 Affordability

The student participants suggested that the host university should make the exchange program financially viable for prospective students. Student participants mentioned that it would be great if they could have financial convenience when staying on campus and having their daily basis during their exchange program. The financial aspect is very important to sustain their well-being during their study at the host university and a slight issue in this aspect may jeopardize their concentration.

Rank No. 3: Factor 4 Facilities and Services

Student participants thought that it is important for the host university to provide access to facilities and services, especially those that they need in their study program. For example, the kitchen labs and hotel labs are essential facilities for hospitality management students. They also expected that the host university would provide similar amenities as they have at home. Finally, they felt that having access to all the facilities is extremely helpful as it helps keep them up with studies, and projects, travel around on and off campus, and stay connected with family and friends.

Rank No. 4: Factor 6 Language Skills

Student participants, whose first language is not English, explained that they want to practice using English during their exchange program period at BUUIC. On the other hand, student participants, whose first language is English, said that they have the desire to go to a country where they don't speak the local language. They want to experience what it is like to learn a new language and they think learning a new language is a profitable personal investment. Though it might be challenging for them, it will be a positive challenge.

Rank No. 5: Factor 5 Individual Preferences

Recommendations from friends, family, and home university are important because they are reliable. Student participants mentioned that they decided to study abroad to fulfill their personal and travel interests and self-development is their driving factor. They have the desire to immerse themselves and learn more about Thai culture, language, religion, and food. They also believe that they will not come home as the same person because the impact of joining the exchange program in Thailand can be life-changing and eye-opening.

Rank No. 5: Factor 8 Visa Assistance

Student participants said that the host university should be able to give them a sense of security. If they have good visa assistance, they think their study can get started without having to worry about the visa and this should ultimately reduce their stress throughout the process of settling abroad.

Rank No. 6: Factor 7 Location of the College

Student participants said that the location is important, and they will consider a location that offers an affordable cost of living. They also wanted to be in a location where different kinds of public transportation are available. They learned that the location of BUUIC is superb. Though it is not in a big city, it offers a unique and authentic experience and they can acclimate easily.

Rank No. 7: Factor 1 College Reputation

Student participants believed that quality of education is crucial because it will reflect a good image of the students. They claimed that they can develop their knowledge and skills effectively if the curriculum is highly qualified. Lastly, it is important to join a university with a solid reputation because they can mention this during their interviews for graduate programs and future careers. BUUIC is an international partner of students' home universities. So, they trust their home universities' decisions and join BUUIC.

Experiences and other comments

One student participant said, “I came home a better person.” Most student participants explained that they had the best experience, which was invaluable and helped create a great memory. Some showed that the double degree programs and internship programs in Thailand are essential. They also mentioned that the most important sources of information were their university's instructors or academic staff, friends, and the official online accounts of BUUIC. However, some respondents want the college to improve the dormitory's dining and recreation areas.

Discussion

Drawing on the interview analysis of 36 student participants, this research seeks to investigate the factors affecting the decisions of foreign students to participate in an exchange program at BUUIC in Thailand and to explore the foreign students' experiences participating in an exchange program at BUUIC. The results revealed that society and culture, affordability, and facilities and services are the top influencing factors in the student participants' decisions to participate in an exchange program at BUUIC. The student participants tended to demonstrate that they had a meaningful experience at BUUIC. What also drew their attention was the collaborative program made by BUUIC and their university such as the double degree program. The researchers found that student participants' university instructors, academic staff and friends, and the official online accounts of BUUIC are the most important sources of information.

This research holds significant implications for the field of education, particularly in the context of international student mobility or international student exchange programs. Understanding that societal and cultural factors, financial feasibility, as well as facilities and services are motivating keys for foreign students could provide guidance and address the targeted improvement for educational institutions to make the exchange programs more ideal or attractive to prospective students. Recognizing that society along with culture is the most compelling factor, it is important for educational institutions to create an inclusive and culturally supporting environment for the exchange students (Hughes & Bruce, 2006). Apart from that, acknowledging affordability as a crucial motivator that puts the light on the need for financially accessible education, scholarships, and other financial aids should be considered to attain the exchange programs. Offering quality facilities and services is necessary

as they are daily parts of exchange students' personal and academic lives. Lastly, educational institutions should ensure that instructors, academic staff, and online platforms will be resources that share accurate and comprehensive information about the exchange programs with prospective students.

Recommendations

Based on the results, BUUIC and host institutions may take the following suggestions into consideration for organizing the exchange programs.

Firstly, the host university should provide support that assists foreign students to understand and adjust to local and international cultures. Making foreign students feel like home is very important as being away from home can be overwhelming. The support can be activities that allow foreign students to socialize with local and other international students such as orientation, welcome and farewell parties, and other cultural-related activities.

Secondly, having financial convenience can maintain students' well-being, and giving clear and accurate financial information must not be neglected. This piece of information should be given to the home university's coordinator and the prospective students. This shall help the prospective students to make decisions and also make sure that the host university can be financially reachable for them. Host universities should also keep communication goals and strategies clear and effective. As suggested by Sankham and Hamra (2016), the university's website is what the students focus on. Therefore, the necessary information should be passed through the host university's website.

Lastly, the host university should make sure to provide necessary facilities and services that aid students' learning process as well as support them to stay healthy and connected with family and friends. Host universities should also keep maintaining the standard quality of all facilities and services that are currently given as well as ones that should be given in the future.

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