

## **The Challenges and Benefits of Study Abroad**

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### **Abstract**

*This literature review summarizes the challenges and benefits of study abroad opportunities. The increasing numbers of students studying abroad has created problematic situations for higher education institutions and for students. For institutions, providing adequate institutional and personal support for students studying abroad has been difficult. Students who study abroad face challenges related to language barriers, social integration issues, and financial challenges. Despite these challenges, the increasing number of study abroad students has created opportunities and benefits for institutions and students. These benefits include financial gains on the part of the institution, the opportunity for cross cultural understanding and global awareness for host institutions and for domestic and international students. Recommendations for support of international students are given.*

**Key Words:** study abroad, international students, domestic students, international education, higher education, social integration, cross-cultural.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, studying abroad has increased rapidly (Oosterbeek & Webbink, 2011). Between 1972 and 1973 nearly 146,000 international students studied in the United States. This number increased to approximately 974,926 international students in 2015 (Institute of International Education, 2015). International students have become an important source of economic contributions toward host countries and educational institutions (Paltridge, Mayson, & Schapper, 2012). An Association of International Educators in the United States (NASFA, 2015) analysis found that in the 2014-2015 academic years, international education contributed \$30.5 billion to the U.S. economy. And, international education provided more than 373,000 jobs to the U.S. economy (Institute of International Education, 2015).

Several scholars have paid attention to the international education phenomenon and to the challenges that face international students (e.g. Andrade, 2006; Barratt & Huba, 1994; Chen, 1999; Constantine, et al., 2005; Sheehan & Pearson, 1995; Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003). Studies indicate that foreign students deal with a variety of adjustment issues when they live or study abroad. As an example, one of the surveys conducted by Lin and Yin (1997) showed that international students faced a wide range of issues such as accommodation problems, language difficulties, discrimination, financial issues, and cultural misunderstanding. So, as the number of international students rapidly increases, it is important to diagnose and get a better understanding of adjustment issues that encounter international students. Also, Paltridge et al. (2012) confirmed that there is a need to improve methods and strategies for supporting international students, socially, economically, academically, and psychologically.

### **1. Chinese Students Studying Abroad**

China is a country which has realized the importance of studying abroad. Zhang (2000) reported that Deng Xiaoping, a leader of China Republican from 1978-1992, realized the importance of studying abroad to increase the knowledge of Chinese students and bring what they learned back to their community to be used properly. The decision to send Chinese students and professionals to study abroad during that time was an important factor to decrease the Chinese isolation and to communicate with Western countries. In 1978, China started to shape open relations with international and foreign societies after a period of segregation which led to a number of students studying abroad (Zhang, 2000). At that time, Jianjun (2012) found that Chinese students felt pressure from both global and domestic forces to abandon some old habits and traditions which made them welcome these changes. Now numerous Chinese students are studying abroad. In particular, in the United States, the U.S. Institute of International Education (2014) reported in 2013-2014 that there were 274,439 Chinese students in the United States.

### **2. Benefits of Hosting International Students**

International students have become important source of revenue for many countries. A number of countries, including the United States, host international students as part of their strategic plans to function effectively in an age of globalization and as a way to increase their revenues (Harryba, Guilfoyle, & Knight, 2011). The Association of International Educators (NAFSA, 2015) reported that in 2009 international education contributed more than \$17.65 billion to the United States economy. In the 2014-2015 academic years, the revenue from international education increased almost doubled and contributed \$30.5 billion to the United States economy (NASFA, 2015).

Australia is also among those countries that put hosting international students as one of their major strategies. For instance, international students play a vital role, particularly in the Australian economy. Mariginson (2011) stated that international education is considered the fourth largest revenue source in Australia. According to the Australian Education International (2011), the economic contribution of international students to the Australian economy was nearly \$18.6 billion in fiscal year 2009. As a result, Paltridge et al. (2012) found that the revenues from international education showed a significant contribution to Australian's economy and its educational system.

In addition to tangible economic contributions, international students bring several non-economic benefits to the hosting countries. For instance, in Australia, Adams, Banks, and Olsen (2011) gave a wide range of benefits of international education such as an increase of public commerce and diplomacy, an enrichment of educational climate culturally for domestic students, and enhancement of the awareness of diversity among all students. Therefore, international students bring cultural diversity to the host country (Olivas & Li, 2006). Numerous researchers (e.g. Kell & Vogel, 2008; Mahat & Hourigan, 2007) claim that international education reinforces intercultural interaction. This interaction minimizes racism and increases tolerance between people (Bochner, 1986; de Wit, 1995, Gudykunst, 1998). At the same time, international students often benefit from living and studying in a foreign country. Domestic students benefit from international students as well. In the United States, American students benefit from the enhancement of their cultural skills and their sensitivity in working with people from different cultures (Calleja, 2000; Carnevale, 1999). Most international students are satisfied with their living and studying abroad. In Australia for example, a survey conducted by the Australian Federal Government reported that approximately 86% of surveyed international students from all educational institutions were satisfied with their experience of living and studying in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010).

### **3. International Student Issues**

Despite the advantages of international education, international students encounter a wide range of issues when they live and study abroad. Those issues are generally related to language difficulties, adaptation to a new learning system, psychological problems such as homesickness, discrimination, and feeling isolated, as well as socio-cultural problems with health care and financial systems (Tseng & Netwon, 2002). Other issues include financial difficulties, depression, and culture shock (Khoo et al., 2002; Leong & Chou, 1996; Lin & Yi, 1997). The United States has attracted the largest number of students from all over the world (Sandhu, 1995). However, international students attending American universities and colleges frequently encounter issues and challenges related to adjustment in their new academic and social environment (Alsharideh & Geo, 1998).

Tseng and Newton (2002) demonstrated that international students attending American higher education institutions may face a number of psychological issues, socio-cultural problems, academic difficulties and language barriers. In particular, a study conducted by Zahi (2002) found that the most important issues that international students encounter in the United States are those associated with language difficulties, the American academic system, and cultural differences.

**3.1 Academic and language issues.** Mori (2000) pointed out that for the majority of international students, language difficulties seem to be the most challenging issue. The language difficulties not only affect international students' academic performance, but also may affect their psychological and social adjustment (Lin & Yi, 1997). Moreover, Hayes and Ling (1994) stated that language issues usually prevent international students from interacting socially with their American peers.

Chen (1999) confirmed the previous point and stated that the lack of English language proficiency could limit a student's willingness to interact socially and to create negativity about their ability to share in the new culture. Furthermore, language proficiency can be an important component affecting the self-efficacy of an international student's performance. Consequently, language proficiency may deter international students from obtaining useful knowledge that will assist them in adjusting to a new environment.

Besides English proficiency issues, academic difficulties appear to be a significant challenge for international students. One academic difficulty is the lack of resource reference experience which helps in developing students' academic achievement (Haung, 2006; McClure, 2005). Campbell-Evans and Leggette (2007) demonstrated that the challenge in using resources may lead to plagiarism, which is considered one of the primary problems facing international students. Other academic difficulties include the lack of writing skills for writing western style research, issues with references, and meeting requirements for essays (Durkin, 2008; Holmes, 2005).

**3.2 Social issues.** In addition to academic and language difficulties, international students encounter a range of socio-cultural barriers and social issues. Socio-cultural issues experienced by international students include the lack of participation in social or leisure activities, difficulty in making close relationships or friendships with people from the host country (Wang & Shan, 2007), and culture shock (Delaney, 2002; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007). Paltridge et al. (2012) also pointed out that international students usually face difficulty in forming new friendships with local citizens due to cultural differences, language barriers, and heavy study which limits time for socializing. Besides these factors, the unwillingness of many citizens to form friendship with international students may reduce the students' opportunities to participate socially. For example, in the first year international students encounter a number of challenges when they are abroad. In addition, the majority of these students wish to form friendships and interact with domestic students (Butcher & McGrath, 2004). Cross-cultural differences in social interactions emerge as a factor preventing international students from forming friendships with domestic students. In addition, cross-cultural differences in social interactions may also contribute to acculturative stress (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Paltridge et al. (2012) stated that international students' status as temporary visitors causes social exclusion. In other words, social exclusion is the failure to integrate fully in the social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of the foreign country. Compared to permanent residents and Australian citizens, Paltridge et al. (2012) believed that international students do not have same opportunities and ability to integrate and participate culturally, socially, and economically with the community. This exclusion has a negative impact on international students' security and safety including exploitation and violence against them (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Marginson, 2011). Also, international students may face some cultural difficulties when they live in a foreign country. For instance, in Australia, some international students come from Asia which is not a part of the dominant Anglo-Australian culture, and the international students' concerns and opinions are quite different. So that tends to make students feel lonely and isolated from the society around them (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).

Beside social issues, international students face a variety of psychological concerns including ethnic and racial discrimination, homesickness, alienation (Yeh & Inose, 2003), and separation from family and friends (Akhtar, 2011). As an explanation, Forbes-Mewett and Nyland (2008) indicated that international students constantly miss the support and assistance from their families and friends when they study abroad. Paltridge et al. (2012) also pointed out that international students usually face difficulty in forming new friendships with local citizens due to cultural differences, language barriers, and heavy study which limits time for socializing.

Besides these factors, the unwillingness of many citizens to form friendships with international students may reduce the students' opportunities to participate socially. International students may experience more psychological issues than American students (Leong & Chou, 1996; Mori, 2000). Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) pointed out that international students perceived to be ethnic minorities, especially those from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, India, and Asia, experience more discrimination than European international students or domestic students. Spencer-Rodgers (2001) mentioned a wide variety of types of discrimination that international students experienced such as stereotypes, negative images of foreigners or those of different ethnicities and races.

**3.3 Financial issues.** International students may face basic welfare issues. They may not have appropriate opportunities to work due to holding a student visa. For example, Babacan et al. (2010) and Ham (2011) found that many international students in Australia have limited work rights and limited knowledge about their rights in workplaces. Also, international students sometimes may miss some public services. In other words, Paltridge et al. (2012) mentioned that international students do not have the right to obtain many common support services such as free public health care, and they must obtain private health insurance. In some states and territories, international students are ineligible to get free tickets for public transportation.

Another important issue for international students is insufficient funding. Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, and Forbes-Mewett (2010) stated that one of the requirements for a student visa in some countries including Canada, the United States, and Australia is proof that a student has sufficient money to cover living expenses and tuition costs for one academic year, this amount is checked only when they apply for a visa.

However, insufficient funds has led some international students to give fake accounts, for example, temporarily borrowing money from their relatives or asking their relatives who will not actually pay for sponsorship. By doing so, students will obtain a visa without having sufficient financial support for themselves during their studies and living abroad. Lane (2011) and Mazzarol and Souter (2002) noted that to increase the competitive international education market, it is important to provide international students sufficient and appropriate financial support which increases the positive reputation for a hosting country.

Among this list of issues and difficulties faced by international students, most students spend most of their time outside their educational institutions which sometimes cause problems for them. International students experience off-campus problems such as finding appropriate accommodations and employment including exploitation by employers and landlords (Paltridge, 2009; Marginson et al., 2010). Therefore, some international students may face difficulties such as discrimination or individual safety concerns (Marginson et al., 2010; Olding & Kwek, 2012).

#### **4. Suggested Strategies to Help International Students**

Many types of support can be offered to international students. Paltridge et al. (2012) wrote that volunteer jobs can play pivotal role in supporting international students socially. In addition, they noted that volunteer jobs are not only beneficial for international students, but also have a positive effect on the local government budgets. Also, participation in social activities can help to address problems of social isolation, improve English language proficiency, and reinforce community development. Moreover, Paltridge et al. (2012) found that programs and services can be run in cooperation with charities, societies, and religious groups and thereby dividing the costs among multiple parties.

The Couch International Students Center in Melbourne, Australia is an example of these supportive programs. The Couch International Student Center was founded by the Salvation Army with support from the City of Melbourne (Perkins, 2009). Likewise, the project of Welcome to Wollongong was a joint initiative of the Illawarra Business Chamber, the city of Wollongong, located in Australia, and different types of educational institutions in Wollongong (Wollongong UniCentre, 2012).

According to Paltridge et al. (2012), educational institutions play a significant role in supporting and helping international students, but international students need more social support. They confirmed a need to support international students when they are off-campus. They added that the local government can play a significant role to fill this gap by giving international students greater integration and security when they are away from their educational institutions.

In addition, one study conducted by Tseng and Newton (2002) reported eight methods that help international students adjust positively.

Those methods include forming relationships, seeking assistance, increasing English proficiency, improving social and cultural communications, building relationships with faculty members, identifying themselves and others, letting go of issues, and expanding their view to the world.

## 5. Summary

International education has become a phenomenon, and international students are considered an important source of revenue for many countries. At the same time, international students benefit from living and studying abroad, including understanding other people's thoughts, beliefs, and cultures. However, international students frequently encounter issues related to their adjustment to new academic and social environments. For example, international students face a wide variety of challenges such as language difficulties, academic problems, social issues, and racism. To help reduce these difficulties, policy makers, faculty members, and counselors should expend effort to meet international student needs and address the particular issues of international students, particularly those involving work, government relationships, social integrations, and language support. Also, academic higher institutions and hosting countries should collaborate to increase international students' awareness toward the host countries' society and help international students to integrate and contribute to these societies.

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