

Benefits of Studying Abroad for Graduate Employability: Perspectives of Exchange Students From Lao Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the benefits of studying abroad with student exchange programs for graduate employability. Data were drawn from a survey with 163 Lao former exchange participants at three public universities in Laos, followed by 19 semi-structured interviews. Results revealed that participants benefited from participating in overseas exchanges at a high level in terms of the development of employability skills, particularly interpersonal and communication skills, and in multidisciplinary knowledge and international competences. Study abroad experience was positively considered as being related to increasing job opportunities, which signal better educational credentials with proven skills that are demanded in the domestic labor market. This study offers useful insights into the benefits of student exchange programs and adds perspectives from a developing country whose voice has been little heard in the literature on the value of study abroad.

Keywords: graduate employability, higher education, Laos, study abroad experience, student exchange programs

INTRODUCTION

Having a university degree is no longer sufficient for graduates to secure employment in today's labor markets. Employability skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork, are required to increase their employment opportunities. Growth in the number of university graduates signifies

a fall in terms of quality (Gale & Parker, 2017), and gradually there is a decline in their status and the economic value of a degree because educational credentials are recognized as being commonplace and easier to attain (Tomlinson, 2008). Employers then become more selective and pose a more challenging set of job requirements and thus there is competition for graduates. In Australia and Japan, for instance, employers tended to emphasize generic and practical skills in recruitment decisions instead of examining only graduates' technical expertise and academic results (Pham & Thompson, 2019; Saito & Pham, 2019). This phenomenon is no exception for Laos, a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Despite a substantial number of graduates in Laos, they appear to be insufficiently equipped with skills and knowledge for employment (Del Carpio et al., 2013). According to their survey on employers' perceptions of graduates' employment in Laos, Duronsoy et al. (2014) reported that 51% of employers faced problems in recruiting relevant graduates. Key issues are the graduates having inadequate skills and work experience, irrelevant qualifications, and their English proficiency being low.

To cope with the shortage of skilled labor, private enterprises imported foreign skilled labor, mainly for high- and medium-skilled occupations (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare [MLSW], 2019). This is partly a result of the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, which is accompanied by a policy on skilled labor mobility. The policy is beneficial in terms of facilitating labor mobility to benefit regional economic development, but it puts pressure on local workers. Lao graduates are automatically under increasing pressure. They have to compete with not only their fellow graduates but also foreign workers who seek employment in the Lao labor market, particularly in the private sector. To win the employment battle, Lao students need to additionally invest in their education to acquire distinct knowledge, skills, competence and to build up their comparative strength in specialized and optimal skills to attract their prospective employers. Also, they have to reach international standards if they wish to replace foreign workers. Their degree needs to be complemented with optimal skills, such as ability to speak a foreign language, to communicate, and be adaptable.

To increase competitiveness in the domestic labor markets, Lao university students decided to study abroad with the hope of seizing job opportunities upon graduation (Sisavath, 2019). This is viewed as a strategy. Previous studies showed that increasing opportunities for employment after graduation were a key driver for students to study abroad (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016), which is referred to as "risk-minimizing strategies" by Van Mol (2014, p. 64) to ensure a smooth transition to labor markets. Research in Europe gave evidence that study abroad experience was worthwhile for graduates' transition from university to work, particularly in obtaining the first job (Bracht et al., 2006; Teichler & Janson, 2007). In Laos, student exchange was prioritized as one of the key activities under the strategy for international cooperation in higher education since 2015. The strategic goal is to strengthen teaching-learning outcomes and enable higher education to work for society (Ministry of Education and Sports [MOES], 2015). Hence, it is worth investigating the benefits students gain from overseas

exchanges and their connection to graduate employability in the context of Laos. Prior studies in America, Australia, Japan, and Europe have shown that study abroad experience positively enhanced graduate employability. That is reflected in developing soft skills concerning cultural understanding, personal characteristics, and ways of thinking (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). Potts (2015) found that graduates developed interpersonal and communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, and analytical skills, and Farrugia and Sanger (2017) added that they improved intercultural skills through studying abroad. Studying abroad also helped graduates to develop their foreign language skills, ability to work, and interact with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures (Brandenburg et al., 2014). However, these studies encompassed participants from different durations and programs, such as short-term study abroad, semester exchange, and internship abroad. Results seem ambiguous as regards which program generates particular outcomes. Therefore, it is worth investigating outcomes associated with employability that have accrued as a result of studying abroad with a particular program of learning abroad. Different programs or durations may generate and characterize their outcomes. Although study abroad experience has professional value, in reality, employers preferred the experience from long-term relative to short-term study abroad, i.e., programs of a few weeks duration (Ota & Shimmi, 2020; Trooboff et al., 2008). This suggests that international study experience from long-term mobility is more likely to enhance a graduate's labor market prospects.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the benefits of studying abroad associated with enhancing graduate employability based on the viewpoint of Lao university students who studied abroad while in their degree programs. Specifically, this paper focuses on study abroad experience gained through spending a semester or a year-long abroad and presents the voice of Asian students, which has been little heard in the literature on student mobility programs (Roy et al., 2019). The central question of this study was: What are the benefits students gained from student exchange programs in relation to enhancing their employability?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studying Abroad to Enhance Human Capital

Investment in education and training enabled individuals to become more productive, and take advantage of better job opportunities and higher earnings (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961). From this perspective, studying abroad while in the degree program is viewed as an extra investment in education to enhance human capital. For Lao students, participating in an exchange program was a unique experience to broaden their academic and cultural horizons deemed important to increase job opportunities, but they assumed the risk of delay in graduation. Although exchange programs were arranged between home and host universities, most participants had to prolong their degree studies at home university after a sojourn abroad (Sisavath, 2019). This means that students invest

more in terms of tuition fees, time, and efforts to fulfill the requirements for graduation. They in return acquire both country-specific and internationally applicable human capital, such as foreign language, interpersonal, and communication skills. Students also become knowledgeable about other countries and cultures, which may later signal their higher caliber and convince employers to hire them.

International study experience does have economic value for labor markets. Previous studies have provided evidence that exchange students had a smoother transition from university to work and received higher economic rewards (Kratz & Netz, 2018; Messer & Wolter, 2007; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011). Yet we cannot say that such labor market outcomes are solely attributed to study abroad experience. It may partly be due to skills and competences acquired by students in addition to specific requirements of a job, and their ability to make the best use of them. We should also not disregard the role employers play in valuing such experiences. For example, European and Japanese employers have become more familiar with and valued study abroad experience positively connected with employability (Brandenburg et al., 2014; Ota & Shimmi, 2020). This establishes that knowledge and skills developed through studying abroad are unique and professionally rewarded, adding to the formation of human capital at the home university.

Graduate Employability

Employability is defined differently in the literature. Generally, it can be defined as having skills and abilities that individuals are able to use to obtain employment, fulfill work requirements, or find new employment, if required, to be satisfied with the chosen occupation (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Harvey, 2001; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Pool & Sewell, 2007). Hillage and Pollard (1998) emphasized the capability to get and retain fulfilling work in the context where graduates seek employment. Graduates are expected to have knowledge and skills sought by employers and abilities to fulfill work requirements. At the same time, employers know which attributes are necessary for the effective functioning of their organization (Harvey, 2001). Pool and Sewell (2007) added the “satisfaction” element to the definition of employability. Individuals can be satisfied with the chosen occupation, in which they can utilize skills and competences appropriately in work tasks. However, it is uncertain whether graduates can use acquired skills and knowledge in their job because the nature of work has changed over time. Regarding this fact, graduates’ employability needs to be constantly enhanced throughout their working life to satisfy labor market needs.

Study Abroad Experience and Employability Skills

Higher education institutions (HEIs) and international educators have laid greater emphasis on linking learning abroad programs to employability (Matherly & Tillman, 2020). This is to ensure that study abroad participation helps graduates

to be equipped with employability skills and competences that are applicable in all sectors of the global economy. Employability skills are referred to as a combination of general and transferable skills that might be useful in any workplace in addition to the specific requirements of a job (Suleman, 2018). However, it is difficult to define a complete set of employability skills because the requirements of labor markets differ from country to country. According to Suleman (2018), employability skills consist of communication, teamwork, IT skills, analytical and critical skills, learning abilities, and organizing and planning. Employers also required graduates to have attitudes toward work, willingness to learn, a foreign language, problem-solving, openness, and specific skills. Specifically, Lao employers, alongside educational qualifications, wanted graduates to have skills, such as a foreign language, ICT and computer skills, communication, customer service, teamwork, problem-solving skills, ability to learn, independence, and timeliness (Del Carpio et al., 2013; MLSW, 2019). Many of these skills are found to be positively developed through studying abroad.

Studying abroad offers students the opportunity to acquire and develop a diverse range of employability skills and competences. Studies in America and Europe reported that exchange students developed greater intercultural communication skills (Williams, 2005) and formed relationships and networks (Bremer, 1998). Students also enhanced theoretical, specialized knowledge of other countries, working attributes and styles (Bracht et al., 2006). In Australia, Potts (2015) found that graduates perceived their employability skills, such as interpersonal and communication skills, teamwork, and problem-solving and analytical skills, were greatly developed through studying abroad. Similarly, Crossman and Clarke (2010) indicated that international experience positively fostered employability, and students developed soft skills and acquired foreign languages. As shown in Cubillos and Ilvento (2012), students were more confident in their language ability after a sojourn abroad, which is three times greater than those who had not studied abroad (Teichler & Janson, 2007). When abroad, students more frequently use a foreign language in a range of academic and social contexts than in their home country.

Study abroad experience is viewed as a competitive advantage in labor markets. Previous studies have shown that the experience helped graduates to obtain their first job (Amendola & Restaino, 2017; Bracht et al., 2006; Potts, 2015). This is demonstrated by a shorter period for job searches until getting the first job. Their academic knowledge and other social skills acquired abroad positively contributed to getting employment. This suggested that employers preferred hiring graduates who graduated domestically with a portion of their education abroad, so they can get the best of both domestic and overseas education, which is a safe investment (Wiers-Jenssen & Try, 2005). However, the impact of study abroad on career outcomes may vary across contexts. Due to limited data, this study cannot fully examine Lao employers' perspectives on the study abroad experience but can discuss this through graduates' responses.

METHOD

In this study, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed (Creswell, 2014). This design allows quantitative and qualitative methods to be used in sequence within the same study. The results of the quantitative phase seek an in-depth explanation or elaboration from the qualitative phase (Ivankova et al., 2006). The use of two methods in data collection can offer a better understanding of the phenomenon and strengthen the findings.

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students at three public universities in Laos who studied abroad between 2014 and 2019. The period selected was dependent on the availability of the record of study abroad students. A purposive sampling technique was applied to select 198 participants who met all four criteria: (a) studied abroad with a semester or academic year exchange program, (b) participated in programs arranged between home and host universities, (c) completed the program and returned to the home university, and (d) contact details (e.g., phone number, e-mail) were available. These participants studied at over 40 universities in 23 countries in Asia and Europe. Although they undertook exchange programs in different universities abroad, this study did not intend to represent any particular host university or country but provide insights into the benefits of exchange programs as a whole.

Data Collection

The data collection was conducted with permission from the targeted universities. For the first phase, the survey was distributed to the participants in person and via e-mail addresses with a link to the survey from March to June 2018 at university A, and from February to June 2019 at university B and C. Participants were asked to rate the perceived benefits of studying abroad on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The benefits were operationalized through survey items related to employability, international competence, and other developmental aspects. The participants were also asked to assess the extent to which their study abroad experience was relevant to their (future) job opportunities as well as to respond to four open-ended questions, such as “If you are employed, which skills developed through studying abroad are frequently used in your current work?” As a result, there were 163 questionnaires returned, representing an 82.3% response rate, with over two-thirds of the respondents studying at the university when this study was conducted.

In the second phase, interviews were used to collect more information from 19 participants, eight of whom had already graduated and were in employment. The interviewees were relatively diverse in terms of disciplines—seven students came from social sciences, five from arts and humanities, two from business, two

from natural sciences, two from engineering, and one from services; and exchange destinations—five students studied in Europe, six in East Asia, and eight in ASEAN countries. The interview questions were based on initial quantitative results and were mostly open-ended questions to explore in more depth their experience in the host country, perceived benefits of study abroad, and impacts of study abroad experience on employability. The participants were informed about the interview purpose, procedures, and ethical issues. They were coded as Subject (S) 1 to 19 respectively. The interviews were conducted individually in the Lao language. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted around an hour.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyze the quantitative data. Participants' demographic backgrounds were first analyzed. Responses given on the scale of benefits and self-assessment of the relevance of study abroad experience were then calculated and displayed as percentages. For qualitative data, the analysis and interpretation were done following procedures in Creswell (2014). First, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Then, the interview transcripts and responses to open-ended questions were read several times, the margin notes marked, and initial codes made. After that, the data described were assigned codes and themes. Finally, the interpreted data and findings were integrated with the initial statistical results as a supporting explanation. Relevant and specific quotes excerpted from interview responses were included to give more details and illustrate the qualitative results, elaborating on the quantitative results.

RESULTS

Demographic Description

The demographics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. The participants consisted of females (60.1%) and males (39.9%). The interview data revealed that female students were more likely to seek greater recognition academically and professionally. Studying abroad was a unique experience to empower them to stand out in male-dominated study fields, i.e., engineering and natural sciences, and among their peers in the same study field. Half of the participants were in social sciences and arts and humanities disciplines, where course contents are more tied to country-specific contexts. Four interviewees from social sciences perceived it as being important to learn what and how students in a similar program to theirs were taught in other countries to enhance their subject-specific knowledge accumulated at home. Programs for natural sciences, engineering, and ICT are fairly standardized and internationalized in themselves. So studying abroad may have little added-value for their degrees.

Table 1: Demographic Descriptions of Participants

| Characteristics | Number of respondents | |
|---|-----------------------|------|
| | <i>n</i> | % |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 65 | 39.9 |
| Female | 98 | 60.1 |
| Discipline* | | |
| Social sciences | 40 | 24.7 |
| Arts and humanities | 38 | 25.5 |
| Business, administration and law | 23 | 14.2 |
| Natural sciences | 20 | 12.3 |
| Engineering | 17 | 10.5 |
| Information and communication technology (ICT) | 9 | 5.6 |
| Other (education, forestry, tourism, rural development) | 15 | 9.3 |
| Program duration | | |
| One semester | 113 | 69.3 |
| One academic year | 50 | 30.7 |
| Exchange destination | | |
| Asia | 130 | 79.8 |
| Europe | 33 | 20.2 |

Note: *N* = 163.

*Total *N* is not 163 because of missing values for the variable, so the valid percentage of responses is used.

In this sample, 69.3% undertook a semester exchange program at universities mostly located in Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore. Exchange destinations significantly indicate sources of scholarships and partner institutions with which Lao universities have established international cooperation. Due to financial constraints, their exchange opportunities have relied largely on support from foreign partners and international exchange programs. However, 75% of participants prolonged their degree studies at the home university after their overseas exchange due to a lack of credit recognition.

Although they studied under the bilateral/multilateral exchange agreement for credits, it is not always implemented in reality.

Perceived Benefits of Study Abroad Experience

The results shown in Table 2 revealed that students benefited from studying abroad at a high level in multiple aspects, including the development of employability skills, enrichment of academic knowledge and experience, improvement of international competence, and forming global citizenship.

Table 2: Perceived Benefits of Study Abroad Experience

| Category | % |
|---|------|
| Developing interpersonal and communication skills | 95.7 |
| Gaining academic experience at a foreign university | 95.7 |
| Having a new way of thinking about my home country | 94.5 |
| Studying courses and subjects unavailable at home | 93.3 |
| Increasing awareness and understanding of global issues and contexts | 92.0 |
| Enhancement of academic and professional knowledge | 91.4 |
| Career prospects development | 91.4 |
| Developing the potential for pursuing an international career | 91.4 |
| Gaining knowledge and understanding of my host country (e.g., lifestyle, culture) | 91.4 |
| Maturity and personal development | 91.4 |
| Improving foreign language skills | 89.6 |
| Learning different cultures from other foreign friends | 89.0 |
| Developing problem-solving and analytical skills | 87.7 |
| Made local and international friends | 87.7 |
| Learning about independence | 87.1 |
| Acquisition of living or working disciplines of people in the host country | 85.9 |
| Developing teamwork skills | 79.8 |

Note: $N = 163$. The percentage (%) is the aggregate of “strongly agree or agree” that study abroad experience is worthwhile for these categories.

Development of Employability Skills

Study abroad experience positively contributed to developing a diverse range of employability skills. First, 95.7% of the sample agreed that they developed interpersonal and communication skills through studying abroad. Ten interviewees explained that they frequently engaged in many academic and cultural activities held within and outside the campus, such as cultural exchange, homestay, and community service. Students then became more familiar and frequently interacted with their fellow participants from different countries, as well as local people, both students and others. Furthermore, student support at the host university, such as room sharing and a buddy system, created the opportunity for exchange students to have more interactions and develop friendships. At least four interviewees reported that they shared rooms with students from other countries at the university accommodation, so they shared information and helped one another.

Second, developing problem-solving and analytical skills and learning about independence were rated as worthwhile by 87% of the participants on average. During the interview, participants reiterated that they became more critical and confident in taking action after studying abroad. Given they endured a new environment and culture abroad alone, students had to deal with academic and living challenges on their own, including managing expenses, health care, and daily life. In such circumstances, they learned more about independence and developed their adaptability, which contributed to overall personal growth. These skills are essential to survive in the world of work, where graduates need to work independently and adapt to various professional settings. Nine of the interviewees acknowledged that studying abroad was a life-changing experience that made them more mature and confident.

Third, nearly 80% of the sample perceived that they developed teamwork skills. At the host university, participants often worked collectively with local and international students to complete assignments or fieldwork projects. They had to listen to different perspectives and to solve problems as sometimes conflicting ideas occurred within the group. Considering this experiential learning, exchange programs have the potential to prepare students for real professional contexts. However, the application of teaching methods differs from one to another university and country.

Enrichment of Academic Knowledge and Experience

A vast majority of the sample (95.7%) gained academic experience through studying abroad. They studied in the same classes with local students, providing them with exposure to academic conditions and provisions in the host country. Regarding teaching methods, students tended to be more independent. Two-thirds of interviewees said they were responsible for their own study, searched for information, and discussed their perspectives with professors and classmates. Students got the opportunity to use laboratories or other facilities that they did not access at home and join internship and fieldwork visits. Such experiences were

positively viewed as being important to enrich their academic knowledge and professional skills.

Furthermore, 93.3% considered their exchange participation worthwhile in terms of being able to study courses and subjects unavailable at home. The interview data disclosed that they studied subjects outside their study major or across disciplines. Students acknowledged that they acquired new knowledge and skills in addition to their professional specialization and outside their major, which is helpful for future jobs. In contrast, at home, students typically study a course-fixed curriculum offered each semester and few elective courses are available. For example, S7 and S8, respectively, said:

While in my exchange program, I studied subjects differing from my major, they were mass communication, news article writing, and graphic design courses. These would increase my job opportunities.

There [at host university], there are many elective subjects that I can choose in which I am interested, also in other faculties such as agriculture. That allows me to study other subjects besides the required subjects.

These quotes imply that students prefer a more flexible approach regarding the course selection to accumulate for degree programs instead of a course-fixed curriculum. In other words, they need more elective courses to enhance multidisciplinary knowledge. That allows students to broaden their academic horizons and to explore new areas of specialization.

Improvement of International Competences

Study abroad experience was highly perceived as being worthwhile to enhance international competences, i.e., knowledge and understanding of other countries and foreign language skills. Nearly 90% of the sample acknowledged that they improved foreign language skills. Besides academic studies, while studying abroad, students used different strategies to improve their language proficiency. They enrolled in language courses and took extra classes with language tutors. Six students reported that they studied via online classes and frequently got along with local and other international students to practice language skills. In doing these, students could forge relationships and networks with their foreign friends while studying abroad, as reported by 87.7% of the participants.

Moreover, 90% of the participants on average agreed that they gained knowledge and understanding of different cultures and ways of living in the host and other countries, as associating with other international students at the host institution. The significant change in knowledge was reflected in changes in their awareness of religious and cultural practices in their host country. For instance, S5 shared:

I went to Indonesia [for an exchange program]. As Muslims, they go to the mosque and pray 5 times per day. That is strange for us [as

Buddhists]... After staying for a while, I can adapt to their culture. Compared with my knowledge before departure, I thought they were strict, females could not speak to males, and they would be extremists. But, in reality, I found that they are polite, have good manners, pay respect to other people. So, they are similar to us.

Participants appeared to acquire a locally appropriate lifestyle or work-related ethic. As they stayed for a semester at least, this was long enough to absorb local practices that would subsequently influence students' personal and professional practices, such as work style. As S8 said:

Now, I know better about Japanese people and culture, such as punctuality, respectfulness, eating, and queuing cultures. For work style, they stress excellent service. That improves my mindset and working skills.

Their international competence will be more helpful if students can use it to appeal to employers, especially at the point of recruitment. Given labor markets are becoming increasingly globalized, it may be an asset for employers to have employees who are knowledgeable about other countries and cultures in their organizations to facilitate business contacts or expansion overseas.

Forming Global Citizenship

Exchange programs helped form part of global citizenship education. Of those participants, 92% agreed that studying abroad was worthwhile to increase their awareness and understanding of global issues and contexts. This finding is partly explained by the subjects they studied at the host university. One-third of interviewees reported that they studied subjects like sociology, ASEAN or Asian Studies that extensively discussed regional and global affairs. Exchange programs also include extracurricular activities, such as field trips, homestay, and community service with local people. Students are able to observe which issues are facing people in their host country or how they live. That made them create comparative perspectives between home and host countries. This was evident in the fact that 94% of the sample responded that they had a new way of thinking about their home country after studying abroad. This suggests that international experience influenced students' attitudes and viewpoints toward their homeland and other countries. As S3 shared:

Initially, I thought they [people in the host country] are similar to us, for example, the quality of sanitation. When abroad, I got a chance to travel to the countryside and stayed at my friend's house. It was shocking as I saw they still live like in the 1990s. I can't believe such living conditions still exist.

Relevance of Study Abroad Experience to Job Opportunities

Results in Table 3 showed that participants were very enthusiastic about their experience related to job opportunities, especially graduates (89.6%). It is more evident that 91.4% of the respondents considered their international experience worthwhile to develop their career prospects, especially the potential for pursuing an international career (see Table 2). Twelve participants shared during the interviews that they researched vacant posts through networking with alumni and attending job fairs before and after studying abroad. They studied vacancy advertisements and requirements in detail. Four students directly asked firm representatives for relevant information on vacancies, the recruitment process, and took a trial for a job interview. So, to some extent participants were aware of what is sought after by employers and should be attained to better prepare for labor markets.

Table 3: Relevance of Study Abroad Experience to Job Opportunities

| Type of participant | <i>n</i> | Not at all/Slightly relevant (%) | Neutral (%) | Relevant/Very relevant (%) |
|---------------------|----------|----------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| Current students | 115 | 1.7 | 15.7 | 82.6 |
| Graduated | 48 | 2.1 | 8.3 | 89.6 |

Regardless of academic discipline, all the interviewees considered their study abroad experience as being important for securing employment and facilitating work performance. They strongly believed their foreign language proficiency increased their opportunities to get a job. This is not only English but also the language of their host or other countries. Due to growth in foreign direct investment in Laos, the ability to communicate in multiple languages enables graduates to enter labor markets smoothly and negotiate for higher salaries. Of those interviewees, graduates emphasized the development of employability skills accrued from their studying abroad, like communication skills, management skills, and adaptability as comparative strengths in finding jobs and at workplaces. Six of them who are in employment said that their international experience made them more confident in communicating in a foreign language, adapting to workplaces, and working with local and foreign colleagues in various professional contexts. With these findings, study abroad experience functions to differentiate graduates from others who did not study abroad during job searches and increase their productivity at the workplace.

Work-related experience and technical knowledge gained while studying abroad were positively relevant to increasing possibilities to secure employment. The interview data revealed that students got the opportunity to do internships and fieldwork visits while in their exchange program. In their view, such practical experience was a plus point when including it in the résumé for job applications, especially if they studied abroad at a prestigious university. New technical

knowledge acquired abroad was perceived to give students better educational credentials compared to others who did not study abroad. This international experience has a signaling effect on adding a professional value to a graduate's degree and helps employers to shortlist for recruitment decisions. As one graduate responded in the survey:

Typically, newly graduated students have no work experience, so it is difficult for them to find a job. But, if one has previous experience like study abroad, employers will be interested in the individual and trust in their capacity and quality. When I graduated, I got three job offers: one from a foreign embassy and others from international organizations.

This quote, however, showed whether international study experience is advantageous for finding a job may be dependent on the nature of work in the targeted organization. Some participants—15.7% of current students and 8.3% of graduates—felt uncertain whether study abroad experience was beneficial in getting jobs.

Participants associated their overseas exchange experience with the development of personal attributes, such as confidence, openness, resilience, and ability to learn. Separating from parents and facing an unfamiliar environment, new culture, and academic challenges abroad enabled students to adapt to new living circumstances, be more decisive, and ready to handle any obstacles or difficult situations. This experiential learning can convey the information to employers that graduates have the ability to deal with pressure, adapt to workplaces, and take responsibility. Six graduates believed that study abroad experience reflected their reliability, commitment, enthusiasm, and global mindset, which incentivized employers to decide to hire them. As S16 and S18 said:

During job interviews, they [employers] asked whether I have ever been abroad. If so, why? How did I benefit from it? ... I believed all experience gained abroad reflected my ability and gave me a comparative strength, compared to other candidates.

I believed my overseas exchange experience helped me to get this current job. I wrote it in my CV when applying for a job. The employer asked me about my living, study, and activities I joined abroad. He also asked how such experiences are relevant to the post applied for.

These excerpts indicated that Lao employers are interested in graduates' international experience. Graduates need to make their experience more attractive to employers, like including in the résumé and exhibiting their potential or attributes. They also have to explain how much the experience is valuable to the organization and function well after getting employment. Otherwise, their international experience is useless.

In the survey and interviews, graduates who are in employment were asked to identify which were the skills developed through studying abroad that are

frequently used in their current work. Their responses were summarized and ranged as follows:

- Foreign language skills
- Teamwork
- Adaptability to work with people from different cultures and strengths
- Communication skills, i.e., writing academic reports, giving presentations
- Planning and organizing skills, i.e., collecting information, creating work plans
- Problem-solving skills

Based on these findings, student exchange programs have positive contributions to developing both employability skills and personal attributes. These are deemed as competitive advantages to increase students' job opportunities and facilitate their work performance. The key point is the extent to which they are able to make use of study abroad experience to attract employers and align with subsequently assigned work tasks.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that students benefited from studying abroad at a high level in multiple aspects related to enhancing their employability. This corroborated the studies of Crossman and Clarke (2010) and Potts (2015). However, this study highlighted the benefits that accrued to students as a result of studying abroad with student exchange programs. It ascertains that participating in exchange programs allowed students to increase their job opportunities, as proven by the development of employability skills, such as interpersonal and communication skills (95.7%), problem-solving and analytical skills (87.7%), and teamwork (79.8%), which are demanded in the Lao labor market. Due to long-term programs, students could study together with local students and be exposed to educational conditions provided in the host country. That is a unique experience enhancing their academic potential, especially when they studied new courses and subjects that are unavailable at their home university. Such experience can strengthen the quality of academic outcomes as being emphasized in the national education policy (MOES, 2015). Graduating with study abroad experience may mitigate employers' criticism about the quality of education provided at local universities, although international experience is not a criterion for recruitment.

Studying abroad can become a strategy for students to negotiate their employability and seize opportunities in labor markets upon graduation. As shown in this study, employers asked graduates about their international study experience when recruiting. Employers are becoming aware of study abroad experience, which may function as a screening device for them to assess graduates' qualities in addition to their university degree. Yet, employers value graduates' international experiences differently across the region. Garam (2005) found that Finnish employers valued work experience instead of taking advantage of

graduates' international experience in recruitment decisions. Similarly, American employers focused more on graduates' academic majors and work experience rather than study abroad experience when hiring, although they valued that international experience (Trooboff et al., 2008). Probably, the more studying abroad becomes commonplace, the more the uniqueness and professional value of international experience are declining. In contrast, in Laos, access to study abroad programs is a luxury opportunity available for a minority of students (Matherly & Tillman, 2020), so studying abroad becomes a unique educational experience enabling graduates to develop desirable skills and knowledge. Del Carpio et al. (2013) reported that Lao employers wanted employees to be sufficiently equipped with transferable skills, such as communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, and foreign language skills. Similar requirements are also stated in the report on education and skills demand in the private sector in Laos (MLSW, 2019). Those skills in demand are mostly those developed through studying abroad found in this study. Graduates with international study experience have better job opportunities. As described above, graduates got several job offers during their job search.

One of the important findings of this study is the potential of student exchange programs in developing employability skills. Many skills developed through studying abroad (see Table 2) met the desirable skills by Lao employers, as compared in Table 4. However, while Laos is facing the emergence of the knowledge economy, alongside academic activities provided at local universities, overseas exchanges bring new technical or innovative knowledge into the formation of human capital to prepare a better-qualified workforce for socio-economic development. International networks and knowledge of other cultures and countries are important as the Lao economy is open to the world, especially the ASEAN region. Given that workplaces are becoming internationalized and Laos has many foreign and local firms with international connections, graduates with international competences are an asset for the firms. They bring in different skills and experience gained in another country to solve problems differently and facilitate business operations.

Table 4: Skills Developed through Studying Abroad and Skills Demanded in Laos

| Current study | MLSW (2019)* | Del Carpio et al. (2013)† |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Interpersonal and communication skills | Language skills | Literacy |
| Technical knowledge | ICT & computer skills | Technical |
| Knowledge of other countries | Communication | Numeracy |
| Foreign language | Ability to learn | Problem-solving |
| Problem-solving | Service | Communication |
| Analytical skills | Teamwork | Teamwork |

| Current study | MLSW (2019)* | Del Carpio et al. (2013)† |
|------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| International networks | Timeliness | Critical thinking |
| Independence | Creativity | Autonomy |
| Teamwork | Stress-resistant | Time-management |
| Adaptability | Analytical skills | Leadership |
| | Flexibility | Literacy in foreign language |
| | Reliability | |
| | Independence | |

*Analysis of job advertisements on 2,192 vacant posts in the private sector in Laos.

†An Enterprise-STEP (Skills Toward Employment and Productivity) survey of 379 firms in the private sector in Laos.

CONCLUSION

Studying abroad with student exchange programs is worth investing in to enhance students' human capital that contributes to ensuring their employability in today's competitive labor markets. Overseas exchange experience was worthwhile for students, particularly to develop employability skills, enrich academic knowledge, enhance international competence, and form global citizenship. These skills and knowledge were widely recognized as a competitive advantage to secure employment. International study experience signals graduates' superior specialized knowledge and ability, relative to their fellow graduates who did not study abroad, to convince employers to take this into account in hiring decisions. However, such experience is just a part of academic attainments. It will be useless if graduates fail to demonstrate the professional value of studying abroad appropriately at the point of recruitment and in workplaces.

Based on the findings of this study, further research is needed to involve employers to substantiate or validate the claims by students that study abroad experience is useful to secure a job. In this way, demands in labor markets can be analyzed to make implications for institutions to better prepare graduates for the workforce. Furthermore, a comparative study between students who do and do not study abroad may better identify the outcomes of study abroad participation. Given an increase in a variety of learning abroad programs and durations, if we can compare one to another, it will be useful to suggest to institutional leaders and parents which programs should be invested in to enhance students' human capital to better their opportunities in labor markets. Although physically studying abroad is now constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are optimistic about the professional value of student mobility in the new normal era.

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