


**THE IMPACT OF STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES ON
STUDENTS' PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT, WITH A FOCUS ON THAI AND EUROPEAN
STUDENTS**

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The image shows a large, faint watermark of the Mahidol University logo in the background. The logo is circular and features a central emblem with Thai script around the perimeter.

**A THEMATIC PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF MANAGEMENT
COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT
MAHIDOL UNIVERSITY
2023**

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Thematic paper
entitled
**IMPACT OF STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES ON STUDENTS'
PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT,
WITH A FOCUS ON THAI AND EUROPEAN STUDENTS**


was submitted to the College of Management, Mahidol University
for the degree of Master of Management

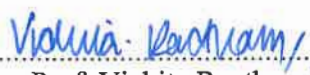
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thematic paper advisor and professor, Astrid Kainzbauer, for her support, guidance and invaluable advice during the writing of my thematic paper. Her invaluable teachings were a genuine source of inspiration for the choice of my subject and for the writing of my thematic paper. I would also like to thank the members of the committee for their investment in reading my research.

Furthermore, I am extremely grateful for all the students and participants of this research who willingly shared on their personal experiences and supported the writing of my research.

Special thanks to CMMU, College of Management, Mahidol University, and all the teachers and students who supported me greatly throughout my year of Master 2.

Amy Beynon

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ABSTRACT

Today more than ever, global educational cooperation is crucial in order to foster cultural awareness and create a more interconnected, tolerant, and knowledgeable world that is better equipped to address the challenges of the 21st century.

The primary challenge remains the reduction of barriers to the physical mobility of students, in order to create a balance of opportunities in the international job market and to foster personal growth and cross-cultural awareness.

This paper examines the impact of long-term mobility on the personal and professional growth of Thai and European students to further demonstrate how long-distance experiences abroad offer in terms of opportunities for self-growth. This research stems from the desire to encourage students to participate in study abroad experiences and highlight their importance in a globalized world.

KEY WORDS: student mobility/ personal development/ professional development/
culture

62 pages

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The number of international and foreign tertiary students started at 300,000 in 1963 and experienced a significant increase, up to 2 million students, in the year 2000. Between 1998 and 2019, the number of tertiary students who had crossed borders to engage in study abroad programs grew consistently and reached 6.1 million students in 2019, as reported by the OECD that same year. Learning a language, discovering another culture, enhancing employability, creating an international network, gaining confidence and independence: the benefits of studying abroad appear numerous and continue to increasingly attract students. Asian students constitute half of the global foreign student population, with a significant proportion coming from China, India, and Korea. Geographically, Europe remains the primary destination for international students, closely followed by North America.

Yet, despite the many reported benefits of international sojourns and the boom in student mobility, this number amounts to only 2.6% of the student population (UNESCO IESALC Report, 2022). The obstacles to student mobility are challenging to overcome and can vary from one country to another: lack of financial resources, political instability and restrictions, unsupportive family environments, fear of the unknown, lack of support from educational institutions, and more. These challenges were exacerbated during the last Covid-19 pandemic when schools and educational institutions were shuttered in 185 countries.

Today more than ever, global educational cooperation is crucial in order to foster cultural awareness and create a more interconnected, tolerant, and knowledgeable world that is better equipped to address the challenges of the 21st century. The primary challenge remains the reduction of barriers to the physical mobility of students, in order to create a balance of opportunities in the international job market and to foster personal growth and cross-cultural awareness. Students need to benefit from higher education and learn to adapt to global economic demands which have emerged from the increasing interdependence of our world cultures and economies. In today's business world, students are facing more barriers to succeed without any cultural adaptation and

knowledge. Studies abroad has become a growing business allowing young individuals from all backgrounds to benefit and learn from their experience abroad.

Research has shown clear benefits of study abroad experiences, however failing to articulate clearly the long-term impact of these experiences on personal and professional growth from in-depth students' perspective (De Graaf, Slagter, 2015, p43). Furthermore, studies rarely consider the duration of the experience and the cultural distance between the home and the host environments as factors and opportunities for personal growth.

This study aims to analyze whether student mobility holds a transformative impact on students' personal and professional growth, and what are the specific impacts it holds for students. Additionally, from a cross-cultural perspective, we will address what particular opportunities for growth do students experience when studying in culturally distant countries. The study focuses purposely on long-term mobilities undertaken by European students (France, Germany, Spain) in Thailand, as well as Thai students in European countries. The focus on Thailand and Europe, both as home and host environments was decided as a result of my own experience and the depth of my encounters in Thailand. This choice was made to provide in-depth narrative analysis on how cross-cultural differences between the home and the host environment can have a transformative impact on students' personal growth. The purpose of narrative inquiry through semi-structured interviews is to provide in-depth insights from international students and the impact of their experience abroad.

Therefore, this paper examines the impact of long-term mobility on the personal and professional growth of Thai and European students to further demonstrate how long-distance experiences abroad offer in terms of opportunities for self-growth. This research stems from the desire to encourage students to participate in study abroad experiences and highlight their importance in a globalized world.

Firstly, the paper presents a review of the research regarding the topic of student mobility, englobing the factors of mobility, the impact of student mobility on personal and professional development. Then, through the use of a qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews, the paper investigates the diverse experiences of the participants who engaged in a study abroad experience. Through their lens, we develop how their experiences fostered personal and professional growth.

Lastly, the paper presents a cross-cultural analysis by examining the impact of the students' mobilities on personal development within the contrasting landscapes of Thai and European host environments. The aim of the paper is to offer a comprehensive understanding of international student mobility, its transformative impact on students with a deeper cross-cultural analysis on Thailand and Europe as host environments.



CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction of the Culture Shock Theory and the Psychological Benefits of Travel

When we look at the studies carried out on study abroad experiences and their effects on students, the findings are often the same: international stays are opportunities for increase in self-awareness and personal growth, and lead to questioning of one's own culture, its values, behavior and beliefs.

Research into international sojourns began in the 1950s, with the introduction of the concept of culture shock, introduced by K. Oberg. With the increase in international exchanges and interactions between individuals from different cultures, cross-cultural experiences were amplified and gave rise to culture shocks. K. Oberg defines culture shock as “the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (K. Oberg, 1954, p142). These signs and symbols include “words, gestures, facial expressions, customs or norms [which] are acquired by all of us in the course of growing up and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept” (K. Oberg, 1954, p142). Part of our culture, these familiar signs are embedded in us and remain largely invisible to our consciousness. Oberg highlights 4 stages or phases that individuals go through during culture shock: excitement or fascination, irritation, adjustment and adaptation. These 4 stages vary in duration and intensity depending on the individual. In order to overcome this culture shock, the author explains that it is important to understand that we are not born with our culture, but with “the capacity to learn it and use it” (K. Oberg, 1954, p144). Oberg develops further that our culture is “the product of history and is built up over time largely through processes which are, as far as the individual is concerned, beyond his awareness” (K. Oberg, 1954, p144), thus explaining why individuals suffer from irritation or rejection of a foreign culture. He develops the relationship of belonging that we naturally develop with our cultures.

Ethnocentrism is the “belief that not only the culture but the race and nation form the center of the world. Individuals identify themselves with their own group and its ways to the extent that any critical comment is taken as an affront to the individual as well as to the group” (K. Oberg, 1954, p144). The author explains how understanding where culture comes from and why we fully identify with it can help overcome culture shock and cultivate more acceptance towards foreign cultures.

In 1975, in his paper “An alternative view of culture shock”, author Peter Adler questions and develops on past research regarding culture shock. He emphasizes that experiencing stages of culture shock imply a developmental process for individuals, and that challenges which are encountered during a culture shock process can also be the source of potential self-development. He explains that a cross-cultural experience is actually marked by the individual's transitional process: “a movement from a state of low self and cultural awareness to a state of high self and cultural awareness” (Adler, 1975, p15). Based on the research of K. Oberg and others, Adler specifies five phases of the transitional process, portraying the progression of experiential learning on a psychological level:

- Contact: In the earliest stages of contact with the host culture, the individual regards the new environment “from the insularity of his or her own ethnocentrism” (Adler, 1975, p16). Individuals are more sensitive to similarities with the home country than differences, thus validating and reinforcing their own cultural behaviors.

- Disintegration: The second stage is characterized by disorientation and growing tension as the individual is faced with different behaviors and values. This stage can lead to feelings of isolation, depression and confusion of one's identity in the new environment.

- Reintegration: The third stage implies a strong rejection of the host culture “through stereotyping, generalization, evaluation, and judgmental behavior and attitude” (Adler, 1975, p17). The individual might relate personal challenges to the host culture and develop negative feelings and defensiveness. However, the author regards these negative feelings as a sign for growing cultural awareness and “a basis for new intuitive, emotional, and cognitive experiences” (Adler, 1975, p17). In this stage, individuals might differ in the decisions they make, whether it should be by drifting back to

“superficial behaviors and responses of the contact phase” or moving closer “to a resolution of the difficulties and frustrations being encountered” (Adler, 1975, p17).

- **Autonomy:** The fourth stage manifests through “a rising sensitivity and by the acquisition of both skill and understanding of the second culture” (Adler, 1975, p17). In this stage, the individual might perceive a sense of autonomy and understanding of the host culture, feels comfortable navigating the new environment and develops an increasing flexibility in facing new situations.

- **Independence:** The final stage of the transitional experience is when the individual is “fully able to accept and draw nourishment from cultural differences and similarities” (Adler, 1975, p18). According to Adler, the individual is “capable of experiential learning that is holistically incorporated into identity, while at the same time capable of again having preconceptions, assumptions, values and attitudes challenged” (Adler, 1975, p18).

Adler explains the stages in transitional experience as “sequences of changes, (...) indicative of a progressive unfolding of the self” (Adler, 1975, p18). The individual experiences diverse situations and gradually develops new perceptions of others, new “dimensions of existence” (Adler, 1975, p18). Adler was one of the first researchers to introduce the culture shock theory and explain how cross-cultural experiences could be used as opportunities for “self-development” towards “higher levels of personality development” (Adler, 1975, p14). The author also outlines that not all significant change situations will foster learning and self-development as certain individuals are unable to adjust. The model of transitional experience put light on the need for further research on assimilation and cross-cultural communication, as interactions and engagement from people in cross-cultural experiences increased. As the author concludes, “the more one is capable of experiencing new and different dimensions of human diversity, the more one learns of oneself. Such learning takes place when a person transcends the boundaries of ego, culture, and thinking” (Adler, 1975, p22). It is interesting to note that the culture shock process is an initiator of personal development. It encourages individuals to reflect on their own identity and cultural background while requiring them to make a greater effort to adjust to the new environment.

Later in the 1980s and 1990s, researchers began to investigate how international experiences were a means for exploring self-identity and one of the most effective ways of nurturing personal development. In a study published in 1983, author N. L. Kauffman was one of the first authors to investigate the relationship between study abroad experiences and changes in personality development among college students. The results showed shifts in personality functioning linked to the study abroad: “Participants increased in self-confidence, in appreciation for cultural differences, and in tolerance for ambiguity. While their interest in helping others was relatively high before going abroad, this developed further while abroad”. (Kauffman, 1984, p18). This study was followed in later years by a large body of research into study abroad experiences and their psychological benefits for students.

2.2 Exploring Motivation Factors and Personal Development

Outcomes in Students’ Overseas Experiences

By the year 2000, up to 2 million students were traveling abroad in part of their studies (UNESCO IESALC report, 2022). The research landscape has witnessed substantial growth, with an increasing focus on understanding the factors motivating students to seek international experiences, as well as the impacts on their personal and professional development. In order to better grasp how study abroad experiences impact students' development, this section aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing knowledge base in order to pave the way for our own research.

2.2.1 Factors of Motivation Driving Student Mobility

Studies present two main factors of motivation for student mobility: contextual factors and expectations. The study “Why do Gen Y Students Study Abroad?” published in 2014 develops on mobility factors among Gen Y students and their intention to study abroad. Co-authors J. Pope, K. Lehnert, C. Sanchez and A. Schmid questioned how students' motivation to study abroad lies in their desire for personal development, moderated by contextual factors such as their age, gender, prior international experience, parents' level of education and household income. These contextual factors were used based on data from past studies. The study depicts Gen Y

students as people with “a desire for firsthand experiences that shakes up their routine, engages their senses, and stimulates personal growth” (Pope, Lehnert, Sanchez, Schmid, 2014, p98). The research proposes that the desire for personal growth motivates Gen Y students’ intent to study abroad. The co-authors collected 292 surveys of undergraduate American students in business majors.

The results of the study supported the hypothesis that students undertook their mobility partly with the intention that the experience should lead to their own personal development: “Gen Y students recognize the benefits of fulfilling their own potential, enhancing their experiences, and seeking individual growth, and that study abroad might help them achieve those objectives” (Pope, Lehnert, Sanchez, Schmid, 2014, p105). Furthermore, the results found that gender, parental educational background and household income made no significant difference in the motivation to go abroad. However, there was a strong positive relationship between motivation to study abroad and prior international experience, as well as age. It seems that students who lived abroad previously have more motivation to reiterate an experience abroad, and younger students may be more willing to seek new opportunities through study abroad (Pope, Lehnert, Sanchez, Schmid, 2014, p106). The study presents the limitations of surveying only American students of business majors. Therefore, we cannot fully extend the results to the students in the present study, given strong differences in cultural and contextual backgrounds. However, the results demonstrate that students’ desire for personal growth holds an influence on their motivation to study abroad. It also indicates that students participating in study abroad experiences hold expectations that it will result in personal development.

A paper published in 2015 by authors S. Bandyopadhyay and K. Bandyopadhyay focused on the factors influencing student participation in college study abroad programs and proposed strategies to better market study abroad programs. The article supports previous studies by suggesting that participation in study abroad programs depends on the students’ expectations of its benefits regarding personal growth, but also professional development and intellectual growth. The intention to participate in such programs would rely on these expected benefits, stemming from the desire for intercultural awareness and by general perceptions that students have regarding study abroad programs. Students’ intent to study abroad would also be

influenced by other contextual factors such as duration, cost and demographic characteristics (S. Bandyopadhyay, K. Bandyopadhyay, 2015, p88).

Based on previous studies and supported by the authors, the complete immersion in the host culture enables students to gain deeper cultural knowledge, enhances their communication and intercultural skills and enhances the global perspectives of students (S. Bandyopadhyay, K. Bandyopadhyay, 2015, p89). Another outcome expected from students is personal growth which is described as “the increased confidence and self-reliance” likely to occur in participants, as well as the increase in “leadership skills, problem-solving skills, ability to cope with unfamiliar and ambiguous situations, and open-mindedness” (S. Bandyopadhyay, K. Bandyopadhyay, 2015, p89). Furthermore, the article reveals that professional development, especially confirming the career choice, changing fields or refining professional options are usual outcomes of a study abroad experience. Studying abroad might also enhance the students’ attractiveness for employment by international companies. As mentioned, other factors have to be considered regarding the students’ intent to study abroad, such as duration, cost and demographic factors which highlight the “consistent disparities among study abroad participants across race, gender, and academic majors” (S. Bandyopadhyay, K. Bandyopadhyay, 2015, p90). The paper further suggests school institutions to better understand students’ expectations on study abroad programs to increase student participation. Co-authors suggest that “creating positive expectations of intercultural awareness will help in creating positive expectations of outcomes” for students who then will be more likely to participate (S. Bandyopadhyay, K. Bandyopadhyay, 2015, p91).

Another study using narrative inquiry methodology (Harrell, 2017), interviewed five undergraduate students from an American university on their experiences abroad. The interviews looked at students' hopes and motivations for studying abroad, followed by the short and long-term impact on their lives and personal development. The research highlighted that all students had determined at least one specific goal they strived for during their experience abroad. The study focuses on the cognitive theory of motivation (Bandura, 1989) to outline how expectations and goals influence the intent to study abroad. The main author Harrell (2017) highlights how interviewees all had the intrinsic desire to travel and learn about other cultures before

deciding to study abroad, thus impacting their decision to participate in such experiences.

The research highlights the importance that all students understand the benefits of student mobility for their personal and professional development. It is therefore essential that educational establishments communicate clearly these positive outcomes of study abroad experiences to their students in order to reduce barriers to student mobility. That way, all students would hold the opportunity to choose objectively whether they want to take part in a study abroad program.

The research on motivation factors for student mobility has shown that students' intent to study abroad largely relies on the positive benefits they expect to receive from their experience. Students choose to study abroad in order to enhance intercultural awareness and benefit from personal and professional development. Other contextual factors such as demographics, past international experience, duration or cost might influence the participation in study abroad experiences.

2.2.2 Impact of Study Abroad Experiences on Personal and Professional Development

The literature on the topic further examined the consequences of mobility abroad for students' personal and professional development. Recent studies have emphasized that study abroad experiences had strong and positive impacts on students' personal and professional growth.

Research shows consensus that there are undeniable effects of long-term mobility on personal development and professional careers, for the majority of students who benefit from it. The main outcome of study abroad programs reported by studies refers to personal growth. According to the author Kauffmann, personal growth includes the process of improving certain skills such as increased tolerance, adaptability to ambiguous situations, empathy, self-esteem and confidence, independence, and cultural openness, as well as professional such as improved language skills, change in career goals, more interest in political and international affairs (Kauffmann, 1983).

In a psychological analysis of the impact of study abroad experiences on personal development and behaviors, author Greta Couper includes in personal growth the "changes in self-identity, personality, and adaptability" (Couper, 2013, p5). The

author emphasizes that international travelers face opportunities for personal growth and self-analysis “far beyond the scope of traditional education” (Couper, 2013, p1), which can result in changing perceptions of themselves, their values and behaviors. The study describes the notion of positive regression, defined by theorists as “a temporary retreat to earlier forms of behavior while under stress that leads to disharmony, self-evaluation, reflection, reintegration, and enhanced self-awareness”, a phenomenon which forces us to adapt to new situations. In an attempt to adapt in an entirely new cultural environment, students undergo stressful and growth experiences which may improve their internal ability to adapt and encourage personal transformation and growth (Couper, 2013, p14). The author also raises criticism about the lack of research into the changes induced in students’ personal development after their mobility: Researchers agree that it is difficult to measure the benefits of study abroad programs. Factors such as advanced preparation, expectations, length of program, course content, attitude and personality characteristics of the traveler, depth of immersion, and post-study follow-up may not all be present, and research design is diverse and not amenable to meta-analysis. Furthermore, “consensus does not exist regarding what assessment instruments should be used to measure change” (Couper, 2013, p3-4).

In a quantitative study on long term personal and professional impact of study abroad programs in the US, main authors DeGraaf and Slagter (2013) examined the gap between two groups of students: the first group had participated in a study abroad experience and the other group of students had not. The study collected 354 on-line surveys, with 193 students having studied off-campus, while the remaining 141 had not participated in a study abroad experience. The first research question related to civic engagement, and the second to the long-term impact of the mobility on students’ personal development, regarding self-confidence and intercultural awareness after their experience abroad. The authors also collected qualitative data through individual interviews, in order to complete the on-line surveys. The questions focused on “personal changes in mindset/awareness, maturity, lifestyle choices, personal skills, sense of adventure and self-confidence, career choices and development, as well as feelings of independence and self-efficacy” (De Graaf, Slagter, 2015, p7).

The authors agree that research has shown significant personal and lifestyle changes following study abroad experiences, however lacks comparing results to a

control group. Thus, this study is interesting in terms of the long-term impact of mobility on individuals, as well as the comparison with individuals who have not been mobile. Out of the 354 respondents, the most important variable between the 2 groups was the ability to speak another language, leading to the likelihood of “having friends from other cultures later in life, work with other cultures professionally and exhibit lower levels of intercultural anxiety”. More than 50% of the respondents marked their experience as having a “strong influence” on their increased social skills, intellectual curiosity, greater appreciation of other cultures, increased language skills, increased sense of adventure and deepened relationships with peers. The authors also conducted in-depth interviews with 30 respondents about the long-term impacts of their experiences abroad. The main themes that were highlighted by all the respondents were the personal and professional benefits stemming from their experience abroad, including “global awareness, maturity, self-confidence, and accomplishment” (De Graaf, Slagter, 2015, p56).

Being conducted only with US citizens, the study shows limitations as the results cannot be scaled up or generalized to all students although it provides a general perspective on how study abroad experiences can impact personal growth. The study also highlights the need to address further topics such as how the location of the study abroad experience might impact participants differently. Referring to the previous work of Marsha Mitchell Hutchins on study abroad experiences and students’ personal development, the author found that location of the experience might have a large impact on students in shaping their experiences (Hutchins, 1996). Indeed, individuals’ perceptions on their experience are likely to vary depending on the host environment. The more distant the host country’s culture is from the country of origin, the more likely the student is to experience a culture shock. The cultural distance is such that it will increase the need to adapt and develop cross-cultural skills for the student. The analysis also points out that the lack of longitudinal research on the long-term impacts of study abroad experiences and how “Understanding these impacts is important as study abroad professionals work to design programs, promote these programs, and justify their existence to college administrators” (De Graaf, Slagter, 2015, p57).

Further recent studies have examined the impact of experiences abroad from the students’ perceptions. Through narrative inquiry methodology, lead author Harrell (2017) interviewed five undergraduate students from an American university on the

short term and long term impacts their experiences had on their personality, attitude, or beliefs. All interviewees found that their experiences abroad impacted their personal and professional growth in that it modified their perspective on life and refined their future career plans (Harrell, 2017, p63). The students also mentioned “becoming more comfortable with new experiences, practicing independence and gaining soft skills such as improvisation or flexibility” (Harrell, 2017, p63). Another interview-based study found that study abroad was “a largely positive experience for its participants, contributing to developing sensitivity to cultural differences, and a sense of intercultural awareness” (Sobkowiak, 2019, p702). The results from this study also implied that student mobility does not always lead to intercultural development and encourages intercultural training prior to the sojourn abroad in order that students enhance their mindfulness during the study abroad experience. Lastly, a multi-study project (Niehoff, 2016) led in Germany has focused solely on the effects of studying abroad on personality development among 221 students. The study compared the results from 93 students who studied abroad and the remaining others who didn't. The findings of the study indicated that study abroad experiences might have the ability to provoke personality changes. The students appeared to have increased extraversion and agreeableness as well as decreased neuroticism (E. Niehoff, L. Petersdotter, P.A. Freund, p55). These recent studies have more deeply examined students' perceptions on their experiences and broadened the scope of research into the effects of study abroad on the development of students' personalities.

Research on the effects of experiences abroad underscores their significant and positive influence on students' personal development. In addition to the previously mentioned benefits of language acquisition, developing an international network, and exploring new cultures, studies reveal that overseas experiences genuinely contribute to students' personal growth. Key findings indicate an enhancement of soft skills such as independence, confidence, and extraversion, along with the development of students' ability to reflect on their own personality, behavior, and culture. It is noteworthy that students undergo diverse experiences, and personal development can manifest in various forms as a result of their mobility.

2.3 Key Findings and Limitations of the Literature Review

The literature review covers a number of common themes surrounding the topic of student mobility. Research has focused mainly on the motivating factors for mobility and the expectations associated with the experience, the various stages of adaptation during mobility, and the short and long-term impact of mobility on students' personal and professional development. Certain contextual or personal factors will influence students' intention and motivation to go abroad. Students also develop expectations prior to their mobility, which will influence their motivation to study abroad. They will then reassess their expectations throughout their experience.

Depending on these expectations, factors intrinsic to the individual and the situational context in which they find themselves (host country, encounters, adaptation), students will experience and interpret mobility differently. On their return, students evaluate how their experience has impacted their personal and professional development. "People's values and goals mediate between external events and the perceived quality of these experiences", meaning students' own perceptions and interpretations of their experience will determine their self-growth (Couper, 2013). The most recent research has focused on the effects that experiences abroad can have on personality development (*see below: Summary table of motivation factors to seek international experiences*).

In relation to the present study, the existing literature reveals certain limitations as it lacks a detailed and thorough examination of the significance of the host country's location in contributing to a more meaningful experience for students' personal development. From an intercultural standpoint, studying in a culturally distant country may exert a more significant impact on students' personal development. It exposes them to diverse cultural norms, values and behaviors that vary significantly from their own culture (Harrell, 2017). This exposure fosters a heightened need for adaptation and an appreciation for cultural diversity (De Graaf and Slagter, 2015). Additionally, students are more likely to experience culture shock presenting an opportunity for self-growth and a transformative experience (Adler, 1975).

Furthermore, there is a noticeable absence of specific studies examining the impact of studying abroad from the perspectives of European and Thai students, which constitutes the primary focus of the present study. The objective is to examine the

influence of cultural distance between the host and home environments on students' personal and professional development.

Summary Table of Motivation Factors to Seek International Experiences

Expectations	Contextual factors	Impact of study abroad experiences on personal development
<p>Students' motivation to study abroad lies in their desire for personal development (Pope, Lehnert, Sanchez, Schmid, 2014)</p>	<p>Students' motivation is moderated by contextual factors: age and prior international experience (Pope, Lehnert, Sanchez, Schmid, 2014)</p>	<p>Culture shock as a potential source for self-development (Adler, 1975)</p> <p>International travelers face opportunities for personal growth and self-analysis through stressful and growth experiences during the time abroad (Couper, 2013)</p>
<p>Students' intention to study abroad relies on expected benefits they hold regarding personal, professional and intellectual growth (S. Bandyopadhyay, K. Bandyopadhyay, 2015)</p>	<p>Students' intent to study abroad would also be influenced by other contextual factors such as duration, cost and demographic characteristics (S. Bandyopadhyay, K. Bandyopadhyay, 2015)</p>	<p>Study abroad experiences result in significant personal and lifestyles changes such as global awareness, maturity, self-confidence and accomplishment (De Graad, Slagter, 2015)</p>
<p>Students' expectations and goals (intrinsic desire to travel and learn about other cultures) influence the intent to study abroad (Harrell, 2017)</p>		<p>Location of the experience might have a large impact on students in shaping their experiences (Hutchins, 1996)</p> <p>Interviews-based studies found that experiences abroad have short- and long-term impacts on personal and</p>

Expectations	Contextual factors	Impact of study abroad experiences on personal development
		<p>professional development through the increase in soft skills and cultural awareness (Harrell, 2017; Sobkowiak, 2019)</p> <p>Study abroad experiences have the ability to provoke personality changes such as increased extraversion and agreeableness (Niehoff, 2017)</p>

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research paper constitutes a qualitative exploration of the perspectives of Thai and European students regarding their experiences abroad. The study investigates the motivating factors driving students to study abroad and examines the impact of these experiences on both personal and professional growth. The investigation involved seven European students (originating from Germany, France, and Spain) who pursued studies in Thailand, and seven Thai students who pursued studies in European countries (France, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom). All participants have participated in a long-term study abroad program that lasted more than 5 months. The selection of participants was based on their extensive experiences in either Thailand or a European country, allowing for a thorough examination from an intercultural standpoint. They were given other names in order to preserve their anonymity (*see Table of participants below*). Their backgrounds were requested to help contextualize their experience abroad. The table of participants specifies the students' relationship with the international scene prior to their stay abroad. Part of the respondents had had several experiences abroad before their stay, or had parents with an international career, and other students had never had any experience abroad.

The interviews employed a semi-structured methodology consisting of “in-depth interviews where the respondents have to answer preset open-ended questions” (National Library of Medicine, 2014). This format of data collection used in qualitative research was chosen to encourage participants to reflect on their experience abroad and the ensuing impact on their personal and professional development. Semi-structured interviews include a foundational set of questions complemented by follow-up questions tailored to the interviewee's responses. This approach in qualitative research offers several advantages. It provides flexibility in questioning, enabling the researcher to explore answers in-depth and capture the complexity and nuances of participants' perspectives and narratives. Embracing a participant-centered approach, this method affords participants the opportunity to fully articulate their experiences. While providing a guiding framework for inquiry, it also permits respondents to share unexpected

insights, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the research topic. Lastly, semi-structured interviews contribute to establishing a sense of comfort and trust between the researcher and participants by creating a safe environment for open and more honest exchanges.

In this research, the respondents were recorded which allowed to analyze the data and their experience during and after the interviews. Foundational interview questions were asked to all participants (*see Appendix 1*), and were complemented by follow-up questions, adapted to the participant's answers.

By employing this qualitative research approach, the paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological and personal impacts of long-term study abroad programs, seeking direct insights from the students' perspectives. The study seeks to illustrate the depth of the impact these experiences have on the students' personal and professional development.

Table of participants

Thai respondents	International background prior the experience abroad
Alex: Master's degree in the UK – < 1y	Prior experiences abroad and parents with international careers
Rim: Master's degree in the UK – < 1y	No prior experiences abroad
Fah: Doctorate in Switzerland – 2y	Prior experiences abroad and parents with international careers
Jeth: Master's degree in Switzerland – 2y	No prior experiences abroad
Lily: Master 2 in France – 1y	No prior experiences abroad
Beam: 6-month internship in France	No prior experiences abroad
Kong: 6-month internship in Spain	Prior experiences abroad and parents with international careers

European respondents	International background prior the experience abroad
Paul: Master 2 in Thailand – 1y	Dual nationality French and Spanish – prior experiences abroad
Teddy: Master 2 in Thailand – 1y	French nationality – prior experiences abroad
Laura: Master 2 in Thailand- 1y	Dual nationality French and English – prior experiences abroad
James: 6-month semester in Thailand	German nationality – no prior experiences abroad
Olivia: 6-month semester in Thailand	French nationality – no prior experiences abroad
Norah: 6-month semester in Thailand	German nationality – no prior experiences abroad
Nolan: 6-month semester in Thailand	French nationality – no prior experiences abroad

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

4.1 Investigating Students' Perspectives on their International Mobility Through Qualitative Study Methods

4.1.1 Description of Thai Students' Experience in Europe

The first point that was addressed with the Thai students in the interview questions related to the factors of motivation for participating in a study abroad program and choosing a European country as their host environment.

Factors of Motivation and Expectations Before the Mobility

The students were inquired about the motivations and expectations that prompted their participation in a study abroad program. One of the participants, Rim, is pursuing a Master course at Nottingham Trent University in the UK. She shared, “Studying abroad, particularly in the UK, had long been a personal passion of mine. The allure of international education had captivated me from early on after having two previous experiences with courses in the UK”. She explained that she was never exposed to a multicultural environment prior to her experience, and that joining “an international program where the instruction was in English exposed (her) to diverse perspectives and placed (her) in a globally-oriented educational environment”. The main factors of motivation for Rim for studying abroad was learning how to speak English, gaining valuable academic experience and developing self-reliance. Alex has also been pursuing a Master of Management degree in the UK for 1 year and 2 months. He explained that his parents strongly advised him to study abroad in order to improve his resume and academic experience. He chose the UK as a preferred destination as he believed it would be easier to travel across the UK and in Europe. Beam is a student with a bachelor degree who had the opportunity to do an internship in France for 6 months thanks to her university in Thailand. The main factor of studying abroad was the accessibility of such an opportunity which was facilitated by her university. Before leaving, she was open “to explore more about the food, culture and people in France, learn new things and improve

herself”. Rim, Alex and Beam all expressed in their interviews that their primary concern was not integrating in the culture because of the cultural differences and language barriers they could face in France and in the UK. “My primary fear was that I had to make new friends, from different cultures and language as me and that made me nervous”, Alex expressed. Beam also shared how her main concern of doing an internship in France was language barriers. This concern was due to her low proficiency in English prior to her experience and having no knowledge in French language. For all three, they would experience living in a different culture for the first time and they anticipated the need to adapt, in order to integrate faster and benefit from their experience.

Kong is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Thailand and completed a 6-month internship in Spain. During his interview, he shared that he had already been immersed in a multicultural environment in Bangkok from the age of 15 to 22, forming connections with international students and becoming acquainted with various European cultures while residing in Thailand. Kong explained that he wanted to live and do his internship in Spain for many reasons: “I wanted to come live in Spain for many reasons. I think the main factor was the people. I had a lot of European friends and I wanted to be closer to them so I did everything to find an internship there. I also wanted to live in a European city as I find them very safe and convenient to travel around”. He expressed having no specific concern prior to his experience but held high expectations regarding meeting international people and making new friendships. Lily pursued a Master’s degree in Management in a French university for one year. Similarly to Kong, her primary motivation for studying in France was to discover another culture and develop connections with international students.

Jeth and Fah have both been living in Switzerland (Zurich and Geneva) for over a year, pursuing Master's degrees. On her motivations to study abroad, Fah stated, “I was an exchange student in the US for one year when I was 16. I always wanted to learn about other cultures because I find it very interesting to experience. I then chose to study in Switzerland because my Master’s degree can only be done in Geneva”. She expressed no specific concerns before relocating to Switzerland: “My experience in the US changed my perspective and I learnt to exchange with foreigners comfortably”. Similarly, Jeth lived in the US in his first year of studies before moving to Switzerland

for his Master's degree in Physics. He shared his motivations for studying abroad, saying, "I chose to go to the US to explore different cultures, especially in California as I was looking for more diversity. Another reason for choosing the US as a first destination to study was to be able to learn English. Then, I wanted to experience Europe to explore other cultures, but especially to study astrophysics as there is a lack of research institutes in Thailand". He explained that he was especially concerned about language barriers and making friends in Switzerland, contrasting his experience in the US where he found it easier.

Overall, the two main points that were highlighted during the interviews with the Thai students as motivating factors were the desire to discover a new culture and language, as well as the enhancement of their academic experience.

The following point that was addressed in the interviews were the opportunities and advantages perceived by the interviewees of living and studying in a European country.

Advantages and Opportunities of the Experience Abroad

• Quality of education

One of the main benefits highlighted in the interviews was the high quality of life and education associated with living in Europe. Jeth emphasized that pursuing a Master's degree in Switzerland would greatly enhance his professional resume and employability. Fah shared that obtaining a degree in Europe, particularly in a country such as Switzerland, "will bring (her) privileges and opportunities when looking for a job in Thailand". Aspects such as the overall quality of life, transportation convenience, healthcare systems, air quality, and safety emerged as recurring themes in the interviews. Fah elaborated, stating, "There are many benefits of living in Switzerland, for the quality of air and access to healthcare for everyone. Here, I receive Swiss insurance thanks to my scholarships. There are fewer inequalities in the country among people, compared to Thailand". Rim expressed that "studying in a university in the UK provides (her) with academic growth through access to quality education and a diverse learning environment". Lily also highlighted how studying for a Master's degree in France expanded her professional network and would be advantageous in future job searches.

• Cultural exploration

A vital aspect addressed by the students revolved around the exploration of new cultures and interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Beam described her internship in France as her initial experience in a country significantly distant from Thailand. She stated, “I learned how to accept people, respect and adapt to cultural differences”. From her experience in the UK, Rim expressed how studying there exposes her to a cultural richness that she had never encountered before. She emphasized, “interacting with people from diverse cultures helps me discover myself from a new angle and more in depth. I find myself growing and evolving in various aspects, even beyond learning a new language”. Kong shared a similar perspective, noting that “living abroad fosters a global perspective since interacting with people from diverse backgrounds broadens one’s awareness”. During his internship in Spain, he had the opportunity to create friendships and expand his professional network with individuals from diverse countries. Lily also highlighted the opportunities for connection that studying in France offered: “I have best friends from France and other countries and we still keep in touch until today. Even though we’re in different places of the world, we’re still sending news and updates on our lives and I feel very blessed to have met them”. Alex also shared about the cultural diversity and open-mindedness he encountered in the UK, highlighting the value of creating new bonds with both international and British students.

Interviews with the Thai students highlighted quality of life, education and cultural openness as the main advantages of studying in a European country.

The following points addressed in the interviews were challenges and obstacles that the Thai students encountered during their studies in Europe.

Challenges and Obstacles During the Mobility

• Language and cultural barriers

Most of the Thai students highlighted language barriers and the challenge of integrating into the local culture during their interviews. Rim shared the primary difficulties she encountered upon arriving in the UK were the language barriers and adjusting to a new culture: “When I arrived, my level of English was not very good and it was difficult to connect with the local people. I had to adjust to British culture which is very different from Thailand”. Fah shared her challenges with adapting to the Swiss

culture and particularly integrating with the local people in Geneva: “My first months in Geneva were very hard, I found people who live in Geneva are colder and more distant. There is also a strong language barrier because I can’t speak French”. Fah also described how living in a host family facilitated language learning and cultural assimilation.

Jeth faced similar challenges adapting to Swiss culture and studying in Zurich: “Compared to Thailand, I find social life is harder in Zurich and I experience struggles adapting to Swiss culture. This is mainly due to language barriers as I don’t speak Swiss German which makes it harder to build relationships with the local people”. Beam also experienced language barriers while she was living in France. When she initially arrived, her English proficiency was low, and she didn’t speak French, prompting her to rapidly improve her English skills and seek support from people who could help her navigate more easily. Lily also found it challenging to adapt to new situations, people and places. During her Master’s degree in France, she chose to create bonds with both international and local students in order to improve her English skills faster and, more importantly, integrate better in her new environment.

- **Cost of living**

The students also raised concerns about the cost of living during their experiences in Europe. Jeth and Fah explained how prices are considerably higher in Switzerland compared to Thailand, given Switzerland’s highly advanced and developed economy. Both students benefited from scholarships which enabled them to pursue their studies in Switzerland. Lily also mentioned that the cost of living compared to Thailand was considerably higher in France, and how she had to adjust her expenses accordingly. Rim faced challenges finding affordable housing in the UK due to very high rents. The interviews shed light on how the disparity in the cost of living affected the mobility of Thai students and was identified as a source of stress for some.

The main challenges and obstacles that were emphasized during the interviews with Thai students included language and cultural barriers, as well as the cost of living.

4.1.2 Description of European Students' Experiences in Thailand

The first point that was addressed with the European students related to the factors of motivation for participating in a study abroad program and choosing Thailand as their host country.

Factors of Motivation and Expectations Before the Mobility

From the literature review, it seems that several factors play a role in influencing students' decision to go abroad. One of the key factors in taking part in a study abroad program revolves around the desire to acquire deeper cultural knowledge and openness. In the interviews, all six students expressed their aspiration to explore new cultures and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds as the primary motivations for their mobility. None of the European students had prior experience in a country on the Asian continent. Opting for Thailand as a destination was a deliberate choice to discover Thai culture and undergo a distinctive experience due to the geographical and cultural differences between Thailand and their home environments.

For Nolan, his main motivation was “discovering a new culture and place on earth as well as meeting new people and understanding their culture better”. Obtaining a genuine and deep insight into a foreign culture requires time, so his motivation was to spend as much time as possible abroad to develop a real understanding. He held expectations that Thai culture would significantly differ from his own German culture.

Among the 7 participants, one interviewee, James, openly expressed having deep expectations on his experience before leaving, and was strongly motivated by the desire to distance himself from his home environment. Dealing with personal issues and lacking professional ambitions prior to his experience, he shared his expectations and hopes regarding his mobility: “to feel calmer, to break free from negative thoughts, and to start a new chapter”. He anticipated that a change of environment would alter his way of thinking and his perspective on the future, viewing it as a strong opportunity for personal development.

Similarly, Teddy shared his wish to distance himself from his environment in France, stating, “By choosing to study in Thailand, I was seeking new experiences and the ability to go out of my comfort zone”. On the other hand, Paul, Norah and Laura

expressed having no specific expectations from the trip except to explore and learn from a completely different culture. Olivia explained that she “had great fear in disappointment” so she avoided building expectations by having no preparation or previous knowledge prior to her arrival in Thailand. Teddy and Laura also mentioned doing minimal research on the host country, as they wished to fully live each experience without preconceived ideas.

One factor highlighted for studying abroad in Thailand was the accessibility of participating in a study abroad experience and the interest in receiving education from a foreign university. In fact, all seven interviewees benefitted from the experience through their universities’ partnerships, enabling them to study in a Thai university. Two of them were required to participate in a study abroad semester as part of their studies. This accessibility is mainly due to the fact that all participants are enrolled in business studies, one of the fields of study that most encourages or requires students to study abroad during their education. Consequently, these students were inherently inclined toward a study abroad experience, potentially influencing their intention to go and facilitating mental preparation before the experience. Furthermore, one interviewee, Teddy, regarded their sojourn abroad as an opportunity to gain more academic and professional experience in Thailand and broaden his international network, with aspirations of possibly working in Asia later in his career.

What emerges from the interviews is that all participants voluntarily took part in their stay abroad, facilitated by their home university’s partnership with the Thai university. None of the participants had visited Asia before, and all expressed a desire to explore a new culture and interact with people from different cultures, serving as the primary motivation for choosing Thailand as a host country. For some, opting for Thailand was an opportunity to distance themselves from their home environment, representing an opportunity for personal development. For others, it was the opportunity to combine studying with an enriching personal experience. Financial constraints, often a concern when studying or living in a foreign country, were not mentioned during the interviews. This could be attributed to the considerably lower cost of living in Thailand compared to France, Germany or Spain, the students’ home countries.

The following points addressed by the students in the interviews were the opportunities and benefits experienced during the sojourn in Thailand.

Advantages and Opportunities of the Experience abroad

• Thai culture

The main point highlighted by the interviews was the discovery of Thai culture, the hospitality, and the kindness prevalent in Thai society. All students expressed this as a central element of their experience in Thailand. For James, he explains being "impressed by the kindness and friendliness of the people, as well as the sense of security" he felt on a daily basis. He also recounts adapting quickly to cultural differences, particularly in an effort to understand Thai society and live a more authentic experience close to the Thais, rather than a touristy one. According to Norah, "Thai people were very friendly, helpful, and made it very easy to integrate in the country". An important point that was emphasized multiple times was the "perceived safety" by all students during their experiences: "When comparing with France, we felt safe, one of the biggest advantages I felt in Thailand", according to Olivia.

Furthermore, Laura, Paul, and Teddy had the opportunity to build strong connections with Thai students during their study abroad. They explained having the strong intention of meeting and forming bonds with Thai people. Their integration into Thai culture was facilitated through these friendly encounters, making their experience even more memorable. Laura particularly shares, "Building relationships with Thai friends was truly the turning point of my experience. I had the chance to discuss many topics, from Thai society to students in Thailand, to understand their values and principles. It was a very enriching year in terms of human connections and cultural discoveries for me, who knew nothing about the culture". Teddy also shared being touched by the connections he created: "I never thought before experiencing this that I would create such strong bonds. Naturally, I interacted with Thai students because I didn't want to stick with students from my country".

The students were notably impressed by the importance of social harmony, family, and sharing, values that are extremely significant and present in many aspects of Thai society. These values differ from Western societies where individuality often takes precedence over the rest of society.

• Cost of living

The second point raised by all the students is the increase in their purchasing power during their mobility. Indeed, the cost of living is very different between Thailand and European countries. According to Olivia, "We had an extremely interesting purchasing power compared to other destinations, such as a European country like England where we would have had strong financial constraints. This allowed us to travel through the country, and experience diverse things we could have never done back in our home country". This low cost of living allowed students to have no financial constraints and, in particular, to travel in the country and have memorable experiences.

In conclusion, the interviews highlighted the profound impact of the students' immersion in Thai culture, emphasizing the warmth, kindness, and perceived safety prevalent in Thai society. Forging genuine connections with Thai students became an essential aspect of some of the participants' study abroad experience, fostering a deeper understanding of Thai values and principles. Additionally, the significantly lower cost of living in Thailand not only increased their purchasing power but also afforded them the freedom to explore the country and engage in enriching experiences that would have been financially challenging in their home countries. The factors contributed to a transformative and memorable period of cultural discovery for the students.

During the interviews, the students all presented similar opportunities from their experience in Thailand, but were faced with different challenges and obstacles according to their own experiences.

Challenges and Obstacles During the Mobility

• Language and communication barriers

During the interviews, we also delved into the challenges and obstacles that students experienced during their study abroad. The most significant obstacle reported by the students was the language barrier and the difficulties of communication and integration with Thais. Norah highlighted the challenges she faced in Thailand, stating, "It was always difficult to communicate with Thai people because of language barriers, whereas for daily exchanges or when trying to build deeper connections". James similarly encountered difficulties to create deep connections with Thai students. He explained that it would sometimes take a lot of energy to try maintaining relationships

with Thai people while it was easier to meet other international students: “At first, I struggled making connections with Thai people as I was mostly surrounded by students from Europe. At one point, I decided to distance myself from this group and went out of my comfort zone by developing friendships with Thais. This was certainly possible as I stayed for a long period in Thailand and I realized I wanted more connections with the local culture”.

All students were enrolled in a Thai university, engaging in work projects and sharing classes with Thai students. Paul and Laura both presented challenges in communicating in a work setting with Thai students: “As I understood later in my experience, group harmony and not losing face are very important in society, and it's frowned upon to express too directly what you're thinking to someone, especially when there are other people listening”, Paul shared on a group project. He contrasted with France where direct communication, individuality, and taking responsibility for your actions, are often encouraged in the workplace. He recognized that his communication style might sometimes be perceived as too direct or offensive to some people. Laura had similar experiences during group projects, noting, “I had to strongly adapt my way of communicating to others and it helped me practice more active listening in the work environment”. Both Laura and Paul reflected on and adapted their behaviors and communication styles in order to navigate group projects more effectively with their Thai peers.

- **Integration in the local culture**

Furthermore, Nolan experienced a deep culture shock in the initial month of his experience in Thailand. He expressed, “It was a huge challenge to get a feeling of how to behave without doing something wrong. The level of integration was highly dependent on my personal willingness to interact with the local culture”. He explained that he was constantly comparing situations with his German culture, leading to strong defensiveness and minimized interactions with the Thai environment. As an attempt to overcome this difficulty, he participated in a cross-cultural management class, facilitating the sharing of experiences and a better understanding of Thai culture. He explained during his interview, “eventually I overcame the difficulties by accepting the differences and learning to appreciate them”. According to Nolan, the presence of other

exchange students from Germany was also crucial, as it enabled him to surround himself with people who could relate to him in stressful situations.

Another challenge highlighted by some students was homesickness and missing the familiarity of their home environment, family, and friends. Teddy shared: “Halfway through my mobility, I was homesick for a few weeks. It’s a period when I reflected much on my personal and professional life, my aspirations for the future. I realized that I wouldn’t necessarily want to be an expatriate later on in my career, as I had initially planned. This period enabled me to bounce back by understanding that I wanted to look for a job in France and not abroad. I got back to the heart of what mattered to me, my personal relationships. It was the distance that made me realize this”. Nolan also mentioned missing his home environment and Norah expressed that this experience fostered gratitude for her home environment.

The main challenges highlighted in the interviews were undoubtedly overcoming language and communication barriers, as well as establishing deeper connections with the local people. Paul, Teddy, Laura and James were able to form deeper connections with Thai people which tremendously facilitated their integration in the Thai environment and enhanced their understanding of Thai society and culture. Building these types of connections was more challenging for Nolan, Olivia and Norah who mainly connected with international students during their experience. Nonetheless, they were strongly and positively impacted by their new connections and experiences with international students.

Challenges are a crucial aspect of mobility because they allow individuals to question their own values and behaviors. The obstacles and challenges faced are often opportunities to adapt to a new environment. They can increase autonomy and self-confidence in individuals as they require the implementation of different means of adaptation. The challenges encountered can sometimes be more significant in terms of impact for students because they involve reflection that the strengths of mobility do not necessarily provide. Students are compelled to engage in introspection, reflecting on their own behaviors and values, which allows them to be more self-aware of themselves and their relationship to others.

4.1.3 Summary Table of Students' Perspectives on their Study Abroad Experiences

	For Thai students	For European students
Advantages and opportunities	Quality of life and access to high education Access to quality healthcare system, quality of air, good transportation, easy geographic access to other European countries	Appreciation for Thai culture Respect of Thai values, appreciation of Thai way of life, spirituality and traditions
	Cultural exploration Increased independence, discovering a new language and values	Cost of living High buying power, cheaper alternatives in daily life, access to travel and more leisure activities
Challenges and obstacles	Language and cultural barriers Difficulty of learning local language, difficulties in integrating with local people, challenges of developing English skills	Language and communication barriers Difficulty of learning Thai language, challenges of adapting the communication style to Thai culture
	Cost of living Highly decreased buying power in every category: rent, leisure activities, travel, food...	Integration in the local culture Difficulties in creating connections with local people

Following the questions regarding their experience during mobility in terms of advantages and challenges encountered, students were interviewed about the impact their experience had on their personal and professional development.

4.2 Impact of Study Abroad Experiences on Students' Personal and Professional Development

The participants were asked about the impact of their study abroad experiences on their personal and professional growth. To collect this information, the students were inquired about the reintegration into their home country, to reflect on their experiences and share their perspective on how their experience impacted them. The questions were left open-ended to encourage students to share their own reflections and experiences.

4.2.1 Thai Students' Perspectives on their Experience in Europe

How Did Studying in Europe Enhance Personal Growth?

Three main points were highlighted by the Thai students as having enabled them to grow as a result from studying in their respective host environments. The main points highlighted by the interviewees were enhancing their cultural awareness and open mindedness, developing self-awareness and the improvement in soft skills such as confidence, independence and decision-making abilities.

- **Enhancing cultural awareness and open mindedness**

The enhancement of cultural awareness and open mindedness to other cultures were the first points addressed by the Thai students as key aspects of their personal development. Alex, for instance, shared how his time in the UK contributed to him becoming more open-minded: "I adapted well to the culture which I found different from Thailand. People are curious and open with foreigners and international students. I can see how I am more open to cultural differences since I came here, in comparison to my Thai environment where I was only surrounded with Thai people". He also shared how he adapted to his new environment by creating bonds with British and international students, facilitating his smooth integration into the local culture.

Similarly, Lily discussed her adaptation to diverse cultures during her studies in France: "I wanted to experience the full opportunity to learn French culture and English at social and academic and professional levels so I chose to distance myself from other Thai students. Today, I feel my prospect of the world is broader because I have experienced new cultures by living in a different country with international

students. I chose to live with a Belgian girl, a Spanish girl, and a French boy. It was a huge challenge for me to experience it and having to adapt to different cultures with no judgment. It made me more resilient, open to change and to cultural differences". Through their experiences abroad, students had the opportunity to explore cultural differences, reflect on their relationships with others, and open up to new ways of communication, leading to enhanced cultural understanding and awareness.

- **Developing self-awareness**

Embarking on a journey of self-discovery, Jeth and Kong found that living abroad, in Switzerland and Spain, enabled profound reflections on their cultural identity and newfound connection to their Thai culture. Jeth shared, "I feel stronger to Thai culture, more connected to it. Seeing variety in others' behaviors and in cultures encouraged me to look back on my own. I realized I took for granted some aspects of my Thai identity. I can feel how I value those things more". Kong shared a similar feeling about studying abroad and the reconnection to his Thai heritage: "I have always appreciated discovering new cultures and exchanging with people from around the world. During my internship in Spain, I experienced for the first-time missing parts of Thai culture and felt a sense of reconnection to Thailand. This experience abroad helped me reflect on my values and identity".

Moreover, Rim reflected on the transformative impact of distancing oneself from a familiar environment during the study abroad experience. She explained, "My experience also gave me the chance to distance myself from my usual surroundings. I got the time and space to think about what truly matters to myself – my values and beliefs. It allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my own identity, strengths, and areas for growth." These reflections underscore how studying abroad provides Thai students with a unique opportunity for introspection, fostering a profound understanding of their cultural identity, values, and personal growth.

- **Developing soft skills: confidence, independence, decision-making abilities**

Another key point discussed in the interviews was the cultivation of soft skills resulting from the students' experiences abroad. Alex mentioned how stepping out of his comfort zone by living abroad enabled him to gain confidence: "I am deeply more confident than before in interacting with other people and talking in public. My

perspective living in the UK has evolved and I feel that I can go out of my comfort zone more through traveling. I often travel around the country which I never did before”. Beam shared how her experience abroad was transformative and made her more self-assured: “I have more confidence to speak and interact with foreigners than before. My experience abroad brought much more than I thought. I have better adaptive skills and less concern about the future”.

Independence was also highlighted by Beam and other interviewees. Beam expressed, “I can feel how I am totally different, how I am not afraid of new experiences anymore, how I can live and handle everything on my own. I plan to travel as much as I can, to discover other cultures, but also to learn more about myself”. Rim also experienced a heightened sense of independence and self-understanding: “This experience exceeded my expectations, and pleasantly surprised me with its transformative impact. Living independently abroad helped me develop my self-reliance and decision-making abilities”.

Jeth further shared his reflections concerning his experience as a Thai student living in Switzerland: “I believe what played in my personal growth is living by myself. Now, I make my own decisions and need to know what I value more in life. It forces me to form opinions on situations, on people. Coming to Zurich further emphasized these reflections because there is a greater sense of individualism here. The language barrier also pushes me to further improve myself in terms of self-management and self-motivation which I find more specific to Europe”. Lily also emphasized how gaining independence and adaptive skills resulted from her experience in France: “I acquired life skills as my personal development from the stay. I feel like I needed to rely on myself a lot while staying there. Studying abroad is very hard. I had to adapt to new changes and situations, people, and places. I learned that I’m stronger than I think and developed problem-solving skills, social skills, and interpersonal skills. I return home and feel more confident when speaking to others, more mature and aware of who I am”.

Furthermore, Fah explained how living in different countries impacted her personal growth: “Due to my various experiences abroad, in Switzerland, but also the US and Japan, I have learnt how to adapt to different environments and people. I learned how to approach others respectfully and depending on the situations. I also notice how I enjoy drawing inspiration from my experiences abroad in order to navigate situations

better. Sometimes, I choose to be more direct in my communication, like most people are in the US. Other times, I will identify more with Thai values, by being more careful and caring with others!”.

The interviews highlighted the profound impact of these experiences on each student's soft skills development. Specifically, the students noted enhancements in self-confidence, independence in decision-making, and a profound understanding of their personal values and aspirations.

How Did Studying in Europe Impact the Students’ Career Path and Professional Growth?

Students shared how their experiences studying abroad impacted their professional growth and goals. The main points which were highlighted in the interviews were the enhancement of English skills and the expansion of the professional network. Students also mentioned how their experiences shifted their perspectives and goals for their professional careers.

• Enhancing language skills and expanding international network for opportunities

Students emphasized the importance of learning English as an opportunity for their future careers, whether in Thailand or abroad. Improving their language proficiency has also allowed them to build an international network through interactions with fellow students, professors, and colleagues. Beam shared her experience with English: “My English level used to be quite low before I went abroad. Now, I can have a conversation in English and I believe I could work in an English-speaking company in Thailand”. Lily who pursued a Master's degree fully taught in English, explained how she feels more confident in English and how she “had the full opportunity to learn English at social, academic and professional levels”.

Jeth and Fah, who lived in the US for several months and are currently pursuing advanced degrees in Switzerland, shared similar experiences. They learned to speak English fluently during their time in the US and now use it daily. Fah highlighted that her chosen study program was not available in Thailand, making fluency in English a prerequisite for entry. Jeth, specializing in Physics, pursued studies in Switzerland that

were not offered in his home country. For both, learning English was a means to access their preferred fields of study.

Kong mentioned how his internship in Spain helped him expand his international social network by developing connections with colleagues from Europe: “I wanted to expand my network in Europe as I plan to work and live in Europe later. This internship was a great opportunity to discover people from diverse European cultures and I think it will help me in my future job search”. Developing English skills in social or professional settings undoubtedly benefits students by creating new job opportunities, expanding their international network, and enhancing their confidence in communicating with foreigners.

- **Shifts in professional opportunities and goals: abroad or in Thailand**

Moreover, most of the interviewees expressed evolutions in their professional outlook before and after their mobility experiences. All were influenced by their time abroad, which led them to question their career goals. Before his mobility, Alex was certain about working in Thailand and aimed only to enhance his CV. However, studying in England significantly impacted his perspective, as he recounted: “I learnt to appreciate being out of my comfort zone. To experience living abroad was an entirely new experience for me when I arrived in the UK. I realize that I was able to adapt to this new environment on my own. Before, I only wanted to upgrade my resume, but now, I want to go further and work abroad, to experience and discover places”. Rim, also studying in the UK, found her ambition for a professional career abroad fueled: “Completing my course in the UK fueled my ambition to apply for jobs in this country as I am drawn to the working culture here. My experience has reshaped my career objective as it has instilled a deep sense of confidence in my adaptability. I aspire to take on challenges that involve navigating foreign working environments with ease and effectiveness. I plan to continue my experience abroad for the time being”. Kong was also deeply impacted by his internship in Europe, “following my internship, I decided to start a Master’s degree in international relations in Thailand. I’m also planning to work abroad in the US for a few months and gain new experience”. He expressed how he wanted to expand his experiences abroad in other parts of the world, aiming for an international career in the future.

After more than a year of studying for her Ph.D. in Switzerland, Fah explained that she is uncertain about whether she wants to return to Thailand or work abroad: “When you’re from Thailand, studying abroad makes you gain privileges in Thai society as graduating from Europe or America is very well seen. I know that coming back to Thailand with a European degree and PhD will help me tremendously to find work. If I choose to stay and work in a European country, I believe it will be much harder to find work here. I will be in competition with many more students with similar educational backgrounds and experiences abroad. However, I believe the quality of life in Switzerland is better and I have a great international environment here. I am still unsure whether I will go back to Thailand or search for a job here, but I know I will have more work opportunities due to my international degree”.

On the contrary, other students shared how their experiences abroad reassured their desire to work and live in Thailand in their future careers. Studying in Switzerland, Jeth explained how his professional goals shifted: “When I was still living in Thailand, I wanted to work abroad. However, my experience changed my goals as I plan to work in Thailand long term. I believe I took a lot of things for granted when I was in Thailand. I feel closer to my family and I realize how I feel more integrated in Thai society. Also, seeing how developed European countries are on an economic level makes me want to work and participate in the Thai economy”. Studying abroad reinforced Jeth’s ties to his home environment and his wish to improve the quality of life for Thai society. Beam also shared that she gained hope and new career objectives following her experience in France: “When I was living in Thailand, I lost my passion for cooking and I had no idea what I wanted to do in my professional career. My internship in France made me believe again in my career in the cooking industry, it showed me how I can find a job that suits me and my values”. Lily expressed how studying in France will help her career development in the future: “Regarding my professional goal, I still want to work as a diplomat in the ministry of foreign affairs in Thailand and I believe my experience abroad is a great opportunity for my career objective. Also, I wish to continue studying abroad to undertake a PhD degree”. Her experience abroad reinforced her professional goal to work in foreign affairs in Thailand and sparked the desire to undertake doctoral studies.

Study abroad experiences enabled Thai students to significantly enhance their English language skills, allowing them to build an international network that they did not have access to in Thailand. Additionally, these experiences shifted their perspectives on their professional careers, either by fueling the desire to work abroad and pursue an international career or by reinforcing their ties and desire to work in Thailand, thereby helping to clarify their professional aspirations.

4.2.2 European Students' Perspectives on their Experience in Thailand

How Did Studying in Thailand Enhance Personal Growth?

Two main points were highlighted by the European students as having deeply impacted them and allowed them to learn and grow as a result of their experience in Thailand: gaining cultural awareness and soft skills, as well as the influence of Thai values and philosophy of life on their experience.

- **Gaining cultural awareness and soft skills: empathy, confidence, openness**

Gaining cultural awareness through discovering an entirely new and different culture was one of the main points highlighted in the interviews. Cultural awareness involves experiencing, understanding and being more mindful of cultural diversity. It is understanding that we operate, communicate, act in different ways based on our cultural backgrounds. Nolan shared the most memorable aspect of his experience was his ability to step out of his comfort zone by leaving his home environment and challenging himself to adapt to a different culture. He shared being proud of learning to adjust and adapt to local culture: “My experience showed me that culture is very diverse and cannot be understood by sticking to your own habits and behaviors”. Reflecting on his experience and especially going through a culture shock in the first months of his mobility, he said: “One of the main takeaways is that culture shock is not necessarily negative. It is a part of staying abroad and helps you to reflect on your experiences. Spending time abroad can tremendously help you to become more mature and understand more of the outside world”. Furthermore, Nolan explained that living in Thailand helped him to be more sensitive and open toward other cultures, especially those much different from his own culture, in Germany. He strongly appreciated aspects of Thai culture “such as the kindness from strangers” while also learning to appreciate

his home culture even more, particularly in terms of open communication. Nolan shared that this experience allowed him to gain confidence and be more open and flexible with others' differences. Norah also expressed some of her reflections: "My experience in Thai society made me more easy-going, accepting other people's new ideas, listening to them and getting more inputs from others. When I'm in Germany, I can feel how it's a narrow circle where it's harder to get different perspectives". Being confronted with another culture, with different values and behaviors, can help students to question and reflect on their own. It fosters more cultural awareness and openness to differences in culture, values and behaviors.

Furthermore, acknowledging their privilege as European students in Thailand was another point that was highlighted in the interviews. James shared being profoundly touched by the generosity and kindness of Thais toward each other and foreigners, despite the inequalities and precarious situations that many Thais experience daily. Laura discussed the perceived inequalities during her experience: "As European students, we had strong purchasing power that allowed us to have experiences and travel that we couldn't have done in France. Paradoxically, during our travels in Thailand outside of Bangkok, we realized the strong financial inequalities that exist in Thailand and are a reality for a large part of the population. By talking to Thai friends, they explained the necessity for many of them to work and study simultaneously. For many young people, university is not even an option as they have to start working early to survive". Paul added, "Being constantly confronted with these inequalities and poverty made me realize the privilege and comfortable life we have in France, in terms of access to necessities like food, medical care, school, university, and so on". Norah also shared on this point: "I met many Thais who didn't have much, but who were extremely generous and kind to me. This allowed me to take a step back from my own problems, to put things into perspective, to become aware of what I already have, and to set an example by showing more empathy and generosity to others". Through their discussions, experiences, and encounters with Thai people, these students were able to realize the differences in living standards between Thailand and their home country, while noting the generosity and mutual support present in Thai culture.

• Values and philosophy of life of Thai culture

Experiencing the values and philosophy of Thai culture also had a profound impact on the students during their mobility. According to Paul, "one of the advantages of Thailand is the importance of family, respect, and kindness. They have strong values that have inspired me, especially compared to France, where we are much more individualistic". Teddy also shared the impact that living in Thai society had on him: "It impacted my relationships: I am calmer, less judgmental, and my centers of interest have changed compared to my hometown friends. I value family more. I now feel more aware of what is truly important or not. I feel less pressured so I take the time to do the things that matter with the right people. On many levels, we had the time to think, exercise, realize, and grow. That's something I tried to bring back after my return from Thailand".

Furthermore, four out of the seven students interviewed mentioned their discovery of Buddhism and meditation during their experience as one of the most meaningful aspects of their experience. James shared about his transformative experience and reflections that this mobility has offered him. As mentioned before, the reasons that led James to leave and choose Thailand were a necessary need to distance himself from his country and environment. James joined Thailand hoping to start afresh and undergo significant self-work. Sharing his narrative and mental state before the experience, James recounts, "Nothing made sense before my stay in Thailand. Before leaving, I told myself that if I didn't change the world, life had no meaning. I was constantly under the influence of negative thoughts due to past personal experiences". During his stay in Thailand, James became more seriously interested in Buddhist culture and philosophy. He already had an interest in the subject, which he rediscovered during this stay. His experiences, encounters, and reflections gave him hope: "Buddhist culture and philosophy brought a lot to me during my mobility. My interest in this subject developed in Thailand, where the environment is conducive as Buddhism is very present in Thai society. Buddhist philosophy is disseminated, ingrained in the culture. This experience brought me back to the essential, simplified my way of thinking and considering my future. I am simply more in the present moment". James also plans to go abroad again to experience more. He says he has a deep desire to discover more, especially about Asian countries and cultures: "I realized through this experience that anything is possible".

Olivia also had a memorable experience: "I experienced culture shock through a meditation retreat. This retreat allowed us to understand Buddhist culture, which plays a central role in everyday, social, and political life in Thailand. It allowed me to question my behaviors, thoughts, learn to relativize, and do personal work on myself. I have carried these reflections and this serenity with me since I returned from Thailand". Paul and Laura also extensively shared their experiences related to meditation and the impact it had on their current lives and philosophy. Laura recounts, "I discovered Buddhist philosophy and meditation entirely during my stay in Thailand. Previously, I hadn't taken the time to be interested in it because it's not a very widespread topic in France. In Thailand, I was quickly exposed to Buddhist philosophy through my encounters, discussions, and visits to Buddhist places. I had the opportunity to participate in a meditation retreat, which was a turning point in my stay. This retreat opened a door to spirituality, deep reflections on my life, how I want to evolve, what matters to me. Following this retreat, I researched a lot about meditation and Buddhist philosophy, which have become beautiful keys for more serenity in my life. I took everything I learned with me. Today, this philosophy accompanies me in my daily life. I take time for myself, try to be more anchored in the present moment, and have much less anxiety about my future". Paul also discovered meditation and experienced two meditation retreats during his time in Thailand. He mentioned that he applied the lessons he had learned in Thailand to his everyday life in Spain, such as through the practice of meditation.

All the students emphasized that they grew and had deeper reflections during their mobility in Thailand, which they then brought back to their home country. Gaining cultural awareness and building soft skills such as confidence, empathy, or openness were highlighted by the students as contributing to their personal growth. The students also strongly appreciated experiencing the values and philosophy of life of Thai culture, such as the importance of family, kindness, and 'Kreng jai', which influenced their way of thinking and brought reflections on their own behaviors. Some of them shared deeper spiritual reflections through their learnings and experiences related to Buddhism in Thailand and meditation.

How Did Studying in Thailand Impact the Students' Career Path and Professional Growth?

Study abroad experiences can influence students' professional development both in the short and long term. In the interviews, several students expressed how their experiences altered their perspective on career goals and instilled hope for future opportunities. Additionally, some students detailed how their time abroad reinforced their ties to their home environment.

- **Increased tolerance to uncertainty**

Some students have shared gaining hope and being more tolerant of uncertainty regarding their professional careers. After his experience, James chose a job in an international team in a French company to connect with people from around the world. He explained, "I no longer have mental professional constraints because I accept not knowing where I will be tomorrow". After his internship, he ambitions to work abroad, especially on the Asian continent, as he wishes to explore more countries there. Norah also shared that she could see herself working in an Asian culture: "I believe it would be easier to work on projects with Asian or more specifically Thai companies". Laura also emphasized that her experience in Thailand allowed her to reflect more precisely on what she wanted to do in her professional career, far from her home environment: "I had strong concerns in my future before my experience in Thailand. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do precisely and it was a great source of stress. Through connections with others and reflections, I have understood that my big goal is to connect and learn with others to do good. It has been guiding me through my job research and is one of the reasons why I applied for my current job. I also think my experience in Thailand assured me that I can work anywhere and that I accept not knowing what will come next".

Similarly, Olivia gained hope and new professional perspectives through her experience: "his experience made me grow, gave me a desire to discover. In my studies, there was a lot of talk about our professional careers, encouraging us to find a job that pays well, where we earn a lot of money. My experience in Thailand questioned me: is that really what will make me happy? Today, I am looking for a job that I love above all, with flexibility, not just for the financial aspect. This stay also sparked my interest in discovery and exploration of new places". Paul also experienced increased tolerance

to uncertainty and detachment from his professional life: “After my experience, I started a job in a sales company where the pressure at work is very strong. I brought what I have learnt in Thailand into this new job environment. I feel less stressed by work and my career because I have more detachment from it. I take my professional life and responsibilities seriously but my personal balance does not depend on it”.

- **Shifts in professional perspectives and goals**

Furthermore, some students developed stronger ties to their home environment and reevaluated their perspectives on their professional careers. Norah explained, “Before, I believed I wanted to work abroad but this experience also reassured me in the fact that I wanted to grow professionally in my home environment”. Teddy also shared how his experience impacted him on different levels: “I changed my willingness to work abroad to actually come back working in my region. In terms of long-term goals, I would say that I am now more aware that I value my personal life as much as my professional one”. He also shared how his experience in Thailand played a crucial role in securing an internship in an international company: “My experience clearly helped me to get that internship, it was a real added value on my resume. Now that I am working there, my experience also helps in my multi-cultural interactions”.

The interviews revealed that the study experiences in Thailand had a significant impact on their professional goals and careers. Students were able to question their professional ambitions, and some changed their perspectives, either strengthening their desire to work abroad or, conversely, their desire to work in their home country. For most, the experience allowed them to embrace the uncertainty related to their professional future while restoring hope in their professional prospects. This experience also enhanced the students' profiles and employability, leading some to find jobs or internships aligned with their expectations.

4.3 Cross-Cultural Analysis: Examining the Impact of Student Mobilities on Personal Development in Thai and European Host Environments

The interviews have highlighted several points regarding the impact that mobility has on students' personal and professional development. We have highlighted four common aspects which emerged from the interviews with all participants, while also emphasizing specificities related to the host country in terms of their influence on personal development. From an intercultural standpoint, we will thus cross examine the impact of student mobilities on personal development, with a focus on Thai and European host environments.

4.3.1 Common Aspects of Student Mobilities in Thai and European Host Environments

Increasing Cultural Awareness Through the Experience of a New Culture

All student mobilities provide a unique cultural immersion for students, regardless of the host environment. Students have the opportunity to explore different values, customs, and perspectives, broadening their understanding of the world. The cultural distance between the home country and the host country can also influence the lived experience as it requires a greater need for adaptation. Confronted with new situations, behaviors, and values foreign to their home country, students are prompted to adapt quickly and may find themselves questioning their own behaviors. The interviews revealed that each mobility had a significant impact on students, with all of them mentioning the discovery of a new culture as a major aspect of their mobility.

This cultural awareness among students goes beyond superficial exposure; it requires meaningful immersion and critical reflection on the social, historical, and behavioral aspects of the culture. Deeper cultural awareness develops as students explore and experience the values, traditions, social norms, and lifestyles during their cultural immersion. This reflection naturally leads to internal questioning about the student's own culture, values, beliefs, and internalized behaviors.

During the interviews, students emphasized that contrasting their own culture with that of the host country allowed them to gain a broader understanding of societies, cultural nuances, moving beyond stereotypes and preconceived ideas. This cultural awareness may vary based on the student's engagement and enables them to develop more tolerant and informed reflections on cultural diversities. Student mobilities, therefore, foster the development of intercultural skills as students learn to navigate multicultural contexts better, strengthening their adaptability and open-mindedness.

Enhancing Language Skills: English as a Tool for Personal and Professional Development

Regardless of the host country, students have all had the opportunity to improve their language skills, especially in English. Student mobility involves encounters with other international students, typically conducted in the English language. The majority of interviewed students mentioned a significant improvement in their English proficiency during their experience, a major asset in our societies and especially in the business world. According to Lily, “I feel more confident when speaking English, and I believe it will help for my career development in the future”.

Indeed, English being the international language of business, mastering the language is a crucial linguistic skill in the current global context. English serves as an advantage both in the professional world and in accessing diverse resources (cultures, academic and educational resources, research materials, etc.) that contribute to students' personal development and critical thinking. Enhancing language skills is, therefore, a crucial aspect that student mobility brings to the personal and professional development of students.

Professional Impact: Enhancing International Network and Employability in the Global Market

Engaging in extended study abroad experiences can significantly influence students' professional development by enhancing their international network and employability on the global market. This aspect was highlighted by the majority of

participants during their interviews as a significant advantage for their personal and professional growth.

Through immersion in a new cultural and academic environment, students expanded their network through interactions and encounters with colleagues, professors, professionals, and other international students. This contributed to the creation of a diverse and international network that could positively influence their future career opportunities. In addition to improving their English proficiency, studying abroad enabled students to develop interpersonal skills such as intercultural communication and adaptability to a new environment—qualities highly valued in an increasingly globalized job market.

As mentioned previously, students also gained a deeper understanding of cultural diversities, enhancing their employability, particularly in roles with an international dimension. The self-confidence and ability to live and work independently, which were also addressed during the interviews, benefit students and contribute to broadening their professional perspectives. As Olivia expressed in her interview, “From a professional perspective, I realize that I can do anything! Work in another country, find a company that suits me”.

4.3.2 Thai Students in Europe: How European Academic Environments Shape Thai Students' Perspectives

Two main points emerged from interviews with Thai students who immersed themselves in a European country, regarding the impact of their experiences on their personal and professional development.

Navigating Individualistic Cultures and Opportunities for Growth: Developing Independence and Self-Confidence

Interviews with Thai students have revealed similarities in their respective experiences in Europe. The first point mentioned by all students was the gain in self-confidence and independence resulting from their experiences. For many of them, their mobility was the first time they lived on their own, thus prompting them to learn to be independent quickly. This led them to develop more autonomy and confidence in their decision-making. Some participants mentioned cultural differences with Thailand,

where collective values and social harmony are highly important on a societal scale. Indeed, studying in a European country exposes Thai students to more individualistic societies.

In the field of intercultural research, Geert Hofstede's pioneering research introduces and develops the concept of cultural dimensions at the societal level. In this study, Hofstede relies on an in-depth study of cultural values in different countries and distinguishes between collectivism and individualism. Collectivism is defined by a preference for close relationships in which individuals take care of each other within social groups like the extended family or the community. In a collectivist society, there is great importance placed on family values and loyalty to loved ones. Collectivist cultures favor the goals of the group as a whole over the individual's own interests. Looking at Thailand's score compared to other European countries according to Hofstede's dimensions calculation, it becomes apparent that Thai society tends to be much more collectivist than most European populations (*see Appendix 2*). This is reflected at various levels in Thai society, where individuals are more encouraged to be part of the collective than to stand out. Individuals are encouraged to progress professionally for the well-being of their family. For example, there are many family businesses in Thailand that are passed down from generation to generation. Populations in France, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom tend to be more individualistic.

Individualism is a cultural orientation that favors and privileges autonomy, personal independence, individual expression, and the achievement of personal goals. In an individualistic society, individuals are encouraged to stand out from the group, especially in professional life, to showcase their talents or strengths. Each person is responsible for their actions, and young populations are strongly encouraged to be independent quickly, pursue their own aspirations and personal interests, and make autonomous decisions. These cultural differences are obviously nuanced and vary from person to person. Nevertheless, they open up possibilities for reflection about the opportunities for a Thai student to experience living in a European country. For example, Fah shared how she uses what she has learned abroad as well as her own Thai culture to communicate effectively in different contexts: "I have learned how to adapt to different environments and people. I learned how to approach others respectfully and

depending on the situations. I also notice how I enjoy drawing inspiration from my experiences abroad to navigate situations better”.

In fact, all participants mentioned the gain in confidence and independence that their mobility offered them, giving them the opportunity to question their future plans. By living in Zurich, Jeth shared, “It forces me to form opinions on situations, on people. Coming to Zurich further emphasized these reflections because there is a greater sense of individualism here. The language barrier also pushes me to further improve myself in terms of self-management and self-motivation, which I find more specific to Europe” Exposure to an individualistic educational environment can help Thai students develop personal initiative, independence, and autonomous decision-making skills. This can be particularly beneficial in more diverse professional and social contexts. The geographical distance from Thailand and the discovery of European culture allowed them to gain perspective on their own culture, question their own values and behaviors: “I got the time and space to think about what truly matters to myself – my values and beliefs. It allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my own identity, strengths, and areas for growth”, Beam shared. For some Thai students, they had to make a greater effort to overcome language or cultural barriers and integrate with local populations, facilitating a sense of independence, autonomy, and even self-confidence.

Developing Professional Opportunities in Thailand or Abroad

Studying in Europe opens doors to international professional opportunities. Thai students can establish connections with companies and diversify their career perspectives. Indeed, institutions in Europe are internationally renowned for their academic standards. A degree obtained from a European university can be perceived as a mark of quality both abroad and in Thailand. As Fah mentioned during her interview, “When you’re from Thailand, studying abroad makes you gain privileges in Thai society as graduating from Europe or America is very well seen. I know that coming back to Thailand with a European degree and PhD will help me tremendously to find work”. Thai students thus enhance the credibility and value of their academic journey, presenting it as an opportunity in their job search.

During the interviews, three of the Thai students, Jeth, Lily, and Beam, also expressed a strengthening of their connection to their Thai culture. They all expressed

the desire to continue their professional careers in Thailand to contribute to the development of the local economy: “I plan to work in Thailand long term. I believe I took a lot of things for granted when I was in Thailand. I feel closer to my family and I realize how I feel more integrated in Thai society. Also, seeing how developed European countries are on an economic level makes me want to work and participate in the Thai economy” (Jeth).

By embarking on a study program in a European country, Thai students have been able to develop broader reflections on economic, social, and political issues. Their experience makes them more attractive in the Thai job market as well as in international contexts. Exposure to more individualistic societies and their interactions has also promoted the development of independence, self-confidence, and adaptability. This has stimulated reflections on their future projects and marked a key milestone in their personal development. The development of autonomy and decision-making skills, coupled with the discovery of another culture, has also led students to contemplate their future professional paths and clarify their long-term career plans. As demonstrated in the interviews, some Thai students now aspire to pursue an international career, while others have expressed a strengthened attachment to Thai culture, with a desire to contribute to the development of the local economy upon their return.

4.3.3 European students in Thailand: How Cultural Immersion in Thailand Impacts European Students’ Perspectives and Experiences

Participants who had studied in Thailand expressed a significant and multifaceted impact of their immersion experiences in Thai culture. Three main points emerged from the interviews with European students about the impact of their experiences on their personal development.

Exploring Thai Culture and Collectivistic Society: The Strong Impact of Thai Philosophy

Interviews with European students revealed strong similarities in their experiences in Thailand and what they gained from them. All students were deeply affected by the discovery of Thai culture, both for its strong societal values and its philosophical principles.

Thai society is characterized by collectivist values that emphasize societal harmony as well as familial and communal relationships and influences communication styles. For instance, Thais usually value subtle and non-direct communication in order to preserve social harmony. Non-verbal communication takes a significant role in all exchanges, and it is sometimes preferable not to express divergent opinions in public to avoid disturbing group unity. These values and behaviors differ from European cultures where individual expression is often prioritized. Values of honesty and transparency with a direct communication style are preferred in France over social harmony. These significant differences in societal communication styles were noted during interviews with the European students: “I realized the differences in communication between France and Thailand, in everyday exchanges as well as in professional settings”, stated Laura. Faced with group work involving Thai students, students had to adapt their communication styles to successfully complete their projects, such as Norah explained: “I noticed that when I was very direct, Thai students weren't used to that and would always remain friendly and polite without saying directly what they thought. I also noticed that avoiding conflict is an important aspect of their communication”.

The confrontation between different communication forms helped develop awareness and active listening among the students. According to James, he “realized the importance of being more invested in listening to others and less in the desire to convince” For Nolan, coming from Germany, “the time in Thailand certainly taught (him) the importance of non-verbal communication. After interacting with Thai people (he) paid way more attention to what was not being said rather than what they actually said” In his words, it made him question how he interacts with others, and helped him pay more attention to others’ values and communication. Through their experience in Thailand, European students enhanced their ability to navigate different communication styles and group dynamics, appreciating the diversity of communication styles.

Students were also profoundly impacted by the Thai way of life they discovered during their immersions: “I admired the way Thai people treat each other. That made me question my own behavior so that I took some of the Thai principles as aspirations, such as kindness and hospitality” (Nolan). In Thailand, there is the concept of ‘Sanuk’, a concept that is complex to translate accordingly, which represents Thai philosophy and governs many behaviors and values in society. It can be defined as “the

path of joy in living”, or the ability to derive satisfaction, pleasure, and fun from whatever you do. This philosophy is reflected in many facets of Thai culture and was experienced by the students during their immersions. They were able to adopt certain aspects of ‘Sanuk’ by valuing social cohesion and appreciating happiness in daily life, contributing to enriching their personal development.

A Step Further in Thai Philosophy: Meditation and Buddhism

Thai philosophy plays an essential role in Thai society and is rooted in spirituality and religion. The discovery of Buddhist philosophy and meditation was emphasized in five interviews with students as having a significant impact on their personal development and daily lives following their experiences. Through their encounters and experiences, students discovered mindfulness practices that promote mental well-being and can serve as a tool to face life's challenges.

Previously open to the subject of meditation and Buddhism, James had encounters in Thailand that truly introduced him to the topic. The experience and presence of Buddhism in Thailand taught him to accept, relativize, and enjoy the present moment: “I accepted that I would never stop thinking. I understood that meditation is not about interrupting thoughts of coming, but rather letting them come and go, with no judgment, and at every moment focusing on the present moment” These principles resonated with his values and allowed him to have deeper reflections on his personality: “I feel more serene, at peace”.

Thailand provides an environment conducive to these reflections, which are often less present in Western cultures in Europe. Spiritual questions and the discovery of mindfulness can have a significant impact on European students, often unfamiliar with these philosophical notions. Olivia also shared her vision of the future after her experience in Thailand: “I could more easily see myself living abroad now. Before Thailand, I didn't think I was capable of that. I have less stress facing the unknown. I also try not to anticipate the future, to be less in control and more anchored in the present moment” Laura also recounts the contrasts she perceives between Thai culture and her French culture: “In French society, we are not governed by the same values as in Thailand. We are much more individualistic and direct. We do care about our family and friends, of course, but we don't have the 'Sanuk' philosophy and social harmony that

I found while I was living in Thailand. Upon my return, I immediately felt this gap with my surroundings, who appeared to be extremely anxious about their personal and professional future. On my part, I use what I have discovered from meditation and Buddhist philosophy in my daily life to approach things with more peace and serenity. It's definitely a personal and spiritual journey, but it allows me to move towards who I am and be at peace with myself” Paul was also deeply affected by the discovery of meditation and Buddhist philosophy, which now accompanies him in his daily life: “My experience in Thailand was profoundly impactful due to the discovery of meditation. I now work in an extremely stressful position with a very toxic corporate culture. However, even though I am constantly under pressure from my managers, I manage to approach work with serenity and equanimity. I continue to practice meditation every day, and it helps me to manage my emotions and stress. My approach to life has been transformed by my experience in Thailand”.

Through the interviews, we can observe that immersion in Thai culture has presented students with numerous opportunities for self-growth. The discovery of Thai philosophy and meditation has allowed students to enhance their mental well-being, develop emotional resilience and equanimity, and foster better relationships with others and themselves.

Recognition of Privileges in Economic, Educational, and Health Domains

Students also shared their reflections on the deconstruction of cultural privileges that were brought about by their experiences in Thailand. They were confronted with different socio-economic realities, particularly through their interactions with the local population. Norah shared her feelings about her experience: “We are very privileged, especially I living in Munich. I met and exchanged with many Thai people about economic struggles, how they had to work all their life and could not easily retire. Experiencing that reminds me to be more grateful”. Paul also shared about his experiences and reflections: “In France, most people have access to almost free education and health care. In Thailand, a lot of my friends had to work and study at the same time in order to pay for their studies. I highly respected their resilience and willingness to work. I also noticed high disparities between the population in big cities

but also between the urban and more rural areas. This made me reflect on my own privileges regarding access to health, education and quality of life in general”.

The more affordable cost of living and access to various experiences (travel, cultural visits, leisure) were also repeatedly highlighted by the students: “Undoubtedly, we had very strong purchasing power compared to our respective habits and had the chance to travel, discover the country, and engage in many unusual activities. This put us in a rather strange position where many things were now financially accessible to us that are not in France. We also had many exchanges with Thai students who became friends. They explained to us that they did not have the financial capacity or time to travel in Thailand like us. They also expressed the desire to study abroad, but that presented obstacles due to differences in the cost of living and lack of funding” (Laura).

By contrasting their personal conditions with their experiences and exchanges in Thailand, students were able to question and put their privileges into perspective. These reflections provide an opportunity for personal growth and encourage critical thinking and cultural sensitivity. They have fostered a deeper understanding of intercultural dynamics among students and led to introspection.

In conclusion, we observe that student mobility in Thailand has offered students a profound cultural immersion and has had a significant impact on their personal and professional development. The discovery of Thai culture has prompted them to rethink their own values and cultural norms. Beyond this cultural exploration, students' interaction with Thai philosophy, especially through meditation and Buddhism, has allowed them to develop spiritual understanding and redefine their approach to daily life. Simultaneously, awareness of their economic, educational, or health-related privileges has sparked deep reflection on the advantages they enjoy as economically favored individuals. In conclusion, the impact of student mobility in Thailand manifested through holistic transformation. Their experiences went beyond academic challenges to become a transformative journey that they have brought into their current lives, allowing positive personal evolution.

Common aspects of the impact of student mobility on personal development	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increasing Cultural Awareness Through the Experience of a New Culture 2. Enhancing Language Skills: English as a Tool for Personal and Professional Development 3. Professional Impact: Enhancing International Network and Employability in the Global Market 	
Impacts on personal development specific to the host environment	
Thai students in Western Europe	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Navigating Individualistic Cultures and Opportunities for Growth: Developing Independence and Self-Confidence 2. Developing Professional Opportunities in Thailand or Abroad
European students in Thailand	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exploring Thai Culture and Collectivistic Society: The Strong Impact of Thai Philosophy 2. A Step Further in Thai Philosophy: Meditation and Buddhism 3. Recognition of Privileges in Economic, Educational, and Health Domains

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Stemming from the desire to encourage students to participate in long-distance experiences abroad, the research aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of international student mobility and its transformative impact. Precisely, we examined the impact of study abroad experiences on the personal and professional development of Thai and European students.

The study focused on whether student mobility had a transformative impact on students' personal and professional development and how this impact manifested over the long term. From a cross-cultural perspective of Thai and European students, the study also questioned what particular opportunities for growth students experience when studying in culturally distant countries. Using the qualitative study method of semi-structured interviews facilitated a thorough exploration of Thai and European students' perspectives on their experiences abroad, enabling an intercultural approach.

Firstly, the paper presented a literature review of the past research regarding the topic of student mobility, englobing the benefits of travel, factors of mobility and its impact on personal and professional development. Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 participants, allowing them to develop on the opportunities for growth, advantages and challenges they experienced during their mobility. The research further analyzed how their experiences abroad impacted their personal and professional development from their own perspective. Lastly, the paper presented a cross-cultural analysis by examining the impact of the students' mobilities on personal development within the contrasting landscapes of Thai and European host environments.

The findings regarding Thai students' experiences in Europe and European students' experiences in Thailand reflect the nuanced ways in which cultural exposure shapes personal growth. From enhancing language skills, increasing cultural awareness to holding a professional impact by enhancing an international network and employability, students encountered multifaceted opportunities for growth following their time abroad. The cross-cultural analysis further dissected students' experiences by

focusing on their host environment. The analysis revealed that navigating individualistic cultures enabled Thai students to develop independence and self-confidence during and after their time abroad. It also shed light how studying in Europe would greatly increase their professional opportunities, in Thailand or abroad. Conversely, the immersion of European students in Thailand enabled them to deeply explore Thai philosophy and its collectivist society. Their experiences enhanced cultural awareness, opening students to unexplored topics such as meditation and Buddhism, as well as the acknowledgment of their privileges in economic, access to education, and health domains.

The study reveals that student mobility indeed holds a transformative impact on personal and professional development. The cross-cultural analysis highlighted the unique opportunities for growth that arises when studying in culturally distant countries, leading to heightened adaptability and openness to new experiences. Moreover, these opportunities for growth are shaped by the students' willingness to explore, their capacity to self-reflect and adapt to their host environment. The study also reveals the benefits of studying abroad for professional development. Study abroad experiences have the capacity to refine career goals, significantly improve language skills, and cultivate cross-cultural competencies. The resulting broadening of international networks creates global career opportunities but also enhances employability in the students' home environments, as companies increasingly value skills that students develop through study abroad experiences.

As we reflect on this research, it is evident that international student mobility serves as a bridge to a more interconnected and tolerant world. However, challenges such as financial constraints, political instability, and more recent disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic underscored the need for continued efforts to reduce barriers to student mobility. This study contributes to the dialogue on study abroad experiences, calling for a deeper understanding of the long-term impact on students' personal development.

In conclusion, global educational cooperation remains vital to provide students with the adaptability, cultural knowledge and self-awareness necessary to succeed in a globally interdependent world. As we move forward, it is imperative to recognize the significance of study abroad experiences and to cultivate an environment that encourages and supports students in their pursuit of personal and professional

growth through international mobility. The main challenge remains to reduce barriers to student mobility by understanding what are the causes preventing students to participate in a study abroad experience. Moving forward, educational institutions and policymakers can act on reducing these barriers to student mobility and inspire students to embark on transformative study abroad journeys.



CHAPTER VI

APPENDIX

6.1 Semi-structured interview questions

General information

- General information: age, nationality, current level of study/job position
- Where and how long have you spent abroad? Through what school/organization did you have the opportunity to study abroad?

Factors for going abroad

- Did you live in a multicultural environment prior to your experience?
- What factors influenced your intention to participate in a study abroad program?

- What were your expectations before going abroad?

- Did you have any fears or concerns prior to your experience?

Personal experience during the mobility

- How was your onboarding/experience at the start of mobility?
- How did you perceive your experience during your stay abroad?
- What were the main advantages during your mobility?
- What were the main obstacles and challenges you encountered?
- How were you integrated into the local environment and culture?
- Did you experience a culture shock?

Study experience

- Was your arrival facilitated by the organizer? Was there any support throughout your stay?

- Did you have any courses or events related to integrating the local culture?

Post-experience from the personal perspective

- How did you experience reintegration into the home country?
- Has your experience met your initial expectations?
- How did your stay impact your personal development?

- Did your experience make you question how you communicate, interact, behave with others?

- Did you gain new insights on yourself through your experience abroad?
- From your perspective, how has this experience abroad allowed you to grow?

Impact on the professional career and professional objectives

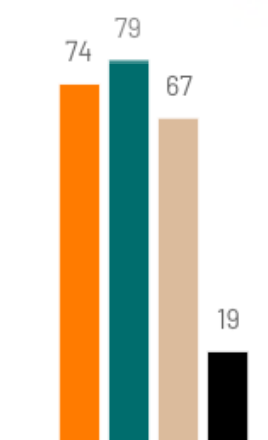
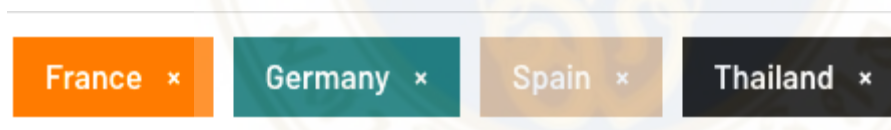
- Has there been any consequences for your professional goals and aspirations?

- Has it had a concrete impact on your career or studies and how?

- Are there any other points you would like to mention about your experience?

6.2 Country comparison tool by Hofstede

Comparison between France, Germany, Spain and Thailand regarding the Individualism dimension



Individualism

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