Study abroad tales: Experiences of international students in Taiwan

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Abstract

In Taiwan, the need to recruit for study abroad or foreign students is actually not by choice, but is of a necessity. For the 2016 school year alone, low numbers of birth-rate for the past two decades have led to the plunge of around 30,000 university enrollees. In effect, the Taiwan Ministry of Education encourages higher education institutions to become more internationalized and start accepting more foreign students. However, with the competition for study abroad students is quite high. Hence, in order to position Taiwan as an international education provider, focus on the *quality of the academic and social aspects* of study abroad program are seen as crucial. In light of these issues, the current paper depicts the results of a quasi-ethnographic study on the experiences of study abroad students in Taiwan. Primary objective of the study is to better understand how students *adapt* or *adjust* to an unfamiliar culture and at the same time understand the students' *study processes*. A total of 5 international graduate student participants underwent the one-year study. Data collection includes periodic interviews and observations. Results are then separated into five sections, namely: Scholarship and study abroad, value for money, first contact, occasions and holidays, and academic studies. Various insights and implications are provided. Lastly, the study also emphasizes the importance of qualitative studies in study abroad such as ethnographic ones, which is actually lacking in Taiwan.

Keywords: study abroad; acculturation; quasi-ethnography; periodic interview; Taiwan

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1. Introduction

Are study abroad students really learning? …are they studying? …or are they just having fun? These are just some of the perennial questions educators asked regarding the benefits brought about by study abroad programs (Chow & Bhandari, 2010). Whenever students return home from their study abroad program, they usually share stories about their experiences on how studying abroad changed their lives (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012a, p. 3) or how studying abroad has helped transformed/enhanced their world views (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990; Killick, 2015; Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Roberts, Chou, & Ching, 2010). However, most study abroad students tend to post iconic pictures of places they visit in social medias and/or blogs (Kelm, 2011), relaying a sense of fun, happiness, and excitement. In fact, such display of trophies and expression of fun without focusing on the *educational aspects of study abroad*, actually **lessens its educational value** (Orahood, Kruze, & Pearson, 2004).

Another important issue is the disparity between the academic levels of students and study abroad venues (Goodman, 2007; Maiworm, 2006). Within the traditional concepts of study abroad, high-quality international programs are seen as opportunity to attract elite foreign students (Roberts et al., 2010). In some ways, study abroad also provides the opportunity for those students who question the quality of their local home grown programs to seek other academic institutions (Lee, 2009; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). This traditional concept of study abroad *push* and *pull* has been described by Mazzarol (1998), wherein the *push factors* are defined as the conditions in home nations that create a generalized interest in university education beyond their national border. While, *pull factors* are characteristics of a host nation that attract study abroad students. However, some have shown that beyond the traditional push and pull theory, the current widespread **commodification** of study abroad programs have started to cause various problems (Vande Berg et al., 2012a). For instance, the **low academic or foreign language competencies of foreign students** that have already become one of the major barriers to successful study abroad experience.

For the past years, many have also started to question the quality of study abroad programs/courses (Bok, 2006; Vande Berg, 2009). Some critics have noted that the United States (US) consumer culture has already become a common practice in study abroad programs (Vande Berg et al., 2012a); *implying that the vast availability and types of study abroad programs has already become a type of commodity*. Even in terms of foreign language gains, it is reported that in some situations only modest improvements are found to be correlated with studying abroad (Freed, 1998; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Segalowitz et al., 2005). Recent findings have noted that the students' prior foreign language proficiency and their being *home-stayed* or *locally immersed* during study abroad, as far more important predictors of language gain (Di Silvio, Donovan, & Malone, 2014; Wilkinson, 1998). Even more surprising is that some research have shown that locally held foreign language immersion programs are said to be more effective than studying abroad (Freed et al., 2004). However, these do not mean that study abroad students are not learning anything, it just meant that students are *not learning and developing* in ways that we believed they did in the past (Gardner, Gross, & Steglitz, 2008; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012b).

In effect, many higher education institutions are currently focusing more on enhancing their study abroad students' experiences, and at the same time improving the quality of their study abroad programs (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Ramachandran, 2014). This also holds true for Taiwan, wherein the decreasing number of incoming local university enrollees has opened up the opportunity to recruit more foreign students (Wang & Ching, 2015). Therefore, in order to promote Taiwan as a quality venue for study abroad *it is quite important to know what study abroad students are currently doing and/or how they are preparing for/handling their academic studies*. In doing so, institutions are able to design the appropriate types and quality of programs **best**

suitable for study abroad students' level of competencies and learning goals, and at the same time promote deep learning.

2. Methodology

The current study is designed as a quasi-ethnographic case, wherein periodic or repeating qualitative interviews are conducted to collect the data.

2.1 Design

A qualitative approach to cultural studies has been noted for more than 40 years (Geertz, 1973). Even though the number of qualitative studies has been growing recently, the ratio is still far too small as compared to quantitative ones (Hansen, 2003). In a meta-analysis article, it is reported that within EBSCO and PsycINFO databases (as of 2012), there are around 1200 published qualitative research articles that describe the *acculturation processes* of individuals (Kennedy & MacNeela, 2014); among them only 11 papers are of ethnographic in nature. This also holds true within the study abroad studies in Taiwan, wherein most of the researches made use of quantitative surveys in collecting data.

In reality, ethnographic studies are quite difficult to accomplish, however, the resulting information collected is quite significant and is able to ***inform policy makers*** about the much needed changes within an institution/organization (GAO, 2003). Therefore, with the need for broadening the range of data collection strategies, ethnographic studies should be able to generate a more *robust picture* of the entire study abroad experiences and provide insightful suggestions for improvement. Quoting Hansen (2003): *The ethnographic approach empowers us to see societies, cultures, interacting individuals, and other elements with greater resolution, granting us the ability to identify interactions and vectors among the aspects and elements of the sojourn that fall through the sifter in questionnaire based survey analyses* (p. 102). With that having said, ***ethnographic researches are seen as effective method to observe and understand*** within the students' natural setting over the entire duration the various forces and processes that take place during study abroad.

An ethnography is best described as a *description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system* (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 23). In usual ethnographic studies, the process involves extended fieldwork, typically employing observations and casual interviews (Fetterman, 1998). Within a pure ethnographic study, Jeffrey and Troman (2004) suggest that the duration of the study should be at least 12 months and more important, there should be a sustained period of data collection. On the other hand, Wolcott (2005) defines strict ethnographic fieldwork to last around 2 years. However, within study abroad students in Taiwan, wherein most foreign students are in the short-term programs (Ching, Lien, & Chao, 2014). In essence, the notion of a ***quasi-ethnography*** is attributed to the timescale of the study and frequency of the visits to the sites of data collection (Murtagh, 2007).

More so, pure ethnography tends to involve the researcher to be in only one setting (Bryman, 2012); researchers are expected to be immersed in one social setting for an extended period of time. Spradley (1979) *describes that these ethnographic subjects (research participants) should have a unique culture; the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior* (p. 5). With the nature of Taiwan's study abroad students to be quite diverse, therefore, for practical reasons data are collected at several *critical time slots*. Furthermore, participants are limited to students of different culture, while enrolled in a single institution. Hence, justifies the need for a quasi-ethnographic design research.

2.2 Participants

Recent study abroad studies have pointed out various differences that exist between students of different nationalities such as the *Chinese and non-Chinese* students' social capital (Ma, 2014), for *English and non-English speaking* students' interactions (Jon, Lee, & Byun, 2014), and for *Asian and non-Asian* students'

learning patterns (Marambe, Vermunt, & Boshuizen, 2012; Yen & Stevens, 2004). This is also true with study abroad students within the *short-term and degree seeking* programs, which means that the duration of study abroad program matters (Alexejun & D'Angelo, 2013; Ching, Chao, & Lien, 2014; Ching, Lien et al., 2014; J. E. Smith, McAuliffe, & Rippard, 2014; Stroud, 2010). More important, is that quite unique only to Taiwan is the presence of four distinct study abroad student groups, namely: Mainland Chinese students (MCS), Hong Kong and Macau students (HKM), overseas Chinese students (OCS), and International students (IS) (Ministry of Education, 2014). Within these premises, ***this uniqueness actually opened up more opportunities to understand the various forces that affect the different groups of study abroad students*** in Taiwan.

With the voluntary nature of the study participants, each student is free to decide if they are willing to join the year-long study or not. In addition, participants are enrolled within a private university in Northern part of Taiwan, hence, an insiders' perspective on the entire study experiences of the students can be collected (Fetterman, 1998). This research venue is selected, since the primary researcher has direct access to students and ample opportunity for observation in an ***overt participant role*** can be conducted; which are key to ethnographic studies (Wolcott, 2005). More important, the researchers **did not** mark (grade/score) study abroad students' work and had no input in any assessment whatsoever, hence, no ethical issues is violated. Lastly, proper ethical considerations such as informed consent and interview protocols were all considered and observed (Blodgett, Boyer, & Turk, 2005; Newington & Metcalfe, 2014; Ssali, Poland, & Seeley, 2015).

At the start of the spring semester of 2015, an announcement was made for a call to participate in the year-long study. During the project briefing a total of 15 foreign students attended. However, only 5 graduate students (Master level) decided to participate in the study. The five participants are students from the following countries: Germany, Indonesia, Philippines, Spain, and Vietnam. Therefore, the findings of the current study are limited to international students, since no MCS, HKM, and OCS participated in the study. The following are brief descriptions of the study participants including their pseudo names:

> ➢ ***Student G*** – a student from Germany; currently a first year student taking up full English Masters Program in the College of Management. He studied Mandarin Chinese language for 2 years in China and is able to communicate well. He is currently the recipient of the Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE) scholarship.

> ➢ ***Student I*** – a student from Indonesia; currently she is a second year, graduating student of the full English Masters Program in the College of Management. She has been learning Mandarin Chinese language for the past year. She is a recipient of the scholarship provided by the university.

> ➢ ***Student P*** – a student from the Philippines; currently a first year student taking up full English Masters Program in the College of Management. He just started to learn Mandarin Chinese language this year. He is a recipient of the scholarship provided by the university.

> ➢ ***Student S*** - a student from Portugal; currently a first year student taking up full English Masters Program in the College of Management. She had previous Mandarin Chinese language learning experience for 6 months in Taiwan. She is currently the recipient of the MOE scholarship.

> ➢ ***Student V*** - a student from Vietnam; currently she is a graduating student of the regular Masters Program in the College of Management. She has been learning Mandarin Chinese language for many years and is quite fluent in both speaking and writing. She is a recipient of the scholarship provided by the university.

2.3 Research tools

Fetterman (1998) noted that ethnographic research is characterized by observations and interviews. **Observation** is included in all levels of data gathering. In general, observations can be used to describe the data that are collected, regardless of the method used in the study (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 2010). For the current study, observation is conducted all throughout the school year, so that the rich experience of the entire cohort of study abroad students is taken into account. More important, is the role of the researcher as being a *participant observer*; this involves not only watching an event, but also participating in it and recording what has taken place and noting the conversations, as they occur (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Some venues for observations are within the school campus, classroom, corridor, library, canteen, office, social events organized by the school or by the students, and lounges.

Besides observations, **interviews** are also used in gathering information. Interviews are said to be flexible and adaptable, and can be used with different types of persons (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 2010). For the current study, interviews are used to access the experiences of the study abroad students from many different perspectives. As ethnography is initially **inductive** (Fetterman, 1998), therefore, the initial interview with the students is deliberately designed as informal and unstructured (Spradley, 1979); grand tour questions are used to stimulate conversation. While the subsequent interviews are guided by the topics and concepts that are expected to emerge during the interviews, including some pre-arranged seasonal topics.

The repeating interviews are also called **periodic interviews**. Periodic interviews are typically conducted over the course of several months or years; a typical methodology employed by quasi-ethnographic researchers (Gardenhire & Nelson, 2003). It is said that by interacting with the same individuals over time, researchers are able to develop a trusting relationship with the participants, hence, effectively captures a great deal of information about opinions and perceptions.

2.4 Research process

As mentioned in the previous section, five students agreed to participate in the study. Before the start of the interview, the primary researcher introduced the research steps, methods, and consent forms were provided. This was done to confirm that the interviewee understands the process and was willing to participate. Participants were also informed that the data collected shall be summarized with the assurance of anonymity. More important, the primary researcher also reiterated that the participants can withdraw from the study anytime they wish and they can refuse to answer any questions they don't like. After signing the consent forms, schedules of the interview were discussed, while a copy of the form was also provided for the participants. In addition, compensation for the participants' time and effort were provided in the form of free lunches/dinners, USB Flash drives, and other school supplies that are useful to them.

For the first interview, the design was deliberately informal and unstructured, grand tour questions such as *"What do you think about Taiwan?" "What is your first impression of the school?" "How did you prepare for study abroad?"* were used to stimulate further conversation. Schedules for the succeeding (periodic) interview were also finalized. During the subsequent interviews, besides the topics that emerged during the previous interviews, *seasonal issues* of interests were also discussed, such as: pre/post arrival physical, emotional, and psychological preparation/adjustments, academic and school life, teachers and classmates, interactions with host nationals, co-nationals, and multi-nationals, mid-term examinations, Christmas holiday and new year, final examinations, Chinese new year break, birthday celebration, academic performance, start of a new semester, summer break, preparations for going home/staying in Taiwan during the vacation, and thesis/dissertation topic and adviser selection.

After the first interviews, initial observations are noted. Preliminary data analysis is done with the use of a coding scheme, which is then followed by the interview data analysis. Coding is the process involving the

reading of the interview notes until *themes or categories began to emerge*, as certain phrases events, activities, ideas occurred repeatedly in the text. Transcripts and field notes were also scrutinized and recurring topics highlighted to be follow up in the next interviews.

2.5 Data analysis

The Miles and Huberman (1994) method for *generating meaning from transcribed and interview data* was used for the qualitative data analysis. Their methods of noting patterns and themes; clustering items into categories; building logical chains of evidence through noting causality and making inferences; and making conceptual coherence allow typically large amounts of qualitative data to be reduced (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). In addition, Glaser's (1978) notion of *constant comparison* was also used when reviewing previous study abroad studies, subsuming particulars into generals, and forming similar categories into indicators. To assist in the data analysis, appropriate coding was implemented on the collected data. *Coding* was achieved by reading through notes and repeatedly listening to recordings and reading transcripts until themes or categories began to emerge, as certain phrases events, activities, ideas, that occurred repeatedly in the text (Brown, 2009, p. 186).

For the concurrent validity of the research, *triangulation*s were accomplished on the results of the interviews and observation logs. Triangulation refers to the use of more than one participant in a research setting. Hence, the careful use of data collected from two or more participants independently, therefore, can lead to more valid and reliable data (H. W. Smith, 1975). While, Lincoln and Guba (1994) assume that the *reliability* of qualitative research refers to replication, and the validity refers to the dependability, stability, consistency, predictability, and accuracy. Furthermore, internal and external reliability, and internal and external validity of the study were accomplish by following the various concepts as prescribed by Guba and Lincoln (1994) and LeCompte, Preissle, and Teach (1993).

2.6 Research ethics

Besides submission of the study protocol for approval by the institutional review board, the study also focused on the impact on the study by the relationships between the researchers and the participants of the study. The *code of ethics* to conduct the research and the moral quality of the researchers are problems that cannot be avoided in qualitative research. Note that as mentioned before, the researchers did not mark (grade/score) study abroad students' work and had no input in assessment; hence, *no ethical issues are violated*. Qualitative research has its solid moral principles and ethical norms, and requires the researchers to consciously comply with these principles and norms. Qualitative researchers believe that good ethics and research methods go hand in hand and complement each other (Sieber, 1991). Therefore, *research ethics are involved at any time in the processes of data collection*, such as the interviews, observations and document analysis, or in data analysis and processing.

3. Results and discussions

Upon arrival students are experiencing various *intercultural adjustments*. At the beginning of the semester, students are trying to adapt; not only to a new sociocultural environment, but also to unfamiliar academic situations. Therefore, both interviews and observations at the start of the semester are very insightful. Then after, follow up interviews consisted of topics that emerge during the previous interviews with the inclusion of seasonal issues. The resulting themes are then organized chronologically as they emerged from the discussions with the participants.

3.1 Scholarship and study abroad

As previous studies have focused greatly on the critical factors that interplay in how foreign students come to select Taiwan as a study abroad venue (Chou, Roberts, & Ching, 2012; Roberts et al., 2010). The current qualitative inquiry further clarifies the previous findings. Anchoring on the traditional concept of study abroad

push and *pull* as described by Mazzarol (1998), the availability of ***scholarship*** seems to be the most important factor. Note the fact that all of the five students interviewed are currently either on national (MOE) or local (institutional) scholarship. *An immediate thought that arises is whether the students would still study in Taiwan if there are no scholarships available*. To clarify, participants are asked regarding their decision to study in Taiwan.

After consulting with the students, it would seem that *scholarship is a determining factor* for study abroad.

> *… Yes, I started looking for scholarship. My first choice is to study in Japan, but decided on Taiwan instead, because of scholarship opportunities … I applied for the MOE scholarship, but did not receive it, however, the university has too (scholarship) and my application was approved …* Student P

With the vast opportunity for study abroad, students tend to go over their options before they decide. However, the prerequisite is that options should be clear. Options in terms of ***information*** regarding scholarship availability and course program offers must be well organized and clear. Hence, the importance of university websites, which is also one of the key indicators for internationalization (Chin & Ching, 2009).

> *… definitely; I need to check the program objectives, before I can decide about the school … clear information on the school's website is really helpful …* Student G

> *… I learn a lot on browsing the Study in Taiwan website (http://www.studyintaiwan.org/), not only about scholarship, but also about the course programs offering … I think the deciding factor for school choice is the availability of clear information on subject offerings … It would be helpful to know what subjects are offered …* Student P

> *… I think schools do not need to translate their website to my native language (Indonesian), it is fine to present them in English. For me, studying abroad is to know and learn about people of other nationalities (beside mine and Taiwan). If the website is in Indonesian, I would rather think that the school caters too much for the Indonesian market … I might not want to study in a school where there are a lot of people from my home country …* Student I

Cooperation with national agencies and study abroad fairs are also quite effective in disseminating information about Taiwan universities, together with the assistance on scholarship applications.

> *… attending the study abroad fair really helped me a lot, and of course the information regarding scholarship availability in Taiwan are both plus factors …* Student S

> *… for me, I applied for the MOE scholarship with the help of an Academic Exchange Service in my country…* Student G

Besides these official sources of information (websites and government agencies/offices), positive ***word of mouth*** advertising can also be considered as one of the unsung heroes of study abroad recruitment.

> *… actually, before I decided to study in Taiwan, I asked around my friends and relatives; whether they know anyone who has study abroad experience in Taiwan. I wanted to ask them about studying and living in Taiwan … I wanted to know what are their perspectives and opinions, before I decide …* Student I

> *… my teacher recommended me this university. Then after, I started to check its website and look for scholarship opportunities, information on how to apply and what courses are available …* Student V

With the ***importance of scholarship availability and course program selections, provision of clear information whether from official channels and/or maintaining positive word of mouth advertisement*** are still quite

important prior to study abroad decisions.

3.2 Value for money

With the importance of securing a scholarship prior to study abroad in Taiwan, a note to ponder would be the students' attitude afterwards. Participants were asked about how they felt about their study experience in Taiwan; more specifically, the **value for money** of a degree secured in Taiwan. Results from previous studies and current discussions with the students noted the importance of learning **Mandarin Chinese language** in Taiwan (Chou et al., 2012; Lewis, Ching, & Su, 2013; Roberts et al., 2010).

> *During my undergraduate years, I came to Taiwan because I wanted to major in Chinese and English language … since, back in my country there is only 1 university offering this course. After finishing my study, I decided to take up graduate studies and major in Business Administration. I think a background in both languages (English and Chinese) and business would be highly helpful and become more competitive for me when I go back to my home country …* Student V

> *Being able to speak Chinese is a plus factor in Europe. I have some experience working already … I know that learning to speak, read, and write Chinese would help me secure a better job in the future …* Student S

> *If my Chinese language is good, there might be an opportunity to work for a Taiwan company that has a branch in my home country or work for a company that do business in my home country …* Student I

For the students, learning *Mandarin Chinese language* in Taiwan is indeed a crucial plus factor for their future employment. Hence, the **quality of the Chinese language program** for international students should be good, or else, students would easily select or go to another university.

In addition, as with the recent 2015 and 2016 QS reports on **affordable cities** for students to study, which included Taiwan's Taipei and Hsinchu cities (QS, 2015a, 2015b). Besides the previous studies noted that cost of living in Taiwan is quite acceptable for study abroad students (Chou & Ching, 2015; Chou et al., 2012). Furthermore, one student even noted that the tuition fees (private universities) are comparable to those of their home country.

> *The tuition fee is actually acceptable, it is just similar and maybe in some case lower when compared to some universities in the capital city back in my home country …* Student I

> *As for the cost of living, it is not that high, even if I am from an Asian country ... more important is the security that you feel and the convenient transportation (subway/MRT) …* Student P

> *… what I like the most is that living in Taiwan is so convenient, there are 7-11 (convenient stores) everywhere and internet is fast …* Student V

With the above findings, most students equate the value of the degree from Taiwan with the potential skills learnt that are able to **benefit future employment**; a so-called value adding effect or increasing one's competitive advantages by means of **learning the Mandarin Chinese language**. In addition with the **acceptable cost of living and convenient livelihood** (internet and transportation); if programs are handled appropriately, Taiwan should be a good candidate for study abroad venue.

3.3 First contact

As with the notion that cultural adjustment is inevitable when facing unfamiliar or new environments (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Vande Berg et al., 2012b; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Zhou, Jindal-Snape,

Topping, & Todman, 2008), it would be quite important to understand how ***first contact*** is established and how students cope with these changes. Initial analysis of the interviews showed that the vast availability of ***internet connections*** as the key factor in maintaining contact with students' friends and families back in their home country. Previous findings have actually noted that internet does play a crucial role in lowering study abroad related stresses (Lin & Ching, 2015).

> *When I first arrived in Taiwan, a key factor for my adjustment is getting to know some other students that are also from my home country … also, internet connections in Taiwan is fast, I can readily send messages to my parents … but still I miss my parents …* Student V

> *I have been studying abroad almost most of my college life … my parents are well adjusted, and because of the ease of internet here in Taiwan, I can talk to them instantly … anytime I wish to …* Student G

> *During the first week here, my mother was so worried and was crying all the time … its good internet is so common that I can keep in touch with my parents all the time … I felt homesick, but I think I must adjust; there is no other way …* Student S

In addition, noting that *making new friends* is one of the primary goals of study abroad (Dewey, Ring, Gardner, & Belnap, 2013; Huang, Chen, & Ching, 2014), students also mentioned the buddy system assistance program; which is to assign a local Taiwan student to assist the foreign student upon arrival, as a good way to ease their transition. Furthermore, language seems to be an important bridge to successful integration into the society, while the presence of co-nationals further served as moderator for quick familiarization of the local culture.

> *During my first day of stay here, my parents came with me and helped me settle down … with the easy transportation, we visited a lot of places and sightseeing in Taipei … I use the internet a lot to check on all sort of things … I missed them (parents), but I kept myself busy most of the time … One thing hard for me to adjust is to learn the Chinese language, most stores (restaurants) are not that good in English …* Student P

> *For me, I am quite okay here, the buddy program and the international office help me settle down quick … there are other students also from my home country, they help me in a lot of ways, such as how to ride the MRT, where I can buy things that I need …* Student I

Ultimately, the need to ***stay connected*** (with the internet) has already become ubiquitous for study abroad nowadays. Moreover, the internet also serves as the gateway for information, not only for prior study abroad preparations such as checking for scholarship and university programs, but also for maintaining contact with friends and families back home and for searching for ways to go around Taiwan (sightseeing, places of interest, transportation, and the like). Lastly, to lessen culture shock, the need to have both ***host (Taiwan) and co-nationals assistance*** during arrival are seen as crucial in easing the transition.

3.4 Occasions and holidays

As with what previous studies have suggested that occasions and holidays can be related to a certain degree of homesickness (Hannigan, 2005; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Vingerhoets, 2005), while changes of an individual's mood are also highly affected (Nawijn, 2009). For the current study, a major event asked is how the students are affected by Christmas and New Year holidays, and the Chinese New Year during the fall semester break. Results show that first and second year students differ slightly in how they are affected by the different events.

First year students

It would seem that the first year students are more disappointed as compared to the second year students with regards to their perception of the Christmas holiday season. However, all of the participants felt some levels of **homesickness**. Holidays bring back the sense of being together with their families back home. Some comments are as follows:

> *The major difference is that Christmas basically does not exist in Taiwan … so there is no Christmas spirit at all … I miss the Christmas markets back in my home country … with all the delicious snacks and drinks, the music and smells, even the cold weather that brings the atmosphere. Luckily in our school (since it is a Catholic university), the school granted us one day of holiday on the 25th (December), but nevertheless it feels like Christmas did not happen …* Student G

> *I think one major difference between Taiwan and my home country during Christmas season is the "Christmas Spirit" itself … even if some of the places have Christmas decorations, most people in Taiwan still do not celebrate Christmas … so I cannot feel the feeling of joy of meeting people and giving gifts … for me, what I do is that I just appreciate some places that have Christmas decors just like at the university … I also still bought gifts and gave them to people I know here in Taiwan …* Student P

> *It is quite hard, I think about my family a lot and I miss them even more … To cope with it, I just get together with some friends and buy a better meal …* Student S

Note that the students still try to make adjustments and cope by doing the things that they usually do during the holiday season.

Second year students

Students who stayed a little longer expressed the notion of homesickness, however, not to the levels of the first timer students. Second year students felt a bit more positive than their first year counterparts.

> *In Taiwan, I can feel more Christmas atmosphere from the decoration in many places ... might be only in Taipei and in the university, because it's a Catholic university … but more important is that the people you've always been sharing Christmas with aren't here ... so, in a way I miss the people back home …* Student I

> *Back in my country, only some people celebrate Christmas, so in Taiwan, I am quite okay … Just in the university, we celebrate the occasion … I can relate to it, sometimes, it makes me think of home …* Student V

In addition, students also try to cope with the situations by means of spending time with their friends and/or going out to experience the new environment.

> *What I did is to go out with friends … we went to the zoo and ride the gondola …* Student I

> *I went to my friend's house, we ate doughnuts and homemade meal and we sang Christmas songs …* Student S

> *Me and my friends from the dormitory went to watch the New Year fireworks … it is a great experience … still I miss my family back home … it is a good thing I have classmates and schoolmates here in Taiwan …* Student P

As for the longer fall semester break, students' reactions are also different depending on their duration of stay in Taiwan. Findings suggest that most second year students would consider to stay and remain in Taiwan.

This is partly due to their classwork, such as thesis writing, and also in part due to the financial cost of going home.

> *I went back home … the flight is expensive and I have to save money for it … I did some part-time job … when I am back at home at first I feel great, but eventually I remember I still have to finish my thesis …* Student I

> *During the vacation, I did not go back home, I want to catch up with my school work and graduate on schedule … besides I am saving money and it cost a lot to go back home …* Student V

For the first year students, most of the students would either go back home (Asian students) or travel around in Asia (European students). Many mentioned that since they are already in Asia it would be nice to *visit other countries* in the region.

> *I never go home during Chinese New Year break because the weather back home is quite bad … for me it's enough to go home once a year during summer. This winter vacation I travelled to Vietnam and Myanmar. Every year, I choose a new destination around Asia to explore during the winter break … For me this is a great chance to explore the continent I live in and get some ideas to what country I would like to work in after graduation in Taiwan …* Student G

> *I went back home. No major preparation was needed. I went to Japan first for some travelling, but I am not staying in a dorm so it's easier, I just pay for my room while I am not here …* Student S

In essence, students felt ***various degrees of homesickness*** during holidays and vacations depending on the duration of stay in Taiwan. More important, ***some students (second year/graduating students) would refrain from going home during vacation, due to financial cost and academic responsibilities***. An additional finding is that as time goes by, students are slowly integrated into the lifestyle, noted by the notion of ***future employment in Taiwan***. Furthermore, students (non-Asian) would tend to ***use Taiwan as a springboard and visit other Asian countries*** and/or visit the local sceneries in Taiwan, hence promote tourism.

3.5 Academic studies

Anchoring on the concept that study abroad should also focus on its academic aspects. Being degree seeking students, participants are all noted the seriousness of making good with their studies. To collect the data, interviews with respect to the academic aspect of their stay in Taiwan are also accomplished. Three emerging topics were formed namely: ***quality of faculty***, ***teaching methods***, and ***academic related stress***.

The second year students noted that their thesis advisers are quite caring and are easy to get along with. An additional finding is that graduating students have the tendency to want to stay and work in Taiwan (or other Asian countries) after they graduate. However, previous interview with a first year student also noted the importance of knowing Mandarin Chinese language and its advantage in looking for a job in her home country.

> *My thesis adviser is quite good; she is like a second mother to me. Ask about my livelihood and takes care of me … during my first year studying, I am not that comfortable working with other students … back home we are focused more on written examinations as compared to reporting and group work …* Student V

> *My adviser is okay, gives me a lot of advice, in terms of research topic … I also ask for advice regarding future employment in Taiwan … If given the case, I would like to stay, work, and live in Taiwan …* Student I

In addition, students also mentioned the classroom atmosphere, such as local students are more relaxed,

while faculty focuses more on thinking outside the box and encourage students to cooperate and learn with each other through group work and reporting.

> *It is quite good how the teachers introduce us to the class, since the program is an international one, I have no difficulty adjusting. There are some problems with the other classes I took that are not in our college … Taiwan students are like high school students, there are not that serious or do not worry much for the future …* Student I

> *I really prefer the teaching style in Taiwan ... Professors here value discussion and personal opinions in class, which I like very much … however, it is somewhat too strict in Taiwan with the attendance of student … I don't see the problem of missing a class now and then … one more thing is that, most of my classmates are Asians (local students) and lots of them are reluctant to take part in class discussions, which I think is a pity. These discussions would be way more exciting and effective if all classmates actively participated but often they just remain silent and observe …* Student G

> *Teachers are very nice and very present. They help you in any situation and you don't feel like a number. On the other hand, you feel like you don't have too much freedom, because in my country it's your responsibility if you don't go to classes, but here it is mandatory … Also, sometimes the level of English of my classmates is very low which makes classes develop slower …* Student S

> *The classes are also different from my expectations. I thought since it's a Master's program, the subjects were supposed to be advanced but since most of classmates don't have work experience, sometimes the class needs to discuss very basic concepts and ideas … Also, since most of my classmates enrolled in this program after finishing their undergraduate studies, they still act immaturely and do not take studies seriously …* Student P

Ultimately, students **commend the quality of the faculty** and are quite serious with their studies. It would be a point to ponder, that since the students involved in the current study are degree seeking graduate students, hence are more serious and would want to make the most of their time studying. On the other spectrum, noted that local students are more easy-going and not that serious on their studies.

4. Conclusions

With the case of Taiwan, the need to recruit for study abroad or foreign students is actually not by choice, but is of a necessity. The downward spiraling numbers of birth-rate has been continuing for more than two decades and is waiting to cost a lot of financial difficulties for academic institutions in Taiwan. It is computed that by the opening of the school year 2016/17 in 2016 there will be huge drop of around 30,000 university enrollees. In effect, the Taiwan MOE encourages higher education institutions to become more internationalized and start accepting more foreign students. These additional enrolments of foreign students are seen as an opportunity to fill up for the oversupply and at the same time provide the opportunity to increase revenue. More important is the increased intercultural contact between local and foreign students should be able to enhance the local students' intercultural skills without even leaving Taiwan. Therefore, to position Taiwan as an international education provider, focus on the *quality of the academic and social aspects* of study abroad program are seen as crucial.

More important is that, relying on study abroad students themselves to become an active learners seems not to be the case, but it should be the shared responsibility of both the institution and the students themselves to instill a sense of **deep learning and academic engagement**; *deep learning is based more on understanding and constructing an understanding of the learned contents.* Therefore, in order to understand the students' study processes (or pattern) **it is quite important to know what study abroad students are doing and/or how they are**

preparing for/handling their academic studies. In doing so, institutions are able to design the appropriate type and quality of program best suitable for study abroad students' levels of competencies and learning goals that are also capable of developing a sense of deep learning.

In addition, results of previous studies have noted the importance of being able ***to adapt or adjust*** to a new unfamiliar culture and the notion of having the chance to be ***immersed*** locally before intercultural learning takes place. Therefore, ***understanding how immersion with the local Taiwan culture takes place and knowing the quality of the students' intercultural experiences*** are quite important in determining the study abroad students' level of acceptance of the Taiwan culture. Hence, the current study utilized a quasi-ethnographic design in order to understand the various issues of study abroad in Taiwan. Results are separated into five sections, namely: *Scholarship and study abroad, value for money, first contact, occasions and holidays*, and *academic studies*. Various insights and implications are provided.

With the various findings, the current study proposes ***a mandatory arrival workshop on getting to understand and know Taiwan's culture*** should be helpful in the study abroad students' intercultural adjustment and preparedness. In essence, in order for study abroad experience to become productive and enjoyable a deep ***understanding on the students' acculturation process with the host Taiwan culture*** and the ***subsequent effects of their psychosocial and sociocultural adjustments with the different student groups*** (host nationals, co-nationals, and multi-nationals) are quite important. Thereby, a continuous effort in caring for the students on the part of the host institution is much encourage.

Lastly, it is also quite important on placing emphasis of qualitative studies in study abroad such as ethnographic ones, which is actually lacking in Taiwan. It is noted that by using a qualitative approach, findings and implications can be clearly described, hence provide a much deeper understanding of the challenges study abroad students are encountering, which can actually assist in study abroad ***policy changes***. In essence, in order for Taiwan to become a quality study abroad venue, it is high time to notice that the study abroad game is not only about the number of students enrolled in an institution, but is about the ***quality of both education and social engagement*** experiences.

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