

The Learning Experiences of Filipino Students in an International Exchange Program in Thailand

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Abstract

Having the opportunity to participate in an international exchange program is not an easy path for every student. After spending a month in an international exchange program at Phranakhon Rajabhat University, Bangkok, seven Filipino students from Iloilo State University of Fisheries Science and Technology shared their reflections for this research study, which aimed to examine their learning experiences during the program. The research methodology included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that their experiences in terms of academic growth, cultural understanding, and personal development were overwhelmingly positive, despite some initial adjustments. They expressed a willingness to return to the country with their loved ones, highlighting that the organizers effectively addressed their needs and met their expectations. Their detailed insights in this report may provide useful ideas for those organizing similar programs.

Keywords: *Exchange program, students, learning experiences, Filipino*

Introduction

As an educational institution, a university benefits from a network outside of its home country to set benchmarks and build friendships with other institutions. Thus, teachers and students may have a chance to learn from and help each other grow academically, culturally, and internationally. The world is becoming smaller nowadays, and educational institutions need to be in a network for mutual growth. Traveling outside the country is becoming the norm for many teachers and students. Sending children to have experiences abroad is also a dream of many parents, as they want their children to expand their thoughts, perspectives, mindsets, and wisdom.

When Phranakhon Rajabhat University (PNRU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Iloilo State University of Fisheries Science and Technology (ISUFST) in February 2023, both institutions aimed to enhance mutual cooperation in academics, research, and teacher and student exchanges. Since then, PNRU teachers and students visited ISUFST and presented their research papers at a conference on ISUFST's main campus. ISUFST also sent a group of seven students and two teachers to immerse themselves in teaching and learning at PNRU for one whole month in 2024. These students and teachers stayed in an apartment near the university, and a tight schedule of academic and cultural activities was arranged for them.

International exchange student programs and studying abroad offer numerous benefits, including cultural enrichment, personal growth, and academic enhancement. Participating students are exposed to new cultures and languages, which broadens their perspectives and fosters global understanding. This cultural immersion helps students develop cross-cultural communication skills, making them more adaptable and empathetic (Anastasia, 2004). Academically, these programs provide access to diverse educational systems and teaching methodologies, which can enhance students' academic experience and future career prospects. Donnelly-Smith (2009) suggested that students in an exchange program would learn best if they participated in some form of service or experiential learning project that put them in contact with their host community. Self-development can occur in a positive way, as studied by Kauffmann and Kuh (1984), who found that changes in three dimensions of personality functioning were associated with studying abroad: (a) increased interest in reflective thought and in the arts, literature, and culture, (b) increased interest in the welfare of others, and (c) increased self-confidence and sense of well-being.

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The trend of sending students abroad was increasing in the West as the parents have better economic strength. A study in Switzerland found several reasons for their students going out for an exchange program—79.8% respondents wanted to improve their knowledge of foreign languages; 69.8% wanted to improve their academic knowledge; and 18.6% wanted to establish useful connections (BBW, 2002, as cited in Messer & Wolter, 2007).

Exchange programs also increased cultural intelligence, as was found in a one-semester exchange program with 203 Australians and 232 French students. It was found that the exchange helped enhance students' cognitive, metacognitive and motivational cultural intelligence. It summarized that university student exchange is a valuable tool for promoting the development of cultural intelligence and helping students to prepare for jobs in a global work environment (McKay et al., 2022).

Literature Review

Student exchange programs offer numerous benefits that significantly enhance the academic and personal growth of participants. One of the most notable advantages is the opportunity for students to experience and understand different cultures firsthand. According to Onosu (2021), cultural immersion allows students to develop a broader perspective and greater cultural sensitivity. The exchange students would realize that physically being in a location is much different from reading about it in a book. They need to go into the cultural experience with openness and a readiness to learn from all situations. This firsthand experience of living in a new culture fosters adaptability and resilience, qualities that are essential for personal development and future career success.

Moreover, living with host families or interacting closely with locals enables students to experience everyday life from a new cultural perspective. This daily interaction helps students understand the subtleties of social behaviors and traditions that define a culture. According to a study by Sustarsic (2020), both students and the host families reap the benefits of intercultural exchange by way of active interaction and culture sharing that is enhanced by a positive student-host relationship. Students also gain deeper insights into the host culture, including family dynamics, social etiquette, and community values.

Another significant benefit of student exchange programs is the enhancement of language skills. When students are immersed in an environment where a different language is spoken, they are compelled to use that language in everyday situations, which accelerates the learning process. Savage and Hughes (2014) also found that proficient second language skills enable learners to more effectively encourage reform, promote understanding, and convey respect for other peoples and cultures, which may result in increased cooperation, peaceful interaction, and mutual understanding.

Student exchange programs also provide a unique academic advantage by exposing students to different educational systems and teaching methodologies. This exposure can inspire new ways of thinking and learning, as students encounter diverse approaches to education that they can integrate into their own studies. According to a study by Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018), students who participate in studying abroad and exchange programs often report increased academic motivation and improved problem-solving skills. These experiences can lead to better academic performance and a more well-rounded educational background.

Student exchange programs also offer substantial personal growth opportunities. Living away from home and navigating a new environment can build independence and self-confidence. Additionally, the relationships forged with host families, peers, and teachers can lead to lifelong friendships and a valuable international network. As highlighted by Beynon (2023), these social connections and the personal growth experienced during an exchange program can profoundly impact a student's life, shaping future perspectives and career paths.

One notable example of a famous individual who benefited greatly from a student exchange program is former U.S. President Bill Clinton. In 1968, Clinton participated in a student exchange program through the Rhodes Scholarship, studying at the University of Oxford in England. This experience played a crucial role in shaping his global perspective and understanding of international affairs. According to Clinton (2004), his time at Oxford exposed him to diverse viewpoints and helped

him develop a more nuanced understanding of global politics. The relationships he formed and the experiences he gained during this period significantly influenced his later work in international diplomacy and policy-making.

Another prominent figure who gained invaluable experience from a student exchange program is Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai. After surviving an assassination attempt by the Taliban in Pakistan, Malala moved to the United Kingdom, where she continued her education and advocacy work. She attended Edgbaston High School in Birmingham through an international exchange initiative. This opportunity allowed Malala to further her education in a safe environment and provided her with a platform to amplify her message of girls' education and empowerment on a global stage. Yousafzai (2014) has often spoken about how her experiences in the UK broadened her horizons and strengthened her resolve to fight for education rights worldwide.

Organizing a student exchange program comes with several significant challenges, one of which is ensuring the safety and well-being of the participants. Safety concerns range from health risks, such as exposure to different diseases and healthcare systems, to potential political instability or natural disasters in the host country. According to Zhang et al. (2022), it is crucial for organizers or the host school to have comprehensive risk management plans that include emergency protocols, health insurance, and regular safety checks to protect students during the unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring that all participants are well-informed and prepared for potential risks is a fundamental aspect of managing a successful exchange program.

Another challenge is the cultural adjustment and integration of students into their host communities. Organizers must facilitate the smooth transition of students into a new cultural environment, which often involves overcoming language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and homesickness. As noted by Ward and Kennedy (2001), providing pre-departure orientations and ongoing support can help students better adapt to their new surroundings. Organizers should also ensure that host families and institutions are adequately prepared to welcome and support the exchange students, fostering an environment of mutual understanding and respect.

Lastly, logistical and administrative complexities can pose significant challenges in organizing student exchange programs. This includes coordinating travel arrangements, visas, accommodation, and academic placements, which can be particularly cumbersome when dealing with large groups of students or multiple countries.

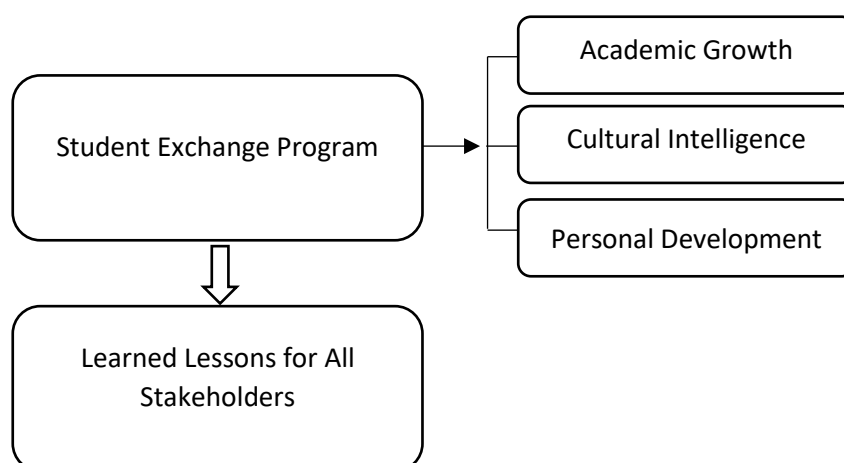
By organizing this student exchange program, we have learned that managing these logistical elements requires meticulous planning and effective communication between all stakeholders, including students, parents, educational institutions, and government agencies. Ensuring that all legal and administrative requirements are met is essential to the smooth operation of the program and the overall experience of the participants.

Population growth in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played an important role in student mobility. By the year 2038, it is predicted that the youth population in this 10-country bloc will reach 220 million, paving the way for the possibility of more international exchange programs. Currently, 20 million students are enrolled in 7,000 universities across ASEAN countries. The top countries sending students to study abroad are Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia, while the top three countries receiving students from outside are Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia (European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region, 2020). Student mobility among ASEAN countries has become a prime target for economic and academic growth.

Research Objectives

This research study aimed to examine the learning experiences of Filipino students in an international exchange program in terms of their academic growth, cultural intelligence, and personal development; please see Figure 1. The results may be useful to organizers of similar programs.

Figure 1 *Conceptual Framework*



Research Methodology

After the completion of the one-month program, the organizers surveyed the opinions of these seven Filipino students, interviewed them, and analyzed the obtained data to summarize in this research report. The effectiveness of the program was measured based on what the students learned academically, culturally, and personally. The research utilized mixed methodologies, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The population consisted of the seven Filipino exchange students from ISUFST. The quantitative method used a questionnaire with 20 items asking for their opinions about all aspects of the program. For the qualitative method, a semi-structured interview was conducted with all students. All questions were validated by university lecturers with experience in student exchange programs. The data obtained were analyzed across three dimensions: academic growth, cultural intelligence, and personal growth.

Results

There were seven students and two teachers in this exchange program, which was organized from February 13 to March 12, 2024, at PNRU (Photo 1). This exchange program resulted from the MOU between PNRU and ISUFST for academic and research cooperation. In the past, students and teachers from these two universities have visited each other for meetings and conferences. This time, ISUFST students spent a month learning about academic and cultural aspects in Thailand. All students were about to graduate from their four-year program in Education. This trip was their first outside of the Philippines. All of them will become school teachers after graduation, so their experience observing classes and helping teach Thai students in some classes will be a valuable asset for their future careers.

Below in Table 1 is the one-month program the organizers finalized after several online discussions with the management of ISUFST prior to their departure from the Philippines.

Table 1 *Schedule for a One-Month International Exchange Program*

Date	Time	Activities
Week 1		
13/2/2024	—	Arriving at PNRU / dormitory
14/2/2024	10.00–15.00	Welcome and orientation by PNRU / Getting to know the university / campus tour
15/2/2024	09.00–12.00	Visiting WPM School (Wat Phra Sri Mahathat Demonstration School Phranakhon Rajabhat University) / Class observation
16/2/2024	09.00–12.00	Thai Cultural Training / Thai Dance Program
17-18/2/2024	09.00–16.00	PNRU International conference on Arts and Culture / attending research conference rooms / Two research papers presented by ISUFST teachers.

Week 2		
19/2/2004	09.00–12.00	Story-telling to children of kindergarten school, PNRU
20/2/2024	09.00–16.00	Class observation at PNRU Demonstration Elementary School (DES)
21/2/2024	09.00–16.00	Assisting in teaching the PNRU DES classes
22/2/2024	09.00–16.00	Attending the traditional Thai dance class / training with Thai students
23-24/2/2024	09.00–16.00	Visiting Bangkok - Jatuchak market / temples / with Thai students
25/2/2024	—	Sunday / Rest
Week 3		
26/2/2024	—	National holiday / visiting Bangkok with Thai students
27/2/2024	13.00–16.00	Class observation: General Science Program – STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics)
28/2/2024	13.00–16.00	Class observation: GBL with 21st Century Teachers; Game-based learning
29/2/2024	12.30–16.30	Class observation “Curriculum Development” / Teaching Profession Program / M.Ed
1/3/2024	13.00–16.00	Attend CTE Elementary Program: Integration Project and STEM Education
Week 4		
4/3/2024	09.00–16.00	Cultural trip to the ancient city Ayutthaya
5/3/2024	09.00–12.00	Observing classes in Business English Program, PNRU
6/3/2024	09.00–12.00	Assisting preparation for the Cultural Flea Market by DES students
7/3/2024	09.00–12.00	Assisting preparation for the Cultural Flea Market by DES students
8 Mar 24	09.00–12.00	Attending the Cultural Flee Market PNRU DES
9-10/3/2024	—	Rest / visiting Bangkok with Thai students
Week 5		
11/3/2024	09.00–12.00	Answering questionnaires / giving an interview on the exchange program research
12/3/2024	09.00–12.00	Closing ceremony at the president’s building / certificate giving
13/3/2024	-	Departure to Philippines

Personal information about students is found in Table 2; all names are pseudonyms.

Table 2 *Information about Filipino Students*

Name	Degree of Study	Major	Sex	Age
S1	Bachelor of Secondary Education	English	Female	22
S2	Bachelor of Secondary Education	English	Female	22
S3	Bachelor of Elementary Education	General Education	Female	23
S4	Bachelor of Elementary Education	General Education	Female	22
S5	Bachelor of Secondary Education	Science	Female	22
S6	Bachelor of Secondary Education	Science	Female	22
S7	Bachelor in Physical Education	Physical Education	Male	22

The two accompanying teachers were Dr. Sunny Gabinete, Dean of the College of Education and an expert in educational management, and Dr. Rex Paulino, an English language teacher. Both of them came to take care of their students and also to present their research papers at two international conferences, held at PNRU and a venue in Nakhon Ratchasima Province (Photo 5).

After the program was completed, these exchange students were asked to answer the questionnaires and be interviewed about their feelings towards the program. The questionnaires contained 20 questions. Their opinions are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 *Students' Opinion about the Program*

Statements	\bar{x}	%
1. You are happy with this exchange program.	5.0	100
2. Your academic experience in the program has fulfilled your expectation.	5.0	100
3. The timing of one month is adequate.	4.4	88
4. You are happy with the apartment.	4.7	94
5. The cultural elements in the program are adequate	5.0	100
6. The local teachers treated you with respect and professionalism.	5.0	100
7. Your Thai friends treated you with respect.	5.0	100
8. You like Thai food.	4.9	98
9. The transportation in Bangkok is satisfying.	4.9	98
10. The exchange program is worth your expenses.	5.0	100

Student answers indicated a high level of satisfaction. However, some answers needed interpretation. Statement No. 3 might suggest that they wanted to stay in Thailand a little longer. This was the first trip outside the country for all of them, and they experienced independence living without their parents. They were happy to stay in an apartment with their friends. They were in the last semester of their studies for their Bachelor's degree in education. Statement No. 4 received 94% satisfaction, which is very high. However, since it's not a perfect score, it might be worth looking into the details. The organizers wanted to accommodate them in the university's dormitory on campus, but all rooms were occupied. So, a private apartment behind the campus was rented; it was about a two-kilometer walk from the campus. The heat from the Bangkok sun can make it tough for some students to walk that distance. Furthermore, they were charged 1,000 Baht each (US\$ 27) to stay in the air-conditioned apartment, with 3-4 students per room, so the students were not burdened with heavy expenses. This amount also included electricity and water.

Table 4 *Students' Opinion About the Program*

Statements	\bar{x}	%
11. You feel safe to travel inside and outside the campus.	5.0	100
12. You will recommend other students to join this exchange program.	5.0	100
13. You like the classes you've observed and participated.	5.0	100
14. You feel welcomed by PNRU teachers and students.	5.0	100
15. You are happy while you are in Thailand.	5.0	100
16. The programs given each day is appropriate.	5.0	100
17. The exchange program makes me want to come back to Thailand again.	5.0	100
18. You like Thai people's hospitality and service-mindedness	5.0	100
19. The exchange program helps you to be a better person.	5.0	100
20. The program helped you able to accept the differences in race, religion, belief and customs.	5.0	100

Statement No. 11 indicated a safe environment in the university and the surrounding area. By Thai law, selling alcohol near schools is prohibited, which helps to increase the safety level. There are currently around 9,000 students and 800 university personnel traveling in and out of the university around the clock. Security guards in uniform are always roaming the campus, and there are few crimes in this area. All statements in Table 4 received full scores for satisfaction. All students expressed plans to visit Thailand again in the future, and some expressed their willingness to seek a teaching job in Thailand, as they know that many Filipino teachers are employed in the country. There are currently around 17,921 Filipinos working in Thailand, mostly as teachers at all levels of education (Novio, 2019). PNRU employed six Filipino teachers during this time, while another three Filipino teachers were teaching English at the PNRU Demonstration School. The Philippines is only a four-hour flight from Thailand, and there are some similarities in personalities and ways of life.

Meanwhile, the two Filipino teachers were invited by PNRU's Business English for International Communication Program to give a public lecture on English Language Teaching to the Thai language teachers on campus, thanks to their willingness to share ideas and engage in discussions with the audience. ELT was discussed in the context of ASEAN usage, and it was emphasized that differences in accents and language styles should be respected, as well as differences in beliefs, lifestyles, and traditions. The promotional poster for this public talk is shown at the end of this article.

The two teachers efficiently used their time while looking after their students. The possibility of conducting two research projects linking ISUFST and PNRU in the field of teacher training was also discussed. It is easy to see that the student exchange program involves not only student affairs, but also teachers' personal growth and mutual cooperation between the two universities.

Results from the Interviews

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the seven students at the end of the exchange program. Three questions were asked:

1. How much did you achieve in academic growth during the exchange program?
2. How did you enhance your cultural intelligence during the exchange program?
3. How did you enhance your personal development during the exchange program?

The students provided various kinds of feedback. Some excerpts from the interviews of students (S1 to S7) are shared below.

Academic Growth

S1: It is an eye opener for me to make interactive activities to offer to my students in the future. It has a lot to offer when it comes to teaching strategies. The inventions and creations of the students made me realize that I can give more than just talking and speaking in front of my students. The program focused on the real-life scenarios which helped me to become prepared as an educator. What I loved about the activities is that it's more on the field activity we have explored a lot and learned from it. There's a lot of exposure that helped us overcome our fears, and try our very best to show our potential and skills differently whether in academic or real-life basis.

S2: The professors at PNRU are knowledgeable and passionate about their subjects. They make the classes engaging and interactive, which makes learning so much more enjoyable. I feel like I'm gaining a lot of valuable knowledge and skills that will benefit me in the future. ... Studying in the Philippines and Thailand shows interesting differences in education. The Philippines focuses on written works, active participation, and student-centered learning, promoting critical thinking. Thailand emphasizes hands-on activities and student-centered approaches, enhancing practical skills and collaboration.

S5: Thailand's approach to education is like a rare gem, unique, and unparalleled. It embraces a learner-centered approach that empowers students to learn through hands-on experiences, a departure from the traditional methods prevalent in our own country. Aside from all of these, I am definitely impressed by the unique teaching pedagogies applied by educators in Thailand, and I am impressed by the dynamic and lively interaction between teachers and learners. They embody "Learning by Doing," where knowledge is not simply transmitted but actively explored and applied.

S6: What's truly commendable about PNRU's approach is the incorporation of enriching activities into the program. These activities not only break the monotony of lectures but also provide practical learning experiences and foster social connections among students. It's like learning with a twist, where education meets enjoyment, resulting in a holistic and fulfilling university experience. So, as you immerse yourself in the activities laid out by PNRU, remember that it's not just about hitting the books but also about embracing the opportunities for growth, collaboration, and fun. After all, a well-rounded education is about more than just grades; it's about the journey of discovery and self-improvement that unfolds along the way.

Cultural Intelligence

- S6: I've amassed a treasure trove of insights and experiences that I am compelled to share with my fellow citizens. Foremost among these is the profound significance of cultural awareness and appreciation. By immersing ourselves in diverse cultures, engaging with individuals from varied backgrounds, and actively participating in cultural activities, we not only broaden our understanding but also enhance our intercultural competence.
- S5: In just a month of staying in Thailand, it feels as though I've been here for many years. It's become a home to me... I would recommend everyone to experience Thailand at least once, not just for its rich cultural heritage, but also for its delectable "Aroi Mak" cuisine, especially my favorite dish, "Pad Thai." The Thai people are truly hospitable and very welcoming. Reflecting on my time here, I can confidently say that Thailand indeed embodies its well-deserved nickname - the Land of Smiles.
- S1: My feelings towards Thailand are fascination, deep admiration and curiousness in their culture and tradition. The respect they show towards each other especially to their leader. ...The bustling streets of Thailand made me realize how hardworking and dedicated Thai people are. I am in awe with their rich tapestry and tantalizing cuisine. My journey here in Thailand is a profound voyage of exploration and personal growth. ...As we wandered through the historical ancient temples of Ayutthaya and the amusing story behind Koh Kret Island had made me reflect to life. Thailand's intricate designs from their temples up to their infrastructures the hard worked carvings spoke the lands rich cultural heritage that will forever have an impact towards me.
- S4: My feelings towards Thai people are often characterized by admiration for their warm hospitality, vibrant culture, and resilient spirit. As a collective, Thai individuals embody a unique blend of tradition and modernity, creating a tapestry of diversity that captivates and inspires. Beyond their hospitality, Thai people take great pride in their cultural heritage, which is reflected in their traditions, customs, and way of life. For me, Thai people are the heart and soul of Thailand, embodying the essence of what it means to be gracious, compassionate, and resilient in the face of life's challenges.

Self-Development

- S7: Student exchange programs often challenge individuals to step out of their comfort zones, adapt to new environments, and navigate unfamiliar situations. This can promote personal growth, resilience, independence, and self-confidence which is something that I have developed in me. Living and studying in a different country broadens my perspectives and expands my worldview. I gain insights into global issues, cross-cultural dynamics, and international affairs, fostering a more nuanced understanding of the world.
- S2: Reflecting on my time here, there are several key learnings that stand out as the most significant. First and foremost, cultural immersion has been a transformative experience. Being fully immersed in Thai culture has allowed me to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for the customs, traditions, and way of life in Thailand. I have learned to embrace diversity and respect different perspectives, fostering a greater sense of cultural sensitivity and empathy....
- S3: This exchange program in Thailand proved to be an enriching and transformative experience. It wasn't just about acquiring knowledge and skills in diverse fields like Thai dancing, basic Thai language, and local food preservation; it was a journey of personal growth and cultural immersion. One of the most profound aspects was learning to interact with children. Though language barriers existed, the eagerness of the elementary students to communicate, participate, and enjoy my classes was truly heartwarming. It instilled in me a deep appreciation for the power of human connection transcending spoken words. Beyond the classroom, I embraced the opportunity to experience authentic Thai culture firsthand. I savored the unique flavors of local cuisines, explored the city on foot, and built lasting connections with my peers at PNRU.

S4: Being a part of student exchange here in Thailand has been an eye-opening and transformative experience, filled with valuable lessons and personal growth. ...Overall, my stay in Thailand has been a transformative journey filled with invaluable lessons and experiences. I've learned to embrace cultural diversity, cultivate resilience, expand my worldview, and foster meaningful connections with others. As I continue my academic journey, I carry these lessons with me, grateful for the profound impact that studying in Thailand has had on my personal and intellectual growth.

Discussion

The data coming from the questionnaires revealed that the students were very satisfied with almost every aspect of the exchange program, including the arrangements, the local people, safety, transportation, culture, and class observation. However, they rated the "adequateness" of the program lower, indicating they thought the one-month duration was rather short. They also rated the apartment lower, which probably was on account of its distance from the university. The university dormitory was full at that time, so they stayed in a private apartment.

The exchange students participated in class activities across various levels, including kindergarten, elementary, secondary, and university. In some classes, they were like students, while in others, they served as teacher's assistants (Photo 3), enriching themselves with various roles in the classroom.

Most agreed that differences exist between classroom atmospheres in the Philippines and what they observed in Bangkok. They noted that Thai students are quite passive and obedient in the classroom, whereas their peers in the Philippines are more active and participative. This finding is supported by research indicating the quiet personality of Thai students. Chung (2021) found that Thai students were very shy to express ideas in class discussions, reflecting their passive nature and desire to harmonize with their environment.

The exchange students often complained that language barriers hindered their communication with Thai peers. This is a common issue noted by English teachers, who have pointed out that Thai students feel shy speaking English. Karnchanachari (2019) found that Thai students' willingness to communicate in some classes was affected by fear of negative evaluation, anxiety, interest, interlocutors, and personality. Familiarity with an English-speaking environment increases their willingness to speak.

The exchange students were in awe of Thai classical music and traditional dances after watching a performance at an international conference held at the university. They also learned to dance with Thai counterparts in a traditional Thai dance class (Photo 2). Thai classical dance is renowned worldwide and often featured in tourism promotions. However, the belief that international visitors universally appreciate this rich culture might not always be accurate. Henkel et al. (2006) found that Thai residents valued cultural sightseeing, friendly people, and food when considering Thailand as a tourist destination, while international visitors placed more importance on nightlife and entertainment.

Despite this, the Filipino students expressed appreciation for the cultural differences and were willing to participate in culture-related classes. Sobkowiak (2019) found that students surrounded by local and their fellow international students experienced foreign cultures, which motivated them to explore and interpret the encountered diversity, and thus equipped them with knowledge about foreign cultures, sensitizing them to cultural diversity (Photo 4). Homburge and Homburg (2021) also suggested that diagnosing a prospective exchange student's motivation and monitoring the capacity for providing social support in host families before and during the exchange are vital components of a successful exchange program, so that students can successfully immerse in a different culture. The exchange program organizers did not include experiences of Bangkok's nightlife, although the students might have visited such places on their own.

The Filipino students likely had positive expectations of the exchange program due to their university's assurances about the positive environment in Thailand. Consistent with these expectations, the program organizers were good hosts, resulting in a positive outcome for the program. This results obtained were similar to Nyaupane et al. (2008), who found that positive

interactions between visitors and hosts promoted peace and mutual respect. This was particularly important for students, given their young age and quest for global and cultural awareness.

After these Filipino students returned home, they were likely to become ambassadors promoting tourism in Thailand. Their positive attitudes toward the country may influence their families, friends, teachers, and neighbors, potentially leading some to visit Thailand for vacation or work. Statistically, 28% of travelers to Thailand return. They spend an average of eight nights, with repeat travelers coming from Malaysia (42%), Singapore (41%), the Philippines (28%), Mainland China (25%), and Vietnam (22%) ("Thailand tourism," 2023).

After the exchange program ended, the researchers continued to communicate with the students, who expressed their intention to visit Thailand again when financially ready. This indicated that they were captivated by the country's positivity and the local people, which was aligned with an unwritten goal of the exchange program.

The similarities between Thailand and the Philippines were so significant that the Filipino students did not feel much difference from their homeland. As Professor Felipe De Leon, chairman of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts of the Philippines stated

The people from both countries have a service-minded nature, deep faith in a spiritual being, and take life as it comes. We are happy-go-lucky people who love to socialize. Both cultures are also rather superstitious, and our historical roots are intertwined, so our physical features are quite similar. ("Cultural connections," 2013)

It was common for Thais who met these exchange students to assume that they were Thai, which could be one reason why they felt happy to be here. It might be too soon to declare the student exchange program a success. We may need to wait until these students return to Thailand as tourists to fully assess the program's impact. However, the questionnaire results and interviews indicated that the Filipino students had a very positive view of the program and Thailand in general. Thus, it can be humbly claimed that the program was somewhat effective.

Conclusion

Seven ISUFST students, escorted by two teachers, participated in an international exchange program for one month at PNRU. They engaged in various activities, including observing classes, assisting in teaching, joining cultural shows, and taking a trip to an ancient city. They expressed the opinion that the program was successful, that they appreciated the experience very much, and that they wanted to return to visit Thailand again. The organizers were also pleased, as they saw that Thai students had a chance to speak English and befriend foreign students. The Filipino students felt that they grew both academically and culturally. The independent stay in Bangkok, away from their families, also helped them gain a deeper understanding of their lives, thoughts, and personal desires. Moreover, observing a different way of life in Bangkok broadened their perspectives, as they compared and contrasted it with the lifestyles of people in their home country.

Limitation

The student exchange program involved only seven students from ISUFST. This limited number may have hindered the researchers' ability to gather a range of opinions.



Photo 1 ISUFST Students Meeting
PNRU Management



Photo 2 Exchange Students Learning Traditional
Thai Dancing



Photo 3 One Filipino Student (far left) Assisted
in Classroom Teaching



Photo 4 Exchange Students on a Cultural Trip to
Ancient City of Ayutthaya

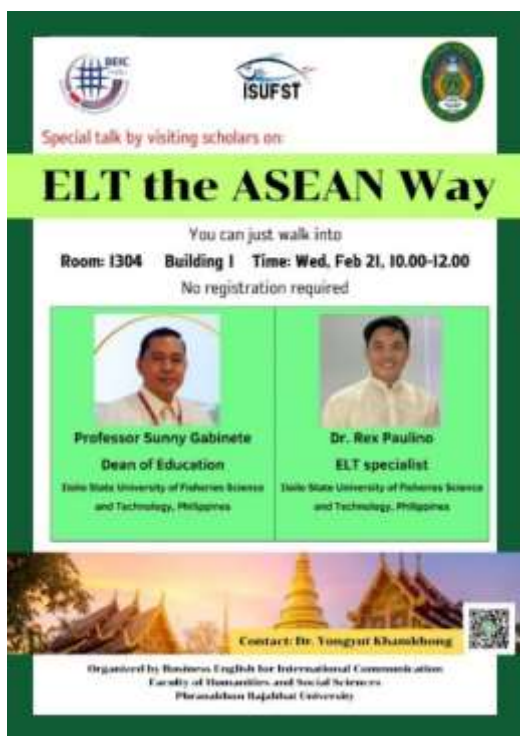


Photo 5. Poster of Public Lectures by ISUFST Professors

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