

What are the benefits of studying abroad according to an international student?

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As a young female with dreams that go further than where she comes from, I grabbed the opportunity to study abroad, and it has been one of the greatest decisions I have ever made. Not only have I been thrown into a beautiful country with spectacular cultures, but I've made the most amazing friends and exposed myself to experiences most can only dream of, and at the tender age of eighteen I am willing to say that there's no better place to "find myself."

Some argue that studying abroad has become less viable because we are living in the 21st century and technology and library resources all around the world are continuously being upgraded. Many question if there is even a point in studying abroad, as many of the benefits found in studying abroad by international students can be found in their home countries. Is studying abroad still relevant despite the world constantly upgrading its resources to the extent that the resources found in first world countries can

also be found in developing countries? Although there are aspects in studying abroad that can be found everywhere, studying abroad is still relevant and vital because it brings about the experience of new cultures, languages, and people. There is also exposure gained from studying abroad that cannot be found by international students in their home countries—for example, exposure to new ideologies, which then stimulates mind growth as the international student is taken out of their comfort zone and forced to be diverse, to think creatively, and to make new friendships and connections. Statistics on studying abroad would seem to support my positive experiences in Canada: according to a survey taken by the Canadian Bureau for International Education in 2015, ninety five percent of international students recommended Canada as a study abroad destination.

International students usually travel abroad in the hopes of finding a better education, and this is what Liu and Winn discuss in a 2009 article on the benefits Chinese students experience from Canadian library systems (mainly the Leddy Library at the University of Windsor). I believe that studying abroad exposes a student to systems and ways of thinking that can enhance their knowledge. For example, the benefits the Chinese students received from the Leddy Library included “online data bases, interlibrary loans and online catalogues” (Liu and Winn, 2009, p.566). These resources were new to them but helped to better their overall performance in school and research abilities in the sense that they became more efficient researchers. The students could easily find and separate what would be effective and relevant for their work from what was irrelevant and added no real value to their work. Another aspect that the authors elaborate on is how the Chinese students became more fluent in English: “The longer

international students remain on English-speaking campuses the more their English skills develop” (Liu and Winn, 2009, p.566). Most international students are exposed to a new language when they study abroad and, since they are constantly around people who speak the language as their first language, they can pick up the language faster as they are immersed in a community that speaks the language fluently. This is a benefit that international students would not be able to receive in their home countries. Studying abroad also offers a new way of learning as the student experiences a different form of acquiring knowledge in the sense that the forms of teaching are different. This exposure makes the student more valuable as a person, as they have learned and experienced different forms of acquiring knowledge; thus, they are more diverse and equipped to work in an environment with different races and cultures.

According to Thorgersen, China is “the largest source of International students today” (2016, p.297). He reported that Chinese parents expected personal development from the children they sent abroad, which is a reality for a lot of international students. Studying abroad offers an opportunity for personal growth, as the student is often sent abroad alone. Not only does this give the student a chance to “find themselves” without the pressure of parents constantly in their face; it also gives the student a chance to set their own boundaries as they will realise that their success or failure is fully in their hands. This often prompts the student to act responsibly and maturely as they realize they will have no one to blame their failure on besides themselves. Thorgersen also brings up the fact that Chinese students who study abroad are expected to acquire the technological skills they lacked when they were in their home countries. The students are expected to

take what they learnt abroad and bring it back to their motherland to better their home country (Thorgersen, 2016). This is another benefit of studying abroad; for example, seventy percent of Chinese international students end up going back to China and bettering the country (Thorgersen, 2016). The international students get to see how other people think and act, learn from that, and apply it when they are in their home countries. They also get a chance to make sure that resources in their home countries are used efficiently and effectively. This is because they would have been exposed to new ideologies, and this will make them more capable to think critically and come up with creative problem-solving skills. For example, I have learned a lot about finance and how to save and do taxes. Previously, I did not know how to file a tax return or the importance of doing so. However, now that I am educated in that field, I can take that knowledge back and teach my friends at home the importance of tax returns. I have also been made aware of issues that concern mental health and been able to have discussions that have made me understand it better. There isn't much emphasis on mental health and self care in South Africa; now that I know the importance of self care, I will take that home to teach people that you cannot give when you are empty. This is one of the most important things I have learned.

Students returning home after studying abroad will also enhance the quality of life of their home country. It is evident that my second home (South Africa) has used ideologies from other countries in its architecture. For example, South Africa's first trained architect, Louis Michel Thibault, was influenced by French architecture and this shows in the beautiful buildings of Cape Town today. Similarly, "the presence of

international students in universities has several benefits for the economies of students' countries of origin" (Grayson, 2015, p. 71). Skills acquired from all over the world are better than skills acquired from one place and will enhance both the home country and the international students' opportunities for employment, as they return with more experience.

Another important aspect of studying abroad that Grayson brings up is the fact that when a student travels abroad they make lifelong friendships and connections that can be used in the future. "Interaction with peers and involvement in campus activities can have a positive effect on educational outcomes" (Grayson, 2015, p.73). The fact that students get to interact with people who were raised differently has a positive impact on the students as they get to learn about other cultures and make friends with people who can eventually become professional partners. Studying abroad brings about the perfect opportunity for networking as the student has a chance to put themselves on the map in a foreign country and one day collaborate with the friends they made whilst studying to get their business started or even get hired by one of those friends. These can be lifelong connections that may prove essential when the student is trying to get a job. These connections are also important should the international student ever have to leave their home country: they will always have a place to go. For example, I had to leave South Africa because of the "Fees Must Fall" strikes. This was a movement where students were striking because they believed they paid too much tuition. They believed that a university education should be free for all South African students. Due to this strike, universities had to be closed. If there ever comes a point where my country provides an

environment where I cannot stay or learn, I know that, due to the connections I have made in Canada, I will always have a place to go.

Studying abroad brings about experiences that a student who stays in their home country cannot experience, Costello maintains in her article “Stories of Studying Abroad: Reflections upon Return.” The fact that the international student is away from their family makes them susceptible to depression and loneliness (Costello, 2015). However, with the way technology has advanced, it is easy for international students to keep in touch with their family members and get the support they need through the phone with apps like Skype, WhatsApp and Facetime. Although there are some who see separation from family as a negative aspect of studying abroad, others argue that separation from family is necessary for growth and maturity (Costello, 2015). Although the student can at times get lonely and homesick, being away from home and family teaches the student to be self reliant, which is not something they would easily learn if they had stayed in their home countries and in their parents’ houses. Costello defines studying abroad as “an academic experience where students physically leave their home countries to engage in college study and cultural interaction in the host country” (Costello, 2015, p.50). It takes students out of their comfort zones and brings them into the unknown, where they are forced to grow because they have to ask questions if they want to succeed. Studying abroad promotes the asking of the right questions as everything is foreign to the international student, so for them to learn, they have to inquire. Costello then states that “the benefits of study abroad far outweigh the barriers and drawbacks” (Costello, 2015, p.51). She sees one of the benefits as “disposition to critical reflection” (Costello, 2015,

p.51). Studying abroad gives a perfect opportunity for reflection because the student can look back on everything they have learnt and see how it has made them a better person. By encountering people from all spheres of life and experiencing new things daily, students can see what truly works for them and get rid of their limited vision. Studying abroad also gives international students a chance to get rid of the stereotypes and assumptions they have made about certain places and people. It gives students a chance to see things for themselves and from a different perspective and encourages them to challenge the ideologies they have grown accustomed to—which leads to critical thinking and growth.

Although there are many benefits of studying abroad, there are also some negative aspects. Pedersen acknowledges that students who study abroad tend to drink more. This is because there is more exposure to new experiences and some students relate alcohol to making memories. Students tend to drink more due to peer pressure. As an international student, there is more pressure to fit in, which is why some end up going to extremes, like drinking alcohol (Pedersen, 2014). As a student in a foreign environment, I can confess to feeling like I stand out due to where I'm from and even due to my skin colour to some extent. I can testify to doing things to fit in because it seems better than being looked at as the foreigner who is clearly out of place. Furthermore, some people argue that some international students never grasp the concepts and teaching ways of the foreign universities. The differences in culture, teaching methods, and language can become too much for the students and they can end up performing less well than if they had stayed in their home countries. Liu and Winn (2009) are aware that

“Asian students encounter various problems when using academic libraries” (p.566).

They point out that some students fail rather than thrive in a foreign environment, as they might never feel comfortable enough to express themselves. Another argument against studying abroad is that learning institutions all around the world are continuously upgrading to the extent that the resources found in a learning institution in Canada can be found in China; therefore, there is no need to learn abroad. Liu and Winn (2009) also acknowledge that “academic libraries in China now offer more resources and services” (p. 571).

These are all very valid arguments. However, to deal with issues like students struggling to understand and grasp the concepts of studying abroad, the lecturers and advisors can do what Liu and Winn describe as becoming “aware of foreign students: backgrounds, cultural differences and learning patterns” (2009, p.566). This can be done by providing sensitivity training for the staff of universities to ensure they will be more equipped to accommodate international students and know what to do when they struggle to grasp concepts or feel out of place. By being aware that international students can struggle but not have the courage to speak up, the lecturers have already put themselves in the mind frame where they are willing to help and be more patient and understanding.

Study abroad is a two-way street in the sense that as I learn from the different things I see and experience, I am also given the opportunity to teach. I get to educate people on Zimbabwean and South African cultures. I get to give other students and lecturers a taste of Africa without them having to leave their countries. They get to see

the beauty that resides in our animals and in our countries. In a simple conversation, I learn, and I teach.

Lee (2012) reached the conclusion that there is a direct link between creative thinking and studying abroad. Lee states, “Students’ awareness and understanding of different worldviews is of significant importance in order to prepare them with the knowledge and skills to meet the demands of today’s globally connected world” (p.768). The more exposed students are, the more prepared they will be when it comes to working in an environment filled with different people with different views. Lee also observes that “study abroad programs benefit students in various ways, including increased international knowledge and understanding of global issues” (p.768). For the international student, being out of their home country gives them a chance to learn about the politics and issues of the country they choose to study in. Not only does study abroad increase academic and textbook knowledge, but it also increases global knowledge.

As a person currently studying abroad, I can fully relate to feeling lonely. For example, during exam season it is incredibly easy to feel overwhelmed, and that causes a lot of homesickness. However, the support I get from my family with their calls and words of love makes it bearable. Studying abroad has opened my eyes to a world I didn’t even believe existed. In the time I have been in Canada, I have tasted food like moose and I have worked in a residence that has taught me that people come from different backgrounds and that understanding diversity and inclusivity is key. To travel and to experience is the best way to acquire knowledge, in my opinion, and although sometimes I feel alone, I know that the decision I made now will ensure that my future will be the

best imaginable. Although there are times I feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, I look at how much I have grown since I left my home in South Africa. Not only have I become independent, but I've become a woman who can make decisions I can be proud of.

Although there are some negative aspects in studying abroad, they can be overcome. The overall outcome for students who study abroad tends to be a positive one, so it is widely believed to be a viable option that will encourage students to experience new cultures and gain knowledge in different ways and from different people. This is something I definitely can agree with due to my experience.

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