



EXPLORING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE ON EXCHANGE PROGRAMS: THE
CASE OF AZERBAIJANI EXCHANGE STUDENTS.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of MASTER
OF ARTS

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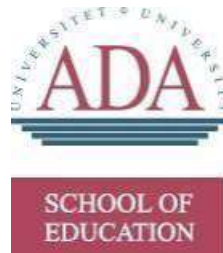
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory research aimed to explore Azerbaijani students' experiences in exchange programs and investigate perceived benefits and opportunities for them. Although it is proven that formal education is the cornerstone of the education system, exchange programs offer an opportunity for students to enhance their knowledge related to different specialized areas. Since non-formal education is an essential part of exchange programs, it is believed that they expand students' worldviews and global perspectives.

Convenient sampling was utilized to select participants who were accessible through personal contacts. Hence, the snowballing strategy assisted in finding more exchange students to participate in the study.

A semi-structured interview analysis revealed that this study participants' social life was affected significantly as their communication skills improved. The ability to work in a team was also positively affected. Moreover, improving language skills was discussed by the participants as significant progress that would contribute to both their social and professional lives in the future. The final aspect of social life that impacted positively was the cultural awareness of the participants who could familiarize themselves with different cultures in the programs. What is more, experiencing independent thinking and acquiring new research skills was shared as one of the perceived benefits of exchange programs. However, the participants also experienced some challenges such as grasping advanced economic concepts, picking up language skills, adaptation, and re-integration. Finally, the career development aspect of exchange programs was mentioned as the participants developed their self-confidence to work abroad after the exchange programs to some extent.

As the previous studies have been context-specific, an in-depth large-scale study of the experiences of Azerbaijani students in exchange programs needs to be conducted to fill the gap in existing knowledge. In this sense, the outcome of this research would be beneficial for students, educational institutions, and policymakers.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Highly interdependent economies of the globalized world nowadays require professionals who are also culturally aware and knowledgeable in different aspects of business and technology (Cowan, 2007). A seamless integration into the world economy also requires an innovative education system that fosters talent (Chak & Makino, 2010). However, it is apparent that it is not practical to develop an innovative and resilient education system in isolation and educational institutions should be in constant pursuit of learning and development in cooperation (Diem, et al., 2023). Emerging market economies are in particular need of upgrading their education systems. Therefore, exposure to the experiences of more developed countries' educational endeavors through exchange programs has been one of the potential solutions to this end (Diem, et al., 2023).

Exchange programs are defined as an agreement between universities from different countries to enable their students to enroll in classes in each other's courses (Atkinson, 2010). The exchange programs were initially facilitated by the World Wars. As World War I ended, the American government intended to promote its values and engage in cultural exchange sending a large number of students to Europe for exchange programs (Scott-Smith, 2012). Hence, the period from 1919 until World War II is known for a considerable increase in the number of exchange students despite not being a part of a formal exchange program (Bevis, 2019).

Cross-border exchange of culture and education was also initiated by the European Union as well in 1987 when the Erasmus Exchange program was launched for this purpose. The program has since then turned into an influential platform for students to become a part of

a global cultural exchange initiative and enhance their experience and knowledge (Feyen, 2013).

There are numerous well-documented benefits of study abroad programs for students. Formal education is the cornerstone of the education system and exchange programs offer an opportunity for students to enhance their knowledge related to different specialized areas (Gaia, 2015). Additionally, non-formal education is an essential part of exchange programs. It has been revealed in different studies that students' worldviews and global perspectives are expanded as a result of the contribution of exchange programs (Kuehn, et al., 2011). Furthermore, social benefits should be mentioned as cultural awareness increases from the exposure to different cultural perspectives as part of exchange programs. Moreover, language-skill acquisition should be highlighted as one of the crucial benefits obtained from exchange programs (Diem, et al., 2012). In the case of developing countries where English is not the first language, this benefit is particularly pronounced as exchange programs enable students to be directly engaged with native speakers which is an invaluable practical tool for improving language skills (Cowan, 2007). However, there are negative aspects of student exchange programs such as feelings of isolation, financial difficulties, homesickness, challenges of adaptation, biases against them, and finally, re-integration back into their own culture upon the completion of the program (Yang, et al., 2021).

1.1 Problem statement

The increasing number of Azerbaijani students participating in exchange programs (Eps) highlights a critical need to understand their experiences. Despite significant participation, with 212 students from four public universities in 2023, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the benefits students have and the challenges they have encountered.

EPs are known to improve language proficiency, learning methods, and mindset (Coleman, 2013). However, international students also experience significant challenges in Western countries (Jackson & Chen, 2018). Considering the rising prevalence of exchange programs and their greater availability due to technological advancements (online format for exchange programs is also implemented), an investigation of the effect of these programs is of considerable importance (Kabanbayeva, et al., 2019). The experiences of students, particularly in terms of social, professional, and career development, have not been sufficiently investigated by local universities. Therefore, there is a necessity to explore the experiences of Azerbaijani exchange students to address this gap and provide insights into the perceived impacts of EPs.

The research analyzed the effect of exchange programs on student's social professional and individual lives. The research is important because there is no investigation of the effect of exchange programs on different aspects of life in the case of Azerbaijan. In other words, the effect of exchange programs that Azerbaijani students took part in has not been studied sufficiently. Furthermore, initial conversations with exchange program graduates revealed that the programs had an impact on their social, personal, and professional lives indicating the importance of analyzing this case.

As the findings of previous studies were context-specific, there is a lack of knowledge concerning how the effect of exchange programs would be on Azerbaijani students (generalizations are not correct according to the review of previous studies). Therefore, an in-depth study of the experiences of Azerbaijani students needs to be conducted so that the existing void of knowledge can be filled. The key beneficiaries of the outcome of this research would be educational institutions (whether to be a part of these programs), students (which benefits they can obtain vis-à-vis costs), and the government (if to support exchange programs).

1.2. The Research aims and questions

The **aims** of the research are as follows

- To explore Azerbaijani exchange students' experiences in exchange programs.
- To investigate exchange programs' perceived benefits and opportunities for Azerbaijani students.

The question of the research is as follows:

What are the perceptions of the exchange students on exchange programs regarding their personal, social, and career development of Azerbaijani students?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing studies have identified myriad challenges and benefits of exchange programs for students. As students become exposed to a different set of cultural and social factors in a different country of study, it was reasonable to expect a sizeable impact of these programs on various aspects of the lives of students.

This chapter critically reviewed existing studies on the effect of exchange programs on the social, personal, and professional lives of students. Based on the review, a gap in the literature was identified to be addressed in this study.

2.1. Review of Academic Studies

Existing literature on the impact of exchange programs on students' personal, social, and career development was reviewed in this chapter. Additionally, literature on the benefits and opportunities of these programs for students has also been critically analyzed.

To begin with, it was identified that host group characteristics (host country) have a significant effect on the identity construction of exchange students. The analysis by Sassnberg and Matschke (2009) revealed that the social lives of students reflected their host country's characteristics in their self-identity.

2.1.1. Benefits of Exchange Programs

Messer and Wolter (2006) analyzed the potential benefits of exchange programs for Swiss students. The study concluded that exchange program participants are more likely to opt for a post-graduate degree compared to students who do not participate in these forms of programs. Additionally, the research also revealed that exchange program participants have a

higher starting salary compared to non-participants indicating the existence of crucial career benefits of these programs.

Eerdewijk (2009) investigated the relationship between exchange program participation in different professional, academic as well as societal aspects of students' lives. The study focused on the experiences of Dutch students and 608 students were analyzed from 126 schools. Knowledge, attitude, and behavior regarding international cooperation, and tolerance for minorities have been measured aspects of students' lives. The results of the research suggested that there is a direct positive impact of exchange programs on all the above-mentioned aspects of students compared to the focus group which was made up of students who did not participate in exchange programs but attended the same schools.

Kuehn, et al. (2011) analyzed the effect of nursing exchange programs on the cultural awareness of students in North America. Student experiences were analyzed for 5 years across Canada, the USA, and Mexico as part of the research. The result of the study indicated that through participation in other countries, students can boost their cultural awareness to a substantial extent. This has been achieved via joint learning and cultural exchange programs that affected both academic as well as social learning aspects of student lives.

Similarly, Ujitani (2013) investigated how cultural awareness and the ability to communicate in a cross-cultural environment of students changed as a result of exchange programs. The Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory which is a tool to evaluate the adaptation of students to a foreign culture was applied in the research to understand the effect of these programs on the cultural adaptability of Japanese students who were involved in exchange programs. The analysis showed that indeed participating students experienced a significant improvement in their cultural awareness and ability to navigate in a multi-cultural environment compared to their peers.

2.1.2 Challenges Students Encounter During Exchange Programs and Their Experiences

Chaiyasat (2020) examined factors that have emerged as challenges to exchange students over the years and the case of French students showed that living expenses are one of the critical decisive factors for students. The study concluded that financial challenges are indeed an issue that needs to be addressed.

Similarly, Dettweiler (2015), similarly, analyzed what kind of difficulties have emerged for German students. Re-integration into the social and academic lives of the home country has been a noticeable challenge for exchange students after at least 6 months in the program. Often to counter negative impacts, an intervention was required.

Hansel (1988) studied the context of US students to understand how a rather mono-cultural view of US students can be changed as traditionally, US students have been known for being centered on a local culture and being ignorant about other cultural settings. In this regard, the research looked into the role of traditional classroom format and compared it with exchange programs to analyze the difference. The findings were again indicative of a positive cultural awareness of students which impacts their social and professional lives alike.

Lee, et al. (2021) studied the experiences of American students concerning exchange programs and how these programs shaped the minds of students for a subsequent study abroad decision. 39,381 students have been a sample of the study and the results found that successful completion of an academic program abroad as an exchange program had a positive and significant role on the decision of students to subsequently study abroad in a full-time format. Moreover, the research also discovered that the same outcome is also the case when students participated in an exchange program only online which has become much more prevalent in light of the Covid-19 pandemic that restricted travel for a long time.

Furthermore, a more indirect effect of exchange programs on society has been studied by Olberding and Olberding (2010). This research recognized the fact that most often exchange

programs and their impacts are measured only on direct participants, and it should be noted that there are indirect beneficiaries of these programs such as society where individuals return. Conducting an extensive study of both direct and indirect participants, the research found that exchange programs have indeed contributed significantly to society through indirect or ripple effects. Hence, exchange participants bring positive outcomes of their education and experiences to cultures where they return.

Boyd et al. (2001) also analyzed the cultural and educational implications of exchange programs. The context of the study is focused on Texas students who participated in the International 4-H Youth Exchange (IFYE) program. The results of the study were similar to other findings in a way that they also pointed to the enhancement of cultural awareness of students to other cultures as a result of participating in the IFYE program. Additionally, these students were also intellectually more curious about global events after participation in the program. Finally, the social lives of participants have also changed, and they were more involved in society through community involvement. Hence, the exchange program by these students was described as a life-changing event.

A set of challenges for exchange students have been identified such as difficulties in learning a language, socio-cultural adaptation and a lack of peer support are among these key factors that have a negative psychological effect on exchange students (Hussain & Shen, 2019).

Cowan (2007) investigated the experiences of Japanese nursing students. It was identified that there are economic and social benefits from exchange programs that enable students access to foreign cultures and learning platforms. To be more precise, the analysis revealed that students can enhance their skills and knowledge from exchange programs that will be essential for them to gain better jobs. Thus, exchange programs have been found to play a role in the development of communities from an economic standpoint. Additionally, social

benefits were reaped from language learning and cultural awareness enhancement that exchange programs have on exchange students.

Chen, et al. (2020) did research into the experiences of former exchange students for years in such countries as Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, and Vietnam. The research covered 15 years so that the benefits of exchange programs over this period since the completion of exchange programs can be analyzed. 326 respondents participated in the study, and it was revealed that there are numerous benefits from participation in exchange programs. These benefits were practical business benefits, personal socio-cultural benefits, professional identity formation, and career choice impact, and exchange programs had a significant effect on all the above-mentioned areas for students.

Smith and Mitry (2008) also determined obvious cultural awareness benefits from exchange program participation for students in addition to the practical value of these programs for obtaining certain knowledge and upgraded skills. The author touches on the meager performance of US schools in this regard and highlights that only 1% of students in the US have participated in some form of foreign exchange programs which is quite low in comparison with international benchmarks. Even though the study concerned higher school exchange programs students' increased knowledge and upgraded skills in cultural awareness, it proved how beneficial such programs could be.

The experiences of students from Vietnam concerning international exchange programs have been studied. The participants emphasized that their main intention to be a part of exchange programs was the fostering of connections globally with people from different parts of the world. Additionally, language skill improvement has also been highlighted as another crucial reason for participation in exchange programs (Diem et al., 2023).

However, not all studies discussed exchange programs in a favorable light as some also focused on the shortcomings of these programs that need to be addressed. To illustrate, Juvan

and Lesjak (2013) investigated 2008-2009 Erasmus students from the University of Primorska to identify their main motives. The findings of the research demonstrated that most students chose exchange programs due to reasons unrelated to knowledge acquisition. Students favored such reasons as traveling and having a fun time as opposed to exchanging knowledge and experiences.

Academic aspects and benefits of exchange programs have been discussed by Wilkins, et al. (2020). The research highlighted the fact that researchers across the globe participate in solving complex scientific challenges by cooperating. Some exchange programs facilitated this collaboration by creating an opportunity for aspiring students to have access to a competitive global research team to address issues of interest. In other words, students participating in exchange programs gain from this cooperation through knowledge enhancement. Moreover, the scientific community and stakeholders of the investigated issues also benefit from the solution of problems.

Cultural perspectives of learning within exchange programs have also been studied by Sustarsic (2020). The analysis involved interviews with both students and host families who volunteered to be a host for respective studies. Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange program was the subject of this study. The findings suggested that the youth and their host families engage in cultural exchange and this, in turn, bolsters the social interaction of students eventually contributing to their cultural awareness, tolerance, and leadership skills.

Almeida, et al. (2016) analyzed how intercultural competencies of students in the European context can be improved as a result of exchange programs. The case of 31 students was analyzed in Portugal as part of an exchange program and the findings of the analysis showed that these programs are indeed beneficial in terms of bolstering intercultural competencies.

Takehera, et al. (2018) were interested in the academic results of students of exchange programs compared to those who did not have an exchange experience. The analysis looked into Japanese dental science students who had a chance to study abroad for a semester analyzed their language skills (English) and compared them to a control group of students who did not have an exchange experience. The findings showed that students without an exchange program participation saw their language skills decline whereas exchange students experienced a substantial improvement in their language skills. In other words, the study corroborated the language benefits of exchange programs which are practical both professionally and academically as language skills are needed in both areas of life.

The effect of exchange programs on the language skills of students is perhaps one of the most studied and well-known benefits of these forms of educational experiences. Students gain a chance to be embedded in the local culture and speak the language from day one with locals who play a significant role in their learning experiences. Lapkin et al. (1995) analyzed the experiences of Canadian students who came from English-speaking parts of the country and these students were transferred as part of an exchange program to Quebec which is a French-speaking part of the country. The purpose was to boost the practical experiences of students in speaking French which paid off as the research of the skills of the participants of the mentioned exchange program showed that a significant improvement was made as a result. Hence, through exchange programs, students would have an opportunity to learn the language much more proficiently in a local culture. It is challenging for these students to have a similar experience back home where they are forced to learn a foreign language mostly from non-native speakers and only for a few hours during the class which is not as effective as extensive exposure to the native language setting as part of an exchange program.

Most of the language-focused studies have examined long-term programs such as a semester. However, there are a considerable number of short-term programs of exchange

between different institutions of countries. There has been a debate about whether these short-term programs had a meaningful impact on the language skills of students. Research by Susandi, et al. (2023) examined a health conference that took part in English and connected the representatives from Thailand, Japan, and the Philippines. Furthermore, the format of the exchange program was online. The research assessed the pre and post-language skills of participants and found that there has been a significant improvement in the English-speaking skills of students. The program runs only for 6 weeks, and the findings of this research suggested that even shorter-term exchange programs have a significant positive effect on language skills.

Wood, et al. (1982) conducted an extensive study of exchange program students for the period of 1971-1980. Students who were part of exchange programs at Purdue University and Indiana University participated in the research. Overall, 57 students and a control group (made up of students who were never part of an exchange program) took part in the surveys. The research aimed at understanding the political, cultural, and social attitudes of exchange program participants and comparing them to a peer group. It was observed as a result of the analysis that exchanges program members expressed a greater level of understanding of other cultures, argued for international peace, showed a greater level of tendency to accept foreign cultural differences, and finally, were more open to educational, social, and political change. The findings also highlighted the fact that the contribution of exchange programs tends to be lasting and the effect becomes even stronger over time. In other words, the research highlighted benefits obtained by exchange students in social, educational, political, and cultural aspects of life.

Weichbrodt (2013) investigated how transnational social practices have been impacted by exchange programs in the case of German students. In other words, the research analyzed further the mobility effect of exchange programs for students. The analysis encompassed the

case of 3,000 students and conducted interviews with them. The findings revealed that almost 80% of students who participated in exchange programs in one form, or another happen to be abroad for longer periods in the next 5 years. This means that transnational social practices become more frequent as a result of exchange program participation.

Studies have also demonstrated the value of exchange programs for teaching not only for learning. From the perspective of teachers, research by Zhou, et al. (2020) investigated how teachers who were also students in exchange programs enhanced their experiences as part of exchange programs and applied their updated knowledge and skills in their home country. Chinese teachers who participated in an exchange program at Canadian schools expressed their reflections with regard to the program. The analysis of the experiences of these teachers showed that they learned a great deal from different features of the Canadian education system and were eager to apply them back at home in their classrooms. In other words, the perspectives of teachers are far-reaching about exchange programs as they can apply novelties learned from different countries' education systems and apply the best cases in their home country.

With a broader focus, Kabanbayeva, et al. (2019) analyzed the effect of the EU-funded Erasmus exchange program on the financial stability of the EU. To be more specific, a focus on academic mobility and its indirect impact on the financial stability of the region has a link. The findings indicated that there was an indirect effect of academic mobility on financial stability via several paths. Firstly, labor mobility is also bolstered through academic mobility. Students who have participated in exchange programs are also likely to move around and work in different parts of the continent which contributes to labor mobility. Moreover, policies of different countries also become more homogenous as a result of extensive exchange programs because students share similar curricula and values which play a role in the creation of similar policies. Furthermore, a greater level of trade dependencies and relationships occur from exchange programs. Again, similar-minded experts are the products of these exchange

programs who also contribute to the formation of a greater level of cooperation between countries within the continent. Finally, the international solidarity of EU countries also increases substantially emanating from homogenous policies and similar values and education systems.

With regards to a short-duration exchange program and its effect on various aspects of the lives of participants, the study by Gaia (2015) concluded that a 3-week short exchange program has been effective for several purposes. Firstly, the language skills of participants have improved during the period. Moreover, the understanding and cultural awareness of participants improved from the participation in a three-week program again testifying to the effectiveness of this form of program similar to long-duration exchange programs.

Chak and Makino (2010) recognized the well-understood benefits of exchange programs such as language skills improvement and cultural awareness. These benefits have been extensively studied and corroborated by numerous previous studies. However, the researchers also found that self-directed learning is a critical element of the learning and professional development process which has improved significantly as a result of exchange programs. This skill is extremely useful in a competitive professional setting as students will not be able to progress significantly without an adequate level of self-directed learning skills. Exchange programs instill this skill and equip students with an ability to excel in the modern organizational context which is based on dynamic learning and adaptability through self-directed learning.

Cultural learning and global perspective aspects of exchange programs have also been corroborated in research in the Korean context. The experiences of South Korean students have been analyzed in the research with respect to their perception of the host country. Pre and post-program perceptions have been evaluated and the findings suggested that exchange programs have been a significant game-changer with regard to cultural awareness and understanding of

foreign cultures. Moreover, it was also concluded that the global perspectives of students improve significantly upon participating in exchange programs.

2.2 Summary and a Gap in the Literature

The analysis of the reviewed studies showed that several perspectives on the contributions and impact of exchange programs have emerged in the literature. Firstly, cultural awareness of students is enhanced through participation in cultural exchange programs as information about and embeddedness in other cultures positively contributes to the understanding and tolerance of students. Additionally, the language-learning aspect of exchange programs has been extensively covered as exchange programs improve the language skills of students through exposure to native students and teachers. Furthermore, the acceptance of social change is also easier for exchange program graduates compared to their peers.

The literature has, however, shown that the experiences of students in each country are different as the context of both countries (host and students' home countries) plays a role in the significance of the impact of exchange programs on various aspects of the lives of exchange program participants. In this regard, the analysis of the case of Azerbaijani students would contribute to the literature with fresh insights as similar research on the experiences of Azerbaijani students could not be found in the literature to the best knowledge of the researcher.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The chapter discusses the details of methodological approaches taken as part of the study to answer research questions. Research design, methodology, sites of the study, target population, sampling technique, research instruments, pre-testing, data collection techniques, data analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations have been covered in the chapter.

3.1 Research Design

An exploratory research design was used for the analysis of the impact of exchange programs on students from Azerbaijan (Creswell, 2014). The choice of this design was appropriate as the study aimed to analyze the experiences of students of one public university in Baku, Azerbaijan in exchange programs by exploring different aspects of life where exchange programs could have an impact. As the literature showed, there were differences in findings from context to context. Therefore, the analysis of those students' experiences was needed individually so that its intricacies could be revealed. In this way, it was possible to identify a greater number of areas in which the effect of exchange programs was noticeable for students (Creswell, 2014). Hence, an exploratory strategy was appropriate for this purpose and has been applied to this project.

3.2 Methodology

Qualitative research methods were applied in the study. Interview questions on the experiences of students, such as what factors of their social, professional, and personal lives had been affected by exchange programs, would be asked. As the study was qualitative, both the collected data and its analysis methods were non-numeric.

Qualitative research methods were non-numeric since they collected and analyzed qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). The analysis of the collected data was carried out with

qualitative coding. Through this method, patterns of meaning in the collected data were revealed, which provided insights into the relationship between exchange program participation and various aspects of life.

3.3 Location of the study

An analysis of the experiences of exchange students was centered on the students of one public university. Hence, the location of the study was chosen due to the ease of accessing potential participants. Data collection took place online via Zoom program and offline in a one-on-one interview format. Thus, all interviewees were current students of that public university who had been identified with the help of the researcher's network and through informal inquiries among the students.

3.4 Target Population

The target population for the research data collection was public university students. The target was current and ex-exchange students who participated in exchange programs in the past, who had already completed exchange programs, and who had a full experience of different aspects of the programs.

3.5 Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The analysis of the exchange programs regarding their effects on students in the Azerbaijani context should be carried out using primary data. A sampling frame should also be discussed in the data collection process as a particular frame that was used by researchers to pick a sample from the population (Creswell, 2014). In this respect, probability and non-probability sampling methods could be identified. Probability sampling is more random as it is based on equal probability for each item to be selected from the population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). Non-probability sampling, nonetheless, does not apply probability but relies

on rather less random but more convenient methods of sample selection. This can be justified by the difficulty of gaining access to all population elements for a particular researcher (Creswell, 2014).

The sampling of research participants in this study could be classified as convenient sampling as the most accessible sample would be selected for the study because the sample consisted of students who had gained access through personal contacts. Hence, the convenience of sampling should be mentioned. Moreover, the snowball strategy was also utilized to investigate the effect of exchange programs on students at the university. Applying snowball sampling assisted in finding people to participate in the data collection via previous participants who persuaded others to join. Initially, some students had been found through the intermediary of personal contacts. Later on, these students were asked via email to attract more students who would be interested in taking part in the study, which resulted in the agreement by several more students to be a part of the research. Since there was no prescribed ideal sample size in the literature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009), ten exchange students were recruited as participants for the study.

3.6 Research Instrument and Data Collection

The research instrument for data collection was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews had several benefits that contributed to the findings of this study. As they incorporated both structured and in-depth types of interviews, it allowed me to draft pre-determined open and close-ended questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). Besides, I asked follow-up questions to enhance the communication flow. It let participants acknowledge that I might not completely understand their initial answer at times and need them to provide details for clarity. The interviews were much more detail-oriented as they promoted further understanding of the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Richer details emerged from the analysis, therefore, creating a higher level of clarity about the issue under focus. However,

the interview method was time-consuming as the researcher needed to personally engage with each interviewee to collect data (Tubey, Rotich, & Bengat, 2015). Given that sufficient time for the collection and analysis of data was needed.

3.7 Pre-testing/Pilot study

Pre-testing of the research instrument was carried out using a small sample interview to identify potential issues before the actual interviews. For this purpose, one pilot interview was conducted to observe approximate completion time, potentially misleading/difficult questions that might have a wording problem, and other potential issues that were addressed before the actual round of interviews.

3.8 Validity and Reliability

Interview validity could be improved with specific and clear research questions and pilot interviews (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009). In this way, issues had been identified regarding a link between research questions and interview questions and addressed before the research.

In this qualitative research, there was no specific quantitative method of measuring reliability, but triangulation had been applied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). The reliability of interview outcomes was ensured through structured transcribing. Reflexivity also ensured that the researcher was aware of her presence in the research process which helped her avoid personal biases. Structured transcribing and note-taking made the output more dependable and trustworthy. Besides, transcribing was relevant as it provided an accurate record of the interviews and increased accessibility for double-checking interview highlights or occurrences that were worth taking note of.

3. 9 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis methods were used in this study. To be more specific, qualitative coding was applied through systematic classification of data collected from interviews with different codes, which later led to the emergence of themes (Creswell, 2014). Codes were assigned to the parts of transcriptions that were to be made during the interview process. Codes, subsequently, were developed into themes. Themes, in the case of this research, refer to different aspects of life that exchange programs have impacted.

3.10 Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged:

1. Interviewee Bias: Participants may have been discouraged from discussing difficulties encountered as exchange students. The hesitation to share personal experiences or opinions would potentially undermine the validity of the responses. Students might have been concerned about the university learning and the problems they faced, affecting their willingness to be candid.

2. Sample Size: The initial plan was to interview 15 individuals. However, three participants withdrew, and two others, despite signing the consent form, did not attend the interview. This reduced the sample size to 10 participants and might impact the study's comprehensiveness.

3. Gender Disparity: There was an imbalance in gender representation, with female participants outnumbering male participants. This gender disparity might affect the generalizability of the findings.

4. Researcher Positionality: As a former exchange program student, I was aware of my subjectivity. To mitigate bias, I refrained from interrupting participants' answers and avoided asking leading questions.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

Ethics has been the foundation of the research process, and this study aimed to adhere to ethical research principles (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). Also, as this research was based on primary data analysis, the ethical approach to data collection and analysis was of paramount concern to the researcher. The first step was to ask for informed consent. Informed consent was sought from each participant as the express agreement to participate in the research. Only after getting signed informed consent, did the researcher proceed with the interview questions. Another important aspect of the research process, which was ethical, was to inform participants that they were allowed to withdraw their participation at any time before completing the research. This guideline was adhered to in the process to give interviewees complete freedom concerning participation till the end of interviews or withdraw at a particular point before the completion of the interview process.

Anonymity and security of private data are of significant concern in today's business environment (Creswell, 2014). Initially, personal information, such as demographic information that had been provided to the researcher in the data collection, was not shared with any other party.

Additionally, the data were deleted when the research process concluded. The data deletion served the purpose of eliminating the risk of data falling into the hands of other individuals or companies. The research participants were also informed that they could obtain a copy of the research findings upon the completion of the study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The research aimed to explore exchange students' experiences in exchange programs.

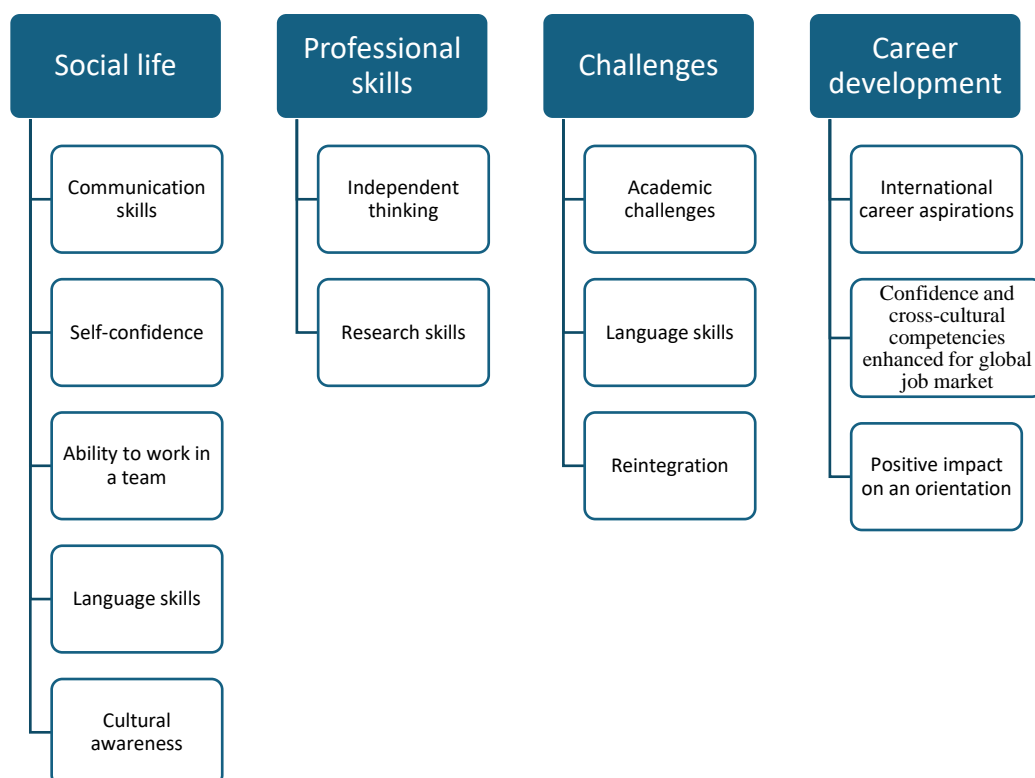
The question of the research was as follows.

What are the perceptions of the exchange students on exchange programs regarding their personal, social, and career development?

This Chapter incorporates the following sections: social life, professional skills, challenges, and career development. Furthermore, challenges faced by students during the exchange program have also been incorporated. The chart below illustrates the structure of the findings.

Figure 1

Summary of Interview Findings



Further elaboration on these themes is provided in a detailed manner.

The chapter first introduces demographic information on participants. Next, it presents the findings of interviews.

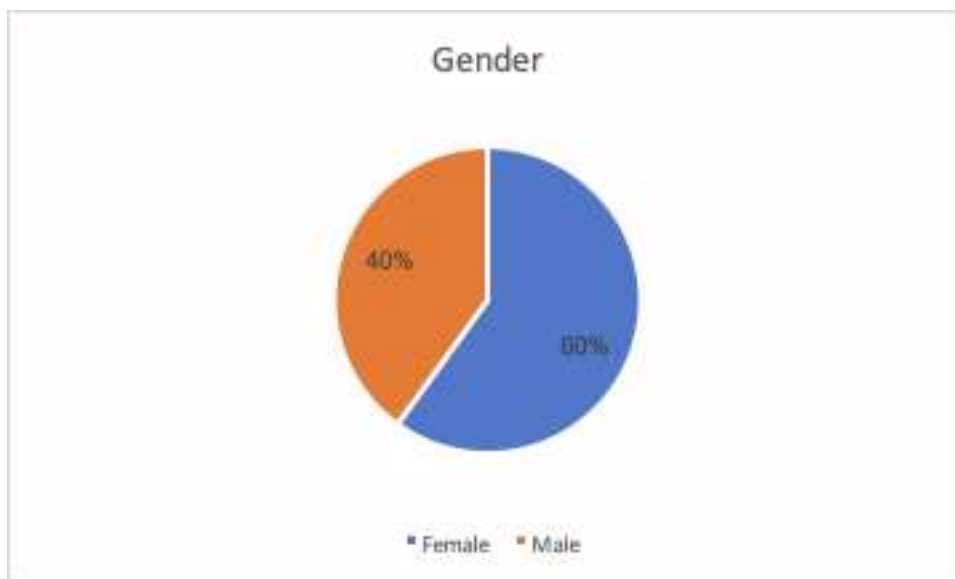
4.1 Demographics of Participants

Key demographic information on participants is discussed in this sub-section.

Regarding gender, 60% (6 participants) of participants were female and 40% (4 participants) male. As the researcher did not apply a particular rule for selecting from each gender, the majority of females in the sample might be accepted as a greater participation percentage of female students of ADA in exchange programs.

Figure 2

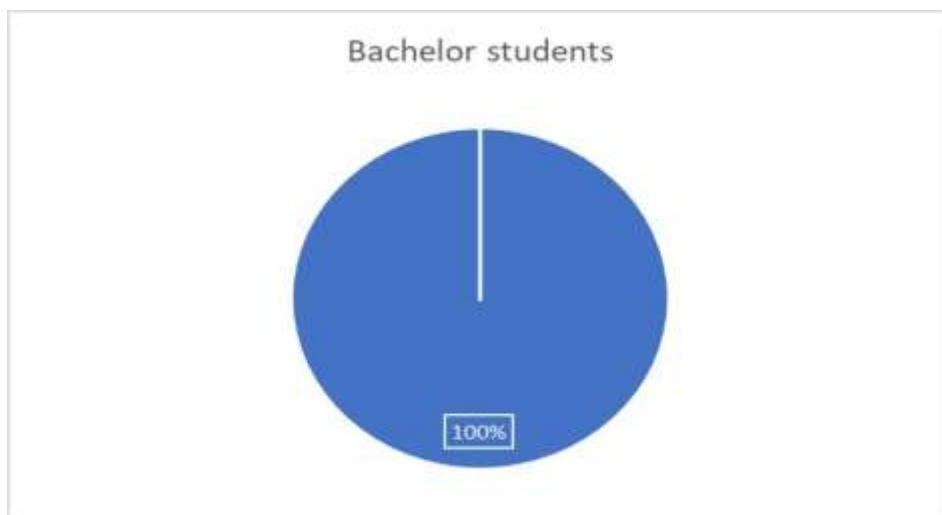
Gender Distribution of Participants



In respect to education level of participants, all of the participants were undergraduate students (participated in exchange programs during their undergraduate years).

Figure 3

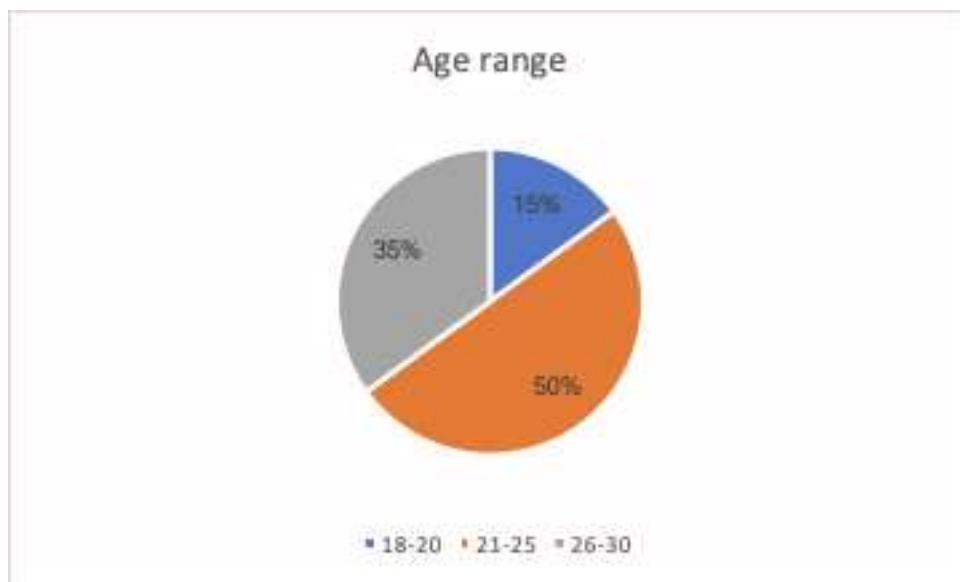
Education Level of Participants



The age range of participants varied as follows (see Figure 4). Most of the participants fell into the 21-25 age range followed by the 26-30 and 18-20 age groups.

Figure 4

Age Range of Participants



4.2 Impact of Exchange Programs

4.2.1 Social life

To begin with, interviews revealed that students participating in exchange programs reported that there were changes in their soft skills, and those skills impacted their social life positively.

All interviewees mentioned that their self-confidence and communication skills were improved, and their ability to work in a team/group and other interpersonal skills were bettered.

Communication skills

According to the respondents, participating in an academic and social life throughout the exchange program greatly enhanced their communication skills.

All participants almost repeated the insights similarly shared by Respondent 1, indicating that it encapsulated the general responses from all respondents about communication skills:

My communication skills improved without a doubt as I made class presentations in front of an international group of students and communicated in events and societies in which I was a member as a student. In addition to communication skills, I can not emphasize enough how much improvement I noticed in my teamwork confidence and ability. We did not have many group projects (teamwork) or competitive cooperation before the exchange program, but the exchange program was a game changer for me because we had a lot of group work.

The communication aspect of soft skills was mentioned by students frequently as the interactive nature of classes and seminars contributed to their ability to communicate and express themselves confidently.

Ability to Work in a Team.

Moreover, the respondents stated they became more confident when working in groups. They were sure that the group work they were involved in throughout the exchange program was rewarding and challenging because it improved their sense of identification with large groups and their ability to navigate the challenges of a group environment. Group setting discussions and coming to a consensus as a group involved a lot of team dynamics that they mentioned as having a positive impact on their abilities. Respondent 2 touched on

the point, "Doing group work allowed me to feel more confident as I was exposed to a group environment repeatedly, which felt more natural about group dynamics and communication."

9 respondents stated a significant effect of exchange programs on their teamwork capacity, illustrating how exchange programs were influential in this regard for the majority of participants.

Language Skills

Language skills were one of the most prominent factors in interviews as an area of skill/competencies that had improved significantly due to exchange programs. Respondent 6 mentioned language skill improvement as one of the critical areas of accomplishment of his exchange program:

Back home, I did not have an adequate environment to improve my English as all my classes were in Azerbaijani, and my friends also spoke to me in this language. However, the exchange program was in English, and having a continued process of interactions in this language throughout the exchange program had a massive impact on my language skills, which I feel benefit from today.

The respondents emphasized language skill improvement as a significant accomplishment along with their academic knowledge and expertise. As most of the research participants did exchange programs in an English-speaking country, they cited language skills as one of the primary achievements emanating from the exchange program. Although language skills were mentioned as a challenge too, students mostly concurred that the difficulty was temporary as learning the language more fluently was possible through the program as clarified by Respondent 1, "The difficulty I experienced in this regard was not in vain, as I knew that it would get easier with time, enabling me to be more successful in the future."

The responses indicated that the language skills they could improve and the difficulties they experienced regarding them during the exchange programs were a worthy outcome, the respondents were certain that with time, all that they experienced would become simpler and they would be able to achieve more success in the future.

Cultural Awareness

Furthermore, there was a common theme regarding cultural awareness and understanding different cultures. All respondents agreed that being exposed to a local culture in a foreign country enhanced their cultural awareness. Being a student from Azerbaijan and having an opportunity to attend a university in a culturally diverse environment in a developed country was underscored by the research participants as a vital impact on their understanding of multiculturalism abroad. Respondent 5 clarified the point:

I have been baffled by the fact that there were so many different cultures represented in our class. It was a truly international class that taught me much about other cultures. Additionally, I also learned how to accept differences and be tolerant in my interactions.

The research participants underlined the positive impact on their worldview. The classroom practice and places they attended throughout the exchange program made, fostered tolerance and increased appreciation for diverse cultures, which were also among the emerging themes.

Most participants talked about their long-term plans of working overseas or for an international firm in Azerbaijan where they would be exposed to a multicultural environment daily when discussing the significance of the component in the lives of the students. Thus, the exchange program raised students' level of competency.

In summary, critical soft skills were affected by exchange programs in a positive sense, and students were proud of these accomplishments.

4.2.2 Professional Skills

Independent Thinking

Furthermore, the narratives of research participants revealed that independent thinking through assigned research projects pushed their understanding of the subject matter and contributed to their critical thinking ability. The research projects encouraged the respondents to ask questions and tackle these questions with academic research methods that were, according to some respondents, new to them and helped them to research and learn, as expressed by Respondent 2 independently:

What I enjoyed most about most of our studies was that they presented you with different options and viewpoints and asked students to make sense of it all on their own through our independent research and understanding of the subject matter. In this manner, they taught us how to form our opinions based on an informed research process.

One of the long-term advantages of exchange programs for the research participants was the development of their critical thinking abilities, as illustrated by the excerpt provided by Respondent 1. According to the research participants, what they learned throughout the exchange program would improve their ability to think critically, learn, and apply what they learned to actual world outcomes, which in turn benefit them academically and in the professional aspects of their lives. 6 respondents confirmed Participant 1's insights. In addition, the research respondents said that those skills would last throughout their lives and morph into lifelong skills.

Research Skills

7 respondents also claimed that research and learning skills were contributed by exchange programs. Students very often were asked to collect and analyze data for the projects they were doing. Learning about a research process and applying it practically to conduct a study helped them to be better equipped for future endeavors regarding education and professional careers. The quote by Respondent 4 clarified this point:

It was practically new for me to collect data, analyze it, and do a complete research report based on this analysis. I can state that I learned by doing independent research on the exchange program.

According to the research participants, research was considered the foundation for understanding basic science and progress, and throughout the exchange program, the strong knowledge they gained would enhance their ability to understand complex situations while conducting research in the future.

4.2.3 Challenges

Academic Challenges

The academic rigor of exchange programs also provided some difficulty for students. As students shared, they touched on a different type of teaching in the programs that at least

initially challenged them. They related it to the fact that the program workload was higher compared to what the participants had been used to. Besides, the programs involved a much greater level of independent work and research. Respondent 7 highlighted:

Independent research and analysis the program required us to do was a huge benefit but, at the same time, a significant challenge for me. Often, our assignments involved creative thinking and approaching important issues independently without much prescription from the university. This put me through some difficult times, but I later enjoyed it.

Hence, the workload itself and the novel teaching and learning methods in different universities around the world made it more challenging for them to be effective (this view represents eighty percent of the respondents). However, as the respondents themselves mentioned, those challenges paid off later on as benefits exceeded costs for them.

Language Skills

Most respondents identified language skills as a barrier (or a struggle) to comprehending the academic content delivered and navigating daily social life activities (seventy percent of participants agreed). An extract from Respondent 3's interview emphasized language proficiency:

When I started my studies as an exchange student in a foreign country, I realized there was still a great deal to learn as I had considerably challenged my communication with native speakers. Also, learning all the materials in a different language presented in an academic setting was a challenge because I had to understand technical terms in another language and use vocabulary on the Internet a lot. So, I started my exchange program, I realized the challenges regarding language skills. Learning my specialty in another language was a different experience for me, but ultimately, it proved to be a worthwhile experience.

Interestingly, language skills were mentioned as an improved area and an obstacle for many students to be effective in their exchange programs.

Reintegration

In addition, the challenge of reintegration into their original school after the exchange program was repeated by half of the respondents as one of the challenges they faced. According to them, the exchange program was highly fulfilling, diverse, academically challenging, and enjoyable, and they could not find these aspects to the same extent in their original schools, which made it often boring to be back. Some of the participants mentioned

how they immediately started looking forward to following challenges in terms of starting an international degree.

Furthermore, the challenge of reintegration into society was also mentioned. An excerpt from Respondent 4 detailed this aspect:

I could not find the same range of activities in the ordinary course of life here after getting used to a hectic life back in the UK. Perhaps it came from the fact that students, my friends, were from different countries, which allowed us to try new things and learn a lot from each other. It is somewhat stagnant here.

Hence, depending on where the respondents did their exchange programs, there was an expression of challenge regarding reintegration into home country life. Nevertheless, some responses showed a different reality, as some participants missed their home country after the exchange program. An opposing view by Respondent 6 illustrated the point.

I missed home a lot. There was this sense of emptiness as the things that I used to, and my friends and family were not there. I could not fully integrate socially, and the only exciting thing for me was classes, which I buried myself in.

Hence, at least half of the students lived through challenges in their post-exchange program regarding integrating back home country.

4.2.4 Career Development

Another effect of exchange programs on the respondents' lives was that their career aspirations became more internationally oriented after the program. Seven out of ten respondents discussed how they became more interested in working abroad for international firms and organizations after the exchange program. An excerpt from Respondent 7 reflected the rationale behind the change:

When I did an exchange program, several things changed for me. Firstly, I became much more confident because observing students from different parts of the world allowed me to understand that I am quite capable of competing on an international scale. Secondly, seeing how multicultural and interactive the Netherlands society is, I decided to continue my career in a similar environment or a global firm.

Thus, the confidence of the research participants to work in a foreign country in a different and more competitive environment was enhanced as a result of exchange programs. What is more, the respondents were also sure that the programs also boosted their social skills

needed to be competitive in an international setting. Exchange programs, according to the participants, equipped them with a more valuable set of social skills such as communication skills, cultural awareness, and cross-cultural work competencies and bolstered their confidence to try their chances at an international arena rather than limiting themselves to a local company in their home country.

4.3 Summary of Corroborated Findings

Triangulation (comparison across programs, skills, and challenges) of the results has been presented in the tables below. The tabulation enables us to understand the number of students in leading global exchange programs and their responses to questions regarding social and professional factors affecting students in an exchange program. To illustrate, numbers in the communication column show how many participants stated that their communication skills improved due to exchange programs, and similar logic applies to the rest of the table (see Figure 5).

The programs represented in the sample were Erasmus (5 participants), Global UGRAD (3 participants), and ISEP (2 participants). All three groups unanimously agreed that communication skills were improved due to exchange programs. Additionally, language skills were also seen as a positive change for all three exchange student groups. Likewise, a cross-sectional analysis demonstrated that all three groups experienced a positive change in their cultural awareness.

Regarding the impact of professional factors, research and study skills were modified more in the case of Erasmus graduates and followed by Global UGRAD and ISEP alums. Regarding the effect of independent thinking, Global UGRAD program graduates led the way in results.

Figure 5

Impact of Exchange Programs on Social and Professional Life and Career

Number of the students	Social life					Professional skills		Career
	Program	Communication	Ability to work in a team	Language skills	Cultural awareness	Independent thinking	Research and study skills	Career development
5	Erasmus	5	5	5	5	2	4	3
3	Global UGRAD	3	2	3	3	3	2	2
2	ISEP	2	2	2	1	1	1	2

In terms of challenges, academic challenges were most significant for Erasmus graduates, followed by language and cultural assimilation challenges, which had an equal effect (see Figure 6). The reintegration challenge was not as great as the previously mentioned challenges. Furthermore, Global UGRAD graduates suffered the most due to cultural assimilation issues, whereas ISEP graduates reported academic and language challenges as the most pressing.

Finally, a positive career development impact was highest among ISEP graduates, followed by Global UGRAD and Erasmus programs.

Figure 6

Challenges of Exchange Students

Challenges			
Program	Academic challenges	Language skills	Reintegration back home
Erasmus	4	3	2
Global UGRAD	2	2	2
ISEP	2	2	1

In summary, it can be mentioned that the respondents have acquired or improved many skills and competencies due to the exchange programs. Language skills, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and independent research and learning were emphasized as necessary. Additionally, the participants' career aspirations also took more international orientation after exchange programs as they improved their self-confidence and cross-cultural work skills. Furthermore, there were several challenges, which encompassed returning and reintegrating into previous schools of studies and, in general, re-integration into the social lives of their home countries. Finally, academic challenges were raised due to the workload of exchange programs and the ways of teaching, which were novel for exchange students compared to their home country's education system.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The findings of the data analysis have been elaborated on and discussed in the context of previous studies in the area.

Firstly, language skill acquisition has been discussed by all participants as an area of improvement. Language skills are essential both for professional and academic purposes, and the research has revealed that participation in exchange programs in various foreign countries provided them with an opportunity to enhance their language skills. It should be noted that language skills are both an opportunity and a challenge for students, according to the findings. As a challenge, prior poor language skills of students were a barrier for them initially to advance academically. Compared to native students, more extended time and effort are needed academically and digest the gist of provided materials. Findings regarding language skills have been in line with previous studies in the context of other countries. While discussing the implications of an exchange program, previous studies have mentioned language skills predominantly as one of the critical areas of improvement as a result of exchange programs (Cowan, 2007; Eerdewijk, 2009; Chen et al., 2020; Diem et al., 2023; Takehera et al., 2018; Lapkin et al., 1995). Constant exposure to a native-speaking environment has contributed to skill enhancement, naturally enabling students to be more fluent. As the participants of this study went to study in an environment of a non-native language, language skills were necessary. Cowan (2007), Eerdewij (2009), and Takehera et al. (2018) have also emphasized specific challenges related to language comprehension in a foreign country, which is again similar to the findings of this research in the Azerbaijani context.

Additionally, cultural awareness and understanding of other cultures have been revealed as an area where exchange students noticed a significant improvement. According to the respondents, due to the fact universities have a more diverse student base in their country of choice for exchange programs (compared to home country-Azerbaijan), they could gain an understanding of other cultures and become more tolerant. This area of finding is in keeping with the majority of studies in the area of exchange programs and how these programs influenced the young. Indeed, previous studies have affirmed to a significant extent that the

cultural awareness of students takes a positive turn after exchange programs, which is related to the fact that exchange programs involve relocation to a new country or city for a certain period (Eerdewijk, 2009; Kuehn et al., 2011; Ujitani, 2013). Not only school life but also the broader life and environment in the country of the program contributed to the cultural understanding of students to a considerable extent.

Furthermore, students have also expressed positive practical implications of exchange programs for their lives. Being familiar with different cultures and living in a multicultural environment bolsters peoples' ability to survive and thrive in an international work environment, and the responses obtained have also corroborated this fact. Similar to language skills, cultural awareness was also challenging in addition to having benefits. Students initially found it difficult to adapt to the new environment, which impacted their studies and social life. The finding has also been corroborated by previous studies where some issues regarding cultural assimilation to a foreign country have been discovered (Eerdewijk, 2009; Kuehn et al., 2011; Ujitani, 2013; Hansel, 1988; Boyd et al., 2001; Lesjak, 2013).

Moreover, soft skill development has been distinguished as a positive side of exchange programs in this study. The participants mostly ascribed this development to the difference in the format of classes, which encouraged a great deal more interaction and discussions, which positively impacted soft skill development. Communication skills and the ability to be more confident and effective as a team member have been elaborated on by the majority of students as a primary benefit of the exchange programs. With regards to the link with previous studies, again, it can be observed that soft skills along with academic knowledge have been improved as a result of exchange program participation (Ujitani, 2013; Eerdewijk, 2009; Hansel, 1988; Chen et al., 2020; Lesjak, 2013). This finding may not be surprising as a change in the study environment puts pressure on students to extend efforts to be mixed in a new group, resulting in a greater level of interaction.

Independent thinking, critical thinking, and the ability to do independent research are areas of development that were encouraged due to participation in the exchange programs. The design of studies has challenged students to think independently and carry out

independent research, which might play a role in developing their cognitive skills and critical thinking ability. There is also some evidence of this regard in literature as some studies have identified critical thinking development among skills that have been picked up by them in their studies (Boyd et al., 2001; Lesjak, 2013; Chak and Makino, 2010).

Furthermore, career perspectives of exchange programs have also changed as most students expressed their interest in having an international career after participating in the exchange programs. By familiarizing themselves with a different academic and social environment and gaining additional knowledge and skills, students' confidence was higher regarding their ability to secure an international job and succeed in it. There is broad support for this finding in the literature as well, where it has been revealed that students who take exchange programs are more likely to seek an international career compared to students who study only in a domestic institution (Boyd et al., 2001; Messer and Wolter, 2006; Lee et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020; Diem et al., 2023; Kabanbayeva et al., 2019).

Students have also outlined challenges they encountered during the exchange program participation. Re-integration into their home country environment and previous schools have been highlighted as among the challenges of re-integration. Being on an exchange program in a significantly different study and living environment changes their perspectives and life habits, making it difficult for some to reintegrate into their old lives when they are back in Azerbaijan. Regarding the perspectives on the extant literature, other studies mentioned reintegration issues after exchange programs and discussed ways of ameliorating difficulties in this process (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Dettweiler, 2015). In other words, similar to the case of Azerbaijani students doing an exchange program abroad, challenges of re-integration have also been identified for students in different countries.

Finally, academic challenges were discussed because most interviewees talked about various academic difficulties they faced. In this regard, workload from an educational standpoint is mentioned as one of the key differences from their home country studies. Thus, a higher workload level for the participants was one of the primary challenges they faced in an exchange program. Additionally, the format of studies, such as more group projects, was

also somewhat more demanding for the participants compared to what they experienced at home. Finally, the format of tasks also required them to be more creative and apply what they have learned to practical areas of life. This was an additional challenging aspect of studies abroad and pressured the participants to adapt to new techniques. The academic rigor of studies has also been discussed in the literature as one of the difficulties that students experience, as the differences in teaching methods and workload can be intimidating at times (Boyd et al., 2001; Messer & Wolter, 2006). This means the research findings broadly agree with the previous studies in this area.

To summarize, most of the findings can be corroborated with other studies from the literature.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, the research question investigating perceptions of the personal, social, and professional impact of exchange programs on students has been analyzed using semi-structured interviews with fifteen exchange program graduates in Azerbaijan. The interviews have been analyzed using qualitative data methods, namely, qualitative coding and thematic analysis.

The analysis of data, firstly, showed that there were positive impacts as well as related challenges for students. To begin with, semi-structured interview results showed that social skills may have been positively affected, or in general, exchange programs may have affected the social life of students. This impact was felt regarding improved language skills, ability to work in a team, communication skills, and cultural awareness.

Secondly, participation in exchange programs also led to the development of such areas as independent thinking and research and learning skills, which were crucial for both the academic and professional lives of students.

Furthermore, a broad range of challenges have been mentioned by the participants as impediments in their journey. These challenges have encompassed academic difficulty, language skills and comprehension, cultural assimilation to a new country, and reintegration when they return home.

In addition, the research has also shown all findings are supported by academic literature, and there are no unexpected findings. As concluded in the literature, exchange programs have both positive impacts as well as challenges for exchange students, which has been corroborated in this research, too.

Ultimately, the cross-sectional analysis of the study data about the various exchange programs that the participants engaged in revealed differences between the three programs, Erasmus (7 participants), Global UGRAD (5 participants), and ISEP (3 participants), in terms of the skills that students improved on and the difficulties they faced.

Recommendations that have been derived from the findings of the research are as follows:

Firstly, students should start improving their language skills before going on an exchange program so that their challenges with exchange programs are alleviated considerably. In addition to basic language skills, it can also be advised that potential exchange program candidates learn their specialties in the relevant language to go through a rigorous program smoothly.

Additionally, recommendations can be given for institutions that send students to participate in exchange programs. To begin with, the experiences of students on exchange programs can be learned to adapt the educational practices of leading educational institutions and apply them locally. Hence, the knowledge and experiences of exchange students can be benefited from by institutions to develop more competitive programs for students. Secondly, to facilitate the preparedness level of students for exchange programs and in general, for a successful career path, local educational institutions must attach a greater level of importance to teaching language skills, independent and critical thinking, and research skills. Incorporating these elements into various parts of teaching would improve the chances of a more successful exchange program outcome for students.

Finally, the research has captured the experiences of exchange program students who participated in some of the leading exchange programs in the world. Although sample size is a limitation of qualitative research, it can be argued that the findings of this research encompass key aspects of exchange program students' lives. The findings are also in alignment with the findings of other studies in the literature meaning that the conclusions of the study can be applied as broadly representative of the experiences and perceptions of students who participate in exchange programs.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

The effect of exchange programs on student's social, professional and individual lives. The case of Azerbaijani exchange students

Dear Participant:

I would like to extend an invitation to you to participate in an interview regarding social, professional and individual lives of exchange students abroad. The case focuses on students of Azerbaijan who have participated in an exchange program and will provide valuable insights into the experiences of exchange students. Your contribution will facilitate the understanding of the benefits and challenges of exchange programs for students and can motivate a greater number of students to participate in these programs in the future. The study is called "The effect of exchange programs on student's social, professional and individual lives. The case of Azerbaijani exchange students" and conducted by Gulzar Habibova under the supervision of Dr. Vafa Yunusova are expected to run up to half an hour and can take place both face-to-face and online depending on your convenience.

The participation is completely voluntary, and you can either say no or choose to respond to question which are appropriate for you. Personal information which can be used to identify you such as full name and workplace will be removed from the report analysis section. Only those people who review the work such as a faculty staff can access the data and these individuals agree to the terms of confidentiality and these people will also have no access to personal information about you such as name and workplace. The analysis of the data provided by you will be used to compile a dissertation.

No risk is posed to participants because of strict measures taken to adhere to confidentiality and privacy principles. You are encouraged to take part only if you are truly passionate about

contributing your knowledge and experience regarding exchange programs and involuntary participation is discouraged.

It should be reiterated that your private information will not be shared in the final report for the purpose of confidentiality and anonymity.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Vafa Yunusova, Assistant Professor, Education faculty, ADA University, by email at vyunusova@ada.edu.az

Thank you for your participation!

I agree to participate in this study. In addition, by signing below I agree to allow my responses to be audio-recorded for research purposes of this study.

Signature_____

Date_____

Name (Printed)_____

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Location _____ Date/Time _____

People attending _____

Researcher conducting interview: Gulzar Habibova

I am Gulzar Habibova and this interview conducted by me will address the experiences of ADA students as an exchange student.

The aims of the research are as follows

-To explore Azerbaijani exchange students' experiences (ADA University students specifically) in exchange programs.

-To investigate exchange programs' perceived benefits and opportunities for Azerbaijani students.

You have expressed your agreement to participate, and you are a part of 10-member group who constitute the sample of this research.

As given here, there are two forms of consent form for participants. You need to sign and return one of these forms while the second one remains with you. Your data is to be kept confidential and your personal details will not be shared in any form. The duration of the interview will be around 45 minutes and a recording will take place for the purpose of transcribing.

If you have no objections to the above, we can go on with the interviews.

1. Please, introduce yourself.
2. What is your overall experience as an exchange student? Be specific and share your experiences.
3. What benefits did you gain through participation in the exchange program? Please, name at least three of them.
4. Has the exchange program impacted your personal growth? If yes, how? If not, why.

5. How did the exchange programs impact your social interactions? Be specific and share a few examples.
6. Did living in a different country and being exposed to local culture contribute to your understanding and appreciation of other cultures? If yes, how? If not, specify why.
7. What challenges have you faced while participating in the exchange program? Please, name at least three of them.
8. How has your mindset regarding inclusivity and diversity been impacted as a result of exchange programs? Please, be specific and elaborate.
9. How did the exchange program impact your career aspirations? Be specific and elaborate.
10. In what ways did the exchange program contribute to your professional growth? Be specific and share a few examples.
11. What skills and competencies were you able to improve as a result of exchange program participation? Name at least three skills and competencies.
12. To what extent could you expand your professional network through participation in the exchange program? Be specific and elaborate.
13. What else would like to share as a final note?