

# Breaking Barriers to Global Education: Investigating the Experiences of Middle-Income Students in Study Abroad Programs

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## ABSTRACT

Everyone has the right to a complete education, yet certain demographic groups face barriers. Study abroad programs help students understand global issues and improve their academic and career skills. International education migration can be tough for middle-class people. This study examines how educational quality and study-abroad programs affect international migration. This study examines how study abroad affects student academic and professional success. Middle-income students may need more study-abroad opportunities. Interviews are used in qualitative research on study abroad students. This project aims to improve study-abroad programs for students from different socioeconomic origins, emphasizing disadvantaged groups. According to studies, economically disadvantaged students may confront many problems when studying abroad. They include financial, cultural, and linguistic barriers and social isolation. Scholarships and financial aid also promote justice and increase study-abroad access. The above funds can help economically disadvantaged students pay for study abroad programs by reducing travel, tuition, and living expenses. The widespread distribution of scholarship program information and its accessibility can help all youngsters receive a comprehensive education and accomplish their academic and occupational goals. This research could help build Sustainable Development Goal 4 policy and implementation techniques. It promotes and improves high-quality education. Furthermore, these discoveries can improve global educational parity.

**Keywords:** Global Education, Student Migration, Middle-Income Students, Access to Education

Setiap orang memiliki hak untuk mendapatkan pendidikan yang lengkap, namun kelompok demografis tertentu menghadapi hambatan. Program studi di luar negeri membantu mahasiswa memahami isu-isu global dan meningkatkan kemampuan akademis dan karir mereka. Migrasi pendidikan internasional bisa jadi sulit bagi masyarakat kelas menengah. Studi ini meneliti bagaimana kualitas pendidikan dan program studi di luar negeri mempengaruhi migrasi internasional. Studi ini meneliti bagaimana studi di luar negeri mempengaruhi kesuksesan akademik dan profesional mahasiswa. Siswa berpenghasilan menengah mungkin membutuhkan lebih banyak kesempatan belajar di luar negeri. Wawancara digunakan dalam penelitian kualitatif pada mahasiswa yang belajar di luar negeri. Proyek ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan program studi di luar negeri bagi mahasiswa dari berbagai latar belakang sosial ekonomi, dengan menekankan pada kelompok-kelompok yang kurang beruntung. Menurut penelitian, mahasiswa yang kurang beruntung secara ekonomi mungkin menghadapi banyak masalah ketika belajar di luar negeri. Masalah-masalah tersebut termasuk hambatan keuangan, budaya, dan bahasa serta isolasi sosial. Beasiswa dan bantuan keuangan juga mempromosikan keadilan dan meningkatkan akses belajar di luar negeri. Dana di atas dapat membantu siswa yang kurang mampu secara ekonomi untuk membiayai program studi di luar negeri dengan mengurangi biaya perjalanan, biaya kuliah, dan biaya hidup. Penyebaran informasi program beasiswa dan aksesibilitasnya yang luas dapat membantu semua anak muda untuk mendapatkan pendidikan yang komprehensif dan mencapai tujuan akademis dan pekerjaan mereka. Penelitian ini dapat membantu membangun kebijakan dan teknik implementasi Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan 4. Penelitian ini mempromosikan dan meningkatkan pendidikan berkualitas tinggi. Selain itu, penemuan ini dapat meningkatkan kesetaraan pendidikan global.

**Kata kunci:** Pendidikan Global, Migrasi Siswa, Siswa Berpenghasilan Menengah, Akses Pendidikan

## **Introduction**

Access to quality education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right, crucial for personal growth, societal advancement, and global understanding. Study abroad programs are acknowledged for cultivating a global perspective, enhancing academic and professional skills, and providing valuable opportunities for students to broaden their horizons (Johnson et al., 2016; De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Nevertheless, not all students have equal opportunities to engage in such programs, specifically individuals from middle-income households who encounter distinct obstacles when contemplating international migration for educational purposes.

Financial constraints are a primary factor contributing to this inequality. Study abroad programs entail significant costs, including tuition, travel, accommodation, and living costs (Boycott, 2009; Sachau, Braser & Fee, 2010; Entrich & Fujihara, 2022). Consequently, middle-income students may find themselves in a difficult position. They must afford these expenses in a manageable amount of time while meeting the eligibility criteria for financial aid programs for low-income families. This limitation reduces their access to scholarships and financial support. Additionally, navigating the complex landscape of study abroad programs poses additional challenges for middle-income students, requiring more information and guidance to make informed decisions about program selection, application processes, and available resources. This lack of knowledge further hampers their ability to explore study-abroad opportunities effectively.

Moreover, social and cultural challenges arise for middle-income students contemplating international migration for education. Residing in a foreign nation with distinct customs, languages, and societal norms can be an intimidating experience (Huang & Lam, 2022). Consequently, these students may experience feelings of isolation and struggle to integrate into a new academic and social environment, impacting their overall study abroad experience and academic performance. To address these issues, evaluating the impact of scholarship programs in promoting equitable access to study-abroad opportunities for underprivileged students is crucial. Scholarships and financial aid programs alleviate the financial burden, enabling students with limited means to engage in transformative international educational experiences.

This research focuses on exploring the connection between quality education and study abroad programs, specifically examining the experiences of middle-income students and the obstacles they encounter when seeking study abroad opportunities. It also aims to understand how study abroad programs contribute to the overall quality of education and analyze the impact of scholarship programs in promoting equal access for underprivileged students. Investigating these challenges sheds light on the barriers middle-income students face and informs strategies to address them. This research acknowledges the substantial obstacles students from low-income families face in international education. These challenges encompass high costs, cultural and language barriers, and social isolation. Addressing these hurdles is crucial to ensure equitable access to study abroad programs and foster a diverse and inclusive educational environment.

Ultimately, this research seeks to inform policies and practices aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education. By identifying effective strategies to promote access to study abroad programs for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, the findings will contribute to advancing educational equity and nurturing a globally engaged generation. Through collective efforts, we can ensure students receive a comprehensive

education, enabling them to reach their full academic and professional potential while building a more inclusive and interconnected world.

### **Methods**

The study uses a qualitative research approach to conduct interviews with students engaged in study abroad programs, intending to obtain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of their experiences. Furthermore, the implementation of group discussions will be undertaken to gain insight into the obstacles encountered and to ascertain methods for enhancing accessibility to study-abroad programs for all students, with a specific focus on those hailing from disadvantaged socio-economic situations.

This study examines the characteristics and experiences of Indonesian students pursuing postgraduate degrees overseas, namely at the master's or doctorate level, focusing on those from the middle-income bracket. The sampling technique used in this study is snowball sampling, whereby main data providers identify and nominate other possible data sources to join the research study (Dosek, 2021). The snowball sampling approach relies only on reference-based recruitment, enabling researchers to build a sample. Hence, this approach is often referred to as the chain-referral sampling technique. This approach is warranted due to the lack of knowledge on the whole population and the inherent challenges associated with selecting suitable participants to serve as representative samples for research purposes.

### **Results and Discussions**

The acquisition of knowledge from students who have participated in study abroad programs yields significant insights on the effects of such programs on their academic and professional development. The act of studying abroad exposes students to a different cultural and educational setting, resulting in profound experiences that have a significant impact on their personal development and acquisition of knowledge (Nada & Legutko, 2022; Leaver & Campbell, 2023). Residing and engaging in educational pursuits in a foreign nation provides students with the opportunity to encounter diverse viewpoints, cultural practices, linguistic variations, and modes of existence. This immersive experience enables individuals to broaden their comprehension of the world and cultivate a more inclusive global outlook. Others can engage in interactions with others from various cultural backgrounds, so promoting the exchange of ideas and enhancing cross-cultural communication and comprehension. According to Jakubik (2023), engaging in these experiences fosters the development of flexibility, open-mindedness, and intercultural abilities, all of which are becoming more crucial in our interconnected and varied global context.

In addition, the pursuit of education in other countries sometimes entails engaging in demanding academic curricula offered by prestigious educational institutions. According to Yamada (2021), students get advantages from being exposed to diverse pedagogical approaches, research prospects, and specialized curricula that may be inaccessible inside their own nations. The aforementioned exposure serves to develop the academic aptitude of individuals, expand their reservoir of information, and foster a sense of intellectual inquisitiveness. Furthermore, students may be afforded the chance to engage in collaborative endeavors with respected academics and subject matter experts within their specific disciplines, so augmenting and expanding their overall educational journey.

### **Academic development**

Study abroad programs provide students with the opportunity to engage with diverse academic concepts, instructional methodologies, and educational systems, potentially leading to significant transformations in their academic advancement. Students acquire novel ideas, methodologies, and curricular content via the process of studying in an alternative educational institution. An advantage associated with pursuing education in a foreign country is the opportunity to encounter diverse pedagogical approaches. In various nations and educational institutions, educators may prioritize interactive discussions, experiential learning, or collaborative initiatives.

By experiencing these varied teaching approaches, students gain a broader understanding of effective educational techniques and develop a more adaptable learning style. In addition, they can observe and learn from professors and classmates who bring diverse perspectives and ideas to the classroom, fostering a rich and stimulating academic environment. Here is an excerpt from an interview with one of the respondents:

*"Studying abroad gives me a unique opportunity to engage with diverse academic perspectives, teaching methods, and educational systems. I experience various teaching styles and gain a broader understanding of effective educational techniques. Additionally, I learn a lot from my classmates." (Dt, 26 years old, master student in Spain).*

Furthermore, studying abroad often allows students to encounter cutting-edge technologies and research methodologies. Different countries may be at the forefront of specific fields or have access to resources and facilities unavailable in their home institutions. By engaging with these advancements, students can expand their knowledge and skills and gain exposure to innovative practices that greatly enhance their academic pursuits. This is an excerpt from an interview that illustrates the condition of student migrants abroad:

*"I have the privilege of accessing excellent computer lab facilities here, where all the programs are genuine and freely available, unlike in Indonesia, where piracy is common. Moreover, I even have the opportunity to request a high-specification laptop to support my research in machine learning. Additionally, I am fortunate to collaborate with pioneering researchers and scholars in their respective fields, which broadens my perspective and enhances my understanding of diverse research practices." (Pr, 31 years old, PhD student in the Netherlands).*

Language immersion is an additional noteworthy facet of studying abroad, which is achieved through the enrollment in courses taught in a foreign language. In addition to enhancing linguistic proficiency, language acquisition fosters the development of communication and cultural competence. By exposing them to authentic language usage and cultural subtleties, students enhance their ability to communicate effectively in a global setting. The capacity to effectively navigate linguistic and cultural barriers is a skill that is progressively becoming more valuable in our globally interconnected and diverse society. Engaging in the acquisition and utilization of a second language fosters the development of empathy, a broader perspective, and a greater regard for the rationales and cultural variations of others (Byker, 2019).

In addition, the exposure to a wide array of academic ideas and cultural settings has a significant role in the development of critical thinking abilities. The act of questioning and challenging existing notions and assumptions enables students to develop a more nuanced

comprehension of complex circumstances. Individuals develop the capacity to analyze subjects from several perspectives, taking into account a wide range of opinions, and participating in cross-cultural conversations that surpass obstacles. The development of critical thinking skills has significant significance in the context of scholarly investigation, problem-solving, and decision-making, as it equips students with the ability to excel in their academic endeavors (Arghode, Heminger, & Goopio, 2021; Cheung, Tung, & Goopio, 2022).

In essence, the act of pursuing education in a foreign country offers students an exceptional chance to expand their intellectual capacities, cultivate their abilities for critical analysis, and nurture a more comprehensive perspective on global affairs. The exposure of students to a varied variety of scholarly viewpoints, pedagogical methodologies, and curriculum-integrated topics enhances their intellectual growth and equips them with more comprehensive abilities to manage the complexities of our globally linked society. Participation in language immersion activities has been shown to have a positive impact on students' cultural competence and communication proficiencies. This provision equips students the necessary resources to actively participate in productive international cooperation.

### ***Professional development***

Engaging in study abroad initiatives can have a significant influence on the professional growth of students, endowing them with an extensive array of competencies and encounters that augment their future career opportunities. Furthermore, in the contemporary globalized labor market, these skills—adaptability, resilience, and cross-cultural communication—become exceedingly valuable through the experience of living and studying abroad.

An essential element of studying abroad is the cultivation of adaptability. Transitioning to a foreign country requires individuals to adapt to distinct social norms, educational systems, and cultural standards (Winkelman, 1994; Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015; Gong et al., 2021). Students gain the ability to navigate unfamiliar situations, overcome obstacles, and devise solutions in a variety of unfamiliar environments as a consequence of these interviews. Their capacity for adaptability enables them to flourish in ever-evolving professional environments that demand flexibility and constancy. Resilience development is an additional critical skill fostered through study abroad experiences. When studying abroad, students encounter a multitude of obstacles, including but not limited to language barriers, melancholy, and cultural adaptation. Students develop resilience by mastering these challenges, which teaches them to persist, control tension, and adjust to novel situations. These experiences enhance their ability to effectively navigate obstacles, rebound from setbacks, and maintain an optimistic outlook, all of which are greatly regarded attributes in the professional domain. The following is an excerpt from participant interviews:

*"Well, one of the coolest things was how it helped "me become more adaptable. Living in a different country requires adjusting to new cultures, social norms, and education systems. Initially, it was a bit overwhelming, but through interviews with other students, I learned to navigate unfamiliar situations and deal with challenges. It really helped me find solutions in new and diverse environments. Oh, definitely. Living in a foreign country can be tough at times. I had to overcome language barriers, and there were moments when I felt homesick. Trying to fit into a different culture was also a challenge. But you know what? Going through those obstacles actually built my resilience. I learned to keep going, manage stress, and adapt to new situations." (RV, 24 years old, master's student in the United Kingdom).*

*"It's been so valuable, honestly. When you enter the real world, things are always changing, and you have to be flexible. The adaptability I gained from studying abroad has been a great asset. It helps me thrive in dynamic professional settings where constant change is the norm. These experiences shaped my ability to handle tough times, bounce back from setbacks, and maintain a positive mindset. And let me tell you, those skills are highly valued in the professional world." (Do, 31 years old, master's student in the USA).*

Study abroad experiences also provide opportunities for students to develop strong interpersonal and intercultural competencies. Engaging with individuals from different backgrounds, collaborating on group projects, and building networks with international classmates enhance students' communication skills and cross-cultural understanding. They learn to navigate cultural differences, work effectively in diverse teams, and demonstrate cultural sensitivity. These interpersonal and intercultural competencies are increasingly important in today's global workplace, where collaboration and understanding across cultures are essential for success.

Furthermore, study abroad programs offer practical experiences such as internships, research projects, or industry placements in global organizations or industries. These opportunities allow students to apply their academic knowledge in real-world contexts, gain hands-on experience, and develop industry-specific skills. Students gain exposure to different work cultures, practices, and professional networks by working internationally. Such experiences provide a competitive edge in the job market, as employers value international exposure and the ability to adapt to new environments.

Moreover, study abroad experiences broaden students' perspectives, enabling them to think globally and approach problems from different cultural viewpoints (Bell et al., 2021). This global mindset enhances their creativity, innovation, and problem-solving abilities, which are highly sought-after skills in today's rapidly changing world. Participating in study abroad programs significantly impacts students' professional development. By developing adaptability, resilience, and cross-cultural communication skills, students become well-prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the global job market (Hubbard & Rexeisen, 2020). In addition, the hands-on experiences and international exposure gained through study abroad programs give students a competitive edge as they acquire industry-specific skills, establish professional connections, and develop a global mindset. Ultimately, study abroad experiences contribute to student's professional growth, increasing their employability and paving the way for successful careers in a globalized world.

### ***Personal growth***

Study abroad programs offer students a transformative journey of personal growth and self-discovery, expanding their perspectives and shaping their identities. One key aspect is the development of independence as students become more self-reliant in navigating daily tasks and adapting to local customs. This newfound independence empowers students to tackle challenges, take risks, and embrace new opportunities.

The student engaged in a study abroad program shared their narrative on the personal growth they underwent via their daily academic pursuits and research endeavours:

*"Studying abroad was truly a transformative journey for me. It opened my eyes to new cultures, traditions, and ways of life, expanding my perspectives and shaping my identity.*

*One of the most significant aspects was developing independence. Being away from familiar surroundings and support systems challenged me to become more self-reliant. I had to navigate daily tasks, manage finances, and adapt to local customs, greatly enhancing my autonomy and self-confidence. This newfound independence empowered me to take on challenges, step out of my comfort zone, and seize new opportunities.”* (St, 34 years old, PhD student in Norway).

In addition, interacting with individuals from diverse backgrounds fosters empathy, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to navigate cross-cultural interactions respectfully. This the story from one of the informants:

*“Interacting with people from diverse backgrounds was a truly enriching experience. It taught me to appreciate and respect cultural differences while challenging any stereotypes or biases I may have. As a result, I developed a greater sense of empathy and cultural sensitivity, and I learned how to navigate cross-cultural interactions respectfully and open-mindedly. Additionally, the friendships I formed during my study abroad program were incredible. I connected with fellow international students, local community members and even had the chance to live with a host family. These relationships have transcended borders and continue to be a source of support and belonging.”* (Ts, 37 years old, PhD student in South Korea).

Engaging in study-abroad opportunities fosters the development of cross-border personal alliances and connections, thereby establishing an extensive international network of supporters and companions (Hidayati, 2017; Killick & Foster, 2021; Sha, 2021). These connections contribute to a sense of belongingness by fostering an atmosphere of inclusiveness within a global community. Engaging in international academic pursuits grants pupils the chance to explore their personal growth, self-awareness, and aspirations, thereby fostering personal development and the formation of a unique sense of self. A research investigation carried out by Hidayati (2017) explored the effects of study abroad experiences on the social networks of students. The study encompassed a diverse group of international students who had engaged in study abroad initiatives. The results indicated that study abroad opportunities significantly contributed to the development of interpersonal relationships and cross-border connections. The students formed intimate connections with individuals hailing from diverse cultural contexts, thereby forging an international network of allies and supporters.

### ***The challenges of students from middle-income families to access study-abroad opportunities***

Middle-income students frequently face distinct obstacles when attempting to gain access to study-abroad opportunities. Although their financial constraints may differ from those of pupils from low-income families, these individuals still face impediments that may impede their ability to participate. According to the focus group discourse, a fundamental obstacle that arises is the financial burden linked to pursuing higher education overseas. Numerous study abroad programs demand that participants pay for their own lodging, transportation, and daily expenses. These financial obligations may impede the participation of middle-income families to a large extent. Students from middle-income families may require financial assistance to finance their study abroad experiences, in contrast to those from higher-income families who may possess greater financial means.

Scholarships and financial assistance play a crucial role in fostering equality and facilitating entry to study-abroad programs, so ensuring that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds are afforded equitable chances. These initiatives enhance the diversity and inclusivity of the study-abroad community by offering financial assistance to students who may otherwise be unable to participate. As a result, they facilitate global understanding and promote cultural interchange. In addition, scholarships and financial help have a beneficial influence on the academic and professional growth of students. By alleviating the financial constraints, students are able to devote their undivided focus to their academic pursuits and actively participate in the enriching study-abroad program. Furthermore, students have the opportunity to participate in research endeavors, internships, and extracurricular pursuits that augment their abilities and chances for forthcoming professional endeavors. Raising awareness and improving accessibility is crucial to maximizing the effectiveness of scholarship programs. Collaboration with educational institutions, community organizations, and online platforms can help promote scholarships and reach a wider audience. Communication channels such as social media, websites, newsletters, and partnerships can effectively inform students about the available financial support for studying abroad.

In addition, providing clear and comprehensive information about the application process and eligibility criteria is essential to encourage more students to apply. Simplifying application procedures and ensuring transparency in requirements helps eliminate potential barriers or confusion that might discourage potential applicants. Finally, creating user-friendly platforms for scholarship applications is necessary to enhance accessibility. Developing online portals or centralized systems that are easy to navigate and understand simplifies the application process for students. By reducing complexities and providing a seamless experience, students are more likely to engage with the application process and seize available scholarship opportunities.

The findings of the research possess the capacity to offer valuable perspectives that could inform the formulation of policies and approaches to implementation that align with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the United Nations. The fourth SDG seeks to ensure that all individuals have inclusive and equitable access to high-quality education. The promotion of equity and equality in educational opportunities is emphasized in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4), which also underscores the imperative of guaranteeing universal access to education irrespective of one's heritage. Furthermore, in addition to fostering a lifelong dedication to education, this objective seeks to provide the knowledge and abilities necessary for sustainable development. Examining the correlation between study abroad programs and high-quality education, this research focuses on the experiences of students hailing from middle-income households. This study enhances our comprehension of the pervasive obstacles and disparities that are present in the educational system through an investigation of the challenges encountered by these students in their pursuit of access to these opportunities. This study aims to shed light on the challenges encountered by students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds and to underscore the criticality of guaranteeing equitable access to international educational opportunities.

The results of this study have the potential to provide policymakers with ideas for recommendations that would increase the likelihood of students participating in international study experiences. Possible approaches encompass improving the availability of financial resources, creating scholarship programs that specifically assist individuals from low-income households, and streamlining the distribution and delivery of services and information. In order to foster a more balanced distribution of resources and improve the



availability of educational opportunities, policymakers may consider enacting measures that reduce the discrepancy between the financial circumstances of disadvantaged students and their ability to partake in study abroad initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

Study abroad programs may provide significant advantages for international student migrants. These programs provide individuals with the chance to immerse themselves in other cultures, acquire international viewpoints, and cultivate essential talents that are highly esteemed by employers. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that middle-income foreign students may encounter challenges when it comes to obtaining study-abroad options, mostly due to financial restrictions and the restricted availability of scholarships. Individuals may also face cultural obstacles and need more knowledge and support. To promote fair and equal opportunities for foreign student migrants, it is imperative to adopt measures such as targeted financial assistance and extensive support services that specifically cater to their distinct requirements. Fostering an inclusive atmosphere inside educational institutions may contribute to a sense of support and inclusion among foreign students.

By acknowledging and tackling the obstacles faced by international student migrants and striving for fair and inclusive opportunities, we not only assist these individuals in their educational and career aspirations but also align with the objectives outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 4. Moreover, via the promotion of equitable opportunities for global education, we enable international student migrants to augment their competencies and understanding, so enabling their assimilation into the receiving nation and bolstering endeavours towards sustainable development. In essence, the promotion of a varied and linked global community that values equitable access to excellent education for everyone, including international student migrants, is achieved via eliminating obstacles and establishing an inclusive study-abroad environment.

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