

Book review: Impacts of Study Abroad on Higher Education Development: Examining the Experiences of Faculty at Leading Universities in Southeast Asia

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Springer
Singapore
2024

ISBN 978-981-97-0774-4 (Hardcover), 978-981-97-0777-5 (Softcover), and
978-981-97-0775-1 (eBook)

DOI [10.1007/978-981-97-0775-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-0775-1)

Review DOI [10.1108/SEAMJ-05-2026-101](https://doi.org/10.1108/SEAMJ-05-2026-101)

Reframing study abroad: from individual outcomes to institutional transformation

The narrative of study abroad has long been dominated by concerns about “brain drain” – the worry that talented individuals from developing countries will abandon their home institutions after acquiring credentials abroad. Yet this edited volume, produced by the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development, tells a strikingly different story. *Impacts of Study Abroad on Higher Education Development* presents a comprehensive empirical analysis of how faculty study abroad experiences fundamentally reshape university capabilities, research productivity and internationalization trajectories across Southeast Asia. Drawing from surveys of over 3,300 faculty members and qualitative interviews with 140 higher education professionals across ten leading universities in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia, this volume offers the most substantial evidence to date that study abroad functions not as an escape hatch, but as a pathway to institutional excellence.

From theory to evidence: a rigorous research framework

The volume’s greatest strength lies in its mixed-methods rigor and transnational analytical lens. Rather than examining study abroad as an individual phenomenon, the editors deploy a sophisticated theoretical framework conceptualizing the “national development-academic profession nexus,” which traces how individual study experiences cascade into institutional outcomes. This framework acknowledges that study abroad participants operate within specific historical contexts – macro-level societal changes, mezzo-level national higher education systems and micro-level university environments – and that these contextual forces significantly shape how international experiences translate into institutional impact.

The research design itself merits attention. Conducted between 2018 and 2023 and disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the project persisted in collecting data representing four countries at markedly different stages of higher education development: Malaysia (43% gross tertiary enrollment), Indonesia (36%), Vietnam (35%) and Cambodia (13%). This deliberate comparative selection enables the volume to examine whether the development



stage influences how study abroad impacts manifest – a critical analytical move that generates actionable insights for policymakers.

Malaysia's networking revolution and Indonesia's research infrastructure challenge

Part II's examination of Malaysia (Chapters 4–6) reveals how faculty study abroad catalyzes transformation through international networking. Universiti Sains Malaysia's case demonstrates that returning faculty leverage overseas connections to establish collaborative research partnerships, with significantly increased participation in international research projects documented post-return. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia's analysis goes further, showing how study abroad experiences directly contributed to the university achieving Malaysia Research University (MRU) status – a designation requiring demonstrated research excellence. The chapter's emphasis on “transformative experience through networking opportunities” reframes study abroad not as knowledge transfer alone, but as social capital accumulation that opens pathways to international funding and collaborative research initiatives.

Indonesia's case studies (Part III) offer more nuanced findings. Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB) and Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) demonstrate how study abroad addresses critical infrastructure gaps in STEM research environments. However, the research reveals an important tension: while faculty with international experience establish research collaborations, Indonesian universities still struggle with structural limitations – underfunded laboratories, complex procurement procedures and limited research funding – that can frustrate the implementation of knowledge acquired abroad. This finding underscores that study abroad impact depends crucially on receiving institution capacity, a lesson often overlooked in celebratory accounts of international mobility.

Vietnam and Cambodia: where study abroad matters most

Perhaps the volume's most compelling findings emerge from Vietnam and Cambodia (Parts IV–V), where study abroad produces pronounced institutional effects. Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU) and Hanoi University of Science and Technology (HUST) demonstrate that faculty study abroad experiences directly strengthen teaching methodologies, research output and university internationalization efforts. The reason: these universities operate in contexts where domestic advanced degree opportunities remain limited, making overseas credentials uniquely valuable for faculty development.

Cambodia presents an especially illuminating case. Having nearly entirely eliminated formal higher education during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), Cambodia's universities remain in early stages of capacity building. Here, faculty with international experiences become institutional pioneers – introducing research methodologies, establishing international partnerships and literally rebuilding academic cultures that had been destroyed. Royal University of Phnom Penh, Institute of Technology of Cambodia, Royal University of Agriculture and Royal University of Law and Economics all demonstrate how study abroad provides essential infrastructure for institution-building that cannot be replicated through domestic means alone.

Shifting paradigms: from knowledge transfer to gateway to networks

A critical conceptual contribution emerges across these case studies: the reframing of the purpose of study abroad. Chapter 3's theoretical analysis reveals a fundamental shift in what study abroad means in Southeast Asia. Historically characterized as a conduit for “knowledge and skill transfer,” study abroad increasingly functions as a “gateway to international academic networks.” This distinction is profound. Rather than viewing study abroad participants as knowledge containers returning home with expertise, the volume shows them as network nodes whose value lies in maintaining collaborative connections, facilitating joint research and bridging institutional relationships across borders.

This reconceptualization has direct policy implications. If study abroad's primary value is network formation rather than knowledge acquisition alone, then program design should emphasize sustained relationship-building, mentorship continuation and institutionalized collaboration mechanisms – not simply degree completion.

Nuanced impacts: beyond binary success/failure

The volume deserves recognition for its refusal of simplistic narratives. While documenting substantial positive impacts, chapters also honestly address challenges. Malaysian faculty who studied in specialized fields sometimes struggle to apply advanced training in under-resourced home environments. Vietnamese returning academics report difficulty securing adequate research funding despite enhanced competencies. Cambodian faculty members note that international connections don't automatically translate to institutional recognition or advancement opportunities in hierarchical university structures.

Chapter 5 on Universiti Sains Malaysia particularly stands out for acknowledging reintegration challenges: some faculty with extended foreign study experience struggle with delayed career advancement upon return, creating subtle disincentives for the very study abroad participation the university theoretically prioritizes. These honest assessments prevent the volume from devolving into advocacy literature, instead offering empirically grounded guidance for addressing implementation barriers.

Destination country variation: strategic diversification

A frequently overlooked finding deserves emphasis: different host countries produce distinct academic outcomes. The volume documents that faculty who studied in Japan and the Netherlands showed particularly strong research productivity gains and international collaboration, while those with experiences in France and the United States reported stronger teaching methodology innovations. This differentiation has immediate relevance: Southeast Asian universities could strategically diversify study abroad destinations to maximize different institutional needs rather than concentrating on traditional Western destinations by default.

The domestication trend and its implications

Perhaps most significant for future policy is the volume's documentation of expanding domestic graduate education across all four countries. Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam now produce substantial numbers of doctoral graduates domestically, reducing reliance on foreign credentials. As this trend accelerates, the volume poses a crucial question: how will study abroad's role evolve? The research suggests that as domestic capacity expands, study abroad's impact may shift from foundational credential provision toward specialized expertise and network formation. This necessitates intentional policy evolution – distinguishing between study abroad for degree completion versus study abroad for career advancement and internationalization.

Limitations and future directions

While comprehensive, the volume has constraints worth noting. Its focus on leading universities means findings may not generalize to second- or third-tier institutions where faculty development needs differ substantially. Additionally, the heavy representation of STEM universities (particularly in Indonesia and Cambodia) may skew findings toward disciplines where international research collaboration is already normative, potentially underestimating study abroad impacts in humanities and social sciences where internationalization remains less established.

The volume would benefit from longer-term longitudinal tracking. While providing snapshot evidence of 2018–2023 impacts, following individual faculty trajectories over 10–20 years would clarify whether study abroad effects persist, compound, or fade over career lifespans – a timescale Arndt’s research suggests is necessary for understanding internationalization’s full societal effects.

Strategic significance for development agendas

For policymakers, the volume offers empirically validated justification for continued investment in faculty study abroad scholarships as SDG 4.b implementation strategy. Unlike abstract calls for human capital development, this research demonstrates concrete mechanisms through which study abroad translates into institutional research advancement, internationalization capacity and knowledge production. For higher education leaders in Southeast Asia, it provides comparative evidence for designing study abroad policies calibrated to institutional development stage and regional context rather than importing wholesale from Western higher education templates.

Conclusion: study abroad as an institutional development strategy

Impacts of Study Abroad on Higher Education Development succeeds in its central mission: moving beyond individual-level analysis to illuminate how study abroad experiences catalyze institutional transformation. The volume makes evident that study abroad functions as neither a luxury nor a threat, but as a strategic institutional investment for universities pursuing research excellence and international engagement in a globalized knowledge economy.

By grounding analysis in rigorous data, maintaining analytical sophistication across four distinct national contexts and honestly acknowledging both impacts and limitations, this volume advances scholarship on international higher education while providing actionable guidance for Southeast Asian universities navigating development trajectories. It represents a significant contribution to the field – one that should reshape how policymakers, university leaders and researchers understand the developmental significance of faculty mobility in building world-class universities in the Global South.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to convey my deepest gratitude and sincere appreciation to Universitas Ahmad Dahlan and Western Michigan University for their support in facilitating access to this book.