

## Challenges and Opportunities Encountered by Filipino SEA-Exchanged Pre-service Teachers in Indonesia

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**ABSTRACT:-** This qualitative phenomenological study investigates the experiences of seven Filipino pre-service teachers from a state university in Zambales, Philippines, who participated in the SEA Teacher program in Indonesian schools. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, focusing on the pedagogical, content, technological, and cultural aspects of their exchange. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns in the participants' narratives. The study reveals that while the pre-service teachers faced challenges such as financial constraints, health issues, language barriers, and cultural shock, the transformative nature of the international exchange program provided significant opportunities for personal and professional growth. Participants gained a global perspective, enhanced teaching skills, and developed cross-cultural competencies, which fostered resilience and adaptability. The lasting friendships and professional networks formed during the exchange further enriched their experiences, highlighting the program's value in preparing students for successful careers in an interconnected world.

**Keywords:** SEAMEO, Exchange Students, Cross-culture, Opportunities, Challenges

### I. INTRODUCTION

International exchange programs have become transformative experiences in our globalized world. They foster cross-cultural understanding and promote global citizenship, offering students invaluable opportunities to broaden their horizons, gain new perspectives, and develop essential skills. (Gaudelli & Laverty, 2015) As previous research has found, these programs "provide students with rich educational experiences, introducing them to different cultures, languages, and work practices that prepare them to work in the global market."

While the merits of such programs are well-established, the logistics of organizing and executing them can pose substantial challenges for faculty and administrators. (Mitchell, 2013) This study examines the particular experiences of pre-service teacher education students from the College of Teacher Education at a State University in Zambales, Philippines, who partook in the SEAMEO - SEA Teacher program, an initiative enabling pre-service teachers in Southeast Asia to gain cross-cultural experiences. Placed in Indonesia, these students offer a compelling context to investigate the obstacles and prospects they navigated during their exchange.

The SEAMEO-SEA Teacher Project, established in 2014, provides pre-service teachers from Southeast Asian universities the chance to gain teaching experience across the region. This case study explores the perspectives of seven Filipino pre-service teachers who participated in the program, shedding light on the unique issues they faced and the strategies they employed to navigate the intercultural dynamics of their classroom placements in Indonesia (Setyaningsih et al., 2023).

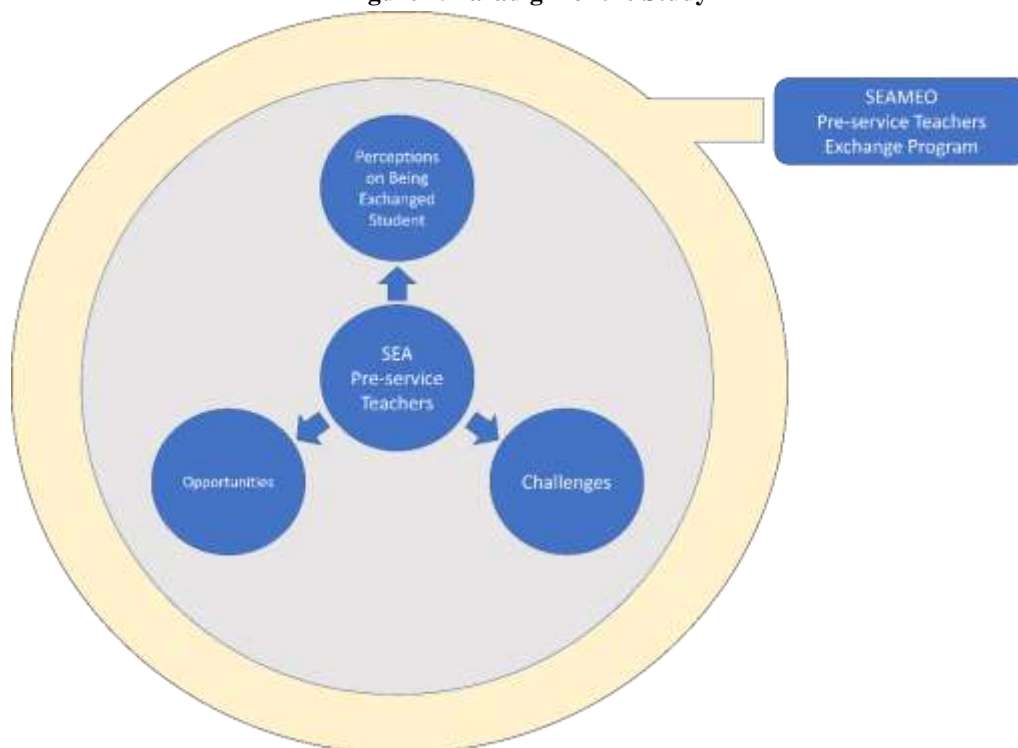
While international exchange programs are generally viewed as beneficial (Sowell, 2022), it's crucial to understand the specific challenges and opportunities that participants face, especially in focused contexts like the SEA Teacher program.

This study aims to shed light on the diverse experiences of Filipino pre-service teachers in Indonesia, analyzing both the hurdles they encountered and the gains they made during their exchange.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the context of the SEA Teacher Project and the Southeast Asia Teacher Competency Framework, which provide crucial insights into the experiences of Filipino pre-service teachers in Indonesia. The SEA Teacher Project offers valuable teaching opportunities across Southeast Asia, emphasizing cross-cultural exposure to develop well-rounded educators (Nurazizah et al., 2021). The Southeast Asia Teacher Competency Framework serves as a comprehensive guide for effective teaching, aligning with the Philippines' standards and addressing the specific needs of participating countries (Gepila, 2020).

**Figure 1. Paradigm of the Study**



This study examines how the SEA Teacher Project, working within the framework, creates a structured yet dynamic environment for pre-service teachers to develop their professional and intercultural skills. By analyzing the challenges and opportunities faced by Filipino pre-service teachers during their practicum in Indonesia, the research aims to contribute to a better understanding of how international exchange programs can prepare future educators for a globalized world.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative phenomenological study follows the experiences of seven Filipino pre-service teachers from College of Teacher Education in a state university in Zambales, Philippines who participated in the SEA Teacher program and were placed in Indonesian schools. The data was collected through in-depth interviews with the participants, exploring their perspectives on the pedagogical, content, technological, and cultural aspects of their exchange (Nazhafah & Muslim, 2021). The interviews were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes in the pre-service teachers' accounts (Setyaningsih et al., 2023). The participants were also coded as 'ST1' meaning student teacher 1.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the interview data revealed several key themes regarding the challenges and opportunities encountered by the Filipino pre-service teachers during their exchange program in Indonesia.

### Perception of Being an International Exchange Students

Table shows the themes and codes formulated regarding to the perception of being an international exchange student.

**Table 1. Generated Themes on the Perceptions of Participants Being an International Exchange Students**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sample Significant Statement</b>	<b>Theme Description</b>
<b>Theme 1. Expanding Horizons</b>	“The experience was truly unique, offering a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that brought immense joy. Moreover, immersing myself in a different culture was something I greatly looked forward to.” ST2	The theme emphasizes the transformative experience of international exchange students, offering a global perspective, diverse teaching methods, and international friendships, fostering responsibility, pride, and personal growth.
<b>Theme 2. Personal and Professional Development</b>	“Students can gain valuable cross-cultural skills, expand their worldview, and develop greater independence and adaptability.” ST3	This theme emphasizes the importance of international exchange programs for pre-service teachers, promoting personal growth, enhancing teaching skills, and fostering a global perspective through transformative experiences.
<b>Theme 3. Stepping Outside Comfort Zone</b>	“It is a chance to see other cultures from the point of view that one can only experience firsthand and to immerse oneself in new systems and environment.” ST7	This theme highlights the transformative experiences of pre-service teachers in international exchange programs, fostering personal growth, open-mindedness, and appreciation for global diversity.
<b>Theme 4. Overcoming Obstacles</b>	Moreover, the pre-service teachers emphasized the importance of being financially prepared to cover the substantial costs associated with the exchange, including program fees, travel expenses, housing, and daily living costs, as also described by another participant. ST4	This theme highlights challenges faced by pre-service teachers in international exchange programs, such as language barriers, cultural adjustments, homesickness, and financial constraints, requiring courage and resilience.

**Theme 1. Expanding Horizons**

Being an international exchange student is seen as a unique opportunity to broaden knowledge, gain a global perspective, (Yang et al., 2021) and immerse in a different culture. According to ST2 “The experience was truly unique, offering a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that brought immense joy. Moreover, immersing myself in a different culture was something I greatly looked forward to.” So, It is viewed as a thrilling chance to step out of one's comfort zone, experience diverse teaching methods and cultural norms (Ospina, & Medina, 2020). It was justified by ST4, “Being an international exchange student is often perceived as a huge chance or opportunity to live and experience different cultures, learn about their living, and gain new friends from the other side of the world.” So the program develop a sense of responsibility (Mitchell, 2013) and pride in representing one's school and country. “Having the opportunity to be part of the first ever CTE-SEA international exchange student program gave me the honor and privilege to learn not just outside the campus but outside the country as well (ST6).” The exchange program is perceived as an honor and privilege that offers invaluable opportunities for growth and personal development.

**Theme 2. Personal and Professional Development**

Pre-service teachers view the international exchange program as an invaluable opportunity for personal and professional growth (Sowell, 2022). It enables them to gain hands-on teaching experience, refine their pedagogical expertise, and cultivate a more global mindset (Purves et al., 2005). As a participant (ST4) experienced, “It’s mostly seen as a chance to learn, grow in various ways, and to explore or have an adventure. It's also perceived that it requires an open mind specially to learn and experience various activities that they offer, adaptability to their culture, and strong focus on your goal.” The participants describe the program as a transformative experience, allowing them to forge new connections, deepen their passion for teaching, and adapt to diverse ways of learning and living. Like what the other participant (ST1) have described, “In addition with that, it's another way of making new friends and see this as a great chance to expand boundaries in terms of my passion in teaching.” Moreover, they emphasize how the exchange helps them develop crucial cross-cultural competencies, expand their worldviews, and become more self-reliant and adaptable (Hřebačková, 2019). “Students can gain valuable cross-cultural skills, expand their worldview, and develop greater independence and adaptability. (ST3)”

In the end, the program is seen as an opportunity to deeply immerse themselves in another country's vibrant traditions, customs, and ways of life, which greatly enhances their understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity worldwide.

**Theme 3. Stepping Outside Comfort Zone**

While pre-service teachers are excited about the international exchange opportunity, they also recognize the major challenges that come with stepping out of their comfort zone to adapt to very different environments and cultures (Macalinao, 2024). As a participant (ST2) vividly described, “So, just imagine how much more fascinated I was when I went to another country with an entirely different culture.” Navigating unfamiliar surroundings and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds takes a lot of courage, as the experience exposes them to customs, beliefs, (Cheok et al., 2013) and ways of life that may be quite different from their own. As another participants (ST6 & 7) justified that, “I was exposed to a different culture, a diverse set of beliefs, a mesmerizing set of people and a whole new dimension in a span of one month.” and “It is a chance to see other cultures from the point of view that one can only experience firsthand and to immerse oneself in new systems and environment.” However, the pre-service teachers see the exchange as a valuable chance to broaden their horizons. They become more open-minded and flexible as they fully immerse themselves in unfamiliar systems and environments (Ateşkan, 2016). The program offers transformative personal growth, as they learn to navigate cross-cultural differences, develop adaptability, and gain a deeper appreciation for global diversity.

**Theme 4. Overcoming Obstacles**

The pre-service teachers faced a number of major challenges during their international exchange program experience. They faced real obstacles, such as navigating language barriers, adapting to unfamiliar food, cultures, and school systems, and dealing with feelings of homesickness, as described by a participant (ST5). These challenges required a great deal of courage and resilience as they immersed themselves in unfamiliar environments and interacted with people from diverse backgrounds (Hu, 2008). Moreover, the pre-service teachers emphasized the importance of being financially prepared to cover the substantial costs associated with the exchange, including program fees, travel expenses, housing, and daily living costs, as also described by another participant (ST4). Overcoming these multifaceted challenges was essential for the pre-service teachers to fully benefit from the transformative personal and professional growth opportunities provided by the international exchange program (Pence & MacGillivray, 2008).

**Challenges Experienced by an International Exchange Students**

The table presents the themes generated from the findings of the study. There are four themes emerged which is related to the challenges that the participants experienced.

**Table 2. Generated Themes on the Challenges Experienced by the International Exchange Students**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sample Significant Statement</b>	<b>Theme Description</b>
<b>Theme 1. Financial Struggles</b>	“There are times that they need to take a domestic flight to get there. Therefore, delayed or cancelled international flights may affect the domestic flights. If so, they need to book another flight and our budget will be tightened. Based on our experience, delayed and cancelled flights are the most stressful challenge.” ST4	This theme shows that pre-service teachers in international exchange programs, especially from low-GNI countries, experiences financial stress due to costs, unexpected expenses, and financial planning, yet they remain committed to maximizing personal and professional development opportunities.
<b>Theme 2. Health Issues</b>	“Another difficulty I encountered was getting sick with a fever in the first week due to exhaustion from the long journey. Additionally, I often suffer from cough and cold in the afternoon because of the windy weather.” ST5	The theme discusses the health challenges faced by international exchange students, including anemia, exhaustion-related illnesses, and respiratory problems due to climate and pollution.
<b>Theme 3. Language Barrier</b>	“One major hurdle is the language barrier since some people here don't speak English. It can be tough to communicate and understand each other.” ST3	This theme highlights the challenges faced by international exchange students due to language barriers, emphasizing the importance of language skills in overcoming cultural obstacles, self-growth, and networking opportunities.
<b>Theme 4. Cultural Shock and Adjustment</b>	“I immersed myself in learning Bahasa Indonesia, downloading books and resources to grasp the basics. In the whirlwind month leading up to departure, a midst paperwork and logistics, my focus remained on communication.” ST5	This theme emphasized how participants faced culture shock and adjustment when entering a new host country, experiencing significant differences in beliefs, values, practices, and food.

### **Theme 1. Financial Struggles**

International exchange programs offer pre-service teachers valuable personal and professional development opportunities, but also present significant challenges. According to Wilson, Hastings, Morris, Ramia, & Mitchell (2023), exchange students, especially those from low-GNI countries, face significant financial stress, negatively impacting their wellbeing. Participants (ST4 and ST1) of this study highlighted financial concerns as major obstacles they had to overcome, including high program costs, unexpected expenses like flight cancellations, and the need for adequate financial preparation to fully benefit from the exchange experience. The substantial financial investments required, such as program fees, travel expenses, housing, and daily living costs, posed a substantial burden for many participants, requiring careful budgeting and resource planning (Vedad, 2023). Despite these financial hurdles, the pre-service teachers were determined to make the most of the transformative personal and professional growth opportunities provided by the international exchange program.

### **Theme 2. Health Issues**

International exchange students often deal with health issues, like handling pre-existing conditions. Participants in this study shared similar experiences. One of the participants said, "During my medical examination, anemia was detected, resulting in the medical paper not being signed. This was a major concern as it threatened the ability to participate in the exchange program. Working closely with the program coordinators to address the issue is a must. So, navigating unfamiliar healthcare, getting needed meds, and managing chronic conditions in a foreign place added to the stress (Egenes, 2012). The new environment also posed health challenges. Different climates, food, and potential illnesses caused problems. As one participant (ST5) said, "Another difficulty I encountered was getting sick with a fever in the first week due to exhaustion from the long journey. Additionally, I often suffer from cough and cold in the afternoon because of the windy weather." Dealing with these health concerns while immersed in a new culture required a lot of resilience and adaptability from the pre-service teachers (Terrana & Al-Delaimy, 2023).

Some specific issues they faced were things like anemia detected during a medical exam, getting fevers from the exhaustion of traveling, and dealing with coughs/colds from the weather. They also had to cope with smog in Indonesia that affected their health, schedules, and classes as described by a participant (ST4).

### **Theme 3. Language Barrier**

The language barrier was a major challenge for international exchange students in this study. The study of Othman, Din, Said, & Aziz (2021) highlights the importance of language skills for expatriates in overcoming cultural challenges, fostering self-transformation, and facilitating cultural exploration and networking. Participants echoed these findings, sharing their struggles with the local language, especially during their first few weeks. One participant (ST1) shared: "It is hard to communicate with other people since English is not their second language." Another (ST3) also described, "One major hurdle is the language barrier since some people here don't speak English. It can be tough to communicate and understand each other." Navigating academic, professional, and social situations with limited proficiency in the local language added significant stress and isolation, hindering their ability to fully engage with the host community (Wilczewski, & Alon, 2023). Participants faced difficulties communicating in an unfamiliar language, especially in academic and professional contexts. They described the challenges of interacting with locals who had limited English proficiency, highlighting the need to learn basic phrases and words to connect with the community. One of the participant (ST5) said, "As the only one in our group to learn the language extensively beforehand, I became our spokesperson, bridging the gap with the locals. Yet, the challenge persisted, especially when interacting with those who spoke little to no English." Overall, the language barrier posed a significant obstacle that required adaptability and resilience from the exchange students.

### **Theme 4. Cultural Shock and Adjustment**

Participants described feeling major culture shock and adjustment problems when they first arrived in the host country. The big differences in beliefs, values, practices, and food from home is really stressing and making people feel lost and even isolated Akarowhe (2018). One of the participant (ST1) said, "Of course the culture shock in terms of belief and religion that really shook me to the Max that I thrive hard to adjust at the moment." Another participant (ST2) emphasized, "They have a fondness for spicy dishes and predominantly consume chicken due to their Muslim beliefs. Although I don't mind chicken, being from a Christian background, there were stark contrasts in our beliefs and practices." Immersing themselves in this unfamiliar culture forced them to face their own preconceptions and biases (Mustafa, 2022). To get through these challenges, participants said it was super important to dive into the local language and culture, and do lots of research and prep beforehand. Like what a participant (ST5) shared, "I immersed myself in learning Bahasa Indonesia, downloading books and resources to grasp the basics. In the whirlwind month leading up to

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departure, amidst paperwork and logistics, my focus remained on communication.” This helped them develop a deeper appreciation for the host country's way of life. Adapting to the new place took a ton of resilience, open-mindedness, and respect for the local customs, instead of expecting the community to change for them (Shim & Paprock, 2002). Being willing to engage with the host culture on its own terms, not just imposing their own norms, was key for the pre-service teachers to fully benefit from the personal and professional growth opportunities of the exchange program. “Do your research about the country you’re about to visit; they should not adjust for you; you’re a foreigner, so do it and always be respectful. (ST7)”

### Opportunities Encountered by the International Exchange Students

The table presents the themes generated from the findings of the study. There are four themes emerged which is related to the opportunities that the participants encountered.

**Table 3. Generated Themes on the Opportunities Encountered by the International Exchange Students**

Themes	Sample Significant Statement	Theme Description
<b>Theme 1. Intellectual Growth</b>	“We may learn from different teaching-learning set-up and gain a global perspective in their study.” ST3	This theme justified that this program significantly enhance students' personal and professional growth by exposing them to diverse cultures, improving their adaptability, communication skills, and intercultural competence.
<b>Theme 2. Career Advancement</b>	“Of course those benefits such as completion of my journey, certificates and awards. Aside from that, to use it all as my potential and reliable experiences for my future work.” ST1	This theme highlights the program could offer career benefits by enhancing global perspectives, adaptability, and employability by providing international experience, professional connections, and highly regarded skills and certifications.
<b>Theme 3. Development of Cross-Cultural Connections</b>	“They may gain new friends from other countries and have the opportunity to travel and explore the different wonders of a country.” ST4	This theme emphasizes exchange programs for fostering cross-cultural connections, enhancing academic and career prospects, fostering trust, and promoting personal growth, confidence, and a broader global perspective among participants.
<b>Theme 4. Cultural Integration</b>	“I had the chance to delve into different educational systems and practices. This included practical experiences like answering FS1 and FS2 books based on our experiences in Indonesia, providing insight into teaching methodologies.”	This theme emphasizes cultural immersion and personal growth, fostering intercultural understanding through activities like sharing traditions and learning local educational practices, enhancing appreciation for diversity and improving home country educational approaches.

### Theme 1. Intellectual Growth

The international exchange students gain lots of opportunities to learn and grow. They are exposed to new cultures, languages, and ways of thinking, broadening their perspectives and increasing their adaptability. This experience also helps them develop important skills such as communication, problem-solving, and intercultural competence (Nieto, 2001). Participants (ST1 & ST2) shared, “I wanted to gain and I am eager to further expand my knowledge and skills in various areas.” and “We also learn about their culture and gain a wealth of knowledge.” They learned all about the host country's culture and schools. Based from the surveys and interviews conducted by Paik, Ganley, Luschei, Kula, Witenstein, Shimogori, and Truong (2015), findings indicated that the program enhanced teachers' intercultural sensitivity, cultural knowledge, and teaching skills. Key components such as intercultural activities, coursework, and exposure to diverse environments contributed to their professional development. The exchange program was super enriching - they got to see different teaching styles and develop a global mindset. According to one of the participants (ST4), “We may learn from different teaching-learning set-up and gain a global perspective in their study.” It also helped them become better at communicating across cultures and adapting to new situations. “The process of navigating unfamiliar environments can indeed contribute to individuals becoming more resilient and mature, as they learn to adapt to new challenges and situations (Cox & Perry, 2011). The exchange even gave them ideas for their future teaching jobs, like different teaching methods and curriculum.

## **Theme 2. Career Advancement**

The exchange program gave the participants great career opportunities. Cultural exchange programs offer participants the chance to experience diverse cultures, enhancing their global perspective and appreciation for diversity. This is beneficial in multicultural workplaces, as employers value candidates who thrive in diverse environments (Global Umbrella Placement LLC, 2024). A participant (ST4) emphasized, ““Having an experience internationally can be your edge in a job. It is valued by the employers considering that you are competent and adaptable in dealing with cross-cultural countries.” Exposure to different cultures deepens understanding of global issues, making them more appealing candidates for international careers (Taras, Baack, Caprar, Jiménez, and Froese, 2021). It helped them build professional connections, develop leadership skills, and gain real-world international experience. A participant (ST7) also shared, “Joining the program would boost your portfolio in terms of professional experience. It would develop your perceptions of diverse cultures and their systems” The participants said they got certifications and awards, and they could use what they learned to boost their future careers.

## **Theme 3. Development of Cross-Cultural Connections**

The exchange program enabled participants to develop meaningful cross-cultural connections and relationships. Cultural exchange programs provide students with unique opportunities to connect with local communities, meet peers, and interact with host families, fostering lifelong friendships and influencing academic and professional futures (Scott, 2022). A participant shared, “I’ve also had the opportunity to make wonderful new friends during my time there. Connecting with these local students and other exchange participants from around the world has been incredibly rewarding.” They formed lasting friendships and professional networks with people from diverse backgrounds, which they plan to maintain beyond the program. Axner (n.d.) justified that, building strong relationships with people from diverse cultures is crucial for achieving significant goals. Effective collaboration requires trust, understanding, and shared goals, ensuring a diverse and powerful community. Participants (ST1 and ST2) shared, ““Building new friendship and exploring the goodness and greatness of my chosen profession in worldwide perspective.” and “I still keep in touch with those I met there, and I have friends I talk to even now.” Another participant (ST6) expressed the rewarding experience of socializing and interacting with local students as well as other exchange participants from around the world. This exposure helped build their confidence and global perspective.

## **Theme 4. Cultural Integration**

The international exchange program allowed participants to fully immerse themselves in another culture, going beyond superficial interactions. Based from the findings of Thong, Lim, and Padgate (2024), exchange students gained a deeper intercultural understanding and appreciation for different cultures, which fostered interpersonal relationships and new experiences.

One of the participants (ST3) shared that, “I’ve been able to participate in cultural activities, try new foods, and learn the language. This has not only been eye-opening, but has also allowed me to grow as a person and gain a deeper appreciation for diversity. One of the highlights of my exchange experience was having the chance to share my Filipino culture with the local students.” This eye-opening experience helped them grow as individuals, fostering a richer appreciation for cultural diversity. Another participant (ST5) shared, “I had the chance to delve into different educational systems and practices. This included practical experiences like answering FS1 and FS2 books based on our experiences in Indonesia, providing insight into teaching methodologies.”

The exchange program let participants fully dive into the host country's culture. They shared their own traditions and learned about the local education system and teaching methods. This cultural immersion let them build meaningful relationships, develop new problem-solving abilities, and gain insights to improve education back in their home countries.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Based from the findings, it concludes that international exchange program is a transformative experience for pre-service teachers, offering significant opportunities for personal and professional development. While participants face challenges such as financial constraints, health issues, language barriers, and cultural shock, the benefits of gaining a global perspective, enhancing teaching skills, and developing cross-cultural competencies far outweigh these obstacles. The program fosters resilience, adaptability, and a proactive approach to learning, ultimately preparing students for successful careers in an increasingly interconnected world. The lasting friendships and professional networks formed during the exchange further enrich their experiences, making the program an invaluable opportunity for growth and connection in diverse environments.

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