



## Perceived Benefits and Risks of Studying Abroad: A Review of Extant Literature

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### *Abstract*

*The trend of student mobility is rapidly increasing within the realm of higher education propelled by forces of globalization and internationalization. As there are two sides to every coin, studying abroad also comes with negative aspects regarding risks deterring students from pursuing this opportunity. This study aims to comprehensively review the literature published in reputed journals spanning from 2010 to 2023 to analyze both the perceived benefits and risks of studying abroad. The study highlights numerous benefits of studying abroad such as language improvement, exposure to different cultures, superior educational standards, employment-oriented skills, personal growth, and holistic development. Conversely, it also brings into light several risks, such as financial obstacles, language barriers, cultural disparities, academic challenges, and psychological impediments, which prove to be a stumbling block in students' path to going abroad. These findings intend to help students make well-informed decisions regarding studying abroad and effectively navigating the associated risks for a successful experience.*

**Keywords:** International students, Benefits, Risks, Higher Education, Overseas



## Introduction

Human Migration is a global phenomenon and has been a part of human existence for decades. The migration of humans takes place in the form of groups or as an individual in search of work, to find new economic opportunities and employment, to join the family, or to study.

Today, a large number of people hardly live in the country in which they were born. The international migrants residing in the country other than their own were estimated to be around 281 million as per the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) in 2020. (United Nations, n.d.). The research on migration has also indicated that people are “driven” in various ways. In other words, Migration drivers act as actual reasons indicating or explaining the people's decision to migrate. This could be due to joblessness or job offers, poverty, inequality, marriage, exposure to threat or persecution, and lack of education and health services. But the strongest driver behind the mass migration of humans is the motivation to study in a foreign land.

The international students' sector has been a quickly expanding segment in higher education due to globalization and internationalization of education. Hence, it becomes easier for students to move to overseas locations. Nowadays, millions of students are moving abroad to pursue higher education. This remarkable boost in the flow of students aspiring to study abroad has been witnessed in the last two decades with 6.3 million students studying abroad in 2021 (Ahmad 2015; Foster 2014; UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). Thus, it signifies a trend where a new generation of young mobile people is eager to learn and expand their horizons beyond national borders. This optimistic perspective on studying is based upon an idealized picture of studying abroad set by universities, educational consultants, and marketers. It outweighs the risks and does not consider the potential risks associated with it. However, studying abroad does not escape from the risks that may come with it, having the potential to make the study abroad experience disheartening for the students. Therefore, the present study seeks to explore extant literature on the positive and negative aspects of studying abroad, so that based on summarized findings, students can make informed decisions about studying in a foreign land. For this purpose, the present study has been segregated into five sections. Section 1 explains the introductory part; Section 2 describes the



research design of the study, describing its need, objectives, and methodology; Section 3 presents critical analysis and findings; Section 4 exhibits the conclusion of the study.

## **Research Design**

### *Need of the study*

Studying abroad is undoubtedly an amazing and transforming experience but comes with many potential benefits and challenges. It allows students to experience diverse cultures, languages, and ways of life which can broaden students' perspectives. Also, having access to a world-class education system can further contribute to the development of a more global mindset which is important in this cross-cultural world. However, with every benefit of the experience, there are certainly downsides that come with it, students should also consider the various challenges and risks that may obstruct their path to studying abroad. Therefore, students must have access to a system that can assist them in channeling these challenges and making their experience fruitful. An understanding of the both benefits and risks associated with studying abroad will enable the students to decide whether to pursue this opportunity or not. Although several studies have been conducted on the benefits and risks of studying abroad, none of them has given an exhaustive overview of the benefits and challenges as perceived by the students being identified by researchers worldwide. So, the present study aims to provide a deeper insight into the benefits that students look for and the risks that they might encounter while undertaking this experience. Thus, it evaluates the effectiveness of study abroad programs and identifies the benefits and risks that influence students' decisions to participate in such programs.

### *Objectives of the Study*

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To provide an up-to-date and thorough review of the benefits and risks associated with studying abroad, as perceived by the students.
2. To investigate the trend of diverse research studies to understand the significant benefits and risks affecting student's decision to study abroad.



### ***Source and Methodology***

A comprehensive approach has been applied by reviewing the existing literature to support the present study. The overall review was taken through the various journal articles published in digital databases and search engines such as Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald, Social Science Research Network (SSRN), ProQuest, Shodhganga, and Google Scholar to learn about the benefits and risks of studying abroad as perceived by the students. Thus, after carefully scrutinizing the articles, published studies on the benefits and risks of studying abroad were traced.

Further, several journals were explored to collect information about the present study such as the Journal of Studies in International Education, Journal of International Education, Journal of Education Research, Intercultural Education, Research in Higher Education Journal, etc. These journals provide commendable work of various scholars around the globe for the researchers to conduct their work efficiently and effectively. Additionally, the research studies of various countries were also reviewed to elicit information regarding the benefits and risks of studying abroad as perceived by the students.

Based on the exhaustive review of past studies, an attempt has been made to explore the students' perception of the benefits and risks of studying abroad across different continents like Europe, Oceania, North America, and Asia. The content analysis approach has been conducted to review the previous studies effectively. The key measures i.e., objectives, sample size, respondent's profile, research methodology, and significant trends have been revealed after a thorough study of the empirical data of various research scholars globally. This study builds up a conceptual framework for the researchers by thoroughly analyzing the empirical studies of the past 13 years from the year 2010 to 2023.

### **Critical Analysis and Findings**

Students perceive studying abroad as having numerous benefits that go beyond what they learn in the foreign classroom. Students get an opportunity to engage in a global learning environment and have exposure to cultural diversity that may prove valuable in their careers in the long run. They expand their horizons and interact with people of different cultural sets and on the other hand, they also face certain risks. Despite these potential risks and difficulties, students are still increasingly involved in studying abroad due to the perceived benefits surpassing the risks. In light of this, studies relating to the potential benefits and risks



perceived by the students related to studying abroad have been reviewed. A critical analysis of the studies reviewed has been summarized in Table 1. After an in-depth analysis of existing literature, major findings in terms of trends and patterns related to sample and respondent selection, variables analyzed, research methodology utilized, theoretical framework employed, and significant benefits and risks influencing students' decisions have been reported as under:



**Table 1: Empirical Studies Related to Benefits and Risks of Studying Abroad as Perceived by the Students**

Author & Year	Objective	Data & Respondents	Country	Research Methodology	Variables	Finding
Doyle et al. (2010)	To identify the perceived benefits and obstacles of overseas exchange programs by the students	17 tertiary students were interviewed and 625 respondents were surveyed from four institutions in New Zealand	New Zealand	Simple percentage Analysis	Demographic variables	The study identified the three most important benefits perceived by the students were to experience a different culture/Language, desire to live & work overseas and to list the top universities on their CVs. Other benefits were the prestigious reputation of the university, wider range of programs overseas, learning another language, etc. Further, the study highlighted the obstacles to studying abroad were the high cost of study, leaving family, and language incompetency. Some other important obstacles were insufficient grades for study abroad and ineligibility for loans.



Author & Year	Objective	Data & Respondents	Country	Research Methodology	Variables	Finding
Trilokekar and Rasmi (2011)	To identify the perception of students regarding the benefits and barriers of studying abroad	77 undergraduate students of York University	Canada	Descriptive statistics, One Way ANOVA, and paired T-test, thematic analysis	Demographic, psychological well-being, perceived benefits and barriers	<p>The study found a positive attitude of the students towards international education. Language learning and courses containing international content were considered important perceived benefits.</p> <p>Further, the study found that students not intending to study abroad perceived cost, time, and several academic hassles as barriers in the way of their study abroad and were also concerned about issues of cultural shock and loneliness.</p>
Milian et al. (2015)	To know about the perceived challenges and benefits of studying abroad for higher education.	130 students of undergraduate and graduate international students at Regional Western University	USA	Descriptive statistics	Demographic variables, adjustment, housing, Family-related variables, benefits, and challenges	<p>The study explored the high quality of education, presence of a community of friends, experience of different cultures, culture awareness, and competence as the most important benefits of studying abroad.</p> <p>Whereas in regards to perceived challenges, language barriers and lack of cultural knowledge of the host country emerged as important for the students.</p>



Author & Year	Objective	Data & Respondents	Country	Research Methodology	Variables	Finding
Potts (2015)	To identify the early career advantages of study abroad programs as perceived by the students	226 students of an Australian university	Australia	Multivariate analysis and exploratory regression analysis	Variables such as background information, employment information, and benefits	The study found skills such as maturity and personal development and interpersonal and communication skills as important benefits of learning abroad programs as perceived by the students.  In addition to this, career-related benefits such as career prospects and increased motivation and passion were also the greatest benefits of study abroad programs.
Kelleher et al. (2016)	To study the perception of nursing and midwifery students regarding the benefits and barriers of studying abroad	25 undergraduate students from a third-level institution in Ireland	Ireland	Theory of planned behavior, Qualitative Descriptive, content analysis	Socio-demographic characteristics, Benefits, Barriers, etc.	The study identified enhancement in personal and professional identity as a potential benefit of studying abroad.  The main potential barriers to studying abroad were lack of language proficiency in the host country, financial costs involved, family commitments at home, fears, and insecurities. etc.
Lam et al. (2017)	To explore the dimensions of perceived risks among international students	515 international students from Malaysian Universities	Malaysia	Mean Score analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), Independent sample t-test, and analysis of variance (ANOVA).	Demographic characteristics, personal factors, Risk dimensions, and reduction strategies	The study found that security risk, physical and tension risk, time and opportunity risk, social risk, financial risk, performance risk, and psychological risk were the dimensions of the risks as perceived by the students.





Author & Year	Objective	Data & Respondents	Country	Research Methodology	Variables	Finding
Jenny et al. (2017)	To investigate the challenges and benefits of studying abroad perceived by the students	783 undergraduate and graduate students from a University in the Southeastern United States	USA	Descriptive Statistics and Multiple Linear Regression Analysis	Demographic variables such as Gender, Age, Class, Ethnicity, and perceived challenges & benefits	<p>The study found a lack of interest and knowledge opportunities, being too far away from family, and course requirements of the existing curriculum were the significant challenges of studying abroad.</p> <p>On the other hand, overall life experience, personal development and growth, and the opportunity to live abroad were some of the perceived benefits of studying abroad.</p>
Yang & Akhtaruzzaman (2017)	To investigate the benefits and risks associated with the use of educational agents for studying abroad	140 students from a polytechnic in New Zealand	New Zealand	Descriptive statistics	Demographic variables such as gender, nationality, and program of study	The study revealed misleading information and fake promises by the agents concerning employment and living were the shortcomings of using agents for the students.
Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018)	To identify perceived benefits and constraints related to study abroad by the students	2715 undergraduate students from campus in Florida and 1016 from campus in Arizona	USA	Descriptive statistics and Frequency analyses	Demographics, Motivations, International experiences, Perceived benefits and constraints	<p>The study found personal &amp; professional benefits such as education &amp; knowledge enhancement, experiencing different cultures, and job and communication skills as perceived by the majority of students on both campuses.</p> <p>The study also identified financial issues, language, security, safety issues, concerns regarding living in other countries, etc., as constraints related to studying abroad perceived by the students.</p>



Author & Year	Objective	Data & Respondents	Country	Research Methodology	Variables	Finding
Grace Chien (2020)	To identify the advantages and disadvantages of studying abroad perceived by the Students	26 postgraduate students were interviewed and 250 respondents from the University in Southwest England	Britain	Descriptive statistics	Demographic variables such as gender, level of study, study field, and geographical region	<p>The study found the different cultural experiences, language improvement, employment opportunities, social networking, and academic abilities as major benefits perceived by the students to study abroad</p> <p>Further, the study highlighted cultural differences, emotional adjustments in the host country, high cost of living and study, harsh climate, lack of language proficiency, and short duration of the course as major disadvantages.</p>
Nordin et al. (2020)	To identify the study abroad programs benefits and correlation between study abroad and employability	146 undergraduate students from 10 public universities under AIMS	Malaysia	Percentages and Mean	Demographic, Benefits, and employability skills	<p>The study highlighted a better understanding of the cultural differences and the opportunity to make new friends as the benefits of study abroad programs.</p> <p>In addition, the development of communication skills, analytical thinking, and self-confidence were also perceived as other benefits.</p>
Agarwal (2022)	To understand potential benefits and obstacles as perceived by the students for participating in study abroad programs	400 students from four cities of Jharkhand i.e Ranchi, Jamshedpur, Bokaro, and Dhanbad	India	Descriptive statistics	Demographic, Benefits and obstacles	<p>The study found career opportunities, high social status, and independent and critical thinking skills after completing graduation as the major benefits of the study abroad.</p> <p>On the other hand, complications with test preparations, fear of getting low grades, and safety concerns in host countries were found to be potential obstacles for students.</p>



Author & Year	Objective	Data & Respondents	Country	Research Methodology	Variables	Finding
Reardon et al. (2022)	To explore how perceived benefits and obstacles of studying abroad influence students' choice of whether to study or not	267 undergraduate students from a midwestern university	USA	Exploratory Factor analysis, Canonical correlation, ANOVA, T-tests, Duncan post hoc test, Regression analysis		<p>The study indicated that expense was the most perceived obstacle to studying abroad. Further, personal and professional obstacles were also perceived by the students.</p> <p>In addition, students perceived personal benefits to be more important than professional benefits.</p>
Zhan & Tan (2022)	To identify the perception of risk, and overall risk assessment of studying abroad among students	2033 students from six universities in three provinces i.e. Guangdong, Henan, and Hubei.	China	Percentage Analysis	Demographic, Perceived risk, and risk assessment	<p>The study results revealed that students intending to study abroad found economic, cultural, and safety risks as important. While psychological risks were insignificant for the students.</p>



Author & Year	Objective	Data & Respondents	Country	Research Methodology	Variables	Finding
Houser and Bornais (2023)	To examine the perceived benefits and barriers to study abroad among the students	49 international students across five different programs in three different institutions	USA	Q - Sort Method	Demographic, program focus, previous travel experience, academic year	<p>The study revealed the students' perceptions of barriers and benefits to study abroad were influenced by the academic year and previous experience.</p> <p>Moreover, the study found that the senior students and those having past travel experience perceived career-related skills as an important benefit. On the other hand, lower-year students and those having less travel experience perceived studying abroad as an opportunity to broaden their horizons and enhance their personal growth &amp; development. While finances and program costs were perceived as barriers by all the students.</p>

*Source: Adapted from different studies*



### ***Content Analysis and Appraisal***

The key considerations for the content analysis of empirical studies have been summarized as under:

#### ***Sample and Respondent Selection***

After reviewing the previous literature, it was found that the primary method of data collection was used for most of the studies. For data collection using primary sources, responses were taken using different approaches such as online surveys, in-depth interviews, Face-to-face interviews, Open-ended belief elicitation questionnaires, and semi-structured questionnaires. International students studying undergraduate/postgraduate courses abroad or aspiring to study abroad were the targeted respondents for eliciting information on the benefits and risks of studying abroad.

#### ***Variables Analyzed***

The researchers explored the various variables such as benefits, risks, and constraints that may affect the student's perception of going abroad for higher education. Many variables such as demographic, socio-demographic characteristics, family-related variables, level of study, program or field of study, information about background, geographical region, and employment-related information were studied by varied authors. Most of the studies have also reported perceived benefits, barriers, risks, and risk dimensions, assessments that may influence the student's decision to study in a foreign country. Other variables studied were psychological well-being, travel experience, and risk reduction strategies to reduce risk hampering the student's way of going abroad.

#### ***Research Methodology***

In almost all studies, the benefits and risks associated with studying abroad have been explored using descriptive (percentage and frequency analysis) and inferential statistics. Moreover, ANOVA has also been used by several researchers for calculating the results of their studies. Furthermore, T-tests were also used by some researchers. Some other techniques used by the researchers were multivariate analysis, score analysis, canonical correlation, Duncan post hoc test, and Q-sort method, etc.



### ***Significant Trends and Patterns in Previous Research***

The content analysis of the studies reviewed outlined a range of advantages and risks associated with studying abroad, influencing students' deliberations on whether to pursue education overseas or remain in their home country for further studies.

The main objective of several studies like Trilokekar and Rasmi (2011), Kelleher et al. (2016), Jenny et al. (2017), Yang and Akhtaruzzaman (2017), Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018), Grace Chien (2020), Reardon et al. (2022), Houser and Bronais (2023), was to identify the perceptions of benefits and risks of studying abroad or study abroad programs from the perspective of the students who are currently studying or have already studied and those who intent to study abroad. These studies reported numerous benefits of studying abroad such as language enhancement, cultural competence, high-quality education, personal development and growth, social networking, etc.

Several studies such as Doyle et al. (2010), Trilokekar and Rasmi (2011), Potts (2015), Kelleher et al. (2016), Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018), Grace Chien (2020), Nordin et al. (2020), Reardon et al. (2022) reported language enhancement, improved foreign language proficiency, communication skills as potential benefits of the study abroad programs perceived by the students.

Whereas, experiencing different cultures was cited as one of the most perceived benefits by studies like Doyle et al. (2010), Milian et al. (2015) Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018), Grace Chien (2020), Nordin et al (2020). It is in line with the study by Houser and Bronais (2023), where experiencing different cultures was observed as a perceived benefit among students belonging to different academic years and with limited travel experience.

Milian et al. (2015) and Kelleher et al. (2016) also found that developing cross-cultural skills, awareness, and competence is a benefit of studying abroad influencing students' intentions. However, certain studies such as Grace Chien (2020) considered differences in the cultures of the host and home as both potential benefits and risks for the students impacting their study decision. On the one hand, it can lead to personal improvement, whereas on the other hand, it can create an atmosphere of uncertainty among the students. Therefore, the study suggested perception relating to most issues of studying abroad is often double-edged having both positive and negative sides.



Further, high quality of education was stated as the perceived benefit of the study abroad by the students enrolled at Regional Western University in the USA (Milian et al., 2016). This agrees with the study by Grace Chien (2020) where better quality education was one of the advantages of studying in Britain. Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018) and Houser and Bronais (2023) also reported that enhancement in education and good quality education an attractive options for students to study overseas.

Houser and Bronais (2023) identified opportunities to develop career-relevant skills as an essential perceived benefit for the students belonging to the Upper academic year. This is in line with the study of Doyle et al. (2010), Potts (2015), Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018), Grace Chien (2020), and Agarwal (2022), where seeking employment opportunities and career-related prospects abroad is considered one of the perceived benefits. Students in these studies believed that studying abroad contributed to their dreams of getting employment and better career prospects. A study by Potts (2015) also reported that studying abroad develops the employability skills of the students, and therefore has the potential to contribute to the higher education sector. This is in contrast with the study of Kelleher et al. (2016) where nursing and midwifery students did not consider employability as the possible advantage of learning abroad.

Most of the studies such as Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018), Agarwal (2022), and Houser and Bronais (2023) identified opportunities to enhance personal growth and professional development as significant potential advantages of studying abroad. Potts (2015) discovered that students considered maturity and personal development concerning their employment and early career experience as perceived benefits of learning abroad. Additionally, Kelleher et al. (2016) found that nursing students view studying abroad as a means to acquire skills and experience relevant to their professions in other countries. Furthermore, Jenny et al. (2017) examined the perceived benefits of studying abroad among two groups of students: those without study abroad experience and those with study abroad experience. The study highlighted personal development as a significant motivating factor or advantage for students in both groups, encompassing both male and female students. These findings align with Nordin et al. (2020) study, which indicated that study-abroad programs enhance personal skills, consequently fostering greater independence in students' lives.



According to Grace Chien (2020) studying abroad is not easy and can be identified with unfamiliarity, discomfort, and many challenges. Several studies such as Doyle et al. (2010), Kelleher et al. (2016), Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018), Reardon et al. (2022), and Houser and Bronais (2023) revealed that financial constraints i.e. cost of studying and living in the host country as the primary challenges to student participation in study abroad programs. Trilokekar and Rasmi (2011) examined the perception of students regarding the risks of studying abroad among three groups those who intend to go abroad, those not sure about their plans, and those who do not want to go abroad. The study revealed cost as the primary inhibiting factor for the students of all three groups. Further, students intending to study abroad reported fewer academic hassles and more social support than students not intending to study. However, students not intend to study abroad were more concerned about culture shock and loneliness in the host country.

Likewise, Zhan and Tan (2022) also studied student perceptions of the risks of self-financed study abroad at the three stages. The study found individuals with varied backgrounds, experiences, and cultures have different risk perceptions. The study found economic risks i.e. high cost of studying and living to be important for the students at all three stages. For the students who have intentions to study abroad, cultural and safety risks are considered to be important. The ranking was reversed for students with no intention and decision to study abroad where completion and health risks were considered more important by the students.

Lam et al. (2017) conducted a study that examined the perceived risks impacting the post-buying behaviour of international students studying in Malaysia. The study revealed that financial considerations played a significant part in the students' evaluation cost incurred on studying abroad and the value they gained from it. The findings confirmed that students felt stressed due to the lack of adequate finances and return on investment from studying overseas. This aligns with the study of Grace Chien (2020), which also identified financial cost as a barrier for students, impacted by their evaluation and expectations regarding return on investment in overseas programs.

Many researchers such as Doyle et al. (2010), Trilokekar and Rasmi (2011), Milian et al. (2015), Curtis and Ledgerwood (2018), Jenny et al. (2017), Grace Chien (2020), identified exposure to different languages, lack of language proficiency or imperfect English language as a significant barrier deterring students from participating in the study abroad programs. This is consistent with the study by Kelleher et al. (2016), where students expressed





difficulties in effectively communicating in the host country, impacting their academic progress. Further, Lam et al. (2017) and Agarwal (2022) highlighted challenges such as students' perceived failure to perform well in their courses.

Students face frustration, helplessness, loneliness, and homesickness due to the cultural differences between the host and home country (Grace Chien, 2020). Similarly, a lack of cultural knowledge of the host country (Milian et al., 2015) and cultural risk arising from adjusting to the host country's environment (Zhan and Tan, 2022) were identified as the perceived challenges restraining students from studying abroad. Some other perceived barriers or risks cited by the various researchers were concerns about safety and security issues in the host country (Kelleher et al., 2016; Curtis and Ledgerwood, 2018; Agarwal, 2022; Zhan and Tan, 2022), short duration of the programs (Trilokekar and Rasmi, 2011; Grace Chien, 2020), and psychological issues (i.e. discrimination) in the host country (Lam et al., 2017; Zhan and Tan, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

Due to the internationalization of education, a large number of students are increasingly lured to study in foreign lands underpinned by numerous advantages. However, the decision to study abroad is brimmed with substantial challenges and risks that give students pause for thought. A comprehensive review of related literature in the present study provides insight into the potential benefits and risks of studying abroad from a student's perspective. An extensive review of the published studies has highlighted the numerous advantages of studying abroad such as language improvement, exposure to different cultures, quality of education, employment-oriented skills, personal growth, and development. However, the literature has also described potential drawbacks or risks, such as financial, language, cultural, academic, and psychological challenges that may obstruct students' path from realizing their aspiration to study overseas. Thus, it is evident that students' perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of studying abroad are influenced by their varied backgrounds, experiences, and cultures.



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