LEARNING ACROSS BORDERS: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN OUTBOUND MOBILITY PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of a focus group approach to evaluate students' experiences in an outbound mobility programme in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, Thailand. It intends to reveal the various dimensions of their learning encounters, such as their understanding of local culture and architecture, academic and professional growth transformation, application of the experience, and improvement for future outbound mobility programmes. A qualitative method was employed, utilising an asynchronous online focus group with ten (n=10) final-year Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Architecture students who participated in this programme. Through data analysis and coding, four key themes emerged: understanding the impact of local architecture and culture, effective collaboration with industry professionals and peers, motivation to pursue architectural projects in the future, and reflections on the post-mobility experience. This study offers a relatively good overview of students' experiences in outbound mobility programmes and shall contribute to the broader discourse on architectural education, especially for graduating cohorts. However, to assess students' experiences more comprehensively, further evaluation needs to be conducted before, during, and after the outbound mobility programme.

Keywords: Architecture, Experiential Learning, Outbound Mobility Programme, Online Focus Group

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Graduates today need to master not only professional skills of their profession, but also various soft skills, including the ability to communicate, coordinate, work under pressure, and solve problems, which incorporate practical skills, often linked to social competencies such as group work and leadership (Qizi, 2020). While some aspects of learning occur in the classroom, experiential learning outside of the classroom is a crucial part of higher education. Experiential learning supports students in applying their knowledge and conceptual understanding of real-world problems or situations where they are being facilitated in their learning (Tovar & Misischia, 2018). This is commonly achieved through hands-on assignments and internship programmes, which push students beyond their comfort zones and encourage social interaction (Chwialkowska, 2020). However, experiential learning is often confined to local communities or within the country due to time constraints, financial limitations, and scheduling conflicts. When these barriers are addressed, students can gain opportunities to engage with different cultures through outbound mobility programmes with partner universities.

2.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Outbound Mobility Programme

An outbound mobility programme can be defined as a programme where students spend a short or a long term abroad at another institution, which aims to positively impact personal growth in the education system or among the students themselves (Ismail et al., 2020). Chwialkowska (2020) identifies six key components of an outbound mobility programme: accommodation, academic context, community engagement, cross-cultural orientation, self-reflection, and mentoring. According to Watson and Wolfel (2015), host universities play a crucial role in assisting social integration and helping students to adapt quickly to new cultural environments.

Through outbound mobility programmes, students develop self-awareness, adaptability, resilience, and intercultural sensitivity (Dall'Alba & Sidhu, 2013). Ismail et al. (2020) and Tovar and Misischia (2018) claim that outbound mobility programmes are critical components of higher education directly entwined with the mission of many universities, which is to provide academic distinction and significantly shape students' perspectives, preparing them for global engagement. However, studies show that students in outbound mobility programmes often face challenges abroad, from adjusting to food, weather, finances, and health to navigating cultural differences and language barriers; these challenges vary based on their language proficiency and adaptability (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2022).

These programmes foster cross-cultural learning by encouraging group collaboration, hands-on experimentation, knowledge sharing, and skill exchange within the education curriculum. This concurs with the industry perspective on attributes of graduate architects in Malaysia, specifically on a positive attitude, teamwork, creativity, independence, problem-solving skills, flexibility, and interpersonal attributes (Ng, Mari, & Chia, 2022). While outbound mobility offers a broad framework for cross-cultural and skill-based learning, its value becomes even more significant when contextualised within the unique pedagogical needs of architecture education.

2.2 Experiential Learning in Architecture Education

Architecture is a multidisciplinary field that integrates the arts, sciences, and social science. Architectural design is the cornerstone of architectural education, with the design studio serving as a space where students integrate knowledge from various disciplines to develop their designs (Charalambous & Christou, 2016; Nicol & Pilling, 2000). The studio culture cultivates a rich, multifaceted learning experience and stimulates students' creativity and engagement, like the office setting experienced during architectural training (Ahamad et al., 2022; Wahid et al., 2023). A key strength of studio-based learning is its emphasis on experiential learning, encouraging students to learn through hands-on practice (Cennamo et al., 2011; Nicol & Pilling, 2000). However, creativity and experiential learning should not be limited to the studio setting. Abdullah et al. (2011) argue that everyday experiences beyond the studio can facilitate architectural learning. Experiential learning theory suggests that knowledge is constructed through experience transformation, requiring internalisation and reinterpretation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). As a semi-structured approach, experiential learning promotes collaboration and problem-solving, allowing students to build on their existing knowledge to grasp new concepts (Bartle, 2015). To further understand the impact of these learning theories, it is essential to examine students' actual experiences within outbound mobility settings.

2.3 Students' Experiences in Outbound Mobility Programme

Outbound mobility programmes have been regarded as a positive method to impact a student's global learning experience and have continued to gain popularity in higher education (Tovar & Misischia, 2018). Research indicates that students are primarily motivated by the opportunity to study in an international setting, visit foreign countries, and enhance their skills (Ruhi Sipahioğlu et al., 2021). Rajaendram and Jeevita (2025) highlight that tertiary education is a life-changing opportunity for students to broaden their perspectives through international exposure, as it is no longer about the traditional classroom experience. This aligns with architectural education, where students are encouraged to explore new perspectives beyond conventional learning environments. These experiences foster interdisciplinary learning (Olson & Lalley, 2012), innovation and creativity (Mahgoub & Alawad, 2014; Smith & Mrozek, 2016), increase global awareness (Campbell & Gedat, 2021; Grigorescu, 2015; Lim et al., 2021; Stathem, 2015), become more independent (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012), and promote higher order thinking skills (Foo & Foo, 2022).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Taylor's University School of Architecture, Building, and Design (SABD) organised Activity Week, a programme that has since been revitalised and expanded into a two-week Student Mobility Programme. After a 6-year hiatus, SABD launched an Outbound Mobility Programme in Thailand for 18 days, from February 16 to March 4, 2024. Ten (n=10) final-year Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Architecture students, guided by two lecturers, participated in this enriching journey, spending 9 days in Chiang Mai and 9 days in Bangkok. The programme offers a holistic learning experience for the students, combining cultural exposure, architectural diversity, and opportunities for hands-on learning.

During the visit, students participated in workshops addressing regional architectural challenges hosted by the Faculty of Architecture, Chiang Mai University, and the Department of Architectural and Design Intelligence (ADI), King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (KMITL) in Bangkok. They also had the opportunity to meet with renowned local architects, including Sher Maker and PHTAA in Chiang Mai, as well as Chat Architects and Arsomsilp Community and Environmental Architect in Bangkok. Additionally, students were given a guided visit to the buildings designed by these architects, gaining firsthand insights into contemporary architectural practices in Thailand. According to Tovar and Misischia (2018), literature evaluating study-abroad experiences is prevalent. However, based on the review by Roy et al. (2018), the literature has not thoroughly addressed shorter travel studies (1-2 weeks), especially in architectural education. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by evaluating students' experiences using a focus group approach to reveal the various dimensions of their learning encounters, such as their understanding of local culture and architecture, academic and professional growth transformation, application of the experience, and improvement for future outbound mobility programmes.

3.0   METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach by conducting an online focus group of ten (n=10) final-year Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Architecture students, consisting of four (n=4) males and six (n=6) females who participated in an outbound mobility programme to Thailand. While there is no definite number of participants for a focus group (Manzano, 2023), Abrams and Gaiser (2017) recommend (n=10-30) participants for an asynchronous online focus group with more prominent groups that tend to capture a greater variety of views.

Additionally, research indicates that mixed-gender groups often enhance the quality of discussion and its outcome (Nyumba et al., 2018). Since the participants share common characteristics relevant to this study, the focus group can be categorised as homogeneous. This approach is appropriate for the study as it involves a purposely selected group of individuals to provide rich, contextual data (Marra & McCullagh, 2018) rather than aiming for a statistically representative sample of a broader population (Kitzinger, 1995; Lane et al., 2001; Nyumba et al., 2018). Therefore, purposive sampling was used to access a limited subject pool of architecture students.

3.1 Asynchronous Online Focus Group

The focus group method enables a researcher to assess ideas in a group setting to gather data and additional participant information. Abrams and Gaiser (2017) noted that much of the seminal literature describing the focus group method was developed with face-to-face communication in mind, and it could be employed for many different purposes. Nyumba et al. (2018) emphasise that this method is widely used in qualitative research to understand social issues comprehensively. The focus group format has also favoured those doing pilot testing for curricula, programme improvement, organisational development, and outcome evaluation (Leung & Savithiri, 2009; Marra & McCullagh, 2018). Furthermore, this method is claimed to provide a rich and meaningful dataset in a relatively short period (Gundumogula, 2020).
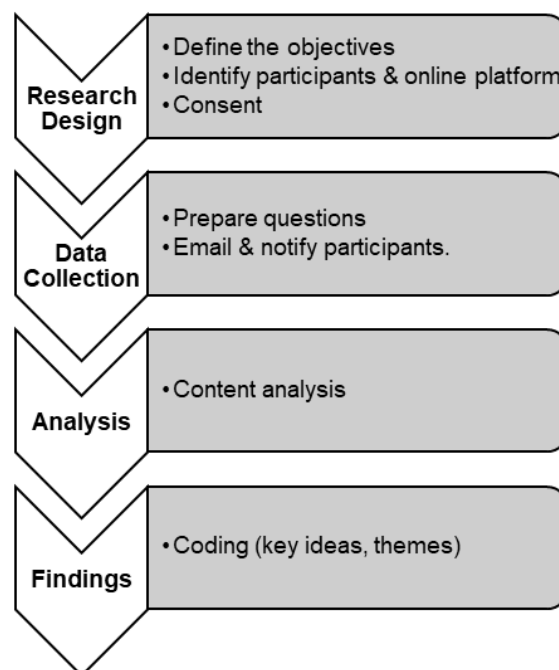
Research Design
- Define the objectives
- Identify participants & online platform
- Consent

Data Collection
- Prepare questions
- Email & notify participants.

Analysis
- Content analysis

Findings
- Coding (key ideas, themes)

Fig. 1: Flow chart of the steps of the online focus group

Nonetheless, Williams et al. (2012) highlight that the researcher has to carefully consider the suitability of using an online focus group approach with a specific research sample to grapple with a particular research question. This includes considering participants' familiarity and comfort with written and online communication to express their views and experiences. After careful consideration and discussion, everyone agreed to participate in this asynchronous online approach, as all participants had graduated and started working, making face-to-face meetings unfeasible. As supported by Abrams and Gaiser (2017) and Schulze et al. (2022),

there are many benefits to conducting focus groups in an online setting: they are relatively inexpensive, provide greater and easier access to a broad range of research participants, and can take less time to collect data. In addition, written communication, especially in an asynchronous setting, enables respondents to share their experiences with vivid emotional detail, leading to powerful emotional responses from the reader (Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014; Williams et al., 2012).

Figure 1 shows the flow of the online focus group procedure. The online focus groups took place in March 2025, one year after the outbound mobility programme. This timing allowed students to reflect on how the experience had influenced their academic and professional growth. However, the year-long gap may also have introduced memory recall bias, potentially threatening the accuracy and depth of participants' reflections (Sutherland et al., 2014). To minimise this, participants were provided with guiding prompts to support memory retrieval using standardised data collection protocols and well-structured questions (Hassan, 2005). Research shows that when appropriately scaffolded, reflective practices can yield meaningful insights even after a time-lapse (Mann et al., 2009).

After obtaining participants' consent, a WhatsApp group was created to facilitate communication. Participants were briefed on the research procedure and reminded to respond to the questions thoughtfully and in as much detail as possible. The questions were emailed to each participant, allowing them one week to complete the questionnaire at their own pace. According to Ratislavová and Ratislav (2014), participants have more time to think and consider their answers. They can review and reflect on their responses, which helps them communicate more carefully. This also can safeguard their privacy.

Ratislavová and Ratislav (2014) have also reported in their research that the quality of the data obtained through asynchronous email is similar to that in face-to-face interviews, as participants are generally more focused. However, due to the limitations of asynchronous online focus groups, follow-up private conversations were conducted to assist participants facing difficulties or seeking further clarification (Schulze et al., 2022).

3.2 Data Analysis and Coding
The data was analysed to gain insight into participants' experiences in the outbound mobility programme. Inductive analysis was conducted to identify the patterns and themes from the data. This analysis is commonly used with text-based data and is useful when approaching data without theoretical guardrails. It aims to produce an understanding of the meanings of the content of the data set and to uncover unexpected insights (Vears & Gillam, 2022). The data was examined with few preconceived ideas and read thoroughly. Exploratory remarks were made through the analysis process to assign meaning to them.

The next step after data analysis was the coding procedure, which was to identify patterns of participant responses and categorise them accordingly. This approach involved reading and re-analysing the responses multiple times and extracting and coding information to understand the data in-depth. It is an iterative process and constant comparative method in which researchers code the data, compare data with data and codes with codes, and eventually condense codes into categories, categories into themes, and themes into findings (Charmaz, 2014, as cited in Bingham, 2023). The coded data was then organised into a spreadsheet based on the selected themes of the participants' descriptive, linguistic, and

conceptual comments (Cooper et al., 2012, as cited in Koh & Ahamad, 2023). Although formal data saturation was not the primary aim of this small-scale study, recurring themes were consistently observed across participants' responses. This thematic convergence supports the dataset's adequacy for the research's exploratory nature.

4.0   RESULTS

Four significant themes were identified by analysing and coding the participants' responses. They are the ability to understand the influence of local architecture and culture, positive collaboration with industry players and students, motivation toward applying architectural projects in the future, and reflection on the post-outbound mobility programme. Table 1 summarises the findings and illustrates the correlation of these themes with the dimensions of students' experiences in this outbound mobility programme.

Table 1: Summary of findings

Themes	Students' Experiences	Keywords
The ability to understand the influence of local architecture and culture	Understanding of local culture and architecture	• Contextual • Vernacular • Preservation • Heritage
Positive collaboration with industry players and students	Academic and professional growth transformation	• Lectures • Discussions • Site Visit • Workshops
Motivation toward applying architectural projects in the future	Application of the experience	• Project Management • Site Analysis • Passive Design • Use of local materials
Reflection on the post-outbound mobility programme	Improvement for future mobility programme	• More activities • Journal diary • Integration with curriculum

4.1 The ability to understand the influence of local architecture and culture

This theme demonstrates that most students grasped new cultures and local architecture well during the outbound mobility programme.

> *Realising the importance of incorporating culture within the fabric of urban design, instilling preservation values while aiming for a continued and modern growth of a place. (Student 2)*

> *Thai culture and architectural diversity opened my eyes to many new ways of passive architecture using cultural work in modern architecture, especially during my time in Chiangmai. (Student 5)*

> *Visiting these two cities, each with its distinct character, climate, and history, provided me with valuable insights into how culture and architecture intertwine, shaping the*

built environment in unique ways. One of the key lessons I learned from this trip is how architecture in Thailand bridges the old and the new. Many contemporary Thai architects have embraced globalisation and modern techniques but remain deeply connected to their cultural roots, often seeking to balance innovation with tradition…..
(Student 8)

Thai culture's robustness and influence on their architectural style made me understand how the heritage of a place directly shapes its architecture to complement the lifestyle. (Student 9)

Exposure to Thai culture and architecture highlights the balance between tradition and modernity in contemporary design with its form and materiality. The blend of vernacular elements with modern innovations in Thailand's urban landscape demonstrates how heritage and innovation coexist, shaping a more holistic and sustainable approach to contemporary architectural practices. (Student 10)

Most students exhibited a good understanding of local architecture and culture. They could analyse the unique characteristics of vernacular architecture and identify how the architects have embraced traditional techniques with a modern twist in their designs. Student 1 also added the importance of incorporating culture in urban design to give the place a distinct identity. Building on this cultural appreciation, students engaged meaningfully with local professionals and peers, which further deepened their insights and fostered collaborative learning experiences.

4.2 Positive collaboration with industry players and students
This theme refers to the students' attitudes towards collaboration with local architects and students in Thailand. The analysis reveals that the students' positive remarks about the activities planned during the outbound mobility programme are recognised.

I think the collaboration activity between different university students has given me a lot of insights in terms of the design approach, software skills, and team dynamics. The design approach for a historical site has given me a fresh perspective on how we look at the site through history, morphology, and building usage. (Student 1)

The most transformative experience would have been meeting new interesting lecturers and architects, hearing about their practices, and discussing specific topics regarding Thai architectural styles. (Student 5)

I learned a lot from this trip, from lecturers to practising architects to students. Especially during site visits. (Student 6)

Meeting industry players such as PHTAA architects at their firms and getting valuable advice helped me grow. (Student 9)

……Engaging with local architects and communities broadened my perspective on contextual design, adaptability, and material innovation…..(Student 10)

The students have benefited from the activities with local architects and students as they had

the opportunity to ask questions and learn about traditional architecture. They also had the chance to converse with the local community, which deepened their understanding of the cultural norms. Students 1 and 10 noted that the collaborative activities provided new perspectives on analysing the site. Others, such as Students 5, 6 and 7, enjoyed learning about local practices and engaging with local architects. These meaningful interactions enriched their understanding of architectural practices and sparked a sense of purpose and enthusiasm for applying these insights to their future professional journeys.

4.3 Motivation towards applying architectural projects in the future

This theme indicates that the students feel motivated to apply the new knowledge they gained in Thailand to their future projects or work.

> *What I love about Thailand's architecture is that it is very distinct. I could easily tell that I was in Thailand just by looking at a building. They put a lot of thought into designing buildings that reflect their culture. Thailand's architecture reflects a deep connection to nature and culture, which I would strive to incorporate in my future work. (Student 6)*

> *Contextual sensitivity in design, blending tradition with innovation, sustainability, and environmental responsibility, focusing on human experience and spatial organisation, and sensitivity to cultural impact are a few aspects that I will keep in mind when approaching my future architectural experiences. The lessons learned from my time in Thailand will be a constant source of inspiration, also encouraging me to learn from more vernacular and contemporary architecture from Southeast Asia. (Student 8)*

> *I plan to integrate the insights from my experience in Thailand by emphasising sustainability, cultural sensitivity, and climate-responsive design in my future architectural work. (Student 10)*

The students have expressed their confidence by projecting ideas on how to implement their experience in their future endeavours through this outbound mobility programme. Student 6 claimed to incorporate nature and culture, while Students 8 and 9 were inspired to integrate sustainability and environmental approaches in their works.

4.4 Reflection on the post-outbound mobility programme

As students looked ahead to applying their knowledge, they also turned their attention inward, offering thoughtful reflections on the programme and how it could be further enriched for future participants. This theme captures the students' perspectives on improving the learning experience in future outbound mobility programmes. It also provides an opportunity for lecturers to review and enhance the overall planning of the programme.

> *I think the mobility programme should have more seminars and architectural tours. The activity with different university students can be more in-depth. I think one of the reasons was language barriers, which resulted in short and quick discussions. (Student 1)*

> *Something I appreciated from the trip was the arrangement of having scheduled daily*

activities ranging from few-days-long workshops, group work, sharing sessions from architects to site visits, and ample free time for us to explore around. I think it would be better if we could have some pre-trip preparation and contextual learning, as well as immediate post-trip reflection to help us understand and reflect better on our experience of the programme, as it was something remarkable of my architecture uni life. (Student 8)

Participants may record their experiences in a diary to help them remember more clearly and utilize the knowledge from the trip. (Student 9)

.....The activities themselves were a good blend of fun and academic, but could also include some that integrated with their existing curriculum instead of creating one. (Student 10)

Overall, the students expressed satisfaction with the outbound mobility programme as they acquired new knowledge and experiences. That being noted, there is potential for future enhancements to this programme. Student 10 suggested this programme could be integrated with the existing curriculum to make the experience more structured and robust. Student 1 pointed out that the language barrier hindered deeper discussions. However, this issue could be addressed, as Student 8 and 9 suggested incorporating a reflective journey during the trip to aid in understanding and contemplating their experiences within the programme.

5.0   DISCUSSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the students gained valuable experiences in the outbound mobility programme, which enabled them to understand the influence of local architecture and culture and to collaborate positively with industry players and students. This outcome concurs with a study by Handayani and Wienanda (2020) and a review by Roy et al. (2018), which reports that outbound mobility programmes allow students to develop their ability to understand and adapt to different cultures and differences. Despite language barriers being a significant challenge, as Kasim et al. (2012) claim, it did not hinder students from embracing new experiences as they felt motivated to apply the new knowledge in their future careers. However, one student highlighted the need for a more structured orientation at the programme's outset to integrate within the existing curriculum. According to De Moor and Henderikx (2013), addressing this as an integral part of a curricular framework in future iterations could further increase students' participation in outbound mobility programmes.

The importance of academic mobility and the advantages of conducting the outbound mobility programme for the student cannot be underestimated since it is evident that the majority of the population studied perceives their mobility experience as positive since they acquired competencies, abilities, capacities, and skills necessary for their disciplinary development (Herazo Chamorro et al., 2023; Ismail et al., 2020). This outbound mobility programme has harnessed soft skills such as flexibility and adaptability, which are highly sought-after by the industry (Crossman & Clarke, 2009; Kasim et al., 2012; Handayani & Wienanda, 2020). Through some student reflections, this study also highlights improvements that could be considered in the future outbound mobility programme, such as having personal journals to record their experiences in detail. These journals would inquire about

their mobility experiences, follow up on their learning, and allow them to promote the programme based on their experiences.

Embedding personal journaling aligns with established pedagogical frameworks such as Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, which emphasises reflective observation as a key stage in transforming experience into learning (Kolb, 1984). Existing literature on mobility programmes also supports structured reflection to enhance students' cultural awareness, personal growth, and professional development (Mohd Noor et al., 2020). Therefore, integrating reflective journals could provide a scaffolded, pedagogically grounded tool to enrich student outcomes and promote more intentional learning during and after the programme.

6.0   CONCLUSION

This study concludes with a positive overview of students' experiences in outbound mobility programmes, highlighting their transformative impact on architectural education. Key findings suggest that students developed critical competencies such as cross-cultural understanding, industry collaboration, and enhanced adaptability, which are essential in the global architecture profession. The programme also effectively fostered valuable soft skills, including flexibility and communication, aligning with industry expectations.

Drawing from the study presented, it is recommended that the outbound mobility programme be vigorously promoted, particularly for the graduating cohort. This will diversify their learning experience and development, enriching their learning and growth, thus producing a highly sought-after graduating cohort. Continuous assessment before, during, and after the programme is encouraged to support better and refine students' experiences. Ultimately, outbound mobility programmes hold immense potential to broaden students' horizons and reimagine and elevate architectural education globally.

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