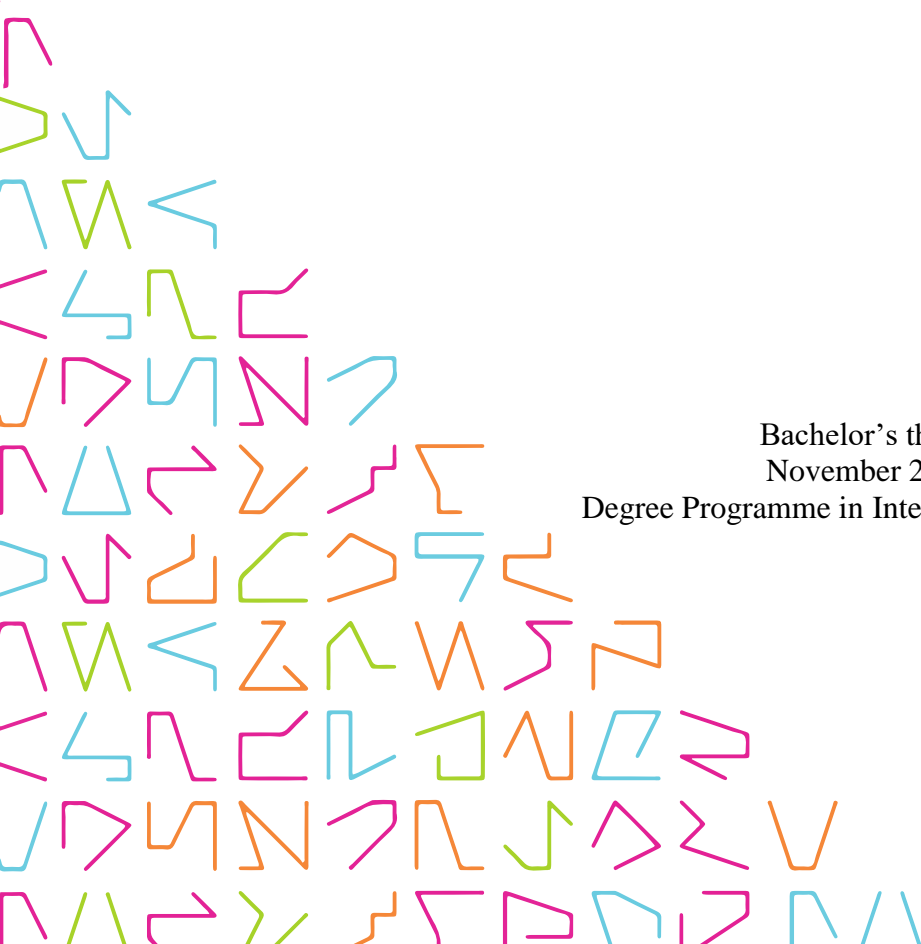


# **THE BENEFITS OF STUDYING ABROAD IN ASIA WITH ASIA EX- CHANGE**

Henri Valtonen



Bachelor's thesis  
November 2017  
Degree Programme in International Business

## **ABSTRACT**

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The Benefits of Studying Abroad in Asia with Asia Exchange

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Researching the long-term benefits of a company's services is a way of creating longevity to the company operations and researching customer satisfaction over a longer period of time than usually. The goal of this research is to provide Asia Exchange with a benchmark for their long-term customer satisfaction research, as well as providing meaningful feedback about the benefits that the respondents of the survey report. While AE has gathered feedback about their exchanges after every semester, this is the first research focused on the long-term benefits of the exchange semesters.

To gather the data for the research, an online survey was constructed that was sent to 1908 former AE students, who studied with AE between 2008 and 2015. The survey was sent to the students via email, and prompted 108 answers in total. The main questions of the survey aimed to find out the perceived benefits to the students' studying, working life and personal growth during their years after the exchanges, as well as the perceived importance of deciding to spend their semester abroad in Asia instead of another area.

The results indicate a very high level of satisfaction among the former AE students, as most questions ranked high on the answer scale. The highest perceived benefits were found in personal growth and working life benefits, while the lowest benefits were in study life benefits and searching for a job abroad. Asia was also considered as highly beneficial study destination among the respondents.

AE may use the results of this survey for marketing, training or research purposes as they deem necessary. As this research is the first of its type for AE, the research serves as a possible stepping stone for further research, or as a basis for continuous long-term customer satisfaction research.

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Key words: student exchange, long-term customer satisfaction

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis was commissioned by Asia Exchange Ltd, a Finnish company that arranges student exchanges to six different Asian countries. The idea for the thesis emerged during an internship of the researcher in the company during autumn 2016 and the thesis was then conducted a few months after the internship during spring, summer and autumn of 2017.

AE as a company has been around since 2007, and the first students went for an exchange through AE to Thailand in 2008. Currently AE sends students to Indonesia, Malaysia, China, South-Korea and Japan in addition to Thailand, with Japan being the newest destination country. AE has been steadily growing over years, reaching peak student numbers almost every year in AE destinations. With most of the AE market being in Germany and Finland, AE aims to expand their operations in other areas as well, where the outgoing students through AE are still in small numbers.

The thesis researches the benefits the Asia Exchange students have gained from their study abroad semester(s) in Asia during their years after the exchange. Previously AE has focused mainly on gathering student feedback directly after the semesters, but the focus of this research is quite different, as the focus of this thesis is to study the benefits of the exchanges in long-term. As AE is a company that turned 10 years old in 2017, the target group of this study consists of students who have been abroad via Asia Exchange throughout the whole decade of AE as an exchange service provider.

The goal of the study is to conduct a survey that would provide meaningful feedback to AE about how useful the students considered their semester abroad during their years after the exchange. This information could be used to enhance AE operations, for example as an addition to the current marketing materials.

## **2 THESIS PLAN**

### **2.1 Thesis topic**

The topic of the thesis is to research the benefits and advantages that the students studying through Asia Exchange (AE) gain from their exchange for their use in the years after the exchange. The benefits can be related to studying, working life, leisure or any other instance where a former AE student has considered their exchange to be a significant helping factor in a given situation or over time.

The topic was chosen based on two factors: the mutual interest of this topic from the researcher and the Asia Exchange CEO, and the fact that AE has not researched this topic earlier. AE has collected customer satisfaction reports after every exchange semester for the whole 10-year history of the company, but researching the long-term benefits of studying with AE has not been part of the company operations so far.

The assumption that an exchange in Asia is beneficial to a student's future is quite easy to make considering the importance of Asia in global markets and the constant growth of international student exchanges in the world as shown later in this chapter. However, this assumption needs to be proven true to be used as a part of AE strategy in the future.

### **2.2 Thesis objectives and research questions**

The objective of this thesis is to provide AE with a comprehensive research paper that can be used as a basis for potential future AE research and as a useful tool for AE marketing. AE has two main ways of attracting customers: marketing directly to the students, or contacting the home universities of the students and finding their way to the interested students that way. In both of these cases it is advantageous that AE can provide proof that the exchange is beneficial for the students' future, and it is definitely even more useful, if AE can provide that the exchange is even more beneficial if it is done via Asia Exchange. For this purpose, an academic thesis on the topic will be a useful tool on top the materials that AE already has in their marketing use.

For now, the analysis done in this paper will be the main goal of this paper, and no marketing plan or similar will be done regarding this paper. AE will have full access to the materials gathered during the research, and can use those materials to their best interest in order to promote AE as a company, or use the paper for marketing or similar purposes. Additionally, this paper can be used as a helping material for training new AE employees depending on which aspects of the company are most important in the training of new or current employees in the company.

Thus, the research questions for this paper are the following:

1. What are the benefits the former Asia Exchange students have gained from their exchange semesters abroad in the years after the exchange?
2. How can Asia Exchange use the gathered information to improve their business operations?

### 2.3 Concepts and theory

The main concepts of this research are student exchanges and long-term customer satisfaction related to them. Arranging student exchanges is the base of AE operations, while customer satisfaction is one of the fundamentals of an ambitious company that wishes to continue expanding their operations. The concepts of a free mover student and importance of Asia as an exchange destination are also described briefly to help understand the idea that AE is built on.

**A student exchange** is an arrangement whereby a student at a university or school studies at another educational institution, typically abroad, for a fixed period. Exchange semesters typically vary from a few weeks to a year, unless the student opts to study abroad their whole degree. The percentages of international students in different countries vary greatly, as it can be anywhere between 0% and 22%. The OECD average in 2009 was around 6,4% (OECD, 2011, p.333).

Study exchanges and student mobility have seen a steady rise for the past decades as seen in Figure 1. In 1990 around 1,3 million students were studying in a foreign country, whereas the number in 2014 had reached 5 million. The main reason for the trend seems

to be the change in student exchange accessibility. Previously, student exchanges were only accessible to the world's elite, whereas now they have now become available for the middle class. Asia has accelerated this trend even faster than other continents, as the economies of the Asian countries have grown rapidly in the past years (ICEF Monitor 2015.)

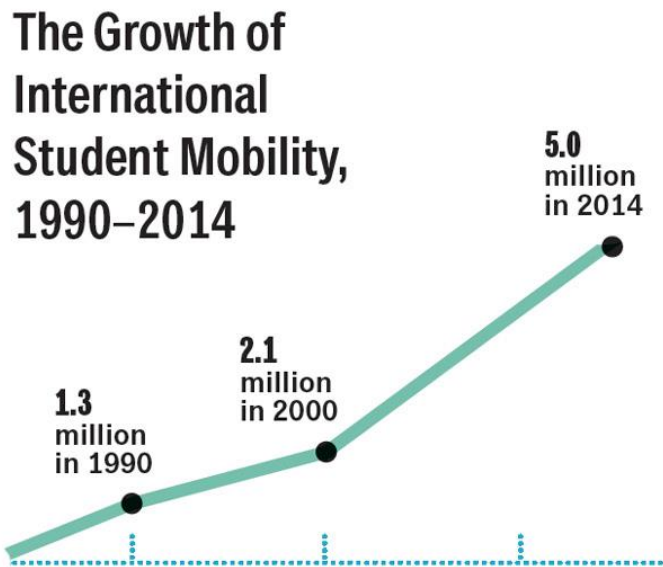


FIGURE 1. The Growth of International Student Mobility, 1990-2014 (ICEF Monitor 2015)

Especially in countries lacking higher education capacity or high level tertiary education, students are looking for opportunities to study abroad. As knowledge has become a good that flows freely across borders, students and governments alike have become aware that raising student mobility is a long-term trend, and investments have been done respectively. Countries such as China, Korea and Malaysia have expressed their clear intentions of raising their student mobility numbers in the following years, and we are now seeing similar attempts from less traditional student mobility countries such as Brazil and Mexico (ICEF Monitor, 2015.)

The growth of Asian exchange student markets is just one major contributing fact to the interest in exchange studies, as pointed out by Gürüz (2008). The world's population growth, globalization and changing demand in the labor markets have together created a situation, where intercultural skills are valued more than ever. This combination has naturally created a prospering environment for higher education students to abroad during their studies (Gürüz, 2008, p. 34, 158-159.)

**A free mover student** is a student who decides to find their study semester abroad without using the bilateral agreements that their home institution has in use. Students going for an exchange as a free mover pay their exchange themselves, and handle the exchange practicalities independently. This includes the fact that studies in a free mover destination university might not fit into a student's degree studies (Asia Exchange, 2017.)

The importance of Asia in the current international exchanges has proven to be extremely important in the last years. For example, 53% of all students studying abroad today are from Asia (ICEF Monitor 2015). Hundreds of thousands of students spend an exchange semester within the region annually, as well as travel the world to USA or Europe.

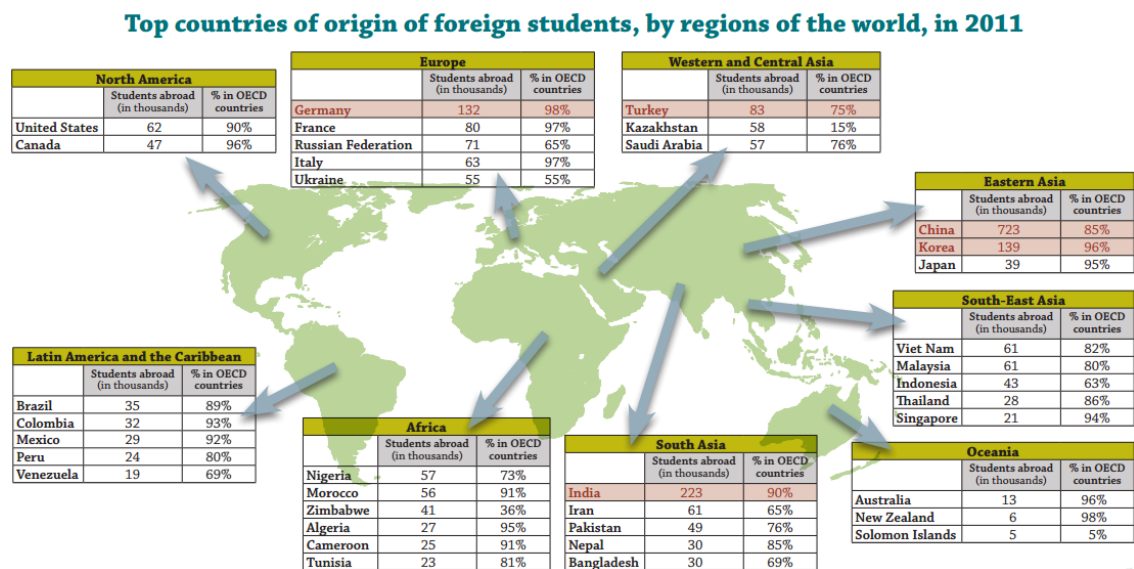


FIGURE 2. Top countries of origin of foreign students, by regions of the world, in 2011. (OECD, 2013)

As seen in Figure 2, Asia is by far the biggest region in sending students abroad, with China topping chart by sending half a million more student abroad in 2011 than the country on the second place, India (OECD, 2013). Since then, China, Japan and Malaysia have targeted to reach 500 000, 300 000, and 250 000 international students living in the respective countries by 2020, meaning the trend of Asia focused growth of student exchange markets is not likely to slow down anytime soon (ICEF Monitor, 2015). This is also the market Asia Exchange is targeting for, making this topic extremely important for this thesis.

**Customer satisfaction** is a term used for describing the level of satisfaction that a customer gets after buying or using a product. A customer always has an expectation of a product or a service, and customer satisfaction describes how well that expectation is met. Additionally, the customer experience is different for each customer and again subjective, even though the product or service might be the same (Rope & Pöllänen 1998, 58-59.) Since both the customer expectation and experience are both unique, benchmarking customer satisfaction is a vital tool for understanding customers and improving the customer experience overall. Customer satisfaction surveys are often conducted soon after the product or service is consumed, but this research is deliberately aimed at contacting customers who have not been in contact with AE in months or years.

According to the research of Rope & Pöllänen, customer satisfaction tends to follow a certain pattern, described below in Figure 3. Around 60% of the customers tend to get the service they expected, while 16% are slightly disappointed or surprised on both sides of the satisfaction scale, with 4% being deeply disappointed or strongly surprised, again at both ends of the spectrum.

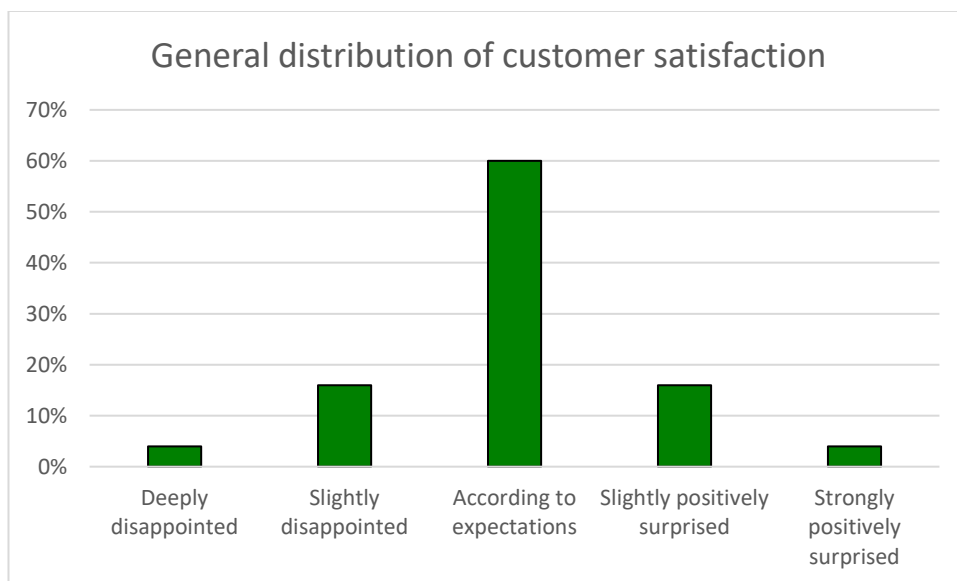


FIGURE 3. General distribution of customer satisfaction (Rope & Pöllänen 1998, 41)

The most disappointed and surprised customers are the ones who tend to be the most vocal about their experience. The ones who get deeply disappointed can easily share their negative experience forward and require compensation from the company, while the strongly positive ones are the ones who might thank the company face to face and, given the opportunity, also share their pleasant experience forwards. These are the customers

that are incredibly important to interact with, as they can make or break a company reputation. The customers who get what they expected or are slightly surprised don't usually talk much but remain loyal, while the slightly disappointed ones tend to change the product or service. (Rope & Pöllänen 1998, 40-43.)

During the internship of the researcher and initial talks about the topic with AE the point was raised that AE tends to be even more polarizing than many other companies when it comes to the far ends of customer satisfaction. This is due to the nature of the company working with exchange students, where students devote a significant amount of time and money to study abroad in a completely different culture. The change suits some customers well, while others get very disappointed and are very dissatisfied. This has been the case in AE surveys which have been sent to the students after their semesters, and is a possible outcome of this research as well.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Online survey

The research of this thesis relies on an online survey that was sent to former Asia Exchange students. The survey was sent to the students as an email, which redirected to a webpage survey. The webpage survey was constructed with Jotform, and can be found in Appendix 1, and the accompanying email can be found in Appendix 2.

Conducting a survey through email as a webpage survey has the advantages of flexibility, cost-friendliness, easy administration, speed and convenience among a few others. Naturally surveys of this type have their disadvantages, such as technological requirements for the respondent, surveys ending up in spam folders, anonymity of respondents and sampling of the respondents (Housden, 2008, 174.) Additionally, according to Sue & Ritter (2007, 13) webpage surveys have the disadvantages of limited populations and abandonment of the survey

In this research project using an online survey was the easiest and most natural way to conduct the research as AE already does their surveys online through emails sent to the students. With the sample size of nearly two thousand students, any other method of research would have been too costly or time consuming to be completed in a timely manner. Since AE already has the software requirements, knowhow and email addresses for the target sample group, some of the above-mentioned disadvantages of using an online survey were nullified and did not have to be taken into consideration for this research.

#### 3.2 Quantitative and qualitative research

**Quantitative research** is numerically oriented, generally evaluative and to a certain degree statistically reliable research. It is based on researching a large sample size which represents the target group. The basic rule is that every respondent is asked the same series of questions. (Van Hamersfeld & de Bont, 2007, 66.)

Quantitative research is used to describe and measure variables, as well as establishing relationships between multiple variables (Friel, 2014). Quantitative research is used for receiving and analysing large amounts of data, and makes analysing data a structured and thought-out process.

The basic steps for a quantitative survey are (Creswell, 2003):

1. Identifying the purpose of the survey
2. Identifying the sample and population for the survey
3. Deciding the survey instruments
4. Defining research questions
5. Deciding survey contents and
6. Steps to be taken in data analysis

In this thesis, all the above steps will be agreed with the commissioner of the thesis, Asia Exchange.

Housden (2008) describes quantitative data as the best-known currency of marketing research, stating that according to ESOMAR in 2010, quantitative research accounted for 80% of the worldwide research expenditure. The main advantage of quantitative research is allowing a company or a researcher to make generalisations of the general population or a specific group by taking a sample of that population (Housden, 2008, 161.) Additionally, Wilson (2006) has identified the key characteristics of quantitative research as the following:

1. Data gathering is more structured.
2. Research involves larger samples than qualitative research
3. The data gathered can provide answers that will quantify the incidence of particular behaviour motivations and attitudes in the population under consideration.
4. Studies can be more easily replicated and direct comparisons can be made between studies.
5. Analysis is statistical in nature and will usually be done with the help of a computer software. (Wilson, 2006.)

**Qualitative research** emphasizes insight and understanding of a specific target group using unstructured data gathering methods. The main goal of qualitative research is to

gather explanations and depth of information for the researcher, meaning that the data is always subjective and interpretative (Housden, 2008, 137.) In this research paper the qualitative data is used as an addition to the quantitative data, giving the respondents an opportunity to explain in further detail about their experiences of AE or their years after the exchange. The focus will be in analysing the quantitative data.

### **3.3 The data collection and survey progression**

The data collection part of this thesis is done as a customer survey, which is executed by using an online form building site called JotForm. JotForm is a site currently in use at AE, which makes it optimal for this thesis process. Familiarity with JotForm makes processing the results of the survey more efficient, and also makes it easy for AE staff to check and interpret the results of the survey later if necessary.

The survey was designed by the researcher, however in cooperation with AE. The original survey design was sent for AE evaluation, which added a few questions to the survey, but kept the basic structure of the survey. The final design of the survey was then agreed on, and the survey was created and sent together by the researcher and one AE employee. The sent survey can be found in Appendix 1 and the sent email in Appendix 2.

The survey has two aims, to gather the background information of the respondents, and to gather the answers to the questions that were considered the most important by the researcher and AE. The background information is split into four questions, with predetermined options of gender and country of origin, and fill in blank spaces for age and years since the respondent's exchange. The 11 following questions are answered on a scale from 1-5, with 1 being the worst option and 5 the best. A "Not applicable" option is also available for these 11 questions. The survey concludes with two voluntary, qualitative questions for sharing a specific experience or feedback to AE more in depth. The survey can be completed in a very short time on purpose, hopefully leading to an increase in response volumes.

The survey was sent to Asia Exchange customers who studied via Asia Exchange between the spring of 2008 and the autumn of 2015, reaching 1908 customers. AE provided all the necessary email addresses and the programs required for the research, mainly JotForm

for constructing and hosting the survey, and Sendy, an email sending software, for sending out the invitations to the survey.

JotForm gathered the answers for two weeks starting from March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017, and prompted 108 answers from the customers in total, meaning a response rate of 5,63%. The response rate was very high during the first few days, but slowed down considerably every day. Less than five answers were received during the second week of the data gathering, and the survey was closed two weeks after the initial emails were sent. A reminder email was a possibility after the initial interest in the survey slowed down, but was cancelled to prevent further negative responses to AE, as some customers reacted negatively to the original email.

## **4 RESEARCH RESULTS**

Before starting the data analysis, the gathered data was inspected for any anomalies or inconsistencies. A question asking the students the approximate years since their exchange (Question 4) had accumulated four incorrect answers as some customers had answered the year they had been abroad, not the years since the exchange. One respondent had also answered 0 for this question, which should not be a possibility since there was over a year between the end of the last semester the survey was sent to and the beginning of the data gathering period. The first types of error were corrected to reflect the time between 2017 and the answer, while the second mistake was left blank for the analysis. Additionally, one respondent had answered their age to be 15, which is not possible considering all AE students have been at least 18-years-old during their exchange, so this answer was left blank for the research as well.

### **4.1 Respondent background information**

The first four questions of the survey aim to give background information about the respondents, more specifically their gender, age, country of origin and the time since their exchange with AE. The questions of gender and country of origin had predetermined answer options, while age and the years since the exchange had a simple fill in blank space. The survey can be found in Appendix 1. The below graph Figure 4 illustrates the gender distribution among the respondents, which in this survey split exactly half between male and female respondents, with 54 survey answers from both genders.

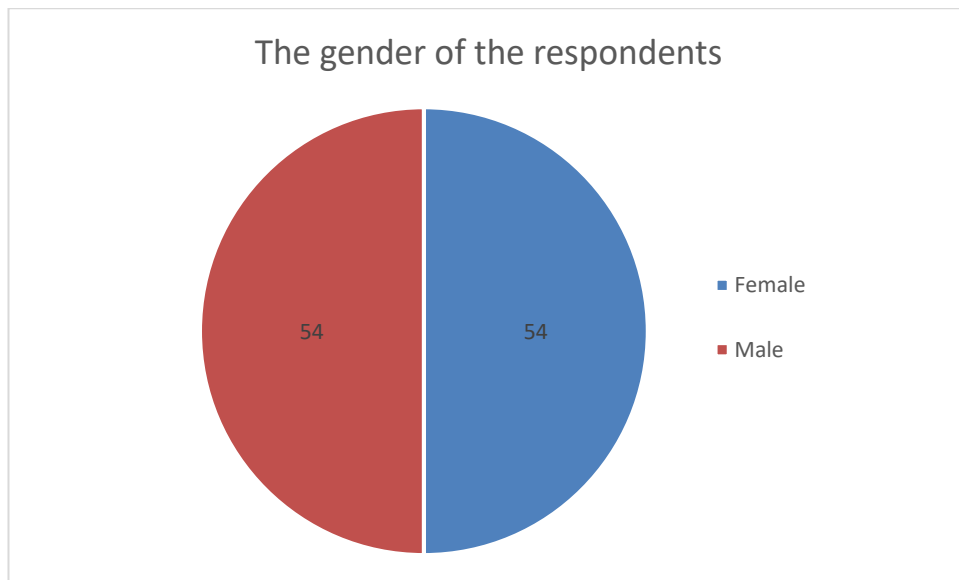


FIGURE 4. The gender of the respondents

The age of the respondents varies between 21 and 38 years. The age distribution is heavily weighted towards respondents in their early or mid-twenties, which is only natural considering AE targets their services to students in tertiary education. The largest age group in this survey was 26-year-olds, with 16 answers in total. The distribution of the age of the respondents can be found below in Figure 5.

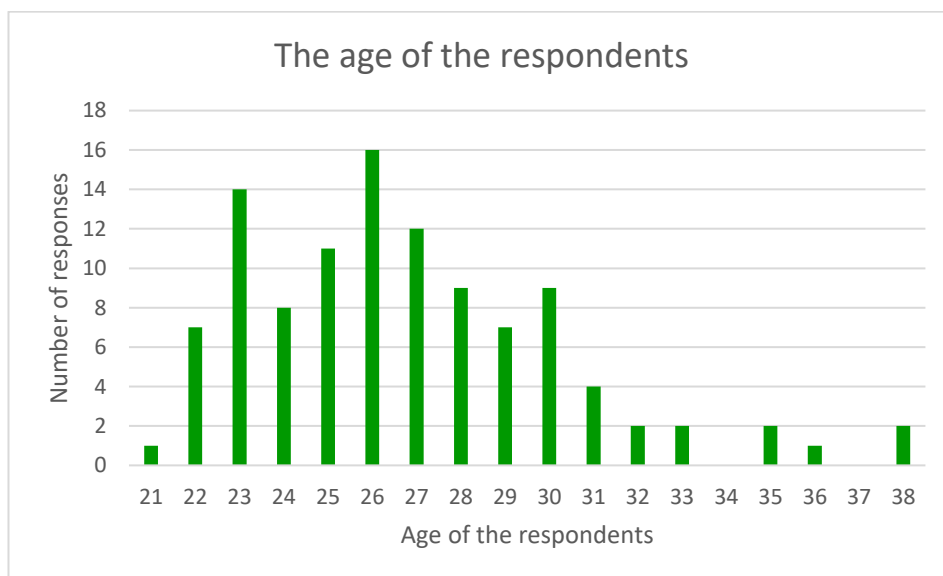


FIGURE 5. The age of the respondents

The country of origin of the respondents shows that Finnish and German students were the most willing to answer the survey, with Finnish students accounting for almost half of the answers with 53 answers in total. The German students gave 38 answers, while the remaining 17 answers were split between ten countries, most notably Sweden with six

answers. The countries with one answer each are Estonia, Vietnam, Turkey, The Netherlands, The United States, France, Switzerland and Czech Republic. The countries of origin for the respondents can be found in Figure 6 below.

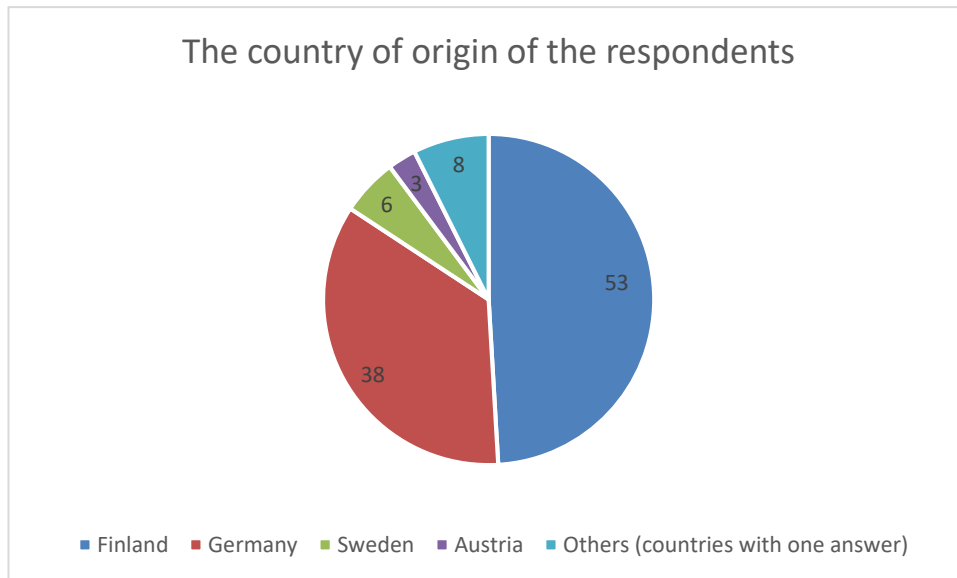


FIGURE 6. The country of origin of the respondents

For comparison, Figure 7 below shows the country of origin for the students who received the survey to their email. The first most notable difference is that the portion of responses from Finnish students in Figure 6 is slightly inflated when comparing to Figure 7. Possible reasons include the researcher being Finnish, making the survey more appealing for Finnish respondents, or similarly the fact that AE is a Finnish company. As a second point, a lack of responses from Austrian, French and Dutch students is clear, considering how many students from those countries received the survey.

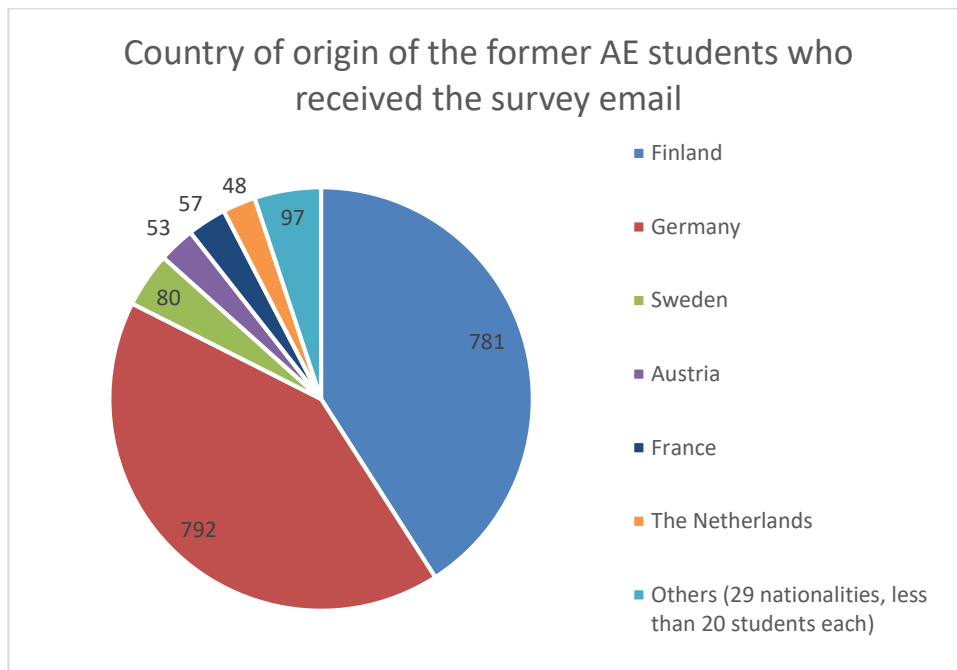


FIGURE 7. The country of origin of the former AE students who received the survey email

The last of the background questions asked how long time there was between the respondent's exchange and the survey answer. The results can be found in Figure 8 below. The students from the most recent years gave the most answers, with two years since the exchange being the most popular option. The students from last four years gave considerably more answers than the students before that, meaning the data is focused mainly on the last four years of AE, with less focus to the early years. The survey also got answers from seven students who studied with AE seven or more years ago, giving a few answers from the time when AE was still on its early years of offering student services.

With this graph it is worth to consider the fact that AE has been growing steadily over the years, meaning that in terms of sheer numbers the survey reached many more students who studied during the last few years compared to students who studied 5 or more years ago. Additionally, the number of students who studied with AE less than two years ago was quite limited in the survey target group as the latest students who were included in the survey target group had their exchange semester in Autumn 2015, and the survey was sent in March 2017.

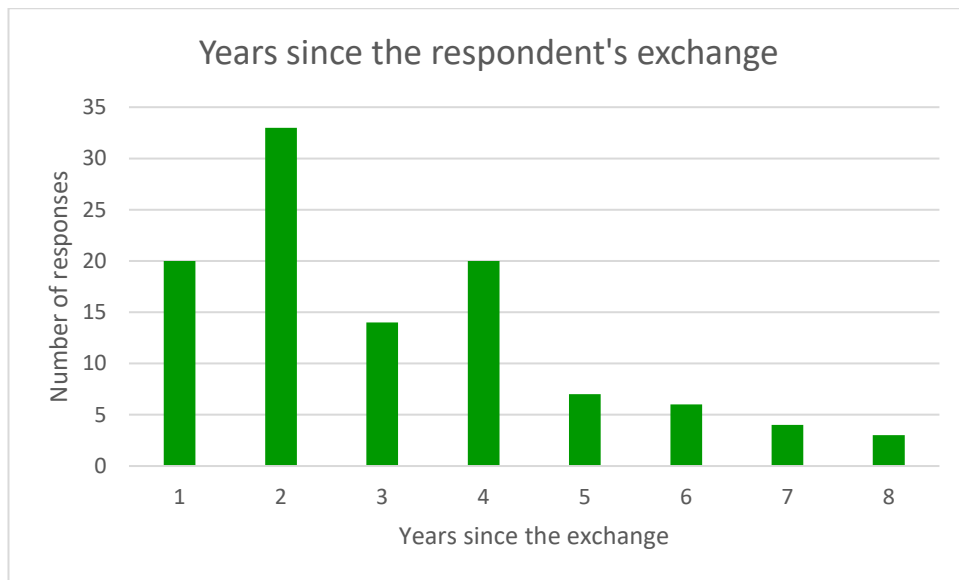


FIGURE 8. Years since the respondent's exchange

#### 4.2 Study and working life benefit results

One of the important aspects of this thesis is to research the usefulness of the exchange semester in the respondent's studies after the exchange, regardless of what level studies the student goes back to in their home country. The answers split quite even between all the options with the middle option being the most popular with 32 answers. The answers also leaned even between both sides of the middle option, however with considerably more answers in the very beneficial option, compared to the not beneficial at all option. The responses can be found below in Figure 9.

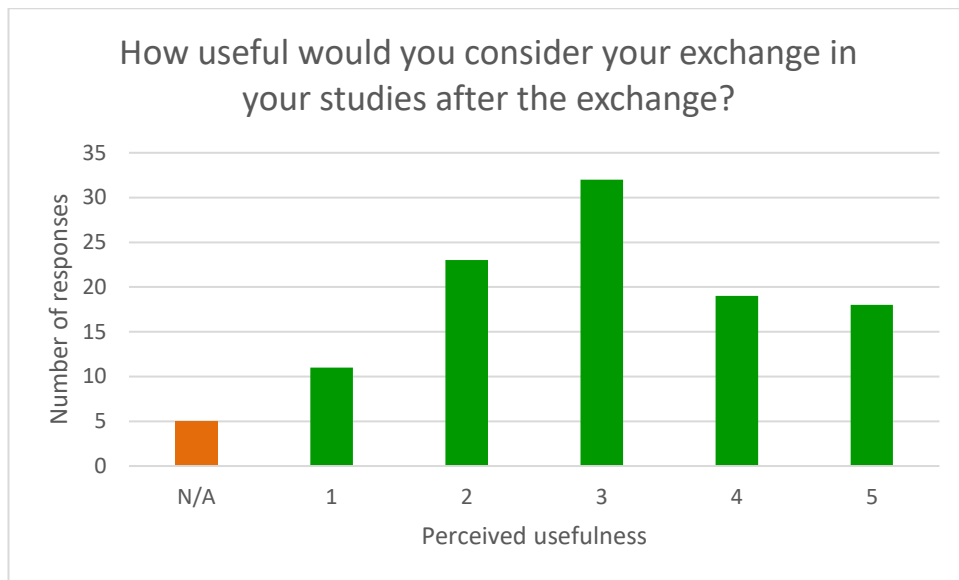


FIGURE 9. The perceived usefulness of the exchange semesters in the students' studies after the exchange

No clear-cut benefit or downside can be seen in the study related question of the survey, but the situation is different when considering the similar work-related question in Figure 10 below. On average the respondents have considered the benefits to working life to be significantly better than the benefits to their studies, with a considerable increase especially in the two highest ranking categories in terms of the benefits.

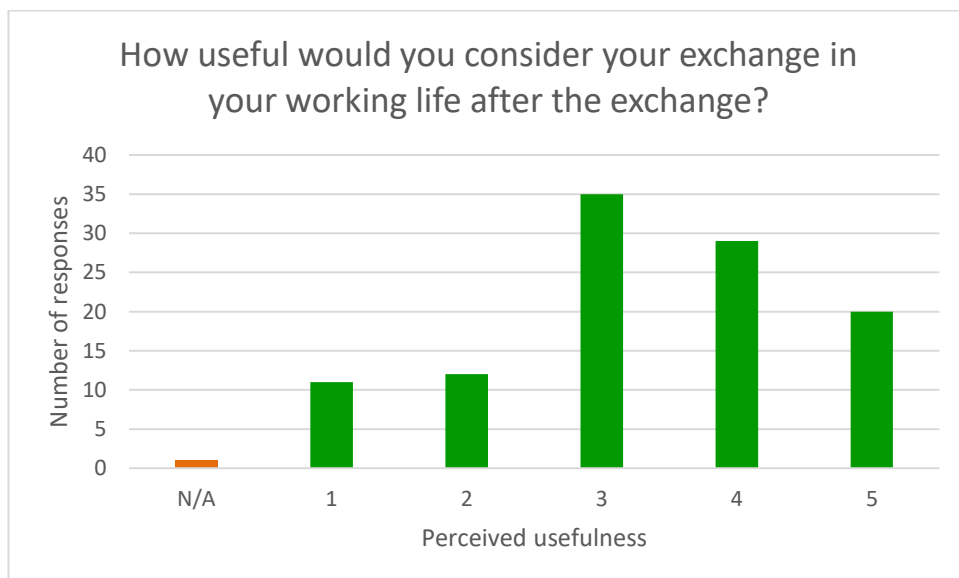


FIGURE 10. The perceived usefulness of the exchange semesters in the students' working life after the exchange

The perception in terms of deciding the student's future career path split the results more than the previous questions, with an increase in the responses of the exchange not being

beneficial at all in deciding a career path compared to the previous questions. At the same time the higher categories are still very popular, with the option 4 even getting more responses than middle option. This implies to the fact that the exchange semesters seem to have very different benefits when it comes to choosing one's career path. The results can be found in Figure 11 below.

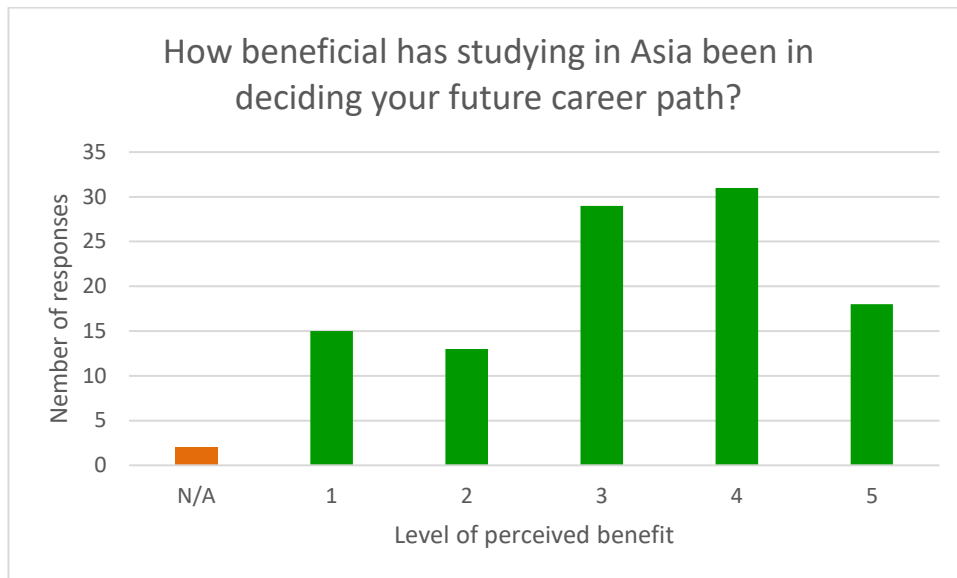


FIGURE 11. The benefit the respondents have gained from their exchange in terms of deciding their future career path

The question regarding the employer's interest in the semester abroad is showcased in Figure 12. The main goal of the question is to figure out if employers are interested in an exchange semester in Asia at all, and if so, how it affects the hiring situation or any other comparable situation. The results showed that employers have shown interest in the exchange semesters of the respondents, and in the eyes of most respondents the interest has been positive in tone or has benefitted the respondent otherwise. This question also has a high number of N/A responses, possibly indicating a lack of interest from some employers.

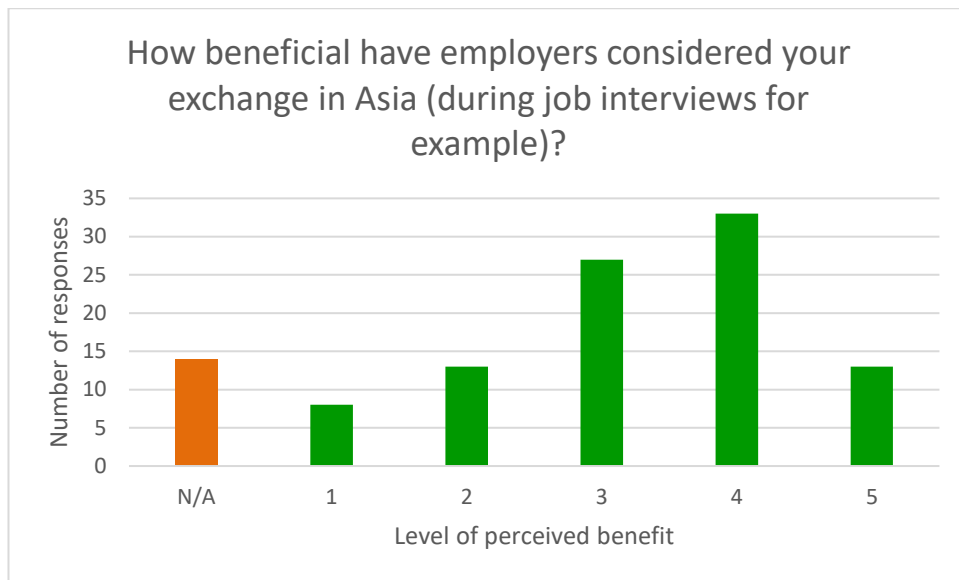


FIGURE 12. The perceived benefit in hiring or comparable situation with employers

The next question asked the respondents how beneficial their exchange had been for searching for a job abroad. At the same time the question also served as an indirect question of have the respondents searched for a job abroad at all, as this question gathered by far the highest number of N/A answers. Considering the fact that not every student who studies abroad also wants to work abroad, that is acceptable. In total 35 respondents answered the not applicable option, which is roughly 32% of all respondents. With 68% of the respondents at least searching for a job abroad at some point during their years after their exchange, the statistic seems like a great tool for AE in terms of promoting the internationalization of their students. However, the results in the graph are otherwise rather unexpected as seen in Figure 13 below. The respondents perceived the benefits of their exchange to their job search abroad to be much lower on average than the perceived benefit in any hiring or work-related situations above in Figure 12. Understanding this very noticeable difference would require further research on the topic.

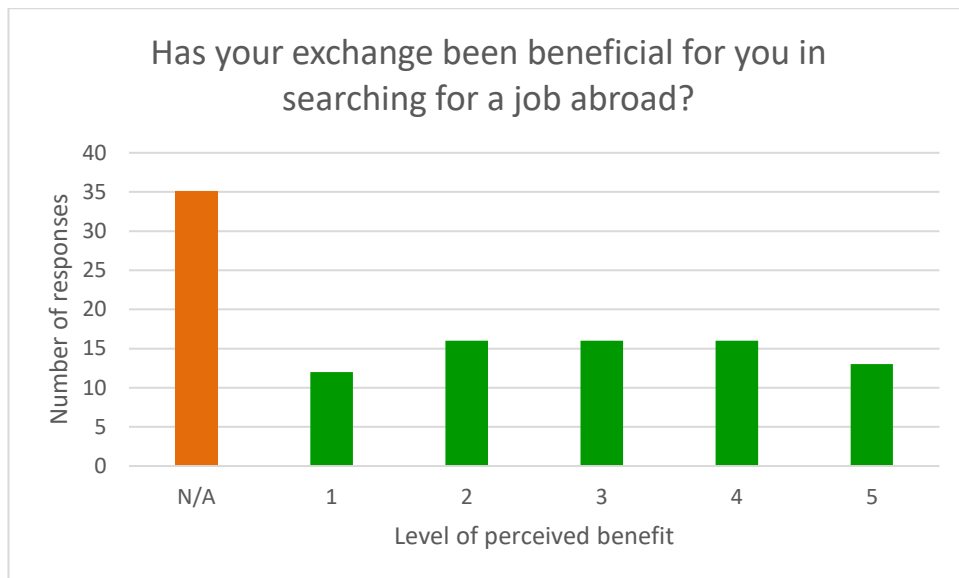


FIGURE 13. The perceived benefit of the exchange to the students' search for work abroad

The study and working life benefits in general gave results that were positive, with all results implying the semester abroad had been a positive benefit for their studies or working life. While this is a positive result for AE, there is still a remarkable number of the lower end evaluations as well, which do leave some questions for why the benefits have not been there for them when many have considered the exchange to be beneficial.

### 4.3 Personal growth and skills results

In addition to the academic and working life benefits of a semester abroad, this thesis also aims to research the personal growth and soft skills benefits a student may gain from a semester abroad. The previous feedback AE has received after each semester has implied of such benefits, and was therefore taken as one of the topics to be researched with his thesis.

The first question of this topic is straightforward, asking how did the students perceive their personal growth during and after their exchange semester in Asia. Remarkably, over 70 of the respondents perceived their semester as very beneficial for their personal growth, with the three lowest categories receiving less than five answers each, as showcased in Figure 14 below. While the results for working life and study benefits are slightly

positive in general, the benefits to the personal growth are considerably better perceived by the respondents.

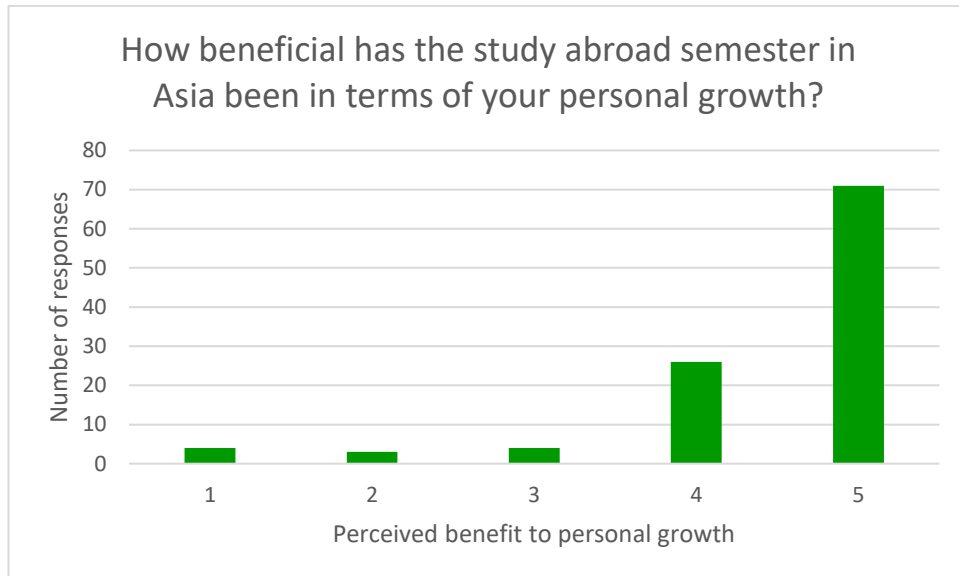


FIGURE 14. The perceived benefit of a semester abroad in Asia to personal growth

For creating an international mindset, Figure 15 below tells a somewhat similar story to the personal growth discussed with Figure 14. Naturally, a semester abroad should help creating a more international to the students, but to what extent was really the concern when the question was discussed with AE. With 65 respondents perceiving the highest possible benefit, a semester abroad definitely should function as a way of creating an even more international mindset for the students.

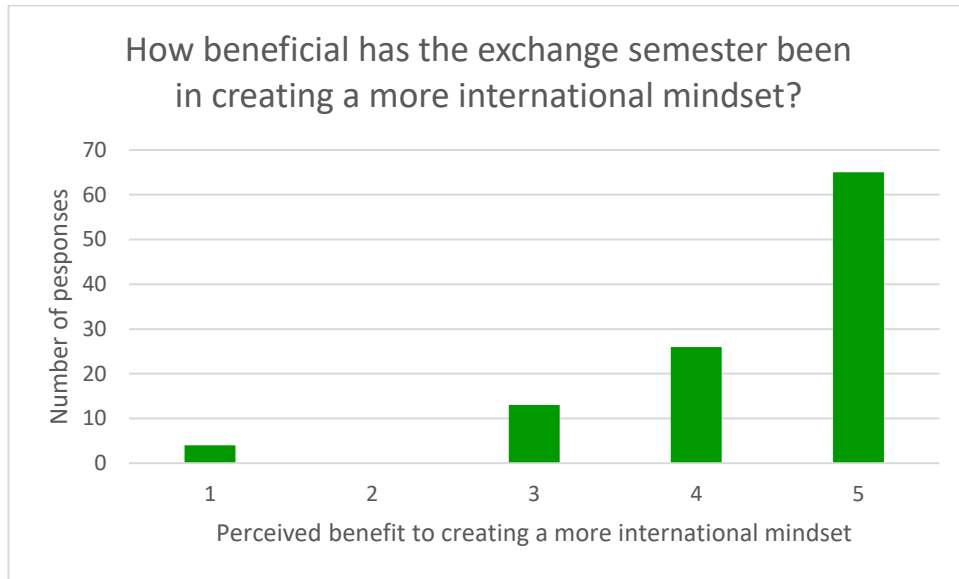


FIGURE 15. The perceived benefit of the exchange semester to creating a more international mindset

As a part of an exchange semester in Asia, students gain experiences and contacts that they would not have gained otherwise. The Figure 16 below illustrates how the respondents answered about their semester abroad as a way of opening new and unexpected opportunities in their life. The answers heavily lean towards high benefits to the students' life in this regard with over 50 answers in the two highest categories, but also 11 respondents considering the exchange not to be beneficial at all to their new opportunities. Researching these new and unexpected opportunities in more detail could be beneficial for AE, if some of the benefits the students have gained are easily repeatable or could be enhanced by AE operations.

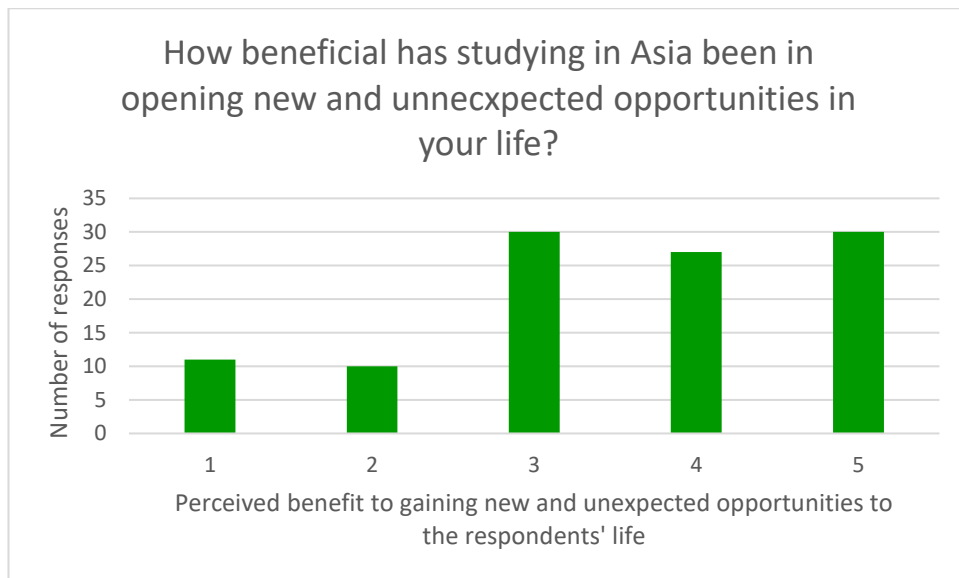


FIGURE 16. The perceived benefit to gaining new and unexpected opportunities to the respondents' life

One of the most essential aspects of a semester abroad is the adaptation to a new culture, which in the case of AE is an extremely important topic since very few AE customers come from Asia. Most AE students integrate into a culture they have never been a part of, and for that reason the question about the ability to adapt to foreign environments and unfamiliar situations is one of the core questions of this research. The results of the perceived improvement in the adaption are shown below in Figure 17. The respondents clearly ranked improvement in their adaption very high, as 91 of the answers were given in the two highest categories. The middle category mounted 12 answers, while only five respondents did not consider their exchange to improve their adaptation skills improved, or only slightly improved.

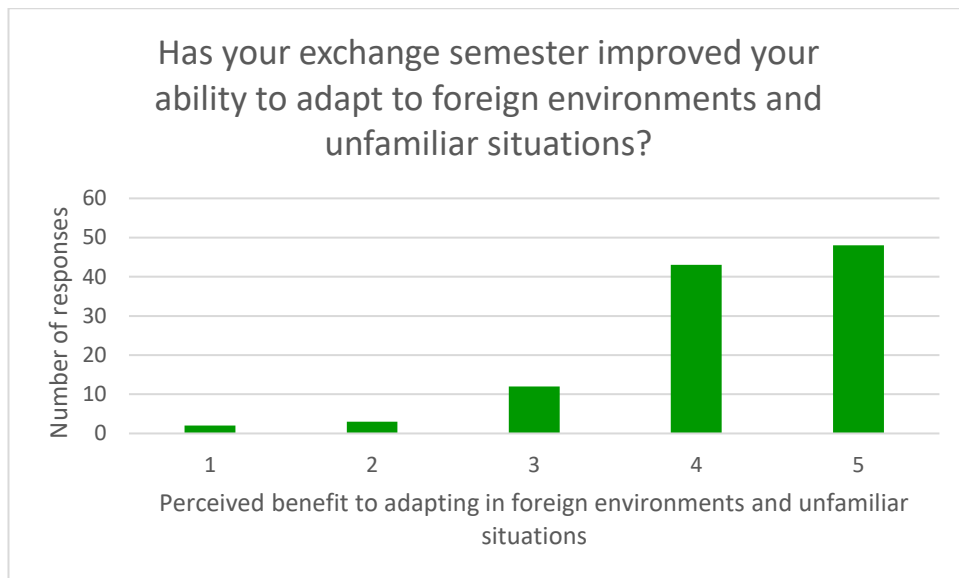


FIGURE 17. The perceived benefit to the ability to adapt to foreign environments and unfamiliar situations

As one of their day to day activities during an exchange the students get to enhance their communication skills while abroad, but surprisingly the benefits to communication skills, shown in Figure 18, were still ranked lower than the benefits to personal growth or soft skills listed above. While the communication skill improvements are still ranked high among the respondents, it is notable that the responses in the highest benefit rank have shifted to the two following ranks when comparing for example to the personal growth illustrated earlier in the chapter.

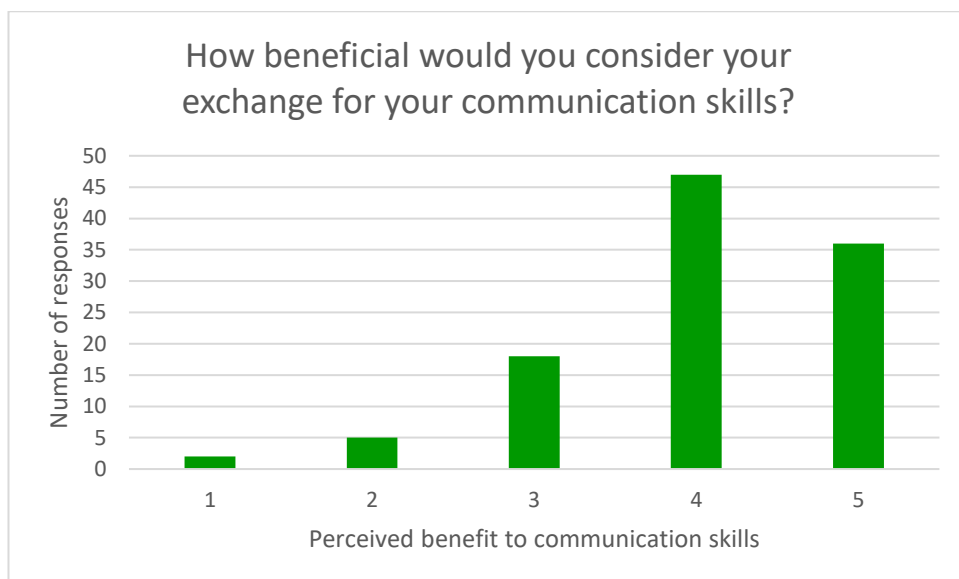


FIGURE 18. The perceived benefit to the communication skills of the respondents

The overall benefits to the personal growth and skills clearly rank higher in the eyes of the respondents than the benefits to the working life or studying. Considering how popular exchange semesters are in the world today, the results were to be expected, but the extent of the perceived benefit is very high compared to the working life or study benefits. As Asia continues to grow both as exporter and importer of exchange student services, it is likely that Asia will continue to attract more exchange students due to the personal growth benefits.

#### 4.4 The results for studying in Asia instead of another area

While this this topic is based on just one survey question, it is one of the core questions of the whole survey since AE operates only in Asian countries. The results show significant perceived benefit to the students for choosing to study in Asia instead of another area, as shown in Figure 19 below. The three highest categories all gathered over 25 answers each, while the option 1 had 9 responses and option 2 eleven responses. As the graph clearly indicates high perceived benefits to the students for studying in Asia, AE can use this information as they continue to develop their marketing and services in the future.

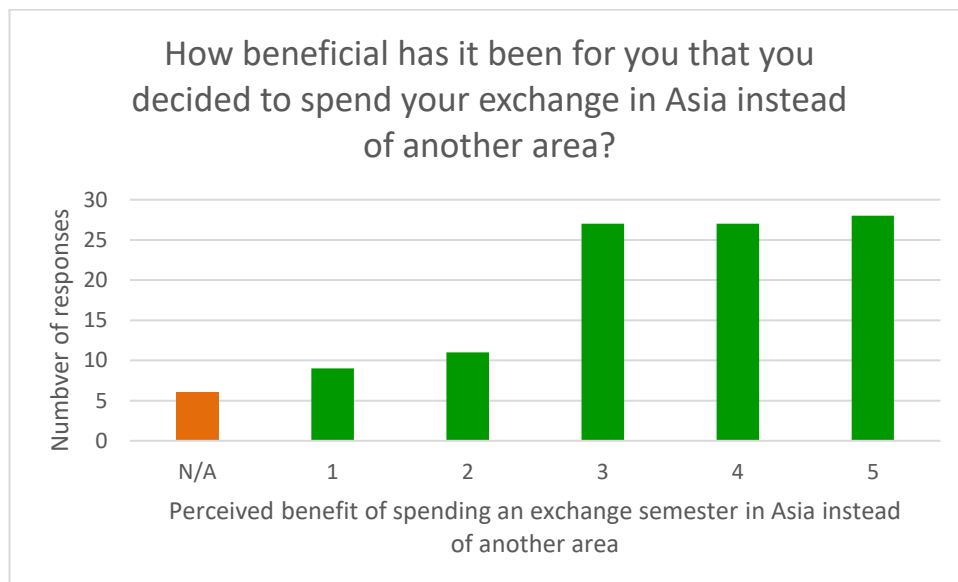


FIGURE 19. The perceived benefit to spending an exchange semester in Asia instead of another area

#### 4.5 The qualitative question results

After the quantitative questions, the respondents were given the opportunity to reflect on their experience regarding their exchange and give feedback with two qualitative questions. Answering both of these two questions was optional as seen in Appendix 1 and all the given answers can be found in Appendix 3. The first question asked if the respondents had experienced a situation where their exchange semester had been helpful to them, and if so, to share that experience. This question prompted 29 answers from the respondents, with two of those responses adding no value to this research with very short one- and two-word answers. Additionally, one of the remaining 27 answers was written in Finnish.

The 27 received answers split roughly into four categories: working life benefits, study benefits, personal growth benefits and traveling benefits, with some of the answers reaching multiple of these four categories. The working life benefits were mentioned by over ten respondents in total, and focused mainly on getting a job abroad, job interviews and requiring good English skills at their work. Multiple answers referred to their exchange semester as being one of the factors that got them to work abroad, further explaining the findings regarding finding a job abroad. Similarly, two respondents explained that for them the exchange semester has been a conversation point in their job interviews, increasing the chances of a successful interview.

The study life benefit answers were only given by a few respondents, and do not have a common theme other than all answers being positive in tone. The personal growth benefits on the other hand were listed by multiple respondents with many answers going through the same themes of friends, language skills and cultural understanding. Many of these responses regarding personal growth are very positive in tone, further explaining the findings of the quantitative questions related to personal growth. The last major point raised from these questions was the benefit to traveling, all the answers following the same outline of the exchange semester making their future travels much easier and making the respondents more enthusiastic to travel abroad.

The second qualitative question was a simple possibility for the respondents to give any feedback to AE or about the survey if they wished to do so. The respondents gave 26 answers in total, with most answers thanking AE about the time the respondents had had

during their exchange. With the exception of one response, the responses were very positive in tone and suggested AE to keep on working as they have so far. The one negative response received criticized the communication between the university and the exchange students, which is not directly feedback about AE operations, but something that AE can take into consideration anyway.

## 5 SURVEY SUMMARY FOR AE AND RESEARCH EVALUATION

### 5.1 Survey summary for AE

AE has the possibility to use the results of this survey for their future marketing and training needs as they continue to expand their operations. In general, the results imply that the exchange semesters have been a positive experience in the lives of the respondents. While AE continues receiving short-term feedback for their exchanges, the results of this research can be used to address the long-term benefits of studying abroad with AE.

The study and work-related benefits of the respondents were considered positive among the respondents, with clear emphasis on the working life benefits being greater than the study life benefits. This was also the trend in the qualitative questions, as many more working life related responses were given in these questions compared to study life related answers. Focusing more marketing efforts on emphasizing the working life benefits of an exchange semester in Asia seems advisable based on this survey.

Possibly the most puzzling find of this survey is also related to the working life benefits of the exchange. While the question considering employer interest in the respondents' exchange semesters received a high number of responses in the high end of the answer scale, the similar question regarding the benefit of the exchanges to searching for a job abroad received very moderate answers. Understanding why the exchange was not perceived very useful in searching for a job abroad cannot be done based on this research and requires further research in the future, unless the data was too inaccurate due to this question having the lowest response rate in the whole survey if the not applicable answers were to be removed when inspecting the data.

The benefits regarding personal growth and skills outmatched the benefits to study and working life quite considerably in this research. With very high response rates in the two highest options on the answer scale on every question of this category, it is clear that the former AE students highly appreciate the learning experience of a different culture and learning environment that AE offers. This is a point that can be further emphasized in AE strategy in the future, if considered necessary.

The data also clearly shows that the respondents did consider their choice of Asia as an exchange destination a significant factor. As AE is solely based on providing exchange student services in Asia, results showing that Asia is a desirable choice in the minds of the respondents justifies the whole business idea behind the company and enforces the idea that AE is providing a service that is desirable and useful for the future customers as well.

The responses to the qualitative questions further specify the types of benefits that the students have gained from their exchange semesters. The answers given can be used as tangible examples of how AE students have benefitted from their exchange semesters, possibly in AE marketing materials or website if deemed necessary. Since the long-term benefits of AE exchanges have not been studied in depth so far, the benefits the students have listed should be completely new material for AE.

## **5.2 Research evaluation and criticism**

The goal of this research was to gather information about how beneficial the exchange semester has been for AE students during their years after the exchange and how to use that information to improve AE operations in the future.

The research result answers the question of the exchange benefits well, but does not offer a simple answer on how to enhance AE operations based on the responses. The respondents are on average highly satisfied in AE services during the years after their exchange, making it difficult to pinpoint a specific segment in AE services to improve on.

Criticism should be used when evaluating the results of the survey, as while the sheer number of responses was not very low at 108 responses, the response percentage was only 5,63%. Researching a relatively low response percent can skew the data towards both ends of the spectrum, leaving less answers in the middle options of the answer scale. This is a possibility in this research, if we compare the theory by Rope & Pöllänen in Figure 2 to any of the survey question results.

The research focused solely on the perceived benefits that the students had from their exchange semester. While giving negative feedback was a possibility with the qualitative

questions, no respondent opted to do so, which either speaks for the fact that no student has had negative experiences due to their exchange semester, or giving negative or constructive feedback should have been made easier for the respondents. Changes that would have included the negative experiences as a possibility in the 1-5 scale would have made the data shift even more towards the higher end of the answer scale, which is not beneficial for the purpose of this research. Instead, a simple qualitative question could have been included in the survey to give the respondents a possibility to reflect on any negative impacts they had experienced due to their exchange.

While the structure of the webpage survey does not likely affect the results of the survey, some criticism should be given to how the survey was structured. First, the order of the questions was not optimal, as the questions regarding distinct aspects of the survey were somewhat in a confusing order. While this does not affect the results most likely, a better order of questions would give simplicity to the survey. As a second point, some of the questions did not require a not applicable option to be available. While the N/A option being available in all the multiple-choice questions does offer simplicity to the design of the survey, in some cases the N/A answers only make the interpretation of the results unnecessarily difficult.

## 6 SUMMARY

This thesis aimed at providing AE with academic research results on the benefits that former AE students have gained from their exchange during their years after the exchange. The topic of the survey was agreed on between AE and the researcher at the end of the researcher's internship at AE in December 2016, which started the whole thesis process. Three months later in March, the survey was sent to 1908 former AE students, sparking 108 responses in total, with the majority of the responses coming from Finnish and German students as expected.

The main objective of the research was to discover which benefits the former AE students considered to be the most beneficial to their lives during their years after their exchange, and to give suggestions to AE on how the results could be used in the future to enhance AE marketing and training operations. The research results implied significant benefits to both the students' working life and personal growth, with substantial focus on the personal growth of the former students. A question regarding the importance of choosing Asia as an exchange destination instead of another area also had most of the answers at the upper end of the answer scale, enforcing the idea that AE is providing a service that is desirable for the customers in the long-term as well.

These findings were further enforced by the answers given in qualitative questions at the end of the survey, as multiple respondents explained their perceived benefit in further detail. The qualitative responses offer an insight into the thinking and experiences of the respondents, serving as direct examples for AE for the possibilities their former students have experienced.

While the research does serve as an extensive look into the experiences of former students, the results are mainly descriptive, and do not point out any major flaws in AE operations. The focus for improvement can be found in two topics, the benefits of the exchange semesters to the students' study life and their job search abroad. On average, these two questions ranked considerably lower compared to other questions of the survey. Additional research into the responses of these two questions could be made in the future if AE wishes to do so.

The results of this survey serve as a stepping for future AE research. With this survey the base is now set for the long-term benefits of AE exchanges, meaning that continuous research on this subject in the future can help understanding the trends behind going for an exchange in Asia, and thus help AE to attract more customers or direct their operations to focus on different subjects, such as the importance of the exchanges in working life. Similarly, the findings of this survey can be compared with the short-term feedback that AE has gathered, finding trends on how the perception of the former students changes over time.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. The survey for the former AE students

1(2)

## Asia Exchange Former Student Survey

The results of this anonymous survey will be part of a Bachelor's thesis on the personal and professional benefits of studying abroad in Asia. It only takes around 2 minutes to complete the survey. Thank you for your time!

---

**Gender \***

- Male  
 Female  
 Other

**Age \***

e.g. 23

**Country of origin \***

**Approximate years since your exchange \***

e.g. 2

Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 = very beneficial / useful , 1 = not at all beneficial / useful) \*

	1	2	3	4	5	Not applicable
How useful would you consider your exchange in your studies after the exchange?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How useful would you consider your exchange in your working life after the exchange?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How beneficial has the study abroad semester in Asia been in terms of your personal growth?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How beneficial has studying in Asia been in deciding your future career path?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How beneficial has the exchange semester been in creating a more international mindset?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How beneficial has studying in Asia been in opening new and unexpected opportunities in your life?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has your exchange been beneficial for you in searching for a job abroad?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How beneficial has it been for you that you decided to spend your exchange in Asia instead of another area?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has your exchange semester improved your ability to adapt to foreign environments and unfamiliar situations?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How beneficial have employers considered your exchange in Asia (during job interviews for example)?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How beneficial would you consider your exchange for your communication skills?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you have any specific situation where your exchange semester has helped you? You can share it here

Any other comments or feedback for Asia Exchange:

Please enter the message as it's shown \*

fact

Submit

## Appendix 2. The accompanying email for the research survey.

Dear former Asia Exchange student,

Greetings from Finland! My name is Henri and I am a former Asia Exchange intern currently doing my Bachelor's thesis with Asia Exchange.

I am researching the benefits of spending an exchange semester in Asia, and this is where I need your help. [Please fill out a short survey here](#). Answering the survey will only take around 2 minutes. All answers are greatly appreciated. If you have any questions about the survey questions, you can contact me at [valtonen.henri@gmail.com](mailto:valtonen.henri@gmail.com) and I will answer to you shortly.

Thanks in advance for your time, and have a great week!

*Best regards,*

Henri Valtonen

### Appendix 3. The qualitative question responses

**Question:** Do you have any specific situation where your exchange semester has helped you? You can share it here

**Responses** (27 in total):

You always have a story to tell in job interviews. It is not the typical area for exchanges, so interviewers are often curious about your motives and your experiences.

I easily found a job and a internship place abroad.

The exchange mainly helped me out in terms of personal growth. I never experienced different cultures but my own one and i was never interested in it. The exchange showed me that it is worth it to leave your comfort zone! I always felt like the field of study i did was not the very right thing and the job i earned throu it is not what makes me really happy but atleast i know now what it is, working abroad in an international environment, preferring educational work or something in the field of international relations. I didn't find the right job for me yet, but atleast i know now where i want to end on my journey! You guys got any open positions? ;)

The second exchange semester, when I lived in UK. Job interviews, when I applied for a trainee position in Finnish embassies abroad.

After the exchange went to travel alone in Asia.

No hesitation to speak English. No hesitation to work or be abroad.

Landed a job in China 4 years after the exchange. Now working for VW in Beijing.

The best thing of semester abroad was making so many new friends. Few of my best friends are my family from exchange in Asia. It's easy to travel abroad when there's a friend as a guide. Also it isn't so scary anymore to travel alone.

## Getting job offers

i got a wife from exchange. i dont feel lonely anymore

## Be confronted with new cultures

## Future vacancies abroad

I worked at a e-commerce startup in BKK, which was a very valuable experience.

the most beneficial about the Semester abroad in Asia for me was that I grew so so much in my personality! I feel so much more responsible for my self now and more confident in my decisions. I am more open for new things in my life and I love to be outside my comfort zone. Since I went to Asia for 6 month I feel the need to travel the world more than ever and I want to see as much places in the worls as possible.

## My english language skills

In all places & situations it was great to undergo an exchange semester. In addition it did help me to write my bachelor thesis abroad also.

The exchange semester in Phuket, Thailand in spring 2013 was my first time in Asia and also, my first culture shock. I had been living abroad within Europe already for two years, however adapting to life in Thailand was an unexpected struggle for me. Yet I can only blame myself, as my preparation for the exchange was more or less nonexistent. My exchange helped me to broaden my thinking and to understand a whole spectrum of different ways to live and see the world. Despite the hardships I experienced mostly with understanding the cultural differences, my exchange period was overall a positive experience and taught me more about myself than anything else. As a result, with the confidence gained from the exchange period, I ended up living and working in the Philippines for a while. Had I never had my exchange semester, I don't think I would've been bold enough to take on to that opportunity. Moreover, I enjoyed the Philippines a lot more when focusing on learning more about Asia and accepting it with eagerness and adapting myself to it, rather than trying to make Asia suitable for my existing worldviews.

In my current Job, they appreciated studying and living abroad very highly!

Still studying

Oh there are so many. Tomorrow I'm going to a job interview where I will need my language skills. My master's thesis was inspired by the culture in my exchange country.

Being more considerate of other opinions or worldview. Becoming more open-minded myself. The semester abroad expanded my great interest in other cultures and led to the path I am taking now according to my career.

I have more courage to speak english.

It's beneficial when applying for international student conferences. I participated in ones organized by Harvard university, Queensland Business School, Tokyo University, etc.

The best thing what came with the exchange was confidence to speak in English. In my work I need time to time speak with people with different backgrounds and experience of understanding different accents is really helpful.

Kovaa valuuttaa työhaastatteluissa. Aiheuttaa paljon keskustelua ja aina voi kääntää omaksi edukseen.

Went to exchange for 3 months, but didn't come back and still live in asia. Best decision ever! :)

Yes

**Question:** Any other comments or feedback for Asia Exchange:

**Responses** (26 in total):

Great Company, finding a way to get to asia for an exchange was very difficult for me and a friend since we are kinda stuck in a study field where something like an exchange is not common (Public Relations), we both had trouble finding a way doing an exchange

outside of Europe (the furthest our University wanted us to go was Belgium) but Asia Exchange made it happen ;) Thanks for that!

Coordinator Colin is doing a great Job at PSU Phuket, greetings Christopher Stubenrauch

Thank you again for an unforgettable time!

Thanks

Even though my exchange semester had nothing to do with my studies, I'm happy i did it. I had a good break from my actual studies and learned lot of myself and intercultural things. Best decision I made with my studies then, haven't regret that even once.

Lifechanging experience!

Thank you it was the best thing that I have ever done in my life

going back to Asia, maybe not yet, but i will go someday to live in Asia.

I have studied in 4 different countries through various programs. Asia Exchange has been particularly helpful and willing to help with anything I needed. This took away a lot of concerns and had me worry less about organisational stuff and enjoy my exchange a lot more.

no

Loved my exchange semester in Bali! Studies weren't that beneficial, but wouldn't change the experience for anything.

Communication with university authorities was not always satisfying. One Professor refused to submit our exam scores, as there were issues with the university (Siam) paying his wage.

Thank you so much for the opportunity Asia Exchange gives students to experience an unforgettable adventure ! And btw, thanks to my stay I met the love of my life ;-)

Don't hesitate to go exchange! It was the best decision in my life and I would leave to Bali again, but it's time to graduated this spring.

The support & ppl I have met at PSU was extraordinary outstanding. I highly recommend you to other open minded students whenever the situation is given.

Time has made my memories golden so any criticism I had back then, I cannot remember anymore. Overall experience, however, was without a doubt a positive one.

Keep up the good work! You guys rock!!

Really good opportunity for students to have a once-in-a-lifetime experience abroad. Everything was really good organised. Asia Exchange does a great job! Keep it up! :)

I had good time abroad! AE did a great job, thanks a lot!

One of the most inspiring, helpful and joyfull experiences I was fortunate to experience so far. Keep your work up!

Keep going on!

In my opinion, AsiaExchange is much more useful in personal growth than in gaining academic or working skills. It can help open your eyes, which of course can have an impact on your future life, but it is very individual and you can hardly make a general conclusion based on individual experiences.

I am very grateful for my exchange semester in Bali! I had the time of my life and I feel like the experience grew me as a person. Everything went well for me with the organization and I enjoyed the exchange semester very much.

Asia exchange should limit the amount of incoming exchange students from specific countries somehow. (we had approx. 84 international students and around 60 of them from Germany) so that was a shame!

Mahtava vaihto-ohjelma Balilla. Great job!

Rock rock