

International mobility programs to improve soft skills of Vocational College students and alumni

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ABSTRACT

In the workplace, hard skills and soft skills are equally taken into account, especially in this 21st century, where people are required to have ‘global employability skills’ to secure a good job. This study aims to determine the benefits of international mobility programs have on the ability of soft skills, especially in the aspects of communication, social skills and flexibility—as parts of ‘global employability skills’—of students and alumni of a Vocational College within three years from 2017 to 2019. The research method used is by distributing questionnaires Google Form with Likert Scale format from strongly disagree to strongly agree scale 1-5. Research subjects were active students and graduates of Vocational College (*Sekolah Vokasi*) UGM who had participated in international mobility programs, both incoming and outgoing programs, organized by the OIA SV-UGM, in 2017-2019. The respondents were 60 people. The results showed that the developed soft skills were language and communication skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork, cultural understanding and adaptability and openness. Specifically for alumni, soft skills that are highly developed and helpful in the working world are adaptability and openness (82.9%), cultural understanding (74.3%), language and communication skills (71.4%), ability to work together (65.7%), and interpersonal skills (54.3%).

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century skills are necessary skills to be possessed by everyone in the work field. The research on this topic has been conducted for years, and the large-scale research currently underway is *Assessment and Teaching 21st Century Skills (ATC21S)* which is conducted by various academics, governments, and three major technology companies [1]. The 21st century skills are relevant with the four pillars of life that include learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together [2]. It was reported that these 21st century skills fall into four domains, namely the traditional core subject and skills domain, the learning and innovation skills domain, the career and life skills domain, and the digital literacies skills domain [3]. This indicates that people nowadays should have skills that go beyond the mastery of the subjects and technical knowledge learnt at education institutions—or commonly called as *hard skills*—to be able to compete in the workplace.

Many 21st century skills are linked to personality characteristics, or what so-called *soft skills* [1]. Soft skills are interpersonal qualities that are also known as ‘people skill’ or personal attributes of a person as

well as his/her ability to communicate with others [4]. In his research, Robles found ten soft skills that are considered relevant by corporate leaders. The skills include integrity, communication, politeness, responsibility, social ability, positive attitude, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethics [4].

Indeed, developing one's soft skills cannot be done in an instant. People need to experience a certain situation that can hone their soft skills. Soft skills especially 21st century skills frame a person's ability to assess and respond to a situation effectively [5]. This indicates that soft skill development should be done far before a person enters a workforce. Colleges and universities as education institutions are responsible for facilitating their students to develop their soft skills along with the development of their hard skills. Unfortunately, there is a gap between what students learn in their respective field of study and the skills needed by the employers [6]. Therefore, it is important that in the 21st century, education institutions prepare their graduates to become productive workers and citizens who possess both, hard skills and soft skills. It is supported by many studies and surveys which found that employers consistently view that skills beyond disciplinary knowledge are needed, and soft skills are, in fact, the essential employability qualities [7]. In addition, most occupations in the 21st century require someone to have international and multicultural knowledge and understanding [2]; therefore, education in the 21st century needs to highlight globalization and internationalization [8].

In order to facilitate the students in honing their soft skills as global citizens, colleges and universities might consider it important to give opportunities for the students to join international mobility programs such as short courses, student exchange, international competition, or international conferences. In the last two decades, short-term student international mobility has been promoted by national government and higher education institutions as a media to increase students' cultural awareness and cultural competence [9-12]. Researchers have also identified various results from participating in the international mobility program [12-16]. These results include cultural awareness, cultural intelligence, global-mindedness, cultural sensitiveness and empathy, cultural adaptation ability, language ability, inter-cultural communication skill, and intercultural competence [17].

Vocational School/Sekolah Vokasi Universitas Gadjah Mada (SV-UGM), as one of the educational institutions in Indonesia, has a vision 'to be a world-class institution of applied higher education that is superior, dignified, and able to produce a professional workforce with a Pancasila spirit, for a better Indonesia' (sv.ugm.ac.id). This vision is then elaborated to some missions, one of which is 'to organize education and applied research to produce graduates who are professional according to the demands of the global workforce' (sv.ugm.ac.id). This becomes the underlying reason to hold international mobility programs, either incoming mobility or outgoing mobility, for students, staff, and lecturers to improve their global competence.

The programs have been held since 2014, and have been in various forms such as international competition, international conference, student exchange, lecturer exchange, summer course, art festival, and initiation of international partnerships. In order to be successful in joining the program, the participants are required to increase their cultural awareness and cultural understanding, improve their language ability, and hone their soft skills. However, due to the differences in cultural background, geographical condition, and social situation, the participants of international mobility programs might encounter some problems such as culture shock, miscommunication, and difficulty in adapting to a new environment within a short period of time. In order to minimize these problems, there should be an understanding of the potential benefits that the programs offered for the academic community, primarily to provide the real-world experience to them, and an effort should be taken to further optimize the benefits that the participants might get from joining the program.

Taking a slightly different focus from the previous studies—which mostly discussed intercultural awareness or communication and language skills only—this study discusses the benefits obtained by students and alumni through participating in international mobility programs in relation to the development of their cultural knowledge/awareness, language skills, teamwork, adaptability, and openness to fulfil the global requirement and the workplace needs. By understanding the benefits for the students and the alumni, and getting the feedbacks from previous participants, SV-UGM is expected to be able to improve the program to optimize the benefits especially in developing students' soft skills and at the same time preparing the prospective participants for preventing the potential problems to arise.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method carried out is a descriptive quantitative method using a questionnaire to obtain the students' and alumni's perceptions on the benefits they get by participating in international mobility programs. Quantitative research method is a research method based on the philosophy of indicators, to examine a particular population or sample, data collection using research instruments, quantitative data

analysis or indicators, with the aim to test a predetermined hypothesis [18]. The target population is defined using selection criteria to select individuals of general population who can share experiences and thoughts under the most convenient conditions [19]. The population of this study are all students and alumni of SV-UGM who participated in international mobility programs both incoming and outgoing in 2017-2019.

The questionnaire consists of some questions about soft skills, including language ability, communication skill, interpersonal skill, teamwork, cultural understanding, adaptability and openness. The measurement scale is important to be set so that the instrument is valid and reliable to answer the research questions [20]. This questionnaire was in the form of Likert scale with a range of 1-5. Likert scale is used to measure the attitudes, opinions and perceptions of a person or group of people about social events or symptoms [21]. The Likert scale asks respondents to answer questions with answers strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (DA) and strongly disagree (SDA). Each answer is associated with the following numbers 1 = STS, 2 = TS, 3 = N, 4 = S, and 5 = SS. The questionnaire reliability index is $\alpha = .941$, which means that the questionnaire is reliable. The questionnaire was administered online through Google Form to 427 students and alumni, but the returned questionnaire was only 60 in total, due to the short administering time.

The questions written on Google Form are divided into six sections. The first part is about the demographic information of the respondents. This section contains the full name, identity (student or alumni), contact (mobile number/Instagram account/Line), the type of mobility program followed, and one question specifically asked to the alumni was the developed ability that helps in the world of work. The second to fifth sections contain questions that measure five elements, namely language and communication skills, interpersonal skills, ability to work together (team work), cultural understanding, adaptability and openness of respondents while participating in an international mobility program. Meanwhile, the sixth part contains input and suggestions from the respondents for the organization of an international mobility program at the SV-UGM.

These five sub-categories and some of the questions in the questionnaire are based on similar studies which also examine the effect of international mobility on the respondents' soft skills. These studies include those conducted by Musa, Mufti, Latiff & Amin entitled 'Project-based learning (PjBL): inculcating soft skills in 21st century workplace'. The study revealed that necessary soft skills for the workplace are the ability to work well with others, handle interpersonal conflicts, make decisions, and practice and solve complex problems [22].

The language and communication skills sub-category includes the use of spoken English, use of written English, oral communication, written communication, formal communication and informal communication. Indicators to measure interpersonal skills are non-verbal communication, responding to questions, the ability to absorb lecturer material, expressing opinions, empathy and cooperation with people with various backgrounds. Meanwhile, indicators for teamwork include the ability to interact, the ability to establish good relationships, accept differences, cooperation, coordination and responsibility. Cultural understanding has indicators such as building trust, cross-cultural understanding, respecting other cultures, self-positioning, and adjusting. For sub-categories the ability to adapt and openness is expressed with indicators such as the ability to avoid conflict, adaptability, open-mindedness, acceptance to change and flexibility.

The analysis of the results was based on the descriptive statistics calculation including mean and standard deviation to describe the attitude. The data were interpreted using the description in Table 1, based on Sudijono [23].

Table 1. Description of attitude level

Attitude level	Calculation formula	Mean range
Strongly agree	$M_i + (1.5 * SD_i)$	4.2 - 5.0
Agree	$M_i + (0.5 * SD_i)$	3.4 - 4.1
Neutral		2.7 - 3.3
Disagree	$M_i - (0.5 * SD_i)$	1.8 - 2.6
Strongly disagree	$M_i - (1.5 * SD_i)$	1.0 - 1.7

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Hypothesis testing

To test the hypothesis of the research about whether international mobility program gives benefits to the students' soft skill development is done by using the categorization proposed by Arikunto [24], where the obtained score was compared to the ideal score by using the formula:

$$\text{Ideal score} = \text{Highest score in Likert Scale} \times \text{Number of questions} \times \text{Number of respondents}$$

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{obtained score}}{\text{ideal score}} \times 100\%$$

The categories were then divided into four, namely highly improved (76% - 100%), improved (56% - 75%), less improved (40% - 55%), and the least improved (<40%). The categorization was done for each aspect of the soft skills being researched. The result for language and communication is 2,466, compared to the ideal score of $5 \times 10 \times 60 = 3,000$. This result in 82.2% in the criterion scale, and is considered highly improved. As for the aspect of interpersonal skills, the score reached 1,303. When it is compared to the ideal score of $5 \times 5 \times 60 = 1,500$, it results in 86.9%, which is included as highly improved. Similarly, responses to teamwork aspect reach the score of 1,022, while its ideal score was $5 \times 4 \times 60 = 1,200$. This shows that the teamwork skill is considered 85.2% improved and is in highly improved criterion. In cultural understanding aspect, the responses reach 1,356 from 1,500 ideal score. When it is calculated in percentage, it reaches 90.4% which is considered highly improved. The last aspect was adaptability and openness, where the responses reached 1,586 from the ideal score of 1,800. This means that this aspect is 88.1% improved and is in highly improved criterion. Thus, it can be said that in general the students' soft skills have been improved after participating in international mobility program, since all the aspects are in highly improved criterion.

3.2. Language and communication skills

The questionnaire section exploring the benefits of joining international mobility program in improving language and communication skills contains ten questions in total, which include the ability to use English in oral communication, using English in written communication, communicating orally with others, communicating in written form, using formal language, using informal language, using non-verbal communication, responding to questions, understanding presentation, and giving opinions. The means on each component is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean score for language and communication skill aspects

No.	Aspect	Mean	Attitude level
1	using English in oral communication	4.50	Strongly Agree
2	using English in written communication	3.92	Agree
3	communicating orally with others	4.53	Strongly Agree
4	communicating in written form	4.05	Agree
5	using formal language when interacting with others	4.03	Agree
6	using informal language when interacting with others	4.17	Agree
7	using non-verbal communication	3.97	Agree
8	responding to questions	4.12	Agree
9	understanding presented materials	4.05	Agree
10	giving opinion	3.93	Agree

Table 2 shows all the respondents feel that their language and communication ability improved after they participated in the international mobility programs, either incoming or outgoing programs. The most prominent result was found in oral communication, whether it is to communicate orally using English or other languages, with the mean score 4.50 and 4.53 respectively. Joining international mobility program such as studying at foreign campus and using another language can enhance FL speaking and comprehension skills [13]. This is most likely due to high oral interaction during the program. The participants were required to interact orally or speak to other people, such as the native speakers of English or other languages during the program. For example, when there are international students joining incoming mobility program, they are escorted by the local students during their daily activities. The escorts are to give assistance to the international students when they need to do something or go somewhere during their stay in Yogyakarta. This is because the international students have not been able to speak Indonesian, so the local students who escort them become the mediator in the communication process. This causes the interaction between the international students and the escorts to be high, especially in oral communication, especially in English, and/or other languages. Not to mention, by the existence of escorts for the international students, they can learn some transactional expressions in local languages. This way, they also improve their language ability. As found in the previous study, the students who joined international mobility program adjusted more on using foreign language, and became more patient with people who do not speak English well. The 'foreign' situation creates more real and immediate second-language acquisition [9].

More interestingly, the respondents feel that their ability to use informal language improved more than the ability to use formal language during the interaction. This is may be due to two factors: the types of interaction and the proportion of interaction. For the types of interactions, the participants are mostly engaged in informal interaction between them and the available escorts, or with the local residents. This is in line with the principle of language acquisition that includes "implicit learning, informal learning, and natural learning" [25]. As for the proportion, it seems that informal interaction has a bigger proportion compared to formal

interaction during the program. Take an example a student exchange. Indeed, the participants attend a lecture on some subject courses in the classroom, but it may only take around 3 to 5 hours a day. In contrast, their informal interaction with the escorts and/or local residents may take more than 5 hours a day, including their interaction using messaging applications or telephone calls. The findings on the improved language and communication skills felt by the participants are showing the significant impact of the ‘continued use of a foreign language’ [12].

On the other hand, the least prominent language and communication skill was written communication in English, with mean score of 3.92. This indicates that written communication might not have been used that often during international mobility program. Therefore, the participants feel that their written communication might not be improved significantly.

3.3. Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills aspect was divided into five questions that cover feel empathy to others’ needs, can work with people from various backgrounds, interact with other people, build a good relationship with strangers, and accept differences. The details for each aspect are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean score for interpersonal skill aspects

No.	Aspect	Mean	Attitude level
1	Feeling empathy to others’ needs	4.15	Agree
2	Working with people from various background	4.38	Strongly Agree
3	Interacting with new people	4.38	Strongly Agree
4	Building good relationship with new people	4.27	Strongly Agree
5	Accepting differences	4.53	Strongly Agree

From Table 3, it is seen that four out of five aspects in interpersonal skills were highly improved aspects. This indicates that interpersonal skills, as one of the employability skills, of the students are considered improved after they participated in an international mobility program. This result is in line with the finding of a previous research showing that interpersonal and communication skills are seen as the most beneficial aspects of learning abroad [26].

The highest aspect is about accepting differences where its mean score reaches 4.53. This result shows that after participating in international mobility, the participants feel that it is easier for them to accept differences, be it in the cultural backgrounds, or in the way of thinking. They also consider that interacting with new people and working with them regardless of their cultural background or education background as essential aspects that are developed through joining the program. This is because they are ‘forced’ to make interaction with people they meet during the program since they are staying in a new place. Improved interpersonal skills are seen important to build an understanding and anticipation of different behaviors of others in order to create a good relationship [27]. Good relationship means good networking that might help the students to get a job in their future career. Not to mention, when the students’ consciousness has been developed, they might engage one another differently [28], and become more understanding of others. However, the least improved aspect in this category is about feeling the empathy to other people’s needs.

3.4. Teamwork

Teamwork category was divided into four questions including the ability to work in a group to finish a project, the ability to coordinate with all group members, the responsibility of doing the task given to them, and the ability to build trust with other group members. Teamwork is about how to work together with other people and to achieve the shared goal through sharing knowledge and skills [29]. Teamwork is seen to be effective when each group member is willing to contribute and is responsible to his/her own task and to create a positive and effective team environment. This means that the main factor for a good teamwork relies on collaboration. The result of this study regarding this category is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Mean score for teamwork aspects

No.	Aspect	Mean	Attitude level
1	Work in a team to achieve shared goal	4.37	Strongly Agree
2	Coordinate with all group members	4.25	Strongly Agree
3	Be responsible to finish one’s task to contribute to group’s task	4.27	Strongly Agree
4	Build trust with all group members	4.15	Agree

The result shows that when joining international mobility program, the participants felt that they developed a higher ability to work in a team to achieve shared goal. It is shown from the questionnaire where the mean score for this aspect reaches 4.37 or in strongly agree level. This result corresponds to the previous research mentioning that teamwork is one of the benefits of studying abroad or joining an international mobility program, as well as one of the important employability skills needed by the students [26].

They also thought that the international mobility program had enabled them to coordinate better with all group members and collaborate well. Not to mention, they also feel a high sense of responsibility to contribute to the group's task. These results are in line with the findings from a case study conducted by Tarricone and Luca where successful teamwork can be achieved through a high commitment to team success and shared goals, responsibility to contribute to team's success, and to be able to communicate well during the process of accomplishing the task [29]. Meanwhile, feeling of trust can be built later after the commitment, responsibility, and communication have been established. Besides, a sense of trust might not be built in an instant during a limited time of interaction.

3.5. Cultural understanding

The findings on the cultural understanding aspect in this present study are shown in Table 5. Out of the five soft skills discussed in this study, cultural understanding is the mostly discussed aspect in the previous studies [10-12, 14, 16]. The previous studies show that the most prominent benefit gained by the students from participating in an international mobility program is the improved cultural awareness and intelligence, rather than general social or personal competence [11]. It is also true with the findings of the present study where the result shows that all aspects in cultural understanding were considered improved during and after joining international mobility program. Through joining the program, students had immediate experience of cultural difference in real life, which increases their cultural understanding and their attitude towards people from different cultural background [30].

Table 5. Mean score for cultural understanding aspects

No.	Aspect	Mean	Attitude level
1	Understand or have the knowledge about the host or other culture(s)	4.53	Strongly Agree
2	Value and respect other cultures	4.65	Strongly Agree
3	Easy to accept the cultural difference	4.57	Strongly Agree
4	Adapt to the cultural difference	4.47	Strongly Agree
5	Can avoid cultural conflicts	4.38	Strongly Agree

The most prominent result was shown in the second aspect, which is to value and respect other cultures. This is in line with the finding from previous study where international mobility program enables the students to become global citizens [31]. This means that the participants can accept differences, one of which is differences in cultures. Another finding of a previous study about cultural understanding also shows similar thing, in which the respondents chose "knowledge/appreciation of another country or culture" as one of the top categories in things they learnt from international mobility program [9]. Different from the appreciation towards other cultures, the ability to avoid cultural conflict has the lowest mean in this category, which is only 4.38, but is still included as highly improved based on the respondents' feedback.

3.6. Adaptability and openness

The last category in the questionnaire is adaptability and openness, which was elaborated into six aspects. The aspects include the ability to quickly adapt when facing a problem, be more open-minded to new ideas or things, can easily accept sudden changes, can easily adapt to changes, can accept different opinions and views, and be more open to critics. The mean score for each aspect is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Mean score of adaptability and openness aspects

No.	Aspect	Mean	Attitude level
1	can quickly adapt when facing a problem	4.35	Strongly Agree
2	be more open-minded to new ideas or things	4.53	Strongly Agree
3	can easily accept sudden changes	4.47	Strongly Agree
4	can easily adapt to changes	4.23	Strongly Agree
5	can accept different opinions and views	4.42	Strongly Agree
6	be more open to critics	4.43	Strongly Agree

It is clearly seen from Table 6 that all aspects in this category are considered improved after joining international mobility program. The highest mean was 4.53, which is to be more open-minded to new things. This indicates that during and after participating in international mobility program, participants learnt to accept many differences in any kinds of aspects, such as differences in public facilities, different rules in public areas, and some other things. Take an example when students are having a field trip to Singapore, they might find some rules that is not implemented in Indonesia, such as no drinking in public transport. Adaptability—along with flexibility, patience, responsibility, respect, and art appreciation—as the aspects of personal growth and development are seen as the prominent benefit of participating in an international mobility program [9]. Not to mention, students who studied abroad are more adaptable and show more cultural sensitivity than students who stayed at home country [32].

Furthermore, in Singapore, many of the citizens are Chinese, which means that they can easily sell pork in many places. This might be a bit different from Indonesia where the majority of people are Moslems. The following aspects, accept changes without getting panic or angry, accept different opinions and views, and be more open to critics, are also considered improved by the participants of international mobility. This indicates that by joining international mobility, they start to value ideas that are different from their own. This may be related to the aspect of valuing and respecting other cultures, in which the participants might have developed their understanding that people from different cultural backgrounds may have different ways of thinking and viewing things. Therefore, someone cannot impose his or her opinion or view on others. Besides, they can also accept critics that could improve their self-quality. Communicating with others in an adaptable and sensitive manner is vital in the global society like nowadays, and people can develop this particular skill by studying or merely staying abroad for a period of time [33].

3.7. Soft skills needed in the workplace

The last aspect is the specific question given for the alumni. It is about the skills that are essential and helpful in the workplace. The alumni are free to choose more than one skill. Those skills are flexibility and adaptability (76.3%), communication skills (73.7%), cultural skills (68.4%), social skills (60.5%), and interpersonal skills (50%).

From the data, it is seen that the most important soft skill for surviving in the workplace is flexibility and adaptability. This is because workplace is a very dynamic place where sudden changes commonly happen. Not to mention, it is a common occurrence that a person should be able to do various tasks within an organization, so that they can easily fill for other's positions or do other people's tasks when needed. Therefore, most employers require the employees to be highly adaptable and flexible. Then, it is followed by communication skills, be it is written or oral. This is in line with the study conducted by Andrews and Higson that revealed communication skills, both oral and written, are important factors in the employability of the college or university graduates [34]. The least needed is interpersonal skills which only reached 50%. This is a bit different from that of Andrews and Higson [34] study where teamwork, which is closely related to interpersonal skills, is considered essential by employers in selecting the potential employees for their companies.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, four main points can be drawn. First, international mobility programs, either incoming or outgoing programs, in general, allow the participants—students and alumni—to develop their soft skills. Second, the soft skills that can be developed include language and communication skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork, cultural understanding, and adaptability, and openness, with the most prominent ones are cultural understanding and adaptability and openness. Third, the essential soft skills needed for the workplace based on the alumni are flexibility and adaptability skills and communication skills. Four, some factors such as written communication and non-verbal communication were the least improved soft skills based on the perceptions of the previous participants in international mobility programs. These points can be used as the basis to improve the implementation of international mobility in order to optimize the benefits and the opportunity for the academic community to develop their soft skills that are highly required by the employers. This way, SV-UGM is expected to create graduates that have high employability to enter the world of work.

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