

## Coping Strategies of Student Exchange Participants Based on Academic Adjustment Ability

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**Abstract: Coping Strategies of Student Exchange Participants Based on Academic Adjustment Ability. Objective:** This study examines student exchange participants' coping strategies by analysing their academic adjustment ability level. Differences in the level of academic adjustment ability impact the coping strategies they will use. **Methods:** This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type. Participants in this study were student exchange participants with low, medium, and high levels of academic adjustment. This criterion was chosen to see the dynamics of coping strategies carried out by student exchange participants. Data collection used interviews using data triangulation as a data credibility test technique. **Findings:** The results of this study indicate that participants placed more emphasis on problem-focused coping as the focus of the problem to be solved, and all participants managed their emotions to help the coping process. **Conclusion:** This study shows the importance of psychological assistance for participants to prepare them mentally during the student exchange activity process.

**Keywords:** academic adjustment, coping strategy, student exchange.

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in Indonesia are currently competing to achieve world class university status (Rachman et.al, 2024; Mudzakir et.al, 2022; Gardiana et.al, 2023 ; Izzi et al., 2022). This makes international experience increasingly crucial for students in broadening their horizons and developing their skills. As the younger generation, students now act as agents of change and innovation in a world facing economic, political, and health challenges (Malini et al., 2023; Jaradat et.al, 2024; Andolina, 2024; Hamadeh, 2022). Various activities that support this are also increasingly numerous and diverse, such as international volunteering or internships, international conferences, global academic

competitions, student delegations in international organizations, short courses, and international student exchanges.

Of the various opportunities, student exchange is one of the international programs that is in great demand by students. The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Religious Affairs also initiated this program through the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) and the MORA Overseas Student Mobility Awards (MOSMA). This program allows students to broaden their cultural, linguistic, and life insights into other countries while preparing them to face complex global challenges in the future (Muthi, 2024). However, despite providing many benefits,

participating in a student exchange program can certainly be challenging. Students may face various challenges that affect their learning and adaptation process.

International students studying in a foreign country often face various obstacles or constraints that affect their adaptation process. Some potential barriers include differences in air temperature and food preferences, language communication, cultural value gaps, cultural adaptation competencies, and differences in learning and institutional models (Bisri et al., 2022; Wilczewski and Alon, 2022; Vakkai et al., 2020). These various obstacles can undoubtedly affect their adjustment to the educational environment.

Baker and Siryk stated that adjustment in the campus environment or college adjustment is an individual's response to academic, social, personal, and emotional demands in the college environment (Rahmadani & Mukti, 2020; Can, 2021). College adjustment consists of four dimensions: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and institutional adjustment. In addition, according to several literatures, many factors influence it. Some of the most frequently studied factors are coping, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personality traits (Valenti & Faraci, 2021). Effective coping can help individuals adapt to new environments when facing challenges on campus.

Coping strategies play an essential role in facilitating students' adjustment in college. Aini and Widyasari (2021) stated that using effective coping strategies is very important for students to face the challenges of higher education successfully. This is certainly relevant for students who participate in student exchange programs and must adjust to a new college environment. They need flexibility in coping strategies to deal with the challenges faced during their academic journey in a new place (Cao & Meng, 2022; Pang & Wang, 2020).

UIN Malang has its student exchange program, which was first run last year, with 20 students who passed the selection and were fully funded to study at Ondokuz Mayıs University (OMU) in Turkey (Project Management Unit UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, 2023). This year, 30 participants passed with different funding schemes, namely fully, partially, and self-funded, and will be sent to Science Po, France (Project Management Unit UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, 2024).

From the initial research on college adjustment, conducted through a questionnaire distributed to participants of the UIN Malang 2023 student exchange program, 13 people were willing to fill it out. The results showed variations in the level of adjustment possessed by the participants. One participant was in the low category, ten were in the medium category, and two were in the high category. Most participants were at a medium level of adjustment, and some were even participants in the low category. This finding raises important questions about the factors that cause some student exchange program participants not to achieve a high level of adjustment.

Students who participate in the student exchange program are expected to be adaptable and ready to face various challenges in the academic environment. Heiman and Kariv explain in the world of education, and students are generally required to be able to adapt to various pressures that must be faced, such as demands to move up a class, anxiety about exams, lots of assignments, and important decisions related to majors and careers (Musdalipa, 2020). Therefore, thorough preparation, especially for foreign students, is vital to adapting well to the destination country's differences and other challenges (Mustafa, 2021).

Yurianti et al. (2020) explained the essential stages for foreign students, namely the planning

stage, which involves seeking information about geographical conditions, culture, climate, legal regulations, and customs of the people in the destination country. Likewise, other preparations, such as arranging documents, clothing, food, and even language skills in the destination country, provide communication with the local community. With this preparation, students who participate in the student exchange program should be more able to adapt. However, early research results indicate that some students cannot achieve high adaptability (Hrehová, Žiaran, & Seðová, 2021; Singh, 2021).

Research by Fitriasari et al. (2021) shows that the preparation stage in the student exchange program has been well designed through appropriate provision and mentoring before the program is implemented. However, even though students should have prepared themselves well, it turns out that many of them still have difficulty adjusting, with the majority being in the moderate or even low adjustment category. This raises questions regarding the factors influencing their adjustment, including coping strategies, coping strategies are defined as specific efforts, both behaviorally and psychologically, that are used to overcome, tolerate, or reduce the impact of stress (López-Duarte, Maley, & Vidal-Suárez, 2021). King also added that coping strategies help individuals manage situations and solve problems (Salmah, 2016).

Previous research on culture shock and coping strategies in foreign students shows that various psychological challenges often accompany adaptation to a new environment. Salmah (2016) in her research on foreign students of the Darmasiswa program in Samarinda found that participants experienced various stressors that resulted in anxiety, discomfort, and the desire to return to their home country. To overcome this pressure, students used two main strategies: problem-focused coping, which focuses on solving problems directly and emotion-focused

coping, which helps manage emotions that arise from this pressure. Although this strategy is not entirely effective, it still allows students to reduce stress levels and survive until the end of their studies.

The study provides a basis that coping strategies are essential in helping international students face the challenges of adapting to a new environment. The challenges students face in student exchange are like those experienced by Darmasiswa program participants, such as culture shock due to differences in culture, language, and social customs in the destination country. However, because the duration of student exchange programs is usually shorter, the adaptation pressures may be more intense due to the limited time to adapt. Therefore, coping strategies are very crucial in supporting their successful adjustment (Chi, 2023; WU Hui-nan & LIU Ying-liang, 2022)..

By delving deeper into the coping strategies applied by the participants, this study aims to find explanations for the differences in the level of adjustment among participants and more effective ways to support students in facing challenges during study in a new environment. This study will contribute to the literature on adjustment in a foreign environment and enrich the understanding of the role of coping strategies, especially in the context of students studying abroad. The results of this study are also expected to provide recommendations for student exchange program organizers in preparing and supporting students before and during the program. By knowing effective coping strategies, campuses and organizers can design better orientation and mentoring programs to help students overcome challenges in a new environment. In addition, the results of this study can also help students prepare themselves psychologically and practically before facing life in the destination country to increase the success of the student exchange program they participate in. This study assumes that students'

coping strategies can take various forms based on their academic adjustment abilities.

## ■ METHOD

### Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study method to explore the coping strategies in facing academic challenges more deeply. This approach was chosen to understand the theory related to coping strategies through the experiences of student exchange participants. The researcher began the research by determining the most common problems faced by student exchange participants, then concluded one of the most common problems, namely stress. The researcher determined the theory to be used, namely coping strategies, followed by compiling interview instruments and observations and preparing documentation needs. This research lasted three months through the preparation stage until the report was completed.

### Participants

The population of this study was the first batch of UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim student

exchange participants, totalling fifteen people. The researcher conducted an initial assessment to see which participants were in the low, medium and high adjustment categories. The researcher used a purposive sampling technique with the criteria of each student having low, medium and high academic adjustment. The number of research participants five people who were selected based on the results of the academic adjustment categorization using the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) scale by Baker and Siryk (1984), which has been adapted into Indonesian by Rifameutia and Malay (2023). The questionnaire was distributed to 13 participants in the student exchange program. The following process was scoring to categorize participants into three groups, namely the level of adjustment: low, medium, and high. The categorization results included one participant from the low group, two from the medium group, and two from the high group. The selection of this subject aims to obtain a variety of experiences that can provide different perspectives regarding the adjustment and coping strategies used by participants in facing challenges during the exchange program.

**Table 1.** Participant's demographic data

No.	Name/Initial	Age	Sex	Academic Adjustment Level
1	MZ	23	M	High
2	AF	23	F	High
3	AI	21	M	Medium
4	RF	22	F	Medium
5	QN	23	F	Low

### Instrument and Data Collection

This research instrument uses semi-structured interviews using the theory of Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), which consists of four aspects: problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused, and social coping. The questions are arranged based on the four aspects and validated by three experts to assess the derivative questions based on indicators made

from aspects of the theory. The data collection technique in this study refers to Boyatzis' theory (1998), which consists of observation, documentation, and interviews. Observation is used to observe participant behaviour during the data collection process, and documentation is carried out to triangulate sources and data validity. At the same time, interviews are conducted semi-structured and in-depth to explore experiences,

perspectives, and coping strategies. The data validity test technique in this study uses data triangulation. The data triangulation is a comparison of several data sources to validate the findings in the form of information obtained from observation, documentation, and interviews.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis technique used is the Thematic Data Analysis technique (Boyatzis, 1998) with the Theory Driven type. Namely, themes are found through analysis procedures with coding based on theory. To determine the validity or credibility of the research data, the results of participant interviews should be compared according to the frequency of interviews conducted. The number of interviews conducted was three times for each participant. The steps in data analysis can be explained as follows: First, a transcript or verbatim interview result process will be conducted by coding it according to the research participants. Second, a thematic analysis was conducted by collecting participants' answers on the same theme. Third, create a significant theme from each theme that has been found. Fourth, a general theme chart

will be created to describe the coping strategies carried out by research participants as the result of data analysis. This analysis is usually used in qualitative research with a case study approach.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Coping strategies are one of the skills that anyone should possess, especially those who participate in student exchange programs and automatically become international students. This position certainly requires thorough psychological and physical preparation, considering the differences in student exchange program participation.

Everyone also has different coping strategy abilities, one of which can be seen from the level of academic adjustment carried out. Theoretically, someone with good academic adjustment abilities will have good coping strategies. The results of this study will show and analyse whether differences in academic adjustment abilities can provide different coping strategies when participating in a student exchange program. The findings of this study can be seen in the following table:

**Table 1.** Finding's categorization

Participant	Aspect	Indicator
1. MZ	PF	Activities outside student exchange program (CS1.22; CS1.56) Programs that have not been scheduled properly (CS1.22; CS1.30 CS1.35; CS1.38; CS1.56) Communication (CS1.22; CS1.26; CS1.30; CS1.34; CS1.38; CS1.44; CS1.50; CS3.70; CS5.31) Self-adjustment to condition (CS1.26; CS1.34; CS1.38; CS1.46; CS1.50; CS1.56
	EF	Emotional control (CS1.38; CS1.38; CS1.40; CS1.42; CS1.50)
	MF	Program commitment (CS1.30; CS1.40; CS1.44 CS1.56) Running program's motivation (CS1.26; CS1.38; CS1.40; CS1.46; CS1.50)
2. AF	SC	Student interaction (CS1.26; CS1.30; CS1.34; CS1.38; CS1.50) Student cooperation (CS1.42; CS1.50; CS1.54)
	PF	Activities outside student exchange program (CS2.19) Communication (CS2.25; CS2.59; CS2.71) Self-adjustment to condition (CS2.19; CS2.29; CS2.41; CS2.73)

	EF	Emotional control (CS2.53; CS2.41)
	MF	Understanding of condition (CS2.41; CS1.26)
	SC	Social interaction (CS2.25; CS2.73) Social support (CS2.71) cooperation (CS2.27)
3. AI	PF	Non-optimal program (CS3.30; CS3.44; CS3.4) Communication (CS3.30; CS3.44; CS3.56; CS3.62; CS3.70; CS3.76) Self-problem solving (CS3.74)
	EF	Self-image (CS3.71) Emotional control (CS3.50)
	MF	Understanding of condition (CS3.50; CS3.78) Self-positioning (CS3.62; CS3.64; CS3.78)
	SC	Social interaction (CS3.30; CS3.34; CS3.44) Cooperation (CS3.62; CS3.76; CS3.78)
4. RF	PF	Activities outside student exchange program (CS4.12; CS4.14; CS4.20) Program execution (CS4.12; CS4.40) Communication (CS4.16) Social and activity adjustment (CS4.16; CS4.40; CS4.90) Different student's ability (CS4.24; CS4.26; CS4.34)
	EF	First experience's anxiety (CS4.40; CS4.74; CS4.76) Emotion control (CS4.52; CS4.74) Self-image (CS4.96; CS4.98)
	MF	Understanding of condition (CS4.34; CS4.40; CS4.90) Viewpoint's change (CS4.40; CS4.90)
	SC	Peer support (CS4.14; CS4.96) Social interaction (CS4.16) Parent trust (CS4.32; CS4.82)
5. Q	PF	Activities outside student exchange program (CS5.17) student exchange learning program (CS5.17; CS5.21; CS5.25; CS5.37; CS5.39) Communication (CS5.31; CS5.37; CS5.49) Different ability (CS5.17; CS5.33)
	EF	Emotional control (CS5.27)
	MF	Understanding of condition (CS5.17; CS5.43) Self-evaluation (CS5.27; CS5.49)
	SC	Social support (CS5.18; CS5.33; CS5.49)

The interview results showed that each participant used various coping strategies to deal with their situations. However, the analysis showed that the participant's most widely used coping strategy was problem focused. Several subjects, such as MZ, RF, and Q, used this strategy, each with five indicators, AI with four

indicators, and AF with three indicators. Meanwhile, the least used coping strategy by participants was emotional-focused. All subjects only used the emotional-focused strategy with one indicator, except for subject RF, which had three indicators. This shows that although emotional focus exists, its use is minimal among participants.

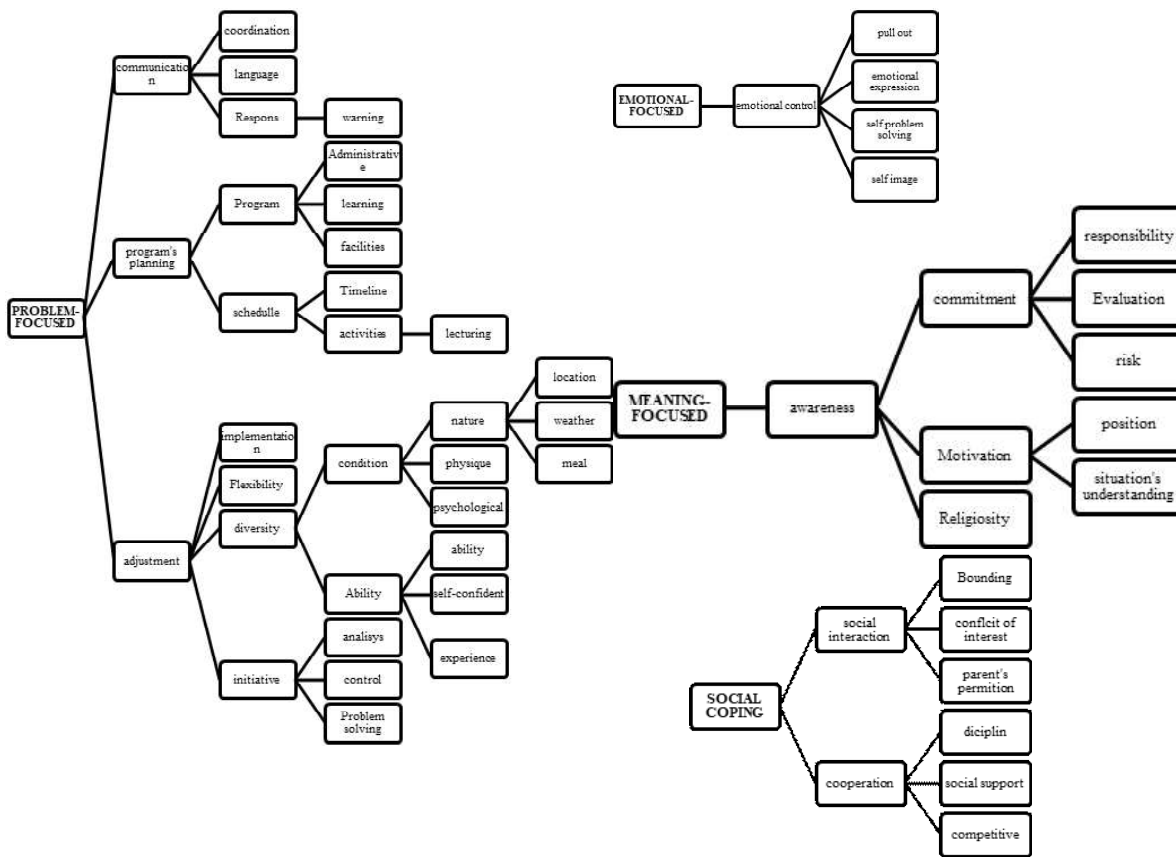


Figure 1. Coping strategies description

**Problem Focused Coping**

The results showed that problem-focused coping strategies were the most common approaches used by participants. This reflects their efforts to actively address problems and find practical solutions. One of the most common challenges faced is communication. Communication is often challenging in cross-cultural interactions, especially for exchange students adapting to a new language and culture. Earlier research by Vardhani and Tyas (2019) revealed that students struggled to communicate with foreign peers because of language differences (Ndoen, Hana, & Nara, 2023; Ningsih & Shsrini, 2024; Safhirah & Misnawati, 2024).

This study highlighted communication challenges, as many locals were not fluent in English, further complicating adaptation.

Communication barriers were also observed among exchange participants from the same campus, suggesting that these issues are not limited to cross-cultural interactions but can also arise within groups sharing the same culture. Interestingly, participants managed to overcome these obstacles by employing problem-focused coping strategies, transforming communication from a barrier into a tool for problem-solving. They became more open, sought clarification, and adapted their communication styles to enhance collaboration. These findings underscore the idea that, while communication often poses challenges, it can also serve as a solution when effective coping strategies are applied.

Research by Ratnayake & Butt (2018) on Australian university students participating in an international field studio project at the University

of Sri Lanka emphasized the significance of effective planning in cross-cultural education. The study revealed that a lack of preparation to address cultural differences and navigate local systems can lead to challenges in implementing international programs. Additionally, it found that poor planning often hinders participants' ability to comprehend the local context and manage unforeseen challenges, particularly in unfamiliar settings.

Beyond communication and planning issues, participants also encountered significant challenges related to adjustment. A key factor was the contrast in natural conditions, such as much colder air temperatures compared to Indonesia and differing food preferences. These factors impacted the participants' physical well-being, leading to fatigue, reduced energy levels, and even illness, which disrupted their learning and adaptation activities.

Adjustment is indeed a significant challenge for students in cross-cultural programs. Students experience culture shock due to differences in culture and education systems (Badri, Karimah, & Sunarya, 2024), differences in aspects of daily life such as food, how to dress, prices, and lifestyle (Sitorus, Sianipar, Sianipar, Marbun, & Sihotang, 2023) and language differences (Putri, Fadilah, Rachman, Lisda, & Febriadha, 2023). In addition to facing challenges through problem-focused coping strategies, students also focus on emotional-focused coping strategies to manage emotional problems. Based on the results of this study, most tend to withdraw, choose to be silent and reflect to understand the situation better. If the problem does not involve others, they prefer to keep it to themselves and channel it personally, such as crying, praying, writing, or other reflective activities. Students are generally reluctant to burden others with their feelings, preferring to keep their problems to themselves and presenting themselves as if they are fine so that others do not worry.

### **Emotional Focused Coping**

Research conducted by Supiani et al. (2020) on Indonesian doctoral students in Australia revealed that international students often face emotional challenges during their time abroad, including anxiety, stress, and loneliness. To cope with these pressures, they employ various strategies, such as seeking support from family or friends and developing independent methods for managing their emotions. These approaches have been shown to be effective in helping students maintain emotional stability.

In addition to employing problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, exchange students also utilize meaning-focused coping strategies by accepting and understanding their circumstances. In this study, many participants demonstrated a profound awareness of their commitment to the program. They acknowledged that studying abroad involves risks and consequences, and this awareness enabled them to stay resilient despite busy schedules and challenging demands. This attitude reflects a strong sense of responsibility for their decisions.

Some participants also adopt stoic principles, acknowledging that not everything in life is within their control. They understand that everyone is unique and no situation is ever entirely perfect. This perspective helps them approach obstacles during the program with greater sincerity, enabling them to stay composed and focused. As a result, this meaning-focused coping strategy enhances their emotional resilience, allowing them to see each challenge as a valuable part of the learning experience.

### **Meaning Focused**

Research by Xiong et al. (2022) on international students in the United States highlights the significance of acceptance-based coping strategies. Their study revealed that a mindfulness program implemented for international students improved self-acceptance



and situational awareness, aiding in more positive adaptation to various challenges abroad. This indicates that embracing uncontrollable circumstances can serve as a foundation for greater peace of mind and emotional regulation, enabling participants to preserve their mental health and handle difficulties more effectively.

Religiosity also plays an important role in the stress coping process they do. Getting closer to God, and improving the quality of worship are some examples of behaviours they do to implement religious behaviour. This is in line with the findings of Saravanan et. al (2019) which explains that religiosity is one of the effective coping models for international students.

Choosing to become an international student is undoubtedly motivated by many things, including motivation. When international students experience difficulties in following the lecture process with differences, one of the things that can make them survive is by remembering the motivation they have built. Motivation has been proven to be an effective form of stress coping, as found by Liu et al. (2020), who compared the level of motivation in international students in the academic adjustment process.

In addition, commitment is another important component in coping for international students. When their motivation increases, it will impact the commitment they have made at the beginning. The findings of Tavares (2024) and Mao (2022) explain the position of commitment as a form of coping for international students.

### **Social Coping**

In employing social coping strategies, participants often demonstrate a strong sense of mutual reliance. They collaborate, offer support, and assist fellow participants in overcoming challenges. For instance, in an academic setting, those who grasp the material more easily are willing to help peers who struggle to keep up with classroom learning. Beyond academics, they also

support one another by offering solutions, managing difficult situations, or providing emotional encouragement.

However, different dynamics can arise in certain situations, such as competition among participants. Some individuals may feel the need to stand out, which can create pressure on others and impact the group dynamic. This competitive atmosphere poses challenges, as instead of receiving full support, participants may feel burdened by feelings of rivalry and superiority within the group.

Research by Cao et al. (2021) highlights the crucial role of social support in managing academic stress among international students. Their study found that Chinese students in Belgium leaned significantly on support from their compatriots to handle the pressures of academic performance and cross-cultural communication challenges. This support not only assisted them academically but also served as an emotional anchor, helping them navigate life in a foreign setting.

On the other hand, participants in the exchange program in this study also showed a similar pattern; although the feeling of competition sometimes created pressure, their main hope remained in the existence of support, cooperation, and responsiveness between participants to create a safe and supportive environment for each other.

### **CONCLUSION**

The results of this study indicate that students participating in the student exchange program use various coping strategies in facing challenges in the new environment, with problem-focused coping strategies being the most used. This strategy reflects their active efforts in solving problems, especially in dealing with communication constraints, suboptimal planning, and adaptation in the new environment. In addition, participants also rely on meaning-focused coping strategies to accept and

understand the situation, including realizing their commitment and responsibilities in this program.

Meanwhile, emotional-focused coping is used less frequently, where participants choose to calm themselves down independently without burdening others. Finally, in social coping, they work together and support each other despite the challenges of competition among fellow participants. Overall, this study shows the adaptation of various coping strategies that help participants deal with the dynamics and difficulties during the program.

The suggestion from this study is that student exchange programs should not only provide academic preparation but also provide psychological preparation for participants, such as stress management training, coping strategies, and improving cross-cultural communication skills. Being in a new environment and facing cultural and language differences requires emotional and mental resilience. This psychological preparation will help participants face challenges that may arise in social interactions and maintain emotional balance while participating in the program in another country.

The limitations of this study are the qualitative approach used and the relatively small number of participants. Not all program participants were willing to fill out the questionnaire, so the results of this study cannot describe the experiences or perspectives of all participants.

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