



# The Influence of the Student Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) on Career Aspirations Moderated by Self-Leadership among Alumni of the Global UGRAD Bachelor's Program

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## Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author CSA designed the study, conducted the research, processed the research data, interpreted the data and wrote the manuscript. Authors Setiani and IM supervised the study. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the influence of the Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) on alumni career aspirations and the role of self-leadership as a moderator of career aspirations among Global UGRAD alumni for the academic year 2022-2023. Employing quantitative techniques, including a 4-point Likert scale and explanatory analysis, data were collected from 85 alumni representing 33 countries. The validity test confirms the credibility of all items, while subsequent reliability tests establish their consistency. Results from hypothesis testing indicate that the student exchange program (Global UGRAD) does not significantly influence career aspirations because the  $P$  value is  $0.153 > 0.05$ . However, student exchange program (Global

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UGRAD) has a significant positive influence on self-leadership as the  $P$  value is  $0.000 < 0.05$ . Furthermore, self-leadership has a positive and significant influence on career aspirations as the  $P$  value is  $0.004 < 0.05$ . Additionally, it was found that self-leadership can moderate the relationship between the student exchange program (Global UGRAD) and career aspirations as the  $P$  value is  $0.015 < 0.05$ . These findings highlight the importance of fostering self-leadership skills for enhancing career aspirations among students participating in international exchange programs (Global UGRAD).

*Keywords: Career aspirations; global UGRAD; self-leadership; student exchange program; study abroad.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of knowledge and technology-based globalization, the quality of Human Resources (HR) becomes a key factor in determining a country's ability to adapt to new challenges and leverage existing opportunities. Various countries, including Indonesia, have recognized efforts to enhance the quality of HR as a strategy to achieve economic growth and sustainable development. One of the efforts of the government and educational institutions in preparing good quality HR is by supporting international student exchange programs.

The phenomenon of studying abroad or participating in student exchange programs abroad is increasing worldwide. Participation in overseas learning programs increased by 232% from 1985 to 2002 and has tripled in the last two decades [1]. According to UNESCO in 2020, 55,961 Indonesian students were studying abroad, marking a 21% growth over the past 6 years. The increase in study abroad participants nowadays may be attributed to students' heightened interest in seeking information and their desire to gain cultural understanding of other countries [2].

Furthermore, the number of Indonesian students choosing to study in the United States between 2019 and 2023 is also quite high. The interest of Indonesian students in studying abroad, especially in the United States, is supported by the abundance of scholarships for studying abroad. In this study, the researcher will only discuss the Fulbright Indonesia / American Indonesian Exchange Foundation (AMINEF) Program, Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (Global UGRAD).

Global UGRAD was established in 2008 with 60 participating countries. This student exchange program is a long-term program that opens annually with a study duration of 1 semester or 3-

4 months at universities in the United States. A program that run for one semester or a full academic year is categorized as long-term programs [3]. Global UGRAD is funded by the U.S. Department of State, managed by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) and World Learning (WL). This student exchange program aims to foster closer ties between the United States and several countries to provide opportunities for undergraduate students to study in the United States. The program's goal is to develop future leaders committed to positive change and international understanding through academic development, leadership, and cultural exchange.

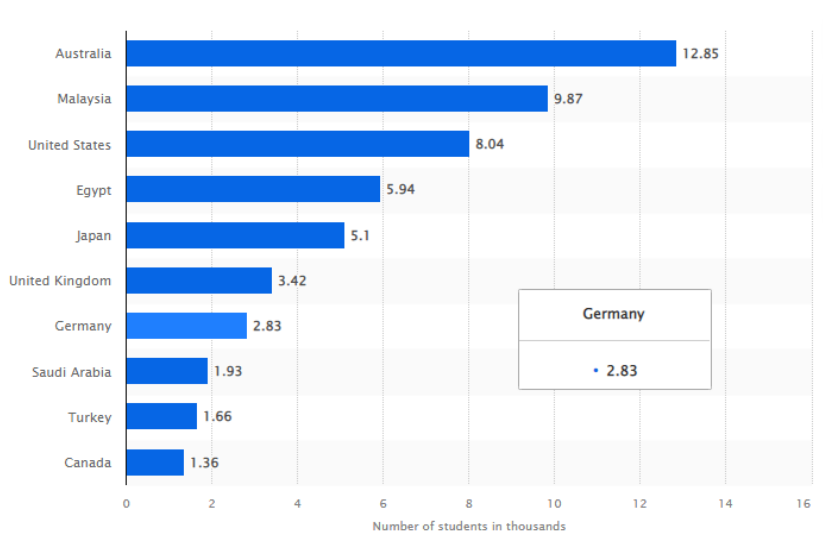
Studying abroad for a semester can develop both personal and professional skills [4]. Student exchange programs can motivate students to plan for future studies, develop their identities, make career decisions, and even develop leadership skills [5,6]. In the context of student exchange, self-leadership can be key to facing new environmental and academic challenges. Self-leadership is the process in which an individual decides what needs to be done, why it needs to be done, how to do it, when to do it, and what directs them [7]. Other findings also indicate that study abroad participants occupy more leadership positions than those who did not study abroad [3].

In addition to developing self-leadership skills, career aspirations are also a common topic discussed in research on studying abroad. Student exchange programs have changed students' perspectives of themselves and influenced their future career directions positively [8]. After studying abroad, students have a more positive view of their career choices and have a clearer picture of their career goals, interests, talents, or professional identities [9]. These results are consistent with previous research findings where studying abroad can shape personal and career development among

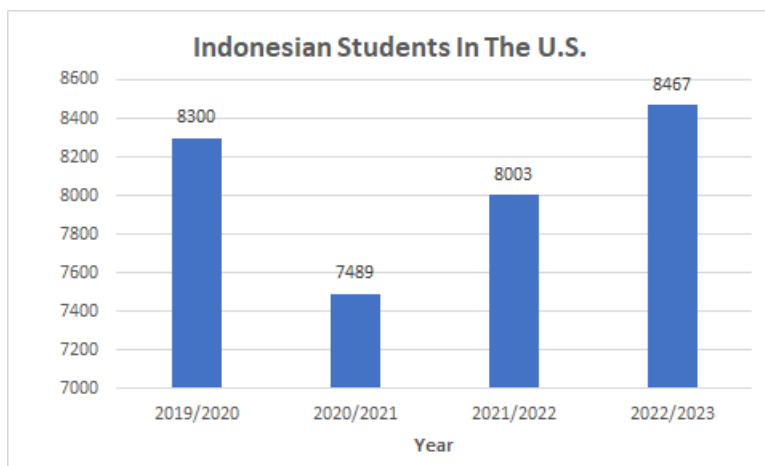
students [10]. Furthermore, the duration of the program does not necessarily determine the success of a program. Many studies show that the results of short-term study abroad programs can still significantly influence students' leadership abilities and career aspirations [3].

However, despite the positive impact of student exchange programs, some cases of international student exchange programs have not had a positive impact due to difficulties during the transition period. Students sometimes face difficulties such as adjusting to class schedules and learning, extremely unfamiliar cultural conditions, and other personal obstacles [11]. Despite the importance of the program and the

great interest of students in international student exchange programs, detailed research on the Global UGRAD program's impact on students' career aspirations is still limited. Furthermore, studies analyzing self-leadership among students are still quite rare. There have been no previous studies examining self-leadership as a moderator of the impact of student exchange programs on career aspirations, making this a novel area. However, a study conducted by Junça et al. [12] showed results indicating that self-leadership could moderate the positive relationship between daily positive emotions and daily work engagement for students. Therefore, it is assumed in this study that self-leadership can moderate or strengthen the influence of student exchange programs on career aspirations.



**Graph 1. Diagram of Indonesian Students Studying Abroad by Destination Country in 2023**  
 Source: <https://uis.unesco.org/>



**Graph 2. Diagram of Indonesian Students Studying in the United States**  
 Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2024) from IDP and Open Doors Report

Therefore, the researcher is interested in taking the title "The Influence of the Global UGRAD Program on Career Aspirations Moderated by Self-Leadership among Alumni of the Global UGRAD Bachelor's Program." The researcher's aim in investigating this topic is to determine whether students' experiences in the Global UGRAD student exchange program for the 2022-2023 academic year, moderated by self-leadership, can affect their future career aspirations or not. This quantitative study involves Global UGRAD alumni from 33 countries. The results of this study are expected to provide insights into student exchange programs and provide recommendations for educational institutions to enhance the benefits of student exchange programs in developing students' potential.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Student Exchange Program

Study abroad is defined as a learning program that takes place outside the student's home country [13]. In other words, study abroad is a program where students attend universities in another country individually or in small groups depending on the policies of the host institution/university [14,15]. The term study abroad is synonymous with student exchange and international study mobility, where a student spends academic activities in another country for a specified period while remaining formally enrolled in an institution in their home country.

### 2.2 Self-Leadership

According to self-leadership theory, self-leadership is when individuals take charge of, influence, regulate, and motivate themselves in order to accomplish their objectives [16]. Self-leadership pertains to the internal capacity of individuals to motivate (self-motivation) and guide (self-direction) themselves towards desired behaviors and results [17]. It involves a self-influence process focused on shaping personal behavioral strategies, particularly in terms of self-direction and self-motivation to accomplish daily tasks and attain individual, professional, or academic targets [18]. Essentially, self-leadership refers to a self-driven process through which individuals cultivate the autonomy and motivation for effective performance [19]."

### 2.3 Career Aspirations

Career aspirations are the ambitions or career hopes that drive efforts toward achieving those

aspirations [20]. Career aspirations can be influenced by parental commitment to their child's education as measured through parental academic encouragement [21]. Career aspirations also play a role in career decision-making, which can be influenced by college assignments and may indicate an interest in pursuing education and recognition in one's chosen career path [22]. Career aspirations are seen in terms of how much individuals aspire to achieve success, career success in their chosen field, and something that helps set career goals, career development, and career success [23]. According to Santrock [24], career aspirations are an individual's hopes in choosing a future career.

## 3. HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

### 3.1 Student Exchange Programs on Career Aspirations

As many as 77% of U.S. student alumni reported that studying abroad helped them acquire skills that influenced their career paths [15,25] shows that 57% of respondents acknowledge that student exchange programs (ERASMUS) influence their career plans. Moreover, findings from the study conducted by Norris and Gillespie [26] indicated that majority of participants reported that the experience of studying abroad influences their career paths and their utilization of foreign languages in the workplace. According to students who have studied abroad, international learning experiences support them in developing skills that they now use in their jobs [27]. Furthermore, 35% of respondents link studying abroad to significantly help their careers [28]. Based on the literature above, the author formulates the hypothesis as follows:

**H1:** Student exchange programs have a positive and significant effect on career aspirations.

### 3.2 Student Exchange Programs on Self-Leadership

Studying abroad allows students to understand various global perspectives on leadership outside their home country [29]. The study showed that during the 9-day program, students grew in personal development and leadership. Each international learning experience shapes experiences and opportunities for students to develop global leadership competencies [30]. Additionally, U.S. students participating in study abroad programs experienced increased self-

confidence, a part of self-leadership, which helps them take over a situation or task from their self-belief [31]. Based on the literature above, the author formulates the hypothesis as follows:

**H2:** Student exchange programs have a positive and significant effect on self-leadership.

### 3.3 Self-Leadership on Career Aspirations

The ability to self-lead can influence individuals to utilize the various specific behavioral and cognitive techniques to regulate their conduct, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and proactive engagement within the professional realm [32]. Study [33] shows that students possessing elevated levels of self-leadership abilities demonstrate more refined self-monitoring behaviors, directing their endeavors towards career advancement. Research carried out by Megheirkouni [34] indicates a correlation between self-leadership, self-efficacy, and career accomplishments. Self-leadership holds significant potential as the primary mechanism for fostering team members' readiness to assume leadership roles within an organization [35,36]. Moreover, strategies such as employing positive internal dialogues or self-talk (as part of self-leadership) can facilitate the cultivation of optimistic or opportunity-focused thought patterns, which in turn can enhance resilience when confronting future challenges. Individual self-leadership is generally acknowledged as a valuable skill due to its association with several favorable job-related outcomes, including heightened job satisfaction [37] and greater career success [38]. Based on the literature above, the author formulates the hypothesis as follows:

**H3:** Self-leadership has a positive and significant effect on career aspirations.

### 3.4 Self-Leadership Moderates the Effect of Student Exchange Programs on Career Aspirations

Research [3] shows that statistical calculations indicate that short-term study abroad not only significantly affects leadership skills but also the career aspirations of students. Liu et al. [39] reveals that self-leading employees have autonomy and control over their tasks, making them want to change and reshape their work, leading to better career outcomes. Additionally, self-leadership refers to behaviors and thoughts that influence oneself to enhance work interests, which are vital tools for students and future organizational success [40]. From the function of self-leadership, researchers want to see the moderating effect of self-leadership on these two variables. Although there have been no specific studies examining the effect of self-leadership as a moderator of student exchange programs and career aspirations, research conducted by Junça et al. [12] uses self-leadership as a moderator and finds that self-leadership strengthens the positive relationship between daily positive emotions and student daily work performance. Self-leadership gives energy to students to complete tasks or difficult situations, so students have more positive emotions, are more engaged in their work, and produce better mental health due to their good self-leadership skills. Therefore, more investigation is required to determine the relationship between the two. Based on the literature above, the author formulates the hypothesis as follows:

**H4:** Student exchange programs moderated by self-leadership reinforce the significant positive effect on career aspirations.

The following is a conceptual framework of the above hypothesis:

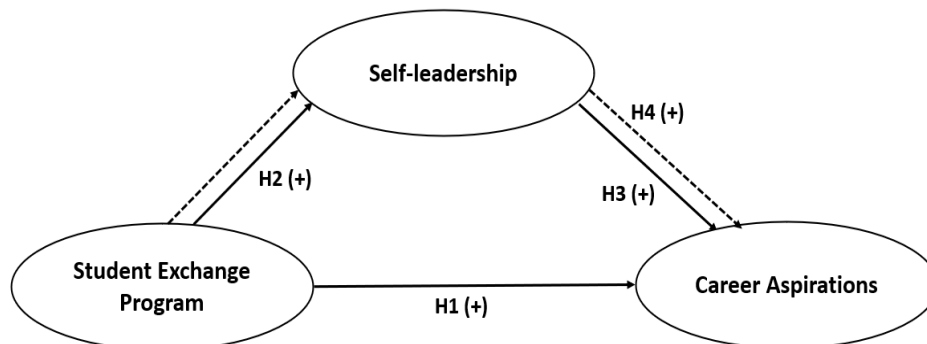


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

The research model utilized in this study is the explanatory quantitative research model. This research uses a purposive sampling technique. Participants in this research were 85 alumni of Global UGRAD batch 2022-2023, comprising 58.6% females and 41.4% males from 33 countries, namely: Azerbaijan, Albania, Armenia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, Philippines, Guatemala, Georgia, Honduras, Indonesia, India, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Malawi, Malaysia, Moldova, Montenegro, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Panama, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

Primary data collection was conducted through questionnaire completion by all alumni via online questionnaire format. Responses were indicated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (4) "strongly agree". Forty-seven questions were divided into 4 sections, namely: personal information (name, country, major, home university and host university in America, and involvement in community service), student exchange program (Global UGRAD), self-leadership, and career aspirations. Data was processed using smartPLS version 3.0. Data analysis stages consisted of a moderation test, inner model test, outer model test, and hypothesis test.

Student Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) was measured using items from Chwialkowska [41] with a total of 19 questionnaire items. Next, Leadership (Self-leadership) was measured using items from Manz [42] with a total of 19 questionnaire items. Last, Career Aspirations were measured using items from Mayra [43] with a total of 9 questionnaire items.

#### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher conducted a questionnaire data analysis filled out by 85 respondents to determine whether the study experience in the United States impacted the leadership and career aspirations of Global UGRAD Program alumni. These findings were divided into two life dimensions, namely personal and professional dimensions. Firstly, the personal dimension reviewed was self-leadership that developed during the student learning process while participating in the Global UGRAD program in the United States. Secondly, the professional dimension reviewed was career aspirations,

which were examined to assess the program's impact on alumni's ambitions, orientations, and expectations for their future careers.

#### 5.1 The Distribution of Respondent Characteristics

Distribution of respondent characteristics based on gender can be seen in Table 1:

**Table 1. Distribution of respondent characteristics based on gender**

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Male	31	36.47%
Female	54	63.53%
Total	85	100%

*Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2024)*

The table above indicates that the majority of respondents in this study are female, totaling 54 individuals (63.53%), while males total 31 individuals (36.47%).

#### 5.2 Validity Test Results and Reliability Tests

The validity test results show valid values for each item used in this research instrument. In the validity test, an item can be considered valid when the correlation value is  $> 0.5$ , and items with correlation values  $< 0.5$  are considered invalid. For the SEP variable, the validity values of the items range from 0.529 to 0.692, with an average value of around 0.623. Meanwhile, for the SL variable, the validity values of the items range from 0.526 to 0.703, with an average value of around 0.624. Meanwhile, for the CA variable, it ranges from 0.559 to 0.817. These values indicate that the research instrument has a sufficiently good level of validity.

There are several different reports on acceptable alpha values, ranging from 0.70 to 0.95 [44,45]. The results of the Cronbach's Alpha reliability test show that this research instrument has a very good level of reliability for each measured variable, ranging from 0.89 to 0.92. This indicates that the research instrument used can be relied upon and has good internal validity to support the analysis and findings in this study.

#### 5.3 Hypothesis Test Results

Generally, in hypothesis testing, a p-value is considered significant if it is less than 0.05 ( $P <$

0.05). In statistics, if the  $P$  value is smaller than the significance value, it is considered influential, and if the  $P$  value is greater than 0.05, it can be concluded that there is no effect between the variables. The hypothesis test results show that the Global UGRAD Student Exchange Program has an insignificant influence on Career Aspirations, with a  $P$  value of 0.153. However, other findings indicate that the student exchange program has a highly significant impact on the development of student Self-Leadership, with a  $P$  value of 0.000. Furthermore, Self-Leadership toward Career Aspirations and the effect of the Student Exchange Program on Career Aspirations are influenced by the level of student Self-Leadership, indicating a significant effect.

#### 5.4 The Influence of the Student Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) on the Career Aspirations of Global UGRAD Alumni

The analysis results indicate that the relationship between the student exchange program (Global UGRAD) and career aspirations is not significant. The hypothesis 1 was not supported, with a  $P$  value of 0.153, where  $0.153 > 0.05$ . This finding suggests that, in this study, hypothesis 1 was not confirmed. Previous studies have shown that international exchange programs can influence students' career aspirations; however, some barriers have also been identified. According to research [11], international students often

**Table 2. Validity test results**

Item	Value	Item	Value	Item	Value
SEP1	0.623	SL1	0.624	CA1	0.763
SEP2	0.627	SL2	0.585	CA2	0.817
SEP3	0.619	SL3	0.655	CA3	0.760
SEP4	0.529	SL4	0.668	CA4	0.559
SEP5	0.574	SL5	0.630	CA5	0.681
SEP6	0.656	SL6	0.703	CA6	0.705
SEP7	0.640	SL7	0.692	CA7	0.814
SEP8	0.588	SL8	0.638	CA8	0.688
SEP9	0.666	SL9	0.660	CA9	0.742
SEP10	0.680	SL10	0.547		
SEP11	0.660	SL11	0.526		
SEP12	0.573	SL12	0.526		
SEP13	0.581	SL13	0.615		
SEP14	0.561	SL14	0.616		
SEP15	0.577	SL15	0.647		
SEP16	0.656	SL16	0.543		
SEP17	0.688	SL17	0.647		
SEP18	0.692	SL18	0.655		
SEP19	0.627	SL19	0.670		

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2024)

**Table 3. Reliability test results**

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Student Exchange Program (SEP)	0.913
Self-Leadership (SL)	0.914
Career Aspirations (CA)	0.892

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2024)

**Table 4. Hypothesis and Moderation Test Results**

Hypothesis	$P$ Values
Student Exchange Program -> Career Aspirations	0.153
Student Exchange Program -> Self-leadership	0.000
Self-Leadership -> Career Aspirations	0.004
Student Exchange Program -> Self-leadership -> Career Aspirations	0.015

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2024)

face a range of transition difficulties in academic, language, social, and cultural aspects, which hinder the learning and exploration process. Career aspiration development can be influenced by various variables, including individuals' readiness to overcome obstacles that may arise during the Global UGRAD program. Other personal barriers such as self-doubt, lack of confidence if they do not have a mentor, and lack of support in college are possible obstacles in choosing a career [46]. Therefore, students who can adapt well to challenges during the exchange program may be more inclined to experience better personal and professional growth, such as career aspiration development. Adaptability can affect how they learn, respond, and formulate their career aspirations after returning to their home country.

### **5.5 The Influence of the Student Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) on the Self-Leadership of Global UGRAD Alumni**

The hypothesis testing results show that the Student Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) significantly influences self-leadership. This is indicated by a  $P$  value of 0.000, where  $0.000 < 0.05$ , confirming hypothesis 2 and indicating that the student exchange program has a significant impact on the development of student self-leadership. This finding suggests that students' involvement in academic and social environments in the United States can enhance their self-leadership, meaning they can develop self-control skills in facing various conditions. An effective step to improve student self-leadership skills is by providing opportunities for students to make decisions about what they should do. For example, universities in the United States provide students with freedom in the teaching and learning process, which helps them develop better self-leadership strategies, such as goal setting, internal and external observation, and self-reward for decisions they make. The development of self-leadership experienced by students in the United States from studying abroad has increased their confidence, thereby enhancing their ability to take over a situation or task with self-confidence [47]. Other findings explain that providing many opportunities for students to engage in foreign cultures formally and informally can enhance leadership skills [29].

### **5.6 The Influence of Self-Leadership on the Career Aspirations of Global UGRAD Alumni**

The hypothesis testing results show that self-leadership significantly influences career aspirations. This is indicated by a  $P$  value of 0.004, where  $0.004 < 0.05$ , confirming hypothesis 3 and indicating that self-leadership significantly affects the career aspirations of Global UGRAD alumni. In this study, career aspirations are determined by respondents' answers to questionnaire questions about whether learning experiences in the classroom, opportunities to gain knowledge outside their field, and social life have changed their career aspirations. This indicates that these experiences provide new insights for them, impacting the strengthening or changing of their career aspirations towards clearer and more measurable goals. Research [34] shows a positive relationship between self-leadership and career success, and self-efficacy is related to careers. This finding is in line with the idea that self-leadership has a positive relationship with self-efficacy and related outcomes (e.g., performance and career success) [35]. Additionally, self-leadership has the potential to act as a key mechanism in team member development willing to share leadership responsibilities in the workplace [36].

### **5.7 The Influence of the Student Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) on the Career Aspirations of Global UGRAD Alumni Moderated by Self-Leadership**

The findings from hypothesis testing prove that hypothesis 4 is supported. The results indicate that self-leadership can moderate or strengthen the relationship between the student exchange program (Global UGRAD) and career aspirations. The  $P$  value of 0.015 shows statistical evidence supporting this hypothesis. In other words, when students have strong self-leadership skills, they are more capable of determining their future career paths. With a strong self-leadership skills, students can control their stress levels better because they have the ability to control themselves in both old and new environments and stay focused on their goals [48,12] mentioned, self-leadership is a personal resource that facilitates the focus and dedication needed by students when working on unpleasant tasks, helping them better manage themselves



when facing difficult conditions, thus strengthening self-development from the program run toward career aspirations. With enhanced self-awareness or self-leadership, students can choose their goals that align with their preferences. Moreover, exposure to international aspects during study abroad experiences has motivated participants to continue engaging in international contexts, including pursuing higher education, working overseas, or participating in global initiatives [49]. Therefore, the home and host universities should take effective measures to encourage activities that can enhance self-leadership skills, thereby providing internal strength for students to better execute programs and determine future careers.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research provide a better understanding of the impact of the Global UGRAD program on the self-leadership and career aspirations of alumni. Every alumni who has studied abroad agrees that their experiences have changed their lives. The conclusions drawn from this study are as follows: (1) There is no relationship between the Student Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) and the Career Aspirations of Global UGRAD alumni. (2) The Student Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) has a significant positive influence on the self-leadership of Global UGRAD alumni. (3) Self-leadership significantly influences the career aspirations of Global UGRAD alumni. (4) Self-leadership can moderate or strengthen the relationship between the student exchange program (Global UGRAD) and the career aspirations of Global UGRAD alumni.

The research findings provide a deeper understanding of the influence of the student exchange program (Global UGRAD) on the development of self-leadership and career aspirations of students. The development of self-leadership skills is crucial for strengthening career aspirations in students participating in international exchange programs. These findings contribute valuable insights to the literature, universities or educational institutions, and scholarship institutions in planning and implementing international exchange programs. These institutions need to develop self-leadership programs to assist students in preparing for participation in international exchange programs.

## FURTHER RESEARCH

Recommendations for further research include examining alumni from a broader range of cohorts, such as alumni from the years 2011-2018 who are already employed to evaluate the potential long-term impact of the Student Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) on the development of their self-leadership and career aspirations. By investigating the experiences and career achievements of alumni who have passed several years since they participated in this program, the research can provide deeper insights into the sustainable effects of this student exchange program. This analysis can also help understand the role played by studying abroad in shaping long-term self-leadership and career ambitions.

Another recommendation is to develop a suitable self-leadership program framework in the context of international student exchange. Programs can include self-awareness, leadership skills, self-confidence and resilience, relationship building, and more. Thus, the hope is that educational institutions and scholarships can assist international student exchange program participants in reaching their full potential and achieving their career goals.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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