

# Virtual Students Mobility and Exchange Programs: Case Study of Malaysia

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v12-i3/19379>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v12-i3/19379

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Published Online: 20 September, 2023

## Abstract

This paper reports on a case study to comprehend some of the issues and challenges faced when organising virtual student mobility and exchange programs at university level. The main objectives are to understand what the expected issues and challenges are when students and lecturers organise and participate in virtual student exchange programs. The reason why university mobility and exchange programs need to be conducted virtually was initially due to the global pandemic where lockdown measures were imposed in many countries, causing strict control of movements of citizens. But, as the world moved out of the global pandemic stage, the benefits of virtual student exchange programs are now becoming more apparent. Four key elements were investigated in this case study including technological constraints, students and lecturers' readiness, language barriers and also cultural differences. A qualitative approach was used to carry out this case study. Four respondents were intensively interviewed in focus group sessions to discuss the four elements above. In sum, the research participants do not agree that virtual student exchange and mobility programs will be as effective as physical ones.

**Keywords:** Student Mobility, Student Exchange, Virtual, Global Pandemic, Malaysia.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic was a threatening health crisis around the world that began at the end of 2019. Our daily lives have undergone significant changes following this global pandemic and the higher education system had to be readjusted to comply with new norms. This global pandemic had indeed brought a huge influence on the economy as well as the fields of education around the world (Akil & Adnan, 2022, 2023; Prawoto et al., 2020). At

that exact time, Malaysia followed suit and decided to close schools, colleges, and universities to prevent the spread of the virus. Consequently, student mobility came to a standstill and active global exchanges were severely affected. Even until this present moment in time mobility and exchange programs are picking up slowly, at least in Malaysia.

All the same, in recent years, there has been an increase in student mobility in higher education. This is due to a number of factors, including the increasing cost of tuition, the desire for students to gain international experience, and the wider availability of online courses (Adnan, 2018). The increasing cost of tuition is one of the main reasons why students are choosing to study abroad. In the United States, for example, tuition prices have been rising steadily for years. This has made it difficult for many students to afford a college education. As a result, many students are looking for ways to reduce the cost of their education (Rahmat et al., 2019). One way to do this is by studying abroad. By studying in another country where higher education is cheaper for instance, university and college students can take advantage of lower tuition rates.

The desire for students to gain international experience is another factor that has contributed to the increase in student mobility. In today's global economy, employers are looking for employees who have experience working in different cultures (Adnan et al., 2021). Studying abroad is a great way for students to gain this type of experience. Additionally, by studying abroad, students can learn about new cultures and customs. Finally, the availability of online courses has made it easier for students to gain study abroad 'experiences' albeit virtually. In the past, students who wanted to study abroad had to take courses at a local university. However, with the advent of online learning, students can now take courses from anywhere in the world. This has made it easier for students to get the education they need while still being able to save their money on expensive physical-related fees.

Nevertheless, partly due to the global pandemic, according to Krishnamurthy (2020) new norms require new and unique solutions. Face-to-face learning activities including student exchange programs cannot be easily and openly implemented even after this global pandemic has been put under control. As such, learning activities have to be switched from physical to online mode using platforms such as Microsoft Team, Google Meet, Zoom, Google Classroom, Telegram, WhatsApp, and others, so that students will not drop out and still follow the teaching and learning process (Adnan, 2020a; Karim et al., 2020). The online teaching environment continues to get community attention after its implementation in the context of education in Malaysia when the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) announced the closure of schools in early 2020.

### **The rise of 'virtual' student mobility and education exchange programs**

Higher education is currently undergoing significant transformation as a result of the world's rapid pace of change, and virtual student mobility and exchange programs are at the forefront of this change. These forward-thinking educational strategies have the potential to not only shape the future of higher education in Malaysia but also in countries all over the world. The idea of mobility and exchange among students has always been appealing. Travel has traditionally been required in order to fulfil the goals of experiencing new cultures, expanding one's understanding of the world, and establishing relationships with people from other countries. Nevertheless, the landscape of higher education is undergoing shifts as a result of developments in technology and the arrival of the digital era. Numerous benefits

can be gained from participating in virtual student mobility and exchange programs, which are made possible by high-speed internet and sophisticated online learning platforms.

This shift is being driven in large part by accessibility. Not all students in Malaysia, like those in many other countries, have the financial resources or the opportunities to travel outside of the country for the purpose of furthering their education. These geographical barriers are overcome by virtual programs, which give access to a wider variety of students regardless of where they are located or what their socioeconomic background is. Another essential component is how much value you get for your money. Traditional exchange programs can be quite pricey because they require participants to pay for their travel, lodging, and other living expenses while they are away from home. Virtual programs, on the other hand, significantly lessen these financial burdens, thereby enabling a greater number of people to pursue international education opportunities.

The rise in popularity of virtual programs is directly attributable to the development of various cutting-edge technologies. The use of high-quality video conferencing, digital laboratories, and interactive online platforms recreates the atmosphere of a traditional classroom setting. They may not be able to fully replicate the allure of face-to-face contact, but they come remarkably close to doing so, ensuring that the educational experience is rich and fulfilling. Resilience can also be demonstrated by virtual programs. They have shown themselves to be a reliable alternative during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual education can continue uninterrupted, whereas in-person interactions might be interrupted, jeopardising the continuity of the learning process. In addition, the positive effects that virtual programs have on the natural world cannot be overlooked. Reduced travel results in a smaller carbon footprint, which is consistent with the objectives of sustainability, a concern that is shared by educational institutions of higher learning all over the world.



Figure 1: Benefits of virtual students' mobility and exchange programs

Our present study makes a significant contribution to a better understanding of the rapidly developing field of virtual student mobility and exchange programs, which are at the vanguard of reshaping the future of higher education in Malaysia as well as all over the world. Accessibility, cost-effectiveness, flexibility, diversity, and resilience are some of the benefits that they offer (see Figure 1 above). At present, they may not be able to completely replace in-person interactions, but they provide a compelling alternative that helps make international education more accessible and environmentally responsible. Students will be better prepared to thrive in a globally interconnected world if they participate in virtual student mobility programs as the digital age is embraced.

As these programs are poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of higher education, an empirical research project was carried out to explore these programs with the following objectives: First, to recognise the issues and challenges faced by lecturers, tutors, and instructors in overseeing virtual student exchanges; And second, to find out the issues and challenges faced by students throughout their involvement in virtual student exchanges. Based on the preceding paragraphs and these objectives, two research questions were operationalised as below.

RQ1. What are some of the issues and challenges faced by lecturers, tutors, and instructors in conducting online / virtual student exchange programs?

RQ2. What are some of the issues and challenges faced by students during their participation in online / virtual student exchange programs?

### **Literature Review**

In this section, relevant research literature is presented and reviewed to better contextualise the topic under study and to frame this empirical case study in a more concrete manner.

#### **Internationalisation of higher education**

The views regarding the internationalization of higher education contain two perspectives that are different, but they generally complement each other. From a macro perspective, university internationalization is a vital agenda of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education's Strategic Plan in an effort to realize the mission and vision of the national education system towards internationalization, where the diversity of university management practices in this country is in line with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (PSPTN) (Fia, et al., 2022). Therefore, the National Higher Education Strategic Plan is seen as the foundation of Malaysia's national higher education transformation containing various ideas, initiatives, improvements, and international policies for university management. In that context, each local university is responsible for supporting this higher education mission towards internationalization through building strong relationships at the global level. At the same time, each institution of higher learning needs to fully support the international activities of academics, researchers, and students, create a conducive and international learning environment for students and also increase the promotion and recruitment activities of academic scholars who are world class.

However, a problem quickly arises. Is the country's commitment to the internationalization of higher education and the ultimate goal of achieving the target of being recognized as a centre of excellence in knowledge on the world stage, really achievable in the first place (Adnan & Smith, 2001)? From a micro perspective, the past decade has seen university 'citizens' heralded to play a more prominent role to effectively utilize the strength of physical resources and human capital as well as create ownership of intellectual property. This is in line with the policy of internationalization of the country's higher education system which places the strategic, comprehensive, and integrated implementation by various parties in an effort to highlight the visibility of Malaysia as a hub of academic excellence (Gunn & Mintrom, 2022). Every level of a Malaysian university or college is made to undergo a transformation of thinking and working practices in accordance with the work culture of universities with international status. But is this initiative supported by all members of the university community who are capable of propelling the country's higher education sector

towards international credibility? There are other hurdles too, for instance the failure to successfully obtain external funds and research grants, and failure to spark the culture of research innovation that will produce international publications. Therefore, 'capability' must be understood as an effort to ensure the capacity of Malaysian academics who are not only qualified but also experienced to fill scholarly positions and underpin the human resource development of a university (Adnan, 2020b).

### **Student mobility trends during the past pandemic and present endemic periods**

During the outbreak of the global pandemic, many countries implemented lockdown measures to curb and stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Atalan, 2020). In Malaysia, a similar measure was implemented, and it is known as the Movement Control Order or MCO. Back then, such measures were necessary because large proportions of the population around the world were still in the process of being vaccinated. Therefore, with such lockdowns in place, student mobility effectively came to a standstill (Caballini et al., 2021). Even the core of physical classroom learning was moved online. As a consequent, non-core, and non-critical activities such as student exchange programs, which are also deemed non-essential, were either totally stopped or moved online altogether. On the other hand, with the global scale vaccination efforts by multiple organizations or brands such as Pfizer BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson, Sinovac, Moderna and many more, cases slowly went down afterwards, and the pandemic was brought under control. Tight control measures were loosened up and the crossing of boundaries is allowed again as we marched towards the 'endemic stage' of the virus in Malaysia.

At this present time, student mobility is gaining traction once again as before the pandemic happened, with some extra precautions and hygienic practices like wearing masks and doing self-tests especially when travelling in public transport to international destinations.

### **Virtual mobility / exchange programs**

Virtual mobility or exchanges are technology-based, classroom-to-classroom programs that connect students located in different geographical locations to develop intercultural understanding and for students to engage in project-based learning (Mangione & Cannella, 2021). Many of these exchanges are designed and facilitated by course instructors for students to establish dialogue and collaborate on various tasks or projects. Virtual exchanges vary in length as some last for a few weeks and others for a semester or longer. A typical student exchange program in which students are supposed to visit the host university in a different country, has been severely impacted by the global pandemic. But even though it dampens physical travelling, this actually allows for better opportunities in terms of time and cost saving in distance education. Still, if a student exchange program is moved and organised online, will this program bring the same positive effects intended, especially on the learning experience and experiential outcome? As we know, learning and cultural exchange do not happen only through formal education sessions. Most of it occurs during informal conversations between participants from different countries.

There are, in fact, many ways to learn about other cultures and to exchange one's own culture with others. One way is to travel and live in another country for an extended period of time, which is what typically happens during a 'gap year' or semester. This allows for a more immersive experience, and one can learn a great deal about the culture and the people. As previously mentioned, another good way to learn about other cultures is to take part in

educational mobility or exchange programs. These can be either formal or informal. Formal programs are often sponsored by organizations or universities, and they usually involve structured activities and learning opportunities. Informal programs, on the other hand, are more likely to be unplanned and spontaneous. They often involve simply interacting with people from other cultures on a day-to-day basis.

Of course, both formal and informal mobility and cultural exchange experiences have their advantages and disadvantages. Formal programs can be very beneficial because they provide a structured environment in which to learn about another culture. However, they can also be quite expensive, and they may not always be available to everyone. Informal exchanges and cultural mobility experiences, on the other hand, are generally more affordable and accessible. They can also be more authentic since they often involve simply living in and interacting with another culture on a daily basis. However, they can also be more chaotic and less organized than formal programs. What is most important is that a student must take advantage of any opportunity that presents itself to gain new knowledge and understanding. Whether she or he chooses to participate in a formal mobility or exchange program or simply to interact with people from other cultures on a daily basis, the important thing is to always keep an open mind together with a willingness to learn.

### **Issues and challenges faced by lecturers and students**

Without a shadow of doubt, there are many challenges and issues if student mobility or exchange programs are held online. For example, the study by Amiruddin et al., (2021) found that students have a high desire for actual classroom-based learning. Yet the online learning experience is affected as a result of various obstacles (Abd Karim et al., 2020). Among the obstacles are the problem of the device usage, poor Internet connections and on-task learning time. Another study by Baber (2021) showed that students are generally ready and have good motivation to accept learning using online modes. However, challenges and limitations during implementation should be refined to increase the effectiveness of the learning process. The challenge and limitation include students who are still unable to adapt to the notion of online learning as a whole, confusion in terms of delivery and lack of learning facilities.

With specific reference to mobility and/or exchange programs, due to the different nationalities and languages used, there will be a certain degree of language barrier between different parties. Hand gestures and facial expressions are often the best methods when language is not helpful, however these non-verbal cues in communication might not be as effective on the computer screen as compared to natural and real life exchanges that happen physically. This might also inevitably lead to the possibility of miscommunication especially when there are cultural differences across different nationalities in conducting work such as punctuality, active learning as well as whether the learning process is student-centred or teacher-centred (Zamari & Adnan, 2011).

### **Methodology**

This empirical research project explored the topic of student mobility and exchange programs, in particular the opportunities and challenges linked to the past global pandemic situation. A qualitative approach was employed in the research to examine and understand the perspectives of students and lecturers towards the organisation of virtual exchange programs. Focus group sessions were held with the selected research participants. A total of four research participants were selected, two university students and two university lecturers respectively. The criterion for the selection of students is those who have joined a short-term

international students' exchange program from the start to the middle of 2022. While the criterion for lecturers is that they have acted as international facilitators or tutors for a short-term virtual international students' exchange program in the last few years before and after the global pandemic gripped the whole world.

The elements and constructs that were discussed during the focus group discussion sessions include the perspective of technological constraints which encompasses the tools used for virtual meetings, internet connection stability and readiness in terms of mobile hardware. Other elements explored were the students and lecturers' readiness to face their virtual students' exchange programs, expected language barriers, the effectiveness of online communication, and finally the cultural differences between all the parties involved in the virtual mobility or exchange program.

To organize the data collected from the field, descriptive notes were used and filed under different themes and sub-themes by reading them carefully. The thematic classification of data was done on the computer directly or on a broad sheet paper as per convenience (Khirfan et al., 2020). Pratt et al. (2020), deliberated the issue of qualitative coding for thematic analysis in qualitative research. They shared that qualitative coding comprises all the techniques for reliably classifying the social data on which very little or no order has been previously imposed by researchers. When data are classified by using existing theoretical models or pre-determined categories, the problems of analysis are mainly mechanical. However, when the social data have to be classified as per the concepts or categories or themes or subthemes that emerged in the process of investigation, the problems are very complex. Therefore, we must be careful in classifying qualitative data as it is necessary to develop the explicit set of instructions for ordering the data to derive meaningful generalizations. The main steps in qualitative coding as described by the authors are as follows.

First, clarify what is that is desired from the materials (as per the purpose to answer the research questions. Next, study the completed schedules or notes of interviews or participant observations very carefully. Then, work out the classes or possible groupings (using concepts, categories, and themes) and the indicators of the classes or groupings. And finally, fit the classes or groupings to the data, and code all the answers. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that qualitative analysis is really the search for patterns in data and ideas that help explain the existence of those patterns. It starts even before a researcher goes to the field and continues throughout the research efforts. Last but not least, the researcher has to employ the *emic* perspective and document folk analyses but she or he must also equally retain the *etic* perspective in qualitative data collection and analyses.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

As mentioned in the last section, a total of four elements and constructs were explored and studied during the focus group discussion sessions. The four elements are: (1) Technological constraints (tools, internet connection, software, and hardware, etc.); (2) Tutors' and students' readiness in using virtual platforms for the virtual mobility/ exchange program; (3) Language barriers and problems related to language competency; (4) Cultural differences and personality differences which were apparent before, during and after the program. The data collected are presented and analysed below as per typical qualitative data organisation and management. Data analysis means the categorizing, ordering, manipulating, and summarizing of data to obtain answers to research questions (Esteva et al., 2021). The purpose of analysis is to reduce data to intelligible and interpretable form so

that the relations of research problems can be studied and tested. Lastly, the interpretation process takes the results of analysis, makes inferences pertinent to the research relations studied, and draws conclusions about these relations.

### **Technological constraints**

Based on the interview sessions done with the participants, for the first element which is the technological constraints, all of them voiced out that “there will definitely be a technical glitch” that will occur during the program. This is because such errors are very common when online learning is conducted over the internet too. This is even worse when the communication is done from two geographical locations that are far away from each other and they do not share the same network provider. Slow and unstable internet connection will be a challenge. Frustrations might happen and the session will be delayed and not enjoyable anymore if such technical errors kept on happening. One lecturer shared the justification on this is that when she was teaching an online class as part of a virtual mobility or virtual exchange program. Students tend to lose focus and there is a lack of two-way communication during online teaching. She adds, “The engagement is not there between me and the students during the session. Sometimes, I’m not sure if the students are present in front of the computer and still listening and focusing or not.” Hence, if future student exchange programs were held virtually, for many it might turn out to be just an online forum or online lecture class only, which is not much different compared to watching YouTube or a boring online conference.

Indeed, technological problems are a common occurrence during virtual student exchange programs. While most students are able to overcome these issues with the help of their peers and program administrators, some students may find themselves struggling to keep up with the pace of the program or feeling isolated from the other participants. Another common technological problem faced by students during virtual exchange programs is a lack of access to reliable internet. This can be a particular issue for students who are based in rural areas or who do not have access to a stable broadband connection. While many program administrators will provide participants with a list of recommended internet providers, it is ultimately up to the student to ensure that they have a reliable connection. If a student is struggling to access the internet, they may need to consider alternative ways of participating, such as using their mobile data allowance or finding a public Wi-Fi hotspot. In some cases, it may also be possible to arrange for a temporary broadband connection to be installed at the student’s accommodation.

Another common technological challenge is compatibility issues between devices and software programs. For example, some students may find that they are unable to join video calls using their laptop because they do not have the correct software installed. In other cases, students may be using an older version of a software program which is not compatible with the latest version used by the other participants. If students struggle to resolve these issues, they should contact the program administrator for assistance although these issues might also be difficult to quickly resolve. Finally, another common technological difficulty faced by students during virtual exchange programs is a lack of understanding about how to use certain technologies. For example, some students may be unfamiliar with video conferencing software and therefore struggle to join or participate in online meetings. In other cases, students may be unsure how to share files or documents electronically. These being said, the research participants believe that these types of problems can sometimes be resolved with the help of online tutorials or by asking other participants for assistance.



**Tutors' and students' readiness**

In terms of readiness to be part of virtual students' exchange and mobility, the research participants generally responded that the 'readiness' is not there as well. Other than the tools and hardware issues, the participants believed that they sometimes do not know how to effectively organise and be part of a student exchange program virtually. This is because such virtual programs might require actual hands on especially when it comes to cultural sharing. However, if such programs are held online, it might be just a series of slides presentation or "dry introduction" to the culture without hands-on activities. The learning and cultural exchange activities will be severely limited to listening and questions asking only.

In truth, virtual or online student exchange programs are a relatively new concept and one that is still evolving. There are a number of reasons why students may not be ready for this type of program, including the fact that they are not used to being in an online environment, they are not used to working with people from other cultures and they may not have the necessary language skills. According to the participants, one of the main reasons for the lack of readiness during online student exchange programs is that students are not really used to being in an online environment. This can be a problem because they are not used to interacting with people from other cultures and they may not be able to communicate effectively. In addition, they may find it difficult to navigate the online environment and may not be able to find resources they need.

The lack of readiness of students during online student exchange programs can have a number of implications; most of them are related to psychological and emotional issues that cannot be easily ameliorated. First, it can lead to a feeling of isolation and loneliness for the students. They may feel isolated and lonely because they are not used to being in an online environment. Second, it can lead to a feeling of frustration and anger towards the program and the host institution. They may feel frustrated and angry because they are not used to working with people from other cultures. Third, it can lead to a feeling of disappointment and disillusionment with the program and the host institution. This might happen especially when they may not have the necessary language skills. Finally, it can lead to a feeling of anxiety and actual stress for the students. Again, being in an unfamiliar online environment might lead to these negativities. Due to these reasons, the lack of readiness of students during online student exchange programs can actually have a negative impact on them, the program, and both the home and host institutions.

**Language and Proficiency Barriers**

The research participants believe that language barriers and language related problems are also serious issues that "caused many hiccoughs" during virtual student exchange programs. This is especially so when the language barriers might be worsened due to limited capabilities to share hand gestures and facial expressions through their smartphones, computer tablets, or computer screens. Gadget mediated communication can make it difficult to pick up on nonverbal cues, such as body language and tone of voice, which can be essential for communication. There are other potential language problems as well, that can arise during online and virtual student exchange programs other than the lack of face-to-face interaction.

Additionally, their written communication through short texts and 'instant' messages can be easily misinterpreted, as there is no way to gauge the tone or intention behind the words uttered. This will surely lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in the long run. Another common problem is the use of slang or colloquialisms; these can be difficult to

understand for those who are not familiar with them and can often lead to confusion or offence. Additionally, they can change rapidly, making it hard to keep up with the latest trends. Another potential issue is the different levels of proficiency among students. Some may be fluent in the local 'version' of the language being used, while others may only have a basic understanding. This can make it difficult to communicate effectively, as those with a limited understanding may struggle to keep up with conversations or may be unable to express themselves fully. Additionally, those who are more proficient may feel frustrated by having to simplify their speech or slow down their conversation at all times for the benefit of those who are less proficient. Finally, there is the issue of cultural differences. What is considered polite or appropriate in one culture may not be in another. This can lead to misunderstandings or offence, as well as a feeling of isolation or exclusion.

Despite these challenges, there are a number of ways to overcome them. One is to make use of online resources, such as dictionaries or translation tools. These can be helpful for understanding unfamiliar words or phrases. Additionally, there are a number of online forums and chatrooms where students can practice their language skills with others. Finally, it is important to remember that everyone is learning and that mistakes are part of the process. By being patient and tolerant of mistakes, we can create an inclusive and supportive environment where everyone can feel comfortable communicating in a foreign language. That being said, these strategies are clearly not part of the virtual students' exchange or mobility programs, and they might only add to the hassle of organising and joining such programs from the outset.

### **Cultural and personality differences**

Another readiness issue that cropped up during online student exchange programs is that students are not used to working with people from other cultures. This can be a problem because they may not be able to understand the culture of the host institution and that of their fellow students in that institution. As a result, they might not be able to work effectively with their counterparts to ensure that the aims and objectives of the virtual students' exchange and mobility program are all achieved. Some of the concerns related to cultural and personality differences are as follows.

First and foremost, different cultures have distinct communication styles, which can include varying levels of directness, formality, and non-verbal communication. Understanding and respecting these differences is crucial to effective virtual communication. At the personal level, individuals also have different communication preferences based on their personality traits. Some university students may prefer written communication, while others may favour some sort of verbal discussions. Virtual programs should accommodate these variations, though this is easier said than done. Take the issue of dealing with time for example. Some cultures place a strong emphasis on punctuality and adherence to schedules, while others have a more relaxed approach to time. This can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in virtual collaborations. In addition to that, personality traits like conscientiousness and time-management skills can also influence an individual's ability to meet deadlines and engage in virtual activities effectively.

From a different perspective, cultural norms can affect how groups function and make decisions. In some cultures, hierarchy and authority play a significant role, while others emphasize consensus and egalitarianism. As such, in virtual students' exchange and mobility programs, personality traits like extraversion and agreeableness can influence an individual's role within a virtual group. Extroverts may be more vocal, while introverts may contribute in

quieter ways or not contribute at all. Cultural adaptability can vary, and students from some backgrounds may find it easier to adjust to virtual exchanges. Others may face more significant challenges in adapting to new technologies and virtual environments. That being said, certain personality traits for instance openness to experience and emotional stability can positively influence an individual's ability to adapt to virtual programs and cope with challenges.

On a final note, the respondents mentioned that cultural differences might not be such a big issue during virtual exchanges compared to other issues and problems. This is because both parties can align their expectations early and misunderstandings will be unlikely to happen, especially when the tolerance level is heightened when dealing with delegates from different nationality. This shows that in virtual student exchange and mobility programs, it is essential to provide cross-cultural training and support from the start, to help participants navigate their personal differences effectively. This can include cultural sensitivity training, clear communication guidelines, and strategies for building trust and rapport in virtual settings. Additionally, fostering a supportive and inclusive virtual community can help participants bridge cultural and personality gaps to achieve successful outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

Unprecedented events brought by the global pandemic have caused many inconveniences to communities and societies around the world. Many activities including online learning and even student exchange program have to be pushed to the cloud and carried out online. It is understandable that, in future, lockdown measures might need to be reinstated when the whole world faces another global health emergency. However, when it comes to virtual experiences including virtual student exchange and virtual student mobility, the world is more than ready to ensure their success. Indeed, in recent years there has been a growing trend of students participating in online or virtual student exchange programs (Adnan, 2018). These programs provide an opportunity for students to study abroad without having to leave their home country. This type of exchange is becoming increasingly popular among higher education institutions even prior to the global pandemic rearing its ugly head, as it offers a number of benefits for both students and universities.

As the empirical data we collected show, one of the main advantages of virtual student exchange is that it is more affordable than traditional study abroad programs. This is because students do not need to pay for travel expenses or accommodation. Additionally, many universities offer scholarships and financial aid for students who participate in these programs. Another benefit of virtual student exchange is that it is more flexible than traditional programs. Students can choose when and for how long they want to participate in the program. This means that they can study abroad during their break, or even take a semester off from their university to participate in a program. Finally, virtual student exchange programs provide an opportunity for students to gain international experience without having to leave their home country. This is especially beneficial for students who may not be able to travel abroad due to financial or personal reasons. Additionally, these programs allow students to meet and interact with people from all over the world, which can help them develop a global perspective. Overall, virtual student exchange programs offer a number of benefits for both students and universities. These programs are more affordable and flexible than traditional study abroad programs, and they provide an opportunity for students to gain international experience without having to leave their home country.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the empirical data we collected also suggest that 'actual' student exchange programs can help to create exposure and opportunity for students to leave their home country and enjoy the travelling journey and experience the world. However, the questions being posed is, will online or virtual student exchange program provide the same experience to students, in future? There are some foreseeable challenges, including language barrier, lack of participation, lack of actual interest, difficulty in cultural exchange and even technological issues that need to be ameliorated from the outset. Furthermore, there will also be a number of teething technological constraints causing annoying miscommunication or misunderstanding but these can be ironed out as the experience progresses. In terms of readiness, although the participants, the lecturers in particular, question the efficiency of having virtual student exchange programs they understand that inevitably virtual experience will figure more prominently in university learning spaces. Although online instruction is not as effective due to the lack of two-way communication between students and lecturers, in virtual exchange and virtual mobility programs, the aims and objective of the experience are perhaps not too rigid and actual program or course learning outcomes.

Of course, some of these unsolved issues and problems can continue to creep into virtual student exchange and virtual mobility programs whereby the participants might not enjoy the same levels of interaction compared to a physical session; language barrier will also continue to be an issue according to the research participants because students already find it challenging to communicate between themselves. The use of hand gestures and facial expressions that are limited by overseas video conferencing will make this process even more difficult. Cultural and personality differences too, will continue to make virtual environments difficult to navigate in virtual student exchange and virtual student mobility programs. But, as the participants in our empirical research effort observed, sometimes the only way to meet the challenge of navigating online and virtual spaces is to continue making strides into the virtual universe. Only by extending the boundaries of teaching and learning, instructing and training beyond the traditional classroom will we be able to become more proficient and efficient at bridging the physical new normal with the virtual universe.

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