

ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) Going Global: Students' Perception

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Abstract: ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) upsurges several opportunities for ASEAN students and higher education administrators operating in the ASEAN region. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the AIMS program from the students' perception of studying in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs). The study explores the program's impact on participants by highlighting personal and professional development. Twenty-four students from ten Malaysian universities participated in this study through in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed by semantic extraction and relational extraction in Leximancer. Connectivity rates in Leximancer analysis reveal that respondents understand the importance of AIMS Global for academic progression, international skills development, and holistic education through quality teaching and learning. Respondents urge the need for the AIMS program to expand its local wings into global so that students learn from cultural diversity. Finally, respondents advocate that AIMS programs would be helpful for graduates' employability by enhancing their creativity and English language skills. These findings may assist the AIMS administrators and ASEAN educational leadership in observing the beneficial impact of regional and global mobility.

Keywords: AIMS program, ASEAN International Mobility for Students, ASEAN Mobility, Regional Mobility

Introduction

Student mobility and international participation facilitate the development of students' capabilities to comprehend social change and cultural diversity. Concurrently, it offers knowledge and skills focused on certain disciplines in a complex international context (OHEC, 2016). The Regional Center for Higher Education and Development (RIHED) of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) undertakes student mobility programs throughout the ASEAN nations after realizing its value. A pilot project with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand (MIT) started in 2010 after the 17th SEAMEO-RIHED Governing Board Meeting in Kuala Lumpur in August 2009. It aims to develop a mobility program in the ASEAN spirit. It was carried out effectively, and in 2013, the MIT was named ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS). The project expanded as more nations and disciplines were added. In 2013, Brunei and Vietnam joined AIMS. International business, agriculture,

hospitality and tourism, language and culture, and food technology are already disciplines, while engineering and economics have recently emerged. The core principles of AIMS are as follows:

1. Self-sufficiency and solidarity, where each member nation supports its participation in the programs and advances jointly following its level of academic preparedness.
2. Balanced mobility, where AIMS encourages both reciprocity and balanced mobility. Based on mutual agreement between the participating higher education institutions chosen by their respective governments, the agreed number of exchange students is set.
3. Supporting system wherein the steering committee and yearly review meetings allow governments, institutions, and students to update progress, discuss problems, and suggest additional program enhancements (Sujatanond, 2018).

The AIMS program offers numerous advantages. It benefits HEIs, students, and member nations to go beyond boundaries. AIMS increases the exposure and recognition of higher education in Southeast Asia and establishes a reputation as a nation that can provide international education, which will entice enrollment from overseas students. Universities in ASEAN can participate in a regional exchange program and build ongoing networks for chances in future international programs among member nations (Symaco & Tee, 2019; Khalid et al., 2019; Soejatminah, 2018). Thus, working in harmony will help each country's economy and higher-quality human capital in the ASEAN region.

The current era witnessed that the political, economic, and social development of a country is significantly influenced by the internationalization of higher education (Atherton et al., 2021). Munusamy and Hashim (2019) highlight that the internationalization of higher education enhances the Malaysian economy and the sector's enormous potential if fully integrated. Malaysian universities also earn significantly from the advantages of effective international mobility programs in this highly competitive global higher education market environment. The intensification of student mobility and cross-border collaboration, coming with increased internationalization, improves economic integration in the Asian region. Most of Malaysia's public institutions made international student mobility programs one of their top priorities (Soejatminah, 2018). Hence, the AIMS program allows students to study abroad and learn the cultures of specific nations.

Studies from researchers outside the ASEAN region also support that mobility benefits students. Dolga et al. (2015) stated that students are drawn to international mobility programs for various reasons, including their desire for new experiences, knowledge of other cultures, and social interaction. It is essential to comprehend how students, particularly those studying, living and performing in society in the host country. Additionally, from the standpoint of second language socialization, Watson and Wolfel (2015) emphasized a favorable relationship between language and culture when studying abroad, particularly for students from Malaysia and UiTM. Additionally, students' high degree of intercultural competency knowledge determines their high levels of attitudes and abilities.

Although some scholars (e.g., Atherton et al., 2021; Nordin et al., 2020; Munusamy & Hashim, 2019) have attempted to inspect the role of mobility programs, there is still a scarcity of research examining the AIMS's impact from students' viewpoint, particularly in Malaysia. A recent study by Yodpet et al. (2022) stressed the need to systematically investigate how mobility programs in the ASEAN region help achieve students' dreams of being an international member. Therefore, the present study aims to probe the students' perception of the AIMS program and how it can brace up students in the global community.

Literature Review

Development of Internationalization and Regionalization in ASEAN

Regionalization and internationalization are generally acknowledged as significant determinants of international education (Yang, 2018). According to Knight (2014), the contemporary internationalization of higher education incorporates "the international, intercultural, or global dimension" of higher education into its primary functions and goals. It is also emphasized by the

Organization of American States (2022), which commends that internationalization and regionalization through higher education are essential to developing a knowledge-based society that prioritizes education for generating knowledge to spur innovation and entrepreneurship. By doing this, universities can easily engage in processes like academic collaboration, student and staff mobility, and the development and exchange of global knowledge.

With a critical goal of facilitating and regulating access to and participation in quality higher education to develop a sustainable knowledge-based society and strengthen its global presence, the ASEAN AIMS chapter has made its own mobility program development. Especially for ASEAN, the goal is to establish a “supra-national regional organization” that can support affordable, high-quality higher education, and academic collaboration to create a “resilient, vibrant, and sustained ASEAN community” (Engron-Polak & Marinoni, 2022, p. 79). Such a notion was also mentioned by Vongthep Arthakaivalvatee, deputy secretary-general of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, quoted:

“As we continue to encourage the free movement of goods, services, and people in ASEAN, it is imperative to assure that the quality of our higher education is at par with agreed international and regional standards; and that our education systems thrive in a culture of quality and credibility” (ASEAN, 2016, para. 3 as cited in Khalid et al., 2019, p. 82).

Hence, the ASEAN AIMS chapter realized the importance of international and regional connectivity, and other consolidated educational quality mobility programs, such as AIMS (Engron-Polak & Marinoni, 2022; Khalid et al., 2019). ASEAN member nations move closer toward integrating their socio-cultural values and creating a knowledge-based society fueled by student mobility and intra-regional, regional, and global collaboration.

ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS)

The SEAMEO-RIHED, AIMS secretariat, and decisions taken at the steering committee level impact how AIMS is implemented in Malaysia. Before the AIMS Review Meeting, the Steering Committee Meeting took place each year. The summit provides a forum for all member nations and representatives to interact and debate concerns pertaining to students, curriculum, networking, student transfer credit, and other topics.

The ASEAN, Japan, and the Republic of Korea are all parties to the Government-to-Government agreement known as AIMS, which is fully funded. Students will receive financial aid to help them with the following scenarios:

1. Flight tickets to the host country
2. Visa
3. Accommodation
4. Living expenses
5. Books and other related expenses

Prior research on the internationalization of higher education emphasized the importance of mobility and its vital role in developing regionalization. For instance, Chao (2017) recommends that increased intraregional student mobility is crucial in developing the ASEAN community and helpful in improving the economic development of the whole region. In particular, intraregional student mobility can strengthen the ASEAN identity and mold future ASEAN citizens, entrepreneurs, and leaders of the ASEAN community. Moreover, some researchers (Skrefsrud, 2022; Cheng, 2021; Bista et al., 2018) found that student mobility helps foster intercultural and social understanding. Hence, raising future generations of learners prepared to address global difficulties requires ASEAN to establish a futuristic form of multimodal, value-based, and rooted mobility with a common objective.

AIMS Going Global

The most eminent mobility program in Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, is known as AIMS. AIMS has established itself as students' preferred study-abroad mobility program for the past ten years. The growing number of exchange programs and inbound and outbound students can be attributed to the strategic alliance between Asian nations; the government's assistance in supporting the program's partial funding is the other factor.

The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization's Center for regional higher education development, SEAMEO-RIHED, was established in 1965 in Singapore before being reformed and moved to Thailand in 1993. SEAMEO-RIHED seeks to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and harmonization of higher education in the entire Southeast Asia through research, empowerment, and the development of structures to encourage sharing and cooperation in the sector. It has actively participated in creating numerous regional frameworks and mechanisms, such as the Academic Credit Transfer Framework for Asia (ACTFA), alongside founding the AIMS program (SEAMEO-RIHED, 2012).

By 2015, the AIMS program was anticipated to have mobilized at least 500 students around the region. In recent years, AIMS has included Korea and Japan in the mobility program (SEAMEO-RIHED, 2018). The recent development shows that AIMS is consistently expanding its operation within and outside ASEAN. By considering AIMS students' experiences, refining the AIMS program's identity, and the knowledge and skills attained after participation in the AIMS program, AIMS made progress in enhancing regional identity and creating AIMS ideologies. The leaders of AIMS decided to use the phrase "Exploring Asia, Embracing Diversity" to reflect the identity of the AIMS program and the three AIMS traits: intercultural competence, self-competency, and regional and global awareness. The 7th Steering Committee of AIMS considered the AIMS Virtual Regional Orientation Program to enhance mobility.

Malaysia in Context

AIMS initiative aims to create a vibrant student mobility program for nationals of all SEAMEO member countries, including Malaysia. Through student exchange program, the initiative aims to promote inter-university collaboration and globalization. This program supports the institution's institutional internationalization strategy and the university's global aspirations. As a result, Malaysia has established a Blueprint for Higher Education (2015–2025) that aims to include Malaysian universities in regional and worldwide rankings (Sirat & Wan, 2016). Key activities to strategically advertise HEIs in Malaysia include working with other agencies and ministries, expanding the number of postgraduate and international students, and enhancing marketing and promotion strategies (Da Wan, Sirat & Razak, 2020).

Watson and Wolfel (2015) emphasized a favorable relationship between language and culture when studying abroad, particularly for students from UiTM, Malaysia. It is so that students' high levels of attitudes and abilities can be determined by their high degree of intercultural competency knowledge (Tholiban et al., 2021). Gesing and Glass (2019) stated that in a recent study, students' experiences and expectations of program choices might vary depending on location. Students from Malaysia have demonstrated that increased international mobility has improved their self-confidence, given them more opportunities to be autonomous, and more travel to other countries (Azzwan & Azhar, 2016). As a result, with member nations' cooperation, the ASEAN community may benefit from regional and global members (Crocco & Tkachenko, 2022). Thus, regional and worldwide mobility program help Malaysian students to gain intercultural knowledge and cultural diversity.

Methodology

Data Collection

For data collection, semi-structured interviews were organized with students from Malaysian universities collaboratively working with AIMS: "Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)." The interview structure was developed over time and continuously adapted during the research period from March 1 until April 30, 2022. The interview was conducted online and lasted 1 hour.

Data Analysis

Among the 24 respondents, 9 were women, and 15 were men. The interviews resulted in 13 transcription pages which were then uploaded into Leximancer. The researchers then followed Leximancer's two extraction stages to interpret and visually display the data: semantic extraction and relational extraction (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). In the semantic extraction stage, the data were analyzed to identify concepts. Concepts are "collections of words that generally run together throughout the text" (Leximancer, 2022). Leximancer distinguishes between two types of concepts: word-like concepts and name-like concepts. Name-like concepts are words the software identifies as proper names; word-like concepts are any other concepts corresponding to everyday words. Based on the frequency of occurrence of words and co-occurrence, the software created concepts from the data. It weighted the existing concepts in a co-occurrence matrix based on their frequency in the data. Using the co-occurrence statistics, it then created a thesaurus for each concept with words and phrases particularly relevant to the concept in the text, creating semantic meaning around the concept. This resulted in both explicit (i.e., directly stated words and phrases) and implicit (i.e., implied but not directly stated in a set of predefined terms) concepts (Harwood et al., 2015; Rooney, 2005).

In the second stage of extraction, relational extraction, the data was re-examined, and the text was coded based on the semantic classifiers (concepts) identified in the semantic extraction stage. Statistics were calculated, including the number of concepts, the number of co-occurrences of concepts, and the relative frequency of co-occurrence of concepts. Themes were extracted to identify related concepts using the statistical data. Themes were then named according to the most prominent concept (semantic meaning and interconnectivity with other concepts) rather than the most frequently occurring concept (Harwood et al., 2015). A "concept map" was created to represent the themes and underlying concepts, and to show the interconnections (Campbell et al., 2011).

Findings and Discussion

Respondent Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 shows that most students are 23 years old (28.6%). The gender distribution shows that most respondents are male (71.4%), with 57.1% being Muslims. Most respondents were from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI, 57.1%), and the rest were from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS, 42.9%). Regarding the year of study, most respondents are third-year students (57.1%), followed by second-year (28.6%), and the lowest percentage, first-year (14.3%). Regarding disability, 28.6% of the respondents have eye impairment, cerebral palsy, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), with 14.3% each. The remaining respondents (42.9%) are normal and have no disability.

Table 1. Respondent profile

Gender	Male	62.5%
	Female	37.5%
Age	22 years old	37.5%
	23 years old	41.7%
	24 years old	20.8%
Religion	Islam	50.0%
	Christian	33.3%
	Buddha	16.7%
University	Universiti Malaya (UM)	8.3%
	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	8.3%
	Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)	8.3%
	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)	12.5%
	Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	8.3%
	Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)	20.8%
	Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)	12.5%

	Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP)	4.2%
	Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)	12.5%
	Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)	4.2%
Year of Study	Year 3	83.3%
	Year 4	16.7%
Alumni AIMS	Yes	66.7%
	No	33.3%

Perceptions about AIMS Global

The Leximancer concept map for respondents' perceptions of AIMS Global is shown in Figure 6. The map's 39 concepts (shown as little gray nodes) are arranged into 12 themes (indicated by the larger colored circles). Colors are used to map themes. The most pertinent subjects are indicated by hot colors (red and orange) and the least relevant by cool colors (blue and green). The 12 themes and their corresponding connectivity rates (in parentheses) were "students" (100%), "international" (57%), "knowledge" (45%), "education" (41%), "study" (35%), "experience" (32%), "need" (14%), "practice" (14%), "world" (9%), "writing" (7%), "critical" (3%), and "creativity" (2%). In Leximancer analysis, connectivity rates represent the concepts in the topic referenced along with a certain proportion of times; they show the relative importance of themes, with the central theme reporting 100%. Connecting concepts within these themes was used to determine the connectivity rate percentages, which represented the relative relevance of these themes within the dataset (Leximancer, 2021). "Students" was the most significant theme among the students' perceptions of AIMS Global. The word "students" was mentioned 1640 times in the 39 concepts' frequency of occurrence that emerged from the analysis.

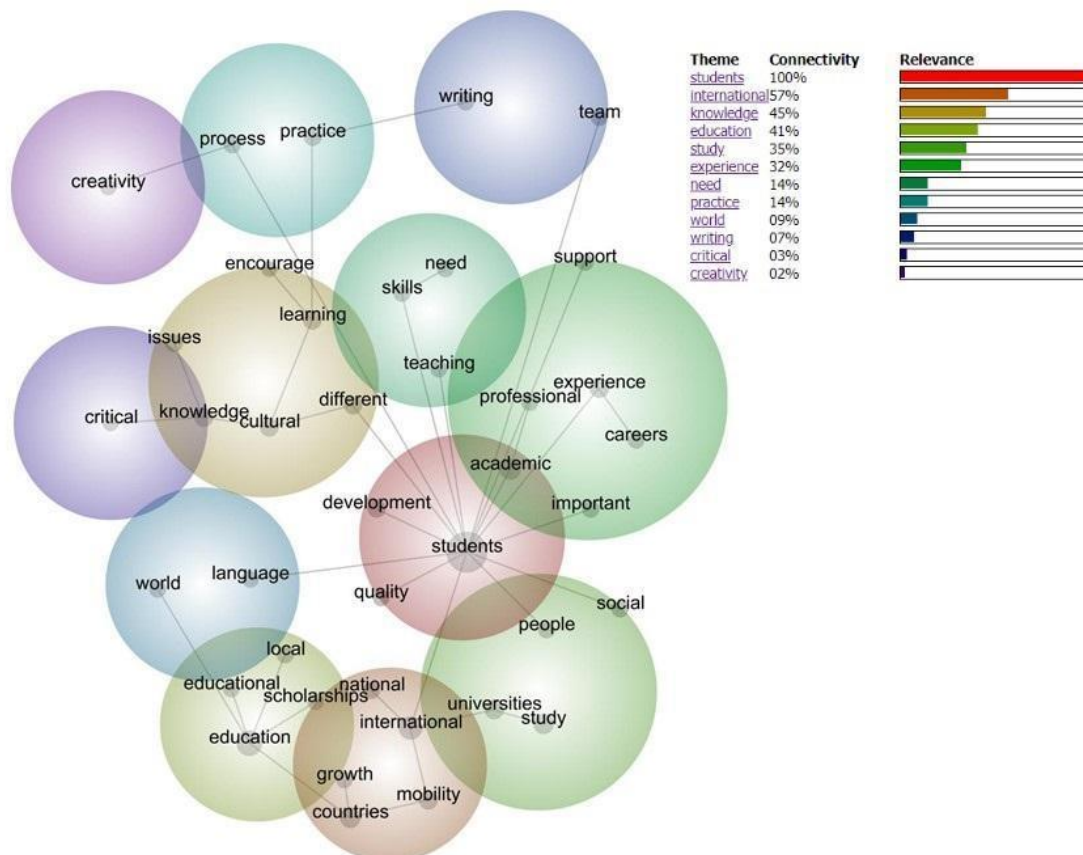


Fig. 1 Conceptual map based on students' perceptions of AIMS Global

The theme “students” was paired with the concepts “academic,” “development,” and “quality” under the red bubble, suggesting that students understand the importance of AIMS Global for academic progression, development of international skills, and ensuring a holistic education through quality teaching and learning process. Therefore, “international” has the second highest connectivity in the dataset with 57% connectivity, showing that AIMS Global refers to the growth of mobility programs internationally. Although AIMS itself is already “international” under this dataset, the respondents stated that the AIMS program should go beyond national and regional boundaries, thus offering the mobility program to other countries worldwide. The following statements of the respondents confirm this:

- Respondent 1 *I would like to experience the other part of the world if given another chance for AIMS mobility exchange. I want to share the Asian culture with other countries such as the US, France, Egypt, and the UK.*
- Respondent 5 *Education is growing, so why not the mobility program? It's about time that we go beyond Malaysia or the Asian region! We must be bold and dare to share and learn from the westerners.*
- Respondent 7 *AIMS Global sounds really fun! Sounds more international!*

The mobility primarily aims to allow the students to receive a versatile “world-class” education in the chosen field of education, increase the learners’ understanding in all facets of world culture, make the person feel like a global citizen, and offer the person access to the universally acknowledged centers of knowledge where the top scientific schools have historically emerged. Thus, Figure 1 shows that the theme “knowledge” is significantly related to the theme “students” (45%). This indicates that respondents are very interested in learning about different cultural aspects of the world, especially encouraging them to explore critical issues. Thus, there is a connection with “critical” with a connectivity of 3%.

- Respondent 3 *If I were allowed to choose, I would go to the other side of Asia. I want to learn more about their culture and understand their language better.*
- Respondent 19 *I read about “globalization”... It means that you learn from outside but bring back the knowledge and adapt it locally. I want to do that! I want to help my country, especially my community. Help solve critical issues here.*
- Respondent 24 *I think what is important is whether what we have learned from global mobility can help us solve our country's problems, especially related to SDGs. We go there to learn and hope that the knowledge and experience can benefit us.*

International mobility is essential in internationalizing higher education, as cross-border movements benefit students and universities. Thus, “education” is linked to “internationalization” with 41% connectivity in the dataset (see Fig 1). A vital push factor is the scholarship initiatives to participate in international mobility programs offered by universities and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). Respondents know the benefits of such programs and always look forward to participating in at least one program during their studies. Respondents felt they needed more than the local educational background and environment. They agreed that to be competitive, they need the “world” element. This could include the world language. Therefore, the topic “world” was mentioned with 9% connectivity.

- Respondent 10 *I would definitely want to go for the student mobility program. However, my main concern is financial support. I came from a B40 family, and it is very costly for my family and me. It'll be nice if a full scholarship is provided for the program.*
- Respondent 16 *I would say that the mobility program is vital in today's education. What makes you different from the rest of the graduates? I would definitely say that I have internationalization experience, I speak from the world view.*
- Respondent 20 *The word “world” will totally makes an impact to local students who are looking for jobs out there.*

The theme of “study” and “experience” with the connectivity of 35% and 32%, respectively, is important in our study. Most respondents said that students should attend international universities and, in this case, go beyond their regional boundaries to meet and connect with others worldwide. Through this, students can gain more experience, especially regarding their career and professional skills development. This gives them added value to their studies.

- Respondent 1 *The mobility program had to influence certain aspect of my personality, for example before the mobility program, I am quite an introvert person. However, today, I am less shy and confident enough to face any challenges, especially talking to other people, which increases my English proficiency.*
- Respondent 12 *When I first started studying, my parent prepared everything for me. Even they tag along to help me with my registration and college settling. However, when I decided to participate in the mobility program, I had to do everything by myself when I arrived in Korea. It was hard when you always had your parent's help. I slowly develop self-independent afterwards until today. Which is good and useful for my career.*
- Respondent 17 *I met a lot of people. All kind of backgrounds when I was in Japan. I love to connect and meet them. We shared stories about our countries, talked about differences and learned from each other, embracing the differences. I love it!*

The theme of “need” was also associated with the term “students” at 14%, suggesting that respondents believe they need a global mobility program to gain experience and develop skills for their future employability. Respondents believe that global mobility across regional borders allows them to learn more about their learning experiences, understand what they have learned, what skills they have acquired, and how their exchange has changed their view of the world and their behavior toward others when they start their first job.

- Respondent 8 *The ability to translate what you have learned in another country has become even more critical when the job interviewer knows that you participated in a mobility program.*
- Respondent 11 *Studying abroad allows students to access high-quality education, learn skills that may not be taught at home, and become closer to labor markets that give a greater return on investment. Studying abroad is often considered as a means to boost employability in increasingly globalized labor markets.*
- Respondent 22 *In this kind of global climate, I think you need to study abroad or at least complete an internship abroad. It's good to show that you already have the experience of having to adapt to a new place. Good for employability as well.*

Figure 1 also shows that going global instead of regional is good for students' creativity (2% connectivity) and English writing skills (7% connectivity).

- Respondent 1 *Don't get me wrong, having mobility program at the regional level is ok. However, if we can go out further from our comfort zone, like the United States, Scotland, Russia, and many other “globally” countries, not only can we improve so much in our English proficiency but also in the writing skill. In fact, such global exposure can develop our creative mind further. Because we are “forced” to think more and creatively for survival hahaha...*
- Respondent 6 *I guess the main reason to go abroad is the process of learning. To learn from them and adopt it here afterwards. Therefore, it's best to learn more and develop skills from developed countries.*
- Respondent 13 *The best way to learn and improve the English proficiency especially in writing, is to go to countries with English as native language.*

Conclusion

In Southeast Asia, mobility programs are branded with the name AIMS. All of the challenges that lie ahead will be opportunities to advance higher education institutions toward meaningful norms. Alongside staff mobility, appropriate and active international affairs management, research and networking collaboration; and support from SEAMEO-RIHED, the government, and other higher education institutions, AIMS may serve as a model for student mobility and can go beyond borders. From being a pandemic to becoming endemic, COVID-19 is now. This will not stop the trend of internationalization, collaboration, and mobility programs harmonizing higher education in this region. The success of this initiative will entice more nations to participate and learn how we recovered from the crisis. This crisis has once again demonstrated the strategic value of networks in collaborating, exchanging knowledge, and solving problems. As a result, we will work hard as a network to seize the chances that the last two years have presented to improve higher education, making it more accessible, adaptable, and resilient. To accomplish this, ASEAN must gather all members around a table, promote information sharing, and work toward shared objectives among members and the global educational community.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the study focused only on domestic students involved in AIMS. Future studies could use respondents from other countries to examine their perceptions of AIMS mobility. Second, data from stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Higher Education, SEAMEO-RIHED, the government, and other higher education institutions in AIMS must identify the strategies and direction of AIMS to attract more participants from ASEAN countries.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors confirm their contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: Nor Akmar Abdul Aziz and Fiffy Hanisdah Saikim; data collection: Nordiana Mohd Nordin; analysis and interpretation of results: Fiffy Hanisdah Saikim and Jamshed Khalid. All authors reviewed the results and approved the manuscript's final version.

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