

Without Crossing a Border: Malaysia AIMS Mobility on Students Intercultural Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Mobility programs have been changed to online or virtual to overcome traveling restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual mobility (VM) programs have been introduced to foster mobility experiences during the pandemic. Intercultural experience is usually connected with mobility programs overseas. However, the participants may have varied intercultural experiences during the VM program. This study will explore the intercultural experiences of outbound tourism students during their participation in The Asian International Mobility for Students (AIMS) program from 2020 to 2021. This study also discusses the advantages and disadvantages of online AIMS program. E-interview or online interviews are employed with a purposive sample of 13 AIMS outbound tourism students from a university in Terengganu. This study shows that the students experience dissatisfaction with online mobility and restricted opportunities in making their intercultural experience. However, they stated that this program brings more advantages than disadvantages despite all the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, intercultural experience, virtual mobility, students, e-interview

Introduction

An unprecedented economic and social lockdown resulted from the novel coronavirus illness 2019 (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China. This had far-reaching economic, political, and social consequences, including educational ones (Bretas & Alon, 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). Transitioning from traditional to online learning has significantly changed working and studying habits (de Haas et al., 2020, Karim et al., 2021). At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, Malaysia imposed quarantine, and travel restrictions; however, as COVID-19 cases continued to rise, the Movement Control Order—which mandated the closure of all businesses aside from those offering necessities like food and shelter—was finally put into effect on March 18, 2020 (Tang, 2020). The mobility program being conducted online or virtually is a response to the restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which made physical travel and in-person exchanges challenging or impossible. By transitioning to an online or virtual format, the program can continue to provide international educational opportunities while ensuring the health and safety of the participants. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to travel restrictions, border closures, and social distancing measures worldwide. In response, educational institutions, including universities, have adapted their programs to remote or online formats to minimise the risk of virus transmission and ensure the continuity of learning. The decision to conduct the mobility program virtually allows students to engage in international experiences without needing

physical travel. Through online platforms, students can still benefit from cross-cultural interactions, collaborative projects, and knowledge exchange with peers from different countries.

While virtual mobility may differ from traditional physical mobility regarding the immersive experience and direct cultural exposure, it offers alternative avenues for international engagement during travel restrictions. It allows students to gain intercultural competencies, expand their global networks, and develop skills relevant to the digital era. The shift to virtual mobility in response to the pandemic has highlighted the importance and potential of online learning and remote collaboration. It has also opened possibilities for future mobility programs, offering flexibility, scalability, and reduced logistical constraints. Notably, the decision to conduct the mobility program virtually during the pandemic was a temporary measure in response to the unique circumstances. As the situation evolves and travel restrictions ease, universities may consider reintroducing physical mobility options alongside virtual formats to provide students with a wide range of opportunities for international experiences.

The COVID-19 epidemic touched all higher education institutions (HEIs), but mobility programs particularly suffered the constraints and limits relating to lockdowns. Malaysia is included in the prognosis of HEIs in important destination countries for 2021 (Mok et al., 2020). Technology has begun to shift the dynamics of global learning and how students study abroad. Intercultural experience in higher education studies traditionally involves student mobility to other countries for a short program or a semester, or longer, where they can live, and learn in another culture. Virtual reality travel allows people to experience the world at the convenience of their own homes (Lee & Snow, 2021, Oviedo & Krimphove, 2022, Rai, Koirala, Zangmo & Zadravec, 2022, Osman, 2022). The COVID-19 outbreak and its aftermath have had a significant negative influence on this mobility program (Vogt & Wick, 2020).

AIMS Program

Launched in 2010 under the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), the AIMS Program has been connecting the government, universities, and students in the Southeast Asian region, fostering collaboration, and partnership among these stakeholders. As an initiative of SEAMEO, the AIMS Program aims to enhance the quality of education and promote regional integration through student mobility and academic cooperation. By bringing governments, universities, and students together, the program facilitates exchanges, joint research projects, and capacity-building activities. The government's involvement ensures the support and endorsement of the program at a policy level. Governments play a vital role in providing the necessary resources, creating favorable frameworks for mobility initiatives, and facilitating students' participation from their respective countries.

Universities are key partners in the AIMS Program, as they implement and coordinate mobility activities. They work closely with SEAMEO and government entities to design curricula, establish partnerships with other universities, and facilitate the smooth operation of the program. Universities provide the academic infrastructure and support services necessary for the students' successful participation in the program. The students themselves are the beneficiaries of the AIMS Program. They have the opportunity to experience studying and living in different countries within the Southeast Asian region. The program allows students to broaden their horizons, gain intercultural competence, and develop a regional perspective. The program also promotes networking and establishes lifelong connections among students from different countries. It plays a significant role in advancing educational cooperation and regional integration, ultimately contributing to the development and growth of the participating countries.

The AIMS Program, which originally started in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, has significantly expanded its reach over time. Currently, the program includes 9 Member Countries and 80 Member universities, showcasing its growth, and success in promoting regional collaboration and mobility. Expanding of the AIMS Program to include more Member Countries reflects the increasing recognition of the program's benefits and the growing interest among Southeast Asian nations to foster educational cooperation and student mobility. By joining the program, these countries and their universities demonstrate their commitment to enhancing regional integration and providing opportunities for their students to gain international experiences. Including of new Member Countries

expands the diversity and richness of the program. Each country brings its unique cultural heritage, academic expertise, and educational resources to the AIMS network. This diversity allows greater cross-cultural exchange, fostering mutual understanding, and appreciation among students from different countries.

The significant increase in the number of member universities highlights the growing interest and engagement of higher education institutions in the region. These universities are crucial in implementing the AIMS Program, facilitating student exchanges, and fostering academic collaboration. The collective efforts of the member universities contribute to the program's success and offering a broad range of study opportunities for participating students. With 9 Member Countries and 80 Member universities, the AIMS Program has established a robust network of educational institutions across Southeast Asia. This network serves as a platform for cooperation, knowledge sharing, and the promotion of regional mobility. It strengthens the educational landscape of the region, supports the development of human capital, and fosters closer ties among participating countries. The continued expansion of the AIMS Program's membership reflects its positive impact and the value it brings to participating countries and universities. It demonstrates the commitment of Southeast Asian nations to collaborate in education, promotes regional integration, and enhances the quality of learning experiences for their students.

Malaysia AIMS Program

The exchange program includes the activity of inbound and outbound students from partner countries or universities with the same niche areas. There are about 10 niche areas: Hospitality & Tourism, Agriculture, Language & Culture, International Business, Food Science & Technology, Engineering, Economics, Environmental Management & Science, Biodiversity, and Marine Science. To encourage mobility activity, each participating university will send their students to universities abroad with the same niche areas. About 10 selected public universities in Malaysia participated in this mobility program: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, and Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT). All those universities were selected based on their strong niche areas that matched the AIMS niche areas.

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) niche areas: Hospitality & Tourism, Environmental Management & Science, Biodiversity, and Marine Science. Among the AIMS Universities that match this niche is Dongguk University, Korea whose niche area is Hospitality & Tourism. For this study, 13 female students of Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors from the Faculty of Business, Economics, and Social Development, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) were selected to join this exchange program under AIMS Virtual Mobility program in 2021. The students comprise 11 Malays and 2 Indians from different semesters in 2020 - 2021 who joined this AIMS virtual mobility for a semester at Dongguk University, Korea. They were all considered outbound students regardless of the VM they joined. In this paper, the intercultural experience of the inbound students, the Dongguk University students, will not be discussed as this paper will only focus on the outbound intercultural experience of the Malaysian students.

This paper, will describe virtual mobility (VM) between Universiti Malaysia Terengganu and Dongguk University, Korea and discuss the main findings. The collaboration was part of the AIMS Exchange Mobility Program under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Higher Education. Learning with Korean friends from the host culture would trigger a process of deeper intercultural learning beyond the engagement with concepts in a textbook, and therefore be an effective way to prepare the Malaysian students before going abroad. This collaboration structures opportunities for intercultural interaction and active exploration of the host country, while providing students with opportunities for reflective learning. This paper will first set out the overview of the intercultural experience, highlight the objectives, and expand on the method design before discussing the evaluation and outcomes drawing from students' answers from the e-interview. Finally, it will finish with a conclusion and recommendation.

Overview of Intercultural Experience

Intercultural communication describes the interaction and exchange of messages among people from different cultures (Hall, 2005; Ganapathi, 2019). Meanwhile, notions of intercultural competency might change depending on intercultural experience and current global conversation (Gierke et al., 2018). A longitudinal study using representative samples is required to establish how intercultural competence definitions change over time (Bui, 2021). Most Southeast Asian students, especially those from Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia, are driven to study cultural awareness, build their capacities to address global concerns, and apply their knowledge to students from other cultural backgrounds in a multicultural environment (Ramawati et. al., 2021). The mobility program also aims for international students to become more adept at interacting with people from diverse cultures, alongside eradicating the inaccurate perceptions and prejudices propagated by the media (Baiutti, 2021).

Through the mobility program, students can gather intercultural experiences throughout their university years. As the pandemic era approached, mobility programs' goals to internationalize exchange and local students were less successfully achieved (Koris, Mato-Daz, and Hernández-Nanclares, 2021). Despite being generally beneficial, the physical program suffers from serious issues, such as financial, and social selectivity, deterring many students from participating (Dait and Hafiz, 2019; Deverell et al., 2020). The stigmatization of the "Chinese Virus" and even hostage-taking and prejudice were suffered by students in the final stages of the outbreak in the nations hosting international students from China, including the U.S., U.K., and Australia (Wang, 2020). As for the students with a more practical session to apply their theories, such as midwifery students, finance, care responsibilities, the influence on studies, and language limitations are all obstacles to mobility (Borelli et. al, 2022). Though they are commonly mentioned as communication difficulties in the literature, how language barriers and cultural distance actually affect the exchange of ideas remains unclear (God & Zhang, 2019).

VM presents a ground-breaking chance for students to participate in and encounter mobility programs, making them more attainable, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (López-Duarte et al., 2022). VM provides a viable alternative for college students residing in remote areas, allowing them to engage in a global and multicultural experience (Zorina et al, 2019). Intercultural experiences in VM cultivate an appreciation for one's cultural heritage and offer a new dimension of student identity through increased knowledge and technological literacy. (Francisco, 2022). Based on the traditional or physical mobility exchange program, students were more internationally-oriented, understanding of the cultural variety, and engaged in intercultural experiences, with increased academic performance; this made them universal citizens and gave them a foremost overview of numerous lifestyles, cultures, and work ethics (Jiménez-Castañeda et al., 2018; Daniel, 2018; Rahim, 2021).

Students who returned to their home country reported online communication with other students to be more beneficial to their online learning experience and had a better academic transition than those who stayed in the host nation (Wilczewski, Gorbaniuk & Giuri, 2021). The statement suggests that students who returned to their home country during their online learning experience reported more benefits and a smoother academic transition than those who stayed in the host nation. It implies that online communication with other students significantly impacted their positive experiences. There can be several reasons why returning home might have been more beneficial for these students:

1. **Familiarity and Support System:** Returning to their home country allows students to be in a familiar environment surrounded by their family and friends. This familiarity can provide emotional support, a sense of belonging, and a conducive atmosphere for studying.
2. **Language and Cultural Comfort:** Being in their home country means students can communicate in their native language, which enhancing their understanding, and participation in online discussions. Moreover, they can connect with peers with the same cultural background, facilitating better communication, and social interaction.
3. **Access to Resources:** Returning home may give students better access to resources necessary for online learning, such as a reliable internet connection, study materials, libraries, or

academic support services. This improved access can contribute to a more effective learning experience.

4. Time Zone Considerations: Depending on the distance between the host nation and the home country, students who return home might be in a more favorable time zone for synchronous online classes and discussions. This can lead to better engagement and participation in real-time interactions.
5. Reduced Distractions: Staying in a host nation may present various distractions, such as a different living environment, language barriers, or unfamiliar cultural practices. Returning home eliminates some of these distractions, allowing students to focus more on their studies.

It is important to note that individual experiences may vary, and the factors influencing the online learning experience can be complex. Some students may have found staying in the host nation to be more advantageous due to specific circumstances or personal preferences. Additionally, technological infrastructure, internet connectivity, and availability of resources in the home country and host nation can significantly impact the overall learning experience. Therefore, while returning home may have proven beneficial for some students, considering a range of factors and individual circumstances is crucial when assessing the overall impact of online communication and academic transitions during the pandemic.

During conventional (in-person) exchange programs, the challenges of adaptability, and encountering culture shock are significant focal points. Yakin and Totu (2018) have classified culture shock into three aspects: language, socio-cultural and practical. Virtual mobility programs have provided a solution to mitigate the impact of culture shock while still delivering the anticipated positive outcomes (Pacheco, 2020). Hence, Dahdouh-Guebas and Vandebroek (2021) stated that virtual mobility (VM) programs could effectively decrease the effects of culture shock by offering academic flexibility, enhancing mobility preparedness, and providing opportunities for cultural immersion in host communities.

Nevertheless, VM programs may encounter certain challenges, including selecting appropriate platforms, limited visibility for social media account logins, and difficulties with unintuitive platform flow and links. Furthermore, additional issues can arise in virtual mobility programs regarding creating and formatting learning materials. For instance, not all materials may be available in English or translated appropriately, leading to language barriers. Additionally, there may be challenges with properly displaying tasks and activities, affecting the overall learning experience (Andone et al., 2020). The implications of VM can introduce various obstacles or problems for students in multiple aspects, including teaching and learning, online access, career-related affairs, everyday routines, and social interactions. These challenges can significantly impact the overall experience of students engaging in VM programs (Yakin et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of VM programs has been questioned by various stakeholders, primarily due to their relatively short duration. Concerns have been raised regarding the extent to which these programs can truly provide meaningful intercultural experiences and the associated benefits (López-Duarte et al., 2021). While facing challenges during virtual mobility (VM) programs, exploring students' intercultural experiences may not have been adequately understood or assessed. The limitations and constraints of the virtual format could have hindered the depth and authenticity of intercultural interactions, making it challenging to fully explore and appreciate diverse cultural perspectives and experiences. There are three research hypotheses derived from Kim's (2001, 2005, 2015) Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation that predicted favorable relationships between and among ethnic proximity: host communication proficiency, host interpersonal communication, and psychological health can be used as a guide to the efficiency of the mobility program toward the mobility students.

This study highlighted their intercultural experiences and the advantages and disadvantages of the online courses they have selected, including the students' perspectives and intercultural experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also discussed the importance of students' involvement in the intercultural experience. Improving online education and training is one of the positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic enabling virtual intercultural exchange, and cultural immersion; both must be strengthened after the epidemic. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated online education and training adoption and improvement. As educational institutions

adapted to remote learning during the pandemic, virtual platforms, and digital tools became essential for delivering educational content and facilitating student engagement. This shift to online education has brought several positive effects, including the opportunity for virtual intercultural exchange and cultural immersion.

The virtual intercultural exchange allows students from different countries and cultures to connect and learn from one another, despite physical barriers. Through online platforms, students can engage in virtual discussions, collaborative projects, and cultural activities promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Virtual intercultural exchange enables students to explore diverse perspectives, share their own cultures, and build relationships with peers worldwide. Cultural immersion, although traditionally associated with physical travel and living in a different country, can also be experienced virtually. Online platforms provide opportunities for students to engage with authentic cultural materials, participate in virtual cultural events, and interact with native speakers of different languages. Virtual cultural immersion can enhance students' cultural competence, language skills, and global awareness.

The positive effects of online education and training, including virtual intercultural exchange, and cultural immersion, should be recognized and further strengthened even after the pandemic. By investing in virtual exchange programs, universities, and educational organizations can continue providing international experiences to a broader range of students, regardless of physical mobility constraints. To enhance virtual intercultural exchange and cultural immersion, developing and refining online platforms and tools specifically designed for these purposes is important. These platforms can facilitate meaningful interactions, provide cultural resources, and offer innovative ways to simulate immersive cultural experiences. Additionally, designing virtual exchange programs that incorporate structured activities, guided reflections, and intercultural competency development can maximize the impact of virtual cultural immersion. Furthermore, a collaboration between universities, educational institutions, and organizations across different countries can strengthen virtual intercultural exchange initiatives. By leveraging collective expertise and resources, these collaborations can create more comprehensive and impactful virtual programs that promote intercultural understanding and dialog.

In summary, improving online education, and training during the COVID-19 pandemic has opened new possibilities for virtual intercultural exchange and cultural immersion. By recognizing the value of these virtual experiences and investing in their development, we can continue providing students with transformative international educational opportunities even after the pandemic subsides.

Materials and Method

A total of 13 Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) students (Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honours) from various two ethnic groups and study programs join the AIMS VM program from early 2021 until the end of 2021. The AIMS-VM program allowed them to engage in virtual exchange activities with partner universities from different countries, allowing them to enhance their intercultural understanding and develop valuable skills. The respondents were separated by two different semesters and in two different seasons. The separation into these groups allowed for the program to be conducted and managed effectively within the university's academic schedule. The First Phase starts from 2nd March until 30th June 2021, which is in the Fall season. While the Second Phase is from 30th August until 17th December 2021, which is during the spring season.

The AIMS Program under Dongguk University Gyeongju Campus, South Korea, has been made especially for AIMS students with the subjects and courses offered only to AIMS students. They also include a basic Korean language course as part of the curriculum for their inbound students to understand the basic Korean language while studying there. The students study through virtual mediums and have classes and activities online. At the time of the program, they cannot travel to Korea due to the pandemic situation. The students took classes and participated in activities online. They only ever interacted online or virtually with their professor, lecturers, and classmates. Due to the nature of the virtual program, all their interactions, including discussions, lectures, and communication, were conducted through online platforms or tools. There were no physical or face-to-face interactions between the students and their professors, lecturers, or classmates during the

program. They had to complete online final exams at the end of the semester. At the program's conclusion, there will be a credit transfer, which will be noted on their academic record.

These students completed an e-interview or online interview through Google Forms to share their intercultural experience and the advantages and disadvantages of the program. First, the researcher provides the instruction to elaborate on the meaning of intercultural experience as below:

“Intercultural experience is when you experience a different way of life, traditions, customs, perspectives, thinking, action (example: how you treat people), and cultural values. This focuses on ONE event or experience which you have had with someone different from yourself. For example, choose just one specific encounter or meeting which you have had with a particular person from another country or culture. It may be somebody you already know and have known during the program. The event could be a visit to that person's house. It could be a meeting with someone from a foreign country or another region of your own country. It could be something that happened whilst on a conversation while doing your group assignment, a trip during the program, and so on...”

Intercultural experience refers to the interaction and engagement between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It involves exposure to different cultural norms, values, beliefs, and practices, and encompasses various forms of cross-cultural encounters such as travelling, living abroad, studying in diverse settings, working in multicultural teams, or engaging with individuals from different cultures in any context. This is crucial because it will help them comprehend the meaning of intercultural experience and help them decide which response is more pertinent to their own personal intercultural experiences.

Through intercultural experiences, individuals can develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for cultural diversity, challenge their own assumptions and biases, and foster intercultural competence. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to effectively communicate, interact, and engage with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, demonstrating sensitivity, empathy, and respect for diverse perspectives. By considering these factors, individuals can assess the significance and relevance of their intercultural experiences, helping them determine which responses are more pertinent to their personal journey and growth. Ultimately, the meaning of intercultural experience is subjective and unique to each individual, shaped by their own encounters and reflections. The subjective nature of the meaning of intercultural experience also allows individuals to continually evolve their understanding over time. As they reflect on their encounters, engage in further learning, and engage in more intercultural interactions, their perspectives, and interpretations can shift and deepen.

As shown in Table 1, 13 UMT students participated in the e-interview (online), which comprised Malay, and Indian ethnicity. The participants were all female, ages around 21 to 23 years old. Around 100% of students stayed in quarantine or self-isolation after completing the e-interview or online interview thus limiting their intercultural experiences.

Table 1. Respondents' profile

AIMS Spring Semester 2021, Dongguk University, Gyeongju Campus			
March 2 -June 20, 2021			
No.	Ethnicity	Gender	Program of Study
1	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
2	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
3	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
4	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
5	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
6	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
7	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors

AIMS Falls Semester 2020 Dongguk University, Gyeongju Campus			
August 30 -December 17, 2020			
No.	Ethnicity	Gender	Program of study
1	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
2	Indian	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
3	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
4	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
5	Malay	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors
6	Indian	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors

Research Design: A qualitative study offered a list of questions regarding the students' intercultural experiences and the program's benefits and drawbacks to gather data and answer the research issue.

Procedure: The researcher conducted an e-interview or online interview due to the COVID-19 restriction during the study. This study lasted from May 18 until May 31, 2022. This time frame was chosen after all the respondents finish their VM program on June 2021, giving them ample time to settle down before the e-interview starts. First, the students were informed about the aims and procedures of the study, and participation was voluntary. They could decide to withdraw from the study at any time. The qualitative inquiry followed the interview guide approach using pre-set questions and guiding prompts (Cohen et al., 2018; Galletta, 2013). The interviews conducted online lasted between 10 and 15 minutes only. They answered the question by writing their experience and the researcher will make a follow-up, if necessary. The qualitative method served the purposes of the current study and yielded valuable results, allowing insights into the intercultural experience and perceptions of the participants. The findings cannot be generalized to other students in other mobility programs during the pandemic.

The qualitative data from the respondents that participated in the AIMS Program through an e-interview or online interview was sent out to the 13 respondents from UMT using Google Forms. Participation was voluntary, and no remuneration was provided. The participants were asked to complete an anonymous e-interview or online interview question concerning their intercultural experience with the AIMS Virtual Mobility program during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are free to respond in Malay if they feel it will help them better explain their intercultural experience than in the English-language version of the prepared e-interview or online interview questions. The English language skills of all UMT participants were sufficient to understand the question in the e-interview or online interview. All 13 of the sample's respondents provided responses in English. The e-interview or online interview question was delivered to them within a week to finish it. If more information is required from them, the researcher will occasionally contact them through e-mail considering the COVID-19 situation at the time of the study.

The instrument has two sections—the demographic section and the interview question section, and the intercultural experience section—and was created based on the literature review. Respondents contributed a substantial amount of data, which was manually (thematically) analyzed using an inductive/data-driven methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A qualitative technique for finding, examining, and reporting patterns in a data corpus is the thematic analysis which has been effective in analyzing the qualitative data (Barnieh et al., 2014; Treiber & Jones, 2010). The question “What is a theme?” is a common one that researchers must ask themselves when doing a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). They contend that a theme, regardless of whether it captures the experience of the majority, will capture a significant component of the data in a systematic pattern.

As a result, when doing a thematic analysis, researchers examine whether a set of data adequately addresses the study issue instead of addressing questions about quantity. To create themes, the data must first be collected after being systematically marked with interesting features. The researcher must organize the initial codes into distinct topics and collect all information pertinent to each theme before developing specific themes. Reviewing themes involves examining how well they relate to the coded extracts and the overall data set. Finding the essence of what each theme

conveys—knowing what it is and what it is not—is necessary for defining and labeling themes. The researcher reviewed the data multiple times to become comfortable with it and develop some basic themes. Lastly, when looking for exemplars, the researcher must choose strong examples that support the topic and are connected to the study question (Peel, 2020). Finally, a number of potent, and convincing examples that included context were chosen to illustrate each theme. The themes were divided into the discussions below, each providing an answer to the study question about the respondent's intercultural experience and the advantages and disadvantages of the program.

Findings and Discussion

In total, 13 UMT students of various ethnicities enrolled in the AIMS VM program for two semesters in 2021, and every participant answered the e-interview. Eleven female Malay students and two Indian female students made up the only two ethnic groupings represented. They all studied for the Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors and came from the same faculty, the Faculty of Business, Economics, and Social Development. Each student either takes part in the AIMS Spring Semester or the AIMS Fall Semester. Only the intercultural experiences of the outbound students will be examined in this study.

They were questioned regarding the benefits and drawbacks of the program as well as their personal intercultural experiences. The respondents' use of English syntax, sentence structure, and word choice was not the focus of this study. This study focuses solely on issues linked to intercultural experience and the benefits and drawbacks of this VM program. The intercultural experiences of the inbound students, namely the students from Dongguk University who participated in this exchange program, shall not be discussed.

The Intercultural Experience: AIMS Virtual Mobility program

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, campus closures, and social isolation policies implemented to restrict the virus's spread deprived students of the social aspect and complicated the mobility program. The AIMS Program's idea to transform mobility into VM allowed students to take part and without worrying too much about their finances, travel arrangements, or visas. During these two events, six UMT students who participated in the AIMS Falls Program and seven UMT students in the AIMS Falls Spring Programme shared their cultural experiences. To better understand the student's intercultural experience, questions on what they learned about working with individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures and how they believe it will affect their ability to create a sense of who they are as students were asked. They were questioned about their most and least favorite intercultural experiences they had while participating in the program.

First, findings indicated that respondents who participated in the AIMS Program are aware of the intercultural experience they received from the VM program. The respondents noted that they gained knowledge of the cultures and communication methods of various Asian nations, felt closer to the nations also participating in this program, learned more about the condition/situation of COVID-19 in other nations, and learned how other nations planned to combat the pandemic.

This was shared by the two respondents below:

"I don't know much about their culture. But then once entering into the 2nd week, I enjoyed all classes, and all the lectures shared their knowledge and they let us share ours as well. ..." (Student 1)

"This experience taught me on how to be a culturally wise person and that we need to be more considerate when working with people with different backgrounds and culture ..." (Student 6)

The respondents also discussed their interactions with students from various backgrounds and cultures. After studying the history and culture of other countries, they acquire new information, skills, and develop a greater understanding of how individuals from various cultures behave, respond,

or interact. It is encouraging to know that the VM program broadens their views and viewpoints. As one of the respondents below stated:

“...It is an eye-opening experience as I get to communicate with them and ask them questions directly as it's my first-time having friends from different countries. It has made me more understanding toward people and knowing everyone is just the same despite living in a different country.” (Student 2)

They discover the importance of respecting others' traditions, even when they differ from their own. They understand that they must respect and adapt to other people's customs. The respondents listed below comment on this:

“... Because every culture has its good points. After this experience, as a student I think we should be more exposed to people from different cultures and backgrounds. This will give us a better understanding of different cultures and open our eyes.” (Student 3)

“...the program gives me a new thing to learn, especially tourism storytelling, and confectionery cooking. These two subjects are an eye-opener to me...” (Student 12)

Respondents said they can learn more about various countries through the VM program. They acknowledge that individuals and cultures had an impact on the beliefs and behaviors of those people. They acknowledge that the people have been influenced by the nation's history and traditions. The respondent offers the following explanations:

“... Dongguk University is committed to the vision of contributing to the globalization of Korean culture, including Buddhism, by strengthening the research, and teaching of academic theories and methods in a free and enlightened academic environment. ...” (Student 2)

When they interact with their group mates, the respondent in the host country fully cooperates with them to ensure that they have an authentic, in-person experience of the program. They chose this as one of their conversation subjects because the pandemic touched most of the daily activities and living circumstances, providing opportunities for intercultural interactions. As described by the respondents below:

“...we usually communicate with each other by snapping pictures like markets, night markets, restaurants, and what kind of Korean food is selling here in Malaysia. This makes us get to know more details about Korean and Malaysia culture...” (Student 1)

“The most favourable experience is that all the lectures are so friendly to us. And the way they communicate to us is understandable. All our Korean course mates are so friendly and cooperative too. They try to interact with us every day and they want to know more about our culture.” (Student 3)

This taught them to be considerate to others as different people from different cultures and backgrounds might experience different things as explained below:

“...I also have the chance to discuss tasks with Korean students which taught me to be a more considerate person. This is because each person has different personal schedule” (Student 2)

“...For me, this is an experience that I can't get anywhere else. I learned how to be more understanding, considerate, and how to socialize with people with different backgrounds and cultures. It also opens my eyes to see from a different perspective. It also broadens my mind to think beyond the box...” (Student 6)

The respondents were asked to share their most and least positive intercultural experiences while participating in the program. In the e-interview or online interview, they defined, and described their intercultural experience in their own words. Most respondents said that they appreciate the VM program and have positive intercultural experiences. They manage to discuss language and cuisine with their classmates from Dongguk University, Korea, and exchange opinions, and thoughts. They are paired with a groupmate from Dongguk University, Korea, and they were assigned to have a buddy. Two respondents describe their positive intercultural experience regarding their interaction with the group member as below:

“During the discussion in class, they accept any questions and answers even if it's wrong because I did want to try. It made me feel more confident and want to be more involved in the discussion. There was one time, I was having an internet problem, the lecturer was very understanding of my problem and told me not to worry and take my time to solve it. During classes, the lecturers always share about the weather in Gyeongju, that makes me feel like I am actually at Gyeongju” (Student 1)

“...the most favourable experience was when the lecturer bought us a cake to celebrate our last day of class. She also congratulates us and sings a song. Also, she decorated her room to celebrate our last day...” (Student 5)

They also discussed their least enjoyable intercultural experience, however, none of these encounters had anything to do with intercultural experience. However, this should be considered as it can enhance the VM program. In general, they would prefer to conduct event in person and the instructions for using the student learning portal be simpler. According to the respondents' opinions, the program was successful in conducting a learning initiative, something that many virtual programs aim to do. The buddy system in this VM program are important to help the respondents to adapt the study system. The respondents above agree that the buddy system helps them a lot through the semesters. Spending one semester is not brief; therefore, having buddies they can always refer to whenever they get confused with the instruction or assignment is important. They also learn more about culture, norms, and values from conversation with their buddies. Henderson (2020) concurred that the buddies' importance to the intercultural experience during their time helped them develop their social, global, and intercultural competence.

Due to the pandemic, social meetings were prohibited by the Movement Control Order or confinement laws, which also prohibited social or cultural activities. All respondents said that they had missed social interactions the most. They admitted that they were lonely and bored, however, when they connected with people worldwide through VM, they got excited when they talked about the cultural components of the experience with their virtual classmates. They met people worldwide through this VM and exchanged ideas about their cultures and experiences. The study by Koris, Mato-Daz, and Hernández-Nanclares (2021) addresses the same issues as those raised above and demonstrates how participation in VM might aid students in developing their intercultural knowledge and experience.

Strong relationships, facilitation, curriculum development, buy-in, measurement, and evaluation are just a few of the components that comprise a successful virtual exchange program, such as virtual exchange programs (Vogt & Wick, 2020). This program seems to exhibit some of the essential qualities of a successful virtual exchange program, suggesting some of the reasons why higher education institutions should consider them when developing their global learning objectives and programs. Students participating in this VM reported that interacting with peers improved their online learning experience and showed greater adaptability (O'Dowd, 2021). The intercultural experience gained from the VM exemplifies all the benefits, including learning each country's customs and traditions, seeking out values and norms, and creating a harmonious virtual platform. It might improve the mutual respect and trust between a group member from each country who become the ambassadors for their respective cultures (Bandara, 2021). VM did serve the sharing and expanding of knowledge for the cultural values and norms of the participating countries.

The result implies that universities should carefully observe fostering peer communication in online learning by promoting group work, collaborative learning, and developing social support

structures; for example, by fostering online discussion groups. This allows students to share their intercultural experiences with peers, or online social activities attenuate the intercultural experience, as these enhance academic adjustment and involvement of the students in intercultural experience (Vogt & Wick, 2020, O'Dowd, 2021, O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). Developing intercultural experiences is not a typical result of higher education advancement. It is not the best strategy to just leave students alone during their academic lives and hope that they will naturally pick up intercultural experiences and develop their intercultural skills. Instead, higher education should deliberately address interculturality. This result supports other studies in this field that indicate intercultural exposure requires special consideration and instruction (Aba, 2016, Vogt & Wick, 2020, O'Dowd, 2021, O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016, O'Reilly, 2021).

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Program

The respondents were asked about the pros and cons of this program. First, the findings demonstrated that respondents who participated in the AIMS Program thoroughly embraced the learning environment during the pandemic. They acknowledge the program's benefits, including its flexible scheduling, the chance to meet people worldwide, the ability to replay all lectures, the convenience of learning, the opportunity to quickly learn about each country's culture and history, and the benefit of not travelling there. The respondents also note that they experienced using of WebEx as a new application of online learning and to learn other countries' cultures and educational systems. Vogt and Wick (2020) also described that working on projects with students from different countries and backgrounds can encourage creative thinking as they are learning different perspectives to address common issues. The students will gain collaboration skills, cultural awareness, and empathic communication abilities, and will be motivated to learn about cultural awareness, develop their ability to deal with global difficulties, and apply their knowledge with students from other cultural backgrounds (Rahmawati et. al, 2019). The VM program improved their leadership abilities, intercultural communication skills, confidence with technology for virtual collaboration, positively altering pre-existing stereotypes, and benefiting their future careers (Vogt & Wick, 2020, O'Reilly, 2021). VM has also been an opportunity for students and the institution (strategically). The respondents highlight VM's advantages over physical mobility, which include sustainability, replicability, digital skills development, and environmental friendliness as well as an inclusive way of accessing an international and intercultural experience for students and staff members who cannot participate in international physical mobility programs for various reasons (e.g. caring duties and limited financial means (Ganassin, Satar & Li, 2021).

However, they also discuss the drawbacks of the VM program, as they prefer to communicate with their group members in person. They also explained that the program's timing conflicts with their class time, it takes a long time to complete, and some of the students are not particularly engaged in group discussions. Two out of the thirteen respondents listed below the program's drawbacks, specifically the absence of face-to-face interaction:

"...As for the disadvantages, I couldn't tell if I was a part of an exchange program."
(Student 9)

"I didn't want to say this as a disadvantage but it's quite sad as we can't experience it in real life such as the beauty of Spring, baking class, meeting new friends, and also meet my respectful lecturers." (Student 2)

While the other two respondents stated that they occasionally found it difficult to pay attention during the session because of their different levels of fluency in English, the duration of class time, and the internet connection:

"...The disadvantage is the duration for each class is too long, which is 3 hours. And also, some of our lecturers cannot speak English fluently, so we cannot understand clearly..."
(Student 7)

“...Disadvantage: The internet connection, language barrier ...” (Student 11)

VM program does need more intensive social networking and support from the respective universities which include the local student and the lecturer of the host university. The group members could be organized to assist, orient, and guide the virtually enrolled international students. The findings are also consistent with the research done by Muslim et al. (2022) on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) method which happened to experience physical obstacles, networking difficulties, and students' emotional challenges. To overcome these challenges, ODL programs should continually evaluate and improve their delivery methods. This may involve incorporating emerging technologies, enhancing student support services, and adopting innovative pedagogical approaches promoting engagement, collaboration, and interaction among students. Additionally, partnerships with local communities, government bodies, and organizations can help address physical obstacles and provide necessary resources to students in need. Educational institutions and policymakers must recognize the specific challenges faced by ODL students and work toward creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. By addressing physical obstacles, networking difficulties, and students' emotional challenges, ODL programs can ensure an effective and enriching learning experience for students engaged in distance education. Therefore, there are similarities between the challenges faced by Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and VM programs. Both modes of education rely heavily on online platforms and virtual interactions, which can present common obstacles

From the findings they also experience the various intensities of instruction due to the language barrier or maybe the fluency of the English language of the lectures involved in VM program. The respondents also expressed that fewer opportunities exist for knowledge transmission, and the quality of the interaction with the lecturer is dissimilar to the physical classroom. They admit that online teaching killed the interaction in the classroom, and they must also engage more in self-study and individual work. This resulted in more time and effort needed to put into learning. A study conducted by Koris, Mato-Díaz, and Hernández-Nanclares (2021) underlines the disadvantages of the VM program. The group members could be organized to assist, orient, and guide the virtually enrolled international students.

Conclusion

The pandemic made it very difficult for the students to participate in any type of overseas mobility program. Students should be invited to visit the host country or university to truly experience the culture, norms, and adaptation. VM opens new possibilities and reduces inconvenience because no visa requirements, travel constraints, or financial concerns are required. The literature on intercultural and international higher education will benefit from our growing understanding of the intercultural experience. In summary, 13 students from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) pursuing a Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honors degree participated in the AIMS VM program from early 2021 until the end of 2021. These students came from different ethnic groups and study programs within UMT. The AIMS VM program allowed them to engage in virtual exchange activities with partner universities from different countries, allowing them to enhance their intercultural understanding and develop valuable skills.

Through this program, students can enhance their intercultural understanding, expand their knowledge, and develop valuable skills for their future careers. By participating in the AIMS-VM program, the UMT students would have had the chance to interact with students from other countries, exchange ideas, and collaborate on various projects. They may have engaged in virtual classes, discussions, workshops, and other activities designed to promote cultural exchange and learning. Coming from various ethnic groups and study programs, the UMT students would have brought diverse perspectives to the AIMS-VM program. This diversity would have enriched the overall experience and contributed to a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. Participating in international programs, like AIMS-VM, can benefit students, such as gaining a global perspective, improving language skills, developing cross-cultural communication abilities, and building a network of international contacts. These experiences can greatly enhance their personal and professional growth.

VM students are recommended to receive pre- and post-orientations, much like when they join the physical mobility. As Koris, Mato-Daz, and Hernández-Nanclares (2021) agreed, this is a crucial

procedure for fostering intercultural learning. Future VM must develop the inventory for VM collaboration as introduced by O'Reilly (2021). This checklist serves as a roadmap for anyone who wants to launch the VM program. Intercultural experience and interaction can also be fostered through other applications like WhatsApp, Telegram, or WeChat. Informal integration strategies (such as learning guides, online peer-mentoring systems, virtual conversation groups, and online intercultural events) could be adapted to the virtual context following the recommendation of Leask (2009) and Catalano and Barriga (2021). The intercultural experience is rarely considered when designing a VM. Rajagopal and Mateusen (2021) suggested including intercultural learning to help students develop their intercultural competence before joining VM. In conclusion, VM creates an important driver in transformative learning "Mobility for All". To support students in higher education in a VM, an appropriate VM handbook should be designed. This study poses some limitations that warrant avenues for future research. Researchers have limited opportunities to contact students with similar research instruments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future qualitative studies could better contextualize research into students' intercultural experiences from the host and home countries.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study recommends investigating other dimensions of VM for future research. Based on the identified crucial factors in this study, exploring additional dimensions of VM for future research is recommended. These dimensions include flexibility in partnership between universities, and information and communication technology (ICT), language differences, virtual teaching and learning experiences, and also teacher mobility:

1. **Flexibility of Partnerships:** Investigate the various aspects of flexibility in establishing and maintaining partnerships between universities for VM programs. This could involve exploring different collaboration models, evaluating the effectiveness of existing partnership frameworks, and identifying strategies to enhance flexibility in virtual mobility initiatives.
2. **Usage of information and communication technology (ICT):** Examine the role of ICT tools and platforms in facilitating VM experiences. This could include studying the effectiveness of specific technologies used for virtual interactions, exploring innovative ways of utilizing ICT to enhance virtual learning and collaboration, and evaluating the impact of different ICT approaches on student engagement and outcomes.
3. **Language Differences:** Explore the challenges and opportunities associated with language differences in VM programs. Investigate strategies to address language barriers, promote effective communication and cultural exchange in multilingual virtual environments, and assess the impact of language proficiency on students' virtual mobility experiences.
4. **Virtual Teaching and Learning Experiences:** Investigate the pedagogical approaches, strategies, and best practices for delivering virtual teaching and learning experiences in VM programs. This could involve exploring effective instructional design, student-centered learning methods, and the use of collaborative online tools to promote active engagement and meaningful learning outcomes.
5. **Teacher Mobility:** Explore the concept of teacher mobility within the VM context. Investigate the benefits and challenges of virtual teacher mobility, examine the role of virtual exchanges in professional development for educators, and explore strategies to promote effective virtual collaboration and knowledge sharing among teachers across different institutions.

By investigating these dimensions, future research to provide to a deeper understanding of VM programs, provide insights into effective implementation strategies, and contribute to improving VM experiences for students and educators.

The study also highly recommends a new method for this similar study in the future using other qualitative methods, such as observation, and direct involvement with the respondents, to identify underneath motivation, or perception toward understanding the study phenomena. Observation and direct involvement with the respondents can be valuable approaches to comprehensively explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and motivations more comprehensively. These methods can

provide insights into the students' lived experiences, their interactions, and the context where the VM program takes place.

Observation allows researchers to directly observe participants' behaviors, interactions, and non-verbal cues, providing rich qualitative data. By observing the students' virtual activities, engagement levels, and communication patterns, researchers can better understand their experiences and identify underlying factors that contribute to their perceptions and motivations.

Direct involvement with the respondents, such as through interviews or focus group discussions, enables researchers to have interactive conversations and delve deeper into participants' thoughts, feelings, and motivations. This approach can help uncover more detailed insights into the students' perspectives on virtual mobility, their perceived benefits and challenges, and the factors influencing their overall experience. By combining observation and direct involvement methods with existing research approaches, future studies can gather a more holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation. This mixed-methods approach can provide a comprehensive view, capturing the qualitative aspects of participants' experiences and the quantitative data that may already have been collected in the initial study.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this article. Authors 1, 2, and 3 conducted the fieldwork and prepared the literature review. Authors 1 and 4 wrote the research methodology and did the statistical analysis and interpretation of the results. Author 2 communicates with the journal secretariat and addresses any potential remarks.

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