

International Student Mobility and Covid-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities in Southeast Asia

Alma Pia G. Reyes, Anna Margarita T. De Leon

College of Management and Business Technology, NEUST

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Abstract— *The influence of Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic is significant in international higher education, especially student mobility. Due to the travel restrictions and campus closure, many students changed or cancelled their plan of studying abroad. Thus this study was therefore conducted primarily to determine the opportunities and challenges of the international mobility of students during the Covid-19 pandemic to draw prospects and recommendations to further enhance the progress of this educational endeavour and as well as, sustainable collaborations in Southeast Asia. The study used descriptive method because the study was associated with large sample sizes, respondents asked the same questions, and concentrating to quantity responses, which ensures that the entire data collection can be analyzed fairly. 35 respondents from institutions in the SEAMEO Network participating in the SEA-TVET Consortium within Southeast Asia were surveyed in this paper, and a questionnaire was used as the main data-gathering instrument for the study. Descriptive method of research and statistical tools were considered. The finding showed that the institution's program for international student mobility was affected by the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic and greater part of the respondents encounter Travel and Government restrictions since the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted most facets of lives including education. This had resulted in many schools and institutions of higher learning (IHE) being forced to cancel physical classes, and controlled international travel, with many nations keeping their borders closed to non-residents. Nevertheless, International Student Mobility in South East Asia was complemented using technological advancement for students such as online language or internet education and webinars in this pandemic. The researchers concluded based on the findings that the challenges and opportunities were both adapted by the institutions for International Student Mobility during pandemic in South East Asia.*

Keywords— *SEA-TVET, pandemic, student mobility, COVID-19, International Student exchange program education, travel, government, South East Asia, webinar, restriction*

I. INTRODUCTION

The influence of CoronaVirus (COVID-19) pandemic was significant in international higher education, especially student mobility (Altbach & de Wits, 2020; Mok, 2020). Due to the travel restrictions and campus closure, many students changed or cancelled their plan of studying abroad.

In the last decades, great significance had been devoted worldwide to student mobility, involving initiatives like Erasmus+ in Europe, International Student Exchange Program (ISEP) in the United States of America, University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) for the Asia-

Pacific region, Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE), which was supported by the European Union, the ASEAN International Mobility of Students (AIMS) Programme and the South East Asia Technical and Vocational Education and Training (SEA-TVET). Among many others, there were forms of internationalization in higher education for which various institutional approaches had been adopted to inspire students to consider education in a foreign country, either on a short-term basis, study tour or educational exchange, or for a longer period in degree programmes. Internationalization has emerged in higher education systems globally because the higher education sector needs to be receptive to the requirements of

globalization, which were increased from underdeveloped to developed countries. Consequently, higher education institutions (HEIs) had essentially assimilated their international and inter-cultural dimensions and principles. International activities at these institutions had been designed to attain the aforementioned purposes of student mobility.

According to the International and Affiliate Student Tutor in the Department of Geography, UCL, (Johanna Waters, 2021) this past eight months had been quite challenging. They had seen first-hand the disappointment of students getting their overseas placements either cancelled or moved online. Students travelling to Europe or either in other countries that were supporting international student mobility have had to get to grips with fluctuating Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice and its impacts on potential visa applications and insurance – all things we previously took for granted as relatively straightforward and unproblematic. Some students, desperate for their year abroad, have chosen to defer their studies and return next year to try again, with all the uncertainty surrounding that decision. So, despite international student mobility being a research, Covid-19 had also directly impacted other work areas.

Similarly, as a regional cooperative body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had envisioned the significance of student mobility in the region. However, structural differences remain one of the challenges in its implementation. Thus, this study determined the opportunities and challenges of the international mobility of students during the Covid-19 pandemic to draw prospects and recommendations to further enhance the progress of this educational endeavour and as well as, sustainable collaborations in Southeast Asia. This research study explored the situation and problems faced by Southeast Asia in terms of international student mobility during covid-19 pandemic and what challenges and opportunities were encountered.

Objectives of the Study

This research study aimed to:

1. Describe the profile of respondent schools in terms of

1.1 Name of Institution

1.2 Country

- Indonesia
- Malaysia

- Philippines
- Thailand
- Vietnam
- Others_____

1.3 Type of Institution

- Private
- Public (Government owned)

1.4 School participation in SEA-TVET exchange programme?

- 1st batch
- 2nd batch
- 3rd batch
- 4th batch
- 5th batch

1.5 Number of students sent abroad (out-going) per SEA-TVET batch

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21 and more
- Others_____

1.6 Number of students received (incoming) from abroad per SEA-TVET batch

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21 and more
- Others_____

2. What challenges to international student mobility did the institution encounter during this pandemic?

- Travel Restrictions
- Lockdown
- Health Barriers
- Financial Barriers
- Language Barriers
- Government Restrictions
- Others_____

3. What programs for international student mobility are implemented by the institution during this pandemic?

- Webinars
- Virtual Student Exchange
- Not Applicable
- Others _____

what, where, when and how questions, but not why questions. A descriptive research can use a wide variety of research methods to investigate one or more variables. The study delimited its respondents to institutions in the SEAMEO network and current member institutions which submitted the letter agreement for the 5th batch SEA-TVET program. Using random sampling technique, 35 institutions participated in the conduct of this research. Likert scale was utilized in determining the challenges and opportunities in international student mobility. The interpretation of Likert scale was based on the degree of agreement where the options are Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly Disagree.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used the descriptive research design. According to Shona McCombes (2019), Descriptive research aims to accurately and systematically describe a population, situation or phenomenon. It uses a quantitative research method by collecting quantifiable information to be used for statistical analysis of the population sample. It can answer

Table 1 Point, Range and Verbal Analogy

Range	Verbal Description
1.00 – 1.80	Strongly Disagree
1.81 – 2.60	Disagree
2.61 – 3.40	Neither
3.42 – 4.20	Agree
4.21 – 5.00	Strongly Agree

III. RESULTS

This shows the summary of the degree of agreement of Higher Educational Institutions as per the challenges and opportunities of student mobility in Southeast Asia. These are presented in tables following the sequence of the specific research problem.

I. Demographic Profile of the Respondent

Table 2 Country of the Institution

Country of the Institution	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Indonesia	22	62.86
Philippines	9	25.71
Malaysia	3	8.57
Thailand	1	2.86
Vietnam	0	0
Total	35	100

Table 3 Type of Institution

Country of the Institution	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Public (Government owned)	18	51.43
Private	17	48.57
Total	35	100

Table 4 School participation in SEA-TVET exchange programme

School participation in SEA-TVET exchange programme	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1st batch	8	9.64
2nd batch	13	15.66
3rd batch	23	27.71
4th batch	24	28.92
5th batch	15	18.07

Table 5 Number of students sent abroad (out-going) per SEA-TVET batch

Number of students sent abroad (out-going) per SEA-TVET batch	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1-5	14	40.00
6-10	13	37.14
11-15	3	8.57
16-20	4	11.43
21 and more	1	2.86
Total	35	100

Table 6 Number of students received (incoming) from abroad per SEA-TVET batch

Number of students received (incoming) from abroad per SEA-TVET batch	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1-5	16	45.71
6-10	8	22.86
11-15	5	14.29
16-20	4	11.43
21 and more	1	2.86
None	1	2.86
Total	35	100

Table 7 What barriers to international student mobility do the institution encounter during this pandemic?

What barriers to international student mobility do the institution encounter during this pandemic?	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Travel Restrictions	31	25.62
Government Restrictions	31	25.62
Health Barriers	25	20.66
Lockdown	24	19.83
Financial Barriers	8	6.61

Language Barriers	1	0.83
Mastery of topics delivered via online media	1	0.83

Table 8 What programs for international student mobility are implemented by the institution during this pandemic?

What programs for international student mobility are implemented by the institution during this pandemic?	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Webinars	28	48.28
Virtual Student Exchange	22	37.93
Not Applicable	5	8.62
International Credit Transfer and Guest Lecture Series	1	1.72
Joint Research	1	1.72
Immersion	1	1.72

II. Challenges and Opportunities

Table 9 Challenges of International Student Mobility during Covid 19 Pandemic

	Item Statement (Challenges)	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1	The institution's program for international student mobility has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic	4.66	Strongly Agree
2	International student mobility program of the institution did not push through because of lockdowns in our area/country	4.34	Strongly Agree
3	International student mobility program of the institution did not push through because of strict health restrictions of exchange (receiving) countries.	4.2	Strongly Agree
4	International student mobility program was hampered by language restrictions.	2.63	Neutral
5	International student mobility program was hampered by cultural differences.	2.4	Disagree
6	The institution has not developed regulations for international student mobility amidst COVID19 pandemic.	2.63	Neutral
7	The government does not allow physical travel for international student mobility.	4.34	Strongly Agree
	Overall Weighted Mean	3.6	Agree

Table 10 Other Challenges not Indicated

Government Restrictions
Vaccine, travel ban, unpredictable wave of pandemic
Internet access
Fair
Difficulty to prepare for accommodation (based on our last experience)
Travel bans and personal experience joining student mobility
Safety

Table 11 Opportunities of International Student Mobility during Covid 19 Pandemic

	Item Statement (Opportunities)	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1	The institution has developed regulations for international student mobility amidst COVID-19 pandemic.	3.86	Agree
2	The institution had joined/participated/facilitated in international student mobility on a face to face level during COVID19 pandemic.	4.11	Agree
3	The institution had joined/participated/facilitated in international student mobility virtually during COVID19 pandemic.	2.49	Neutral
4	The institution has standing collaborations/agreement with foreign institutions to engage in international student mobility amidst COVID19 pandemic.	3.97	Agree
5	The institution has standing collaborations/agreement with foreign institutions to engage in international student mobility post-COVID19 pandemic.	4	Agree
6	The institution has collaborated with other organizations to provide virtual internships.	3.74	Agree
7	The institution is engaged in technological advancements for students such as online language and/or internet education and webinars.	4.37	Strongly Agree
8	The institution is willing to participate in face to face international student mobility should restrictions lighten.	3.89	Agree
	Overall Weighted Mean	3.83	Agree

IV. DISCUSSION

The following discussion show the summary of the results of the study and the degree of agreement of institutions as to challenges and opportunities to international student mobility in Southeast Asia.

Demographi Profile: Country of the Institution

Table 2 shows that 22 or 62.86 percent of the respondents were from Indonesia, while there were no respondents coming from Vietnam. This implied that

Indonesian institutions are keen in participating in international student mobility programs as evidenced in a report by International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF) that the most recent UNESCO data shows that there were just over 45,000 Indonesian students abroad in 2017, there are indications from other sources that this figure may be understated. The US Commercial Service uses IIE data to estimate that that there were over 69,000

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Indonesian students abroad in 2018/19, with 9,130 in the US. Most Indonesian students abroad are enrolled in undergraduate programmes, but it can be anticipated more demand for post-graduate studies as a result of the Indonesian government's greatly increased funding for the Endowment Fund. This data is also evident in a SEA-TVET directory report involving majority of participants (65) Indonesian institutions engaged in the 5th Batch SEA-TVET Student Exchange programme.

Demographi Profile: Type of Institution

Table 3 shows that 18 or 51.43 percent of the respondents are from Public or Government owned institution, while the remaining 17 or 48.57 percent are from Private Institutions. From a study by Wong & Wu (2011), Internationalization has emerged as one of the top priorities for higher education institutions around the world. In the Philippines, Internationalization is beginning to be a core part of SUCs' organizational program development but is still in the initial phase, that is, SUCs are internationalizing within their own system. (Rivera, 2019)

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