SHARE Mapping and Identification Study of Virtual Exchange Schemes in ASEAN

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Executive Summary

About the Study

The global pandemic has affected internationalisation efforts of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the world. One key affected area is international student mobility: given travel restrictions, HEIs have been required to find alternative ways to ensure the continuity of mobility and ensure that students are able to still develop their inter-cultural competence. Virtual Exchange or Collaborative Online International Learning (VE/COIL) is a form of teaching and learning that has had minimal exposure within the ASEAN region. VE/COIL is seen as not only a possible alternative in the current restricted environment, but has the potential to be a permanent feature within the student mobility spectrum. As HEIs across ASEAN have geared up extensively on technological infrastructure and accessibility in order to accommodate the new norm in learning, it is timely to explore the understanding and practice of VE/COIL programmes within the region.

Objectives

This study aims to map the implementation of VE/COIL schemes by universities in the ASEAN region. The objectives of this mapping research are to:

1. Identify obstacles in implementing VE/COIL schemes.
2. Specify existing VE/COIL schemes, i.e. duration, type of platform used, maximum number of students per course, number of transferable credits, etc.
3. Grasp the level of support provided by universities or institutions for their respective students participating in VE/COIL schemes.

4. Describe academic and non-academic activities implemented in the VE/COIL schemes.
5. Suggest evidence-based recommendations for implementing a region-wide VE/COIL scheme under the SHARE scholarship.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach of surveys and interviews was applied in the study. Two surveys were conducted with different groups of respondents in September-October 2021. The first included 95 university representatives within ASEAN, while the second survey included 525 ASEAN student respondents. Another nine university representatives from each of the ASEAN countries - with the exception of Singapore - were interviewed to build a deeper understanding of the practice and implementation of COIL/VE in their respective universities.

Findings

The key finding from the study was that there is a need for students and universities within the region to have a clear definition and understanding of VE/COIL. Confusions exist between this and other forms of online learning such as virtual mobility. This can be attributed to the fact that universities have had to be agile in adapting to online learning without fully exploring and understanding the concepts and terminologies.

In terms of online learning as an experience, most universities have improved access and infrastructure to accommodate this new norm, though some countries may still be behind in terms of the speed of transformation. Universities are better-prepared and the academics are familiarising themselves with the new technology. Students in general are providing positive feedback of their experience; highlighting enhancing inter-cultural competence, the opportunity to work and interact with international students, and flexibility of learning as among the positive factors. Working across global time zones and poor internet service, meanwhile, are among the negative experiences. As for the university representatives, there are challenges in terms of encouraging students to be involved, with time zones and technical competencies highlighted as other key issues.

Conclusion

Based on the data collected, it is clear that among the most important issues to be resolved is the understanding of the concept and terminology of VE/COIL. We have observed that the level of understanding among those who were present during the SHARE Capacity Building Workshop[i] was good, with awareness of the general operations of VE/COIL. Thus, a key recommendation is a series of training to further enhance the understanding of university representatives within the region. In addition, there is a need to develop a virtual platform or one-stop centre where university representatives can access materials regarding VE/COIL as well as online teaching, information on how to develop online courses, success stories from other university experiences, and a network directory outlining the VE/COIL courses offered within the region.

Some universities within the region may need directives either from the top management or even ministry for the implementation of VE/COIL, as it may involve processes and procedures affecting policies. Another key recommendation is therefore to have a top-down approach for the implementation of this online education.

There is a strong potential for VE/COIL programmes to be developed and expanded within the ASEAN region. Universities are improving their technological infrastructure and accessibility, while students have shown interest in experiencing online learning. Although physical mobility will return once the pandemic is over, VE/COIL will have an opportunity to grow in a niche of its own. It should no longer be a replacement for physical mobility, but an opportunity for students to experience internationalisation and develop inter-cultural competence without the costs of travel.

About SHARE Programme

The Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) Programme is the European Union's flagship higher education programme with ASEAN. Since 2015, SHARE has worked alongside the ASEAN Secretariat and regional partners to strengthen regional cooperation, enhance the quality, regional competitiveness and internationalisation of ASEAN Higher Education institutions and students.

SHARE provides technical assistance to the ASEAN Secretariat and regional stakeholders in their implementation of the ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2021-2025, which was adopted by the ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting (ASED) on May 31st, 2021. As a key sector for the ASEAN region, Higher Education is incorporated in the Work Plan through 'Outcome 3: Enhanced regional capacity in higher education as part of lifelong learning provision, including the harmonisation of ASEAN higher education.'

The Programme is implemented by a consortium comprised of the British Council, the DAAD, ENQA and Nuffic.

Disclaimer

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[i] A SHARE Capacity Building Workshop for VE/COIL was conducted in Sept. 16th through October 6th. The detail report of the workshop can be found at the below URL:
https://share-asean.eu/news/supporting-asean-student-mobility-amid-covid-19-through-initiating-collaborations-virtual