Higher Education and Student Short-Term Mobility in ASEAN Countries: Current Trends and Priorities - A Case of Passage to ASEAN

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, international student mobility is among the most notable phenomena in Higher Education. While the current literature on its opportunities and challenges is still expanding, the majority of research recognizes its transformative potential along with a costly barrier to entry for most students. Long-term student mobility also takes priority in most scholarly works, despite the growing demand for short-term exchanges. Among the organizations seeking to alleviate said challenge and foster human capital is Passage to ASEAN (P2A) Network, a regional organization of Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs), businesses and government agencies in Southeast Asia. P2A has, since its inception, been dedicated to fostering academic exchanges, cultural understanding, collaboration prospects, and technological integration among ASEAN member IHEs. This study explores the P2A Network's structure, its goals and impacts on regional education, especially tourism and technology, and its potential to further enhance collaborations in the region. This study employs a mixed-method approach, synthesizing document analysis and stakeholder interviews. P2A published material is closely examined and combined with emerging themes from a total of 12 interviews with individuals who have worked with P2A. This study highlights Passage to ASEAN's role in expanding accessible Short-Term Mobility (STM) through cultural exchanges and virtual programs. By reducing cost barriers and leveraging online platforms, P2A has successfully increased participation and provided valuable educational benefits. These findings offer insights into effective STM models and serve as a reference for institutions aiming to enhance their mobility initiatives.

1. Introduction

With the rise in international collaboration among Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs), short-term mobility programs (STM) have seen widespread adoption by IHEs as an alternative to traditional long-term international exchanges [1]. European and Australian universities, in particular, feature established STM programs, both intra-regional and to various destinations in Asia [2–7]. The majority of current research on STM in these regions reports clear benefits seen in program participants, ranging from academic and career prospect advancements [7,8] to cultural and global issue awareness [1,3,9], all of which contribute to transformative learning, creating more capable learners and future workers [4,10,11].

Within Southeast Asia, there is a large discrepancy between intra-region STM experiences and international, inter-region counterparts, exhibiting a clear imbalance towards experiences at host institutions outside of the region [11]. Aside from this, Chao [11] also found a correlation between STM participant figures and income level among countries within this region, suggesting that costs are a clear antecedent to students' participation in these experiences. Regarding STM organization, intra-ASEAN short term mobility has been serving a small but

privileged fraction of the total higher education student population and often lacks sustainable funding.

Among the regional organizations established with a goal to grow STM in Southeast Asia, Passage to ASEAN (P2A) aims to foster mobility, especially short-term mobility, among the student masses in order to develop academic exchanges and collaboration, cultural understanding, and technological integration among IHEs in the region. To tackle the cost and funding barriers to mobility, P2A has established various frameworks and programs that leverage funding sources, communication technology, and shared efforts from its members. A primary example of this is their virtual and hybrid (on-site and online) mobility programs that allow member institution students to participate at virtually no cost while ensuring continuity even amid travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the benefits of STMs in a globalizing world and the distinct inadequacy of mobility programs in ASEAN countries compared to other regions, this paper seeks to understand the type of STM activities and programs hosted by the P2A Network, specifically their design and execution, and, more importantly, the impacts that these programs create for their stakeholders and STM in the region at large.

By understanding how P2A innovates and overcomes the barriers to mobility, especially STM, the study hopes to suggest potential practical steps to alleviate the issues currently facing institutions and participants in mobility programs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Student Short-term mobility as a trend in higher education

STM denotes any academic exchange (both credit-transferable and non-credit-transferable), language programs, volunteering activity, training, and placement whose duration is a year or less [12], while Iskhakova and Bradly [13] contend that most STM programs last between one and eight weeks. The former regards STM goals as academic, while the latter stresses STM's roles in developing cross-cultural competence and fostering global citizenship.

The current body of research identifies a range of benefits to learners, including heightening cultural awareness, personal advancements, and improved employability [7,14–16]. The personal facet, specifically, includes developments not only to STM participants' introspection [16] but also to academic performance and awareness of ethics [14]. Australian tertiary students participating in a discipline-specific short-term exchange program to Japan are reported to have improved their grasp of knowledge through exposure to a different academic environment, as well as the mastery of skills within their discipline, thanks to an abundance of novel opportunities and challenges absent from their home institution [7].

Nerlich [15] argues that a combination of personal skills development, cultural awareness, and improved academic and practical performance culminates in a statistically significant advantage in terms of employability for STM participants.

Students' interdisciplinary learning also stands to gain from STMs. Hains-Wesson and Ji [4] carried out pre-post surveys and conducted case studies on students from an Australian IHE participating in interdisciplinary short-term learning exchanges with an integrated practical work element. The study reveals that students' adaptability and openness to other ideas and disciplines saw significant improvements, while their perceived independence lowered, which Hains-Wesson and Ji [4] argue is indicative of an awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration and thus an increased willingness to work with other disciplines.

Besides, STM has also been shown to have a positive influence on students' future long-term, full-degree courses in different countries. In an investigation into Chinese graduate and postgraduate students studying abroad with prior STM experiences, Xu et al. [12] report a positive effect of STM on long-term international mobility study. In particular, students who have undergone an STM experience are more ready to go on full-course study programs abroad, more capable of navigating challenges during such courses, and more cognizant of their life trajectory beyond their courses.

Besides participants, institutions themselves have incentives to join and host STM programs. These programs could be used to secure partnerships in universities' internationalization efforts and offer added value to students to meet changing demands in higher education [17]. However, the degree to which these STMs benefit institutions are underreported, as most studies are oriented around the student experience and gains.

Thus, STM offers a wide range of benefits to participants, from disciplinary and interdisciplinary capacity building and skill development to heightening awareness of global, local, cultural, and ethical issues, ultimately contributing to improving their future career prospects or long-term international degree courses abroad. Hosts and participating institutions can also leverage STM programs to strengthen international collaborations and inject value into their education.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual and often short-term mobility programs saw a rise from a stopgap solution to global lockdown and travel restrictions to accepted alternatives to on-site mobility. The majority of studies on virtual mobility programs report a positive general sentiment from participants, academic and non-academic staff alike. Southeast Asian participants in a regional virtual mobility program expressed highly positive opinions of the international networking opportunity as well as the chance to hone digital literacy and cultural competence [18]. Peng & Dervin [19] also had similar findings when investigating the interactions between Finnish and Chinese student cohorts in a virtual mobility program. Inquisitive questioning and critical

reasoning were observed to have been employed by both groups to navigate conversations about their respective cultures, thereby showing virtual mobility as an opportunity to hone critical intercultural communication skills.

However, the online medium that virtual mobility is based on might not be conducive to facilitating the same degree of learning and cultural exchange as in-person, on-campus mobility. In a mixed-method study on Chinese students, Li & Ai [20] identified a multitude of issues with Virtual Mobility, ranging from technology-related, such as accessibility, to internet-connecting devices, to organizational and learning barriers, such as inadequate time with instructors or low learning efficiency. The latter could be extremely challenging to overcome and therefore hinder the academic value delivery of virtual mobility programs.

2.2. Prevailing issues with short-term mobility programs at higher education level

STM programs are not without their challenges before, during, and after the exchanges take place, according to Nada et al. [21]- a claim well-supported by current literature [6,22,23].

Prior to the exchange experience, Nada et al. [21] reported complaints from Erasmus alumni respondents regarding a lack of socio-academic assistance in preparing for their sojourn abroad. This is among other issues identified by an earlier study on Erasmus participants by Souto-Otero et al. [23], whose findings also include insufficient funding and uncertainty about the program's benefits. Almost a decade later, these issues are shown to persist as barriers to entry not just to the Erasmus programs, but also in other similar international short-term exchanges [24].

During the exchanges, students noted a lack of institutional support framework for most of their needs, among which included accommodation, social integration, and administration [21]. Perez-Encinas et al. [6] echo this issue, claiming that host institutions' support to Erasmus+ participants is found to be inadequate. In particular, students did not receive prompt and adequate support from the host institution when resolving administrative hurdles such as visas and enrollment. Most respondents to the study also voiced concerns over affordability- or rather a lack thereof- during their exchange.

Issues arising following the conclusion of STMs revolve around the recognition of their academic achievements, as revealed in Nada et al. [21]. While most of the Erasmus participants experienced a smooth and automatic transfer of academic credit, some reported delays or even non-conversion of credits taken during their studies abroad.

STM programs are susceptible to disruption, deepening the challenges reported above. Moxey et al. [22] investigate STMs in the context of the COVID-19 travel bans, which reveal that travel restrictions not only increased the financial cost of travelling due to long quarantine periods but also caused mental strains on travelling students, further hindering their integration into life and learning at their host institution.

2.3. STM in ASEAN Countries- Issues hindering growth

Institutions within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are active participants in the Short-term mobility trend. ASEAN institutions have been reported to be both recipients and senders of students on STM programs [3,4,7,17]. However, in the region of Southeast Asia, the current trend skews heavily toward outbound mobility, leaving intra-ASEAN mobility rather scant in comparison [11]. As a result, few reports concern themselves with STM programs within this region. The few who do report positively on students' personal development and cultural awareness, while also highlighting the need to attend to participants' safety and well-being. Kumpoh et al. [25] report the experience of a Bruneian student cohort in Vietnam. The participants' interactions with the locals and their subsequent reflections following the trip indicate marked improvements in their intra-ASEAN cultural awareness, problem-solving capacity, and communication skills. Sisavath [26] also reports improved communication skills in Laotian alumni with exchange experiences, both to ASEAN countries and beyond, while subsequently crediting this with increased employability. Thus, while STM activities within Southeast Asia are rather scant, they have the potential to offer advantages to participants in their career, personal development, and cultural understandings, similar to exchanges in more active regions that have been shown above.

Chao [11] also identifies two challenges to mobility programs, especially inter-ASEAN mobility. First, the cost barrier and a lack of sustainable funding have diminished the range of these programs, limiting participation to a small cohort of elite, privileged students. Second, the fragmented nature of these programs results in a lack of region-wide collaboration toward multilateral mobility, especially when there is little involvement from the ASEAN Secretariat- the key regional organization responsible for connecting and coordinating regional efforts. Thus, the funding issue encountered by this region is similar to problems encountered in other regions, while STM efforts in the region require a multilateral regional organization to expand their scope.

Thus, while short-term student mobility is shown to be a prevailing trend in higher education, activities among Southeast Asian institutions are found to be lacking, and so is research into this topic. Specifically, the barriers of funding and a lack of centrally coordinated efforts hinder the former, while the resulting shortage of intra-ASEAN STM programs stave off academic interest. Among the

multilateral, Southeast Asian-based organizations working to foster higher education collaboration and regional development, Passage to ASEAN (P2A) is one of the few leveraging and developing student short-term mobility to pursue these goals. Thus, this research seeks to address the gap in research into Southeast Asia's STM, as well as P2A's efforts and impact in improving this reality.

Research Questions

To attain this research goal, this study adopts two research questions:

1. What design features, organization structure, and execution strategy of P2A programs are oriented toward regional short-term student mobility activities?
2. What are the impacts of these programs on short-term student mobility in the region?
3. What can be learned from these programs and their implementation to overcome STM barriers in the ASEAN region?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To tackle the research questions, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews with P2A staff members. The analysis of professional reports (grey literature) provides valuable insights into the organization's operations [27] and activities and programs of the P2A Network in the area of short-term student mobility. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to capture rich insights [28] into the effectiveness of P2A's STM programs while ensuring flexibility during the interview sessions.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

a. Document Analysis

Relevant P2A publications, such as program concept notes, guidelines, schedules, social media posts, website articles, and participant testimonials, will be gathered from P2A, its member institutions, and partner sources. These professional reports (grey literature) offer valuable insights from experienced professionals, document stream daylighting projects, and help clarify the overall scope and nature [29] of P2A activities. P2A media is collected on their official website (https://passagetoasean.org/) and social media account (Facebook, to be specific).

Concept notes and guidelines to P2A programs are supplied for the authors with clearance granted by the P2A Secretariat Director. Following retrieval, the documents are analysed using content and discourse analysis to identify core themes in P2A's programs and objectives, which are used to inform the semi-structured interviews.

b. Semi-Structured Interview

Twelve senior P2A staff members, including program coordinators and managers, participated in the interviews. The interview themes were based on key findings from the document analysis. Following a semi-structured format, the questions are open-ended and organized by topic. Data saturation was reached at 12 participants, with fundamental themes emerging as early as the sixth interview [30]. The interviews follow a structured guide based on Kallio's five-phase framework of [31].

All participants were informed of the scope of the interview beforehand and had given their consent prior to the interview. Pseudonyms were used in interview transcripts for confidentiality and privacy's sake.

4. Results & Discussion

The synthesis of the data obtained from document analysis and semi-structured interviews revealed three major emerging themes.

4.1. Accessible short-term mobility programs

The document analysis reveals that P2A's most prevalent programs revolve around the goal of bringing short-term student mobility experiences to traditionally underserved demographics. The two programs in question, P2A Journey and P2A Virtual Mobility, reflect this goal in their conception and execution.

The former, P2A Journey, is the more long-standing program, which exhibits an effort to overcome some of the criticisms of STMs with certain design choices. First, the concept of the program focuses on cultural-oriented exchange opportunities rather than credit-transferable courses in a foreign institution. The reality that the majority of ASEAN universities do not partake in any academic credit transfer framework hinders the organization of large, multi-institutional academic exchanges [32].

Thus, the conscious choice to focus on cultural exchange allows P2A to set up a network of exchange programs quickly. This is then confirmed via interview with senior program managers who directly contributed to conceptualizing and realizing the program.

Another advantage of culture-oriented exchange is the elimination of much of the administrative support problem. This focus thus allows administrators and organizers to prepare a shared itinerary for the whole cohort, as the majority of the program would be dedicated to site visits, student activities and single-day non-academic classes. Finally, the simplicity afforded by this choice allows for the optimization of a number of associated costs, such as administration and accommodation, thus cutting down on the total cost for participants. According to a P2A program manager, the majority of P2A Journeys cost less than 40 US$ per day per participant, in line with the P2A cost ceiling for the program as indicated in their internal concept notes.

The subsequent interviews confirm these design choices as intentional. As the internal goal at P2A when setting up P2A Journeys, program managers at the time were willing to forgo academic credit transferability and simplify program itineraries to prioritize accessibility to learners. According to one interview participant, although a credit transferable exchange program would be preferred among P2A executives, it was found that credit systems and requirements varied vastly between countries, regions and even institutions. Thus, setting up a credit transfer framework would have been impractical and unattainable for such a young organization as P2A at the time. Member institutions at the time also expressed little interest in setting up individual credit transfer agreements with potential partners, seeing that such an international exchange model was still unproven in the region. Interviewers also pointed out that STM's lack of traction in the ASEAN region, in combination with the high cost associated with international exchange programs, also translated into a lack of interest from students across member institutions. This in turn makes recruiting students within any one discipline or course rather difficult. Therefore, P2A was forced to pivot to cultural-oriented STM programs as a means to lay the groundwork for STMs in general and P2A's STM programs in particular.

Besides low cost and simplicity, the P2A Journey program offers another important benefit to participating institutions. Specifically, a few institutions have forged an exchange relationship, which translates into annual P2A Journeys between the institutions. Before and after these exchanges, staff members of both the sending and hosting institutions collaborate to work on the administrative, logistic, and academic details of the exchange. During the P2A Journey, most sending institutions also include at least two staff members, typically from the academic staff, to help manage the student participants while also meeting with the host institution for further discussion in a number of cases. In this regard, P2A Journey fulfils one of the major goals of an exchange program, namely, aiding the internationalization efforts of institutions, as Song & Kim [17] indicates. Specifically, discussion opportunities for staff members are a great source of future collaborations in multiple capacities, including teaching and research. This finding highlights the value of short-term student exchange as a facilitator for institutional connections while also suggesting that non-academic, culture-centric STM programs can serve as a stepping stone for further academic collaborations between institutions down the road.

Another effort P2A takes to facilitate seamless and affordable STM is the P2A Virtual Mobility program. This program brings together student participants from multiple institutions for a project-based exchange experience that requires little to no travel. This is possible by leveraging an online meeting application (Zoom) to facilitate all of the included sessions, including workshops, guest lectures, and student-led discussion meetings. Only during the finals would the participating students be offered an opportunity to travel to the institution hosting the finale on an accompanying P2A Journey. Thus, this program sees significantly higher annual participant numbers, as seen in P2A's annual published materials on Virtual Mobility. From initial figures of two programs and roughly 80 student participants, the program has grown to three seasons per year and nearly 600 participants as of 2024.

Virtual mobility is not a unique idea. Chinese institutions have also organized virtual mobility programs as a response to the COVID-19 travel bans to a respectable level of success [20]. According to Li & Ai [20], these virtual mobility initiatives are seen by students as a more economical and flexible alternative to STM programs. Within ASEAN, however, although there are reports of similar programs [18,33], none reported the continuity and growth that P2A Virtual Mobility demonstrated, making it the first of its kind.

Interviews reveal similarities in P2A Virtual Mobility's origin story with those above. However, interviewees claim that P2A wishes to continue providing the program in conjunction with P2A Journeys instead of transitioning back to on-site programs only. The reasoning behind this decision is one of pragmatism, seeing that the Virtual Mobility format allows the organizers to inject a large amount of academic value into the program with ease while lowering the cost barrier. Particularly, this include the cost of travel, boarding and support staff pay that would normally make up the majority of the program fees participants have to bear. Meanwhile, workshops, lectures and cooperative learning opportunities are more easily coordinated as online meeting platforms such as Zoom

render the need to organize venues, academic staff travel and accommodation redundant. Thus, P2A intends to expand on the academic offerings of the Virtual Mobility program as compensation for their cultural-oriented P2A Journey.

Thus, to answer RQ1, P2A has taken a two-pronged approach to boosting the accessibility of STM in the ASEAN region. First, lowering the cost barrier is a common goal in both P2A programs, achieved through either leveraging virtual platforms or orienting the program towards cultural awareness- skills that the majority of students, regardless of discipline, can and need to acquire. Second, offering choices in the program type, with either on-site and cultural focus (P2A Journey) or online and project-based academic learning (P2A Virtual Mobility) caters to a variety of student needs. The result speaks for itself, as the combined participation of both programs climbed from only fewer than 100 students in the first year to more than 2000 in 2024, according to the P2A official annual report.

Regarding RQ3, other ASEAN organizations wishing to establish STM programs can also learn from the P2A approach outlined above. Particularly, the hurdles of cost and lack of interest can be overcome through simplifying the program agendas while expanding on a variety of program offerings to capture the engagement of a large body of students.

4.2. STM for practical and interdisciplinary learning

The second finding on P2A activities and impact relates to the educational values of their exchange programs. Between the two major P2A STM programs, P2A Virtual Mobility is central to P2A's academic exchange effort. While this annual program is divided into different seasons, all of which are on the lower end in terms of length at only between 4-6 weeks, their programs are structured to prioritize student-led, practical, and interdisciplinary learning. P2A Virtual Mobility programs are project-based with interdisciplinary themes such as Business, Entrepreneurship & Technology, Language & Culture, Tourism, Hospitality and Health Science.

Interdisciplinary project-based mobility programs are not novel in the context of Southeast Asia. Rahmawati et al. [34] report a Business and Technology mobility program as part of the Southeast Asia Mobility (SAM) initiative that spans three countries (Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia). However, this project is organized in person, whereas P2A Virtual Mobility is conducted online, thereby negating the need for and cost of travel for the participants. Despite the difference in mode, both programs boast similar benefits to students, including interpersonal and international communication and problem-solving

skills, both of which contribute to the interdisciplinary and interpersonal competence of the participants.

The organization of P2A Virtual Mobility also share similar features with other interdisciplinary project-based learning initiatives. Martin & Bombaerts [35] describe an interdisciplinary project-based Engineering course, which poses challenges that require intelligence applications in health, mobility or energy. Students in these courses undergo several distinct phases in their problem-solving process, through which students focus on and gain insights about the context in which their project takes place, different approaches to solving the same problem and the adaptability required to work effectively. The course also featured student-led and instructor-led support sessions to aid struggling groups and help groups navigate their projects. In this way, P2A has managed to set up a program that contains the elements of a project-based interdisciplinary course in an online environment.

Further interviews with P2A mentors reveal a shared sentiment on the educational value of the program. Particularly, mentors who directly observe and give feedback on the student groups' ongoing projects expressed pleasant surprise at the degree to which their feedback and comments are incorporated into the student outputs in consulting sessions and at the end of the program.

This theme thus compliments the first in answering RQ1 and 3. To tailor their virtual programs to the Southeast Asian student body while overcoming the pitfalls in usual mobility programs, P2A has designed a short, project-based and instructor-led program that emphasizes interdisciplinary learning. This has proven to be effective in attracting students and imparting learnings, regardless of the confines of the online settings.

4.3 P2A and the spread of STM in ASEAN Countries

P2A's two major programs, P2A Journeys and P2A Virtual Mobility, are found to have garnered the participation of a sizeable number of institutions and students. In ten years of P2A Journey, several bilateral P2A Journeys have evolved into annual programs. The most active sending university is Temasek Polytechnic (Singapore), which has established exchange programs with Duy Tan University (Vietnam), Chiang Mai Rajabhat University (Thailand), Universitas Islam Indonesia (Indonesia) and beyond. However, the majority of this active participation is mainly thanks to different grants and financial aids for student and staff exchanges, thus are rather weak in terms of evidence for sustainable growth in P2A Journey activities. This matter is reiterated in most of the interviews as well. P2A program managers attribute most of the difficulty to two major factors. First, the wide disparity in income and living standards among different countries means that the

majority of students in the region have great difficulties in paying for the program without incentives or financial aid from their institutions. Secondly, the program managers themselves encounter great difficulties committing to the 50 USD per day standard set out in internal P2A meetings in exchange experiences with the majority of institutions. While affordable accommodation for exchange students in major cities in the region can be a challenge to find, transportation difficulties such as multiple flights or bus transit bump up exchange costs to institutions located in remote regions. Outside of this hurdle, multiple annual P2A Journey programs have been set up, with the longest being between Duy Tan University (Vietnam) and Temasek Polytechnic (Singapore). Multi-university exchanges are also recognized under the framework of P2A Journey, where one institution acts as the host for the others, with a week-long agenda that accommodates different groups' travel schedules. The amount of effort to connect the institutions and set up such an intricate agenda speaks to the demand for STM in Southeast Asia and the degree of success of P2A Journeys.

Meanwhile, P2A Virtual Mobility has managed to attract the participation of students from a diverse range of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, representing a large number of member institutions. In particular, the highest and most consistent participation figures are recorded in the disciplines of business, technology and tourism. Interviews with P2A program managers also revealed that students in said disciplines expressed an interest in the program for the relevant topics, opportunities to learn and practice, and the accessibility of the program. Output submissions by groups participating in these disciplines are found to be well-informed by local realities and creative in their proposed solutions, a number of whom have been picked to participate in other entrepreneurship and hackathon competitions in ASEAN, with various degrees of success.

However, interviews with program managers who are directly involved with P2A Virtual Mobility revealed two major challenges remain with the program. First is a rather high attrition rate, a problem that arose during seasons with high participation numbers. While not published, program managers estimated that roughly 15-20% of participants at the beginning of the program drop off during its course. The two major reasons for this are the inability to commit to the program schedule and teamwork difficulties exacerbated by an online meeting environment. This is not a unique barrier to P2A programs, but rather most Virtual Mobility programs (CITE). Second is difficulties in finding judges and mentors for the program. Due to its cost-saving directives, the program often relies on voluntary efforts to assess students and support their projects. This lack of incentive to participate means only a few experts and lecturers take up these mantles, which can limit the diversity of content of the program in the long run.

Thus, in response to RQ2, P2A STM programs have seen a good degree of success in terms of boosting STM activities in the region. Through setting up a network of institutions and program standards, P2A members have connected and organized bi-lateral and multi-lateral exchange programs, some of which became annual offerings. Besides, the growing number of participating institutions and students in both programs indicates a strong demand for STM programs in the region, which P2A has managed to capture.

Meanwhile, lessons that can be derived from P2A's experience in organizing STM programs, in response to RQ3, include the remaining barriers of costs, staff and attrition. While the second can be mitigated with relatively funding, the first and last are endemic barriers to on-site and online exchanges, respectively. Thus institutions looking to set up similar programs need to be aware of these difficulties and leverage any resource they can to mitigate them.

5. Recommendations and future research agendas

Different implications for ASEAN institutions looking to organize and participate in STMs can be drawn from the findings above. First, cultural-oriented STM opportunities in Southeast Asia can be organized with relatively few of the challenges that typically befall STM administrations while also serving as a facilitator for staff connections and higher-level collaboration between the participating institutions. Thus, institutions whose goals include internationalization may consider these STM programs as a starting point for their efforts. Second, virtual mobility programs can be a more flexible and economical alternative avenue for interdisciplinary and intercultural education compared to traditional STM, making this an attractive option for institutions looking to expand and modernize their education while keeping the costs down for both themselves and their students. Finally, by working together, members of IHE alliances can enjoy the benefits of STM as either host or sending institutions at a relatively affordable and sustainable cost.

Besides, several limitations within this research can be addressed by future studies to deepen the understanding of the organization and execution of STM in Southeast Asia. Given the unreliability of self-reported data, subsequent research may use qualitative methodologies to explore the effectiveness and impact of STM programs more conclusively. The use of document retrieval methodology in this research may also cause a blindspot in negative information on P2A and its programs. Therefore, future studies may focus on this underreported area in order to identify risks and shortcomings endemic to these types of STMs.

6. Conclusion

This study investigates the programs organized by Passage to ASEAN, a Southeast Asian-based higher education institution alliance, in the area of Short-Term Mobility (STM) in order to identify its efforts to foster STM in the region and the degree to which this effort succeeds. A mixed-method approach is employed, using document retrieval to identify the relevant programs and their core themes, in combination with semi-structured interviews to deepen the understanding of the program's design, implementation and its impact on STM activities and students. The study found that the two main STM programs organized by P2A, namely P2A Journey and P2A Virtual Mobility, are designed and executed with the goal of bringing affordable mobility to the masses. While the former program aims to reduce the cost barrier to student mobility by organizing short-term cultural exchanges, the latter leverages online meeting applications to facilitate interdisciplinary project-based learning in an intercultural environment. These two programs have managed to grow and attract a sizeable participation figure, imparting tangible benefits to the participating institutions and students. These findings contribute to the understanding of virtual and cultural-oriented STM, as well as Passage to ASEAN as a case study for STM in Southeast Asia. They can also help institutions evaluate and optimize STM programs, be it their own or a prospective alliance's. Future research should explore the effectiveness of STM programs in Southeast Asia using qualitative methods to address self-reported data limitations. Additionally, studies should investigate underreported challenges and risks associated with STM, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their execution and impact.

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