



Title	The Changing Dynamics in International Exchange During the Time of Halted Physical Mobility
Author(s)	Moinuddin, Mohammad
Citation	With Corona or Post Corona : The Opportunities and The Challenges for Virtual Learning and International Exchange. 2021, p. 7-13
Version Type	VoR
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/84834">https://doi.org/10.18910/84834</a>
rights	
Note	

*The University of Osaka Institutional Knowledge Archive : OUKA*

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

The University of Osaka

# The Changing Dynamics in International Exchange During the Time of Halted Physical Mobility

Mohammad Moinuddin, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Letters,  
Osaka University

## Introduction

The unexpected spread of Covid-19 during the end of 2019 has brought the world to a halt and has been continuing with some ups and downs. On March 11, 2020, when World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic<sup>1</sup>, cities across the globe began shutting down, mobility programs started being canceled or suspended. Most of the students on their exchange programs were asked to discontinue and return to their home universities. Teachers had had to go online to make up the classes and catch up with the time to complete the syllabi. After more than fifteen months, the bigger change is the hurried development of the vaccines, giving hopes for normalcy. However, with the outbreak of much more contagious variants like Delta variants (B.1.617.2)<sup>2</sup> and the possibility of a new mutant of Delta called “Delta plus”<sup>3</sup>, the restrictions seem to be escalating further. The Japan Times, quotes German Chancellor Angela Merkel, “The pandemic is not over, as we would have wished”<sup>4</sup>, the statement that she made after a summit of European Union leaders in Brussels. The reports published during late July 2021 when the infection surged to a record high by exceeding the previous numbers, say, “Japan's National Institute of Infectious Diseases has estimated that the Delta variant is now

---

<sup>1</sup> “WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020” <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020> (Web accessed on July 1, 2021)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)01358-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)01358-1/fulltext) (Web accessed on July 3, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/science/science-news/delta-delta-variants-everything-need-know-rcna1281> (Web accessed on July 3, 2021)

<sup>4</sup> “Delta variant threatens to destroy another European summer” The Japan Times, Jun 27, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/06/27/world/europe-delta-variant-tourism/> (Web accessed on July 3, 2021)

responsible for about 70% of infections in the metropolitan area.”<sup>5</sup> On July 30, 2021, the Japanese government has announced another state of emergency placed until August 31.<sup>6</sup>

A change that can be seen in society is that the people seem to be less panicked as compared to the time a few months after the outbreak of the pandemic. In other words, people are learning to live along with the virus, and striving to resume the pre-Covid-19 activities. The questions, however, remain unanswered: would we be able to see normalcy like the pre-Covid-19 world, and be able to move freely? Would the exchange programs be carried out as they were before the Covid-19 outbreak? The pandemic has forced the world to go virtual, come what may. It has drastically affected our day-to-day behaviors. Besides, there have been greater effects on social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communications, and so on. Virtual learning is incredibly convenient and allows borderless connectivity of minds beyond what is possible physically on a university campus. It may provide an even more expansive and global experience to the learning process without causing much financial and physical stress. Nevertheless, many disadvantages remain a great matter of concern, and a viable solution must be sorted out. For instance, issues related to direct and indirect communication, stopping social separation, promoting social integration, maintaining personal and social lives, and so on. In this paper, while referring to such issues, I would attempt to examine the changing dynamics in mobility beyond borders.

### **A Glance on the Student Mobility in the Pre-Covid-19 World**

Here, student mobility indicates the general perception of a transnational process between a student's home country and the country of his/her education. In the words of Collins, such mobility of students is the 'bridge' which often connects the transnational spaces rooted in “the economic activities of education agents and... the interpersonal networks that assist in the movement and settlement of international students and the role that former international students play in

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Japan-s-daily-COVID-cases-top-9-000-for-1st-time-amid-Olympics> (Web accessed on July 30, 2021)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/07/30/national/expanded-covid-emergency/> (Web accessed on July 30, 2021)

promoting overseas study”<sup>7</sup> (p.399). Robertson et al.<sup>8</sup> see this transnational mobility not only as a means of securing better education and employment prospects but also as a way of creating a new space of identification and belonging.

The transnational mobility of students has always been aimed at internationalizing the higher education of the partnering countries, and further, at strengthening intercultural relations. Knight<sup>9</sup> sees the internationalization of education as one of the ways of responding to globalization from a country. The higher educational institutions across the world are rated to be in better positions based on their ability to attract more students from other countries. Since it plays a very significant role in the world university ranking; the universities from around the world have been putting a lot of effort into boosting student mobility. Measures have been taken to enhance the number of inbound and outbound students. As pointed out by De Wit<sup>10</sup> and Knight<sup>11</sup>, a dominant research trend for the last few years focuses primarily on the numbers of international students, their flows, the networks, and such. Barnett & Wu<sup>12</sup> as well as King & Raghuram<sup>13</sup> argue that transnational student mobility has been receiving immense impetus and scholarly attention across the world for the last few decades.

Mol<sup>14</sup> addresses the issue of international student mobility in Europe from an interdisciplinary approach, through large-scale empirical surveys, interviews conducted in European countries. He interrogates the mobility aspirations of higher

---

<sup>7</sup> Collins, F. L., "Bridges to learning: international student mobilities, education agencies, and inter-personal networks", *Global Networks*, 8(4), October 2008, pp. 398–417.

<sup>8</sup> Robertson, S., Harris, A., Baldassar, L., "Mobile transitions: a conceptual framework for researching a generation on the move", *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21 (2), 2018, pp. 203-217

<sup>9</sup> Knight, J., "Internationalization of higher education", in J. Knight & H. de Wit (Eds.), *Quality and internationalization of higher education*, 1999 (pp. 13–28)

<sup>10</sup> Hans De Wit, "Changing Dynamics in International Student Circulation: Meanings, Push and Pull Factors, Trends, and Data", in Hans De Wit (Ed.) "The Dynamics of International Student Circulation in a Global Context", Sense Publishers, 2008, pp. 15–45.

<sup>11</sup> Knight, J., "Student Mobility and Internationalization: trends and tribulations". *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 7(1), 2012, pp.20–33.

<sup>12</sup> Barnett, G. A., & Wu, R. Y., "The international student exchange network: 1970 & 1989", *Higher Education*, 30(4), 1995, pp.353–368.

<sup>13</sup> King, R., & Raghuram, P., "International student migration: Mapping the field and new research agendas", *Population, Space and Place*, 19(2), 2012, pp.127–137.

<sup>14</sup> Mol, C. V., "Intra-European student mobility in international higher education circuits: Europe on the move", Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

education students by adopting a firm international comparative approach. Cairns<sup>15</sup> explores international student mobility in three contemporary European contexts: Portugal, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Cairns considers International Student Mobility vital to the future of European countries. His findings “confirm that there is a huge desire to be mobile, with the majority of respondents in each region indicating that they were indeed contemplating moving abroad upon completion of their present course of study.”<sup>16</sup> (p. 107)

It is very significant to understand the factors that contribute to student mobility. Raghuram<sup>17</sup> has highlighted that a large section of research on migration studies charts neoclassical perspective, which interprets students’ decisions on the sheer basis of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Anna Wells<sup>18</sup> notes, “traditionally pull factors are associated with the students’ desire to move abroad while push factors are those that make them want to leave their home countries” (p. 21). The unexpected outbreak of Covid-19 and the surge of its variants put these arguments on hold when the movement beyond borders itself is restricted. Let’s examine the changing dynamics in terms of student mobility under such circumstances.

### **The Changing Dynamics for the Mobility Factors**

Due to the pandemic caused by Covid-19, mobility beyond borders has almost come to a standstill and the global human exchange has been severely affected. Most of the higher educational institutions are going online. A kind of “virtual” mobility of students is also being discussed, but would this suffice the need for mobility in a real sense? Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU)<sup>19</sup> a network of leading universities in the Asia-Pacific region went further and started a virtual student exchange program<sup>20</sup>. Our department at Osaka University was asked by the

---

<sup>15</sup> Cairns, D., “Youth transitions, international student mobility, and spatial reflexivity: Being mobile?”, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> King, R., & Raghuram, P., 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Wells, A., “International student mobility: Approaches, Challenges, and Suggestions for Further Research”, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 143, 2014, 19–24.

<sup>19</sup> <https://apru.org/about/> (Web accessed on July 3, 2021)

<sup>20</sup> <https://apru.org/event/apru-virtual-student-exchange-co-curricular-programs-in-2021/> (Web accessed on July 3, 2021)

university administration to propose courses, which can be taken by the students on a virtual exchange program. It is said that through Study Abroad Programs, one gets an opportunity to experience the world. Would the virtual exchange programs help to experience the world? A question that is being asked by students and parents. The School of Letters, Osaka University has even started giving financial support (A scholarship named *Kyoiku Yumekikin*<sup>21</sup>) to the students who are interested to attend a virtual program from an overseas university. However, as of July 15, 2021, not even a single student has shown interest to apply for this scholarship on virtual programs. Some students who are selected for a Study Abroad Program decided to either extend or withdraw after learning about virtual classes due to the pandemic. On the other hand, many foreign students are selected to come to Osaka University as exchange students, have either extended their terms of mobility or withdrawn from the program.

According to Yonson Ahn (2020), transnational mobility is a multi-dimensional process comprising the physical mobility of individuals and their ideas, cross-cultural exchanges, remittances, or counter remittance, which affect their identity along with the diversity of the local demographic landscape. The virtual programs do not fulfill these, due to their limitations. 'Virtual' cannot replace the 'real', and there are many issues with virtual learning. For example, cultural exchange, intercultural understanding, the issue of eye contact, real-time interaction, Non-verbal communication learning opportunity through interaction with fellow students, and so on. One of the main factors that are given was the lack of opportunity for cultural exchange in virtual learning. However, this is not always true that physical interaction is the only viable option for cultural exchange. Başak Bilecen<sup>22</sup> offers critical insights into the geographical and emotional factors effective upon the friendship networks of transnational students. This empirical study conducted upon doctoral students in Germany demonstrates that students from the same nation form friend circle.

This is evident that both “physical” and “virtual” have their pros and cons. The exchange programs with “physical” mobility, which has been the basis of Study

---

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.let.osaka-u.ac.jp/ja/international/exchange/inter-faculty> (Web accessed on July 15, 2021)

<sup>22</sup> Bilecen, B., “International Student Mobility and Transnational Friendships”, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Abroad Programs, came into practice with specific goals and expected results. The outcome of the Study Abroad Programs is judged following a yardstick that came into being by mostly taking account of “physical” mobility. It is significant to note that virtual learning existed before the Covid-19 pandemic, too. We have an open university system as well as online courses from many leading universities. But terms like “virtual” exchange program or “virtual” mobility were not used. Needless to say, the “virtual” was never considered to be a Study Abroad Program. In a nutshell, there is a dire need to redefine the expectation as well as a goal from Study Abroad Programs. It shall take account of the positive aspects of “virtual” mobility and prepare a yardstick accordingly.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced the world to restrict the movements beyond borders, which has been greatly affecting the Study Abroad Programs. It is high time that the world should strive to find a different space with a different expectation, which may achieve the expected outcome similar to what one achieves from a Study Abroad Program through physical mobility.

Needless to say that despite several challenges in virtual education, there are many opportunities that shall be taken into consideration. Higher education could be easier to access by the people of all strata of society. Including even those who do not belong to any country. However, it has to be observed that how the corporate world and the governments respond to this new opportunity.

The institutions shall think from students’ perspective whose concerns are to fulfill their dreams by getting a quality education and having a good job perspective. On the other hand, the corporate world should accept degrees earned through a virtual program at par with face-to-face programs. So that, the virtual programs are given equal treatment.

There could be more collaboration between universities of different countries, in which specific articles regarding virtual collaboration may be included in the agreements. Alternatively, a separate mechanism may be chalked out for agreements on virtual exchange programs without going through a hectic process and strict terms and conditions. Opening virtual campuses in different countries could be one of the viable options to attract international students. At the same time, double degree programs might be more needed in the coming days. The Digital

library shall be enriched and expanded, further. The Study Abroad Programs shall be redefined and its goal shall be re-set by taking account of the pros and cons of virtual exchange.



