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Preface

Even more than a year and a half after the outbreak of the Covid-19, the border restrictions and lockdowns continued in major parts of the world. It was believed and widely propagated that the development of a vaccine would be a panacea for nearly every kind of effect that was caused by the virus. However, despite the two doses of the vaccination, the variants like, Delta and Omicron created havoc around the world. The Japan Times reported on November 29, 2021, referring to World Health Organization (WHO) that the Omicron variant posed a “very high” risk globally. It quotes WHO, “The overall global risk related to the new variant ... is assessed as very high”. Japan faced its worst kind of effect and had to raise the alert to the “highest level”. These invited further restrictions on the movements of the people.

The Study Abroad Programs continued to remain hampered with some improvement through virtual resources. The virtual means, however, have been a very big challenge for many. In the international seminar that was held on August 18, 2021, the educators and students came together to discuss and ponder upon the challenges that the world was expected to face in the coming days. The seminar was divided into two sessions: panel discussion and students’ presentation. The topic of the panel discussion was “International Exchange During the Covid-19’s Post-vaccination World: What would be the Future of Study Abroad Programs?” led by Prof. Miki SUEHIRO, the then head of Global Business Course, School of Economics and Management, and Chair of Global MBA Course, Graduate School of Social Sciences, University of Hyogo and Prof. Taro MOCHIZUKI, the then director of International Affairs Office, School of Letters/Graduate School of Letters Osaka University and former regional director (2014-2017) of ASEAN Center for Academic Initiatives Osaka University, Bangkok (Thailand). The panel attempted to examine several questions with the experts who had been teaching virtually, and the students who were being taught virtually. Besides, it also tried to investigate by hearing from the students that how they were coping with their studies, graduation theses, and research. Prof. Miki discussed a case study on virtual programs and physical mobility. On the other hand, Prof. Taro emphasized the dire need to create a third space where the students can experience the international exchange physically, not virtually. He also discussed that how we who are part of the international exchange programs can help the students to be optimistic for an exciting future.

The students’ presentation mainly focused on their respective specializations, while partially touching upon their experiences during the “neo corona age”. The immense success of this seminar and the request from the students and faculty members encouraged the International Affairs Office to organize another international seminar with a little modified format. To this end another seminar, “An International Seminar for Young Scholars for the Promotion of International Exchange” was held on February 18, 2022 with focus on young and emerging scholars.

In this seminar, the then director of the International Affairs Office, Prof. Taro delivered a keynote on the topic, “Looking Beyond International Exchange over *Sakoku*”. He discussed about how “Stop Japan’s ban” movement gained popularity online during early February 2022, to urge Japan to open her border for international students. He questioned the Japanese authorities’ emphasis on “national interest” and argued, “I believe that the right to travel matters. The right to travel or the freedom of movement includes changing the places where individuals reside and work. This right is provided in various documents reflecting norms of the international law.” He further quoted Article 13 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and argued that the freedom of movement beyond the border comes under universal human rights which is much more important than the “national interest”.

Dr. Michael Hofmeyr, Specially Appointed Associate Professor, from then Graduate School of Language and Culture, Osaka University, commented on the presentations and gave valuable feedback. He also emphasized on the importance of eye contact, while discussing about the presentation skills. Miss. Pratyusha Majumder of Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi, India, moderated the sessions. Due to certain unavoidable reasons Dr. Michael could not contribute with a paper. However, Miss. Majumder has submitted her work which has been included in the Proceedings.

The Proceedings comprises improved versions of all the ten papers presented in the duo international seminars. Besides, it includes a case study by Prof. Miki SUEHIRO and a short paper by Prof. Taro MOCHIZUKI. Prof. Miki’s paper is titled as, “International Exchange Program during Covid-19: The Positive Aspects of Virtual Learning Considering the Future of Studying Abroad”, in which she has tried to provide some insights into the positive aspects of virtual programs by examining the difference between virtual and in-person courses in terms of learning improvement. She has explored two research questions: 1) Can the virtual programs fill the vacuum created by the halt in the physical mobility of students, and 2) Can virtual learning continue to play a role on return to the pre-Covid-19 normalcy? She has used the CEFR scale and questionnaire to analyze student learning effectiveness.

Prof. Taro argues in his paper titled, “Thinking Future Studying Abroad between Parallel Worlds: The Crisis and Optimism” about the so-called “optimistic world” surrounded around the discussion after overseas travelers were allowed in the Olympics. He emphasized the need to bridge the separate parallel worlds and do necessary preparation that may be needed to face the crisis. Furthermore, he called upon the educators to give moral support to the students and help to create a sense of optimism in them regarding their future.

The seminars proved to be a setting for discussing future steps and exploring the countermeasures for the challenges that have been posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Different arguments related to virtual learning and face-to-face learning were shared and discussed. The audience too gave valuable insights from their own experiences. We highly appreciate the speakers and all the participants for their support and encouraging comments. Our special thanks

with appreciation to Prof. Miki and Dr. Michael for their valuable time and great contribution to the seminars. We also thank our foreign participants and everyone for their direct or indirect support. We cannot forget to thank Mr. Yutaka MINEKURA (Special Appointed Researcher, Graduate School of Humanities, Osaka University) for designing a nice poster and Ms. Reiko MATSUMOTO (Office staff of the International Affairs Office) for extending logistic support. It is our pleasant duty to acknowledge the financial support from the International Affairs Office, School of Letters/Graduate School of Humanities, Osaka University.

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