

Ambigapathy Pandian · Vighnarajah ·
Weng Marc Lim · Huey Fen Cheong
Editors



Future of Education in Asia

Sustainability, Technology
and Internationalisation

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Foreword

In an era marked by rapid technological advancements, global interconnectedness, and pressing environmental challenges, the future of education in Asia is undergoing a profound transformation. The education systems across the region must not only adapt to these shifts but also lead the way in fostering sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready learning environments. *Future of Education in Asia: Sustainability, Technology, and Internationalisation* is a timely exploration of these critical themes, offering insights and strategies for shaping the educational landscape of tomorrow.

This volume is thoughtfully structured into three thematic sections, each addressing a pivotal aspect that will influence the trajectory of education in Asia for years to come. The first section, *Fostering Sustainable Education*, emphasises the importance of creating educational systems that are both resilient, equitable and environmentally conscious. From the role of digital and hybrid mobility programmes in promoting global competence to inclusive practices across diverse classrooms, the chapters in this section examine how sustainability can be integrated into educational strategies to benefit all students.

The second section, *Technological Trends in Education*, explores the transformative role of emerging technologies in reshaping teaching and learning. As artificial intelligence (AI) and other digital innovations continue to evolve, these chapters offer valuable perspectives on how technology can enhance educational outcomes, improve accessibility, and equip students with the skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world. The focus is on how educational institutions can leverage technological advances to meet the demands of the twenty-first century.

The third section, *Internationalisation of Education*, highlights the importance of cross-border collaboration and regional cooperation. This section addresses the current state of internationalisation in higher education, focusing on how Asia's educational systems can become more globally competitive while fostering stronger academic exchanges and international partnerships. Through an in-depth exploration of various internationalisation models, this section provides valuable insights into how the region can build a more integrated and dynamic educational ecosystem.

Throughout the chapters, the research is organised into thematic clusters that align with the current and future challenges facing education in Asia. These thematic clusters drawing on the works of Ferhnani (2019), such as *Past & Futures*, *Humanity at the Limen*, *Environmental Futures*, *Post-Normality & Complexity*, and *Technological Trends*, serve as the foundation for exploring the evolving nature of education and its intersection with sustainability, technology, and internationalisation. The thoughtful analyses in these chapters contribute to the ongoing conversation about how Asia can build educational systems that are both innovative and inclusive, addressing the needs of a rapidly changing world.

This collection serves as an essential resource for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders invested in advancing education across Asia. It provides a comprehensive framework for advancing education in the region, ensuring that future generations are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to thrive in a globalised, technology-driven world. *Future of Education in Asia: Sustainability, Technology, and Internationalisation* is not just a reflection of the present but a roadmap for the future, guiding us towards a more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable future in education.

Professor Datuk Dr. Mohd Tajudin Md
Ninggal

Titles on the *Futures of Asia*

Future of Business in Asia: Exploring Pathways to Tomorrow's Business Landscape

Future of Cities in Asia: Future Direction of Urban Planning, Technology and Environmental Sustainability

Future of Economy in Asia: Geopolitical Diplomacy, Technological Revolutions and Sustainable Pathways

Future of Education in Asia: Sustainability, Technology and Internationalisation

Future of Healthcare in Asia: Advancing Equity, Ethics and Technology in Asian Healthcare

Future of Media in Asia: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Technology and Media Practice

Future of Work in Asia: Transforming Work Models, Workforce Dynamics and Workplace Technology

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Editors' Note

The clusters of future studies in each chapter are based on Fergnani (2019, 2020), who identified six (6) key research/thematic clusters from reviews of future studies since 1968: “corporate foresight; past and futures; humanity at the limen; environmental futures; post-normality and complexity, and technological trends”. While the chapter topics present different aspects of work in Asia, the clusters of future studies show different dimensions of futures and future studies.

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Chapter 5

Sustainable Cultural Transformations in Asia: Vietnamese Students' Intercultural Awareness Following a Malaysian Exchange Programme



Wun-Chiew Pung , Connie Keh-Nie Lim , and Su-Hie Ting 

Abstract This empirical study examined the impact of a short-term student exchange programme on Vietnamese students' intercultural awareness, positioning it within the context of growing global interconnectedness. The goal of this chapter is to show how experiential learning through study abroad initiatives can foster intercultural sensitivity, particularly within the Asian region. To achieve this, a descriptive methodology was adopted, using an online questionnaire administered to 104 Vietnamese students who participated in an exchange programme at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. The questionnaire examined the students' exposure to other cultures in their family and among friends, and communicative behaviours and attitudes towards other cultures. Key findings indicated that despite limited prior intercultural contact, participants experienced positive shifts in cultural perception and increased ethnocentrism, though they encountered challenges such as adjusting to local cuisine. These results show that even brief study abroad experiences can enhance students' appreciation for diverse worldviews, values and beliefs. The study suggests that formal intercultural education is essential to prepare students to engage constructively with cultural differences, an increasingly vital skill in a globally connected world.

Keywords Sustainable cultural transformations · Intercultural awareness · Ethnorelativism · Exchange programme · Study abroad · Vietnamese

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5.1 Introduction

Today's world is marked by increasing global interconnectedness. The rapid development of technology in communication and transportation facilitates international collaborations. It facilitates student mobility or study abroad programmes in higher education. During their time abroad, students are immersed in the culture(s) of the host country which may be different from the home country. The brief duration of these programmes makes them a viable option for a broader spectrum of students seeking international educational experiences, catering especially to those unable to engage in extended stays overseas due to work or familial commitments (Carley et al., 2011).

For the benefits of student mobility programmes to be reaped, the students need some intercultural awareness to effectively navigate the diverse cultural environments they encounter. Mere exposure to cultural differences may not be sufficient, and there must be opportunities for cultural reflection (Tarchi & Surian, 2022). The engagement with both local and fellow international students allows students to improve their intercultural competence (Sobkowiak, 2019). Sierra-Huedo and Foucart (2022) point out the need for universities to shift focus from quantity (i.e. the number of international students and student mobility programmes) to quality of intercultural experiences which involves changing students' attitudes and developing their intercultural competence.

Past findings are inconsistent on the association between intercultural exposure and intercultural competence. Some studies show a link (Skefsrud, 2022; Sobkowiak, 2019) and researchers even found that short-term mobility programme is effective (San & Htwe, 2023). However, there are contradictory findings on whether ethnocentrism increased after the time abroad (Czura, 2017).

At this juncture, past studies in intercultural awareness often focus on students travelling between western and eastern countries, or within the western context such as the Erasmus+ mobility programme (Sierra-Huedo & Foucart, 2022). However, very few studies investigate the intercultural awareness of students involved in mobility programmes within Asian cultures. The interest in academic exchange between universities in Asian countries has been driven by the desire to have international linkages. Having a large foreign student population is one indicator of university prestige (Slipchuk et al., 2021). Furthermore, universities are pressured to boost their number of international students not only to pursue branding and reputation (rankings) but also to generate revenue (de Wit, 2019). The MOUs signed for such purposes often include staff and student exchange activities. However, the students' experiences may be neglected in the pursuit of points for the university ranking.

As far as Malaysia is concerned, the spotlight should be turned on Vietnam because although diplomatic ties have been established for only half a century, since 30 March 1973, movement between the two countries for education is just beginning. Tourism-related travels between Malaysia and Vietnam may look promising. As of September 2023, Malaysia recorded 272,852 Vietnamese arrivals (Panaroma Destination, 2023). Malaysian tourist arrivals in Vietnam totalled 470,000 in 2023 (Phong,

2023). However, Malaysia and Vietnam are not education destination hubs for either country. Joint academic activities such as training and conferences are merely beginning after the COVID-19 pandemic eased in 2022. Examples are MOUs between Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and the University Kebangsaan Malaysia (HUTECH, 2024) and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Hoa Sen University (HSU, 2023).

Thus far, there is a shortage of research and scant empirical evidence on intercultural awareness of students involved in mobility programmes in the Asian region, and our literature review did not find any studies on student exchange programmes and intercultural awareness of Vietnamese students when they spend time abroad. The past studies were on Vietnamese learners of English in Vietnam (Kiet, 2016; Nguyen, 2023). Kiet (2016) found that students' active engagement in intercultural learning resulted in better understanding of the English culture and cultural self-awareness, while Nguyen (2023) concluded that cultural knowledge should be given the same emphasis as linguistic knowledge in English language teaching at university level in Vietnam. Learning English in mobility programmes abroad provides the advantage of being in a different learning environment. Extending language education beyond the home country can broaden students' cultural awareness through interacting with peers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Kong & Rajandram, 2023), allowing them to develop better interpersonal skills and cultural appreciation. Due to the lack of studies on gains from short-duration international experiences in the Asian region, further exploration is much needed to understand the impact of the exposure on intercultural awareness.

The study investigated Vietnamese students' intercultural awareness after an exchange programme in Malaysia. The research questions are:

- (1) What are the Vietnamese students' exposure to other cultures prior to their arrival in Malaysia?
- (2) In what ways has participation in the mobility programme impacted the cultural awareness of Vietnamese students?

5.2 Literature Review

5.2.1 *Intercultural Awareness*

In general, intercultural awareness involves understanding the similarities and differences between one's culture and other cultures (Council of Europe, 2001). This encompasses the ability to recognise, appreciate and respect cultural differences between people in different contexts (Kim, 2001). Adler (1987) posits that intercultural awareness involves a process of internalising insights about group-specific common understandings that shape an individual's predominant values, attitudes, beliefs and outlooks. Hanvey (1987) categorises intercultural awareness as encompassing:

- (1) superficial cultural traits which involve recognising the most visible and surface-level aspects of a culture;
- (2) significant and subtle cultural traits which involve understanding deeper and different traits of other cultures; and
- (3) insider's perspective involves understanding how insiders experienced the culture.

Closely linked to intercultural awareness is Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. According to Bennett (1993), intercultural competence develops along a continuum from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Ethnocentric individuals who have little exposure to other ethnic groups carry the attitude that one's own group, ethnicity, or nationality is superior. Ethnorelativistic individuals believe that no one culture is superior to another. This progression begins with a denial of cultural differences, then moves through defence, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation and finally culminates in integration of cultural diversity. However, Ting-Toomey (1999) emphasises that intercultural competence does not happen in isolation, but through interactions with and in response to individuals from diverse backgrounds.

5.2.2 Intercultural Awareness in Student Mobility Programmes

Student mobility programmes can reduce ethnocentrism as they enable students to gain overseas experiences, improve cultural and linguistic skills, foster tolerance and broaden perspectives (Skefsrud, 2022). These programmes also enhance intercultural communication skills and competence (Sobkowiak, 2019). More importantly, mobility programmes enable hands-on intercultural experience gained from living and collaborating with people from diverse backgrounds (Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012).

However, results from past studies on intercultural awareness in student mobility programmes are not consistent. Krajewski's (2011) study showed a positive link between intercultural experience and competence, with participation in these programmes alone being a form of learning. Czerwionka et al. (2015) discovered that students who went abroad showed increased knowledge related to daily life, food and drink, values and politics of the host country. Engle and Engle (2004) found participants' intercultural sensitivity improved, even when time spent abroad was as short as one semester. Similarly, Fang and Baker (2017) also reported that even a short-term mobility programme resulted in changes in students' attitudes and behaviours whereby they became more understanding of other cultures, developed a more inclusive mind, and were more open to diversity. San and Htwe (2023) found that Myanmar students who were in a one-semester study abroad programmes in Thailand, Vietnam, Sweden and the Netherlands reported enhanced intercultural awareness. The Myanmar students reported open-mindedness, ethno-relative views,

attitude changes, skill development and the ability to exhibit appropriate and effective intercultural behaviours following their study abroad experience.

However, there were also studies which showed that positive outcomes from mobility programmes were not automatic, supporting Ting-Toomey's (1999) contention. For instance, Czura (2017) reported that students on mobility programmes return home being more ethnocentric and less willing to communicate with people of other cultures. As such, the findings of these studies imply that merely mixing domestic and international students does not necessarily contribute to intercultural competence. This underscores the need for universities to create opportunities for domestic and international students to engage in meaningful interaction. Otherwise, international students may spend most of their time with peers from the same culture. As a result, their relationships with domestic students, local community members and other international students can become superficial, brief, or even negative and combative (Geibel, 2020). Hence, factors such as frequency and levels of intercultural engagement, as well as facilitating contexts which require individuals to reflect on their intercultural interactions are important requisites for intercultural competence (Sobkowiak, 2019).

Intercultural competence is also influenced by a person's previous intercultural experiences and personality traits. These factors affect one's ability to interact with others, behave appropriately, and handle new situations when entering different cultures. Rings and Allehyani (2020) found positive associations between personality traits like openness and conscientiousness and intercultural competence. Therefore, educational institutions need to provide opportunities and support for students to experience and participate in diverse cultural experiences so that they step out of their comfort zones (Penbek et al., 2012).

5.2.3 Higher Education Student Mobility in Asia

Traditionally, Western universities were the preferred destinations for international students. However, recent trends show a growing interest in Asian universities, especially among Southeast Asian students. In 2019, China hosted 28,600 Thai students, 15,000 Indonesian students, 11,300 Vietnamese students and 9,500 students from other Southeast Asian countries, making it the top destination for many Southeast Asian students (ICEF Monitor, 2024). Japan aims to increase its foreign enrolment to 400,000 students, South Korea targets 300,000 by 2027, and Taiwan aims for 320,000 by 2030 (ICEF Monitor, 2024).

There are several reasons why intraregional student mobility is popular. Among them are familiarity with cultural customs, a sense of physical and cultural safety, and cost savings due to proximity (ICEF Monitor, 2024). Government policies also play a significant role. Initiatives like the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific Association, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations University Network and the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning promote better

educational opportunities for member countries (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020). Additionally, the number of top-ranked universities in Asia is rising. For example, 33 Asian universities ranked within the 2024 Times Higher Education top 200, up from 28 in 2023 (ICEF Monitor, 2024). Furthermore, Asia is recognised as the world's fastest-growing regional economy, and students understand that attending Asian universities can provide opportunities for industry internships and jobs in the region (ICEF Monitor, 2019).

Despite the advantages of intraregional student mobility in that geographic and cultural proximity can ease challenges like homesickness and adjustment difficulties when studying abroad, students still face various issues. Students often form in-groups based on nationality, ethnicity and educational background (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020), which defeats the purpose of fostering intercultural competence and integration. These divisions can exacerbate existing prejudices and stereotypes. There are reports of local prejudices, such as Taiwanese locals' views of Indonesian students as migrant workers (Paramitaningrum, 2013), Chinese students in Singapore being stereotyped as prostitutes (Yang, 2014), Chinese students in Japan being discriminated against due to their nationality (Taniguchi et al., 2022), and Malaysian students in South Korea being looked down upon due to their country of origin and the misconception that Malaysians are poor (Dos Santos, 2022).

Although intraregional mobility in Asia is a growing trend, at this juncture, little is known about the experiences and intercultural awareness of Asian students within the region (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020). Most existing literature focuses on intercontinental mobility between Western and non-Western countries, but the impact of intraregional mobility on students' intercultural awareness and competence may differ from these perspectives.

5.3 Background on Vietnam and Malaysia

5.3.1 Vietnam

Vietnam primarily comprises the Kinh (Viet) ethnic group (85.3%), has Vietnamese as its official language and is increasingly favouring English as a second language (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024b). Like the rest of the world, Vietnam is also actively internationalising its education system, following the Higher Education Reform Agenda introduced in 2005 and the announcement by the Prime Minister to enhance the quality of higher education from 2019 to 2025 (Luong et al., 2023). Vietnam's future direction and move towards internationalisation are largely spurred by its low education quality which lags behind global standards. This could be attributed by the prevalence of traditional teaching methods, which focus heavily on theory with little practical application (Nguyen, 2021), as well as insufficient qualified staff (Uoc et al., 2023). This affects the quality of graduates, who often lack the skills, adaptability and competitiveness needed in the global market.

Key steps in improving the quality of education through internationalisation efforts include adopting English as a medium of instruction, incorporating foreign curricula and forming international partnerships for transnational education initiatives (Tran et al., 2018). It is expected that by 2025, at least 50% of tertiary institutions will integrate foreign curricula, either partially or wholly, into their programmes (Luong et al., 2023). The English language mobility programme in Malaysia, which was structured as credit transfer, is an example of Vietnam's integration of foreign curricula into their existing educational structure. Initiatives like this have paved the way for stronger educational ties between the two nations. On October 17, 2023, Vietnam and Malaysia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in higher education, formalising their commitment to enhancing educational cooperation (VietnamPlus, 2023).

Student exchange programmes are crucial in preparing Vietnamese students for global competitiveness and enhancing their intercultural competence. Findings from past studies on student mobility programmes for Vietnamese students have been positive. Cuong's (2020) research revealed that Vietnamese students show a high level of readiness for international mobility programmes. Their primary motivations include learning about different cultures, practising English with locals, broadening their knowledge, experiencing a new learning environment, developing personal skills and making friends. However, students also expressed a need for more orientation activities and faculty support to better prepare them for the different environments they would encounter, indicating concerns about adjusting to new settings.

Similarly, Diem et al. (2023) found that student teachers had positive perceptions of student exchange programmes. They noted advantages such as access to new knowledge, enhanced teaching skills and valuable support from foreign partners and mentors. These benefits are crucial for Vietnam, particularly in improving teacher training strategies and curricula to elevate education standards. However, the study also revealed challenges related to language differences and cultural norms, suggesting that student teachers would benefit from better orientation and preparation before going abroad.

Overall, findings on student mobility programmes for Vietnamese students highlight their importance not only for internationalisation efforts to improve the quality of education in Vietnam, but also for fostering intercultural awareness and competence. However, there is a need for adequate preparation and support to maximise the benefits and address potential challenges. This need may stem from Vietnam's relatively homogeneous population, with the majority being of the Kinh (Viet) ethnic group (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024b). Additionally, although English is increasingly being used as a second language in Vietnam, English proficiency among Vietnamese students remains a barrier, impacting their academic performance and social integration in the host country (Le et al., 2017).

These findings have significant implications for the future of education in Vietnam. Efforts must be directed towards acquiring essential skills that equip students with the mindset and capabilities to thrive as global citizens, and these include having greater intercultural awareness and adaptability to navigate new environments. It is

also crucial to address the barriers posed by limited English proficiency in order to ensure that students are well-prepared for cultural and academic adjustments.

5.3.2 Malaysia

Unlike Vietnam, Malaysia has a more multicultural population with Bumiputera comprising Malays and indigenous groups such as Dayaks, Kadazans and Orang Asli (62.5%), Chinese (20.6%), Indians (6.2%) and others (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024a, 2024b). Malaysia also has a greater diversity of languages, such as English, Chinese, Indian, indigenous languages and the national language, *Bahasa Melayu*.

In recent years, Malaysia has intensified efforts to internationalise higher education. The aim is to host 250,000 international students by 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Key initiatives for internationalisation include integrating international elements into course syllabi, hiring more international staff, establishing student mobility programmes, and offering twinning programmes with institutions in the UK, US, Australia and New Zealand (Muthu & Chelliah, 2020). Malaysia is also a host for international branch campuses such as Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia, University of Southampton Malaysian Campus, Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology, University of Reading Malaysia and University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (ICEF Monitor, 2016). These efforts are part of a broader strategy to position Malaysia as a world-class education provider and a hub for education in Southeast Asia (Chang & Abdullah, 2021).

International students are drawn to Malaysia for various reasons, including its culture, the use of English as the medium of instruction (Singh, 2019), and the combination of quality and affordability in education (Khalid et al., 2020). This appeal is particularly strong among Asian students. The top three sending markets for Malaysia are China, Indonesia and Bangladesh (ICEF Monitor, 2023), but Vietnam is also a significant contributor. Vietnamese students find the lower costs and cultural similarities between Malaysia and their home country advantageous (Thoo et al., 2022). In recent years, extensive collaborations between Vietnam and Malaysia have resulted in approximately 1,000 Vietnamese students studying in Malaysia (VietnamPlus, 2023).

Despite Malaysia being a popular destination for Asian students, they still face significant challenges. Tuerxun et al. (2020) found that Muslim Chinese international students in Malaysia faced problems with the hot humid and unpredictable climate, spicy food and language. Although both China and Malaysia are Asian countries, the students also reported social and cultural challenges. They found that Malaysian students kept to themselves. The students' lack of proficiency in English and the local language, Malay, led them to socialise more with other international students rather than with locals. This indicates that better language support and planned opportunities for intercultural interactions are important.

A study by Rathakrishnan et al. (2021) involving 541 international undergraduate students at a public Malaysian university highlighted similar issues. The international

students experienced homesickness and cultural stress, primarily due to language adaptation challenges. They faced language barriers that led to feelings of depression, homesickness and an inability to adjust to the new environment. Even those proficient in English struggled to understand the English spoken by locals due to the heavy Malay accent. This prevented them from building and maintaining good relationships with local people, resulting in social anxiety and a sense of not fitting in.

The findings have significant implications for student mobility programmes and the development of intercultural competence. Firstly, the challenges faced by international students in Malaysia highlight the necessity for universities to provide comprehensive support systems that address both academic and non-academic needs. This includes orientation programmes that prepare students for the local climate, cuisine and social norms, as well as ongoing language support to help them overcome communication barriers. Encouraging local students to engage with their international peers can help reduce homesickness, cultural stress and social anxiety and bridge social gaps. By doing so, universities can foster a more inclusive environment.

5.4 Methodology

The study involved 104 first-year inbound mobility students from Vietnam (80 male, 24 female). Most participants came from families with modest incomes, typically earning less than 14,999,999 VND per month (equivalent to about USD610). The students were in a one-month intensive English language mobility programme in one of the universities in Sarawak, Malaysia. It was designed to enhance the students' English language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The programme was a credit transfer programme.

The programme comprised a blend of both English lessons and cultural immersion. During the weekdays, the students spent five hours each day in intensive English classes. During weekends, their educational experience extended beyond the classroom to prominent local attractions such as museums and Sarawak Cultural Village to enrich the students' cultural understanding. The programme was also augmented with on-campus activities that allowed students to engage with local people and learn local cultures. This included opportunities to learn traditional Malaysian dances, an experience facilitated by expert traditional Malaysian dancers. In addition, throughout their stay, the mobility students were accommodated at a residential college within the university campus, giving them opportunities to interact with other students at the college.

In investigating students' intercultural awareness, an online questionnaire consisting of four sections (background information, initial intercultural exposure, intercultural awareness and elaboration of experiences) was constructed in Google Forms. The mobility students were told about the study on intercultural awareness, voluntary participation and confidentiality of responses. Informed consent was secured from all participants. The link was sent to students by the second researcher

on the last day of the mobility programme through their WhatsApp group. The students were encouraged to complete the questionnaire.

For the questionnaire, the participants' responses were downloaded in the form of an Excel sheet. The responses were coded numerically (e.g. 1 for female, 2 for male, 1 for strongly disagree, 2 for agree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree, 5 for strongly agree). Then the Excel statistical functions were used to compute means, standard deviations and percentages. For the responses to the open-ended questions on students' accounts of their experiences, their responses were read a few times to understand their context and content. Thematic analysis was conducted based on Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) to determine key themes and sub-themes. Categories were developed based on the aspects of the experiences such as culture, language and practical issues. The responses were then assigned to the developed categories. Finally, the themes and sub-themes were counted because the number indicate whether a particular theme or sub-theme was of common concern of interest to the students, or the unique experiences of a small subset of the mobility student experiences.

5.5 Findings

5.5.1 *Participants' Initial Exposure to Other Cultures*

All participants had minimal direct engagement with other cultures before coming to Malaysia. Nearly 70% indicated they did not have an ethnically diverse family background, 59.23% had fewer than three international friends and 76.93% had visited fewer than three countries (Table 5.1).

5.5.2 *Participants' Intercultural Awareness After Student Mobility Programme*

The other culture referred to here is the Malaysian culture. The participants reported respect for people from different cultures in terms of their ways ($M = 4.41$) and values ($M = 4.36$). When interacting with people from other cultures, the participants tried to give positive responses ($M = 4.13$) and obtain as much information as they could ($M = 4.09$). They were keen to find opportunities for such interactions by attending events ($M = 4.07$). The participants had an interest in cultural exchange and a high regard for cultural diversity. Table 5.2 shows that the programme fostered positive intercultural awareness, based on the Vietnamese students' self-reports.

Next, in terms of adaptability in intercultural situations, the participants' mean scores were around the neutral of three, and the larger standard deviations showed variability in responses. As a group, the Vietnamese participants were marginally positive about the importance of having agreement from friends of different cultures

Table 5.1 Participants' intercultural exposure (N = 104)

Intercultural exposure	Level of agreement	Frequency	Percentage
Ethnic diversity within family members	Strongly disagree	71	68.27
	Disagree	1	0.96
	Neutral	8	7.69
	Agree	16	15.38
	Strongly agree	8	7.69
Number of friends from other culture groups	0	35	33.98
	1	7	6.80
	2	19	18.45
	3	14	13.59
	4	2	1.94
	5	1	0.97
	6	25	24.27
Number of countries	0	31	29.81
	1	39	37.50
	2	10	9.62
	3	12	11.54
	4	3	2.88
	5	0	0
	6	9	8.65

Table 5.2 Participants' experiences of intercultural awareness (N = 104)

Item	Mean	SD
1. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave	4.41	0.89
2. I respect the values of people from different cultures	4.36	0.97
3. I often give positive responses when interacting with people from other cultures	4.13	1.03
4. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures	4.09	1.07
5. I like to attend events where I might get to know people from different cultures	4.07	1.05
6. It is important that friends from different cultures agree with me on issues	3.31	1.20
7. Getting to know someone of another culture is generally uncomfortable for me	3.15	1.41
8. I am sensitive to the subtle meanings conveyed by people from other cultures	2.87	1.20
9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures	2.33	1.46

($M = 3.31$) and the discomfort of the acquaintance process ($M = 3.15$). However, the participants disagreed that they were sensitive to the subtle meanings conveyed by Malaysians but they do not get upset easily in such intercultural interactions ($M = 2.33$). These findings hint at the complexity of reconciling personal beliefs with the respect for diverse cultural perspectives, and that the participants acknowledged the challenges in fully understanding subtle communication across cultures.

5.5.3 *Changes in Cultural Views Towards Malaysia and Vietnam*

The Vietnamese students were asked to directly reflect on the changes in cultural views towards both Malaysia (host country) and Vietnam (native country). Table 5.3 shows the results.

Over 70% of the participants reported a considerable increase in their cultural knowledge of Malaysia (71.15%) and ease in interacting with Malaysians (70.19%). The open-ended item which allowed them to give additional responses revealed the cultural exchange events were meaningful for the participants. One of the participants explained that he or she ‘participated in many cultural exchange events and learned a lot about food and life’. Examples of cultural exchange events are excursions to cultural sites (“Here I went to some places like museums, mosques, cultural villages”) and intercultural activities like sports (“I have some Malaysian friends play basketball with me”) and cultural performances (“Get on stage and dance”). The cultural exchange events enabled the participants to gain an understanding and appreciation of different cultures. The acquired cultural knowledge was translated into actions, with several participants reporting better adaption to the local culture (“trying to adapt to the culture is important”, “I learned how to behave with people around me”).

Most of the participants also experienced greater ease when interacting with Malaysians as only 6.73% reported that their ease level remained the same. Many of them viewed Malaysians as friendly (“People here friendly”). A few of them had

Table 5.3 Changes in cultural views towards Malaysia and Vietnam (N = 104)

Item	Increased a lot	Increased a little	Remained the same
1. Cultural knowledge of Malaysia	74 (71.15%)	25 (24.04%)	5 (4.81%)
2. Ease in interacting with Malaysians	73 (70.19%)	24 (23.08%)	7 (6.73%)
	Became more positive	Became more negative	Remained the same
3. View of Malaysia	84 (80.77%)	1 (0.96%)	19 (16.35%)
4. View of Vietnam	58 (55.77%)	8 (7.69%)	38 (36.54%)

even formed personal relationships with the locals (“Have a friend from Kuching”, “I have a girlfriend in Kuching”).

The next part of the results in Table 5.3 show that after the one-month student mobility programme, 80.77% of the participants’ cultural views also underwent positive changes. Only one of 104 participants (0.96%) reported their views becoming more negative while 16.35% retained their cultural views of Malaysia.

The open-ended responses revealed that their negative experiences were predominantly cuisine-related. They were not used to spicy food (“The food in Kuching very spicy”) and having chicken for most meals (“I only eat chicken, I am very sad”). Although Malaysian food is generally spicier than Vietnamese food, Malaysian cuisine include lamb, beef and pork (consumed by non-Muslims). The Vietnamese students could have reached the conclusion about chicken because of the food catering selection during their stay. The implication of the findings is that a more diverse range of cuisines that accurately represent Malaysian culture should be offered. This would address misconceptions such as the belief that ‘Malaysians do not eat pork’ due to Muslim dietary laws. Offering a broader variety of local cuisines that accurately reflects the host culture will not only break down stereotypes, but also leads to better understanding of the culture.

The Vietnamese students also were not used to the prayer calls for Muslims to pray. They commented to the organisers about the singing, and wondered why there was singing at different times of the day. The organisers explained to the students who queried, but this experience indicated that the exchange students should be informed about various religious practices in Malaysia.

As for cultural views of Vietnam, the results showed that the time in Malaysia enabled 55.77% to view their own country more positively while 7.69% reported a negative shift in their views of Vietnam and 36.54% retained their views. Some participants stated they developed respect for a variety of cultures while still taking pride in their own heritage (“Respect different cultures and be proud of your nation”). This finding suggests an advanced understanding of intercultural sensitivity where individuals appreciate the richness of other cultures without diminishing the value of their own cultural identity.

5.6 Discussion

This study highlights three noteworthy points regarding student mobility programmes and intercultural education in Asia in terms of their intercultural awareness, social and personal development and challenges in cross-cultural adaptation.

Firstly, we showed that even a brief student mobility programme can significantly impact students’ intercultural awareness and sensitivity. Before the programme, the Vietnamese students had limited exposure to cultural diversity, be it in terms of their family background, social circle, or travel experience. By the end of the programme, they reported positive shifts in intercultural awareness. This finding aligns with previous studies by Fang and Baker (2017) and San and Htwe (2023) which also

concluded that short-term mobility programmes are effective in promoting students' intercultural awareness.

Our findings indicated that the inclusive, hands-on cultural experiences that can bring about increased intercultural awareness include excursions, participation in cultural events, conversations with locals and learning local dances. The Vietnamese students participated actively in various informal activities as well. The programme structure which included both formal talks on culture and informal interactions with locals allow for deeper cultural engagement. The hands-on cultural experiences led to considerable positive shifts in their cultural perceptions towards both Malaysia and Vietnam, advancing towards greater ethnorelativism. This progression is a critical stage in Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. The Vietnamese students exhibited a proactive and open approach to understanding other cultures. This finding thus underscores the need for an educational structure that promotes inclusion, engagement and cultural synergy to achieve intercultural competence. This finding echoes Sobkowiak's (2019) assertion that factors like the frequency and depth of intercultural engagement are essential for developing intercultural competence.

Secondly, the benefits of studying abroad extended beyond academic achievement (improving English proficiency) to include social and personal development. Immersed in Malaysia, where English is widely used as a second language, the students not only improved their language skills through increased exposure but also used English to communicate with local students and build new friendships, broadening their perspectives on their own and other cultures. As noted by Skefsrud (2022), such programmes are instrumental in helping students develop a deeper appreciation of diverse cultures and improve their global competencies.

Finally, despite participating in immersive activities, the Vietnamese participants had difficulties adapting to local cuisine. They expressed disappointment with the limited variety of food, specifically the frequent serving of chicken, and struggled with the spiciness of the meals. This issue shows the need for better dietary options in mobility programmes to accommodate diverse student needs while allowing them to experience the local food. This finding concurs with Tuerxun et al.'s (2020) findings, where Muslim Chinese international students in Malaysia also reported difficulties with spicy food. As such, it is crucial for student mobility programmes to have greater empathy towards foreign students' needs and design mobility programmes that reflect the full range of the host culture, including cuisine and religion. Even when the programme is based in Asia and aimed at Asian students, there are still cultural differences which can pose challenges and adversely affect their memory of their stay. Furthermore, universities should facilitate open dialogues where students feel supported and encouraged to express their concerns, ensuring their issues are addressed.

Another problem faced by the Vietnamese participants was their difficulties in establishing deep cross-cultural connections. They reported uncertainty in forming cross-cultural friendships. They were unsure about intercultural communication nuances, suggesting that a one-month programme may be too brief. This finding echoes Jon's (2013) findings in Korea, where short programme length limited

students' opportunities for forging meaningful social bonds. These findings indicate that while short-term programmes offer initial intercultural exposure, students may benefit from additional support, such as virtual exchanges or follow-up collaborations, to help them maintain relationships and extend their intercultural engagement beyond the formal programme period. Mobility programmes should be seen as the starting point for fostering meaningful humanistic benefits, rather than the end goal.

The difficulties Vietnamese students faced in forming cross-cultural friendships also highlight the need to reconsider the pedagogical framework of the programme. Focusing solely on international students is insufficient. Local students must also be engaged and take on active roles. In short, effective student mobility programmes should foster positive relationships that lead to mutual improvement and growth for all participants, not just international students.

5.7 Situating the Findings Within the Broader Asian Context

The study was on the impact of a Malaysian short-term mobility programmes on intercultural awareness of Vietnamese students. The study generated new findings as similar studies have not been conducted in other Southeast Asian countries. In short, Vietnamese students with limited prior exposure to diverse cultures showed increased intercultural sensitivity after a brief exchange in Malaysia. This outcome reflects findings from Jon's (2013) study, where Korean students in short-term programmes reported gains in intercultural competence and confidence. Similarly, Hofmeyr (2021) found that even brief, multicultural interactions raised cultural awareness among Japanese students. As such, the findings of these studies suggest that a well-structured short-term mobility programme can provide meaningful cultural learning experiences.

Student mobility programmes had conventionally involved bringing students across the eastern and western hemispheres. Our study showed that there are intercultural gains from intraregional exchanges within Asia. Shared cultural elements can facilitate adaptation for students. For instance, Jon and Yoo (2021) found that regional mobility programmes in Korea enhanced mutual understanding and encouraged students' interest in neighbouring Asian cultures. This implies that intraregional student exchanges provide an accessible entry point for intercultural engagement, particularly for students without prior experience in culturally diverse settings.

Our study provided an indication of informal, experiential activities that are important for fostering intercultural contact with locals, such as cultural events and social gatherings. Similarly, a study on a one-month teacher exchange programme in the Philippines (Agustin & Montebon, 2018) found that Thai teachers' intercultural awareness increased through activities like homestays, where host families cooked local dishes and guided visits to cultural heritage sites. These findings emphasise the importance of experiential learning tailored to cultural context, which is especially

effective when the locals are involved, as they offer first-hand cultural perspectives. This kind of interactive engagement helps foster intercultural sensitivity and enables students to connect more authentically.

Other studies on student mobility programmes are on those with a longer duration. For example, the Mobility Programme of University Student in Asia (CAMPUS Asia) initiative among Japan, South Korea and China demonstrates that extended exchanges with integrated academic and extracurricular activities are more effective at fostering deep, lasting intercultural connections. For example, Yung et al. (2017) observed that CAMPUS Asia's extended duration encouraged sustained engagement, enabling students to form meaningful cross-cultural relationships.

By contrast, shorter programmes, while valuable for initial intercultural exposure, often face challenges in building such bonds, as seen in this study where Vietnamese students reported difficulties forming close friendships within the programme's brief duration. This also aligns with Jon's (2013) findings in Korea, where limited programme length constrained students' ability to establish strong social connections. As such, to enhance the impact of short-term exchanges, incorporating virtual exchanges or follow-up collaborations could allow students to maintain relationships and deepen their intercultural understanding beyond the programme's duration.

Finally, the challenges Vietnamese students faced in adapting to Malaysian cuisine reflect the complex role of food in cultural immersion. Tuerxun et al. (2020) reported that Chinese Muslim students in Malaysia also struggled with local spicy foods, illustrating how unfamiliar cuisine can act as a barrier to engagement. However, some programmes have successfully used food as a bridge to cultural understanding. For instance, Umemiya et al. (2024) described a Bruneian student's experience in Korea, where a traditional sweet cooking class became a meaningful way to connect with the host culture. These contrasting experiences suggest that while regional proximity can ease some cultural adjustments, differences in food preferences often persist within Asia. To enhance students' comfort and engagement, mobility programmes should balance cultural immersion with sensitivity to dietary preferences.

5.8 Future Directions

Looking ahead, the long-term evolution of short-term intercultural exchange programmes will increasingly be shaped by the global interconnectedness of Asia. As students' intercultural sensitivity is enhanced during these exchanges, it is essential to examine how these shifts in cultural awareness continue to evolve over time.

This exploration should focus not only on immediate changes but also on whether these experiences lead to sustained shifts in attitudes, behaviours and cross-cultural engagement once students return to their home countries. Integrating post-exchange activities, such as virtual exchanges or alumni networks, could enhance the sustainability of intercultural learning, addressing the challenges of

brief mobility programmes while supporting the continuous development of intercultural competence. This expansion of follow-up opportunities highlights how short-term exchanges can contribute meaningfully to the lifelong cultivation of global citizenship.

As the role of local cultural context becomes even more critical, future work will need to explore how experiential learning activities—such as homestays, cooking classes, or collaborative community projects—affect intercultural understanding across different cultural settings in Asia. A comparative analysis across Asian nations could reveal how various cultural contexts shape the experience of intercultural exchange and help identify the most effective methods for fostering lasting intercultural competence. Expanding the types of cultural immersion offered will provide a more holistic view of intercultural exchange and support the development of genuine, enduring relationships.

In parallel, integrating these experiential elements into the broader academic curriculum could further elevate the educational value of exchange programmes. Formalising intercultural learning within academic structures will provide greater depth and continuity, enabling students to connect their exchange experiences with global issues such as sustainable development, cultural diversity and the complexities of an interconnected world. By embedding these themes into structured academic programmes, future studies can better equip students with the critical thinking tools needed to engage with the evolving challenges of global interconnectedness.

5.9 Conclusion

This study validates the value of short-term student mobility exchanges as an effective entry point for intercultural awareness and sensitivity, especially within an intraregional Asian context. The future of education in the Asian region lies in formal intercultural education in well-structured student mobility programmes that focus on both short-term and long-term benefits. This means that the programmes must prioritise not only academic achievements but also personal growth through culturally immersive activities. This approach will enable students to form meaningful friendships, gain broader cultural perspectives and foster greater tolerance and competencies.

Nevertheless, effective programmes will also require the active participation of both international and local students to ensure meaningful cultural integration. These programmes must also accurately represent host countries' cultural practices to avoid misunderstandings and be sensitive to the diverse needs of international students. Preparing students with orientation sessions on cultural norms and language before they go abroad can also help them adapt and thrive more easily in a new environment. Formal intercultural education in student mobility programmes will become vital components of future education, serving as essential tools for preparing students, both international and domestic, to thrive in a globally interconnected world.

Highlights

- Short-term student mobility programmes significantly enhance intercultural awareness and sensitivity, with Vietnamese students reporting positive shifts in cultural perceptions after their exchange in Malaysia.
- Challenges include difficulties in adapting to local cuisine and forming deep cross-cultural connections, suggesting the need for better dietary options and longer programmes for meaningful relationship-building.
- Intraregional exchanges within Asia, particularly among neighbouring countries, provide valuable intercultural learning opportunities, highlighting the potential of regional mobility programmes for promoting mutual understanding.
- Future directions for student mobility programmes should include follow-up activities, experiential learning and integration of intercultural education into academic curricula to ensure sustained intercultural development.

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