

# Education Futures and Going Global Conferences

## The Future of Outward Mobility Summary

### Background

The below summary is taken from the outward mobility sessions as part of the British Council's Education Futures Mini Conference series, and the UK-ASEAN outward mobility session at the Going Global conference. The series of panel discussions aim to provide insight to support the UK sector's strategic action planning and decision-making allowing the UK education sector to better anticipate challenges, manage risk and respond to opportunities.

- Session one: Student and graduate perceptions on the impact of Covid-19 on outward mobility.
- Session two: Early decision-making and the future of outward mobility - insights from university and industry
- Session three: The future of UK-ASEAN outward mobility in a post-pandemic higher education landscape

Higher education experts, industry leaders and students from around the world joined the British Council staff to explore what the future of outward mobility looks like.

### Summary

The immediate future of outward mobility is unclear, but consensus from senior leadership, policy makers, business and students is that face-to-face mobility programmes cannot be replaced and demand will still be there once the pandemic is over. In preparation for the return to mobility once travel restrictions relax, universities must actively invest in mobility opportunities, particularly through strategic partnerships.

### Opportunities for UK-ASEAN outward mobility

Despite the current crisis, and perhaps even more because of it, universities and governments must consider outward mobility programmes as investments in the future. The UK continues to lag behind Australia, the United States, and many European countries in student mobility: just 7.8% of UK undergraduates students went abroad to study in 2018/19 and of these, only 2740 students went to an ASEAN country to study, work or volunteer<sup>1</sup>. This is compared to 22% of Australian students and 16% of American students.

As Brexit approaches, the UK will increasingly need to diversify its bilateral connections and partnerships, and ASEAN can play a crucial role. Universities should take advantage of this need. Strategic partnerships between UK and ASEAN HEIs will take on new importance as the world comes out of the global pandemic, and new international programmes must be meaningful, focused, and mutually beneficial.

To increase demand, universities should build awareness through short-term programmes. Allowing the alumni of such programmes to act as ambassadors is a fantastic way to raise their profile and can set partnerships on the path to developing semester and year-long programmes. ASEAN universities should invest in building valuable intercultural experiences for international students, particularly in workplace experience and skills development opportunities – mobility for employability.

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<sup>1</sup> UUKi – International facts and figures 2019

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/2019/International%20facts%20and%20figures%20slides.pdf>  
<https://education-services.britishcouncil.org>

Funding support will be critical to the success of these programmes, and especially for increasing the number of outward-bound UK students. The development of UK-ASEAN tertiary partnerships is crucial for furthering UK-ASEAN ties, business opportunities, and building cultural bridges.

### **Early decision-making on outward mobility**

Over the last five months, Covid-19 has caused significant implications on outward mobility. As the global pandemic continues, students, universities and businesses alike have been forced to manage disruptions that may yet last for some time. At the beginning of the crisis, strict lockdowns and travel restrictions meant that many students who were studying or working abroad had to abruptly return home and quickly adjust to attending online lectures. Most UK universities have cancelled summer outward mobility programmes. The next hurdle is the feasibility of study abroad in the new semester and beyond.

Universities must tackle significant challenges in order to run any mobility programmes in the near future. Travel restrictions are the most obvious of these – Australian outward mobility programmes are currently closed until 2021 as the government maintains strict border closures for people entering and leaving the country. In the UK, universities that are still set to go ahead with semester one, such as the University of Bristol, must also heed travel advice and warnings from the Foreign Commonwealth Office as well as quarantine and social distancing guidelines from Public Health England. Universities must also navigate application timelines amid disrupted and rescheduled semesters and exam periods while still allowing students some flexibility to make their own decisions. Other key issues include travel insurance and how demand might change for different study destinations around the world.

### **The ‘Covid cohort’ and virtual alternatives**

Many students are now wondering how they can continue to develop new skills despite lockdowns, travel restrictions, and cancelled plans as they lose valuable time that would have otherwise been used productively. The primary stopgap measures are virtual: online summer courses and virtual internships. However, concerns abound over the quality and real value of these alternatives. In-person learning, networking, skills development and cultural immersion is irreplaceable. When it comes to virtual experiences, universities and companies must ensure that online and virtual provisions are worthy replacements.

Students do not underestimate the value of in situ international cultural and internship experiences and regard virtual opportunities as second best. While online experiences and internships present a better-than-nothing option that allay concerns over finances and health, they do not have the same impact of natural human experiences of casual connections. Additionally, this ‘Covid cohort’ of graduating students who are most impacted by the pandemic view these online experiences as a way to show employers that they are doing something useful with their time. Virtual options are a fantastic way to fill this temporary gap, but they are not full replacements, and the student panellists indicated their enthusiasm to go abroad once travel is again a feasible option.

### **The virtual shift**

To make their programmes valuable, institutions and businesses must invest time and resources to developing digital provisions and communicate well with their students and interns. Virtual programmes cannot simply be face-to-face courses moved online. Currently there is an overall willingness on all sides to explore innovative ways to deliver global opportunities virtually. Running pilot programmes with real students is a great way to take advantage of this attitude. For example, Huawei’s Seeds for the Future programme, which is a partnership with the British Council’s Generation UK campaign, will pilot its condensed, one-week

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online course in July before launching the full programme. This will allow the programme – typically a one-month experience in China – to elicit valuable feedback from participants.

Students and businesses must also be aware that online and virtual experiences will depend heavily on their own dedication and investments. In order to benefit, students must be proactive and enthusiastic, taking initiative to develop skills, find opportunities, and network online. Many aspects of internships will be lost in the transfer to the digital sphere, such as working environments, the cultural immersion of international internships, day-to-day networking with other employees or clients, and other social opportunities. Given the novel nature of the virtual internship, employers' perceptions of virtual experiences will depend on the student's ability to articulate the experience and skills they gained as they would for face-to-face experiences. But companies, too, must be proactive. Virtual internships will require high levels of communication and special attention to ensure that interns are gaining something from the experience.

As limits on international travel continue and social distancing remains in place, we can all take steps to develop the hybrid models of the future. While ultimately the onus is on businesses to create virtual skills development opportunities, universities also play a critical role in linking employers and young people. Universities should also be willing to share best practices on pilot programmes, how to mitigate the risks and concerns of international mobility, and how to get these essential programmes back up and running.

The British Council wishes to thank the following speakers and panellists for their invaluable contributions to this series:

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