Emerging Scholars Research Summary

Professionalization of Virtual Education Abroad: Where are we in the Innovation-Decision Process?

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic upended the Education Abroad (EA) field when in-person programming and travel became impossible. In order to continue offering international experiences to students, many universities and organizations developed virtual EA offerings (VEA). This article presents data from a study that examined educators' experiences creating, facilitating, and administering these programs through a qualitative survey and optional follow-up semi-structured interview. Including the reflections of 51 EA practitioners, the data reveal positive outcomes and strong support for the continuation of VEA even post-pandemic; the implications of this research are that VEA is an important part of an EA organization's portfolio and merits additional research. Using

Sahin's application of Rogers' Theory of Diffusion of Innovations on incorporating technology into education, this paper considers what stage EA stakeholders are at now in the process of accepting the use of the virtual space in the field.

Keywords: abroad, COVID-19, education, international, online, professionalization, virtual

INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread, all travel-based education abroad (EA) programs in the United States were canceled (Moody, 2020). To continue offering the benefits of EA, many organizations and practitioners hurriedly created virtual EA (VEA) programs. This meant reconfiguring EA pedagogy to work in the online space, rapidly learning new skills, and discovering student reactions and results in real time. Practitioners now posit that VEA might offer similarly effective benefits as in-person programs, with the caveat that they are based on sound, well-designed pedagogy, and that in the post-pandemic future they might constitute one part of an organization's portfolio (Angell et al., 2021; Dietrich, 2020). While some VEA existed before the pandemic, the profusion of new programs created out of necessity offers a chance to evaluate VEA's potential as well as consider its future. This qualitative study asked: What experience did educators have in the process of creating, leading, and administering VEA programs during the pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

EA is an umbrella term including various international curricular and co-curricular student activities. These include study abroad, international internships, faculty-led programs, and others (The Forum on Education Abroad, n.d.). Research on the benefits of EA and developments in the field have increased in recent decades (Davidson et al., 2018) and professionalization has steadily increased since the 50s, including more EA publications and conferences, career tracks, and specializations (Davidson et al., 2018; Hibel, n.d.). Online education has also increased over the past decades as technology

has improved and strategies, structures, and programs have emerged. Researchers have examined the potential benefits of this teaching modality (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004) but cautioned that online education is only effective when technology is used in the service of effective pedagogy (Mittelmeier et al., 2020).

Research on EA and online learning have overlapped, often in specific contexts and amongst certain practitioner communities. Some students have accessed classes and degrees in other countries by participating in online programs (Mittelmeier et al., 2021). A small group of educators have urged colleagues to consider technology-assisted EA and have developed programs in the forms of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Virtual Exchange (VE) (Dorroll et al., 2019), but enthusiasm and ambition for the development of these models remained within their respective communities (Dietrich, 2021). In 2018, before the pandemic, Zhang and Pearlman reported that,

Despite the benefits technology enhanced COIL courses bring to American and international students, faculty, and institutions, it is important to point out the lack of pedagogical and instructional support, and on-going technological professional development for faculty who teach online (p. 9). During the pandemic when educators had no choice but to either cease offering EA or switch to VEA because of the health risks of meeting in-person, VEA programming increased dramatically (Dietrich, 2021; Mudiamu, 2021).

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

Sahin (2006) demonstrated how Rogers' Theory of Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) (Rogers, 2003) can be used as a framework to examine innovations in incorporating technology into education. In this article, one aspect of DOI theory will be used: the Innovation-Decision Process. Sahin (2006) describes this as five sequential steps: Knowledge, Persuasion, Decision, Implementation, and Confirmation. Briefly, the Knowledge Stage concerns the awareness that an innovation exists and an increase in know-how to use and understand it. The Persuasion Stage involves shifting feelings and evaluations of the innovation. The Decision Stage concerns adoption or rejection of the innovation; the Implementation Stage involves putting the innovation into

practice; and at the Confirmation Stage individuals look for confirming evidence to back their decision about the innovation.

RESEARCH METHOD

A snowball sampling method was used to recruit individuals who led, designed, and/or administered VEA during the pandemic by posting the research call on industry listservs SECUSS'L and NAFSA as well as an alumni network. The call was also forwarded by email through professional networks. Data were collected using an online qualitative survey. Questions included demographic information; whether participants' institutions offered VEA and why; what kinds of programs they were; their experience creating, facilitating, or administering them; how they were received by students; whether programs achieved their learning goals; and whether they thought their organization should continue offering the programs. Finally, participants were asked if they were interested in taking part in a follow-up semi-structured interview. Data were analyzed using first and second cycle coding as outlined by Miles et al. (2014).

RESULTS

In all, there were 60 questionnaire respondents. 51 reported offering VEA; the remaining responses were not included in this analysis. 23 interviews were conducted. 41 participants were located in the United States or Canada, 7 in Europe, 3 in Latin America, and 2 in Asia. Other participant details are included in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Participant information

Variable	Number of participants
Organization where participant works	
3rd party provider of EA	12
University	31
Other	7
Position at Organization	
Global education program designer	4
Global education program facilitator	9
Both designer and facilitator	25
Other	12

Notes: "Other" responses of where participant works included community college, high school, and liberal arts college. "Other" responses of position included administrator, advocate, director, and faculty. One participant chose not to respond to each question.

Preliminary findings revealed an initial scramble to continue offering international experiences, resulting in new VEA that often surprised their creators with positive outcomes. When asked about student perception, 19 reported a very positive reception from students, 19 a positive one, nine a 'better than nothing' feeling, three had overall negative impressions, and one did not respond. These numbers indicate that in the perception of educators, many students enjoyed and learned from VEA. Several participants expressed surprise at how successful programs were. One participant said about their VEA, "They were beloved. Honestly, they surpassed all expectations. We conducted multiple levels of assessment and the ICC [intercultural competence] gains were higher than we see in some in-person programming." Others remained skeptical, saying for example, "It's not a substitute for being in-country, but students felt they were very worthwhile".

14 participants described the initial change-over to VEA stressful or challenging, and 11 mentioned the need for careful collaboration within their institution and with international contacts. One elaborated, "I would say the process required [1]) flexibility, 2) innovative thinking, 3) creativity, and 4) high level of organization and administrative oversight." 45 participants planned on continuing all or part of the programs they developed as a permanent part of their EA portfolio, and many planned on using virtual to support in-person programs for pre- and post-program training, advising, and more. 16 called virtual a potential tool to increase student access to international experiences and inspire future in-person travel. Six participants framed VEA as only a stopgap measure that they would not continue in the future.

DISCUSSION

Rogers' Innovation-Decision Process (Sahin, 2006) can be used to consider in which stage VEA finds itself now and at what velocity it has reached that point. The Knowledge Phase constituted years of dedicated scholars and practitioners creating VEA which despite showing encouraging results enjoyed

little support (Dorroll et al., 2019; Zhang & Pearlman, 2018). After the pandemic hit, the speed of the Innovation-Decision Process accelerated rapidly, as seen by the results of this study. Suddenly, educators had no choice but to move programs online (Moody, 2020), and they both innovated and turned to research from previous years (Dietrich, 2021; Mudiamu, 2021). VEA rushed into the Persuasion Phase and picked up many adherents in the process.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper highlights several implications for the future of VEA and expands the research supporting the educational and developmental value of EA and online learning for students. As of Summer 2021, some individuals or institutions reflected in this study were entering the Decision Phase, while some were further along in the Implementation or Confirmation Phases (Sahin, 2006). Many participants anticipated continuing VEA while others indicated a wait-and-see mindset. As the COVID-19 pandemic lingers and the concept of normal remains an elusive state, universally reaching the Implementation or Confirmation phases is still hazy in a hard-to-imagine future. Some participants asked: Will students be excited about anything virtual after these long Zoom-filled years? Many said yes, as part of a larger EA portfolio. Some wondered: Will an aim for equity and accessibility in EA back-fire and create a two-tiered system of the 'haves' taking planes and 'have-nots' in front of a computer? Several participants reported that not only did VEA increase access to international experiences for students, but many also expressed a desire to travel post-pandemic.

This study supports the idea that well-designed VEA can enhance students' intercultural competencies and provide access to international experiences, among other benefits (Angell et al., 2021; Dietrich, 2020). Institutions and educators are recommended to incorporate VEA into their practice. To push these innovations into the mainstream and gain support from all stakeholders, practitioners and researchers will need to keep in mind the industry-wide Implementation and Confirmation phases that are yet to come. Gathering and sharing data and experiences will bolster the momentum resulting from the rapid creation of VEA during the pandemic. This will represent a shift of VEA from a knee-jerk reaction to COVID to part of the professional fabric of EA. As one participant put it, "COVID-19 is often discussed as a deficit or negative

impact on all aspects of life. In my view this is an opportunity for reinvention, innovation, and evolution." Educators should recognize this opportunity and seize it.

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