Student Mobility Program Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has changed the digital revolution to replace the normal face-to-face practice, and it strongly impacts rather than strengthens the university's new norm. The measures and policies of international students' movement required revision and confirmation with the government operation procedures. The mobility program was disrupted and became less attractive due to the new virtual-learning experience. Thus, virtual mobility or cross-border education is offered rapidly due to the pandemic. Without cross-border traveling, virtual mobility offers the same advantages as physical mobility using information and communication technologies. This research is expected to aim to achieve the stated objectives: (i) to determine the key factors that may influence students' participation in the mobility program during COVID-19; (ii) to evaluate the students' perceptions of the mobility program during COVID-19 and (iii) to develop strategies to engage in the mobility program during a pandemic. This research is an exploratory study with a mixed-method approach via interview and survey. The sample students enrolled in the mobility program were randomly selected. It provides an overview of the factors that affected students to engage in the mobility program during the pandemic via the perceptions gathered that could assist the university for future mobility engagement. Therefore, suitable strategies could be developed to engage mobility programs during a pandemic.

Keywords: Mobility program, Engagement, COVID-19, Pandemic crisis

Introduction

Student engagement has become a central concern in today's learning and teaching. Scholars have reported various outcomes from student engagement, such as increased satisfaction in learning (Farley, McKee & Brooks, 2011) and better performance in academic and soft skills development (Holland, 2016; Kuh et al., 2008). Due to these significances, Kuh et al. (2006) assert that teachers and their teaching approaches are at the heart of engagement. Likewise, Stefani (2009) also argues that engaging students in the learning process and encouraging them to understand will enhance their employability; thus, it must be at the core of the powerful pedagogical idea.

The pandemic in years 2020 and 2021 brought a huge change in normal lifestyles and affected human mobility globally with drastic restrictions, stopping all cross-border movements for any reason or activity. It affected tourism and business travel, limited labor migration, and reduced the movement of all groups to family reunification and international students' movement. Indeed, the pandemic disrupted economic and social activities worldwide and changed normal behavior and movement

restrictions, impacting everyone to different degrees. Unexceptionally, universities was significantly affected and required a drastic change from normal face-to-face practice to virtual application.

The changes also affected the mobility program, which include inbound and outbound mobility programs. In Malaysia, for instance, domiciled and migration students traveling internationally for mobility programs during undergraduate, postgraduate, and research programs could identify institutional barriers to participation in outbound and inbound mobility in higher education. Although mobility programs could introduce the advantages of studying and working abroad, the pandemic situation has limited the international movement that would spread communicable diseases.

This phenomenon has boosted an vigorous discussion among international education community worldwide and its potential impact on higher education, internationalisation, and international student mobility. Thus, this research aims to study the effects of student mobility program for internationalisation in higher education after the COVID-19 era. The current internationalisation strategy plan is to strengthen Higher Education Institutions' international research, scholarship, and collaboration to achieve a global profile of the university ranking as a research institution comprising faculty from a wide range of disciplines. The lack of crisis management awareness in the plan encourages this research to be executed.

A mechanism that could identify the key contributory factors will be developed and followed by establishing an internationalization strategy action plan based on the mobility model and teaching and learning five models. The model will be evaluated and compared with current educational mobilities and guidelines. The expected results would disclose the significant relationship between the educational mobility model, higher educational students' development, and internationalisation performance index. The research also concludes by suggesting an internationalisation strategy action plan and guideline for student mobility programs to achieve the objectives of the mobility programs of all parties concerned. Although many mobility programs have been generally conducted, a detailed study on the effect of student mobility programs for internationalisation in higher education during the crisis phase was still an unexplored domain.

Concerning the expectation, this research is designed to explore these questions: (i) What are the significant factors that may influence students' participation in a mobility program during COVID-19? (ii) What are students' perceptions on a mobility program during COVID-19? and (iii) How to implement a mobility program during a pandemic crisis?

Literature Review

Most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have established international educational brands. The independent schools, such as Graduate School, Business School, and International Studies School, have been welcoming students worldwide to pursue study at their institutions. Also, the standard entry requirement for the professions and professional development, including ethical and technical principles, is designed by the HEIs and should be respected by other parties. It also could be seen as the standard of qualifications offered by HEIs in countries worldwide. Thus, these credentials are highly appreciated by the industry, government, and students with access to various worldwide employment prospects due to their depth and breadth of business abilities. HEIs have an education sector comprising independent, autonomous institutions that are confident and competent to make decisions and develop strategies. Thus, most of HEIs in Malaysia do well by strengthening all institutions' capacity in international competitions.

Mobility Program

HEIs recognize the importance of students spending time abroad. The higher education sector is developing a strategy for inbound and outbound student mobility programs. The plan will promote the benefits of mobility and signpost opportunities for students and institutions (NSSE, 2018). It will work with businesses and others to source scholarship funding, support the brokerage of internships, and reinforce messages on outward student mobility for employability.

HEIs' autonomy attracts students worldwide with distinctive programs. Many emerging economies are looking to send large numbers of students overseas and achieve transformational change in domestic education systems. A mobility program is a tool to source collective expertise

from organizations, provide services to the education sector, which include construction services, legal advice, and project finance.

Education Innovation

Significant changes in education result in a genuine, global industries, attracting more and more investors to be interested in large-scale global expansion. This change does not only offer challenges, but opportunities to established HEIs providers. Thus, HEIs need:

1. Autonomy, flexibility, and entrepreneurial approach to search out opportunities and respond rapidly to emerging demands and needs.
2. Ability and willingness to form partnerships, cooperate across the old public-private boundaries, and contemplate growth where appropriate.
3. Access to extra investment if required and an understanding of how to strike mutually beneficial deals with investors.

International demands for education also stimulate growth for HEIs. Institutions are trying to attract more overseas students to study in Malaysia. In addition, technology mainly enables many types of international education and underpins the growth of multinational education companies. According to Nujid and Tholibon (2023), students' unfamiliarity with technology affects their learning process. For instance, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) has established its institutions to be well-placed to secure investment for greater use of technology in learning and teaching, including having several world-class brands. UUM and their most experienced expert providers of distance learning have been successfully engaging educational excellence and tradition with technology and research to produce world-class pedagogies. However, the demand for education and vocational skills is changing unprecedentedly. The rising cost of education has provoked demands for alternatives to traditional campus college education. Global businesses are using technology platforms for employee learning and development. Thus, this has resulted to several innovations that could disrupt the education marketplace.

Quality Mobility Engagement

These practices are parallel with Bruening et al. (2015) who suggest that course-based and credit-bearing need to be considered in designing the learning programs. Although the program requirements could vary according to the institution's aims and objectives of teaching and learning, the fundamental concept, such as mutual benefits, integration, and engagement, should be observed in any mobility teaching and learning.

Meanwhile, Brownell and Swaner (2009) have reviewed various outcomes of learning implementation and highlighted the following three factors in developing a quality mobility experience:

1. Students could experience meaningful teaching and learning through direct and effective interaction with faculties.
2. Teachers, as supervisors, should assess and give regular feedback to students regarding their progress.
3. Timeframe of mobility should be enough for students to experience meaningful teaching and learning and to allow relationships to develop between students, communities, and the university.

Notably, the researchers frequently identify a certain strategy or process that would direct the implementation of an efficient educational mobility. Some tactics could be adapted from successful stories of implementing mobility at other institutions to make mobility work best for universities. For instance, the Schools (2018), College of Saint Benedict, and Saint John's University (2018) specified the requirements:

1. Students are required to complete a set of teaching and learning hours (including discussions, meetings, and preparation) for a semester;
2. Every student must submit a written reflection;
3. The community must benefit from student-community partnerships for them to be successful; and
4. Discussions, lessons, activities, and any other relevant methods should be used to include educational mobility in the classroom learning process.

Students, professors, universities, communities, and university partners are all winners in a mobility program. However, if a mobility program is executed badly during a crisis, students may gain hazy experiences. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic has interfered with economic and social activities and changed institutions and culture of the societies. Universities are among the organisations that have been significantly affected by the pandemic and the consequences are still visible until today (UNESCO, 2020).

Challenges in Mobility Program

If students cannot demonstrate the goals and objectives of teaching and learning mobility, the level of knowledge, accuracy, and expertise in the mobility program may become a challenge (Cooper, 2014; Eby, 1998). Several challenges were found, including the diversity of stakeholder interests, strong university-university partnerships, quality and reciprocity of students' learning, the need to instill sociological imagination in students, the need to incorporate opportunities for support and community development, and assessment and reflection strategies in ensuring continuous improvement of a program (Billig & Waterman, 2014; Donahue, Fenner, & Mitchell, 2015).

These practices agree with those observed by Bruening et al. (2015). The design of the mobility programs based on course and credit-bearing needs to be taken into consideration. Although the exact requirements depend on the goals and objectives of the institution, any educational mobility should adhere to the core principles of mutual benefits, integration, and engagement. Student challenges, faculty challenges and university partner obstacles are the three fundamental components that are pertinent to the challenges of mobility programs during a crisis.

Lack of time may be a problem for students as their burden, which includes homework, extracurricular activities, family responsibilities, and social obligations, increases. Students' participation in a mobility program may also encounter difficulties as they need to cope with new online learning, distant learning, and current challenges. Students will experience challenges related to logistical convenience and transportation due to the movement restrictions due to the pandemic crisis. Students may experience difficulties connecting their volunteer activity to their schoolwork or the activities of a partner university due to distance learning. Moreover, students' participation in a mobility program would have difficulties due to the lack of information, knowledge of local regulations, funding, and other factors.

The introduction of virtual mobility programs during the pandemic crisis results in some difficulties to the faculties. Management teams may face few indirect challenges due to the hasty planning and preparation. It takes time to coordinate teaching and learning activities with university partners. Additionally, since the effects of mobility are uncertain, there is fear of the unknown and classroom management. Along with the absence of institutional and departmental support provided to faculties, the hurdles may also include lack of time to appropriately update and restructure courses to fully integrate remote learning for mobility programs. The pandemic poses a barrier on mobility programs since they are perceived as optional component of a curriculum.

Undoubtedly, amid the COVID-19 problem, university partners are also having some difficulties implementing mobility programs. Among the biggest obstacles facing by university partners is the lack of time for planning, training, and supervision. Besides, this also include short-term volunteers that limit the benefits, which may potentially lead to adverse outcomes. University partners experience difficulties in finding students to work for the organizations because of the locations or labor required. Indeed, defining opportunities that match the aims of students, teachers, and the community at large presents a challenge for university partners.

Methodology

This study is an exploratory research that was conducted via a mixed method as it includes interview and a survey. The unit analysis of this study is individuals belonging to the inbound and outbound students. The students are randomly selected from a group enrolling under UUM's mobility program. The complexity of the "inbound and outbound mobility program" for students is varied in oder to assess their performance and behavior during a crisis event. Students' choices and decisions are extremely vital when managing a crisis, particularly when decisions are be made instantly under pressure (Casutt, Martin, Keller, & Jäncke, 2014; Hassan, King, & Watt, 2015).

The interview session was to engage with students, aiming to motivate students to openly share their experiences. Students must see the crisis in the environment. The students must also quickly scan important information, such as notices from their home country's government, the university's teaching and learning requirements, visa requirements, and flight ticket schedules. Many students feel a certain degree of pressure and anxiety when managing a crisis during their mobility program especially when it involves safety and security.

This research also employs a quantitative survey. The questionnaire was designed based on the literature review, research objectives, and research questions. The first section provides the respondents' demographic information, which is essential in understanding their responses. Section two evaluates factors that may influence students' participation during COVID-19. An interview, led by the researcher, with the focus group was conducted to allow open, in-depth discussions with the mobility students to intricately explore students' perceptions on UUM's mobility programs during COVID-19.

This research is divided into four phases:1) designing instruments, 2) data collection, 3) data analysis, and 4) formulating guideline phases. Designing instruments reviews relevant literatures and information regarding the introduction to educational mobility structure, including studying the selection of measurements for the instrument. Furthermore, collecting data, identifying sample, distributing online survey, and conducting focus group interviews were taken into action. Next, data analysis involves data collection via qualitative and quantitative methods. Descriptive analysis by using SPSS and thematic analysis for a focus group were used in this research. Lastly, the guidelines were constructed and validated based on an expert's review.

Results and Discussion

Mobility programs could promote the benefits of studying and working abroad. However, the rapid spread of COVID-19 has raised concern at international travel. This results in vigorous discussion among international education communities on its potential impacts on higher education, internationalisation, and international student mobility. International students experience rapid changes in their learning and living settings, host institutions, and faculty members encounter various obstacles especially in academic settings, bureaucratic obligations, health and safety issues at the universities.

Respondents' Age and Gender on Mobility Program During COVID-19 Pandemic

A total of 171 respondents participated in this research as a convenience sampling design was applied. The age groups of the respondents are 18–22 (81.3%) and 23–27 years old (18.7%). In total, there are 50 male respondents (29.2%) and 121 female repondents (70.8%) that have completed the questionnaires. The selection of respondents' gender was based on convenience sampling and volunteered feedback during the invitation timeframe.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of the mobility program currently enrolled by gender and age group. Female aged 18–22 years old makes up the majority of students currently enrolled in mobility program (43.8%), followed by male students aged 18–22 years old (38%). The survey shows that six male students and 13 female students aged 23–27 years old are currently enrolled in the mobility program. In total, 72 students aged 18–22 years old and 19 students aged 23–27 years old are currently enrolled in mobility program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, 67 respondents

aged 18–22 years old (21 male, 46 female) and 13 respondents aged 23–27 years old (4 male, 9 female) are not recently enrolled in mobility program.

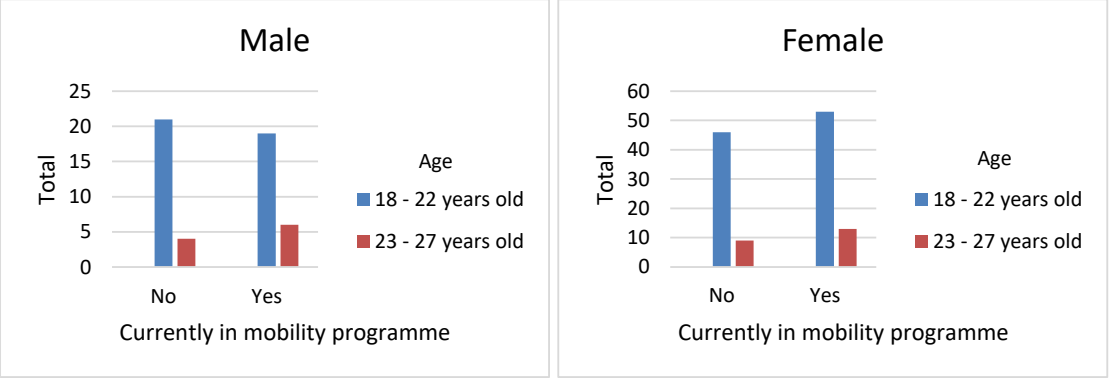

Fig. 1 Total respondents currently enrolled in mobility program by gender and age

Figure 2 shows the proportion of respondents interested to enroll in mobility program by gender and age group. In total, 103 respondents (31 male and 72 female) aged 18–22 years old and 22 respondents (8 male and 14 female) aged 23–27 years old intent to participate in any mobility program in the future. However, several factors during pandemic affected respondents' decision to enroll in mobility program. It shows that 11 male respondents (22%) and 35 female respondents (28.9%) do not have plan to enroll in mobility program during COVID-19 pandemic.

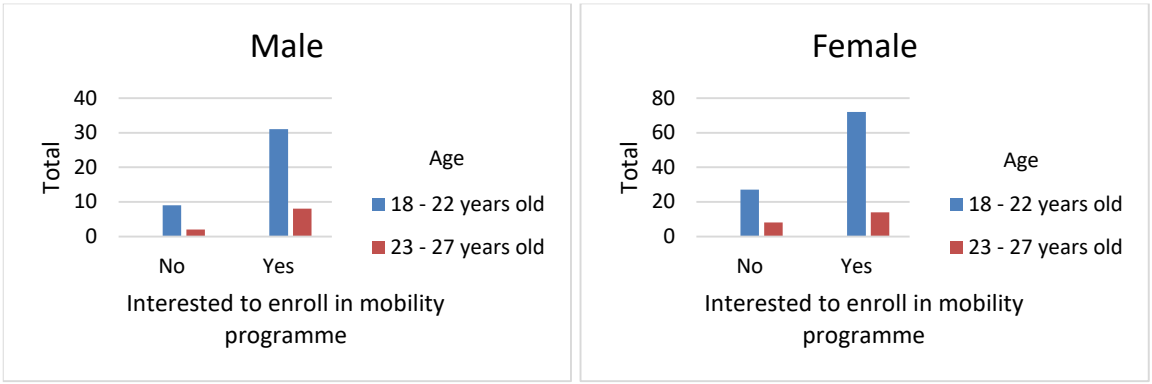

Fig. 2 Total respondents interested to enroll in mobility program by gender and age

The Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Mobility Program

The level of knowledge, accuracy, and expertise pose a challenge to the mobility program if the students could not demonstrate the aims and objectives of mobility teaching and learning. The main reason for participating in mobility program is the student's personal desire to experience studying in a particular country of their choice, followed by having a new perspective on their studies (55%) while experiencing a new culture (36%). Additionally, the students would also like the opportunity to study in a reputable institution (36%).

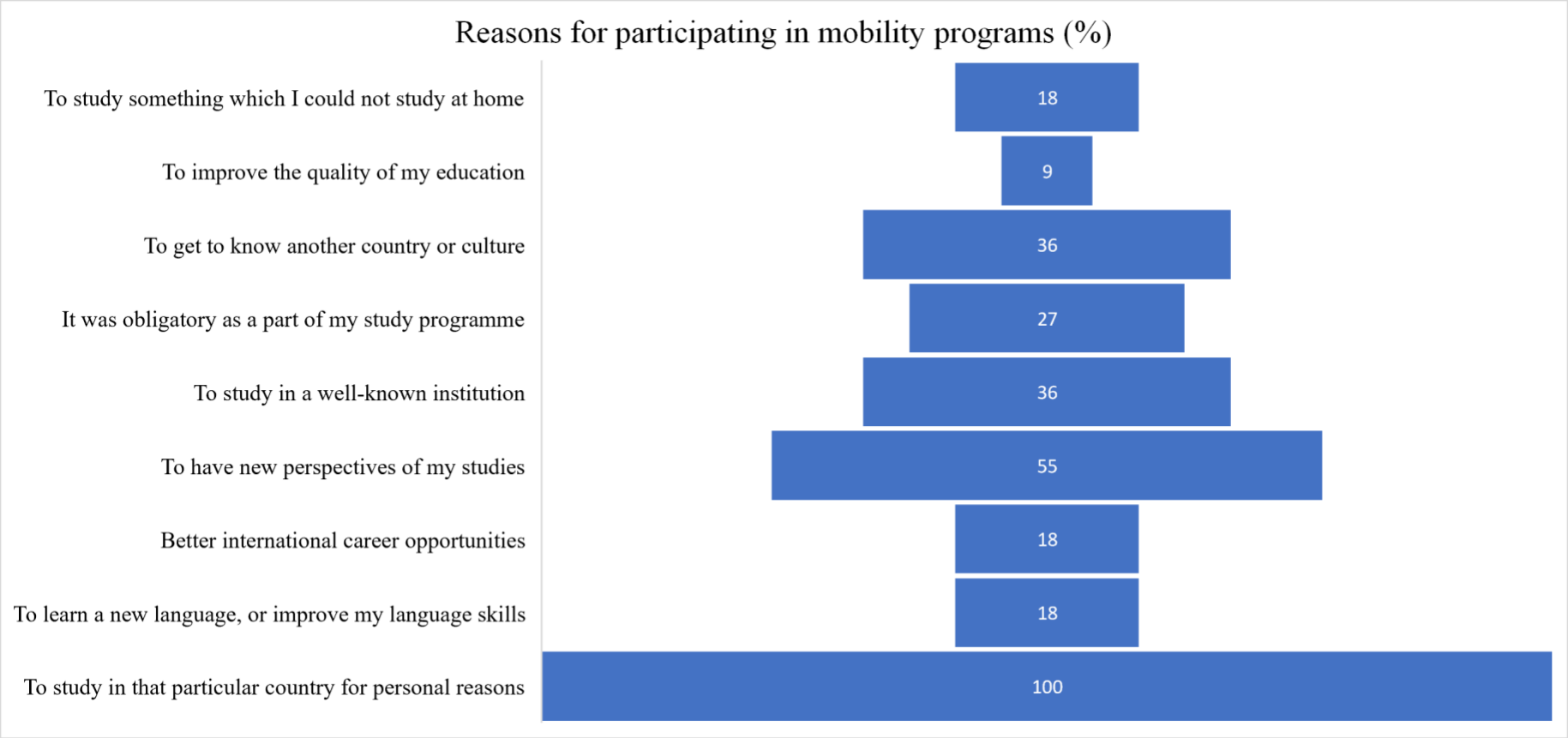

Fig. 3 Reasons to engage in mobility program during the COVID-19 pandemic

Despite the potential benefits of mobility program to all parties (i.e., the student, faculty, university, community, and university partners), several reasons exist why students are not keen to engage in mobility programs. Fig. 4 illustrates the top reasons are personal basis related to family and social circles (39%), followed by health issues (38%). In addition, a number of them (32%) have claimed that the advisors in their home university do not advise them to participate. Thirty-one percent found it itoo stressful to participate in exchange programs. Several other reasons exist related to their studies, preventing the students from participating in mobility program.

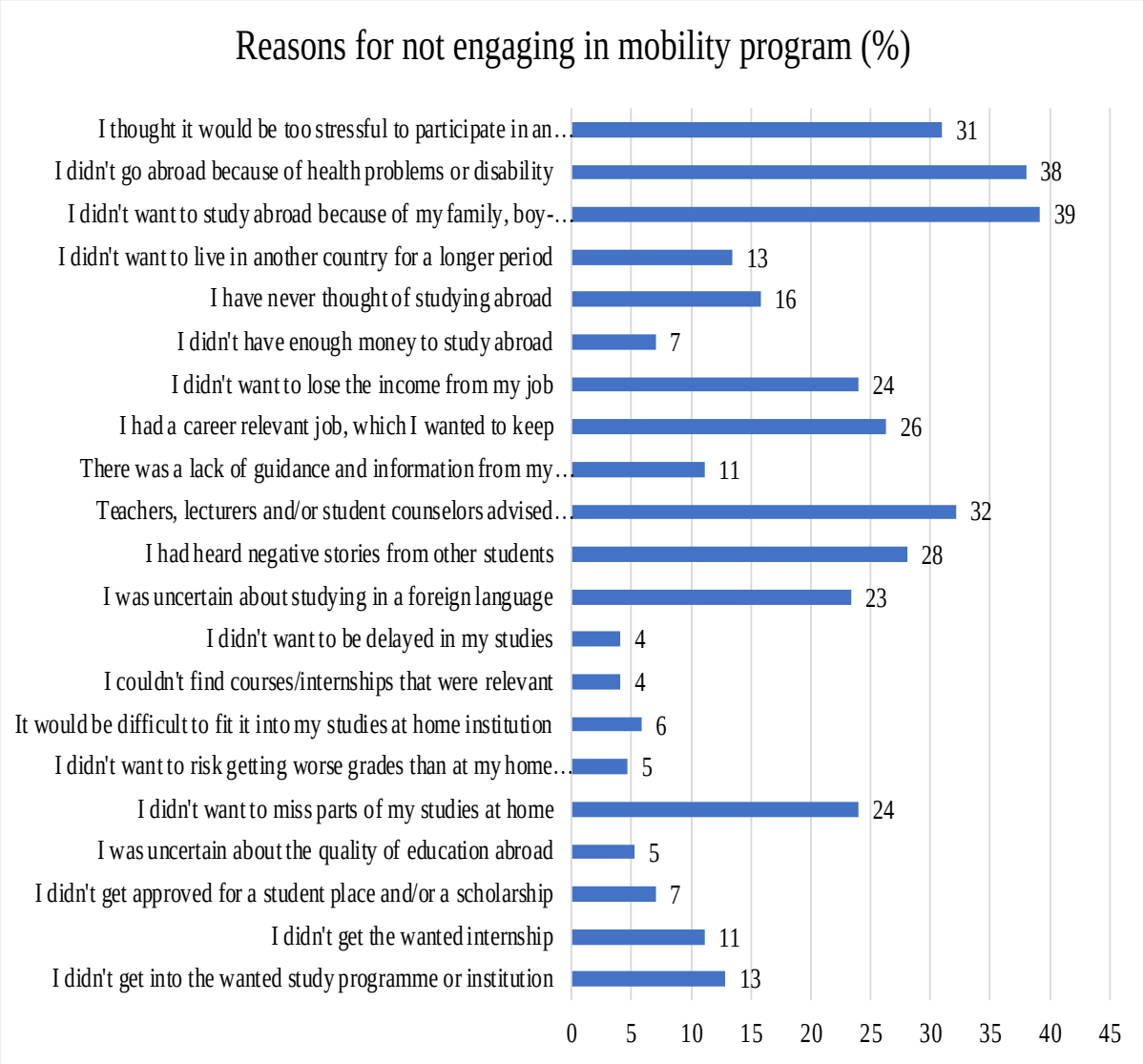

Fig. 4 Reasons not to engage in mobility program during the COVID-19 pandemic

Mobility programs could bring vague experience to students if done poorly during a crisis. Information, education, and publicity are needed to increase students' awareness on the effects of crisis and the possible effects of mobility program on health. HEIs should cater to different student groups who might consider participating in the internationalisation network since some do not consider the effect of crisis events, such as suitabilty, safety, cleanliness, attractions, convenience and affordability. The results also show better understanding on the link between mobility and students' safety behavior. For instance, negative response from other students may reflect poorly on host institutions. Based on the research findings, student mobility programs for internationalisation in higher education institutions should highly consider students' safety behavior during COVID-19. Although many studies have been generally conducted on mobility programs, a detailed evaluation on the effects of student mobility programs for internationalisation in higher education institutions during

crisis phase remains unexplored. The findings suggest inbound and outbound educational mobility principles to be derived from the study of higher education students using the literature search of mobility and exchange students in the actual environment of crisis events. It has never been conducted in the region and the results will be useful for students, educational institutions, and respective authorities.

Conclusion

This research introduces a better understanding and improvement of sustainable educational mobility programs for students and institutions. This paper explores the consequence of COVID-19 on the students' mobility programs.

This study aims to engage students in a program during the pandemic, where the norm had been changed to a virtual mobility program. The indirect approach to distance learning has affected students' emotional states since the mobility program expects them to gain experience by participating. This situation might affect the students' engagement in the program.

Hence, this research was designed to seek answers for the following questions: (i) What are the key factors that may influence students' participation on UUM mobility program during COVID-19? (ii) What are the students' perceptions on UUM mobility program during COVID-19? and (iii) How to implement mobility program during a pandemic? The findings reveal the reality of students' experience in engaging with the mobility program from inbound and outbound point of views. This would give some ideas on management to the faculty and university to closely monitor and design ideal mobility programs in the future.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is suggested to empower student mobility programs to promote comprehensive student learning and development. Mobility engagement, as teaching and learning practices explain the integration of time, commitment, effort, and university support on student development, is critical to increase future leaders' understanding and talent development, which will benefit the university's reputation. Interaction and commitment showed by the students to the intended educational and program community during the pandemic promote better results for prospective talent. The benefits of mobility programs have been proven to successfully in assisting students concerning the educational and social background, personal ambitions, skills, and competencies following the problems of the twenty-first century, including differences and similarities. As a result, the collection of contributing elements that could substantially influence holistic student development should be recognized. HEIs should improve student engagement and performance in mobility programs by being more consistent in their teaching and learning procedures. Although the number of active students is minimal, the institution should increase the participation and make it a priority for all students.

Co-Author Contribution

This article's writers declare no conflict of interest. Author 1 conducted the fieldwork and prepared the literature and research technique. Authors 2 and 3 are responsible for the research technique, including statistical analysis and interpretation of findings. The research findings were discussed by authors 4 and 5. Author 6 proofread and revised the study while also contributing insight into it.

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