



# Going Global in the Time of Corona: HCT-SAIT Virtual Student Mobility Pilot

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**Abstract.** The concept of international exchange of students, in person or virtually, is in existence for several decades and the benefits and challenges of such exchange programs are extensively discussed in the literature. However, the literature is limited to the students' exchange programs for language courses and is confined to the western countries such as UK, USA, France, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Ireland and Israel. There is a dearth of scholarly work on the international exchange of students between Middle Eastern Countries and Western countries. Furthermore, the process from conception to completion of an exchange program reflecting the benefits and challenges from faculty and students' perspectives is not readily available. The purpose of this white paper is to share the process adopted by the Higher Colleges of Technology (UAE) to pilot its first successful virtual student exchange with the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (Canada), using the collaborative online international learning approach. The paper also highlights the challenges faced during the pilot, and strategies adopted to mitigate the challenges and benefits of the exchange program for the faculty and students. Paraphrasing Gabriel García Márquez' "Love in the Time of Cholera" in the title of this paper, the authors want to emphasize the context in which this experience took place – both as an obstacle and as an opportunity.

**Keywords:** Collaborative online international learning (COIL), Virtual Student Exchange, Student Mobility, Challenges, Benefits, Mitigation strategies

## 1 Background

Higher Colleges of Technology (hereafter, HCT) and Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (hereafter, SAIT) have a long history of collaboration, including within the Global Applied Education Network (GAEN) (HCT, 2018). Since 2017, SAIT has been identified as one of the peer partners to HCT and has already contributed to HCT developments through various projects.

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HCT is the largest federal institution for higher education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) established in 1988. HCT offers over 70 academic programs in Applied Media, Business, Computer Information Science, Education, Engineering Technology & Science and Health Sciences at Bachelor and Applied Diploma levels. These programs are all designed in consultation with business and industry leaders and incorporate principles of Innovation and Entrepreneurship to ensure HCT students' skills are up-to-date and to the highest standards. HCT operates as a system of 15 separate campuses for male and female students in urban and rural locations in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Dubai, Fujairah, Madinat Zayed, Ras Al Khaimah, Ruwais and Sharjah (HCT, 2022a). SAIT was established in 1916 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada with the key mission to match educational offers with the community's needs. SAIT consists of 9 Schools and offers programs at various levels (Certificate, Diploma, Applied Degree, Bachelor Degree). SAIT's action-based learning, solution-focused research and industry partnerships are helping to shape the next generation of inventors, entrepreneurs and pioneers. With more than 11,000 industry partners, we blur the lines between industry and SAIT to strengthen the economy. 91% of SAIT graduates are employed and 97% are satisfied with a SAIT education (SAIT, 2021).

In 2021, HCT and SAIT piloted the first virtual student exchange, online student mobility using the collaborative online international learning (COIL) approach. This white paper aims to share the process adopted by the HCT, challenges faced during the pilot, and strategies adopted to mitigate the challenges and benefits of the exchange program to the faculty and students. The practice adopted is unique to the HCT-SAIT pilot project in terms of context, content, practice, students, course and faculty. Hence, through this white paper, a new piece of knowledge is added to the field of international student exchange programs. This paper will benefit the higher education institutions aiming to implement virtual student mobility programs, policymakers, specialists in the field of internationalization of higher education, Curriculum managers, educators and researchers.

## **2 Process Adopted: Conception to Completion**

The virtual student exchange is similar to the collaborative online international learning (COIL) method which Guth (2013) described as “a new approach to teaching and learning that brings together geographically distant instructors and students from different lingua-cultural backgrounds to communicate and collaborate through the use of online communication tools” (P.2). Both terms, virtual exchange and COIL are often used interchangeably (Hernández-Nanclares et al., 2019; Jung et al., 2021) in a sense that two cohorts, from two different parts of the world, connect through technology and are taught the same subject by professors from partnering institutions. Hackett et al. (2023) and O'Dowd (2021) described COIL as a teaching and learning approach that use online technology for “online intercultural interactions and collaboration” (P.3). The COIL term was coined in 2006 by the State University New York. Wit et al. (2022) characterised COIL as an approach that promotes collaboration between students and

educators from different geographical locations. The participating students, though virtually mobile are not considered the credit mobility students who study abroad to earn course credit (Campos et al., 2022). With this understanding of virtual student exchange, HCT and SAIT collaborated for implementing the pilot program. The process adopted from conception to completion is discussed below.

## 2.1 Conception

The first international student exchange program between the HCT and the SAIT was initiated in early 2021. The initiative for the virtual student exchange originated from the Presidents of both institutions at the time – Prof. Abdullatif Alshamsi and David Ross. The initiative was in alignment with HCT’s Internationalization Framework and it was regulated by HCT’s Internationalization Policy and International Student Mobility Procedure. This framework aims to create better education, better organization and a better world through international cooperation, engagement, presence and commitment. The project design and preparation were entrusted to the International Relations teams. HCT’s team applied the lessons learnt from the Virtual Exchange Pilot with DePaul University, supported by the Stevens Initiative (HCT, 2022b). This included engagement with experienced partners, encouraging participation from internal stakeholders, planning and training, mapping the course, and pairing the faculty and students.

The pilot project was planned to achieve long-term, mid-term, and short-term benefits. In the long term, HCT intended to build the institutional capacity for international student mobility; provide a rich learning experience at HCT by providing students with diverse learning opportunities, and enhance institutional knowledge by learning from international experiences. The mid-term targeted benefits expected through the pilot exchange program were to practice student mobility-related processes with SAIT to grow towards physical exchange in future, and to test the process and student appetite for international mobility. The targeted short-term benefits expected were to exchange cultural views between UAE and Canada, to experience new cultural norms, and to compare and learn from peers regarding the organizational behavior concepts practiced at organizations. The baseline of all was to provide students with the opportunity to collaborate with their peers abroad, to learn together and compare and benchmark their competence at the international scale. Lee et al. (2022) have postulated that such virtual student exchanges support the attainment of these benefits by leveraging technology to collaborate with international organizations.

The key internal stakeholders included the Registrar’s office, Executive Dean’s Office, Program Chairs, Course leaders, Student engagement teams, Communication teams, EdTech teams, Legal teams and the HCT Accreditation unit. The registrar’s offices exchanged the academic calendars and conditions for exchange student registration. The Business Division exchanged the course lists and syllabi to explore the academic equivalency. The Executive Deans met to decide the scope and shape of the exchange program and to identify suitable scheduling for synchronous learning in different time zones. The communication teams produced introduction video clips to

present two cultural milieus. The Education Technologies team identified the conditions for students' access to the learning management system. The legal team prepared and negotiated the Exchange agreement.

The HCT accreditation unit liaised with the Commission for Academic Accreditation to ensure agreement approval is per the Accreditation Standards. The review of successful global collaborations in higher education institutions by AI-Youbi, Zahed and Tierney (2020) revealed that different departments of partnering institutions must work as a team to make any student exchange successful. The role and contribution of the academic team are discussed throughout this paper.

The preliminary work started in February 2021 with a joint meeting organized by international office leads (Dr. Marko Savic & Mark Wall). The initial proposal included a couple of courses and finally, it was agreed by Executive Deans (Dr. Ayesha Abdulla and Dr. Janet Segato) that the pilot will run with one course and Organizational Behaviour course (MGT 2103 – HCT; MNGT 250 – SAIT) was selected. The starting term was the Fall of 2021. This course was identified as the best fit after discussions between the Academic Program Chairs and discipline experts. It had a matching rate of more than 80% and it also included an intercultural component in the syllabus. The pilot was based on each institution creating a Class of around 20 students.

This virtual student exchange was the best move forward, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, to strengthen HCT's international footprint. Covid-19 negatively impacted the international student mobility programs of 89% of higher education institutions (Li & Ai, 2022) and decline in students' interest to attend such programs (Whatley et al., 2022). However, HCT-SAIT leveraged the technology to go global during the time of corona and execute the HCT-SAIT Virtual Student Mobility Pilot. During Covid-19, many higher education institutions reported transforming their in-person student exchange programs to virtual student exchange programs (Cairns & França, 2022; Lee et al., 2022; Li & Ai, 2022; Qi & Ma, 2021). However, most of these programs were for language learning and discussed the context of eastern countries like China and Japan and western countries.

## **2.2 Mapping**

The HCT and SAIT academic teams (led by Dr. Priya Baguant and Gursher Pannu) compared the course outlines from both institutions and developed a joint classroom proposal for the exchange program. Eight common topics were proposed in the initial plan, to be delivered using a variety of teaching methodologies. Finally, during the initial academic team meeting, four topics were finalized – Stages of Team development; Conflict Management; Organizational Culture; and Communication. Based on the start of the semester and course delivery framework, the date of the first session was set to be 8th Sep 2021, and 12 total sessions were planned.

## **2.3 Development**

During July-August, 2021, the HCT lead faculty (Dr. Bharti Pandya) and SAIT lead faculty (Monica Rovers) developed the Delivery and Assessment Framework Proposal

that included the Date, Topic, Lead faculty for the session; In-class activities; Collaborative activities beyond the classroom and Assessments attached to each session. The Lead faculty for the session was responsible for developing the teaching content, in consultation with the other faculty. The teaching resources from both HCT and SAIT were shared to create the content. The HCT's MGT 2103 Project guidelines were amended for international collaborative team project work. And it became the formal assessment for both institutions (40%). For HCT students, this assessment was the coursework and for SAIT, it was the final assessment. The program was developed and delivered whilst ensuring that the course learning outcomes of both institutions are met.

## **2.4 Scheduling**

Both institutions agreed for the exchange sessions to be delivered on Monday and Wednesday, from 6:00 p.m. to 7:50 p.m. (Gulf standard time). During the academic team meeting, it was decided to have two sessions on a fortnightly basis. Thereafter, a total of 13 sessions, including the closing ceremony, were dated considering the assessment periods and coverage of the entire syllabus. Later, some dates were amended to accommodate national holidays and changes in the day-light-savings.

## **2.5 Other Aspects of project preparation**

A special section was created at HCT, for the international student-exchange class. Students across various campuses were nominated by the program team leaders based on their outstanding academic performance and interest. Both institutions provided access to their respective Learning Management Systems (Blackboard Learn – HCT; Desire2Learn – SAIT) and e-textbooks. The HCT students were given an orientation about the exchange program. A total of 26 students were registered from HCT and 24 students from SAIT. Later, four students from SAIT withdrew from the course due to personal reasons.

## **2.6 Closing ceremony**

The closing ceremony of this exchange was held on 29th November 2021, to celebrate the success of the exchange program, students, faculty, program chairs, and leadership. Students were recognized and awarded for their teamwork (the best team), presentation skills (the best presenter and the best presentation), active learning and participation (best student from each institution), and applied research skills (best project). The vision of both Presidents made this exchange possible during unprecedented times, with the support of members from the international relations department, marketing department, and program management. The happiness and zeal to have many more international exchanges like this were evident in the closing remarks of Dr Ayesha Abdulla (HCT), Dr Alex Zahavich (HCT), and Tom Bornhorst (SAIT).

### **3 Challenges faced, the mitigation strategies and lessons learned**

#### **3.1 Content development**

The faculty from HCT started the mapping process in March 2021 and designed the Joint classroom proposal, delivery framework and assessments based on both the course outlines and the semester start date. The faculty from SAIT was appointed in June 2021 and since summer break was to start in July, both faculties had limited time for content development. This was the first challenge. To ensure complete coverage of the material (of both institutions), for each topic, the content was to be compared, a new set of slides and activities were to be developed, and the Nearpod sessions with interactive activities were to be developed. Since this was an international exchange, the content was reviewed for intercultural sensitivities whilst keeping the inclusivity approach.

With mutual consensus, both faculties scheduled their meeting timings over the weekends for discussing the content developed during the week. Before the start of the fall semester (August 2021), the course content was ready.

It is recommended to plan the initiative a semester ahead and pair the faculty from both institutions from the beginning stage. Further, it is suggested to develop a bank of international case studies, and interactive and engaging activities that can be readily available and save participating faculty's time in developing the content. Moreover, higher education institutions can add course preparation time to the workload calculation of the faculty considering that the content development for international exchange courses requires greater efforts.

#### **3.2 Assessments**

The difference in assessment strategy and assessment administration period of both institutions posed the second challenge. For HCT students, amending the assessment strategy for just one section, during the semester was not possible. SAIT's assessments were divided into short quizzes, discussions and portfolios; while HCT's assessments were divided into written test, project and final exam (FWA). Hence, finding a common assessment, to be administered at the same time was a challenge.

Since SAIT's faculty could make amendments to their assessment strategy and instruments, it was agreed that HCT's project guidelines will be amended. The project work expanded to include the collection and comparison of data from both countries. Benchmarking the assessments conducted at reputed international universities, the assessments must be reviewed and designed to incorporate practical applications. And for online courses, assessments such as discussion boards, personal development plans, peer feedback, and portfolio can replace traditional written exams.

#### **3.3 Timings**

The biggest challenge reported by HCT students was to attend late evening classes, manage different time zones/weekends and find common meeting times. Furthermore, the change in timings due to day-time savings reduced the common class time.

A Team charter was created by each team where members set their meeting times, considering their geographical location, study schedule, and personal commitments. Also, 40-50 minutes of class time was assigned for teamwork, using breakout rooms. For daylight saving (1 hour), it was agreed that each faculty will teach their class separately for one hour and together for another hour. Faculty also flipped the sessions wherein teams completed their tasks before each session, allowing more time for discussions and explanations during class time. An in-person student exchange program is more feasible to overcome the time-zone difference.

### **3.4 Communication**

Students reported the language barrier as a challenge where HCT students, initially, lacked the confidence to present their ideas/thoughts and had difficulty understanding their counterparts from SAIT (accent, fast speech). For HCT students, English is a second language. Campos et al. (2022) noted that the difference in language proficiency influences the cross-cultural interactions between students in a student-exchange program.

Students used WhatsApp voice notes and chat for minimizing misunderstandings. Google translator was also used by some students. SAIT students reduced their pace of speech and avoided using jargon and advanced sentences/vocabulary. Faculty created activities where all students got the opportunity to present their ideas verbally and in writing. Students were encouraged to speak more often during class discussions, question-answer sessions, presentations, and other learning activities.

Activities assisting the improvement of communication skills (verbal, non-verbal, and written) are to be embedded in the course.

### **3.5 Students engagement**

In the first two sessions, only 3-4 students from HCT were actively participating in the class discussions. The remaining students lacked confidence and were shy to present their ideas. Moreover, it was observed that during team discussions, HCT students were quieter than SAIT students.

After the meetings with students, the faculty analysed the causal factors were cultural differences, language barrier and not knowing the team members. To neutralize this, it was important for students to interact more with each other. Hence, more time was allocated to team-building exercises. The team charter was created where the team set their expectations, norms, work ethics, communication technologies, and *modus operandi* for completing the tasks as a team.

The teams can become cohesive with team-building activities. And sessions can become more active and engaging if students' cameras are on. It was noted that teams with their cameras on were more interactive and performed better than teams with their cameras off.

### **3.6 Campus Operations**

The CRN was created at Sharjah Campus while the faculty was located at Dubai Campus. The scheduling team at Dubai Campus was not aware of the international exchange program and hence classroom was not scheduled. Furthermore, this was the only class running from 6 pm to 8 pm at the campus. Being unaware of this class, for the first two sessions, the electrical power shut down and on-campus facility support was not readily available.

Faculty discussed the security, safety, and operational requirements with the Dean of Academic Operations. Thereafter, adequate arrangements were made to deliver the classes.

The operational plans must be considered for delivering the class including a teaching room with an additional monitor. For late evening classes, safety provisions must be made. And since virtual exchange can be delivered online, teaching from anywhere or flexible working hours could be considered.

## **4 Benefits**

The benefits of virtual student exchange are discussed extensively in the literature (Cairns & França, 2022; Campos et al., 2022; Hallberg Adu, 2019; Koris et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Li & Ai, 2022; Netz, 2021; Qi & Ma, 2021; Watson et al., 2020; Whatley et al., 2022; Whatley & Fischer, 2022a, 2022b; Wu et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). However, the literature is more inclined towards student exchange for learning a language and the exchange programs between far eastern institutions and western institutions. The Middle Eastern context remained understudied.

### **4.1 Students' reflections**

The HCT-SAIT pilot project students shared their reflections during the final project presentations and participated in the post-semester survey. The survey after the completion of the semester revealed that 88.9% of students recommend international exchange programs (attending in-person or virtually) to their colleague-students. They attributed this recommendation to a new and unique experience, learning skills to manage people from different cultures and languages, increased awareness of other perspectives and cultures, collaborative learning, knowledge sharing and a great opportunity to broaden social horizons.

During the closing Students reported the following benefits gained from the exchange program –

- a. A deeper understanding of diverse cultures and linguistics.
- b. Strong friendships.
- c. Viewing the world differently, respecting others' perspectives and ideas.
- d. Improvement in confidence level
- e. Improvement in communication skills
- f. Managing various time zones
- g. Using various technologies for learning and communicating.



- h. A unique experience of attending international studying experience
- i. Personal growth
- j. Enhancement in adaptability
- k. Becoming more tolerant

During the closing ceremony, the representative student (Mozah Alyammahi) from HCT mentioned, “This was my first experience studying with foreign students. In this process, I developed my social network, build long-term friendships, and became a better student and a person. This course gave us a chance to live the situation and experience organizational behaviour topics. We learnt to manage conflicts, manage different time zones, learnt from two teachers, and become better at problem-solving. This experience helped me to accept people as they are, and be flexible to deal with any differentiations”.

The representative student from SAIT (Julie Grant) said, “I found that the different time zones and language barrier were the most difficult parts of this experience. But we always remained in consistent contact through WhatsApp. The way this course was delivered was very engaging for students. We had a group activity every class which allowed the students to be very interactive with one another and this program was also able to hold my interest throughout the program. My favourite part was when I was in the breakout rooms with my team, and we got to have conversations and tell stories and laugh together. We enjoyed listening to stories from Ms. Bharti and Ms. Monica and seeing how passionate they are about teaching and passionate about working in the international business world”.

## 4.2 Faculty’s reflections

Both instructors reflected on their experience and shared the following benefits they gained from this exchange -

- a. Opportunity to develop engaging and interactive teaching material for the international class.
- b. Expansion in the professional network, building a community of practice.
- c. Sharing of knowledge, expertise, and ideas. It helps in developing own practice of teaching and research.
- d. Joint teaching was a new experience, adding value to teaching styles and class engagement tactics.
- e. Access to more teaching resources and learning management systems.
- f. A wider understanding of organizational cultures, practices, and stakeholders.
- g. Building everlasting friendship.
- h. Satisfaction in witnessing students developing their interpersonal and intercultural competencies - communication skills, collaboration, confidence, teamwork, tolerance, curiosity, adaptability and decisiveness.

During the closing ceremony, the course leader from the HCT, Dr. Bharti, summarized her experience by the following rhyme:

*I presumed this collaboration would be a jittery ride;  
But who knew that we could take it by a stride  
Some said, huh, this is just a flashy light  
But they don't know that you and I made it right  
Students (and faculty) from HCT and SAIT became friends forever  
but they were no shorter of being clever  
We had a lot of knowledge and fun to share  
And we witnessed, students do care  
The outcome of this exchange is precious,  
But, trust me my darlings, when I say the everlasting effect will be forever propitious*

## **5 Moving Foreword**

Following the doubtless success of the Pilot, HCT and SAIT teams have already opened talks looking to wide-up opportunities for the virtual student exchange in Business, Computer and Information Science & Health programs during the Fall semester of 2022, as well as possible physical exchange during Summer term that will depend on Covid pandemic-driven travel protocols.

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