

# Realigning Divergent Paths:

Facilitating Mutual Learning Between International Students' Collaboration  
Projects in Nepal and Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

Student-centered exchange programs have been conducted by the Asia Association of Education and Exchange (AAEE) since 2012. The same basic concept and initial goals were applied to both the Vietnam-Japan Exchange Program (VJEP) and Nepal-Japan Exchange Program (NJEP) in Vietnam and Nepal, respectively. Despite their similarities in structure, VJEP and NJEP have diverged and, now, in their most recent incarnations, have become intrinsically different from one another. This study examines the causes of the differences between the two programs by reviewing past program reports, documents, and interviews. The ultimate goal is to facilitate mutual learning between the organizations and identify strategies to make both programs more sustainable. The analysis shows that the main points of divergence were acculturative stressors faced by participants and the impacts of political and cultural factors on the organizing process. Mutual points of learning were proposed based on the advantages of each program. Therefore, there is more room for development in both programs. Nonetheless, a sustainable future for both NJEP and VJEP can be achieved.

## 1. Introduction

With the development of communications technology, trade policies, cheaper transportation, and the growing demand for products, globalization has been developing rapidly in recent decades. Exchange between countries and cultures has accelerated as a natural consequence of internationalization. Educational institutions have increasingly been promoting international trade to cope with rapid globalization, thus requiring novel competitive skills. Various international exchange programs have been created with a variety of purposes, including promoting friendship, enhancing cross-cultural competence, and lan-

guage learning. The Asia Association of Education and Exchange (AAEE, a general incorporated association in Japan) is one such institution. The AAEE was established in 2008 primarily to equip university students with the skills needed to become global citizens. Since its founding, the AAEE has held more than 30 international exchange programs in both Nepal and Vietnam. Nepal-Japan Exchange Program (NJEP) and Vietnam-Japan Exchange Program (VJEP) both have three key goals: cultural exchange, educational exchange, and networking. The primary focus of both programs is to create a platform for students within Asia to collaborate and engage in activities that widen their cultural knowledge. The long-term objective of both programs is to bring students together from different academic fields to foster a personal relationship as a basis for professional connections in the future. Both programs were highly rated, not only by the participants but also by local governments and other educational institutions. However, the programs in both countries have evolved independently and thus have become differentiated over time. The basis of these changes has been under consideration for a significant period, with this paper attempting to identify these differences, the factors which triggered the changes, and what one program can learn from the other.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2-1. Globalization and the internationalization of education**

Globalization, as a phenomenon and a process, is a term that was popularized in the 1990s (Harvey, 2000). Globalization refers to the time-space compression of global consciousness. The term is generally defined as a process of international integration arising from the exchange of local perspectives, products, ideas, and other aspects of culture (Albrow et al., 1990; Al-Rodhan et al., 2006). Globalization is often referenced in economic, cultural, and political contexts. However, internationalization also occurs in other fields as a result of globalization. For example, the internationalization of education is a major phenomenon that has been intensively discussed over past decades. From an institutional perspective, there are many reasons to foster internationalization. Internationalization of education creates opportunities for curriculum development, raises the quality of teaching and learning, and strengthens international cooperation for institutional research and knowledge capacity. Along with these, internationalization is expected to produce more open-minded and dynamic citizens who can work in any country and across culturally diverse environments and can interact effectively with an increasingly complicated and in-

ternationally mobile society and labor market (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Denson and Zhang, 2010; Knight and de Wit, 1995). This is based on the increasing need to contribute to evolving global labor markets by fostering international and comparative learning (Maringe, 2010).

## **2-2. Development of international exchange programs**

International exchange programs are a pioneering initiative arising from education internationalization. Short-term and long-term student exchange programs are conducted for public and cultural diplomacy (Mulcahy, 1999). However, student mobility dates as far back as the medieval period but, until post-World War II, international student exchange was limited to intraregional arrangements due to limited diplomatic relations and transportation barriers between nations. Only after the Second World War did student exchange programs start to flourish, with an increased number of students willing to go abroad (Goodwin, 1993) as a direct result of internationalization and globalization (Maringe et al., 2013; Maringe and Foskett, 2010). The number of tertiary overseas students in 2007 totaled about three million, an increase of almost a million people compared with that in 1980. The development of student exchange programs was also reflected in the establishment of international organizations and programs, such as the AFS Intercultural Program (originally American Field Service) in 1914, AIESEC since 1948, the Erasmus Programme since 1987, and the Fulbright Program since 1945.

## **2-3. Skills fostered by international exchange programs**

Although exchange programs are administered in various formats and goals by schools and organizations, most programs focus on cultural, social, and academic goals. From an educational perspective, exchange programs equip students with intercultural competence, language learning, and both and personal improvement. Students studying abroad seem to possess better intercultural communication competencies (Williams, 2005). The exchange programs also provide students with opportunities to develop international experience and intercultural friendships (Clinton, 2000). Other research shows that international exchange programs play a significant role in nurturing the skills required for the global era.

## **2-4. AAEE International Exchange Program**

AAEE has been conducting 2-week international exchange programs since 2008

aimed at promoting language learning, intercultural competencies, and international relationships. It is open to foreign and Japanese students pursuing any type of tertiary degree. The program framework includes cultural and academic exchange activities in which the main theme is the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). AAEE programs adhered to the concept of a student-centered program that includes activities in both the urban and rural areas of the host countries. These exchange programs generally have three stages: (1) preprogram (preparation stage), (2) program proper, and (3) postprogram, including follow-up activities and evaluation.

#### **2-4-1. Preprogram**

A program begins by forming the Japanese and the host country's organizing teams, which include both students and professional coordinators. The teams work together in preparing the legal, logistic, and activity-related tasks; participant recruitment; and training. The preparation stage lasts between 3 and 10 months, depending on the host country and the particulars of the program. Participants are recruited about 2 to 3 months before the program begins. Given the vital role they play in the program's success, these participants are carefully selected by applying holistic criteria to assess both their ability and character. Participants from the host country are recruited based on personality matches with the Japanese participants so that they can connect more easily and provide social support to their counterparts. All participants are then instructed in etiquette and essential skills for the program by their respective organizations. During this time, they also prepare for cultural performances and academic presentations. Participants of the two countries are also connected online to start interacting with one another.

#### **2-4-2. Program**

After the preparation stage, the programs begin with activities that take place in both urban and rural areas of the host country, which are geared toward the main theme and goals of the project. These activities are divided into different domains (Table 1).

#### **2-4-3. Postprogram**

When the program is completed, participants write a report reflecting on their experience and personal growth. A reflection event, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Japan International Cooperation Agency, is also held in Japan. Before the foreign students leave the host country, a similar reflection event is included in the outcome pre-

**Table 1.** Activities in AAEE International Exchange Program

Activity categories	Details
<b>Friendship building</b>	This domain consists of activities to promote friendship among participants. Ice-breaking and team-building sessions are conducted at the very start of the program. A Buddy Model (Seki, 2016) is used so that each participant can have an easier time making connections and monitoring each other for any problems. Friendships made in this domain are further developed through activities in other domains.
<b>Academic/group learning</b>	Activities and cooperative tasks like presentations related to the program themes are done by the participants. This domain adequate requires teamwork during both the research phase and discussions. Through these activities, students improve their ability to work in a bicultural environment.
<b>Cultural exchange</b>	Cultural performances and classes, homestays, and organizational visits are some examples of opportunities for students to learn about each other. Interacting with the community is also a source of cultural learning for participants.
<b>Reflections</b>	In daily reflection and final reflection, students are required to reflect and self-evaluate their progress. Reflections are chances for students to verbalize their thoughts and motivate each other.
<b>Others</b>	Activities for participants to gain general knowledge about the host country such as politics and history. These activities could be a city tour with the host participants or organizers as tour guides.

sentation at the end of the program since it would be difficult for the participants and organizers to meet physically after the project is finished.

### 3. Brief Introduction of Nepal and Vietnam

International exchange programs are shaped by their host societies. Thus, it is essential to understand the key features of Vietnam and Nepal where the VJEP and NJEP have been conducted.

#### 3-1. Nepal

Nepal is a small country located between the world's two largest nations: China and India. Due to its elevation, Nepal's varied climate ranges dramatically from subtropical

monsoon to cool temperate conditions. The country is best known for its natural beauty, including Mount Everest, making tourism one of the primary sources of income. Geographically, the country is divided into three regions: mountainous, valley, and plains. All three regions are diverse in terms of climate, resources, and culture. Culturally, the country has 125 ethnic groups that speak 123 unique local languages. This makes it very culturally diverse and thus a hub of cultural riches. Nepal has had several types of political regimes over the years, from autocracy to monarchy to its present multi-party republic.

### **3-2. Vietnam**

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is located in South East Asia and borders China, Laos, and Cambodia. It is a tropical country with a year-round hot and humid climate, especially in the rainy season. Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups, but the Viet (Kinh) people comprise 87% of the country's population. Since the country's independence in 1945, Vietnam has been a socialist republic country led by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The CPV's organizational system extends from the central executive to grassroots groups to sociopolitical organizations and economic entities. The political system of Vietnam currently comprises the following: the CPV, political cells, sociopolitical organizations, professional bodies, and mass associations.

### **3-3. Characteristics of Nepalese and Vietnamese societies**

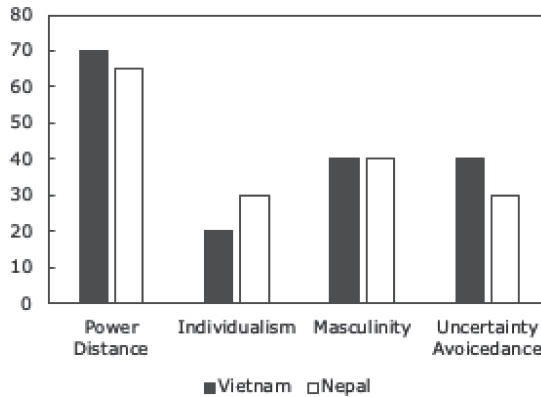
Measured by Hofstede's model (Figure 1), Nepal and Vietnam differ in four different dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. The evaluation of the programs found these to be the main factors impacting the separate evolution of VJEP and NJEP.

#### **3-3-1. Power distance**

This dimension examines cultural attitudes toward inequalities in society. Power distance is defined as the extent that people expect and accept that power is unequally distributed. Vietnam and Nepal are viewed as relatively hierarchical countries where people accept their place with no protest, and subordinates expect to be ordered around by their superiors. However, the power distance score of Vietnam is higher than that of Nepal.

#### **3-3-2. Individualism**

Individualism is often interpreted as the interdependence level of society maintained



**Figure 1.** Comparison of Nepalese and Vietnamese societies (Hofstede Insights, 2020)

among its members. Vietnam and Nepal are both collectivist societies where long-term commitment to a group is a norm and loyalty is the most important social rule. However, Vietnam has a higher score on this measure, implying that the idea of collectivism is more cherished and practiced. Nepal, which has more inherent cultural diversity, is more individualistic.

### 3-3-3. Masculinity

Masculinity is a society driver with two categories: feminine and masculine. A feminine society means the community places a higher value on caring for people and life quality, whereas a masculine society values success and achievement. Vietnam and Nepal are both rated as feminine societies, having the same score on this dimension. In both countries, people value solidarity, equality, and quality in their working lives, with conflicts generally resolved through negotiation and compromise.

### 3-3-4. Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is the dimension in which unknown situations are considered threatening, and avoidance is the preferred response. Nepal and Vietnam, respectively, have medium-low and low preferences for uncertainty avoidance. This indicates that, for Vietnam, societal norms are more flexible than those for Nepal; thus, new ideas are more likely to be accepted in Vietnam.

## **4. Description of the AAEE International Program in Nepal and Vietnam**

### **4-1. Nepal-Japan Exchange Program**

#### **4-1-1. History and evolution**

The NJEP is an international student exchange program that since 2013 has been held annually in Nepal through the AAEE and AAEE Nepal. The NJEP program includes a range of voluntary activities conducted in remote areas of Nepal. NJEP is also referred to as the “Mero Sathi” Project, a Nepalese phrase meaning “my friends.” This title was established in the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, which resulted in an immense loss of life and widespread devastation. The disaster also disrupted essential health services, education, and economic activities (Goda, 2015). In support of Nepal, AAEE students in Japan launched the earthquake reconstruction campaign and raised funds to donate to a chosen locality in Nepal, dubbed the Mero Sathi Project. As of February 2020, a total of 13 programs have been completed.

#### **4-1-2. Current organizing process and organizing team in Nepal**

Since the start of NJEP in 2013, the programs have always been headed by one coordinator and one student leader. The student leader, supervised by the coordinator, manages the entire program. NJEP follows the structure of the AAEE international exchange programs, incorporating the three stages listed above. After securing permits from the government, the Nepalese team begins coordinating with stakeholders, recruiting participants, and preparing for the program’s activities. Participants are trained and given information about the programs and the country they will be visiting. The students also prepare musical performances, presentations related to the theme, and traditional games. Moreover, Japanese participants work on research tasks, choosing topics and formulating questionnaires. This preparation phase usually takes 3 months. The organizers attempt to keep a relaxed schedule for the program proper; thus, there is generally only one or two main activity per day. This allows the students to remain stress-free and have more time for personal interaction. Throughout the program, the organizers focus mainly on organizing and maintaining relationships between the students.

#### **4-1-3. Program activities**

The program is usually held in Kathmandu, the capital city and a tourist destination,



**Table 2.** Activities in NJEP

Activity categories	Parties involved	
	Members	Members and community
Warm-up	Team building	None
Academic/group learning	Discussion	Presentation related to the theme
		Teaching local students
	Community survey (Japanese students prepare)	
Cultural exchange	Cooking session	Cultural performances
		Organization visits
		Homestay
Reflections	Outcome presentation	
	Daily reflections	None
Others	Sight-seeing	

along with Pokhara and other villages that are rich in culture and nature. The selected places help students understand the diversity of Nepalese society and give them an insight into the geographical, socio-economic, and cultural features of the country. The program has also been conducted with the involvement of the members of the communities (Table 2). These official activities are decided by the organizers and remain more or less the same each year.

## 4-2. Vietnam-Japan Exchange Program

### 4-2-1. History and evolution

The VJEP is a Vietnam-based international student exchange program annually held by AAEE along with a Vietnamese student organizing team. The program has been in existence since 2013. The Vietnamese student organizing team always takes a proactive role in the entire organizing process, making various decisions and dealing with other stakeholders in the locality because they are more familiar with Vietnamese society and local laws. The AAEE works with and manages the Japanese students. The program was developed to address current issues, thus promoting a deeper understanding among students through an exchange of perspectives. The program has been supported by Vietnamese organizers who are recent graduates of VJEP (usually 1 or 2 years prior) and are

in charge of creating the new organizing team. The VJEP is legally supported by public universities and government authorities.

#### **4-2-2. The organizing team and current organizing process**

VJEP is organized by a team of about eight Vietnamese students. Each organizer oversees one part of the program. Each activity has a project leader and a sub-leader, assistants, PR and marketing, event creators, logistics, and finance. Despite the task divisions, everyone on the team works together to make decisions and solve problems. The leaders of the Vietnamese and Japanese teams communicate with each other to facilitate efficient interaction. The organizing team includes chosen delegates from the previous program and newly recruited students. The former organizers train the recruits by sharing their experiences. The team works with the Japanese team, government authorities, and a national university in Vietnam to prepare for the program. Preparation takes 10 months on average. During this period, participants are recruited and oriented separately in the two countries.

The participants must then prepare presentations: three musical performances, classes on chosen topics, and traditional games. They have to bring their supplies for their performance. The program starts in August of the given year, often with a tight schedule that includes two to three major activities per day. Any conflict among the members is resolved by participant leaders with the organizer's support.

#### **4-2-3. Program activities**

VJEP offers its members chances to experience Vietnamese culture, lifestyle, and different viewpoints on specific topics. The program includes activities in Ho Chi Minh City and one field trip to a province of Vietnam. The main academic theme centers on SDGs. The program was conducted with two main types of activities (Table 2). The content and format of these activities vary over the years, with the organizers generally taking a creative approach to the program. Furthermore, almost all activities in VJEP are based on a prepared agenda with detailed arrangements, from the Master of Ceremony script to assigning seats for the guests and participants. All the performances, especially for the community and government, must be well-rehearsed and traditional.

**Table 3.** Activities in VJEP

Activity categories	Parties involved	
	Members	Members and community
Warm-up	Ice-breaking session	None
	Team building	
Academic/group learning	Presentations related to the themes	Presentations related to the themes
	Discussion	Teaching local students
	Academic lecture and community survey (Japanese and Vietnamese students prepare in group)	
Cultural exchange	Cultural class	Cultural performances
	Cooking session	Organization visits
	Cultural performances	Cuisine exchange
		Homestay
Reflections	Outcome presentation	
	Daily reflections	None
Others	Sight-seeing tour in a historical site	

## 5. Research

### 5-1. Aims of the research

This study examines the evolution of VJEP and NJEP by identifying specific differences that led to the current format of the programs. Since both programs were originally based on the same fundamental concepts, this can be a means to facilitate mutual learning for their future sustainability.

### 5-2. Research questions

To achieve the research goals mentioned, the following questions are considered and answered:

- (1) What are the differences between the programs in Nepal and Vietnam?
- (2) What factors created these differences?
- (3) What can both countries learn from each other?

### **5-3. Research Method**

This study compares the VJEP and NJEP. The primary method was a desk review of the reports and other types of documentation compiled by AAEE over the years. A virtual insight interview meeting was also held with four Japanese program alumni and 10 Vietnamese and 10 Nepalese past participants and organizers. Reports from previous participants over the two last years were also examined. The second and third authors also drew from their personal experiences as past participants and organizers of the student exchange programs.

## **6. Results and Discussion**

### **6-1. Differences between the programs in Nepal and Vietnam**

#### **6-1-1. Preparation of participants**

Although the preparation time for participants in VJEP and NJEP are nearly the same, VJEP participants are required to carry out more onerous tasks compared with NJEP participants. For example, 10 weeks before the program commences, they have to prepare three presentations, three formal musical/cultural performances, and lectures for the local students. In some cases, the participants could not complete these preprogram tasks on time and had to work on them during the program proper. By comparison, NJEP participants are required to prepare fewer materials in the preprogram phase (just one or two presentations). The remaining tasks are done during the program.

#### **6-1-2. Activities**

##### **(1) Schedule**

NJEP schedules are more relaxed, having just one main activity, which is supplemented with another simple activity every day. VJEP, by contrast, has a tight daily schedule with various activities crammed in a day. Due to this busy schedule, daily reflection sessions could not always be organized during VJEP. This limited the time for the resolution of conflicts or misunderstandings. NJEP activities were conducted with more flexible schedules. According to the records, VJEP Japanese participants also struggled with the hot and humid climate in Vietnam. This put them under physical strain, which reduced their satisfaction and engagement with the program. For NJEP, participants were better adapted to the new environment since the climate was similar to that of their home country.

## (2) Activity characteristics

Unlike NJEP, VJEP's activities always began with a formal ceremony, including an introduction of the guests, guest speeches, and gift exchange. Most activities in VJEP involved the participation of other parties and organizations during sharing or lecture sessions, whereas in NJEP the activities mainly involved members of the program. For both programs, a local community visit is one of the main events to help students understand the realities of life in the host country. In the NJEP program, the participants were free to interact with anyone in the community, whereas in VJEP the students were limited to formal gatherings created specifically for the program. This is due to VJEP's more structured organizing style, wherein everything is planned and participants are less exposed to others outside the program.

## (3) Academic exchange

Academic exchange is what most differentiates the two programs. Japanese participants in NJEP prepare their academic project on the basis of their research interests and chosen methodologies. In VJEP, academic presentations were decided by the Vietnamese organizers, who to that point have had limited interaction with the Japanese participants. Thus, the research presentation styles of the Vietnamese and Japanese students of the two countries are often significantly different. Some of the topics presented therefore proved uninteresting for other participants. Moreover, the differing levels of language proficiency between participants, coupled with the difficulty or technicality of tasks, result in participants being more passive in doing academic-related group work. This resulted in frustration for some students. Most Japanese participants reported being overwhelmed at times by the academic superiority that the Vietnamese students displayed during the program. Nonetheless, they also admitted that, to some degree, this encouraged them to learn. These academic pressures were intentionally created to promote learning during VJEP, but this is not an approach taken in NJEP.

To this extent, VJEP participants were thus more stressed but were also, in some ways, more productive. Students reported significant growth from meeting the challenges and were motivated to support AAEE as an opportunity for their professional development. Conversely, all Japanese members interviewed wanted more academic exchange and cooperation with Nepalese NJEP participants.

**6-1-3. Participants interactions**

The results from the reports and interviews show that, for each program, the dynam-

ics of social interaction between the students begin similarly. The Japanese students tend to be more reserved, whereas the host students are usually the ones who initiate interaction. The Japanese students are generally less confident about their English language competence and more uncertain about how to act in the unfamiliar cultural context. Hence, they are less likely to begin informal conversations in English. This finding is supported by research showing that language barriers can impede international students' social interactions with locals (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000). Furthermore, the literature demonstrates that lower levels of English proficiency predict acculturative stress and/or depression (Dao et al., 2007; Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003). In this scenario, both Nepalese and Vietnamese students try to support Japanese participants. In this regard, VJEP has proven to be more challenging for the Japanese participants because the program is structured toward more academic issues and formal discussion, which requires prior knowledge about the topic (e.g., education, poverty, and environmental issues). Close observation showed that Japanese students tend to avoid communicating in English, and the time needed for them to open up increases with the difficulty of the topic being discussed.

The research also highlighted that Vietnamese and Nepalese students have varying expectations about their Japanese counterparts. A majority of the Nepalese participants interviewed said that they expected the Japanese participants to be "warm and kind." Vietnamese students, however, expected the Japanese participants' to have high academic abilities and be willing to discuss and give ideas for the presentation. This suggests that NJEP participants are more likely to view the program as a social activity, whereas the Vietnamese participants saw it as an academic exercise. Nonetheless, Japanese members were observed to be more proactive in their research activities for NJEP than those for VJEP.

There were also instances where the Vietnamese students felt that unequal standards were imposed on them compared with their counterparts. Some said that they got demotivated with the program, which negatively affected their interaction with the Japanese students. The Japanese students, in their turn, felt they were not given social support from their hosts—a variable that could have decreased acculturative stress experienced and helped them adapt (Berry, 2006; Safdar et al., 2003; Ward et al., 2001). By contrast, Nepalese students reported that NJEP had a friendlier and open atmosphere, largely derived from cooperative task management of the programs. This resulted in Nepalese students retaining their motivation and providing better support to Japanese stu-

dents.

#### **6-1-4. Organizing process**

##### (1) Preparation and documents

Organizers and participants alike observed that VJEP maintains a very detail-oriented, rigid itinerary that is carefully planned over several months, whereas NJEP is more flexible. Permission for program topics, length of activities, and days to be held are all predetermined in VJEP; thus, there is more pressure to stick to the plan, which is not the case with NJEP.

##### (2) Structure of organizing team

NJEP has always been led by one individual with the help of a single student assistant. The VJEP organizing team, by contrast, has 8-10 members who are replaced at regular intervals. The more meticulous work in VJEP requires tight group coordination, several meetings, and consensus among the team members. In NJEP, the chance of conflict arising because of sudden changes to the schedule is very unlikely since fewer people make decisions. Conversely, in VJEP, more people are involved in the organizing process, and each decision made for the program requires agreement from members. Thus, changes in the schedule tend to give rise to apprehension among team members which, in turn, often causes conflict.

## **6-2. Factors that triggered the differences**

### **6-2-1. Cultural and educational aspects**

#### (1) Vietnam

Japanese professors who were part of the oversight team during the program noted that the academic culture of the Vietnamese participants is more formal and rigid compared with Japan's. Education and academic achievement are taken very seriously in Vietnam. This may be because, in developing countries, academic achievement is more crucial for professional success than in developed nations. This creates more intense competition and academic pressures for students. Vietnamese cultural norms dictate that children must obey, respect, and live closely with their parents (Winkel et al., 2014). It is said that adolescence begins in biology but ends in culture. This signifies that Vietnamese people place greater significance on their culture as regards living a disciplined life, including academics. Making education a top priority in life, along with practicing discipline and showing the utmost respect to the teacher's will, is ingrained in Vietnamese culture.

Furthermore, the school system in Vietnam is strict about maintaining discipline among the students. Class discussions are not standard practice and students are expected to always follow the rules. Students are graded based on both their academic scores and their behavior. A class monitor is selected among the students; and the monitor observes, marks, and reports students to the teacher.

The education culture in Vietnam can explain the rigid organizing process seen with the VJEP team. As they have learned in school, the team members focus on getting things organized, following assigned duties, and sticking to decisions. (Hoang, 2008). Also, as reflected in the VJEP itinerary, academic activities are prioritized. This focus is rooted in an education culture that sees the academic setting as the best place to learn. This is apparent in both the organizing process and the rigid attitudes of the organizing team during the program. Based on this, the presentations, academic discussions, and programs held at universities have become unique selling points for the VJEP.

Changes in the schedule, big or small, distress the organizing team because in Vietnamese culture departing from a plan is considered erroneous. In the work environment, the Vietnamese people adhere to collectivist principles—group decision-making, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance. These are the primary virtues of the Vietnamese work ethic. This is why the Vietnamese organizing team of Vietnamese participants tends to be bigger. Inclusion and collective decision-making are favored for group advantage (Quang & Vuong, 2002). Vietnam has been heavily influenced by Chinese culture. In China, the leader and the follower have a formal and disciplined relationship (Ng, 1998). Leaders are viewed respectfully and even as an ideal. The people believe in the leader and follow his instructions for the benefit of the group. This high belief and respect bestowed on leaders are seen among the VJEP organizers and students. VJEP leaders and participants share a vertical power relationship where the leaders are entrusted to make informed decisions for the well-being of all members.

### (2) Nepal

Nepali education culture similarly follows a one-way learning process. However, while following instructions is important, there is less rigidity in comparison to the Vietnamese school culture. Discipline is important, but students' behavior is not factored into their academic grades. While school and academic progress are important in Nepali culture, so are engaging with the community, being social, and being inclusive toward social customs (Caddell, 2007). Traditional teachings are significant in Nepali society. The older generation is keen to transfer their beliefs, practices, and culture to the younger. Therefore, to



Nepalese people, community engagement is considered a primary method of learning. It is for this reason that the NJEP's organizing team prefers the activities of the program to involve the community rather than having a purely academic exercise. The organizing team believes that a cultural program is best utilized if the students acquire learning in the "real environment" alongside local people. Going to selected destinations, living with local hosts, and interacting with ordinary people are considered the most efficient ways to learn. For this reason, the Nepali organizing team prefers the NJEP program to be community-based rather than academic. The activities take place at various localities and with non-formal groups. Changes in the plans are to be expected, as few activities are conducted with rigid formality. Thus, the organizers are prepared for any changes and instant improvisation if needed.

Organizers and participants of NJEP accept the reality that, even if you make a detailed schedule, it will not be adhered to. Thus, the Nepalese program has simpler preparations and itineraries than the Vietnamese one. This is not to say that the Nepalese coordinators and student organizers are not as academically inclined or as efficient in making detailed plans. However, in Nepalese culture, unexpected events are considered to be unavoidable occurrences, unlike the Vietnamese and Japanese cultures. Thus, there is a greater inclination for a flexible plan rather than a rigid one.

The Nepalese find the minute-by-minute scheduling that characterizes Japanese and Vietnamese programs odd. The Nepalese are taught to embrace a high degree of flexibility, to look at the situation in front of them, and make the best choices accordingly if a problem arises.

These are the reasons that VJEP and NJEP are different in terms of the academic emphases in the activities. Social upbringing significantly affects how the program stakeholders act, even in a multicultural environment. The organizing process, strategies, and beliefs that inform how the activities are planned and executed reflect the respective cultures.

#### **6-2-2. Political context**

A program adapts itself to the context of the country where it is held. While participants seem to be most influenced by sociocultural factors, the organizing process of a program embodies the host country's political environment. Consequently, the organizing process of NJEP and VJEP varies partly due to this factor. Vietnam's government is de-

financed by the single-party socialist republic framework, whereas the Nepalese government is a multi-party democracy. Thus, laws and policies differ significantly in the two nations. The main factor that influenced the conduct of these two programs was government involvement in the organizing process.

(1) Possible reasons of difference in government involvement

AAEE plays the same role in dealing with the Japanese side of these two programs. However, there are variations on how AAEE Japan interacts with the Vietnamese government through the support of host universities and Vietnamese organizers since there is no AAEE-specific organization in Vietnam. AAEE, as a foreign organization, is less free to conduct programs in a specific area because of stricter government oversight of such programs. Dealing with any perceived problems would require a complicated process involving both the local host authority and the embassy. For example, in case of illness, foreigners taking part in a program must be treated at a public hospital. However, medication cannot be given freely to foreigners without a doctor's prescription since this would lead to the legal involvement of all parties related to the program. Thus, AAEE Japan has to maintain close communications with the local authorities to ensure the safety of the participants. Consequently, the government is involved in all activities of the programs. The Vietnamese government also strictly monitors parties that may oppose it, including foreign parties who might influence their citizens. In recent years, the involvement of the government has become even deeper, as VJEP has been officially recognized as a provincial program.

By contrast, AAEE Nepal has been legally registered and operated as a company of education and exchange. AAEE Nepal deals directly with local authorities to handle any problems that might arise during the program. In this setup, AAEE Japan is considered as a partner of AAEE Nepal but does not have to directly deal with local politics. This results in a more independent NJEP, which has continuously earned local prestige via official reports from programs done over the years. The Japanese members of the project are under the supervision of AAEE Nepal. The company is responsible for their safety, which reduces the responsibility of local authorities to oversee the program. Additionally, AAEE Nepal only needs a general memorandum of understanding from the government to hold the programs. Using that, the organization can directly contact other local institutions/units to plan the programs without any direct government involvement. This allows flexibility for any changes in activities or participating parties. In the context of VJEP, apart from the general permission for the program, one unit can only be visited when it

receives an official dispatch from the government. Legal administration in Nepal and Vietnam is approximately equal since both take about a month to get permission to conduct the student exchange program. However, as Vietnam requires legal permission to hold activities in each location (except tourist sites), the administrative procedure is more complicated and takes a longer time overall compared with those of Nepal. Hence, VJEP is less flexible in dealing with changes, especially those that may involve negotiating with the local government.

## (2) Effects of government involvement

NJEP maintains its flexibility due to less government control, whereas VJEP is more rigid for the opposite reason. Although the complexity of preparation for each activity has increased, the involvement of local authorities ensures the legality and safety of the program. This also allows VJEP greater access to government facilities and official support. Furthermore, Student Program organizers and participants can learn more about the legalities of conducting the program and its timeline on their own. They are given opportunities to experience working within the socialist republic system and compare differences between political regimes. However, the reduction in flexibility of the program and the overwhelming amount of preparation required for both organizers and participants does have negative consequences. By contrast, NJEP is barely affected by the government as AAEE Nepal independently interacts with joint units and maintains sole responsibility for the program. This benefits the programs in ways such as faster administration and less complex legal requirements, a more “friendly” environment creation, and less pressure on the organizers and participants. The advantages of one program can be viewed as disadvantages in the latter, but, ultimately, both programs are only negotiating their arrangements within the local context of government control and involvement.

### **6-3. Possible mutual learning**

Thoroughly investigating these differences has revealed strategies for ensuring that the two programs, NJEP and VJEP, learn from each other so both can improve and be more sustainable.

#### **6-3-1. Activities improvement**

NJEP can further promote participants' satisfaction and learning by developing creative activities and specific schedules. This can be accomplished by increasing student involvement in the organizing process; alternatively, the Japanese student organizers can

take a more proactive role in developing activity content. VJEP can reduce participants' stress by having fewer activities and enhancing logistical preparations to ensure all members' well-being. This can be achieved by drawing on the experience of organizers during recruitment and bolstering the connection between past and present organizers. While it is difficult for activities to be changed after they have been finalized, VJEP can compromise by having more activities that are of greater interest to the participants. To accomplish this, recruitment should be carried out before activities are fixed to get the participants' views on this issue. At the same time, NJEP could probably benefit from reducing its flexibility so the program can be conducted more efficiently and achieve more academic goals.

### **6-3-2. Conflict management and friendship development**

Both programs would find it advantageous to adjust their themes and tools to promote relationship development and avoid stress. The theme could be more approachable but not too standard, so students would be motivated to learn. Conflict is unavoidable in international exchange programs, but the buddy model and reflection sessions can be further strengthened to help alleviate some of the common problems that participants encounter. Moreover, a friendly and open environment is important so that participants are comfortable about sharing their ideas and personal problems, allowing timely support to be provided.

### **6-3-3. Support-seeking**

Apart from AAEE Japan, VJEP and its organizing process is dependent on host universities and authorities, whereas NJEP depends mainly on AAEE Nepal. While it is difficult for VJEP to act independently due to the realities of the local government system, VJEP could try to enhance its status through official program reports, certified by the relevant provincial authorities, so that networking and asking for permission in other provinces would be easier. VJEP can also try to reduce direct government involvement by restructuring their program or by raising the influence of AAEE Japan in the decision-making process through a project leader who is better positioned to negotiate with the local authorities. Meanwhile, NJEP can use increased government involvement to develop more activities and to deepen participants' experience working with the Nepalese political system. Cooperation with other organizations could also provide NJEP with more facilities and professional support.

## 7. Implications for future research

VJEP and NJEP are two programs that originated from the same concept as envisioned by the AAEE. However, the two programs diverged significantly from one another due to factors that can be attributed to the local context. The differences discussed and possible learning proposed might provide insights for further research on practical impacts and actual applications. Furthermore, different tools and models to optimize participant development and sustainable organizing processes could be developed from this study.

## 8. Conclusion

The study investigated differences between the NJEP and VJEP. These are acculturative stressors faced by participants and the impact of political and cultural traits on the organizing process. The stress level of participants in VJEP is higher than that in NJEP, largely because of differing expectations resulting in conflicts, creating a lack of unity between participants in the program. NJEP is less stressful, but the activities may not have fully satisfied highly motivated students. Conversely, the involvement of the government in the organizing process significantly affects the complexity of preparations and the conduct of the programs. Mutual learning between the two programs, particularly with activities and government involvement, could lead to more sustainable actualization of the goals of both VJEP and NJEP.

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