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Virtual Exchange Practices, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Historically Marginalized

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Abstract

This paper presents data collected over a two-month period in summer 2021 from the Johns Organization (JO), a U.S.-based virtual exchange (VE) program that partners with South-West Asian and North African (SWANA) schools. The seven focus groups interviewed included VE scholars, JO staff, external VE evaluators, and SWANA-based JO staff. The research team's questions focused on the impact of VE for historically marginalized people. The findings indicate an absence of any discussion/assessment relating to racial/ethnic identity, religious identity, LGBTQ2+ students, or students with disabilities. Also, most VE was found to be U.S.-focused and driven through the use of English. Most VE exchange programs were driven by project-oriented goals relating to STEM, intercultural dialogue, or global and international affairs or the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The major themes that emerged were: Sense of Belonging, Race/Diversity, English, U.S.-Centric Activities and Pedagogy, and Technology.

Abstract in Spanish

Este documento representa la recolección de datos acumulados durante el transcurso de dos meses del verano 2021de la Organización Johns (OJ), un

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Intercambio Virtual (IV) con base en los Estados Unidos con escuelas afiliadas en Sur-Oeste Asia/ y en el Norte de África (SWANA). Los siete grupos de enfoque entrevistados incluye: eruditos de Intercambio Virtual, personal de OJ, los que evalúan el Intercambio Virtual, y el personal de OJ localizado en SWANA. El equipo de Investigadores enfocaron sus preguntas sobre el impacto del Intercambio Virtual (IV) de personas históricamente marginados. Las conclusiones indican la ausencia de cualquier discusión/evaluación relacionada con la identidad racial/étnica o identidad religiosa; de los estudiantes LGBTQ2+, o los estudiantes con discapacidades. También encontraron que los estudiantes en el Intercambio Virtual (IV) de los Estados Unidos fueron los más enfocados. Especialmente porque fueron motivados por el uso del idioma Inglés. La mayoría de los programas de Intercambio Virtual (IV) fueron impulsados por metas orientadas a proyectos relacionados con STEM, diálogo intercultural o asuntos globales internacionales o los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible de la ONU. Los temas de mayor importancia que surgieron fueron: Sentido de Pertenencia, Raza/Diversidad, Inglés, Actividades Pedagógicas y Tecnológicas centradas en los Estados Unidos.

Keywords

DEI; historically marginalized students; SWANA; virtual exchange

1. Introduction

The Johns Organization (JO) is a public/private virtual exchange (VE) sponsor based in the United States. JO's mission is to connect students in the U.S. with students in Southwest Asia and Northern Africa (SWANA)[1] through virtual exchange. Virtual exchange is an innovative and new pedagogical technique implemented across a variety of academic fields. While VE is not a new pedagogical practice (established since the late 1980s), it is still not a widely developed field of study.

One of the most salient areas for future research that appeared several times in current VE research (see Literature Review) was the need to do research on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and how that impacts VE and historically marginalized students and regions. With this directive, the Research

[1] We intentionally use 'SWANA' rather than 'MENA' and 'historically marginalized' rather than 'underrepresented' in order to accurately convey a decolonial, authentic, and more inclusive description of these populations being discussed.

team focused our work on how historically marginalized students in Grades K-12 and in undergraduate and graduate programs, and teachers, especially those in SWANA and those of African descent in the U.S., get access (or not) to VE learning and funding. In reviewing JO's website, materials, and participant testimonials, it became obvious that specific ethnic and racial demographics were missing from the existing literature and are not widely represented in their website, videos, marketing, or staff, even though the U.S. and the SWANA regions are racially diverse.

From materials gathered and in subsequent focus group interviews with staff and practitioners, it was also evident that discussion and representation of demographics— including race, nationality, religion, language, disability and LGBTQ2+ status—were missing or rarely discussed amongst the populations they serve as well as the people they employ and fund, despite JO's focus on engaging young people in these wide regions with the intentions of supporting DEI in VE. From the focus group interviews, many of the examples of partnerships are with small, homogenous (mostly white) towns in the United States and are subject-specific VE programs with SWANA institutions which may be linguistically diverse but not racially diverse. The main takeaways from the research are that for authentic diversity, equity, and inclusion to exist in these VE initiatives and for JO to truly employ DEI in all levels of its programming and research, it is critical that JO:

- be more intentional in the capturing, vetting, and sharing of the demographics of program participants,
- widen its partnership regions and peoples, and
- fully support a mutual relationship for planning from start-to-finish by all parties involved (even if the funding is coming from JO).

2. Research Objectives and Major Themes

For this paper, we highlight the five following major themes, italicized, which emerged consistently in the data. First, *a sense of belonging* means that all participants need to feel a sense of belonging to buy into the VE program. In many countries, including the U.S., historically marginalized people including women, religiously diverse, differently abled students, BIPOC and LGBTQ2+ populations. Many SWANA countries have minority populations based on religion, ethnicity, language, and geography, which should be considered when

fully addressing DEI issues. Second, inclusive recruitment of participants from communities historically marginalized in international education, both in the U.S. and SWANA contexts, need to focus on *race and diversity*. Third, culturally responsive education practices and culturally inclusive curricula are vital for VE. Understanding the backgrounds of students in the United States and in the countries participating in virtual exchange is crucial to providing a culturally inclusive curriculum. Since most VE happens in English, there must be an intentional shift to include the *language* of non-English speakers. Fourth, focus must be placed on shifting power dynamics and imbalances in VE implementation including neocolonialism, *U.S./Western-centricity*, and other power conceptualizations including those relating to gender and historically marginalized participants that are common in the SWANA, and in North, Central, and South America. Fifth, *technology* must be addressed in how VE addresses or exacerbates larger societal inequities and the digital divide. Income inequalities in the SWANA remain high and it has been shown that Internet use in those countries falls along demographic and income lines—those who are younger, with more education and higher incomes are more likely to have access to technology. The digital divide is more prevalent in some SWANA countries than others. In Latin America and the Caribbean, internet access is approximately 50%.

3. Literature Review

Though virtual exchange programs have become more common in recent years and are being more widely studied, there has been little research about how diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) play a role in the programs and how issues concerning power imbalances, and the digital divide affect DEI. To begin, we discuss in this literature review issues tangential to the DEI challenges in both study abroad and virtual exchange, with the perspective that some of the findings in study abroad programming remains applicable in the online virtual exchange programs. For our purposes, we will rely on the following definition of virtual exchange, which is a method that uses technology to connect people for education and exchange.

3.1. History of VE

The literature suggests the field of virtual exchange began in 1988 with a program started by Peter Copen and the Copen Family Foundation, which later

became iEARN (Helm, 2018b). It used early video technology to connect classrooms in New York and Russia. Since then, as technology has progressed exponentially, virtual exchange has grown and developed to become an established means of sharing cultural and linguistic experiences among groups of students around the world. iEARN has 30,000 projects around the world according to Helm. Often considered an alternative to study abroad programming, VE has come into its own as a field, especially as colleges and universities began dedicating more resources to preparing students for the global workforce with the skills and competencies needed for a diverse, multicultural, and technologically connected world (De Wit, 2016). Kolm et al. (2021) discuss the growing need for International Online Collaboration Competencies which includes "students having experienced diversity in sociocultural and linguistic environments" (p. 184) and developing skills for communicating and working with people from diverse backgrounds in addition to technology competence.

3.2. Study Abroad versus VE Programming

Many research studies found that students who studied abroad had competencies important in the workplace that students who had not participated in study abroad lacked (Black & Duhon, 2006; Crossman & Clark, 2010; DiPietro, 2014; Hadis, 2005). These competencies included excelling in culturally sensitive situations, ability to build relationships, flexible thinking, and capacity for active learning. Although study abroad can be transformative for students, less than ten percent of four-year undergraduates have that opportunity (ACE, 2016). In fact, during 2018-2019, the academic year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, only two percent of undergraduates studied abroad (Fischer, 2021). And, with the pandemic altering lives, workplaces, global education, international student enrollment in U.S. institutions fell sharply in the fall of 2020, punctuating a decline that began in 2016-2017, which was the first year that international enrollment dropped since 9/11 (Fischer, 2019; Glass et al., 2021). After discussing what many have deemed as the end for internationalization as a philosophy for institutions of higher education, Robin Helms (2020) observed:

> Coronavirus, ironically enough, illustrates exactly why we need internationalization—we need students who understand global phenomena, can see xenophobic and culture-bound reactions for what they are, and are prepared to work with colleagues around the world to

> address global crises in the short term, and contribute to long-term solutions through research and the advancement of knowledge.

The Chronicle of Higher Education also reflected on what the pandemic means for study abroad. Author Karin Fischer (2021, p. 20) wrote, "The pandemic's more lasting effect may be to spotlight and even exacerbate many of the pre-existing challenges facing study abroad, beginning with diversity". VE is now seen as a way to continue—and perhaps even save—internationalization as a way to enhance the quality of education (Li & Haupt, 2021). Helms (2020) also notes that now may be the time for universities to take up virtual exchange or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). White and Lee (2020) write about the future of international higher education in a post-mobility world, noting that mobility has always severely limited access to "transborder education". They believe that to continue with the pre-pandemic model relying on travel, would only increase the competition for a limited supply of students and scholars.

For approximately the past twenty years, researchers have found correlations between study abroad and academic success—including higher GPAs and graduation within four years (Lebold et al., 2005; Lee & Green, 2016; NAFSA, 2008; NSSE, 2007; O'Rear et al., 2012). This was found true for all who participated in study abroad, including students who were first-generation college students and students from low-income backgrounds. As mentioned previously, plenty of other researchers have studied the career boosts that study abroad brings.

Students with disabilities have also shied away from study abroad due to difficulties negotiating accommodations (Kelley et al., 2016; Link, 2016) and LGBTQ2+ students are often anxious about safety and legal protections abroad (Pope, 2007). Hipple et al. (2020) discuss the benefits of participation by students from the LGBTQ2+ community. They write, "Their international experiences may also help to expand their own and others' understanding of the global social construction of gender and sexuality" (Hipple et al., 2020, p. 177). To that end, they maintain that outreach and support to LGBTQ2+ students is necessary for programs to be considered multiculturally competent. Others, like Calhoon et al. (2003), have looked at the value Native Americans can bring to programs as their values may be very different from those that traditional study abroad programs display. In order to continue to grow and infuse the internationalization that Helm discusses, VE must become even more robust than it is, and it is up to those

sponsoring programs at the high school and college levels to help students develop intercultural knowledge, less ethnocentric attitudes and greater open-mindedness—all of the benefits attributed to studying abroad (Lee & Song, 2019).

3.3. Effectiveness of Online Programming

O'Dowd (2016) discusses the focus of Malinowski and Kramsch (2014) on the effect of the technology itself used in virtual exchange or online intercultural exchange. They believe it can impede intercultural learning as students pay more attention to glitches such as the screen freezing and other technical problems instead of the social and cultural cues and meanings that are in play. Drawing on Malinowski and Kramsch (2014, p. 287) work, O'Dowd (2016) developed a list of strong versus weak approaches to telecollaborative task design. One of the strong approaches pertinent to this student was that tasks should "reflect themes of social justice and intercultural citizenship" as well as "avoid stereotyping and forced culture clash." He also believed strong approaches included reflection on the role of technology in online communication and self-reflection and critical evaluation.

The weak approaches included "superficial communicative themes" and stereotyping. These approaches also sometimes lacked a reflection component. Yet other studies have found that intercultural competence can be enhanced by virtual exchange. The Johns Organization, which supports virtual exchange programs between the U.S. and SWANA regions, found that during summer and fall of 2019 and spring of 2020, grantee participants from thirty-two states in the United States as well as participants from eleven countries in the SWANA region reported largely positive changes with regard to knowledge of the other country or culture. Additionally, statistically significant changes along a number of domains including cross-cultural communication, empathy, and perspective taking, among others.

Studying the minority Arab population in Israel, Mesch et al. (2013) surmised ethnic disparities in digital access may reflect social-structural disadvantages and cultural differences. In their study of the Israeli Arabs who were overrepresented in manual occupations, they found that negative attitudes toward technology reflected disadvantaged social position (Mesch et al., 2013, p. 234). These types of differences do affect the diversity of virtual exchange programs, in both the United States and the partner country. VE participants will not get a full sense of the culture, diversity, and challenges that

exist in other countries without a broad range of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Though disability and LGBTQ2+ status may not be apparent initially in online exchange settings, students with disabilities and those from the LGBTQ2+ community have much to bring to the table as well as those from differing racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Hipple et al., 2020; Masterson-Algar et al., 2020).

Helm (2018a, p. 52) further discusses the global spread of English as being a medium of soft power which she maintains is supported by the rise of the Internet as an international system which the United States dominates. Helm (2018a, p. 338) warns that virtual exchange could be used to meet governments' political and ideological agendas, further exacerbating inequalities, not leading to greater understanding and even using conversations for surveillance. Helm (2018a) drew on a previous joint work (Helm & Bali, 2013) in discussing the power imbalance often found in programs between Americans and students in the SWANA region. There are issues concerning students who must converse in their "second, possibly third, fourth (or more) language, on controversial or emotional issues" (Helm, 2018a, p. 143). Bali (cited in Helm, 2018a, p. 143) notes that even with an Arabic interpreter, the power imbalance can be intensified if the interpreter is less fluent in English. Helm (2018a) suggests one way to alter the imbalance is make the primary language Arabic and use English-language interpreters.

3.4. Recruiting Diverse Participants

Recruiting more diverse populations to participate in VE is key to developing a more robust program that ensures cross-cultural communication and competencies. There is a need to focus efforts on diverse populations but also to communicate basic information about the programming. Hipple et al. (2020) examined outreach strategies of the thirty-eight top institutions of higher education listed in the 2015 *U.S. News & World Report* rankings of the Best Colleges for Study Abroad Programming. That sample was almost evenly split between public and private institutions. They found, "In order of frequency, most common types of diversity outreach were to disability status, queer status, ethnicity/race, gender, and religion. These were followed, at much lower frequencies, by outreach to social class, national origin, age, and indigenous heritage" (Hipple et al., 2020, p. 180). Of those, more than half of the programs reached out to students with disabilities. Another was the need to adjust content

for LGBTQ2+ groups, understanding that although some concerns among individuals may overlap, a variety of needs and identities are found in that community that require different considerations.

The research findings focused on study abroad can provide clues for future VE programming and recruitment. There were several gaps found in the literature review. One problem was the lack of research that examined how diversity in countries other than the United States affected both study abroad experiences and VE experiences and the lack of discussion about what constitutes diversity in other nations as well as discussion of how diverse groups are represented in the education systems of other countries. Another deficiency was little discussion in the literature around diversity other than in terms of race/ethnicity. There was hardly any mention of religion or gender identity or expression. The third deficiency had to do with a lack of literature around study abroad or VE at levels other than higher education.

4. Methods and Ethics

The Research team used a qualitative approach with seven focus group interviews to immerse ourselves in the data to understand VE culture and our DEI objectives better. We supplemented this with pre-focus group demographic surveys, which added to the robust data collected as well as a thorough literature review of current scholarship. These triangulated methods allowed us to get a broader picture of the field and identify the gaps in current DEI work in VE to provide recommendations for future JO funding, scholarship, and programming. A thematic and content analysis was applied to the methods approach once the data was collected and coded.

Seven focus groups were conducted virtually, with a total of eighteen participants of twenty-one invited, over a two-month period in summer 2021. All the participants were provided to the Research team by the Johns Organization (JO). We did not solicit any additional information from non-JO invitees. The first five focus groups were JO personnel, RTI International staff who serve as independent evaluators of JO virtual exchange programs, and leading scholars in the VE field. The final two focus groups were JO grantee practitioners.

According to the *Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research,* the three basic ethical principles in

guiding research are: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. These three principles protect the rights of research participants while conserving the integrity of the research itself. Respect for persons is the “recognition that people are autonomous and entitled to their own opinions and choices, unless detrimental to others” and includes the fact that not everyone is capable of self-determination, and may require protection (Czubaruk, 2019, p. 3). In this area, we secured informed consent from each participant. Prior to participating in the focus groups, demographic surveys were emailed, and the first question was about consent before the participant could join the focus group.

Beneficence recognizes that people are treated ethically by respecting their decisions and, “protecting them from harm” (Czubaruk, 2019, p. 4). We manifested this in our focus groups through cultural competency. We were respectful of each person’s time and context, language, and made intentional decisions to repeat or explain questions when there was confusion. Lastly, justice ensures that research does not target vulnerable people, specifically the “economically disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities, or persons confined to institutions" (Czubaruk, 2019, p. 5). Here, we prioritized confidentiality by sending an introductory protocol email with our confidentiality statement, asking each participant to use a pseudonym at the start of each session *prior* to recording, and reading our confidentiality statement at the start of each focus group to ensure the enforcement of this third ethical principle. Every facet of the research was carried out with these three ethical principles in mind. Additionally, all research was conducted online and recorded via Zoom with consent.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1. A Sense of Belonging

A major theme throughout all parts of the data was a sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2019) suggests that a “sense of belonging is a basic human need, a fundamental motivation, sufficient to drive behaviors and perceptions. Its satisfaction leads to positive gains such as happiness, elation, wellbeing, achievement and optimal functioning” (p. 9). For VE students to feel connected, included, and comfortable they must experience a sense of belonging. VE programs encouraged a sense of belonging through group activities and by

highlighting similarities between the two parties. When students did not feel like they belonged, they were less engaged.

Focus group participants suggested that VE programs were designed in a way that perpetuated the disconnect from feeling a sense of belonging for historically marginalized students. Often VE curriculum design was made through the lens of privilege, which impacts students who do not carry these identities. One respondent noted that programs reflect their sponsoring institutions and many of them are designed to exclude those who have been historically marginalized. That individual then described programming that did help support a sense of belonging:

> One of our programs is designed so that their curriculum is essentially made up of the stories that youth share themselves. . . So, if you're invited to give your voice to share your story, the hope is that you will feel a sense of belonging that, you know, you're literally seeing yourself in the curriculum, which isn't always the case. And so virtual exchange has allowed us to design a program like that.

Another respondent who identified as Latinx and worked with underrepresented students answered the question "What factors increase the likelihood that historically excluded students would partake or participate in global virtual exchange programs that are accessible, inclusive, diverse, and equitable?" as follows:

> Many of the times, if not most of the times, the designs of these virtual spaces are done or are put together by privileged groups or [are] westernized. And so culturally, there are many things that I cannot identify with and there are many ways of communicating that I cannot identify with. [Those are the things that provide] a sense of belonging. And if that's not there, an environment that welcomes the cultural context of the students, then it's kind of very difficult to feel you belong to the space. And if you don't feel you belong, then you don't feel you have a voice. You don't feel whatever you're going to say it's correct or it's going to be welcomed. And another one, it's language because language also [provides] this sense of cultural identity. And many times, when you come from underrepresented populations, in this case, Hispanics or other underrepresented populations, they have certain ways of communicating.

It was particularly important to focus on students' cultures as a major piece to establishing a sense of belonging and to work towards forming belonging at the

start of the program. Highlighting cultural similarities and creating spaces for conversations about students' identities helped to encourage togetherness and heighten a sense of belonging. However, there is potential for conflict among the VE participants due to country and community history and politics. Cases of conflict can create tension and 'othering' (Said, 1978) in the process. One respondent who was involved with high school VE programming had discussed how they break students down into progressively smaller groups called communities, neighborhoods, and families. Here, she describes what has happened when the students are placed in regional groups and there can be conflict within those regional placements as well, even though those include students from the same geographic area:

> One feature of our program is we try to connect our participants regionally as well. So, I mentioned . . . the community level, the neighborhood level and the family level. In between that we kind of break our full community into regions so that as they're planning their projects, and thinking of ideas; they have like-minded people, or people who maybe have gone through or had to get similar permissions nearby to talk to. And so, it's also a really great way of simulating the traditional exchange group, you kind of go abroad with people who are from the same place as you and kind of have those people to go back to, and kind of have that sense of belonging of like, okay, we're culturally similar. If I have this question about this other culture, I feel more comfortable asking you than asking it in a space and feeling othered by not knowing. And so really intentionally creating those regional chats for that. But with that, we also had a pretty serious moment of conflict, and other things happened within the regional chat. And so, recognizing that among even within countries, but among neighboring countries, there's a lot of conflict. And there's a lot of history behind that as well, that you have to keep in mind and recognize… We were able to address it through some of the strategies shared here of having, you know, direct one-on-one facilitation and dialogue together and to really talk about what it means to represent yourself as an individual and not at that country or bigger level. But again, that is still a moment of really deep pain and something that is possible through virtual exchange. And if you're not careful about the spaces you create, there can be a lot of harm because it is really easy to not feel like you belong when you're connecting virtually.

Another issue that arose in several of the focus groups was that of Muslim identity, which is not surprising since a majority of the SWANA region is Muslim. The United States has a long history of Islamophobia and anti-Arab

discrimination and racism. Since the 1970s, racial profiling of Arabs in public spaces in the United States has continued to increase, as have discrimination and hate crimes towards Arabs, Muslims, or those perceived to be Arab or Muslim (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2006; Jamal & Naber, 2008; Naber, 2000; Naser, 2021). Levels of Islamophobia, hate crimes, and discrimination towards Arabs, Muslims, and those perceived to be Arab or Muslim surged after major historical events such as 9/11, the 2016 presidential campaigns, and the travel ban in 2017 which targeted Muslim-majority countries (Abouchedid & Nasser, 2006; Jamal & Naber, 2008; Naber, 2000; Naser, 2021). A 2021 Pew survey found that 48% of adult Muslims surveyed had faced discrimination and bias.

Learning that U.S. Muslim students may have faced discrimination was eye opening to students from the SWANA region but having Muslim-American students also helped establish a sense of belonging according to at least one respondent as they described interactions between students based in SWANA with students in the U.S.:

> [For the Muslim students in SWANA], it was knowing, not within their country of being Muslim and being discriminated against, but knowing the stereotypes exists for them in the Western world and knowing that ... their, you know, friends, families and other members of the Muslim community in the U.S. were discriminated against. So, there was a really interesting sort of tie and sense of commonality that existed between these two groups, when they realized when they got to know how each of them were situated in their countries and globally. It was really, really insightful and meaningful to them. And it was really insightful, meaningful to me just to hear about his connections that were forged

Another practitioner said:

> I did see some Muslim students [in the U.S.], students who have heritage from the MENA region kind of make great connections with their counterparts, because they do share this identity, this cultural background. And so that's how I personally saw kind of these usually excluded populations or student populations find a connection through this bridge exchange program.

The importance of a sense of belonging in VE programs parallels that of in-person classroom experiences. Establishing strong levels of sense of belonging in VE programs is critical in ensuring students feel comfortable, engaged, and connected.

5.2. Race and Diversity: "Taboo" Unless It Is the United States

Respondents were asked to define "historically marginalized students." Most crafted definitions that focused on U.S.-based Blacks, Latinx immigrants, students who lived in rural areas, and students with disabilities. There was no standard definition. Outside of race, there are other groups to be considered within those that have been historically marginalized from VE programming. However, because most of the responses leaned toward racial differences and diversity, it is important to highlight how race showed up in both the U.S. and SWANA regions. Questions of racial difference were not extended to populations within SWANA. As one respondent noted:

> Our American students don't see much of a hesitation, you know, about answering questions on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, you know, those are like categories we want to look at. Whereas in other demographics, it's really hard to extract that information, because of the sort of perceived taboo and the perceived social and cultural feedback.

The SWANA region is not racially, ethnic, or religiously homogeneous. Many respondents echoed the thoughts of the aforementioned participant that racial difference is a foreign or taboo topic within SWANA. However, without a diverse staff that has knowledge of the complexities of the region and its histories, sweeping generalizations of these topics being taboo may prevent authentic interactions from happening. Here are comments from several respondents speaking about the region's diversity and the limitations to address what some perceived to be "taboo" topics in SWANA:

> I guess one other thing is that we tend to say MENA, but MENA is very diverse. . . Every country is completely different from the other in terms of. And I think in a U.S. state of mind, it's kind of like a chunk. And so, some of the issues are—even when we're talking about women—it's different in every country as well. So, I think it's very important to keep that in mind.

> One of the objectives of a virtual exchange is to connect people who come from different communities and cultures. And sometimes there are cultural barriers that prevent, or that [demonstrate] some of the marginalization or exclusion. So, like sometimes, a program in the MENA region won't want to talk about gender identities or, or sexual identities. And that could further marginalize or exclude individuals who hold that identity in that community and in the community they're partnering with the same way.

Respondents tended to rely on stereotypes of the SWANA region to allude to how difference is viewed and engaged in the region. The respondents (which include JO staff and VE practitioners and grantees) know there is diversity of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and others in the SWANA region, but they have limitations on how to articulate or address this diversity within their programming when looking to work with historically excluded groups. As previously noted, this speaks to the U.S.-centric structure of VE programming whereas many respondents observed, they do not have the lens or knowledge to understand and utilize the local information for the program. Instead, respondents have listed such issues as gender, gender expression or ethnicity as "taboo." Classifying these issues as "taboo" can be seen as a way to distance themselves from the responsibilities of finding solutions to address these issues within their program. In effect, the responsibility of addressing racial and other types of diversity is placed on the partners within SWANA, which comes with limitations.

While most of the respondents gave examples of diversity being "taboo" on issues of gender and ethnicity within the region, one respondent elucidated how SWANA participants also projected their ideas about race within their expectations for potential U.S.-based virtual exchange partners. The following response demonstrates that SWANA participates are aware of issues of race, and particularly Blackness, and reflects the fluidity of racial attitudes between the United States and the SWANA region:

> Maybe I'll give the example that I was thinking of, of these schools in Chicago with Moroccan students, actually. And there was another one of the secondary students that the MENA students said, 'Oh, . . . I wasn't expecting to be matched with students who were all Black and that was really interesting in the USA'.

Operating within the U.S.-centric perspective also illuminates the SWANA perspective toward the United States. It is evident through this response there was an expectation of the SWANA students to engage white people from the United States. This is an important issue to highlight as the United States is a racially diverse country with multiple histories and experiences. However, the response also demonstrates the irony of an expectation (and desire) of SWANA students to be paired with white Americans.

When issues of "race" were raised within programming, Black Americans were seen as representatives of their race, and put on the spot to speak, even if they were not student participants. One VE practitioner reported:

> One example I have is one of our facilitators was a Black American, and the only one in [a discussion one day]. And so, when any questions came up about race in the U.S., it was directed to her. And she felt that that was not her place, because the dialogue was one among the participants. But there wasn't [a] way to handle these conversations and make it still feel like a not targeted conversation.

This provides further evidence that issues surrounding race are present and within the understanding of SWANA and U.S.-based participants. In this very specific example of Morocco, it important to highlight that scholars and activists in Morocco have actively been highlighting the country's racial diversity, particularly its Black African population, the country's historical participation in the trans-Sahara slave trade, and the lingering vestiges of anti-Blackness that impact the lives of Black Moroccans (King, 2020). As such, comments from the U.S.-based focus group participants who stated that these issues are "taboo" and are only limited to Black and Latinx people in the United States are complicit in the anti-Blackness that impacts the lives of Black Moroccans. As Marouan (2016) explained in the Moroccan context of race-based slavery and its aftermath racism in the country:

> The topics are taboo. The denial, the silence (including in the educational curriculum) is part of a larger national discourse that does not acknowledge the magnitude of the trans-Saharan slave trade and the existence of Morocco's marginalized minority Black community whose stories have not been told. (p. 268)

Anti-Blackness is not unique to Morocco. Since 2020, there has been a rising movement in anti-racism activism throughout SWANA, calling attention to systemic racism and the deep-rooted denial of the slave trade and anti-Blackness.

SWANA students need to be aware of the racial diversity of the United States, how it connects to their local contexts, and know Black and Latinx students are also legitimate participants in VE programs. Multiple focus group comments led the Research team to surmise that people of African descent in the SWANA region may not be well represented in the VE programming that occurs on their campuses and schools, and not readily represented in the SWANA faculty as well.

Regarding the general discussion around diversity, most of the focus groups related diversity around issues of race and nationality. Notably missing was discussion about students with disabilities. This is consistent with literature review findings regarding the underrepresentation in VE programs and the lack of targeted recruitment efforts. There was also little discussion around students who identified as LGBTQ2+.

5.3. Language: A Monopoly of English as the Primary Language in VE

Language, and specifically the primacy of the English language within VE programming, emerged as a principal theme within this study. When asked, "Does language and linguistic diversity present any challenges for historically excluded groups in virtual exchange programs you're connected to or have witnessed?" many respondents quickly noted that English is the primary language of instruction within their virtual exchange programs and organizational structure.

One respondent referred to the "U.S. as a linguistically privileged place." This can be interpreted as English is the predominant language of the United States and since much of the programming (and funding) originates from the U.S., they are privileged over non-U.S. English-speaking countries. This is important because there are millions of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the U.S. This enters as an example of how the centrality and primacy of the English language within JO and other VE programming reveals inequalities in both the U.S. and the SWANA region. This section demonstrates how the English language showed up during the focus groups. One practitioner based in the SWANA region said:

> I think this virtual exchange for me will never be completely equitable, because when you're talking about the MENA region and the U.S., so you say, "OK, let me start with the beginning to the virtual exchanges that we mostly support are in English." And so, we request that the students have a minimum command of the English language where they're able to share their opinions and talk freely. I understand the reason behind this, and that is because you don't want the students to be out of their depth and you want the connections to happen between the students. But a lot of students in our region don't speak English. And so, you're anywhere reaching only the students who can speak English. And so that is kind of, you know, a very specific percent of the population.

A JO staff member remarked:

> For the vast majority of virtual exchange programs that I've seen, if you can't communicate in English, you can't participate. That is, to participate sometimes at all. And often, like participate meaningfully. I think we've seen programs try to get around it with translators or with different accessibility efforts. But I think that it does come down to like, if you're having to talk to a translator, it is just something about the meaningful participation in the program, in my opinion goes away. And so, I think, yes, language, especially an inability to communicate in English is one of those things that just privileges you so much in this exchange context.

Another JO staff member explained:

> When we are working with ministries . . . for example, when they're talking about what type of strategy they want to roll out, what are they saying, 'We want you to work with the schools where they speak English." That's a part of what they want to do, and then just say, of course, stakeholder alignment, they're not thinking about that. They're thinking of putting forth their best students in a way to participate in these virtual exchange opportunities. So, it's a cycle for both ends in a way.

The responses highlight the primacy of English and the privilege it provides JO members to operate programming. Some respondents in different focus groups said that English is the *lingua franca* of the world. However, this is deeply tied to European colonialism and principally U.S. imperialism within the world. These points reflect recognition in how JO engages with linguistic diversity and dealing with historically excluded groups where language is a principal factor. JO staff members acknowledged, "If you can't communicate in English, you can't participate." This statement reveals that only a certain population of individuals within the U.S. or SWANA region may be able to take part at all or meaningfully within VE programming.

The primacy of English in JO-funded programs as highlighted by the respondents is not limited to virtual exchange programming, but also includes resources. One JO staff person said:

> Yeah, and if we're not even talking about the programming side, let's think about the resources we provide. It has taken us a really long time to provide any resource in a language that's not English. And that has some implications for the type of people we can engage like, stakeholder cultivation, right? I think that's a really important point here, too.

Others in the focus group mentioned they could only come up with two examples of materials that were in a language besides English, out of approximately 60 VE programs that have taken place.

These comments elucidate the primacy of English language within JO's virtual exchange-funded programs. As the responders highlight, the primacy of English impacts the type of stakeholder cultivation that the organization can develop. Coupled with the earlier comment that ministries play a role in replicating inequalities by only wanting their "best" students to participate, it is easy to see why inequalities historically have existed in VE programming. If there is a commitment to addressing the historical gaps of inequalities within virtual education, all stakeholders must be cognizant of how the educational system and particularly where access to English language education is proxy for differences among race, class, gender, among others, which can exclude the intended historically marginalized groups.

The same critique is valid within the United States: that the primacy of English language education can serve as a barrier to U.S. students along lines of class, race, and other markers that may impede access. A JO staff member explained:

> It's also the fact that in the United States. If you want to do a virtual exchange that's conducted in a foreign language, or when the language is not English, often the young people who have the ability to do that are young people who have attended prestigious institutions for much of their educational career and then are equipped to participate in Arabic or participate fully or meaningfully or have a conversation in the other languages or language other than English. And so that kind of verifies that this young person attended these under-resourced schools for their whole life; they didn't get the second language training that this other student did. And so [the other] students can now participate in this virtual exchange in Arabic, because they've been training in Arabic for their whole life.

As a recommendation, JO should contract individuals that are versed within the diversity of their partner regions to best advise how to engage in dialogue with partner agencies or governmental industries to include historically marginalized groups within their programming.

5.4. U.S.-Centered Power Dynamic: Virtual Exchange Programming's U.S.-centric Focus

A major theme that has appeared across all parts of the data is that virtual exchange remains a U.S.-centric project with most planning, funding, pedagogy, and subject matter originating from the U.S. without a true sense of mutuality with their international partners. The main areas where this understanding was found in respondents' observations around:

- VE being U.S.-funded and white-Western-centric,
- U.S. institutions going the easy route in VE planning (numbers and easy topics over real diversity and mutuality and no clear assessments to ensure the latter),
- SWANA-based perceptions of U.S.-based VE programs, and
- U.S.-based practitioners' definition of historically marginalized students and regions.

These areas all focused on the needs and desires of the U.S.-based participants, evaluators, and funders. There were many limitations shared by respondents, though it was universally acknowledged that the U.S.-centric VE programming is one-directional and does not practice in real-time its mission for diversity, equity, and inclusion. The general perception from a number of respondents is that a majority of VE programs in the United States will comprise of white students who are wealthy, live in urban areas, and have access to unlimited resources as they attend elite schools and universities. There is also the perception that the faculty and facilitators will be white Americans who will use English as the primary language of engagement. Lastly, there was the perception that a general understanding with SWANA partners is that because the VE is funded from the U.S., there is a buy-in allowing for ideas and planning to be initiated from the U.S. rather than it being a mutually established VE project from the start. One-sided funding from the U.S. creates the perception that VE 'ownership' comes with those who pay for it. However, there are also many success stories and surprises when SWANA students engage with racially diverse, multilingual U.S. students, as that defies the stereotypes already established in the field. Two respondents shared their thoughts on U.S.-focused VE programming, stating:

> There are a lot of programs that are designed, that are conceived, ideated, designed and facilitated by all adults, and all people from the geographic

> West, or people within the United States, you know, more white people, more people with relatively higher status.
>
> If it's being designed by an all-Western, all adult-funded entity, you know, the choices are just not coming from where [participants from the MENA region] are coming from necessarily.

5.5. Going the Easy Route with U.S.-based University Programs

Another reason there are more university programs in VE rather than K-12 may be because it can be easier to work with the older college students in SWANA as they do not have to have family buy-in or parental permission to participate. Also, curricular topics do not have to be as carefully monitored as with younger students, especially those topics considered taboo in SWANA countries (drugs, sex, sexuality, racial diversity, for example).

Focus group participants also suggested that some U.S.-based practitioners either did not want the challenge of working with an under-resourced SWANA school or have the capacity to work with an under-resourced school, so they sometimes went the route of partnering with a certain economic class in the SWANA region that had access to resources and more on social and economic par with the U.S. cohort. One participant stated:

> I think we have seen in the field that practitioners who are implementing these programs find it to be very challenging often to work with, for example, like an under-resourced school. And so, they tend to not do that. And they tend to, you know, go for what's easier, which may be working with a more resourced school that may serve students or young people who are more represented in these types of programs.

Another participant explained how limited resources could also play a role in excluding historically underserved students in the SWANA region:

> Including historically excluded students in a program requires more support; it requires more effort; it requires more money; it requires more like time [for] capacity building—all of these things. And I think sometimes virtual exchange programs are operating in like context of scarcity, they only have so much effort, they only have so many resources, they only have so many tech dollars to put behind a program.

5.6. SWANA Perceptions of U.S.-based and Initiated VE Programs

Participants from each of the focus groups discussed SWANA perceptions of the U.S.-based virtual exchange programming. Here are a some of the SWANA stereotypes and assumptions shared:

> [The VE will be] a lot of white people from the United States.
>
> Some schools here [SWANA], for example, have very guarded curriculum and that anything that's coming from abroad is considered to be kind of like playing with the minds and the way of thinking of the kids and is perceived to maybe get to them. You know, they worry that the students will become, quote unquote, corrupted by Western ideals or thoughts exposed to things that they wouldn't be exposed to normally. So, I think that's also a challenge.
>
> They have a lot of stereotypes about the U.S. just being very wealthy before based on what they see on TV, and that it's a very eye opening to them, to talk to students who are not necessarily wealthy, who have economic challenges. And it just really helps them understand more about the U.S. in a realistic way.

With all these responses, what was most obvious was the absence of a definition of historically marginalized within a SWANA context. The SWANA participants did not define historically marginalized except in the context of rural students but there was no discussion of religious, racial, or economic diversity or how that could affect a student's access to a VE program opportunity.

5.7. Technology Access Affects Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds and Low-Resourced Institutions

Technology was a major theme that appeared across all parts of the data. The lack of access to stable Internet connection and computers was an issue for VE students. This was particularly challenging for students in SWANA regions. Often VE programming was scheduled according to U.S. time zones and as a result, SWANA participants were participating in late evening after their schools were closed, limiting their access to computers and Internet connections. VE students often resorted to using cell phones when they did not have access to computers and the Internet (which can be very costly if they are using data plans or pre-paid cards).

When asked about what barriers should be removed to increase the participation of historically marginalized students, participants in every focus group mentioned some aspect of technology. Participants expressed a need to provide additional resources to students such as additional minutes for students' phone plans, devices such as computers or tablets, and Wi-Fi and to make sure that every student had their own device. As one participant explained, "I think when students have to share devices, there's a lot less sort of synchronous interaction that can happen."

In addition, students found themselves with "Zoom fatigue." Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were facing extended screen time because not only were they attending their VE program online but also their regular classroom instruction:

> So, the first thing that came to mind for me is technology, that access to virtual exchange inherently requires access to technology, access to high-speed Internet, access to computers, et cetera. And we know that those resources are not equitably distributed across the population in the United States, or elsewhere in the world, just in general. So, I would identify that as maybe the primary challenge to the virtual exchange programs that I have experienced and observed. I think also, at least in the past year, Zoom fatigue has definitely been a challenge to the virtual exchanges that I'm involved with. I see students becoming less engaged in those experiences because they're just on Zoom all day, every day for everything that they do. And so, one additional online Zoom experience is they can only pay attention for so long, they can only put effort into those kinds of exchanges for so long.

Like larger societal experiences, income status affected students' VE experiences and access to resources. The digital divide remains an issue in the US and the SWANA region. It was acknowledged multiple times that students who were from a low-income background had difficulties accessing technology and the Internet, which created additional barriers to students' participation.

Technology can also be a barrier for some institutions that wish to engage in VE:

> Technology and like the infrastructure needed for that kind of technology is hugely, hugely important. Whether that is technology, you know, obtained by an individual or technology that exists, you know, like, at a school or at a nonprofit organization where participants are participating from these programs, or any kind of an educational

> institution, you know, both having programs that utilize or require accessible technology, and then also those institutions kind of having this infrastructure to support that. That's a really big barrier at the moment.

Students' sense of belonging was impacted by their technological experiences. For students with technology difficulties such as unstable Internet connection, they often felt like they did not belong. After experiencing technological difficulties in the middle of class, students often felt disconnected and became less engaged.

Students' access to stable Internet connections and computers are critical in VE programs. The inequities seen in larger societal settings are magnified in the VE programs. Students coming from low-income backgrounds were impacted the most. They often had difficulties accessing stable internet connection and computers. This can impact the students' overall VE experience and learning process.

6. Discussion

Based on the secondary research and findings from this report, the Research team offers the following thematically placed recommendations for VE DEI work. We also included a sixth category here around Faculty and Facilitator Training, Planning and Funding. These recommendations are based on comments that the practitioners and others noted as well as the Research team's observations. One example from each category will be shared, noting this is not an exhaustive list of recommendations.

6.1. A Sense of Belonging

Although it is difficult to get a sense of how prevalent Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiments are among students who participate in JO-sponsored programming, it would be helpful to increase training and cultural competency concerning what Islamophobia is and how it shows up in the classroom setting, the Arab student experience, and how practitioners can facilitate classroom discussions about Islamophobia, bias, and hate crimes toward Arabs and Muslims, and anti-Arab discrimination that is prevalent in the U.S. We make this recommendation based on comments of practitioners regarding the bonds formed between U.S.-based Muslim students and SWANA students and on comments around misunderstandings that occurred in some of the VE interactions, and the broad research base around prevalence of Islamophobia

in the U.S. During the focus groups, religious differences between the student participants came up only briefly. For example, one participant described a U.S. classroom as largely Southern Christian and posed the question of how to prepare students for the religious differences in SWANA. SWANA country participants may be majority Muslims and Islam which determines the overall culture of their countries. In the U.S., Muslims are a religious minority, and the majority are Black. Due to negative media and political agendas, the majority of Americans believe all Muslims are Arabs and all Arabs are Muslim.

6.2. Race and Diversity

Demographic questions are very important, but they are framed from a U.S. point of view and some students in other countries do not understand these specific questions on race/gender as defined in the Global North. SWANA is not an official race according to the U.S. census. So, there is no disaggregated data about SWANA populations or really the option for them to identify as SWANA on questionnaires. In the U.S., most data lists SWANA under “white”, which is problematic because it does not allow for a true understanding of SWANA experience and assumes SWANA individuals benefit from white privilege when they do not (Awad et al., 2021). VE programs should be intentional and include SWANA as a race option.

6.3. English Language

Re-shift the focus on English as the primary language. Translation and interpretation support is needed so it is not just English language focused. In order to shift away from English language focus, we suggest VE programs should partner or contract individuals versed within the diversity of their partner regions for advice on how to engage in dialogue with partner agencies or governmental industries to include historically marginalized groups who speak languages other than English. Doing so would help broaden the pool of potential participants.

6.4. U.S.-Focused

Rise to the challenge of finding historically marginalized school partners in the SWANA region not just elite schools where they speak English and have access to the similar resources as in the U.S. partner school. A pre-demographic survey that addresses issues around participant diversity, languages spoken, and other factors of diversity could be administered among potential projects.

It would require that culturally competent questions be created by JO and partner institutions.

6.6. Technology

Provide additional technology resources to participants that need it, including access to the Internet and computers or tablets for all participants. If this was part of the incentive, then perhaps more historically marginalized students would be involved.

6.6. Faculty and Facilitator Training, Planning, and Funding

Creating strategies for differentiated learning are vital in pre-planning sessions between faculty and facilitators. It was suggested in the discussions that faculty and facilitators should meet face-to-face if possible before the start of a program to develop mutual goals and clarify expectations as well as gain knowledge about the population of students who would be participating.

7. Limitations of the Study

A significant limitation found in the research is that the U.S.-based practitioners and scholars defined historically marginalized students as the ones they serve in the U.S. (mostly Black and Latinx). They did not envision historically marginalized diversity in their SWANA partners. Since this is the case, it can then be assumed that they are not checking for diversity and inclusivity on their partner's end. The data proves that historically marginalized students in the U.S. are the least likely to be included in VE programs—because of financial or immigrant status, no tangible incentive, no sense of belonging, no family buy-in, and no time because of job or academic requirements for a scholarship or financial aid. There was also little to no discussion about having racially diverse faculty outside of one participant explaining that her university did little to no marketing to attract Black or Latinx students or faculty to VE programs. Support was not provided for racially and differently abled faculty to get training or funding to create their own programs or participate in existing ones.

Another limitation to this study is that all the participants were provided by the Johns Organization. Non-JO participants were not solicited by the Research team as the JO team made clear that the focus groups respondents would be provided. The limitations to this were that most of the respondents

were employed or funded by JO and therefore many of their perspectives already supported or aligned with JO's philosophy. It also meant that only one respondent focused on high schools (no Grade K through Middle School), while everyone else was university or organization based. By being provided with the respondents, the Research team did not have the ability to include other voices that represented racial, ethnic, age, educational, and regional diversity. There were no visible participants of Afro-descent nor anyone with a visible disability, and no one racially or ethnically self-identified except one practitioner who stated she was Latina. There were several SWANA participants, but they did not self-identify beyond their work status in the VE field. The time periods were also somewhat fixed as the JO staff preferred to participate only during work hours in EST, even when weekend options were provided. Most absent from the data are the voices of students who participate in VE, which is one of the Research team's recommendations for future research to include student voices and their ideas in the pre-planning stage along with the facilitators and faculty.

8. Conclusion

Through this research, focus group participants did not clarify why the JO only focused on VE between the United States and SWANA. Perhaps this can be more developed and fleshed out in their public-facing documents and testimonials. With a mission that encourages global youth participation, the lack of other global (and historically marginalized regions) in their mission and funding contradicts the concept of global youth becoming connected through VE. However, if the funding directive stipulates VE just between these regions, then a deeper commitment to ascertain DEI needs to be prioritized from the start of any potential VE relationship between institutions and on the proposal submission levels.

Based on the research, it seems like the JO needs to capture more in-depth demographic work prior to funding U.S. or SWANA projects. This also means that concepts like "diversity," "race," "ethnicity," differently abled," and "LGBTQ2+" need to be defined and made culturally sensitive for all cohorts (i.e., the United States' understanding of race and sexual expression may not be readily understood or applied in a SWANA context). For full cultural competency to happen at the pre-planning stage, then representatives from SWANA must be brought into the discussion early and their voices have to be

up front in terms of capturing this demographic information from the beginning to determine marketing to all student populations.

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