

The Effectiveness of Electronic Communication in Higher Education Institutions in Consolidating the Concept of Cultural Diversity among Students

—Taking IAESTE as a Model

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Abstract

The term “Transculturation” was coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1947 to describe the phenomenon of merging and converting cultures. Transculturation involves more than just the transition from one culture to another, it does not only consist of acquiring another culture, but also merges these concepts, facilitating the creation of new cultural phenomena. The International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience (IAESTE), established in 1948, is a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering cultural exchange between various universities around the world, serving as a platform for exchanging students. IAESTE aims to enhance mutual understanding, international relations, and cooperation among students and academic institutions, regardless of race, color, culture, gender, religious or political beliefs, or disabilities. The University of Sharjah (UoS) is the main office for the program in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). From this perspective, the research aims to evaluate and analyze the role of the IAESTE program’s website in promoting understanding, cooperation, and trust between students and higher education institutions. It also seeks to uncover the extent to which the website is committed to achieving the concept of self-respect regardless of gender, race, or religion through positive communication among students from various universities around the world. This positive communication leads to the exchange of cultural dialogue in intellectual, social, religious, and political fields. Different tools were used to collect data including content analysis and in-depth interviews, using a descriptive approach to achieve the study’s objectives. This research sheds light on such topics, benefiting higher education

institutions by providing insights on how to evaluate the standards of cultural exchange programs and achieve outcomes or indicators that meet the program's goals, By focusing on the study issue, which is: How can the website of the International Organization for the Exchange of Training Offers (IAESTE) promote the concept of cultural diversity as a working basis for student exchange programs?

Keywords

Cultural Diversity, Higher Education, Electronic Communication, Training, Exchange Program

1. Introduction

The higher education sector is constantly expanding and evolving across its academic, research, and service offerings. Changes and reforms in the field of higher education are considered challenges that cannot be ignored or overlooked in an increasingly globalized world with its laws and conditions. Cooperation in higher education across various sectors of society has become an essential requirement, transforming such collaboration into a vital means of information exchange and transculturation. The objective is to achieve convergence between scientific and organizational concepts, skills, and experiences in the work environment, and contribute to their harmonization.

Higher education in the Arab region has been witness to a prolific history. Long intertwined with major religious, intellectual, political, social, and economic movements, institutions of higher learning have occupied a central place in Arab societies. The university in the contemporary Arab world can be conceptualized as a global, universal institution located within a region with particular histories and cultures of learning. The region contains a great deal of diversity, yet despite significant differences, a number of features—including the prominence of numerous pan-Arab political and economic organizations, a shared language, majority religion, political systems, common history, and experience of regional politics—allow for a coherent treatment of the Arab region (Herrera, 2007). On the other hand, it is vital to seek strategies that promote integration within the institution as well as strategies that facilitate the sharing of information during extra-curricular activities. This is consistent with the finding that most interactions between international and domestic students take place outside of the classroom. In order to increase support and intercultural friendships in an international context, he emphasizes the importance of domestic and international students forming groups and using intercultural collaboration strategies (Abdul-Rahaman, Arkorful, & Okereke, 2022).

Transculturation is a term coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1947 to describe the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures. Transculturation encompasses more than a transition from one culture to another;

rather, it merges these concepts and carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena. Consequently, certain scholars perceive transculturation as a reflection of global phenomena and human events.

Transculturation is a method of communication in the field of education. Central to the idea of “transculturation” is its reliance on two reciprocal elements from each side—giving and receiving. One entity engages in both taking and giving simultaneously, while the other side reciprocates in a similar manner. This is why this idea has been popular in cultivating relationships and fostering positive communication between higher education institutions. As such, the idea of “transculturation” hinges on the concept of human connection with a cultural and cognitive purpose.

If we consider positive communication between people to be a result of cultural exchange, this outcome significantly impacts the operations of higher education institutions. These institutions effectively contribute to the development of cultural communication among their students, aiming to construct expansive bridges for understanding others (the students). This understanding assists students in self-assessment and in recognizing their cultural stance in the context of the contemporary global landscape, encompassing diverse peoples and cultures. Hence, the concept of transculturation between higher education institutions that focuses on communication has emerged to diversify students’ experiences to acquire knowledge and experience, lead other ways of life, and deal with new patterns of behavior and thought. Each of them returns with different experiences and diverse ideas that enrich their cognitive disciplines and refine their practical skills.

- **Study Concepts:**

Cultural Diversity: Cong Lin (2020) generally refers to a reality of coexistence of diverse knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, religions, languages, abilities and disabilities, genders, ethnicities, races, nationalities, sexual orientations, etc., of human beings. It could extend to the way people react to this reality and the way people choose to live together with this reality.

Electronic Communication: actions and techniques of communication that are characterized by the utilization of new technologies and, in particular, the Internet tools of communication (World Wide Web, electronic mail, Weblogs, chats, forums, wikies, etc.) (Capriotti, 2009).

Higher Education: is a form of formal learning, in which education is provided by universities, colleges, graduate school, etc. and completed with a diploma (Şendurur, Bilgiç, & Şendurur, 2019).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Student Transculturation Program Concept¹

The Student Exchange Program entails sending high school and university

¹In this section, the researcher referred to several references:

<https://www.ts3a.com/%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A/>

<http://www.alkhaleej.ae/supplements/page/8af30c24-8bb9-4935-bf22-b7b6ebfe4dc7>

<https://www.ef.com/wwen/pg/student-exchange/>

students abroad to partner educational institutions. The primary objective of this program is to help participating students enhance their understanding and tolerance of other culture (Messer & Wolter, 2007). On the other hand, the number of university students participating in exchange programs has increased significantly over the past decade. A survey conducted on Swiss university graduates from 1999 to 2001 showed that participation in student exchange programs depended heavily on students' socio-economic backgrounds and their assessment of the benefits offered by these exchange programs. Any student exchange program involves several steps for the students, as outlined below:

1) Research Phase for Student Exchange Programs:

- Search for programs that offer grants for student exchange inside or outside the country, and select the suitable options.
- Ensure that the program's admission requirements are met. Many exchange program agencies require a minimum age of 15 years, and some also require a student to maintain a cumulative average of at least 2.8 to be eligible for application.
- Understand the duration of the chosen program. Some programs last three months, a single semester, or even an entire year of study.

2) Application Phase:

- Once an appropriate offer is identified, the student must know enrollment dates, program duration, costs, and provided features.
- The student fills out the application form, gathers necessary documents, attaches them to the application, and awaits a response from the agency.
- If a student is unable to afford the program, she can apply for a grant or financial assistance. Scholarships are often granted based on a high GPA. The student can also seek a part-time job to cover accommodation and living expenses.
- Once all the requirements are met, the student must prepare to attend the program and secure accommodation. Some programs offer housing through the educational institution, while others require students to find host families willing to accommodate them for the program's duration, often in exchange for a financial contribution.

2.2. Examples of Student Exchange Programs in Educational Institutions

In this section, the researcher presents examples of student exchange programs used by certain higher education institutions to provide an overview of the most important criteria upon which these programs rely for student admission. These criteria encompass GPA, services provided to students, the mechanism of selecting universities, and other aspects on which these programs depend.

1) The US and educational exchange programs with Arab countries²

One of the most noteworthy international educational exchange programs is the Fulbright Program. Since its inception in 1946, this program has facilitated

²[http://www.siironline.org/alabwab/derasat\(01\)/189.htm](http://www.siironline.org/alabwab/derasat(01)/189.htm).

educational experiences for over 250,000 students from 185 countries to study in the US. Additionally, the Gilman Scholarship Program, operational since 2000, has enabled 2200 American students to pursue studies abroad. In 2005, the number of foreign students in the US exceeded 565,000, complemented by 89,000 international scholars (comprising teachers and researchers). This surge reflects the US's endeavor to foster educational connections with nations progressively assuming crucial roles on the global stage.

The political situation in the world after September 11, 2001, amplified US interest in what is happening in the Arab and Islamic world. The growing interest is manifested in several ways, notably the heightened desire of thousands of US citizens to learn the Arabic language. The US government is also working hard to support student exchange programs with Arab and Islamic countries to provide them with the opportunity to acquire firsthand insights through immersive academic experiences.

2) University of Sharjah's CASTO³

Given that student development is the main focus of the University of Sharjah, in consonance with its general mission, the integration of practical training with theoretical qualifications assumes paramount importance, necessitating meticulous attention and precision. The Career Advising and Student Training Office (CASTO) seeks to fulfill several objectives, including the provision of academic and administrative support to students as they prepare to enter professional communities. It aims to bridge the gap between theoretical hypotheses presented to students in lecture halls and their practical application, thereby fostering the integration and solidification of specialized comprehension. Additionally, CASTO aims for students to grasp the nuances of specialization, professionalism, and life responsibilities within various fields of work, culminating in the fulfillment of practical training as a prerequisite for graduation. Therefore, CASTO plays a key role in activating the student exchange clause stipulated in the partnership agreements signed between the University of Sharjah and the international universities. CASTO undertakes logistical responsibilities concerning exchanges, ensuring a supportive and comfortable environment for foreign students at the University of Sharjah and fostering interaction amongst university students. This is done through communication and coordination with relevant colleges and departments within the University to ensure the provision of high-quality services from the moment a student enrolls in a program, starting from their reception at the airport and continuing until they depart from the country. CASTO also provides university students with opportunities to travel abroad to benefit from student exchange programs through the University's membership in the Association of Arab Universities and the International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience (IAESTE).

3) Student Exchange Program at Sultan Qaboos University⁴

Sultan Qaboos University adopts a student exchange program in collaboration

³<http://www.sharjah.ac.ae/ar/administration/CASTO/Pages/jsep.aspx>

⁴<https://www.squ.edu.om/>

with several recognized higher education institutions, according to the following rules:

a) Non-university students are admitted to the student exchange program for undergraduate programs. This includes individuals enrolled in universities or institutions affiliated with Sultan Qaboos University through student exchange agreements or memoranda of understanding. The objective is to allow these students to undertake specific courses at Sultan Qaboos University for a period not exceeding two semesters.

b) Students from Sultan Qaboos University wishing to join the student exchange program must have successfully completed 60 credit hours within their study plan, maintaining a cumulative GPA of at least 2.5. These students are required to submit their applications to the International Cooperation Office.

4) United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)⁵

This program centers on the notion that within a culturally diverse world, it is imperative to cultivate a fresh approach to intercultural dialogue. This involves exploring methods of intercultural communication and acknowledging shared cultural similarities, and common goals. Rooted in this principle, UNESCO strives to bolster peace and security through engagement in education, science, and culture. Additionally, it seeks to fortify international cooperation, fostering a climate of universal respect for justice, law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms. This commitment is in line with the United Nations Charter, which advocates these principles to apply to all individuals regardless of their race, gender, language, or religion. UNESCO's efforts extend to fostering intercultural dialogue through education, science, culture, communication, and information exchange. The program extends its support to higher education students across various countries by offering grants. It does so by endorsing national programs under the purview of USAID and by evaluating and enhancing educational outcomes to contribute to the advancement of nations.

2.3. Examples of Global Student Exchange Programs

In this section, the researcher presents several examples of international student exchange programs employed by higher education institutions. These models involve contracting with these institutions to facilitate the enrollment of their students in different universities worldwide. Alternatively, institutions directly engage with students to help them leverage these programs, thereby enhancing their knowledge and practical skills as they transition beyond their graduation.

1) AIESEC⁶

AIESEC is one of the best opportunities for student exchange. It is a non-profit organization run by the world's youth, operating in more than 2400 universities across 126 countries around the world, including universities in Arab countries.

⁵<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

⁶<https://aiesec.org/about-us>.

AIESEC fulfills its mission by focusing on its core objective of recognizing the significance of youth in global transformation and facilitating their access to opportunities for honing leadership and management skills. It is keen to avoid entanglement in political, ethnic, and ideological distinctions, striving instead to identify shared aspects that contribute to the realization of peace and human unity.

2) Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange & Study (YES) Program⁷

Amideast is one of five organizations collaborating to administer a component of the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program. Through funding from the U.S. State Department, the program extends grants to high school students in 40 countries spanning the Middle East, Africa, South/Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America. These grants offer the opportunity for students to reside and study in the United States for a full academic year. With a focus on nurturing youth leadership and promoting an understanding of US culture, participants in the YES Program serve as cultural ambassadors of their respective nations.

3) US Institutes (SUSIs) for Student Leaders⁸

Study of the U.S. Institutes (SUSIs) for Student Leaders are five-to-six-week academic programs designed for foreign undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25 to improve their understanding of the United States and to develop their leadership skills. Institutes include a four-week academic residency consisting of interactive classroom activities, discussions, lectures, readings, site visits, and workshops; a one-week educational study tour to a different region of the United States; leadership skills building activities; community service; and opportunities to interact with their American peers on a college campus. Each Institute includes approximately 20 participants from selected countries.

4) Mundus Erasmus⁹

Erasmus Mundus is the EU's program established in 1984, which was later joined in 2014 by the Erasmus, to support education and training. It comprises a series of grants provided by the EU with the primary objective of fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding among people through collaboration between the EU and third-world nations in various academic disciplines, while also creating employment opportunities through student exchange programs during specific periods of the year. Erasmus Mundus includes more than 4000 universities across 33 countries around the world, in addition to an educational institute. Enrolled students have the opportunity to apply for scholarships provided by Erasmus. This program serves as a means through which the EU extends financial support, in the form of scholarships, to students, faculty, and researchers who wish to study at higher education institutions in Europe.

5) The Middle East and North Africa Regional (MENAR) Fellowship

⁷<https://www.amideast.org/ar/our-work/academic-and-cultural-exchange/expanding-global-understanding/2360>.

⁸<https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/study-us-institutes-student-leaders>.

⁹<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/erasmus-programme-guide/introduction>.

Program¹⁰

The MENAR Fellowship Program is working to achieve this objective by offering one-year post-graduation fellowships for top graduates of American colleges at leading organizations in the Middle East and North Africa. The program offers these graduates an opportunity to engage with the people and institutions of the Middle East through high-impact, professional fellowships; provides service organizations with passionate young professionals who can forge a bridge between the U.S. and the region and aid in the region's development; and fosters a new generation of U.S. leaders in service, politics, and policy who have experience with the challenges the region faces and the potential it holds.

6) PLUS, Program¹¹

One of the most important programs run by the US Department of State is the PLUS Program. Launched in the 2004-2005 academic year, its core purpose is to facilitate transculturation between the US and countries within the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia by inviting a group of high-achieving students from these regions to spend two years in the US. The selected students have the aspiration to assume significant roles within their home countries following the completion of their studies in the US. Students enjoy a full scholarship from the US Department of State to enable them to pursue their university education and carry out some activities, such as participation in seminars.

7) IAESTE¹²

Founded in January 1948 at the Royal College in London, IAESTE expanded geographically across most of Europe. It operates as a non-profit entity that brings together national committees representing academic, industrial, and medical interests. IAESTE caters to approximately 4000 students, 3000 employers, and 1000 academic institutions by offering specialized international training programs in work-related fields, social and cultural spheres, and the development of international communication networks. Additionally, IAESTE engages in commercial and employment activities spanning over 80 countries worldwide. Currently, IAESTE has more than 80 participating countries, offering over 4,000 training exchanges each year.

• The key functions and objectives of IAESTE are:

- Fostering understanding, cooperation and trust among students as well as between academic institutions, employers, and society.
- Working within an inclusive system, irrespective of factors like race, color, culture, gender, religious and political beliefs, or disabilities.
- Preparing a group of qualified trainees to join the labor market and serve the community.
- Contributing to the cultural enrichment of trainees and their host communities.

• The programs are enrolled through the following steps:

¹⁰<https://www.menarprogram.org/>.

¹¹[http://www.siironline.org/alabwab/derasat\(01\)/189.htm](http://www.siironline.org/alabwab/derasat(01)/189.htm).

¹²<https://iaeste.org/history>.

- Submit a training request at the beginning of the academic year.
- Applications are exchanged with member states during the international conference of the organization in January of each year, where the requirements of students and employment entities are discussed.
- Students are nominated after they submit the applications to the committee (IAESTE) in their country through IAESTE's representatives. Subsequently, the employer contacts the candidate for an interview and makes the final decision.
- Once the candidate is accepted, the representatives of IAESTE in the student's country and the employer's country coordinate to prepare all necessary exchange, training, and permit requirements.
- **Among the most important requirements of the Student Exchange Program are:**
 - Proficiency in the English language. Some programs require proficiency in other languages based on the country.
 - Enrollment in a full-time bachelor's or master's program during the application period.
 - The training duration is 8 to 12 weeks during the summer, with the possibility of extension throughout the year.
- **Here we present some of the program's benefits:**
 - Enhancing the resume and showcasing employers' experiences.
 - Gaining practical experience in a real work environment.
 - Creating new friendships and experiencing different cultures.
 - Improving linguistic, social, and communication skills.
 - Establishing a network of professional relationships and communication across different countries.
 - Providing multiple options for students to choose the country and university that meets their ambitions.

2.4. Previous Studies

The topic of student exchange aimed at promoting cultural dialogue between higher education institutions is an underexplored area in Arab studies. Despite this, the researcher discovered a wealth of foreign studies on the subject. The researcher specifically concentrated on the outcomes of prior research concerning the effects of transculturation programs on students. The study's "**Student Movement between GCC Universities with Future Prospects in Light of Practical Experience (Bologna Process)**" (Al-Qahtani, 2012) objective was to identify the concepts of student mobility and the Bologna process, with a view to creating a preliminary understanding of the potential benefits for GCC universities. Employing a descriptive approach, the study concluded that implementing student mobility among GCC universities can harness the Bologna process to align with the region's context. Accordingly, the study introduced a proposition for student mobility within GCC universities, structured around two phases: the prerequisites

for student mobility and the student mobility phase itself. On the other hand, the study “**Determinants of Participating in Australian University Student Exchange Programs**” (Daly, 2011) aimed to investigate various factors influencing Australian students’ decisions to participate in the student exchange program. It also examined the reasons behind their choice of universities in specific countries. Additionally, the study explored the potential implications of expanding student participation in exchange programs on cultural identity, particularly for students from Asia and the Middle East pursuing their qualifications in Australia. The paper also sought to understand these students’ experiences with the cultural diversity of the host country. It identified several key factors that influenced students’ selection of destinations for their exchange programs. These factors encompassed **international contexts**, such as the growing demand for graduates with international competencies and the evolving perceptions driven by intercultural interactions and travel experiences both domestically and abroad. Within the **local context**, the Australian Government’s international education policy was instrumental in evaluating the advantages of international education for individuals and communities. Moreover, **institutional factors** such as organizational culture, commitment, exchange opportunities, selection mechanisms, and the host university’s culture were found to play pivotal roles. Finally, there are influential **personal factors** such as personal characteristics, cultural competencies, field of study, and language skills. The study revealed that personal factors and the international context had the most pronounced impact on students’ decisions to participate in transculturation programs.

In a study entitled “**Short-Term Study Abroad and Intercultural Sensitivity: A pilot study**” (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006) the researcher focused on measuring the development of cross-cultural relationships to assess the extent to which a short-term program, run by the faculty abroad, could influence relationships between multicultural students at universities in the US before traveling abroad and upon their return four weeks later to their respective universities. Preliminary results indicated that short-term programs could have a positive impact on overall development, removing any cross-cultural barriers while acknowledging individual differences.

While, the study “**Australian and New Zealand University Students’ Participation in International Exchange Programs**” (Daly & Barker, 2005) assessed several initiatives for student exchange programs, including preparing international curricula, attracting international students to the campus, and student exchange opportunities. As a methodological tool, a questionnaire was disseminated via email to staff members working at international exchange offices across 28 Australian universities and 5 offices within New Zealand universities. The study’s findings indicated that despite increased governmental emphasis on funding student exchange programs by expanding the number of agreements, the results revealed a low participation rate among Australian and New Zealand students, with only 1% of students engaged in student exchange programs during their academic

pursuits. The study suggested that the government consider setting a minimum participation target of 10% for student exchange fees and expenses to motivate students to integrate with other students in different universities. **“The Syndrome of the Boiled Frog:” Exploring International Students on US Campuses as Co-Cultural Group Members** (Urban & Orben, 2007) This study utilized intercultural theory to investigate how the attitudes of foreign students in American universities, as cultural outsiders, could impact their communication practices. Qualitative analysis was conducted on 62 responses from international students representing 30 countries. These students were guided to identify five topics related to their shared cultural status within and outside the classroom. The study noted that international students played a significant role in negotiating systems that influence changes in self-identity and cultural communication practices among them to overcome challenges tied to their circumstances outside their home countries. Also The study **“The Impact of Exchange Programs on the Integration of the Host Group into the Self-Concept”** (Sassenberg & Matschke, 2009) analyzed the impact of international exchange programs on the development of a student’s identity by comparing the students from the host university with those participating in exchange programs across various American universities. The study found that the concept of social identity and high commitment were less pronounced among the host group in comparison to future exchange students. The integration of the host group’s identity into the self-concept was measured against that of future students. The outcomes revealed a strong association between exchange students of the host group and those in the exchange program, with both groups displaying an equally robust connection to their self-concept. The last study was **“Evaluating the Impact of a North American Nursing Exchange Program on Student Cultural Awareness”** (Kuehn, Chircop, & Sheppard-LeMoine, 2011) Which adopted a descriptive approach to assess a five-year North American project facilitated by six partner universities in Canada, Mexico, and the US. The project aimed to enhance cultural awareness in nursing care delivery, devise innovative and effective educational strategies and curricula for nursing programs, and deepen understanding of healthcare systems and nurses’ roles in these countries. The findings underscored the necessity of teaching nursing through a cultural literacy lens, utilizing collaborative online courses involving participants from diverse universities. Furthermore, the exchange of programs between students and educational institutions in these three countries emerged as an effective strategy for elevating cultural awareness levels among nursing students.

3. Methodological Framework

3.1. Study Case

Transculturation among higher education institutions is a recent trend that has garnered attention from universities, particularly in light of the growing emphasis on cultural diversity and the importance of respecting identity as a foundation for international understanding. The University of Sharjah stands out as one of the

institutions that have embraced this trend, exemplified by its chosen institutional logo, which is the meeting point of civilizations. Additionally, the university's remarkable ability to attract students from approximately 100 different nationalities across various scientific and literary disciplines further exemplifies its commitment.

To actively promote the concept of cultural diversity, the university has entrusted the task of facilitating student exchanges between diverse cultures to the Career Advancement and Student Training Office. This office is responsible for implementing strategies that facilitate these exchanges, as outlined in the cooperative agreements and partnerships established between the University of Sharjah and various Arab and international universities. The University of Sharjah's affiliation with IAESTE presents exceptional prospects for students to engage in transculturation programs. These initiatives involve sending students from the university to diverse institutions worldwide, while also hosting students from various universities at the University of Sharjah.

In light of these considerations, the study topic can be formulated as follows: "Examining and analyzing the efficacy of the IAESTE website in advancing the concept of cultural diversity as a fundamental pillar within student exchange programs and determining its effectiveness in guiding university students towards enrolling in these programs and assisting them in selecting the most suitable options among the offerings available."

3.2. Importance of the Study

This study holds significant importance for higher education institutions, both within the UAE and specifically at the University of Sharjah. Its primary focus is to examine the effectiveness of electronic communication in transculturation programs for university students in advancing the understanding of cultural diversity, fostering cultural dialogue, and promoting understanding during its students' participation in IAESTE through its website.

3.3. Study Objective

- To comprehend the notion of cultural identity within higher education institutions and recognize universities' roles in dismantling barriers impeding intercultural dialogue among students within the same university.
- To identify international student exchange programs, their fundamental enrollment prerequisites, and the benefits they extend to participating students.
- To gain insight into the University of Sharjah's experiences with IAESTE, specifically regarding student exchanges with international universities.
- To explore the distinctive features provided by IAESTE to students enrolled in the program, concerning issues of identity and cultural diversity.

3.4. Study Methodology

The study employed a descriptive approach to fulfill its aforementioned objectives.

This approach is recognized as one of the methods that elucidate phenomena through available research topic sources. Furthermore, a content analysis methodology was utilized and involved a qualitative examination of the IAESTE website. This analysis aimed to evaluate the efficacy of this website in promoting the idea of cultural diversity within student exchange programs. The evaluation encompassed various indicators, including program features for students, photo albums, video files, opinions of students enrolled in IAESTE, and website interactions.

Additionally, the researcher incorporated in-depth interviews with the Director of the Career Advancement and Student Training Office at the University of Sharjah. The purpose of these interviews was to grasp the IAESTE's contribution to achieving its objectives, specifically in terms of advancing the concept of cultural diversity among participating students and assessing the effectiveness of the IAESTE website in attracting and enrolling University of Sharjah students in the program.

Conversely, the researcher employed a questionnaire as a tool for data collection. The questionnaire was administered to a random sample of students who participated in IAESTE during the academic year 2021-2022. The sample consisted of 100 individuals who were queried to fulfill the study's objectives.

3.5. Application

The researcher used two data collection tools: in-depth interviews and content analysis. The findings underwent qualitative analysis. Additionally, the questionnaire tool was utilized, and its outcomes were quantitatively examined to discern the primary factor influencing students' decision to enroll in the Student Transculturation Program (IAESTE). **The research approach is outlined as follows:**

1) In-depth interview with Mrs. Rana Qabbani, Director of the Career Advancement and Student Training Office: An in-depth interview was conducted to identify the role of the office in encouraging students at the University of Sharjah to participate in IAESTE. The interview was analyzed qualitatively to deduce students' motivation for engaging in the program and the impact of cultural diversity on their decisions. The results of the interview yielded the following conclusions:

a) Enrollment in IAESTE has witnessed a gradual increase from 2002 to 2019 (see appendix).

b) Students have the autonomy to select their desired country for IAESTE. The Career Advancement and Student Training Office suggests universities in the chosen country and provides optimal offers. Prominent choices among University of Sharjah students include Egypt, Libya, Palestine, India, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iraq, Sudan, Pakistan, Yemen, the Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon, and the United States of America.

c) Cultural diversity among nationalities did not hinder the enrollment of University of Sharjah students of all disciplines at various universities. Instead, it

contributed significantly to their personal growth, particularly in aspects such as behavior, embracing interaction with other students irrespective of race nationality, or language, self-skill development, and enhanced academic performance post-program completion.

d) In accordance with IAESTE's objectives, University of Sharjah students enrolled in IAESTE were able to translate these goals significantly, especially in the following terms, as the program successfully achieved the following goals for students:

- Promote understanding, international relations, cooperation, and trust between students, academic institutions, employers, and society.
- Work as part of a practical training exchange program among the organization's members to support technical and professional development.
- Collaborate regardless of factors like race, color, culture, gender, religious and political beliefs, and disability.
- Attain cultural enrichment for participants and their host communities.
- Equip students with technical expertise relevant to their field of study.
- Notable personal achievements for students following their experience with IAESTE include:
 - Strengthening their resumes and emphasizing their work experiences to potential employers.
 - Enhancing language proficiency, social skills, and cross-cultural communication.
 - Establishing communication channels with peers at host universities to exchange experiences and ideas.

2) Analysis of the content of IAETSE website:

The researcher analyzed the IAETSE website to identify interactive links available on the website that pertain to the concept of cultural diversity, which affects the students' decision to participate in the student transculturation program. The indicators used to evaluate the concept of cultural diversity were categorized by analyzing the following links:

Results of the IAESTE website content analysis, as shown in **Table 1**.

a) Website Language: The website exclusively employs the English language, chosen as a universal language in higher education institutions.

b) Multimedia links:

- **Images:** The website prominently features images across various electronic links. It is evident that IAESTE regards images as significant tools for illustrating equality between all nationalities within the context of the student transculturation program. These images highlight the interaction and homogeneity among students, regardless of differences in gender, race, and color. This was evident in all images used on the website.
- **Videos:** A series of video files are uploaded to showcase students' experiences in the exchange program. Through these videos, students express their emotions and interactions with peers from host universities, detailing the

experiences they've gained.

- **Social Media:** The website provides access to all its social media accounts, fostering diverse forms of digital communication among students across global universities who are enrolled in the student transculturation program.

c) Text Links: Textual content that embodies the concept of cultural diversity is present within the following electronic links:

- **“About” and IAESTE Goals:** 1) promoting understanding, international relations, cooperation, and trust among students, academic institutions, and employers; and 2) working without regard to race, color, culture, gender, religion, political beliefs, or disability.
- **“Students” and Program Features:** 1) forming new friendships and experiencing integration with various cultures; 2) improving language and social skills and connecting with different cultures; and 3) establishing communication channels with **students** from host universities to exchange experiences and engage in dialogue.
- **“Testimonials:”** Work, experience, discover: Comments from students who participated in the student transculturation program, emphasizing the program's positive impact in overcoming cultural barriers and gaining enriching experiences. **For instance:**
 - I have cultivated strong friendships with individuals from over 15 countries, gaining extensive experience in working within a university laboratory, overcoming challenges, and adapting to diverse cultures and languages.
 - As an engineering student in Tunisia, summer training was a mandatory course. Opting for IAESTE training led me to Rongheng Information Technology Ltd. in Shanghai, China. Initially, I felt apprehensive due to the professional challenges, as well as challenges in terms of culture and tradition, in the company I worked for. As there were only a few English-speaking employees, they took the initiative to clarify and translate all the information essential for our tasks. They extended their support owing to the language barrier stemming from cultural differences and eventually became lifelong friends.
 - I'm a mechanical engineering student from China currently studying at Harbin Institute of Technology. During the summer of 2016, I interned at IAESTE at the Institute for Dynamic and Vibration Research at Leibniz University, Germany. Training at IAESTE, I forged great memories. I worked with a supervisor who exhibited remarkable understanding and support. Throughout my stay in Germany, the IAESTE committee proved exceedingly accommodating, arranging weekend activities that allowed me to bond with friends hailing from diverse corners of the globe. Together, we forged indelible memories. Moreover, I had the opportunity to journey to the Netherlands and Belgium, affording me valuable insights into European culture.

- **Feedback:** The website incorporates a designated section at the bottom, allowing users to send inquiries via email regarding various IAESTE-related topics, ensuring prompt responses to all emails received through the website.

Table 1. Analysis of the content of IAETSE Website.

Site Language	Multimedia links			Text links		Feedback links (Site Interaction)
	Images	Videos	Social media	IAESTE objectives	Program features	
English only	All website links	Precious experiences	At the bottom of the Home page	On Home page about	under students	Contact us

4. Results of the Study Sample's Responses to the Questionnaire Questions

The questionnaire was distributed via email to a selection of students who participated in the student transculturation program (IAESTE) during the academic year 2021-2022, in collaboration with international universities to gather their opinions and experiences regarding the program, as well as to assess the program's impact on their sense of identity and cultural diversity. The obtained questionnaire results are outlined below:

4.1. General Data Questions

1) Age:

The following table shows the age distribution within the study sample. It indicates that the students' ages ranged between 20 and 26 years. This distribution suggests that the sample primarily consisted of students in an advanced stage of their studies, possessing substantial familiarity with the transculturation program (IAESTE) and its enrollment procedures, see **Table 2**.

Table 2. The age of the study sample.

20 Years	14%
21 Years	31%
22 Years	14%
23 Years	21%
24 Years	10%
25 Years	7%
26 Years	3%

2) Nationality:

Table 3 shows the diversity of nationalities within the study sample that participated in the IAESTE program, spanning various countries including Palestine,

Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Canada, and India. It is an indication of the diversity of the nationalities of the students enrolled in the IAETSE program as an international program that attracts different nationalities.

Table 3. The nationality of the study sample.

Palestine	7%
Iraq	21%
Syria	17%
Sudan	10%
Jordan	21%
Libya	3%
UAE	3%
Egypt	7%
Canada	7%
India	3%

3) Training Entities:

Table 4 shows the diversity of universities for the sample members who participated in the questionnaire. The University of Sharjah holds the highest representation at 88%, followed by the American University of Sharjah, Heriot-Watt University, and Khalifa University, each accounting for 4%.

Table 4. Training entities for the study sample.

UOS	88%
AUS	4%
Heriot-Watt University	4%
Khalifa University	4%

4) Faculty:

Table 5 shows the diverse academic specializations of the study sample. The Faculty of Engineering constitutes the majority at 77%, followed by the Faculty of Science at 15%, business management, and arts and design specializations both at 4%. These findings underscore the range of majors among students enrolled in the IAESTE program, spanning scientific and applied specializations.

5) Sub-specialization:

The specializations of the sub-study sample varied based on their affiliations with different colleges. **Table 6** presents data indicating that the study sample primarily comprised students from scientific colleges, particularly engineering,

spanning various specializations. The researcher interprets this outcome as stemming from the students' inclination in scientific colleges toward practical training in scientific institutions to enhance and refine their skills, given that these colleges encompass numerous subjects reliant on hands-on application.

Table 5. The faculty of the study sample.

Engineering	77%
Sciences	15%
Business Administration	4%
Fine Arts and Design	4%

Table 6. The specializations of the sub-study sample varied based on their colleges.

Architectural Engineering	15%
Civil Engineering	15%
Computer Engineering	8%
Computer Science	12%
Electrical & Electronics Engineering	4%
Electrical Engineering	8%
Industrial Engineering	8%
Mechanical Engineering	4%
SREE	4%
Sustainable and Renewable	12%
Biotechnology	4%
Finance	4%
Interior Architecture	4%

6) Academic year:

The following **Table 7** shows that a majority (77%) of the study sample belonged to the advanced phase of the baccalaureate program, with the remaining 15% in the foundation stage and the lowest percentage (8%) representing Master's program students. This suggests that the training and exchange program caters primarily to students in the advanced stages of the baccalaureate program. These students have already completed several specialized subjects within their major, after which they can start the training phase within an academic setting, either within or outside the university.

7) Countries to whose universities participants have enrolled:

Table 8 shows that 23% of the study sample chose Türkiye as their destination

for university enrollment, followed by Switzerland and Macedonia at 12% each. Germany and Serbia were selected by 8% of the participants. Other countries, including Romania, Bosnia, and Spain, were also chosen. The study sample's choice of countries like Türkiye, Macedonia, and Switzerland to enroll in the transculturation and training program is because they offer specialized universities associated with the field of their respective colleges and sub-specializations, enhancing the benefits of enrolling in the program.

Table 7. The academic year for the study sample.

Junior	15%
Senior	77%
Master	8%

Table 8. Countries to whose universities participants have enrolled for study sample.

Türkiye	23%
Romania	4%
Serbia	8%
Bosnia	4%
Malta	4%
Belgium	4%
Switzerland	12%
UAE	4%
Spain	4%
Germany	8%
Cyprus	4%
China	4%
Brazil	4%
Macedonia	12%
Egypt	4%

8) Duration of enrollment in the training program:

Table 9 outlines the duration of the student transculturation program (IAESTE) attended by the study sample at various universities. The majority, 48% of participants, attended the program for eight weeks, while 15% attended the program for four weeks. The researcher deems that this is based on the nature of the training program for each specialization, as each requires a specific duration for the student to make the most of it in all practical and hands-on aspects.

Table 9. The duration of the study sample transculturation program (IAESTE).

4 Weeks	15%
40 Days	7%
7 Weeks	4%
8 Weeks	48%
9 Weeks	4%
10 Weeks	7%
12 Weeks	11%
1 Year	4%

4.2. Objectives of the Transculturation Program (IAESTE)

This section of the questionnaire aimed to evaluate the extent to which the study sample benefited from the student transculturation program (IAESTE) in alignment with the program's objectives. The researcher selected a set of objectives and requested the study sample to assess their achievement levels. The outcomes are as follows:

1) Promoting understanding, international relations, cooperation, and trust among students, academic institutions, employers, and society:

The following **Table 10** shows that 72% of the study sample confirmed that the student transculturation program achieved the goal of enhancing understanding, international relations, cooperation, and trust between students, academic institutions, the training environment, and society. This is an indication that the program has helped to achieve synergy between the educational institution, the student, and the community as an integrated cycle, each complementing the other to achieve the student's self-confidence and ability to develop their skills.

Table 10. The first goal that was achieved when joining the (IAESTE) program.

Strongly Agree	72%
Agree	21%
Neutral	3%
Disagree	0
Strongly Disagree	3%

2) Working within a practical training exchange program among IAESTE's members to support technical and professional development:

Table 11 shows an important aspect of the student exchange between universities related to the development of technical and vocational skills of those enrolled in the program. In fact, 55% of the study sample confirmed the achievement of the IAESTE program for this goal, while none indicated a lack of achievement.

Table 11. The second goal that was achieved when joining the (IAESTE) program.

Strongly Agree	55%
Agree	31%
Neutral	14%
Disagree	0
Strongly Disagree	0

3) Working regardless of race, color, culture, gender, or religious and political beliefs:

The following **Table 12** shows an important aspect related to communication between individuals within culturally, religiously, and ideologically diverse environments. About 63% of the study sample confirmed that the student exchange program facilitated seamless and flexible interactions without hindrances related to race, color, culture, gender, religion, or political beliefs before enrolled students. This inclusivity is crucial due to the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, whether local or international. Positive academic and social interactions were achieved, with only 3% indicating that this objective was not fully met.

Table 12. The third goal that was achieved when joining the (IAESTE) program.

Strongly Agree	63%
Agree	28%
Neutral	3%
Disagree	3%
Strongly Disagree	3%

4) Providing training by qualified and experienced employees:

Table 13 shows that the study sample confirmed with a weight of 69% that those who provided training in the work environment were highly qualified and experienced employees and that their training was fully supervised. Only 3% of the study sample indicated disagreement with the assertion that the training was conducted by experienced employees.

Table 13. The fourth goal that was achieved when joining the (IAESTE) program.

Strongly Agree	69%
Agree	21%
Neutral	7%
Disagree	3%
Strongly Disagree	0

5) IAESTE is a source of cultural enrichment for trainees and host communities:

The majority, 67%, of the study sample strongly expressed that the work environment in the institution in which they enrolled was characterized by cultural enrichment stemming from the diversity among enrolled students in the program and the various aspects of communication that facilitated the exchange of experiences. Only 4% of the sample confirmed that this objective was not strongly achieved, see **Table 14**.

Table 14. The fifth goal that was achieved when joining the (IAESTE) program.

Strongly Agree	67%
Agree	29%
Neutral	0
Disagree	0
Strongly Disagree	4%

6) Providing students with technical expertise related to their study:

A significant 59% of the study sample strongly affirmed their agreement that the student transculturation program (IAESTE) significantly enhanced enrolled students' technical expertise related to their studies during their training period. This is necessary because the program focuses on the training aspects of students in terms of practical practice rather than theoretical aspects, which develops their skill levels. Additionally, 7% of the sample maintained a neutral stance on this aspect, which are shown in **Table 15**.

Table 15. The sixth goal that was achieved when joining the (IAESTE) program.

Strongly Agree	59%
Agree	34%
Neutral	%
Disagree	0
Strongly Disagree	0

4.3. Advantages of the Transculturation Exchange Program (IAESTE)

This section includes the sample study's identification of the advantages they perceive from enrolling in the IAESTE program. The results were as follows.

Table 16 shows that a large percentage of the study sample regarded enrollment in the IAESTE program as crucial for enhancing their resumes and highlighting their experiences for prospective employers post-graduation, accounting for 73% of the total study sample. This holds particular importance from the researcher's

perspective, as enhancing a student's resume during their studies aids in securing a job suited to their capabilities upon graduation. The significance of living and working in another country, forming new friendships, and experiencing diverse cultures followed in second place, capturing 63% of the responses. The study sample found that the act of residing in another country, engaging in training, and fostering friendships across various cultures, contributes to their skill and ability development. Furthermore, 43% believed that the training program helps enhance their language and social skills, fostering connections with others. Meanwhile, 40% stated that practical experience within a real work environment, coupled with the establishment of international professional contacts and networks, constitutes a pivotal facet of the training and transculturation program as it not only facilitates communication with their trainers but also cultivates friendships with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Only 3% of the study sample confirmed that the diversity and the availability of over 80 countries to choose from are an advantage for them to join the IAESTE program. According to the researcher, this relatively low percentage can be attributed to the fact that the student has sufficient information about the country and place he wishes to enroll in for training. Such insights are often obtained from prior students who have participated in the program.

Table 16. Advantages of the transculturation exchange (IAESTE) program.

Strengthening your resume and making your experience stand out to employers	73%
Working and living abroad	63%
Practical experience in a real workplace	40%
Forming new friendships and experiences with different cultures	63%
Improving communication, social, and language skills	43%
Forming international professional networks and connections	40%
Over 80 participating countries from which to choose	3%
Benefiting from the Organization's experience in student training	13%

- **Field Study Results:**

After analyzing the results of the field study on the questionnaire tool, the researcher arrived at a set of findings outlined as follows:

1) Students from the University of Sharjah displayed a strong interest in enrolling in the IAESTE program instead of other universities in the country. The diverse nationalities of students enrolled in the training program, and the age range of these students varied between 22 and 26.

2) Students from the College of Engineering, spanning various specializations, showed a notable inclination towards the IAESTE program due to its practical orientation. The program necessitates hands-on application of theoretical concepts. Additionally, the majority of the sampled students were at an advanced academic

level (third and fourth years).

3) An important finding is the diversity of the countries chosen by the study sample for training in their institutions, according to their academic and sub-specialization, which requires the selection of specific institutions that provide them with appropriate training for the refinement of their skills and abilities. It is also linked to the specific training period that the study sample underwent in the chosen country.

4) The study sample affirmed the achievement of the program's objectives to a significant extent, particularly in fostering mutual understanding, international cooperation, and trust among students, academic institutions, the training environment, and society. The researcher observed that the study's objectives were intertwined with cross-cultural interactions among students, transcending factors like gender, race, nationality, and religion through a meeting point represented in transculturation between students.

5) The study sample confirmed that one of IAESTE's most important advantages is enhancing their resumes and highlighting the experience they gained to post-graduation employment prospects. Furthermore, travel emerged as a means to enrich experiences, forge professional connections, and derive benefits from diverse cultural settings.

• **Based on the outcomes of the field study, the researcher identified several significant findings:**

1) The University of Sharjah is considered a healthy training educational environment to attract students of different nationalities to study in its scientific and literary faculties.

2) The student transculturation program (IAESTE) contributes to nurturing a sense of unity among students, transcending gender, nationality, and race.

3) The University of Sharjah students place trust in the IAESTE program to bolster their academic knowledge through practical applications.

4) The duration of IAESTE programs is suitable for surmounting challenges related to varying nationalities among students, facilitating harmony among them.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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