

International Fully Integrated Virtual Exchange (I-FIVE) as an Innovative and Inclusive Alternative to Study Abroad for College Business Students

Keith H. Sakuda¹, Stephen A. Zurcher²

¹University of Hawaii – West Oahu, USA

²Kansai Gaidai University, Japan

Abstract

International study abroad is an ideal means to develop 21st century workplace skills such as intercultural competence, foreign languages, and the ability to work collaboratively in diverse teams, but minority, first-generation, and socioeconomically challenged students have been historically underrepresented in college study abroad programs. Others, such as non-traditional, working-professional, and family-caretaker students face obstacles that make international travel unrealistic, preventing participation in study abroad. International fully integrated virtual exchange (I-FIVE) is an alternative to traditional study abroad which leverages distance learning technologies to merge classes in different countries into a semester-long sustained intercultural learning experience. Unlike other forms of virtual exchange, classes are fully integrated in terms of assignments, meeting times, and groupwork with faculty cooperatively team-teaching lessons. This paper discusses the ongoing efforts at Kansai Gaidai University and the University of Hawaii – West Oahu to create a more inclusive version of study abroad through I-FIVE for business students in Hawaii and Japan.

1. Introduction

Since the spring semester of 2020, Kansai Gaidai University (KGU) and the University of Hawaii - West Oahu (UHWO) have engaged in international fully integrated virtual exchange (I-FIVE) to create an online study abroad experience for students in Hawaii and Japan. Using both asynchronous (on-demand video lectures) and synchronous (required Zoom sessions) instruction in a team-teaching format, an international virtual classroom is created for a semester-long shared learning experience. Initiated before the COVID pandemic, the pilot project was intended to explore the usefulness of virtual exchange as an alternative to traditional study abroad. However, the success of the project along with the global shift towards online teaching brought on by the pandemic encouraged both institutions to continue I-FIVE despite the return of in-person

instruction and study abroad.

Unlike other forms of virtual exchange, I-FIVE merges geographically distant classes for a semester of integrated assignments, lessons, and groupwork. To the fullest extent possible, students from around the world learn together in a virtual classroom without the administrative or logistical challenges of enrolling at another institution. To date, all I-FIVE courses have been taught by business management faculty, though students from multiple academic disciplines have participated in the classes.

As of Fall 2023, the partnership has taught three different business courses, including four semester of global business political risk (management department), three semesters of organizational behavior (management department), and one semester of Asian Economies, Business, and Consumers (cross-listed between history, economics, and marketing, taught by management faculty). Students from multiple countries have participated in I-FIVE, but most participants have been from Hawaii (U.S.) and Japan. Almost all students from Hawaii have been business students, while the students from Japan have come from various academic disciplines.

2. Background of Partner Institutions

The KGU – UHWO partnership brings together two very different institutions with strikingly different student populations. For KGU the purpose of the partnership is to prepare their students for future in-person study abroad. For UHWO, the purpose is to provide greater internationalization for students who were either unable or unwilling to study outside of Hawaii.

KGU, also known as Kansai Foreign Studies University, is a pioneer of study abroad programs in Japan. Located in the Kansai region of central Japan (Osaka Prefecture), KGU's enrollment is about 12,000 students. Its primary focus is foreign language and international studies, and it consistently ranks as one of the top universities in Japan for outbound study abroad and international transfer students. Each year about 750 international student study on its campus, most of which are enrolled in

the Asian Studies Program (ASP) for semester- or year-long study abroad. ASP students are recruited from KGU's network of over 393 affiliated institutions across 55 countries and regions. Like most Japanese universities, almost all domestic undergraduate students are recruited directly out of Japanese high schools. Unlike other Japanese universities, almost all students participate in at least one semester of study abroad.

Although KGU offers a program in global business through its School of International Professional Development, students selected for I-FIVE are recruited from across all university majors and areas of study. Most students are in their sophomore year and are planning on participating in upcoming study abroad programs.

UHWO is a 4-year public baccalaureate college of about 3,000 students located in the city of Kapolei in Honolulu County of Hawaii. It is an indigenous- and minority-serving institution based in Native Hawaiian culture and values which champions diversity and underserved communities. It is known for its high level of diversity among faculty and students and was ranked by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as having the most diverse faculty and staff among 4-year public universities in the U.S. [1]. Its student population is also highly diverse and multicultural, with a significant number of non-traditional and working professional students. Despite its multicultural student population and location in the Asia-Pacific region, UHWO lacks formal international programs. As of Spring 2023, no UHWO students participated in any formal study abroad program through the university.

Almost all UHWO students participating in I-FIVE are from the university's Division of Business Administration, with the majority from the business management concentration of study. Students self-select into the I-FIVE course during the university's course registration period. Most students are in their junior or senior year.

2. Literature Review

Studying abroad is an excellent way for students to develop intercultural skills and competencies. An estimated 16% of all U.S. undergraduate students participate in international study abroad [2], but minority students and first-generation college students are greatly underrepresented, reflecting a lack of accessibility for students with exceptional needs [3]. Virtual mobility (VM), taking online classes at a foreign university, and virtual exchange, the use of distance learning technologies to engage geographically distant students, are two ways colleges have sought to offer international experiences to students unable or unwilling to travel. These virtual alternatives to in-person study abroad can help overcome obstacles such as geographical

location, attendance status (part-time), employment status (working professional), financial hardships (financial aid), and family obligations (single parent or family caretaker) for students who have historically been underrepresented in study abroad programs.

One of the most well-respected models of virtual exchange is collaborative online international learning (COIL). Developed and championed by the State University of New York (SUNY) COIL Center, COIL has been promoted as an innovative and scalable approach to international learning which can offer an intercultural experience without the need for travel [4,5]. Combining online instruction's ability to promote quality learning with international faculty and students to promote intercultural contact [6,7], COIL seeks to provide a cost-effective alternative to in-person study abroad. Focusing on the three components of pedagogy, intercultural learning, and technology [8], COIL often leverages technology students are familiar with to minimize costs while maximizing students' ability to easily communicate with their international classmates.

Universities can capitalize on the highly flexible, cost-effective, and scalable solutions offered by distance technologies to promote greater access to international and intercultural learning experiences. Virtual exchange and COIL were also solutions for universities that were forced to shut down in-person study abroad programs due to the COVID outbreak. The American Council on Education (ACE) even identified VM/COIL as essential responses to the COVID pandemic and as the future of international exchanges [9].

3. International Fully Integrated Virtual Exchange (I-FIVE)

I-FIVE was initially proposed to encourage students to engage in more international experiences at UHWO, at that time an institution with no formal international programs. It was hoped that the concept of online study abroad would offer students who were unable to travel a chance to experience some of the benefits of studying abroad. Unfortunately, the project ended when the university shifted away from its early-stage internationalization plan. Several years later the proposal was revived as an informal experiment with KGU. Tapping into KGU's vast international resources and leveraging UHWO's distance education capabilities, the first I-FIVE course was launched in Spring 2020 with students from Hawaii, Japan, and several other countries. Subsequent I-FIVE and other virtual exchange projects have included students from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Because the development of I-FIVE has been a voluntary endeavor requiring no additional resources for either university, the faculty have been granted a

significant amount of flexibility and freedom. Both faculty members received training from ACE on COIL techniques to help shape their approach to virtual exchange, and both are certified in case teaching methods. Based on formal and informal student feedback, new activities and assignments, such as computer simulations, case study seminars, ice-breaker activities, and student peer evaluations of assignments have been added to the course to encourage more interaction among students.

I-FIVE is like other forms of virtual exchange in its emphasis on fostering international exchanges using distance learning technologies, but it is not intended to replace or compete with other models, such as COIL. Because it can only be implemented on occasions when curriculum and campus logistics allow for the full integration of classes, I-FIVE is limited in its application and ability to scale.

The primary benefit of I-FIVE appears to be offering students a more sustained and immersive cross-cultural experience, but more investigation is needed to determine whether the added complexity is worth the perceived benefit.

3.1. International

As the first “I” in the acronym of I-FIVE, international is an essential component of the model. Many models of virtual exchange assume an international aspect to the collaboration, but that assumption fails to recognize that geographically separated participants in a virtual exchange program may still share the same citizenship or even be in the same country. Other models specifically stipulate that their virtual exchange is about cross-cultural or intercultural exchange, which can occur without the program crossing borders or involving participants from other countries. However, I-FIVE was specifically conceived as an alternative for in-person international study abroad programs. As a result, it is essential that an international component be included in I-FIVE.

The KGU – UHWO partnership has always been an exchange between students physically located in Japan and the U.S., though at times students from other countries have participated while enrolled at one of the partner institutions. Colombia, Mexico, Morocco, Taiwan, and the Philippines have been represented by I-FIVE students. In addition, the I-FIVE course has been run parallel with an international online course through KGU with students located in Latvia, Morocco, Switzerland, and Turkey. Although not enrolled with the I-FIVE students, the concurrent courses shared resources and instructors, and participated in joint sessions for special classes via Zoom.

3.2. Integrated (fully)

Most virtual exchange methods involve modules, while I-FIVE classes are fully integrated in terms of assignments, class meetings, and groupwork. COIL is an excellent model of virtual exchange, and the SUNY COIL Lab should be recognized for their pioneering work in establishing its standards and protocols. However, most COIL efforts are projected-based and modular. The ability to add a multi-week COIL module to a course allows for greater flexibility in adding internationalization to existing curriculum and has likely facilitated COIL’s adoption by many institutions. Faculty engaged in COIL must collaborate, but the level of cooperation is less than preparing an entire semester of integration. The difficulty of full integration in I-FIVE in terms of both curriculum and logistics, such as semester scheduling, time zones, and ordering of textbooks and materials, significantly limits the number of institutions which can implement I-FIVE. Countries with greater cultural distance and institutions with different academic priorities are also likely to experience greater challenges with full integration.

The I-FIVE partnership between KGU-UHWO benefits from several unique characteristics of the two institutions to facilitate full integration. Although physically separated by over 6,000 kilometers and 19 time zones, the effective time difference is only five hours due to the international date line. The partnership also benefits from a lack of daylight savings time changes, which avoids the logistical challenge of having the class times shift an hour mid-semester. KGU is also one of the few Japanese universities with an academic calendar aligned with the western calendar, allowing the two campuses to have up to 13 joint sessions per 15-week semester. Lastly, the I-FIVE faculty members have taught at both institutions, granting significant familiarity with the workings of each institution.

The use of a common learning management system is essential for integration across the two campuses. The use of the University of Hawaii’s proprietary *Laulima* learning management system offers a common forum where video lessons, assignments, exams and quizzes, and other learning resources can be accessed by the students. Another useful tool for integration has been the use of both the full and abridged or “essential” versions of the textbooks. UHWO students use the standard or full textbook provided by the publisher, while the KGU students use the abridged/essentials versions of the same textbook, when available. The shortened form of the readings can help compensate for the KGU students’ less developed English reading skills.

3.3. Interactive

Students regularly interact in small group discussions, activities, and team projects to create a more immersive learning experience. The goal of virtual exchange should be to maximize the amount of interchange between students of different cultures. However, simply being in a culturally diverse classroom, whether virtual or in-person, does not mean students will engage in meaningful exchange. I-FIVE classes must have multiple opportunities for students to share their learning with each other through multiple channels. Cultural exchange does not need to be the focus of all activities and discussions, though some level of guided cross-cultural activity is important to encourage dialogue related to internationalization.

A typical I-FIVE class at KGU-UHWO includes a minimum of two team projects, but most interactions come from activities and breakout room discussions during synchronous sessions. Classes are structured to meet via Zoom once a week with students required to watch asynchronous video presentations prior to attending the Zoom session. Most weeks, the asynchronous videos take the place of classroom lectures, allowing the Zoom sessions to focus more on activities and discussions. Zoom sessions are also used for student presentations, often in a seminar-style format, to encourage student-led discussions and dialogue. Breakout rooms have been found to be a useful tool for encouraging engagement from more introverted students, as many students have reported a higher degree of comfort with small group discussions. More recently team-based computer simulations by providers such as Harvard Business Publishing have been used as an activity to engage students in group decision-making.

One particularly useful activity for generating interaction among students has been the use of current news events. Each Zoom session opens with a 15–20-minute discussion of world news events. Students are asked to share a recent news event that has a connection to course content or the U.S., Japan, or Hawaii. The discussion of current events often segues into a conversation about cross-cultural differences between the two countries or other conversations related to the U.S. or Japan. For example, recent mass shootings in the U.S. have offered classes an opportunity to discuss cultural differences in attitudes towards firearms and national gun control legislation. Many students have commented that these discussions are the most memorable part of the course. More importantly, they keep students engaged in discussions that are relevant to their interests and learning, particularly for students who intend to study or travel abroad to other countries.

3.4. Intercultural

Cultural awareness goes beyond cross-national comparisons to recognize and value the ethnic and multicultural identities of students for true intercultural learning. Most formal international exchange programs in higher education use a cross-national approach to internationalization. For example, students from a university in country A interact with students from a university in country B, creating an opportunity for students to compare the national cultures of country A and country B. Although a classroom may have additional cultural diversity based on the inherent demographics of students and faculty, the emphasis of these cultural exchanges is on the nation of origin of each university.

I-FIVE takes a different approach in terms of acknowledging the natural diversity of the classrooms. While students are first recognized by the nationality of their institution, for example American or Japanese, individual ethnic identities are emphasized to promote awareness of a multicultural classroom. A measure of forced interactions among cultural grouping is also imposed to ensure project teams and discussion groups have a good mix of students from different ethnic backgrounds.

UHWO is one of the most ethnically diverse public universities in the U.S. in terms of both student and faculty diversity. As an indigenous-serving institution rooted in Native Hawaiian values, the campus has always sought to recognize and appreciate the importance of ethnic identity. In contrast, KGU students are almost exclusively Japanese, creating a juxtaposition to the ethnic multiculturalism of UHWO. The stark difference from the cultural homogeneity of their Japan campus teaches an immediate lesson in diversity and challenges any preconceived notions about the demographics of a U.S. classroom. Students quickly learn that diversity extends well beyond the national identities of U.S. and Japan.

While it can be argued that the unique nature of UHWO allows for an intercultural, as opposed to international, focus for virtual exchange, it is important to recognize that many college classrooms possess a hidden measure of interculturalism or multicultural diversity. Diversity, equity, and inclusion programs have made university campuses much more diverse, and a growing number of students possess intrinsic multiculturalism through either their heritage, international travel, or having lived in different countries or cultures (particularly military students and dependents). Recognizing and appreciating diversity beyond national identities in the classroom allows for a richer cultural experience which better reflects the changing demographics of the world.

3.5. Inclusive

Awareness and appreciation for diversity in age, socioeconomic status, marital status, sexual orientation, and other categories is promoted to create an inclusive learning space accessible to those unable to participate in traditional study abroad. The movement in the U.S. to improve access to higher education has not equated to improved access to all aspects of higher education. While efforts are being made to make study abroad more inclusive to traditionally underrepresented populations, the reality is some students are just not able to travel while enrolled in college. Professional or work obligations, family commitments, and a host of other challenges are obstacles many students cannot overcome, forcing them to abandon their desires to study abroad. Because of the underrepresentation in outbound study abroad programs, universities which host inbound study abroad students do not receive a mix of students which properly reflects the true demographic nature of a university's population. By using distance learning and virtual tools, I-FIVE can overcome many of the restrictions which limit access to traditional study abroad to create an international classroom which better reflects the true demographics of a university. By bringing together students from more diverse backgrounds, I-FIVE can move beyond cultural diversity to better reflect the true demographics of society.

UHWO has a significant number of non-traditional students, including senior citizens, called *kupuna* in Hawaiian, and students with children. Students at KGU, like most Japanese universities, enroll straight out of high school, and parenthood as a student is non-existent. Feedback from Japanese students consistently cites an appreciation for the opportunity to work with non-traditional students, with many mentioning working with older students and students with children as most significant learning moments of their I-FIVE experience.

It was a great experience that I could study with Hawaii students. It was interesting that there were older students like some of them are even a grandpa, which I haven't taken classes within Japan.

– KGU Student, Spring 2023

KGU students' appreciation for diversity beyond cultural diversity was recognized early in the I-FIVE program. Since then, efforts have been made to include topics such as age discrimination, LGBTQ rights, and role juggling for working parents in the curriculum when relevant.

4. Evaluating I-FIVE

Despite the challenges of navigating language

differences, time zones, and groupwork with classmates thousands of miles away, early-stage research suggests that student learning outcomes for academic content in I-FIVE classes are equivalent to other teaching modalities, including in-person and online asynchronous [10]. However, the most important feedback in terms of evaluating I-FIVE has come from the qualitative feedback.

“This class has opened my eyes in many different ways. To be working with students from KGU was an awesome experience. I have grown in a way that I need to see things through other people's eyes rather than just my own. Seeing how different cultures react to certain things made me see that we are similar in many ways, but we all hold different values.”

– UHWO Student, Fall 2022

I-FIVE students have also been assessed for intercultural sensitivity development using psychometric instruments specifically designed for Japanese studying overseas [11, 12]. Early-stage data suggests that students in I-FIVE classes develop equal if not higher levels of intercultural sensitivity than those who take in-person classes with international students [13]. I-FIVE is more difficult for both students and instructors, but student feedback has been consistently positive. The comment above from a UHWO I-FIVE student reflects why they believe I-FIVE improves their learning outcomes and experiences.

5. Conclusion

I-FIVE offers a cost-effective means to expand international exchange to students who have historically been underrepresented in traditional study abroad experiences. Although they may not have the benefits of living overseas, the opportunity for semester-long sustained intercultural experiences offered by I-FIVE introduces students to new and culturally unfamiliar perspectives that are invaluable for developing skills and talent for an increasingly diverse workplace. Studying and working with classmates who are geographically distanced also helps students learn to overcome the social distance imposed by technology-enabled work environments such as telecommuting, remote-work, and virtual teams. By combining international and virtual, I-FIVE prepares students to be successful in the 21st century workplace.

Despite the success of the KGU-UHWO I-FIVE partnership, it must be recognized that it lacks the scalability of other versions of virtual exchange. Only the unique circumstances of similar academic calendars, cross-campus familiarity of instructional faculty, and the generous flexibility granted by both administrations allowed the KGU-UHWO

partnership to develop. Most universities will not be able to provide such an academic environment to allow for I-FIVE, but for those who are able to institute the practice, the benefits can be tremendous.

6. References

[1] Chronicle of Higher Education (2019 August 18). Colleges with the greatest racial and ethnic diversity among faculty members, Fall 2017. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-with-the-greatest-racial-and-ethnic-diversity-among-students-fall-2017/> (Access Date: 2 March 2023)

[2] Redden, E. (2019 November 18). Study abroad numbers continue steady increase. Inside Higher Education. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/11/18/open-doors-data-show-continued-increase-numbers-americans-studying-abroad> (Access Date: 15 March 2023).

[3] NAFSA: Association of International Educators (2021) Trends in U.S. study abroad. <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/trends-us-study-abroad>. (Access Date: 23 March 2023).

[4] Vahed, A., and Rodriguez, K. (2020). Enriching students' engaged learning experiences through the collaborative online international learning project. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 1–10.

[5] Nava-Aguirre, K. M., Garcia-Portillo, B. I., and Lopez-Morales, J. S. (2019). Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): An innovative strategy for experiential learning and internationalization at home. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Learning and Teaching International Business and Management* (pp. 721–746). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

[6] Lo, C., Johnson, E., and Tenorio, K. (2011). Promoting student learning by having college students participate in an online environment. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(2), 1-15.

[7] Bai, J., Larimer, S., and Riner, M. (2016). Cross-cultural pedagogy: Practical strategies for a successful interprofessional study abroad course. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 16, 72-81.

[8] Asojo, A. O., Kartoshkina, Y., Amole, D., and Babatunde, J. (2019). Multicultural learning and experiences in design through the collaborative online international learning (COIL) framework. *Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology*, 8(1), 5 – 16.

[9] American Council on Education (2020). Rapid response virtual exchange/COIL transformation lab: U.S. Japan. <https://www.acenet.edu/Programs-Services/Pages/Professional-Learning/Rapid-Response-Virtual-Exchange-COIL-Transformation-Lab-US-Japan.aspx> (Access Date: 17 March 2023).

[10] Sakuda, K. H. and Zurcher, S. A. (2021). Addressing Institutional Weakness through a COIL Partnership: A Case Study of Fully Integrated Semester-Long COIL

Courses. Proceedings of the International Virtual Exchange Conference. October 27 – 29, 2021.

[11] Bhawuk, D. P. S., and Sakuda, K. H. (2008). Intercultural Sensitivity for Global Managers. In Michael A. Moodian (Ed.) *Contemporary Leadership and Intercultural Competence: Understanding and Utilizing Cultural Diversity to Build Successful Organizations* (pp/ 255 – 267). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

[12] Bhawuk, D. P. S., and Brislin, R. W. (1992). The measurement of intercultural sensitivity using the concepts of individualism and collectivism. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 16, 413 – 436.

[13] Sakuda, K. H. and Zurcher, S. A. (2023). A Virtual International Classroom for Organizational Behavior: Collaborative Online International Learning for Business Students in Hawaii and Japan. A presentation at the Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Society – Oceania Conference, Sydney, NSW, Australia. February 1st, 2023.