

Canadian-East African Learning Internships amidst COVID-19: Impacts of Virtual Learning and Exchange on Collaborative Relationships, Trust, and Power

Katie Butler

University of Western Ontario

Aimée Josephine Utuza

University of Western Ontario

Elysée Nouvet

University of Western Ontario

Abstract

The formation of trusting relationships is a stated aim of student mobility programs, but resources to support virtual relationship-building in the absence of in-person student travel to international locations have yet to be developed. Towards informing the development of such resources, especially for the context of North-South partnerships, qualitative research was conducted based on the experience of a 2020 summer cohort of remote interns at a Canadian university and an East African partner supervisor. Thematic analysis of intern blogs and semi-structured interviews indicates several considerations and recommendations that, if considered prior to virtual international student learning opportunities, could optimize learning and North-South relationship-building potential of these opportunities. These considerations and recommendations include: recognizing that the formality of online communication can limit feelings of trust and closeness between participants; infrequent communication can impact relationship-building; self-reflexive practice must be intentional to optimize learning in virtual internships; open communication makes a difference to learning and relationships; and, internships would benefit from the development of internship-specific strategic plans. More robust research on remote international internships is warranted to build up understanding of how and why virtual student international internships in general, and virtual internships involving Global North-South partnership in particular, differ from in-person internships.

Keywords

North-South partnerships; global ethical engagement; virtual teams; North-South student mobility programs; remote student internships; self-reflexivity; trust; power; East Africa; in-person cultural immersion

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the landscape of global partnerships and internationalization has been significantly and suddenly altered. Many scholars have hypothesized that these current events will influence the post-pandemic world. Potential areas of transformation include: decreased globalization and developmental cooperation, altered global power structures, and changed values systems (Bhusal, 2020; Niewiadomski, 2020; Schilirò, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020).

North-South student mobility programs represent one area of university global partnership and internationalization that faced the need to suddenly pivot in the face of the pandemic. The program described in this article represents one such case. This is a program, established in 2002, in which student interns from the University of Western Ontario are partnered with universities and organizations from Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda to engage in mutual learning for a three-month project promoting community health and women's financial independence through the making and selling of probiotic yogurt, employing a social enterprise model. In the face of the pandemic and with the impossibility of international travel, program leaders in 2020 could either cancel the program or find a way to proceed without travel. Canadian and African partners decided to trial virtual internships. This article presents findings from a study conducted with the aim of documenting and understanding how the 2020 internships were experienced by students. In doing so, it draws attention to consideration of how virtual versus in person international student internships differ. How might issues of power and trust, always present in North-South partnerships, differ in the context of virtual learning opportunities? In the absence of face-to-face meetings and interactions, can participants still develop cross-cultural learning, a key objective of the many international student internships, including that of the University of Western Ontario? Exploration of these questions is crucial. Beyond pandemic conditions limiting international travel, it is important to think through what virtual-only international student North-South internship programs might achieve.

Background

Global service-learning and North-South student partnerships are a known source of ethical concerns and considerations (Chapman, 2016; Clark, 2020; Karim-Haji et al., 2016; McGloin & Georgeou, 2015). Accordingly, several pre-departure training materials have been developed and made mandatory prerequisites to engaging in global exchanges (Hartman, 2018; Hartman et al., 2014; Nair & Henning, 2017). At the University of Western Ontario, these include a Critical Global Engagement module and a Gender Norms and Sexual Violence workshop (Karim-Haji et al., 2016). These University of Western Ontario materials aim to support students in developing a critical perspective on service-learning and mobility programs, where self-reflexivity is practiced so they may recognize power imbalances, actively mitigate their effects, and create an environment of mutual learning and reciprocal benefit within North-South partnerships (University Foundation for Development Cooperation, 2019).

At the core of many pre-departure training materials, including those from the University of Western Ontario, is an assumption that global service learning will occur in person. Thus, for example, the resource guide on "Meaningful North-South Student Mobility" (University Foundation for Development Cooperation, 2019) highlights the importance of forming trusting cross-cultural relationships and a deep understanding of the local context and warns that superficial

exchanges may only serve to reinforce stereotyping and prejudices in participants. This guide indicates that “achieving interpersonal relationships is an aim in itself and is as important as achieving the subject-related competencies for students” (2019, pp. 15–16). The guide’s recommendations for improvement focus on in-person cultural immersion. Resources to support critical and self-reflexive perspectives specific to remote virtual student partnerships have yet to be developed.

There are several reasons to think through more carefully the differences of virtual, as opposed to in-person, global student learning opportunities. As has been noted, the use of technology may make developing trusting relationships more challenging and may reinforce unequal power dynamics based on differing access to and quality of technology and the history of technology (Panteli & Tucker, 2009). The chapter “A Feminist Perspective on Technology” by Janine Marie Morgall (1993) reminds its readers, for example, of the long-standing tradition of science and technology as a Western, masculine field. Morgall rejects the idea that technology is a neutral tool and instead sees technology as a social and cultural activity that creates competitive advantages for the privileged class. Within feminist scholarship, science and technology may be analyzed “as part of a system of domination” (Morgall, 1993, p. 102). Just as it is problematic to analyze North-South partnerships through an ahistorical lens, the capitalist, patriarchal and colonial history of technological advancement plays a role in current access to quality technology and technological education that should not be ignored. According to Roberts et al. (2017), “There has been a fundamental unevenness to the delivery of digital technology in all its forms that has been shaped by existing geographic and social inequalities ... impact[ing] the ability of rural communities to be resilient in an increasingly digital world” (p. 355). The situation is further complicated, in that we cannot assume that digital participation is wholly beneficial, given that most information and communication technologies (ICTs) are produced by and for urban, Global North populations and may not be compatible with the desires and needs of the rural Global South (Young, 2019).

Considerable research has been conducted on team building and the importance of trust in increasingly common virtual working structures (Daim et al., 2011; Erez et al., 2013; Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005; Panteli & Tucker, 2009; Paul & McDaniel, 2004). According to Henttonen and Blomqvist (2005), trust is the most important component of teamwork. In studying the development of trust in the early stages of a virtual team for a telecommunications company, Henttonen and Blomqvist (2005) arrived at the following conclusions: Trust was highly dependent on first impressions; there were far fewer opportunities for social communication and discussion to build personal relationships during virtual collaboration; and the importance of behaviour was elevated as other social cues and indications of trustworthiness became less available. Virtual teams often develop models of “swift trust,” where trust is presumed from the start of a project, is focused on task completion, and is less robust compared to other forms of interpersonal and team-level trust (Erez et al., 2013). According to Erez et al., this superficial trust increases the risk of viewing other team members as part of an outgroup, thereby inhibiting cultural intelligence and global identity development. Erez et al. describe cultural intelligence as “an individual’s ability to grasp and reason correctly in situations of cultural diversity” (2013, p. 335). A global identity emerges in effective global teams, allowing multicultural team members to see beyond differences, creating a new in-group for the culturally diverse team. Erez et al.’s research results confirmed their hypothesis that team trust enhances both of these dimensions and that the type and quality of trust must be considered.

Unfortunately, while considerable high-quality research has gone into the development of trust in corporate global virtual teams, research employing a postcolonial lens and considering self-reflexivity appears to be missing from this research area. Much of the research assumes an ahistorical approach. In other words, it fails to acknowledge the postcolonial legacies that result in power imbalances that one needs to consider and actively work to redress in many global work relationships. Instead, existing research on global virtual teams highlights current cultural differences as a barrier to trust, assuming a neutral relationship between North and South partners (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005). Even the article “Power and Trust in Global Virtual Teams” avoids stating which partners may have more power in a team setting and why, stating that “the most powerful was the individual with the most relevant information” (Panteli & Tucker, 2009, p. 114). This is a failure to explicitly acknowledge the history of oppression and unequal access to information and development that puts Southern partners at a disadvantage. Without recognizing this power disparity, one will continue to perpetuate an unequal relationship.

There is evidence suggesting a lack of trust not only compromises the potential for building relationships and positive team perceptions, but also measurably hinders group *performance* (Paul & McDaniel, 2004). Paul and McDaniel break down integrated trust into three components: competence trust, calculative trust, and relational trust. Their key informant interviews about trust within telemedicine teams revealed no indication that technology was a cause of project failure; instead, by their analysis, if any of the three components of integrated interpersonal trust were absent, the project was likely to fail. The ways technology may impact trust in teams in general remains under-studied and under-theorized. Further research is merited to clarify precisely how trust in virtual partnerships may break down and to create recommendations to support ethical global engagement on a remote basis.

Trust-building matters when aiming for team relationships that feel fair, respectful, and, as such, ethical to all involved. While the study of trust in virtual relationships is limited, there is significant research indicating a relationship between modes of communication and trust development. A popular theory of how technology challenges trust development is miscommunication in the absence of face-to-face interactions (Daim et al., 2011). An American study contends that 7% of a message is communicated verbally, and 38% is communicated via expressions and gestures (Pellegrini, 2016). Given this, the importance of nonverbal communication for trust-building cannot be overstated (Pellegrini, 2016). Additionally, in a study of 493 employees by Kivimaki et al. (2000), participative communication, referring here to all members openly sharing their ideas to allow connective thinking and mutual understanding, was the most reliable indicator of innovation. Furthermore, face-to-face interaction was the most effective precursor to establishing this type of communication (Daim et al., 2011). According to Walther’s (1997) Social Identification/Deindividuation theory (SIDE), without communication cues, team members will use categorical information processing and create stereotypes of others based on limited information (Daim et al., 2011).

Cross-cultural communication adds a layer of complexity to this challenge. Cotton (2013) differentiates high-context from low-context communicators. These categories originated with Hall (1989, as cited in Lifintsev & Wellbrock, 2019, p. 94), who hypothesized that “in low context cultures the words spoken have direct meanings, in high context cultures ... all nonverbal elements (e.g., rituals, nonverbal communication, roles etc.) mean as much as verbal communication.” While there exists substantial individual variation, different cultures will have a more commonly

accepted context style, which must be considered and respected to avoid miscommunication or insult (Cotton, 2013). With high-context communication styles being more common in Canada and East Africa, much of a message's meaning will depend on intonation, body language, volume, expression, pauses, and posture, which may be lost depending on the mode of virtual communication.

It should be noted here that cultural differences in communication patterns and styles are far from the only possible sources of miscommunication. In his essay "Blaming Culture for Bad Behaviour," Volpp (2000) states the following, referring to narratives around adolescent marriage: "These narratives suggest that behaviour that we might find troubling is more often causally attributed to a group-defined culture when the actor is perceived to 'have' culture. Because we tend to perceive white Americans as 'people without culture,' when white people engage in certain practices, we do not associate their behaviour with a racialized conception of culture, but rather construct other, non-cultural explanations. The result is an exaggerated perception of ethnic difference that equates it with moral difference from 'us'" (p. 89). Volpp's argument (2000) may also be applied to miscommunication in global partnerships and serve as a reminder that cultural difference must only be one consideration; without also practicing self-reflexivity by checking one's internal biases and evaluating how one's positionality affects the relationship, one cannot expect to maintain an ethical partnership (Karim-Haji et al., 2016).

Methods

The study was designed to document student experiences during 2020 virtual internships and to consider how cross-cultural trust, relationship-building, and power relations might be complicated in unique ways, where interactions between North-based students and collaborators in the Global South rely exclusively on virtual platforms. This qualitative study draws from two data sets: blogs penned by interns and semi-structured interviews. Below is a brief summary of our data collection and analysis strategy.

First, to be eligible to participate in the study, participants must have completed the program's internship during the summer of 2020, when all internships were offered on a remote basis. Additionally, interns must have worked directly with East African partners virtually rather than a local organization.

As a component of the program, interns were asked to post blog entries during their three-month internships. Blogs were posted and remain available in the public domain on WordPress and advertised on the program website. Blogs were written throughout the internship experience, from May to September 2020. Their content was open to directions interns chose, within parameters of being required to reflect on events as they occurred. Each intern was provided an Intern Handbook which contained blog writing guidelines to: "Write about daily achievements and challenges you often face. Share tips on how to make an international internship a success." Interns were cautioned to reflect on the content they were creating to ensure it was professional, productive, appropriate, and not contributing to negative stereotypes or sharing confidential information regarding their international partners. NVivo (QSR 12.0) qualitative data analysis software was used to thematically code blog posts around issues relating to trust, technology, power dynamics, and their intersection. Blogs provided relevant background information on particular participants'

experiences of their online internship, which was used to inform the interview guide of semi-structured interviews.

After completing their internships, all interns meeting the eligibility requirements (N=13) were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to give more context to the initial patterns and themes identified in the interpretive descriptive analysis of the blog posts. A supervisor was also invited and agreed to participate in an interview. Inclusion of the supervisor was deemed important to ensure that a partner perspective was included in the research findings. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Participants signed a consent form before the start of the interview. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded with the participants' permission.

All interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVIVO for analysis. One of the East African partner supervisors joined as a co-author after the full completion of analysis (to avoid potential conflict of interest while still offering important insight on how the information should be presented).

Both blogs and interviews were analyzed using an interpretive description approach to answer the following:

1. How might virtual partnerships pose additional challenges to engaging in ethical and successful North-South collaborative partnerships?
2. How is the process of building cross-cultural trust and relationships altered in purely virtual relationships?
3. What measures might be taken to most effectively address unequal power dynamics and re-establish mutual trust when engaging in virtual global partnerships?

Interpretive description was used to qualitatively analyze the blog posts and the interview transcripts (Thorne, 2016). The main author identified patterns, themes, and conceptual links within the data relating to trust, power dynamics, technology, and their intersection. Rather than using directed analysis in which participants' blogs and transcripts would be analyzed based on pre-defined terms, with interpretive description, analysis is more inductive. The analyst reads and re-reads transcripts to immerse in the data, and then begins to identify recurring themes. Interpretive description allows for attention to both implicit and explicit implications of participants' statements (Thorne, 2016). Thorne's methods were used to guide this research analysis so that rich themes could be identified for blog posts, contextualized using interviews, and then repeated with thematic analysis of interview transcripts to develop practical recommendations to be applied to the future remote internship training and practice.

Ethics approval was obtained from Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (REB #116516) prior to the study's commencement.

Findings

A total of 48 blogs from 11 student interns, as well as 3 intern and 1 supervisor interviews were ultimately gathered for analysis. The 11 students whose blogs were included consisted of 10 female undergraduate and post-graduate students and one male undergraduate student. This uneven gender distribution is not surprising given the disproportionate number of females who engage in

international learning programs compared to their male counterparts on average (Selingo, 2019). These interns worked with East African partners in the countries of Rwanda, Tanzania, and Kenya.

Only three of the interns from the larger group agreed to an interview, all participants being female undergraduate students. The East African partner supervisor interviewed was also female. The one-on-one open-ended interview questions from a familiar peer may have encouraged deeper reflection and quality data to further inform the initial thematic blog analysis findings.

Five main themes emerged through analysis of the blogs and interviews: (1) Formality of online communication as a barrier to relationship-building; (2) Infrequency of online communication as a barrier; (3) Intentional reflexivity required; (4) The need for strategic plan development; and (5) Openness as an opportunity for connection. Each of these is described below, with supporting quotes. In the discussion section that follows, we share our reflections on the significance of participants' reported experiences of virtual internships as these connect to issues of trust, power, and relationship-building in global virtual teams.

Formality of Online Communication as a Barrier to Trust and Closeness

Interns and supervisors were each prompted to reflect on the biggest successes and challenges of participating in a global virtual team. This frequently led to a discussion of barriers to developing trust or feelings of closeness virtually. A commonly cited barrier was the formality of online communication.

Participants commented on the communication style expected, and sometimes required, in their experience, for videoconferencing. This style was far more structured than in-person communication. Participants noted the absence of opportunities for polite interjection, one-on-one communication, small talk before and after meetings, and the use of eye contact to signal one's intent to add to a conversation. This was particularly salient in larger group settings, which seemed to elevate the inappropriateness of interruption or speaking out of turn, as discussed in the following intern testimonials.

"Another barrier is just, okay, like group settings. It's really hard online, I find, because, I don't know, I always feel like I'm interrupting someone. I never can like make eye contact and realize, you're done talking now, can I talk? I feel like it's really, way harder to read, when I can think I'm making eye contact with someone, but they don't know that, in particular. So, I think that like when group settings might sometimes be a good way to first connect with people, in person, it's not that way like virtually...."

I feel like the virtual nature was a barrier because I felt like if I tried to say anything to interrupt, to be like just kidding, we mean like this... firstly it would have been rude, like I would have been outright like interrupting him, like stopping him from saying what he was saying. But if it was in person I could have like just, I felt like it would have felt more like me adding on, it wouldn't have been rude. Cause I don't know when people are talking it feels more like a monologue. Wait your turn when it's on Zoom, but in person I could just be like, 'also, you know this,' you know? So, I think the virtual nature just stopped us from preventing [NAME] feelings of like not being heard, because our presentation wasn't what she wanted." [Participant 2]

Not only was this more formal “monologue”-like style of communication generally held as the only acceptable standard of online conversation, but the content of conversations was also described as being restricted to work-related topics, occasionally at the expense of much-needed personal connection. This issue is described in the following quote.

“I have a challenge, but I can’t say that because it’s a personal challenge, like, just be like ‘it was hard to get in contact with someone’. Don’t say like, ‘work-life balance is killing me right now, what do I do?’ I feel like it could have been an opportunity for us to like bond as a group and learn from each other.” [Participant 2]

Participants hypothesized this limited range of conversation was due to the stricter time restraints placed on virtual meetings. This created a sense of urgency to get through project-related questions that made personal, informal communication less of a priority. Participants recommended future interns take time at the outset of the internship-supervisor relationship to get to know their partners better, asking about their expectations and goals for the internship and life goals to facilitate deeper understanding and enhance future productivity.

“I feel like, you’re more likely to be understanding to be with someone if you understand where they’re coming from but if we’re just talking about work, I don’t know, you’re less likely to see eye to eye I find.” [Participant 2]

Infrequency of Online Communication as a Barrier to Relationship-Building

Virtual collaboration involves much less frequent interaction than that of in-person internships. Almost all virtual team conversations require scheduling a meeting, coordinating between different time zones and schedules, and so, it is often the case that, simply put, less is said. Thus, interactions are fewer, exchanges are shorter, and community involvement is reduced. Several participants stressed that the infrequency of online communication acted as a significant barrier to building relationships, highlighting that both the quality and *quantity* of communication affected participants’ ability to trust each other. Interns expressed disappointment in their evaluations of the potential for relationship longevity with partners beyond the three-month internship period.

“The frequency of how often they talk to you, I think that’s a huge factor in building trust as well as I think it’s important to build personal relationships in addition to professional relationships.” [Participant 3]

“I don’t know if we built like quality long-lasting relationships, I don’t, it’s a sad thing to say but I don’t really stay in contact in anyways except maybe, to check in on the [project] or anything.” [Participant 1]

The vast majority of intern blogs include themes of *time*, specifically, general dissatisfaction with time. Some interns expressed frustration about slow-moving progress and long periods spent waiting, while others expressed that they were running out of time too quickly. Many interns experienced a combination of these feelings, commenting that “time seems to be passing really strangely now.” While rapid changes amidst the COVID-19 pandemic certainly played a contributing role in distorted perceptions of time, the infrequency and irregularity of communication throughout internships likely advanced these feelings.

More frequent communication was the most common recommendation participants said they would give to future interns. When discussing the basis of trust in global virtual partnerships, the frequency and openness of communication were consistently mentioned in the same breath, further demonstrating the difficulty of separating the value of quality versus quantity of interactions when building relationships. Other qualities of the partnership that participants highlighted as the bases of trust included promises kept, demonstrating care, active listening, reaffirming community power, existing trust in the larger team/program, and shared project goals. The following quote from an intern demonstrates how student interns could apply almost all of the above qualities to establish themselves as trustworthy interns:

“I guess us always asking questions and always updating them on our progress, I think that showed them that we, really wanted to put our effort into this, and that we were consistent with our work. And that built our trust with them.” [Participant 1]

Intentional Reflexivity

An emergent theme related to virtual intercultural relationships when engaging in North-South partnerships was the extra intentionality required to practice self-reflexivity. “Where self-reflection may be defined as individuals thinking about their personal experiences and assumptions, self-reflexivity is defined as connecting our individual assumptions to collective socially, culturally and historically situated ‘stories’ and assumptions that define what is real, ideal (right), and knowable” (Karim-Haji et al., 2016). To be self-reflexive is to challenge one’s thinking and try to take on another culture’s perspective.

In traditional student mobility programs emphasizing ethical global engagement, such as the one being studied, Northern students receive research-based training on self-reflexive practice to prepare students to challenge their thinking and responses while abroad, immersed in the host country’s culture. A distinction must be made for global virtual partnerships being conducted on a remote basis, where each partner remains in their home country and does not have the same opportunity to understand their team members’ culture and social contexts. Interns described that while practicing self-reflexivity was still crucially important in their remote internships, it was avoidable. Consequently, increased intentionality is demanded of remote interns, as demonstrated in the following quote:

“I think had I done it in person [self-reflexive practice] would have happened as well but it was interesting to have to really push myself to do that and I think definitely [program name] set us up for that, asking different questions like they did in their reflection and prompting that. Had they not, I think, I would have encountered power dynamics, but I don’t think I would have even been able to identify it as that, necessarily.” [Participant 1]

Self-reflexivity is crucial in developing project outcomes and with each interaction to ensure that partners feel respected and mutual understanding is consistently achieved. Thus, virtual communication may pose an additional challenge to navigating power dynamics while speaking to partners by limiting intern and supervisor abilities to “read the room.” Different personal and cultural perceptions of what is considered appropriate for online communication must also be considered, as an intern explains below:

“It’s definitely easier to cross the boundaries just because you’re not physically there. So, it’s just so easy to just send something without thinking about it, because you’re just kind of behind a screen. So definitely have to be more mindful when sending that. And because we’re just so used to messaging everyone here, and not really thinking about it, we can like, unintentionally send something inappropriate to East African partners without thinking about it, just because we’re so used to our own ways of texting.” [Participant 3]

Interns who made an effort to practice self-reflexivity expressed confidence that this translated into a demonstration of respect for their partners’ priorities, trust-building, and relationships they felt proud about:

“When we established the way we did, we were really clear to [NAME] that this was, us, creating her vision. Not us creating our own vision. Like taking what she wanted, so I think that’s an important thing about building trust. Making sure that you’re established that you’re all on the same page.” [Participant 1]

Openness as Key to Connection and Learning

“That’s the ... thing about trust, if you don’t trust, you can’t ask... You remember in one session, someone said, ‘I’m going to talk ... because I represent women on the rural side.’ And she was open to give the example. That’s, a good thing also of trust.” [Participant 4]

The above quote is from an interview with an East African partner supervisor, speaking about a statement made by an East African program beneficiary during a virtual training session reflecting on the final key theme identified in the present research: the importance of being honest and open in virtual communication as both a means of developing trust and an indication of the presence of trusting relationships.

Openness may be framed as a brave choice to be made; to be vulnerable and authentic; to sacrifice one’s own comfort in the moment to facilitate comfort in a partner; to say what needs to be said, or to ask what needs to be asked for the health of the relationship and the project. Participant 4 made the following recommendation in support of open communication while in the program planning phases of a project:

“I would recommend to others is to break fear, come and ask the host, ‘what do you have as materials?’ There are some, many of them might be open to say, we don’t have laptop. We don’t have internet connection. But we can do this. And do this. But if there is not that openness to say, we need this, and we don’t have this, then you can’t know how to facilitate each other.” [Participant 4]

Open communication also invites constructive criticism and feedback rather than uncritical acceptance of program components. Thus, it may be viewed as an essential precursor to genuine collaboration and empowering to all members of a partnership. The outcome of the trust that Participant 4 (an East African partner supervisor) established prior to her interview is that she felt assured and allowed to provide her assessment of the existing power dynamics of the program delivery structure.

“It’s no longer a matter of [university name] to Africa, powerful and here. And sometimes, I don’t want to say that now, but sometimes, I, question, why is there the [program name]? Why is there not the East Heads West? Because we are coming here too, we are here too, we learn, we write about...I wish one day we will have East Heads West...And share the power.” [Participant 4]

Recommended Development of Internship-Specific Strategic Plans

Participant discussion of recommendations uncovered the final central theme, which is the importance of developing a strategic plan and schedule at the outset of the partnership. All participants, interns, and supervisor independently made this recommendation for future interns and were adamant about its potential to increase future programs’ success. Interns stated the following:

“You need to have a strategic plan. Like an outline for the whole thing. And maybe that’s something like a suggested, or required, I don’t know of all interns at the beginning of their internship, like write a strategic outline as you would for any big project. Having that, there and available is definitely, I definitely think would be helpful. It will save time at the end of it, like, as opposed to, like even if it is a task you have to do in the beginning that seems daunting or just not what you want to do, I see where it would have benefited me, a lot.” [Participant 1]

“Try to make sure that you say your expectations and ask the other person’s expectations from the beginning, for like the East African partners and the interns you’re working with. And actually mean what you’re saying about your expectations.” [Participant 2]

This type of advanced planning was seen as critical to project outcomes and could have considerable influence on building positive relationships and navigating power imbalances. By taking time at the outset of a relationship to confirm that expectations, goals, and roles are sufficiently clarified, the partnership is more likely to be based on mutual understanding. This helps to ensure values and priorities are aligned from the beginning, rather than starting from confusion or disjointedness, which can hinder trust-building, as explained by one of the supervisors in the following excerpt:

“You know, sometimes you can have a good plan. You have knowledge and skills but without agenda, without preparation, it becomes a mess. You don’t know where you want to go, you don’t know what you want. So, you confuse people. I have never had any confusion in the work we are doing. And that is very important to build trust. People can count on us like that, which is really good.” [Participant 4]

Discussion

It is critical in the current social climate to better understand how to best promote trust between colleagues, within international partnerships, and within student learning programs through virtual platforms. In the face of potential future infectious disease outbreaks, but also with the ethical need to reduce carbon footprints in the face of climate change, international partnerships and learning programs must consider the potential of virtual experiences. The study at the core of this article’s

discussion emerged opportunistically. As the University of Western Ontario adapted its East African internships for students to virtual delivery in the face of international travel bans, the authors noted an opportunity and need to document participant experiences of these virtual internships.

Canadian intern and East African partner supervisor reflections of their virtual global partnership experiences demonstrate the critical role played by communications between students and their remote partners in relationship-building and program success. Study participants underline the importance of maintaining *less formal communication, more frequent, and open communication*, even as communication shifts from traditional face-to-face conversation to online communication channels. While some might assert, as does Handy (1995, p. 46), that “[t]rust needs touch,” there is evidence that virtual relationships can also establish trust (De Laat, 2005, p. 168). De Laat highlights the disconnect between theoretical assertions that trust demands face-to-face, in-person connection and the reality that virtual trust is ubiquitous in our current society with the example of trust as it pertains to actions involving high risk. Virtual markets, support groups, and memorial websites all show evidence of people putting themselves in vulnerable positions in which they require trustworthiness from other “purely virtuals” (2005). The reflections of interns and the East African internship supervisor suggest trust can be enhanced or reduced in virtual interactions, dependent on the nature of those interactions.

The findings of this research also suggest that virtual international collaboration requires additional *intentionality*. Time and effort must be dedicated to self-reflexive practice and establishing mutual understanding of expectations and responsibilities throughout the internships to create an environment more conducive to building trust, reaffirming community power, and creating sustainable collaborative project outputs.

A striking difference between the Canadian intern and East African partner supervisor perspectives was their understanding of what constitutes a mutually beneficial virtual internship. Nearly all intern blogs spoke of feelings of personal loss and a period of adjusting expectations when finding out their internships would be conducted on a remote basis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, no interns openly reflected on how their inability to travel to their host country could be a loss *for their supervisors*. Student mobility is supposed to be about **intercultural exchange**. The benefit one receives from an intercultural exchange is not just in mutual learning but in mutual teaching and sharing. Participant 4 (an East African partner supervisor) stated that being unable to share her country with her interns was the principal disadvantage of a virtual partnership. This missing piece reaffirmed the absolute importance of including the East African partner perspective in this research. It also suggests that more thought should be invested to ensure that mutually beneficial relationships and intercultural exchange are achieved in global virtual partnerships. Having interns develop strategic plans for their internships in dialogue with East African partners, prior to embarking on internships, is one recommendation made by participants that could serve to clarify understandings of what and how internships will work and benefit both Northern and Southern partners.

The findings outlined above set out directives for improving future remote internships, and more broadly, global virtual partnerships in place of traditional North-South student mobility programs. Key themes emerging from blog and interview analysis are highly compatible with each other and

may be integrated into the following recommendations. Note: These are not in a particular order of importance.

1. Limit the use of larger group videoconferences in favour of smaller group calls whenever possible.
2. Create a strategic plan at the outset of the internship.
3. Prioritize personal connection at the outset of each relationship before beginning collaboration on work-related tasks.
4. Ask partners about their community and cultural contexts, and prioritized values.
5. Extend the length of remote internships to allow more time for relationships to develop naturally.
6. Increase accountability by making self-reflexive practice a mandatory and consistently scheduled internship component.

Why and how each of these recommendations could make a difference to relationship-building and learning in virtual international internships merits some elaboration.

Limit the use of larger group video conferences in favour of smaller group calls whenever possible. Smaller group conversations can shift both the style and content of conversation towards informal personal communication. Participants may find themselves more likely to add to the conversation and more comfortable speaking to personal challenges and goals. Pedagogical research of online learning group size by AbuSeileek (2012) found groups of five students to be the ideal environment for the development of communication skills, commenting that smaller group sizes provided fewer opportunities to gain from the perspectives of others while any larger group sizes eliminated opportunities for all members to share and express themselves. This was attributed to both limited time and social anxiety in larger group settings. More recently, a study of small group discussion in synchronous online class delivery amongst orthopedic surgeons strengthened these findings as 80% of participants reported their preferred online small group discussion size included 4-5 participants (Roels et al., 2021). Group size is a critical factor in determining the level of interactivity, which Cheng et al. (2016), Du et al. (2017), and others (Rovai, 2001; Schwier & Daniel, 2008) contend predicts group trust during collaboration.

Create a strategic plan at the outset of the internship. This theme needed to be included as a result of its sheer frequency, but a question remains whether this is a distinct theme in the data, a product of perhaps formality and infrequency of communication, or just an ongoing challenge that plagues all efforts from year to year—with or without COVID limitations. Regardless, it seems Backward Design, which emphasizes *beginning* with an end goal or established objectives, was seen as the most appropriate course of action when planning expectations for each internship. Jozwik et al. (2017) explain that Backward Design is particularly compatible with the reciprocity, ongoing collaboration, and the six principles of service learning: (1) meaningful connections and sustained commitment; (2) recipients defining goals; (3) clear goals accessible to all stakeholders; (4) projects connected to course content; (5) project impact measured to reflect students' learning and recipient perceptions of success; and (6) the sharing and celebrating of project outcomes. Further, Davis et al. (2021) find the approach particularly advantageous for online courses, which necessitate more intentional design due to the limited interaction involved. Backward Design is

also in alignment with the six steps for planning a health promotion program, according to Public Health Ontario (2015).

A strategic plan should include personal and team-level goals, expectations for the internship, and team members' availability. This may take the form of a jointly created team contract and help clarify roles and ensure mutual understanding of a shared vision for the project.

Prioritize personal connection at the outset of each relationship before beginning collaboration on work-related tasks. During their interviews, interns highlighted the importance of first impressions to their ongoing relationships. This supports the research by Henttonen and Blomqvist (2005) and Erez et al. (2013) on the development of "swift trust" in virtual teams. "Swift trust" is a type of trust that exists by default when beginning a project. It is focused on task completion and weaker than other forms of interpersonal and team-level trust (Erez et al., 2013). By taking the time to get to know partners' lifestyles, values, interests, and goals, one can increase the likelihood of moving beyond swift trust, developing more stable relational trust. Efforts to establish longer-lasting team trust at the outset will improve the likelihood of successful first impressions and are likely to enhance all future group performance (Paul & McDaniel, 2004).

Ask partners about their community and cultural contexts, and prioritized values. The resource guide on "Meaningful North-South Student Mobility" (University Foundation for Development Cooperation, 2019) states that the formation of trusting intercultural relationships is an essential program component and requires a deep understanding of the local context. While participating in global virtual partnerships, the traditional experience of cultural immersion and cultural learning through experience must be replaced with learning through communication with partners if participants hope to meet the learning objective of improving their intercultural competence.

Expressing interest in partners' cultures can also demonstrate care and active listening, which participants cited as bases of trust. By inquiring about East African partners' communities, interns will receive information relevant and valuable to their project development from an expert of the local context while also positioning themselves as the learners, helping to mitigate postcolonial power imbalances. Further, once interns and partners better understand each other's values, backgrounds, and socioeconomic constraints, the risk of miscommunication can be decreased.

It is also vital that interns have an awareness of the colonial histories of the host countries, which may also act as a barrier to trust. Such barriers can be wrongly attributed to present cultural differences when using an ahistorical lens (Volpp, 2000). Remote interns should take the time to educate themselves on host countries' history prior to their internships and should use appropriate sensitivity around these topics. For example, in the case of Rwanda, the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi is an extremely impactful part of Rwandan history, but a highly traumatic topic that would not be appropriate to openly ask about in a working relationship unless the partner supervisor has initiated a discussion on the topic.

When interns ask a supervisor about the unique features of the supervisor's community, they are effectively protecting against "the danger of a single story" (Adichie, 2009). Further, interns may find it helpful to ask about the possibility of being introduced to more community members if the technology and internet access exist. Rather than making assumptions by generalizing the personal traits of their direct contact person to the entire population of a country, or worse still, of Africa as

a whole, interns who seek to learn about the diversity of culture and history within African communities will find themselves better informed.

The partnership relationship's outset is the ideal time to involve the community health program's priority population whenever possible. Program ownership and subsequent uptake of community health programs can be significantly enhanced by the joint creation of these programs (McKenzie et al., 2017). If a program seeks to empower its beneficiaries, it must first recognize that they offer valuable expertise on their lived experience and the local context. This recognition can be displayed by consulting community members and informing community members about the project in its preliminary stages. These practices do not apply any less to community health programs developed by global virtual teams. If anything, extra time may need to be allotted to help provide those outside of the host country with a better understanding of the local context, given their inability to be there in person and to give community members time to become comfortable with the novel online partnership arrangement.

Extend the length of remote internships to allow more time for relationships to develop naturally. Consistent with the findings of Henttonen and Blomqvist (2005), participants found there was much less time for social communication and building personal relationships during their internships. By the end of the three-month internship period, interns interviewed regretted that the working relationships they had formed were unlikely to endure over time. At the same time, many intern blog posts allude to the demanding nature of their working arrangements, often by mentioning challenges as a precursor to expressing optimism, with connecting phrases such as “despite it all,” “still,” and “yet.” These insights point towards an extension of the internship timeline, rather than making more frequent meetings mandatory for participants, as the more favourable way to increase the number of interactions that interns, supervisors, and other host-country community members have with each other.

Increase accountability by making self-reflexive practice a mandatory and consistently scheduled internship component. Interns interviewed highlighted the significance of personal reflection and their appreciation for the program exercises encouraging self-reflexive practice included as a monthly compulsory component of the internship. However, the benefits of the internship expressed by the interns interviewed were primarily professional growth and communication skill development. Cultural and ethical learning objectives were discussed as secondary outcomes.

The personal benefits discussed by this cohort of interns aligned more with the expected outcomes of a typical, local internship, such as hands-on experience to complement academic knowledge, something to get to be competitive on the job market, a form of career exploration, and learning about oneself and one's future (Hora et al., 2020). These are valuable outcomes to be expected of internships, but do not include to the same extent the benefits of traditional student mobility programs such as cultural awareness, global-mindedness, and intercultural competence (Roy et al., 2018). If remote internships aim to offer a similar learning opportunity to traditional internships, increasing the frequency of self-reflexive practice and opportunities for cultural learning could help achieve this goal. This could be done by assigning more mandatory guided reflexive exercises or discussions to increase accountability and consistency of practise between interns or even implementing an entire course on self-reflexivity as a prerequisite to participation. The internships during the summer of 2020 did include periodic reflective activities and regular team meetings

with the program coordinators, interns, and partners to talk about any challenges and redefine the way forward. This was important for the progressive evaluation of internships to enhance positive outcomes and accountability.

Further, the importance of self-reflexive practice is potentially magnified when working remotely. Unlike traditional mobility programs where Northern students are very dependent on host-country partners who act as translators, guides, supervisors, and more, virtual interns working from behind a screen can choose whether to adequately include their partners in the work they are doing. The ethical choice is inclusion, but from the comfort of one's home context, with ample access to online resources and considerable program flexibility, it is a choice to be made. If remote interns were to bypass reflexive practice, this could lead to overstepping, taking shortcuts by skipping over community consultation, completing work independently, and then presenting the finished package to their supervisor. This would result in project outcomes that are ill-suited to local contexts, that do not encourage program ownership in the host country, and that recreate colonial patterns with their prescriptive North-South delivery. Fortunately, the partner supervisor did not feel that this was the case for the cohort of interns sampled in this study.

These recommendations are not exhaustive but could be directly applied to future purely or partially virtual international student internships to further inform support materials to better suit the changing landscape of globalization from home. This would be tailored to the program discussed in this article but may also help to inform student exchanges from any Northern university trying to engage in ethical virtual global partnerships and combat voluntourism (Karim-Haji et al., 2016). The research also has potential applications in telehealth and telemedicine. Telehealth often involves working in virtual team settings to collaborate on a treatment plan and often with patients from vulnerable and culturally diverse groups (Toh et al., 2016). Trust is the keystone of patient-physician relationships, and so doctors engaging in virtual relationships in the field of telehealth must acquire the proper training to mitigate these additional barriers to trust (Pellegrini, 2016). Finally, COVID-19 has changed many work and learning environments to remote settings and forced industries to create technological resources to support that change. There is the possibility that remote working and learning conditions may be preferred or more efficient and result in a more permanent structural change (Bhusal, 2020). To ensure that collaboration and connection with colleagues is not lost from a distance, we must be aware of technology's effects on building relationships and trust.

Conclusion

This research provides a case study of only a few interns' experience from a particular cohort of this program's first remote internship. While the recommendations produced from the present data analysis are relatively intuitive and may help guide similar programs, more robust research is needed to properly inform the creation of standard guidelines for global virtual partnerships that maintain outputs of intercultural competence, global-mindedness, and cultural awareness in a format compatible with intern and partner goals.

More research is needed that includes the perspective of the host country community volunteers and beneficiaries who will be implementing and receiving the community health programs created within global virtual teams. It is unclear due to the novelty of the remote internships and similar online collaborations whether their relational needs were met or unfulfilled with this new form of

partnership. Research from the host community perspective would more effectively demonstrate what barriers exist for community members to feel included in the project and to access the technology necessary to participate in a virtual partnership. For example, some limitations may include not having available materials like computers, limited or non-existent access to the internet, and time differences. This is especially probable when partnering with those in rural areas without electricity or other supports.

The research focused on the power dynamics and trust within the relationship between interns and their East African partner supervisors, who acted as their direct contact person. It is unclear whether the broader community was aware of the project, invited to participate in virtual discussions, and met with global team members or felt they could trust the interns helping with the project despite never meeting them in person. This is a considerable gap in the present research that we encourage others to explore.

While it was necessary to research whether interns and partner supervisors could form trusting intercultural relationships during remote internships, it will also be critical to look at the effectiveness of programs developed by global virtual teams. Due to the three-month time span of the first cohort's internships, most projects did not reach completion and will be continued by community volunteers and eventually the next cohort of interns. Connecting past interns with the next selected interns may enhance program continuity, especially for those working in the same country. This may help in program evaluation and planning of new goals, avoiding repetitions or duplication, and building on the lessons learned by prior interns. Presently, it is too soon to know how the quality of the project outputs has been impacted by virtual collaboration, if at all.

Finally, while this research explored one of the challenging aspects of virtual partnerships, forming trusting relationships, it would be practical and helpful also to consider the potential benefits of this form of partnership over traditional programs. In blog entries and interviews, Canadian interns and the East African partner supervisor interviewed brought up the potential for increased accessibility of international collaboration through the use of remote internships. Future research could explore whether virtual internships could be offered as a more inclusive type of program, opening doors for more student exchange and more ethical reciprocal exchanges with its decreased costs. If it is found to be a feasible and similarly effective alternative to traditional programs requiring international travel, perhaps it could lead to the program development of a reciprocal opportunity for East African students in the future, as highlighted by the supervisor interviewed.

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Corresponding Author

Katie Butler
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Western Ontario
kbutle48@uwo.ca