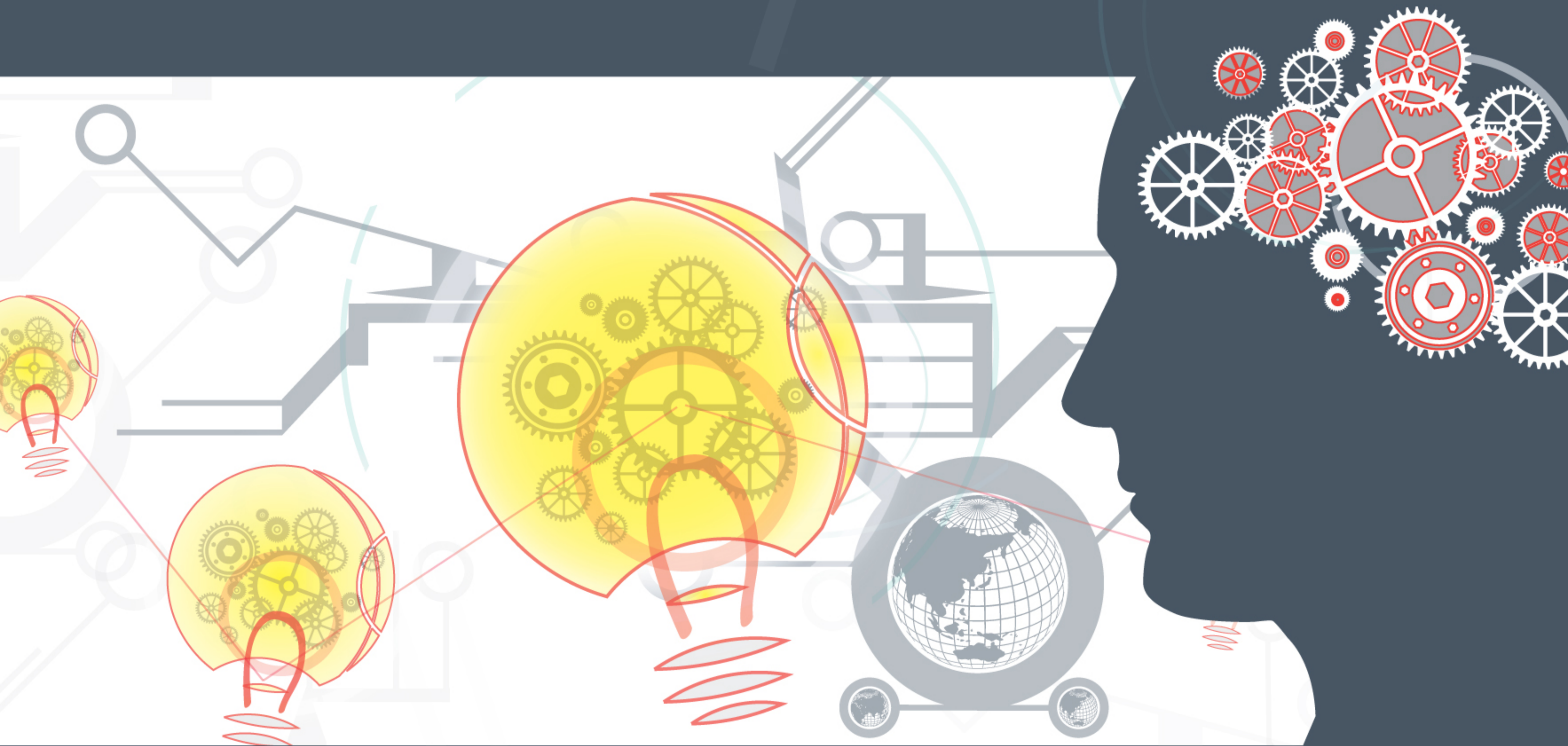




International Institute for
Trade and Development



The Thai Brain-Exchange: Evaluation and Recommendations



The Thai Brain-Exchange: Evaluation and Recommendations

Abstract

The paper is meant to evaluate and provide recommendations on improving the Thai Brain-Exchange program. Based on qualitative interviews with the developers, founders, and students who have taken part in the program, the paper aims at assessing the effectiveness of the Brain-Exchange, an initiative with the potential of fostering a dynamic human capital market and promoting cultural exchange in Thailand. Most importantly, surveying the strengths and weakness of the program, the paper will provide recommendations on how to move forward with the initiative capitalizing on its opportunities.

Key Words: Thailand, Brain-Exchange, Knowledge Sharing, Internship programs, Cultural Exchange.

Gioel Gioachino

Gioel is the Executive Director of Recreer, an international youth-lead organization with the vision of reenergizing the development discourse (read more at www.recrearmagnify.org). Gioel holds a BA in International Studies from the University of New Orleans and an MPhil in Development Studies from Cambridge University. She visited Thailand through the Brain-Exchange program as a temporary research associate with the International Institute for Trade and Development (ITD).

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Section I: Introduction

The Brain-Exchange program (BEX) was set up with the vision to match highly qualified international students with Thai companies for short-term work opportunities. Students would be attracted by the idea of ‘experiencing Thailand’ while contributing to the development of the country, employers benefit from skilled human resources at minimum cost for the company. The work relations between foreign students and Thai companies are aimed at fostering cultural exchange and creating the base for longer-term international partnerships. Set up through a simple and intuitive online platform, the Brain-Exchange is an innovative response to the changing patterns in human resources globally and could become a useful model for other developing countries.

However, since its launch in December 2010 the BEX has received little attention. How has the program been functioning? Is it successful? This paper is meant to carry out a preliminary evaluation of the Brain-Exchange program in this early stage of its development with the aim of assessing its strengths and weaknesses. While surveying some of the concepts and theories behind the Brain-Exchange initiative, this paper aims at providing concrete recommendations on how to move forward with the initiative capitalizing on its opportunities. Moreover, the analysis and observations made in this study will be useful to other developing countries interested in launching a similar platform.

This paper is organized as follows. Section II explains the research’s methodology and discusses its significance and limitations. Section III provides a background to the Brain-Exchange and outlines its history as well as the mechanisms involved in making the program a reality. Section IV places the Brain-Exchange in a theoretical perspective and discusses the ideology and theories that legitimize the initiative. Section V includes the program evaluation, presented as a SWOT analysis, based on qualitative interviews with the developers, employees, and students who have taken part in it; what follows in section VI are several recommendations on moving forward with the Thai Brain-Exchange. Finally, section VII concludes summing up the study’s findings.

Section II: Study's Methodology, Significance and Limitations

While pursuing an MPhil in Development Studies at the University of Cambridge in 2010/11, I was told by a Thai friend about the Brain-Exchange program. I only decided to register after a good friend and colleague was invited for an internship position at the International Institute for Trade and Development (ITD). Intrigued by the opportunity to spend some time in Thailand while taking serious decisions about my career, I also uploaded my resume on the Brain-Exchange platform. A few months later, I was welcomed by the ITD for an internship as a research associate.

During my stay in Thailand, I decided to do an evaluation of the Brain-Exchange because I was interested in understanding the balances of give and take between companies and students within an internship program. Working with Recrear, a non-profit organization that seeks to empower youths to contribute to the development process, I was curious to explore the potential contribution of international young people to Thailand through internship program. Was I benefiting more from this opportunity, or was the hosting organization? Are the investments Thai companies make on foreign students worth it? If so, how? The program interested me also because the Brain-Exchange's website draws a very explicit connection between this 'exchange' and the larger development process; having a passion for interculturalism, I was curious to see how cultural diversity and intercultural work environments influenced this relationship.

In researching the Brain-Exchange, I focused on understanding the significance of the internship program in terms of the invisible processes fueled by the presence of international human resources within Thai organizations. I also wanted to collect the experience of companies who had worked with students from the Brain-Exchange network in order to draw lessons and articulate concrete, useful recommendations on moving forward. While the conclusions of this study are not based on a very large sample of companies, it is meant to reflect my attempt to discuss the program in-depth, bringing to surface the non-obvious dynamics involved in the Brain-Exchange.

For this paper I tried to approach as many of the Brain-Exchange stakeholders as I could during the month and a half I spent at the ITD. In particular, I talked to three different groups: international students, the developers of the Brain-Exchange, and employing

organizations. I first approached people by email and through an online survey¹. Following this first contact I tried to schedule meetings in person or over Skype/phone and held qualitative, open ended interviews. Each of these three groups of stakeholder provided a different piece in the puzzle of understanding the Brain-Exchange program's impact and effectiveness.

In my conversations with some of the international students who worked in Thailand through the BEX I wanted to understand how they perceived their work environment and how cultural differences influenced their internship. How was their work organized? Did they feel enabled to be creative? Were they feeling gratified for their work? Was the difference in their experience and knowledge adding innovation in the organization's work? The students' perspective is also informed by my personal reflections and experience working at the ITD.

With employers I tried to get a feel for their relationship with the internship program. Were interns doing work that would have otherwise been done by one of their regular employees? How does having international interns influence the work environment? Was the time the intern spent in the organization appropriate to allow them to do their work? Is the company learning something from the interns? I was also interested in understanding the way they understood the role program as a whole: did they recognize benefits with the program beyond the ones perceived by their company?

The people that form the team of BEX developers include politicians, academics, civil society exponents and website developers. In the interviews I explored the collaborative process between the different organizations. In addition, I tried to understand the ideological foundation of the BEX and how each person or organization that worked to launch the program contributed to understanding and realizing the BEX's vision.

The significance of this process of trying to reconstruct the BEX is multifaceted. First of all, the discussion that follows contributes to understanding the possible role of intercultural exchange and diversity in human resources. Moreover, the information I collected is an example of how innovation comes about through collaboration between different perspectives, skill sets and networks. Another important theme of the paper is the significance of skills transfers and on-the-job training. While companies have not always been able to capitalize on the opportunity to learn the most from interns, I hope this paper can provide inspiration and direction on how to make the most of the international internship program.

¹ Survey for the Brain Exchange developers: <http://bit.ly/ArMGAh>.

Considering the early stage of the Brain-Exchange program, the sample of companies and students that contributed to the study was small. While this is a serious limitation in trying to paint a complete picture of the BEX, it also points to the need for the BEX's coordinators to find new strategies to market the program and make it more widely know. For this reason, I conclude with some recommendations on how to lead more Thai organizations to benefits from the program and on publicizing the program in various international student networks. Because of the reduced sample of companies, it is very likely that many more dynamics other than the ones that emerged in this study are associated with the BEX.

Despite the limitations, it is my hope that this evaluation can have a practical use. The developers of the BEX should be able to have compiled in one document a clear overview of the strengths of the program from both a theoretical and practical angle. This can be used to market the program and as a starting point to keep building on the program's mission and vision. Most importantly, I hope my work will be used as a background document to mobilize further support and encourage investments in the initiative. In this evaluation weaknesses are pointed out with a constructive intent and are always followed by suggestions and recommendations on how to minimize them. The study also makes an attempt to identify the future opportunities of the program, which are thought of as prospects for the Thai Brain-Exchange, but also for other similar initiatives.

Section III: The Brain-Exchange: Overview and History

Overview

Following a yearlong pilot under the name of the ‘Thailand Internship Program’, the current Brain-Exchange online platform was launched in December 2010. From its inception, the program was thought of as a potential part of the Thai government’s integral policy framework to foster education and investment in human capital. The founders of the BEX saw that both high-caliber international students and Thai firms could benefit from being matched together through temporary assignments.

Students looking to fulfill their university requirement for short-term work in developing countries expect low monetary compensation but look for a well-structured internship program where they can learn and maximize their contribution. It is hard for universities to gain information about appropriate internship programs. Meanwhile, Thai governmental agencies and other organizations/firms often pay expensive consultants for short-term studies and they rarely have access to connection with academic institutions abroad.

By targeting students moved by their drive and passion for contributing to Thailand’s development, local organizations can gain access to and be supported by highly skilled interns at low cost. In short, as the program tagline summarizes, the Brain-Exchange wants to apply ‘global brains, for local development’. This ‘win-win’ encounter between students and organizations is facilitated online, in a platform designed to put in contact the two interested parts, the student and the company, directly and without adding any extra bureaucratic layer to the process.

The ‘About Us’ page of the BEX website indicates a list of remarkable actors supporting the initiative. The BEX’s advisory board includes distinguished local and international exponents including Thai ministers, and Harvard and Columbia professors. The online platform was sponsored and designed by three local organizations: a civil society organization, and two small social enterprises. However, reconstructing the history of the BEX I was surprised to learn that the initiative did not yet receive funding and has been working with no budget. Investigating the BEX I came to think that the most impressive and striking aspect of the program is that, in essence, the initiative is a grassroots project inspired and coordinated by a group of dedicated young people.

History

The Brain-Exchange program was ideated by two young Thai professionals and students, Ms. Ada Chirapaisarnkl (Ada) and Dr. Santitarn Sathirathai (Tonson). Tonson and Ada met at the Prime Minister's Office in Thailand in mid-2009. Ada was a senior policy analyst, working on developing the Thai Young Philanthropists Network (TYPN) in her free time; Tonson was pursuing a PhD at Harvard Kennedy School and doing his internship at the Prime Minister's office. Talking about their experience and plans, Ada and Tonson discussed the requirement as part of their master programs to complete an internship in a developing country and how their Western colleagues had troubles finding good internships. Could the two help their colleagues set up their internships in Thailand? Wouldn't this also benefit Thai companies?! The Brain Exchange was started out of the consideration that both the demand and supply for international students is high. Ada was looking into ways to mobilize international resources through TYPN and together with Tonson she brainstormed the idea of a Thai Internship Program, later developed into the BEX.

Ada and Tonson started networking in Thailand and in the United States. The Brain-Exchange founders were quick to mobilize all their 'warm' contacts. They pitched the idea to a few Thai organizations: the Maeh Fah Luang Foundation (MFLF), the Office of the Prime Minister, the Social Enterprise Promotion Committee and ChangeFusion. Meanwhile, they proposed the initiative to Harvard and Colombia University. The first students that came to Thailand read about the internships through the two universities' career centers. This pilot of the Brain-Exchange was labeled as the 'Thai Internship Program'.

Throughout 2010, Ada and Tonson continued their work. The ideology behind the initiative as well as their marketing language became more specific and it was clearly summarized in a 4 pages proposal that they used to gain endorsement from various politicians and professors. The Brain-Exchange became one of the pillars of TYPN, an active network of 'young determined professionals with a common goal to make a positive impact to Thailand'².

It was in this period of excitement and attention for the program that Sunit, a dynamic social entrepreneur in Bangkok and founder of ChangeFusion, got involved in the program's development. Sunit took interns in the first year (2009) mainly because he was looking for high-calibre individuals to help with his projects and partly because of the ongoing partnership between ChangeFusion and TYPN. After the first batch of interns, however, Sunit saw a great

² To read more about TYPN: <http://www.typn.org/About-Us.html>

potential of the program as a mechanism to attract 'global brains for local development' and, as a result, decided to support the BEX by allocating a working quota ChangeFusion had from OpenDream to create the BEX website. OpenDream, a social enterprise created by a group of young people with a background in ICT and a passion for social innovation, also liked the BEX idea and continued to invest resources even after the work quota that Change Fusion allocated for the BEX terminated. Mr. Patipat Susumpow, co-founder of Opendream, estimates that the value of Opendream's contribution is about 300.000 Baths (equivalent to 10.000 USD). Opendream was able to afford the sum by utilizing a system of cross subsidization which charges businesses that can afford their services to support social initiatives.

While the website was being developed, with Ada being the main point of reference for OpenDream, Tonson was still working to gather support for the Brian Exchange and to put together an advisory board aimed at increasing the legitimacy to the initiative. In short, a lot of time and hard work but no monetary transaction took place to launch the Brain-Exchange initiative as it is today.

In the first months of 2012 when this study is being carried out, the BEX website has been up and running for little more than a year. It still operates with no budget. Meanwhile, its founders have had to face 'the real world' and have both been heavily engaged with their personal life and carrier growth. What will be the future of the BEX? The next section will discuss its meaningfulness as a development program. This paper will try to place this history of the BEX into perspective, discussing practical ways Thai society and beyond can learn, evolve, and capitalize on the passion of Ada, Tonson, Patipat, Sunit, and all the other young people that have worked to ideate and concretize the Thai Brain-Exchange.

Section IV: Ideological Baggage of the Brain-Exchange

To understand how the Brain-Exchange is a ‘development’ project, I will place the initiative in a broader theoretical framework. Today, however, it is widely agreed that beyond the technology-gap that divides ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries it is ideas and innovations that ignite the mechanisms for economic and social change. Knowledge is today understood as a resource that determines the ability of a country to compete in the global market. In this sense it is not technology in itself that brings about development, but rather how technology is developed and utilized to address specific needs (Avgerou, 2010) (Olaniyan and Okemakinde, 2008).

Since technology is the product of knowledge, fostering education and human capital development is a more sustainable answer to addressing gaps in technology and know-how (Son, 2010). These ideas have promoted a development approach that stresses knowledge sharing between developed and developing countries (World Bank, 2003).

ICTs have been identified as an important tool to promoting knowledge sharing and a process of collaboration. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are today unavoidably an integral part of a country’s development path. This was emphasized during the 2005 United Nations Summits, which anticipated the creation of The Global Alliance for Information and Communication Technologies and Development (GAID) and was approved by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2006 (GAID, 2012). Attention to ICTs has grown hand in hand with the idea of the development of a ‘global partnership’. In particular, it became apparent that to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) development actors had to start working together more proactively and in coordination; ICTs were identified as key tools to achieve MDG 8, which calls for the creation of a ‘global partnership’ (GAID, 2012). Yet, ‘knowledge sharing’ and ‘global partnerships’ are easier said than done. For example, there is a strong cultural and contextual component which determines how information is deciphered and understood and as Hutchings & Mohannak (2007; 4) point out, ‘knowledge is constructed across a variety of cultural contexts’. Culture also determines the way technology is applied to a local context and the effectiveness of international partnerships and exchanges.

The BEX represents a very interesting experiment fusing ICT, knowledge sharing and inter-cultural exchange to further local development. Moreover, the BEX fits perfectly in the Thailand strategy to utilize ICT are also part of Thailand Human Resource Development strategy (Thuvasethakul & Pooparadai, 2003) (Ahuja, Chucherd, and Pootrakool, 2006). To

begin, the BEX model fosters an idea of international collaboration and alliance. Linking between international universities to local organizations, the BEX encourages a more fluid exchange of ideas. The networks promoted by the BEX go beyond this exchange between university students and Thai organizations. Students bring along with them their experience and make the Thai organization part of their present and future networks.

Meanwhile, this exchange is also filtered and understood through cultural differences. The BEX's role in facilitating cultural exchange and dialogue is not spelled out very explicitly in the program's website. Yet, the connection between cultural exchange and the 'development' process is valuable and worth exploring. While discussing the BEX program with companies who have hosted interns through the program, it emerged that employers generally understand the initiative, not as one that will exclusively bring benefits to their company, but rather to Thailand as a whole. Employers recognize that by living and working in Thailand, foreign students will understand Thai culture and environment more profoundly, and their positive experience in Thailand will make them 'Thai ambassadors' when returning to their home country. This 'bond' with Thailand that students develop during the internship is significant in building long-term partnerships between BEX interns and Thai organizations. Such partnerships, as next session will suggest, can make the knowledge sharing process more sustainable.

The intercultural exchange the BEX promotes transcends nationality and race. The BEX also facilitates a bridging or a dialogue between organizational cultures which, as Tharp points out are 'constructed socially and affected by environment and history' (2009; 5) . The added value provided by interns stems from the different perspectives they bring to the host organization. Because of the diverse education system and life experience that the interns bring along, stepping into a new environment they understand organizational dynamics and work in a unique way, distinct from the Thai colleagues. In this sense, given that the students are put in a position to share and discuss their perceptions and opinions, the internship could become an important source of reflection and innovation for the host company.

These knowledge sharing mechanisms fostered by the Brain-Exchange are meaningful in two ways. At the organizational level, the quality of human resources is very indicative of a company's productivity and capacity to innovate (Arokiasamy & Ismail, 2009). The BEX facilitates the availability of cheap qualified human resources into Thai organizations. Students bring skills, fresh energy and ideas, but most importantly they are put in the position to translate their skills, energy, and ideas to fit the Thai as well as the organizational cultural context. While

of course this process is neither automatic nor obvious, the BEX does have the potential to facilitate a more culturally sensitive knowledge sharing process.

Culturally appropriate knowledge could also mean more sustainable, effective knowledge. In fact, the scope of the BEX is much broader than the internship program itself. The Brain-Exchange promotes research in Thailand by students and young professionals that will most likely continue working in the development field. In this sense, the program is fostering an interest in Thailand's development process. Next to inspiring more research and attention for Thailand, the experience with Thai culture also means that the policies and research produced by international interns will tend to be more in touch with and informed about the local reality.

Section V: Program Evaluation

Strengths

A year and a half after the launch of the Brain-Exchange program, the initiative can take pride in various achievements. The committed and qualified group of young people behind the initiative was able to engage well-connected advisors so that the program is highly respected in between the Thai organizations that have joined the initiative so far. Moreover, its users find the BEX website accessible and easy to use with a powerful marketing language in terms of explaining the program's vision and value to student and companies.

The BEX does not introduce itself as another internship program, instead it reaches a niche of organizations and students by making a connection between the exchange program and the Thai development process. This connection is integral to the marketing language utilized by the BEX website and it sets the program aside from competitors creating a unique selling point for the BEX. Answering the question 'what do we mean by opportunities in the "development" field?', the BEX finds it useful to conceptualize the loose, confusing and overused term 'development' more specifically (BEX Website, 2012). The Brain-Exchange categorizes the opportunities available in the platform in four types: 1. government policy advisory work; 2. research to evaluate policies and programs; 3. assisting local and social programs; 4. providing consultancy services for social enterprises and corporations active in the CSR sector. By narrowing down the type of internships offered, the BEX program targets students particularly dedicated to and specialized in the field of development. Moreover, the focus on high profile students leads companies to value the opportunity to recruit interns, which should encourage them to maximize the interns' contributions.

How exactly do international brains benefit a Thai organization? One of the biggest selling points of the BEX, is the idea that local organizations can 'raise your organization profile at a global scale'. Despite the appeal of this cliché, in the interviews conducted for this study it emerged that this raise in status is hard to measure and put in evidence. For this reason, although it is a catchy point to attract companies to join the program at first, it is not among the most discussed benefits brought by the internship.

Realistically, having a Harvard student working in a company does not magically make the organization famous on the global scale. However, it might represent a small step towards giving a more international flavor to the organization. To begin, the presence of an English

speaker pushes the staff of an organization to practice their language skills. For example, many Thai people have studied English in school but might be shy or intimidated to practice. Being in contact with the language on a daily basis over an extended period of time is a valuable human resources ‘training program’ and among the most valuable byproducts of the internship noted by employers.

Another factor that can contribute to raising the company to global status is the process of knowledge sharing between the intern and the organization. As discussed above, skill transfer is an important element of the development project. Surely, both students and organizations have many skills to learn from each other. However, employees have pointed out that finding the forum to consolidate this learning process is not always possible. The length of the internship, among others, might hinder this process. In this sense, in order for knowledge transfer to occur there needs to be a conscious and focused intent to facilitate the process.

Instead, what emerged from the interviews is that the presence of interns facilitates a very valuable exchange of ideas and opinions, with a potential to inspire innovation and foster creativity. Here it is important to mention again that this enriching exchange is more an opportunity that companies and students can choose to seize and manage well, that an automatic benefit of the internships. Thai people tends to score high on the Hofstede’s power distance dimension (Hofstede Website, Thailand Profile) suggesting they are very keen on respecting strict power structures and respect protocol. Thai people are also more likely to avoid conflict compared to Western Cultures (for a discussing of this Talent Technology, 2010). For this reasons, students might not be put in the position to engage with deeper, more controversial topics, and open and direct discussion could be perceived as overly confrontational. Nevertheless, several of the people I interviewed stressed that, with sensitivity from both sides, discussions and exchanges can shake some opinions and instigate more reflexivity. Such exchange is just as valuable for the company as it is for the intern.

Interestingly, during interviews employees stressed the cultural exchange happening through the internships as the most remarkable feature of the program. Here it should be specified that the Thai firms that have been involved with the program so far are all organizations with a more international character. This is the case because without at least a few English speakers, it would be very hard to manage the internship at all. In addition, many of the people in leadership positions of these organizations have themselves studies abroad, especially in Europe or the United States, and have therefore a good grasp of, and often an appreciation for, Western cultures and education systems.

Thailand is famous for white beaches, wonderful architecture, good food and smiles. Tourism is a key industry of the country and visitors learn about Thailand in a very tourist friendly environment. The people I interviewed mentioned and recognized that living and working in Thailand students would be able to gain a more insightful understanding of Thailand, and become ‘cultural ambassadors’ of the country as they move on and advance with their careers. This cultural exchange should therefore not be intended as one-sided or simply a way to transfer Western skills, working style, and culture into Thai firms. Taking pride in their culture, employers also view the internships as an opportunity to share and promote Thailand.

The BEX website also mentions the opportunity to build ‘long term partnerships’ with students as another talking point for the program. At this point in the history of the BEX, it is hard to assess the participating organizations’ success in consolidating their relationship with students. However, cultural exchange is an important base to build a bond between the interns and both the specific organization and Thailand as a whole; this bond if sustained can translate into a long lasting relationship. Moreover, word of mouth between students and their friends and colleagues is a very powerful tool to create more support for Thai firms and their work.

Weaknesses

Considering the program’s grassroots nature, the BEX’s success is very closely linked to the time, efforts and dedication of the volunteers behind the initiative. The online platform of the BEX is updated and requires little maintenance work. However, because the program is still not well established, to sustain the momentum and facilitate more internships a lot effort needs to be put into promoting the program both in Thailand and abroad. In this section the weaknesses of the program will be divided into two broad areas: the restrictions that relate to the BEX team’s management capacity, and the broader constraints that limit the impact of BEX internships.

To enhance its influence, the BEX needs to be more widely known. Currently, the program lacks a strategy to systematically reach out to students and companies beyond the network accessed through the efforts of the young people that have launched the program. This means that many Thai organizations that would greatly benefit from the opportunity simply do not know about the program. Consequently, with few opportunities posted, students do not find good matches and the Thai firms lose opportunity to recruit good students.

As discussed above, the BEX's choice to target a niche of specialized students is a valuable strategy to recruit motivated students; so far, companies have had very positive experiences with the interns they have hosted. However, this choice might also create the impression that the program is only designed for 'development students' while students of other disciplines who could do very valuable work and share important skills are not directly engaged. Promoting the Brain-Exchange to a variety of academic programs could be an important strategy to expand the pool of students applying for the internships. Yet, as mentioned in the history of the Brain-Exchange, the initiative has been developed without a budget. For this reason, limited resources have been invested in promoting the BEX and the program has been growing slowly in the last year.

The limited time that the BEX team can dedicate to the organization also implies that the program has not been able to develop its added value in terms of facilitating students and organizations to organize structured and useful internships. During the pilot phase of the project, networking events were organized regularly; however, recently the BEX has not had the capacity to build more personal relationships with the interns. Forums to investigate and learn from the experiences organizations are having with the program are also nonexistent.

Several limitations to the impact of internships themselves have emerged from this research. To begin, language barriers hinder the scope of the internship. Since the interns tend to spend short periods of time with an organization (1-3 months on average), and they do not speak Thai, it is harder for them to be integrated and contribute to the core business of an organization. Moreover, while workers who have a good grasp of the English language can practice their English, a thick wall separates the interns from the workers that do not speak it sufficiently well. For this reason, in many cases the students work on projects individually, reducing the time they are exposed to the other employees; this also limits their ability to engage in discussion, bond, learn and share skills. At last, while the internship might be 'cheap' for the host organization, the human resources and time that it is needed to set up the internship, communicate with the student, and arrange the details represent a consistent investment. Both the firms and the student should keep these weaknesses in mind to design internships that can maximize benefits despite the structural limitations.

Opportunities

The Brain-Exchange has been launched with little resources and a lot of resourcefulness. This section will focalize on some of the opportunities that the program could seize; recognizing the project's potential is essential to catalyzing more resources for its development.

The BEX has great potential to engage and benefit more Thai firms while allowing more international students to gain relevant experience in Thailand. This is especially true because of the BEX's market niche. In Europe and North America, internships have become part of the curriculum required for a good university formation. With the economic slowdown of the last years, internships have become increasingly competitive (despite remaining mostly unpaid) and numerous organizations even charge fees for internships in developing countries. Internships are a controversial and debated topic. In the last couple of years several articles in main international newspapers have discussed the internship market as unfair unpaid work³. Students often feel overqualified and exploited. Yet, very qualified students are making costly investments to work for a company for free. In fact, internships are recognized as valuable work experience necessary to find a paid employment; students who can afford them take up the opportunity and are glad for the experience.

Internship through the Brain-Exchange are not per se 'paid', yet they possess several competitive advantages. Interns do need to cover the cost of flying to Thailand. However, with living expenses being considerably lower in Thailand and often being covered by the host firm, the cost of the flight ends up being no higher than the cost of living and paying rent in London or New York. Moreover, according to a recent study, interns' job satisfaction and their ability to contribute to the organization is related to the level of mentoring and attention that organization are able to provide to direct the student (Liu, Xu and Weitz, 2011). BEX students are motivated from being truly appreciated and valued by Thai organizations that respect their education and are honored to be their host and show case Thailand. This makes the dynamics involved in doing an internship in Thailand through the BEX more appealing. Students are also rewarded by the idea of contributing to the development of the organization and of the country, aware that the company is investing in them and dedicated to making the experience pleasant. Meanwhile, especially since the program is designed for student in the development field, working in Thailand adds a more exotic and unique field experience to their resume. These

³ See for example the debate on Interns Anonymous: <http://internsanonymous.co.uk/>.

considerations, if coupled with the fact that Thailand is beautiful and fun, give the BEX a very strong competitive edge.

In order to gain access to the students that would be interested in doing internships in Thailand, the BEX needs to develop a more systematic way to reach out to them. Developing partnerships with master programs and universities would facilitate the recruiting program and ensure a more stable flow of interns every year. For example, the BEX piloted the program with partnerships with Colombia and Harvard. These partnerships have been effective and there are opportunities to expand the scope of the cooperation by maintaining and consolidating them; the BEX would also benefit from building similar relationships with other programs.

At the same time, more partnerships could also be made with local Thai firms as more positions available would attract more students and attract more of the students' registrations to the site to be translated into actual internships. During the course of my research I interacted with several organizations that would very easily fit in the 'international development' sphere but simply did not know about the Brain-Exchange program. At this stage of the initiative, in order to encourage companies to register on the Brain-Exchange website more information needs to be made available and the program needs to be pitched and clearly explained to organizations. As the program strengthens, word of mouth will be a powerful recruiting tool for students and organizations.

At last, the program is heavily concentrated on connecting Western Students with Thai organizations. Limiting the scope will potentially translate into a missed opportunity for the BEX. Attending a recent conference organized by The Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS) on 'the Association of Southeast Asian Nations 'ASEAN' between China and the United States', several speakers mentioned that one of the biggest obstacles to further integration of ASEAN is the lack for a cultural integration in the region. In particular, Dr. Sathirathai (2012) suggested that Thai people are often better equipped at dealing with Western Cultures than with the people in the ASEAN region. The Brain-Exchange could be a powerful tool for Thai institutions to build relationships with other emerging universities in ASEAN. For example, Thai firms could benefit from hosting students from universities in the ASEAN University Network, which could in fact be approached as a partner⁴. Beyond ASEAN, it would also be worth for the BEX internships to reach to the fast growing economies of India and China where investments in education have been high and universities are expanding rapidly.

⁴ ASEAN University Network: <http://www.aun-sec.org/>

Considering the BEX's potential in terms of fostering cultural exchange, it would be a missed opportunity for Thailand not to capitalize on the program in order to build deeper bonds, partnerships and cultural exchanges with its Asian neighbors.

Next to recruiting and expanding the reach of the program, the BEX can also take steps to enlarge the prospect for internships to be impactful. Beyond facilitating the matching process, more resources would allow the organizers of the BEX to create events to facilitate knowledge transfer between students and organizations. A more active and involved program in Thailand could be coordinated by the TYPN who is already very dedicated to creating a sense of connectedness and a dynamic networking space for people in Thailand passionate about philanthropy and development.

Threats

The Brain-Exchange program is in an important moment of its growth history. It has the potential to enlarge its scope and impact but it also risks losing in dynamism. The lack of allocated resources for the project is a concrete and serious threat to the Brain-Exchange's growth. While a budget, even if limited, could facilitate the scaling of the program, the inability of the BEX team and founders to dedicate time and energy to the program would seriously damage it. Maintaining the program requires constant work. Promoting the BEX is crucial to the expansion of the program; on the other hand, the lack of promotion would risk limiting the ability of students and organizations to be presented with sufficient choice and find a suitable match. This would discourage both parts from registering to the website. This process would also limit the role of word of mouth marketing and could bring bad publicity to the BEX.

Similarly, also the technological platform of the BEX website will require constant updating. Considering that the ICT industry changes rapidly, without proper renovations and the website risks becoming outdated in the future. In short, the dedication to the program on the side of TYPN, OpenDream and ChangeFusion is a very fundamental prerequisite to the program's future success. In the same way, the willingness of the private or public sector to believe and support this initiative will be key deciding factors in the BEX's future developments.

SWOT Analysis Summarizing Table

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>BEX Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and easy to use website • Respectable and well-connected team and board • Valuable partnerships and successful pilot project • Market a specific niche of people ‘passionate about development’ • Confirmed win-win perception for students and companies <p>Impact of BEX internships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On job training (English language etc) • Internationalization of local firms • Cultural exchange! • Creativity and innovation • Long term partnerships • Soft, cultural diplomacy • More research on Thailand development projects available 	<p>BEX Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No sustainability strategy • No full time staff or budget • Lack of human resources available • Little marketing for the program <p>Impact of BEX internships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barrier is a problem • Internship length might limit impact • Hard to integrate interns with core business
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing market niche • BEX as regional integration tool • Marketing and recruiting through partnerships and word of mouth • Maximize the added value of BEX 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With no recruiting efforts, risk of becoming inactive • With no regular updates, website would become outdated • With no constant flow of students and organizations registering on the BEX’s site, less chance to find a suitable match (problems with reputation and word of mouth recruiting).

Section VI: Recommendations

With an attempt to make this study practical and useful, this section presents some recommendations intended to amplify the impact of the Thai Brain-Exchange and to provide some initial guidance on setting up similar platforms in other developing countries.⁵

Engage more Thai firms- Increasing the number of firms posting internship positions on the Brain-Exchange website is critical to making the program more appealing to students and increasing the flow of internships. So far, the organizations registered have been introduced to the BEX exchange via ‘warm contacts’. In order to register to the program, Thai firms should to be introduced and explained the program in detail. A more formal and personalized ‘commencement’ might be necessary and email or phone interaction might not be sufficient to recruit more organizations especially in this early stage of the program development.

In order to reach and propose the program to more organizations at once, the Brain-Exchange team could organize an event presenting the BEX’s model to a range of interested organizations. This event would outline the advantages and implications of registering on the website. Events of this sort could be also used as an opportunity for the BEX team to understand what challenges might prevent organizations from joining the program and brainstorm how they could be overcome.

Engage more students: Next to ensuring more internship positions, the BEX team should focus on reaching to more international students. Possible strategies to engage students could be maximizing the BEX’s presence on social networking sites and building strategic partnerships with university and specific master and PhD programs.

Creating a profile for the Brain-Exchange on sites like www.idealists.org (US based) or <http://www.charity-works.co.uk> (UK based) which tend to attract people with a passionate for development work would allow the BEX to connect with the specific niche of students that has been targeted by the program. Publicizing the Brain-Exchange on a range of online recruiting websites would also provide an additional service to Thai organizations searching for interns

⁵ Many of the recommendations in this section have emerged in the interviewed I had with various Brain Exchange stakeholders. This section was also informed by a brainstorming session following a talk on: ‘The Thai Brain Exchange program- History, Evaluation and future opportunities’ organized on February 9th, 2012 at the International Institute for Trade and Development, Bangkok.

which could recruit simply by posting on the centralized BEX platform instead of spending more time engaging with multiple websites. In addition, the BEX could reach to more students and maximize the peer-to-peer recruiting by managing a facebook, linked-in and twitter account.

Meanwhile, building partnerships directly with universities would allow the BEX to develop more targeted, tailored internships. Partnering with university programs directly could be particularly effective for research internships, as arrangements could be made to allow students to do research in Thailand as part of their course assignments. Moreover, instead of focusing exclusively on development programs, it would be interesting to reach out to business schools, environment programs, or other curricula matching the specific interests of Thai organizations.

Enhance the BEX's added values: The Brain-Exchange is intended as more than a simple website or matching service between interns and organizations. An important selling point of the BEX's model is that of providing 'well-structured programs with clear scope of work, close supervision by local staff, and unique cultural exposure' (BEX Proposal Draft, August 2009). Implementing an early idea of the BEX to allocate 'Thai internship partners' recruited among Thai graduates or volunteers to oversee the work and learning process of the interns could turn out very effective; it would allow both international students and their Thai colleagues to benefit from the exchange by promoting cultural and knowledge transfer.

In addition, it is highly recommended for hosting organization to spell out clearly the responsibilities for supervising and supporting the international interns. Not doing so could create tension in the office environment. In fact, supervising the intern will require investments of time and effort, and the extra work could create pressure on staff members if the additional workload is not appropriately accounted for.

Hire staff: As discussed, the unavailability of a budget has been the most critical obstacle to the Brain-Exchange. The most valuable asset of the program is the highly skilled and dedicated team behind the initiative. However, as the BEX team is increasingly busy with their career and life, the time and resources they are able to dedicate to the initiative becomes more scarce. The initiative has reached a stage of maturity, where its value and potential is easily recognizable; to be maintained and developed, the Brain-Exchange needs investments.

In order to promote and develop the program, additional work is required from the BEX team. Hiring staff (even if on a temporary basis or part time) would speed the program's growth consistently as most of the volunteers currently involved with the BEX are engaged in

other full-time activities. The hired staff should be encouraged to focus on more systematic recruitment strategies.

Recruiting interns could be a very cost-efficient strategy to develop the program. In particular, international interns would be apt for establishing partnerships with international universities.

Allocate funding for knowledge sharing and networking events: As part of enhancing the added value of the Brain-Exchange for both the students and Thai organizations, more networking and knowledge sharing events could be organized. Three types of events would be particularly effective:

1. *Networking events for interns and local students*; Networking events would improve the sense of connectedness among interns and their local colleagues. There would be opportunities for interns to process their experience and provide a further forum for knowledge sharing. Building bonds with local students would also increase the possibility for interns to maintain a stronger connection with Thailand and engage with other local projects.

TYPN is in a good position to organize peer to peer networking events and the TYPN community already involves a range of proactive youth that could be interested in meeting and engaging with BEX interns. Organizations hosting interns could be invited to make donations to sponsor the events.

2. *Presentations, brainstorming and knowledge sharing sessions with students and companies*; Formal and informal knowledge sharing sessions would ensure that the work of international interns has a broad reach. Presentations and brainstorming sessions at the end of an intern would represent a way to gratify the interns and expose their work and achievement. Importantly, the events could be a way for Thai organizations to network, and to discuss cooperation initiatives.

Such sessions could be organized and sponsored directly by host organizations. It would be useful for the Brain-Exchange staff to present the host organization with the advantage of organizing these events presenting them as integral part of the BEX program.

3. *Networking events and sharing sessions between hosting organizations and BEX staff*; By sharing their experience, Thai organizations could improve their management of international interns and learn how to maximize their impact in an organizations. Informal sharing sessions among the people in charge of interns within Thai organizations active with the BEX would be also an important occasion to discuss and process the acquired knowledge on intercultural communication. It would be useful for Brain-Exchange staff to take a role in coordinating and moderating such events that could be sponsored directly by interested organizations.

4. *Create forums for alumni and interns to share their experience:* A simple facebook group for the BEX where students and organizations can keep in touch and share their experience would help create a sense of participation among BEX interns, strengthen the legitimacy of the BEX in the eyes of international students and provide a link to sustain longer term connections between companies and interns. The Facebook group could also be a venue to post new job opportunities available on the BEX website for students interested in working in Thailand.

5. Manage Expectations

Set up interviews between organizations and students: When recruiting interns, it is really hard to understand how their contribution could be maximized simply reviewing their resume. For this reason, companies have found that usually it is only when the intern arrives to Thailand that they are able to discuss more concretely their role and tasks. However, clarifying expectations and talking about the details of the internship beforehand could really facilitate the internship outcome. Even a quick phone/Skype interview would allow the firm to present itself and the student to gain a better idea of the type of environment s/he will be getting in. It would be also useful to have both the student and employee agreeing on the expected output of the internship. While this might not always be possible, and flexibility is an essential asset in maximizing short-term internships, steps to better manage expectations could be valuable tools to improve the firm-intern relations.

Brief companies and interns on intercultural communication: The BEX could provide a very valuable resource for Thai organizations looking to host international interns by providing printed material and/or briefing sessions to cope with intercultural dynamics. Simply collecting some anecdotes and tips on hosting international staff would provide organizations with valuable material to make the most out of their relations with the BEX interns.

Section VII. Conclusion

When I first started studying the Brain-Exchange, I was not expecting to be researching a grassroots, volunteer initiative. Ironically, I found myself exploring dynamics that I have been experiencing first hand in my work developing Recrear: the struggles, problem solving attitude and ideas of a program articulated by a group of young students and professionals with a vision for their society. In a United Nations policy guide on youth and development (UN, 2010), it is stressed that development assistance should not limit itself to intending youth as target beneficiaries, focusing on their needs, problems or threats. Instead, it should view young people as partners and leaders paying attention to their strengths and opportunities. Young people are powerful agents of change and a true asset to the development process.

At Recrear, we like to say that young people are the present of development. Yet, we believe that in order for this to be true, young people themselves need to first of all take themselves seriously. The Brain-Exchange program is a wonderful example of youths taking their ideas and drive very seriously. At the same time, for youths to be impact-full in their work, society at large needs to be able to see youths as assets. Projects that are started by young people don't need to remain grassroots. Innovative and ingenious ideas should be in constant dialogue with other processes and initiatives. In this way good ideas can be nourished and supported, and their impact amplified.

I think the Brain-Exchange is an initiative that deserves and should be taken seriously. The process the Brain-Exchange founders have worked on in order to gather resources to launch the initiative represents a valuable case study of the collaboration between civil society, and the private and public sectors in order to promote cost efficient innovative solutions. The energy, passion and vision that has been invested in the Brain-Exchange are impressive; yet, sustaining the momentum for the initiative has been very challenging because of the lack of resources available. I believe that these collaborative relationships need to be upgraded in order for the Brain-Exchange program to mature.

In this paper I analyzed the BEX suggesting recommendations to capitalize on the programs opportunity, minimize its weaknesses and maintain and consolidate its strengths. My wish is for this paper to provide direction, motivation and energy for the BEX team to move forward with the initiative. It is also my hope that this study will support the Brain-Exchange in being identified as a valuable development strategy that should receive support and investments.

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