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Malaysian team clinches 2021 APEC Digital Prosperity Award for developing travel app

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The winning team. From Left: Amjad Ali Alhaneesh, Faisal Ariff, Sherman Peter and Nik Emir Rizan Sulaiman. — Picture courtesy of Faisal Ariff

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 13 — Two weeks was all it took for Faisal Ariff and his team from Malaysia to develop a mobile app to help travellers move around safely in the Asia-Pacific region, before eventually emerging victorious in the recently announced 2021 APEC Digital Prosperity Award.

As fitting as it sounds for this year's theme of "Getting People Moving Again", the APEC Traveller App developed by Faisal and his team was primarily designed with the goal of supporting the resumption of tourism in the region.

"The funny part was that it was perhaps too quick, to the point where the judges wondered whether we really did all of that in just two weeks.

"In the end they told us we didn't win the App Challenge, but they wanted to put us up for the APEC Digital Prosperity Award instead. It was a nice surprise!" Faisal Ariff, a former fund manager turned start-up founder told *Malay Mail.*

The annual prize had been [announced](#) by New Zealand's Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta at the APEC Ministerial Meeting she hosted along with New Zealand's Minister of Agriculture for Trade and Export Growth Damien O'Connor on November 9.

Besides Faisal, other winning team members are Amjad Ali Alhaneesh, Sherman Peter and Nik Emir Rizan Sulaiman.

Faisal, who is also the founder of BorderPass, attributed their success to the team's seven years of experience which had allowed them to incorporate various features such as facial recognition, passport readers, optical character recognition and QR codes relatively quickly within the two-week period.

With global vaccinations on full rollout to curb the spread of Covid-19, countries have begun to resume international travel and digital tools have been used to resolve some of the most pressing challenges such as vaccination records of travellers.

Although there are nearly two billion fully vaccinated people in APEC, many will have their own versions of MySejahtera or TraceTogether for vaccination records and testing with some vaccination and testing records still in paper.

MySejahtera is an application developed by the Malaysian government to assist in monitoring Covid-19 outbreak in the country by empowering users to assess their health risks and for contact tracing purposes.

In this case, Faisal explained that the APEC Traveller App uses simple QR codes where the certifying entity in each country can verify that a person has been vaccinated and tested as per the destination's requirements, with identity documents then matched with those records using facial recognition.

"The challenge is ensuring that the destination is aware of these different standards and recognises them, and that's where APEC can act as an intermediary to facilitate this information exchange," he said.

With the Covid-19 pandemic far from over and the need to minimise physical contact, Faisal expressed gratitude that the team only had to come together occasionally to iron out bugs.

What does the future hold?

With the groundwork now laid, Faisal said the team will work at continually improving the app since it is part of the group's broader proposal to automate the APEC immigration lane at various airports, including those in Malaysia.

"Looking at past developments, the next real challenge is implementing something useful.

"We have made no secret out of the fact that the app is part of our broader proposal to automate the APEC immigration lane at airports and broaden its use for APEC tourists and business travellers.

"APEC themselves have admitted that they need to automate APEC lanes in a 2014 report and we would love to do the work," he said.

Closer to home, however, Faisal said BorderPass has been in limbo since October 2018 after the Malaysian government embarked on a review of all immigration systems after the team installed its first autogate and personal recognition software at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport 2 in November 2016.

"We ran a very successful and popular free trial at the airport but unfortunately, the government asked us to cease operating at the airport after the 2018 election even though we have no political links and won approvals purely on merit.

"We have been in limbo since, but MOSTI's National Technology and Innovation Sandbox programme has been trying to get us reinstated with the Home Ministry.

"We are ready to modernise the APEC immigration lane with autogates and apps, but we need the International Trade and Industry Ministry (which handles APEC matters) and the Home Ministry (which handles immigration matters) to give us the green light.

Faisal said the revamped service would have to interface with domestic immigration systems of not just Malaysia but other APEC economies as well.

"We really hope that the Malaysian government will give us a chance to automate the APEC lane for tourists and business travellers and realise that this is a broader opportunity for Malaysians to build a regional service," he said.

The winners of the 2021 APEC Digital Prosperity Award were selected from the roster of participants of the 2021 APEC App Challenge, the fifth edition of this event, and open to software developers and designers from all APEC economies.

The APEC Digital Prosperity Award also recognises innovative digital products or applications that have the potential to increase prosperity and inclusive growth and is a joint initiative of APEC New Zealand and the APEC Secretariat, with support from The Asia Foundation and Google.