

Globally Engaged and Locally Relevant: Revisiting Higher Education

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Higher education institutions are grappling with COVID-19 outbreaks on campus, and travel conditions, limited flights, and health concerns are presenting challenges to mobility. To mitigate safety concerns, many universities have introduced a staggered return to campus with options for students to study online or with local partners based overseas, or to start the following term. Anecdotal evidence suggests that universities with flexible learning options are managing overseas student demand relatively well.

While solutions to pressures from all sides are short-term and focused on the current academic cycle, there are some long-term considerations for higher education institutions and policy makers, which we are exploring in this article.

Revisiting International Higher Education

The current barriers to mobility are pressing students to reassess the value of international education. For educators, these barriers present an opportunity to repurpose their higher education offer. For too long, the global race for talent has been measured by the distribution of countries' market share of international students and these students' economic contribution to the host country.

While the current environment favors remote learning and studying near to home, it also presents an opportunity to revisit the value of international education as seen through students' lenses. This goes beyond graduation rates, employment outcomes, and life-changing experiences. Increasingly, globally minded students are environmentally conscious, and their choice of study opportunities is no longer solely focused on career prospects. An institution's carbon footprint and contribution to sustainable development policies globally are likely to become critical decision-making factors for students. The question is whether this change will be demand driven, or whether higher education institutions will take leadership on this matter.

For too long, countries' international education strategies have been export driven. Additionally, universities have adopted a rather simplistic approach when developing their internationalization strategies, which are often lacking critical evidence about the contextual factors that affect demand and supply of higher education. Internationalization at home has growing importance and enables HEIs to develop globally minded citizens, particularly relevant to those without any international mobility experience.

Historically, even at times of global conflict and disruption, universities have been agents of international collaboration. Today, in a period during which the process of internationalization is challenged, the role of universities as "global social enterprises," prioritizing social and environmental benefits and impact on a global scale over their own economic profit, is increasingly important. As part of their broader mandate to develop and educate responsible citizens, universities play a paramount role in promoting inclusion, access to quality education, and sustainability. Such a role will become more prominent in the face of deepening social and economic inequalities globally.

Maintaining Local Relevance

Is it possible for a globally delivered degree to be locally relevant, and how can this balance be achieved? For decades, transnational education has facilitated the local delivery of international qualifications. In times of challenged mobility and travel, there is a growing scope for such delivery. The importance of local partners is heightened by the flexibility that they bring in terms of education delivery—locally facilitated teaching or

Abstract

This article examines current pressures on higher education provision and attempts to draw long-term considerations for institutions and policy makers. It calls for a reconceptualization of international higher education, placing global citizenship at the core of its provision. Such education delivery aims to be locally embedded, globally relevant, and centered on the needs and ambitions of a diverse student population.

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locally assisted online delivery models. In response to the pandemic crisis, some institutions have taken the initiative to offer “study abroad” options for international students in their home country for a semester or longer, until travel conditions improve.

Cost-efficient study abroad options will enjoy growing popularity in the post-COVID-19 recession, which will exert pressure on middle-class families and their ability to educate their children overseas. Near-to-home study options are an opportunity to continue to engage students locally through a network of trusted education partners.

At the same time, internationalization should not be considered as mutually exclusive to local relevance. The “future of work” and the [Fourth Industrial Revolution \(4IR\)](#) shift the emphasis to soft skills, and particularly to personal qualities like adaptability and the ability of graduates to “connect the dots.” These soft skills require universities to provide a dynamic learning environment where students are placed outside of their comfort zone to discover, explore, and experiment with knowledge beyond their local context.

Environmental Considerations

Engaging with students in their country of residence reduces HEIs’ carbon footprints significantly. Innovative ways of delivering education and quality assurance of remotely delivered programs and assessment are already taking place.

The pandemic has brought into focus the significant environmental footprint of higher education, both in terms of student travel and academic staff mobility. Although there is a clear justification for the value of immersing an international student into the learning environment of a different country, there is now broad agreement that a substantial amount of academic staff mobility can be substituted by online collaboration.

The Way Forward

International student mobility is a valuable component of international higher education. However, considering the costs and risks involved, an overseas study has to add unique value to the student’s experience. Universities need to assume more actively and transparently their role of global social enterprises. By embracing a global citizenship education agenda, universities should aim to educate global citizens who can comprehend, pursue, and propagate key priorities for society in the twenty-first century.

Even today, the location of the learner is used to distinguish between the different forms, and often the perceived value, of provision—e.g., local, international, or distance. Nevertheless, international higher education does not guarantee an internationalized learning experience. Equally, an internationalized learning experience is possible in locally delivered higher education. Thus, there needs to be a reconceptualization of international higher education so that global citizenship is at the core of its provision, irrespective of the location of the student. Such provision aims to be locally embedded, globally relevant, and centered around the needs and ambitions of a diverse student population. It is through a global delivery model, environmentally conscious and with sustainable development and global citizenship at its heart, that international higher education can remain relevant in the future. ▲

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