

Abstract

Recent surveys on the impacts of COVID-19 on international education agendas and activities in Europe and North America provide important insights into challenges as well as responses taken by the sector. Mobility, agility, and care emerge as key themes framing the current situation and future prospects.

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COVID-19 and Internationalization: Mobility, Agility, and Care

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As we enter the second quarter of 2020, the upheaval caused by the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic is both alarming and difficult to process.

Higher education is hit hard by these developments, and the internationalization agendas and activities of institutions particularly so, given their often heavy reliance on the physical movement and in-person engagement of students, faculty, and staff to advance core interests. The fast-moving nature of the COVID-19 crisis has made it difficult to grasp how the sector is experiencing these developments on a broad scale. However, several national and regional surveys are helping to establish a baseline of information. These preliminary findings are shedding important light on the immediate impacts being felt and responses being taken. They are helping to highlight gaps in resources and levels of preparedness for such crises. Crucially, they are also providing a foundation for understanding what may matter most as we emerge from this crisis: preserving meaningful mobility; ensuring ever greater levels of agility in response to disruption; and fostering the notion of care as a core value in our work.

Mobility: Situation Critical

The European Association for International Education (EAIE) conducted a survey in the period 19 February to 6 March 2020, aimed at individuals working in higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The goal of this exercise was to understand how the outbreak (not yet deemed a pandemic by the World Health Organization) was affecting the internationalization agendas and activities of institutions in the EHEA. Among other issues, the survey also sought to uncover how respondents' institutions were choosing to respond, how they defined their most pressing needs in the face of the current situation, and what they considered to be the most important mid- to longer-term considerations arising from the crisis.

Overlapping in the same time frame (February–March 2020), the Institute of International Education (IIE) conducted a survey on COVID-19 effects at US higher education institutions, while the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) did the same among Canadian institutions.

In all three cases, mobility stands out as the key internationalization activity bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 crisis. In Europe, for example, a majority of respondents (ranging from 51 to 57 percent) considered the effects on mobility—inbound and outbound, for students and for staff—to be “somewhat significant.” An additional 15 to 21 percent perceived these effects to be “very significant.” In the United States, respondents reported that a whopping 94 percent of study abroad programs to China had been postponed or

canceled. Close to 70 percent of the CBIE survey respondents indicated that outbound mobility as well as outgoing missions and travel delegations were among the international education areas most affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Incoming mobility and delegations/missions rounded out the top four most affected activities in the Canadian survey.

Mobility also featured among the top concerns for the future. Nearly 80 percent of Canadian respondents indicated that mobility-related activities were among their “institution’s primary concerns over the next 6–12 months.” In Europe, 291 individuals (out of a total of 805 survey respondents) answered an optional, open-ended question about future concerns, among which some 45 percent expressed concern about future outbound mobility prospects and 40 percent indicated the same regarding future inbound mobility.

The fast pace of developments of the COVID-19 pandemic means that the mobility picture today, not even two months after these surveys were administered, is decidedly different—and bleaker. The uncertainty around how mobility opportunities will be affected in the coming academic year also remains very high, and will clearly be a focal point for planning and recalibration on the part of European and North American institutions in the coming period.

Agility: Essential Ingredient

The need, and the efforts expended, to implement meaningful, timely responses to the crisis stand out as another key finding of the recent surveys in Europe, the United States, and Canada. For example, the EAIE research found that nearly 60 percent of respondents’ institutions were actively implementing a COVID-19 response plan, and another 14 percent were in the process of developing such a plan. In Canada, 45 percent of respondents indicated that their institution was currently implementing a response plan, while more than 43 percent reported a plan in development.

Beyond the existence of formal response plans, the surveys also shed light on some of the specific ways that institutions were trying to meet the needs of constituents. Communication and information dissemination efforts featured as a major—if not the major—action line in both North America and Europe. In all cases, however, the desire for better access to the most current intelligence, as well as to examples that can inform good practice, was evident. Waiting is one option: the IIE survey (which focused on the effects related to China programs and Chinese students) found that “about one in five institutions (20 percent) indicated that they do not have current plans in place for alternative recruitment, and many of these institutions indicated that they are waiting for the situation to evolve.”

However, with the closing of many national borders and the instigation of a wide array of travel restrictions since the administration of these surveys, action has overtaken a wait-and-see approach in many quarters. For example, the mass migration of teaching and learning activities to online platforms across Europe and North America in recent weeks shows that a focus on agility has clearly moved center-stage. Of course, the ramifications of these decisions on the “international experiences” of students and staff (not to mention the administrative implications of, for example, Erasmus mobility grant payments) will require a great deal more focus on just how “agile” our institutions and international partnership frameworks can really be.

Care: The Tie That Binds

The ability of the international education community—in Europe, North America, and elsewhere—to weather the storm created by the COVID-19 pandemic will depend on many factors; first and foremost, may be the ability to place “care” at the center of the effort. The fact that the EAIE, IIE, and CBIE surveys generated input from nearly 1,000 different institutions across both regions at a time of enormous professional (and potentially personal) stress for respondents, speaks to the seriousness with which European and North American international education professionals are taking this situation. There is a genuine desire to connect and pool information and intelligence.

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The nature of reported efforts also demonstrates that “care”—in the form of working to ensure student and staff safety and wellbeing, keeping relationships with partners warm, aiming to deliver messaging that is both accurate and reassuring, etc.—is actively informing approaches to this complex situation. Given the very real human cost of this pandemic, smart but, equally, sensitive responses will likely prove to be most effective for sustaining the field.

Moving forward, the early days’ data provided by these recent surveys will serve as an important benchmark against which further developments can be gauged and future responses to disruption can be thoughtfully crafted. ▲