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COVID-19: The Internationalization Revolution That Isn't

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis will have major implications for global student mobility, with declines overall, most probably from China. Additional implications will be felt concerning internationalization generally. Universities and national systems relying on international student enrollments for income are likely to suffer a significant blow. However, overall, it is likely that the broader trends of recent years will continue, but only after considerable disruption.

The coronavirus crisis is upending higher education—as well as economies and the lives of millions of individuals around the world. Universities closed, with teaching canceled or put online. Conferences have been called off. Of direct relevance to international higher education, prospective students have been unable to take examinations, and international students have been unable to travel to their campuses or to return home. Study abroad programs have been canceled. Faculty members have been asked not to travel to affected countries—or to avoid foreign travel entirely. The immediate implications and inconveniences are likely to increase as the coronavirus spreads to more countries and affects larger numbers of people.

What will be the medium- and longer-term implications of the coronavirus crisis? Basically—not much! There are colleagues who see an unintended positive impact on higher education, in particular on the increase of online teaching and learning and the related cut in carbon footprint, and on more diverse international student recruitment policy, reducing dependence on one or two main countries, especially China. We are afraid that the realities and trends evident in international higher education are likely to remain, and that higher education will quickly return to normal routines—but perhaps with even less financial stability than is now the case in many countries and institutions.

Mobility

Without question, there will be declines in global student mobility and with particular implications for the number of students coming from China to the rest of the world. This temporary decline accompanies an end to the Chinese student boom of the past two decades. Thus, there is likely to be a significant temporary decline and longer-term, more modest decrease, although China will remain the largest single sending country for the foreseeable future.

Following the end of the coronavirus crisis, there may be a restructuring of mobility patterns. Over time, there have been changes in patterns and flows of international students. At one time, Iran was one of the main sending countries—it no longer plays much of a role. Brazil and Saudi Arabia have declined, while Vietnam and to some extent India have increased. Future increases will come from Africa—mainly from Nigeria and

Kenya. We have already seen destination patterns modestly swing away from Europe, North America, and Australia to Asia and the Middle East. Our guess is that overall numbers will not rapidly increase and may well somewhat decline, and that preferred destinations may change. The United States, increasingly seen as unwelcoming, will likely decline. But the traditional pattern of international study will continue.

Financial Dependence on International Students

Some receiving countries, most notably Australia and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom, and some less prestigious colleges and universities in the United States have become dependent on international student tuition fees as an important part of their financial survival. After all, international education is an estimated US$300-billion-dollar industry globally. The coronavirus crisis shows that this dependence is deeply problematic: it is likely that institutions dependent on this income will face significant problems. The crisis might signal that seeing international education mainly as an income generator is undesirable from many viewpoints, but one has to fear it will not. Indeed, governments and academic institutions may double down on their recruitment efforts.

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Technology's Impact on Mobility?

Many universities are now teaching their students through distance education since campuses in many places have been closed, and much success has been reported anecdotally. It is indeed impressive that universities have been quickly shifting all, or a substantive part of their courses to the Internet. But we are somewhat skeptical that what is being offered is of high quality or that students are very satisfied with the new situation. Most faculty members worldwide are not trained to offer distance courses, do not have the sophisticated technology necessary for high-quality teaching and learning, and have not adapted their curricula to the Web. We know from our own experience over the past few years with our master's degree in international higher education at Boston College how difficult it is to create an interactive and effective classroom environment online, due to limitations in technology and lack of experience and appropriate equipment for students and staff. There are many aspects and modalities to take into account: asynchronized or synchronized teaching, how to manage group discussions effectively online, and how to organize assignments and exams online. These are only some of the questions that require attention. Of course, effective online learning and teaching are possible, but it takes time and support. Making these changes quickly is a guarantee of low quality. And quality drops further when most students are lacking sufficient equipment at home, such as poor internet connection or a lack of privacy. So, let us not idealize the current shift to online!

Some have argued that degree studies aimed at international students might increasingly go completely "online." This has been predicted before and has been modestly successful only for continuing education. It is much more likely that international students, for the most part, will continue to prefer the experience of studying in another country, also because many seek employment overseas, either temporary or permanent, following their studies.

The Impact on Study Abroad

Thousands of students from North America and Europe who were engaged in carefully planned, semester-long or shorter study abroad programs have been called home. While temporarily problematic from many perspectives, it is unlikely that these programs will suffer long-term declines. It will more likely increase the trend for shorter periods of mobility (less than eight weeks) and dependence on "safe" countries. As we have seen, France and Spain soon recovered their preferred status after the terrorist attacks they suffered, and the same will happen with Italy.

Strategic Planning

Without question, the coronavirus crisis is a serious problem for societies and individuals, and for higher education. But the crisis will eventually pass, and, at least in the areas of higher education internationalization, the status quo will largely prevail. There are many serious problems with internationalization and

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online delivery. These include overdependence on foreign student tuition fees in some countries, the carbon footprint of mobility (see the article of Laura E. Rumbley, Internationalization of Higher Education and the Future of the Planet, in *IHE* #100), quality standards, instability in mobility, and others.

Universities worldwide are doing an impressive job of crisis management in difficult circumstances, but learning longer-term lessons and effective strategic planning have not been a strength of the academic community. Will the current crisis be a wake-up call? ◢