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Post-COVID Higher Education Internationalization

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As the world struggles through global disruption—of lives, jobs, education, health, safety, economies—we witness again the powerful influence of globalization. Winston Churchill advised, “If you’re going through hell, keep going!” Considering Churchill’s advice, international educators and higher education (HE) need an approach to internationalization that comports with a post-COVID-19 environment.

Globalization and HE internationalization are not going away, but both will be different tomorrow than they were today or yesterday. Catalysts for a new normal were present before COVID-19, yet COVID-19 has accelerated change, amplified the pre-existing challenges, and added new difficulties.

The impacts on mobility (students and faculty), campus internationalization, and cross-border research and collaborations have been massively disruptive. “How long will this last” is not the right question. The better question is, “How will internationalization adapt to help shape a new normal.”

A successful reboot of HE internationalization in a post-COVID-19 world requires revisions of goals and strategies, innovation in practice, and integration of HE internationalization into core institutional missions. International educators must plan and work now toward new realities in the interest of local and global common goods (Marginson 2020).

THERE IS NO “BACK-TO-NORMAL”

Numerous commentators have generally concluded that COVID-19’s impacts on HE finances, practices, and internationalization will be strong and enduring—and of global reach. COVID-19’s economic fallout will persist for many years (Bothwell 2020).

In June 2020, McKinsey & Company (2020a) reported that more than 90 percent of respondents surveyed in every world region reported major declining economic conditions—except in China, where less than half of respondents were as pessimistic. McKinsey & Company’s (2020b) July 2020 report considered variables of pandemic longevity and economic stimulus policies; they predicted a “slow and muted” global recovery lasting several years.

Various sources of income and revenue for universities in Europe (Murphy 2020; Estermann et al. 2020) and the United States are substantially weakening (Friga 2020), prompting contemplation of major changes in HE funding sources and appropriation formulas. U.S. 2020 second quarter GDP dropped nearly 10 percent year over year, and Europe’s dropped about 15 percent (McKinsey & Company 2020b). In Australia, early estimates were for a AUD 4.6 billion loss almost immediately from declining international student enrollments (as much as AUD 19 billion over the next 3 years) and 21,000 staff losses. The Education Minister opined that Australian “higher education’s reliance on international education must be assessed” (Fergus 2020). When data reporting matures globally, they will show challenges of magnitude for most countries around the world.

Fundamental Drivers of Change in the United States

In the United States, available data indicate that overall state revenue shortfalls will average 10 percent in 2020 and about 25 percent by 2021 with additional reductions in years beyond for a cumulative \$550–650 billion reduction, which would be the largest on record (McNichol and Leachman 2020; Huang et al. 2020). Agencies, including HE institutions, in many states are preliminarily being told to plan for 15–25 percent reductions on average through 2021 (CBPP 2020). Further declines are likely depending on pandemic and government-support trends.

If following historical patterns, cuts to public HE in the United States will be disproportionately more than those to other expenditure areas, such as healthcare (Carey 2020). HE has still not recovered fully from the “great recession” of 2007 (Cantwell and Taylor 2020; Estermann et al. 2020; PEW 2019). Private institutions have their own challenges in sustaining high costs and tuition.

The situation is compounded by other persistent factors that predate COVID-19, such as

- trends of domestic enrollment at many U.S. institutions declining or flattening (Hussar and Bailey 2019), forcing closures and amalgamations (Barshay 2018);
- international enrollments suffering from visa restrictions, anti-immigration sentiments, and increased competition from abroad for international students and scholars; and
- brakes being applied on further tuition increases by governments and market conditions (Hudzik et al. 2017).

Tuition is already a huge replacement revenue source for public HE operating budgets as government appropriations have become a “minority” source of revenue for research institutions (19 percent), masters institutions (29 percent), bachelors institutions (33 percent), and even community colleges (46 percent) (NASBO 2015).

Other pre-COVID-19 pressures for change will continue post-pandemic and include

- pressure for a more eco-friendly and less costly internationalization;
- more flexible, integrated at-home and cross-border programming;
- outcome-based value assessment of international activity; and
- the blended use of technology for online and hybrid models for courses and degrees.

SEEKING A PATH FORWARD

While there are no short-term solutions to these challenges, there are strategies aimed at strengthening the long-term position of internationalization within HE. Some will be difficult to implement; long-term and consistent efforts must address the scope of change pressing upon HE and its internationalization. Globalization will continue as an ally to support the need for HE internationalization, as well as to change it.

What do international educators need to do?

1. **Redefine goals for a paradigm shift.** Focus on internationalization’s seminal goals as drivers of action—on cross-cultural learning, research, and outcomes rather than on the movement of bodies across borders as an end in itself. If, for example, only 3–5 percent of U.S. students study abroad, how do others engage in global learning and experiences? Internationalizing on-campus general education and curricula of the majors through the following opportunities will affect everyone.
 - Use technology to blend physical and virtual learning “mobility.”
 - Take advantage of learning opportunities from research collaborations abroad.
 - Connect to community diversity to enrich on-campus learning by blending in community-based, cross-cultural opportunities at home.
 - Integrate international students who are cultural and language informants for campus enrichment rather than stressing their revenue value.

The objective is to focus more on idea exchange and learning objectives. Physical-mobility pedagogies are important to these ends and offer unique advantages, but they are one means among several to engage cross-cultural learning.

- 2. Reduce costs to institutions, students, and others.** COVID-19 poses complications on both the revenue and expenditure sides of HE. While unpopular to say, reducing HE costs is the only real budget balancing option in the face of the reductions taken now by nearly all HE revenue sources, including tuition, appropriations, grants, fundraising, and auxiliary budgets.

Short-term tactical cuts, such as hiring freezes, institutional staff and faculty travel freezes or restrictions, deferred capital projects, pay cuts, and staff furloughs or layoffs are all currently in play and growing (White 2020). Some will become permanent. However, tactical cuts are mostly time-buying fixes.

The following long-term recommendations for reductions and change can be more strategically impactful, especially for internationalization:

- Reprioritize what is essential to effective internationalization and provides the best payoff for high priority goals, and focus limited resources on these. Not everything done in the name of internationalization is of equal value and payoff.
- Change practices by supplementing expensive mobility models with less costly cross-cultural learning options: at-home learning, a mix of virtual and physical learning opportunities, and virtual internships.
- Re-engineer administrative structures and processes to simplify and reduce costs. Compared to faculty growth, administrative and staff support positions have increased disproportionately over recent decades (Ginsberg 2011). Some are justified by increased regulation and greater complexity in HE, but hardly all improve efficiency *and* effectiveness. Many program efforts are prisoners of bloated bureaucracies.
- Share the load by having others do parts of the job (e.g., partnerships and consortia to share expertise and workloads), which can

minimize program redundancies across, as well as within, institutions (Baskin 2020). The amalgamation of institutions is gaining steam for similar reasons (Gardner 2020).

- Contract out some functions on a cost-controlled, fee-for-service basis to reduce high fixed-cost internal administrative infrastructure (e.g., travel offices).
- Rethink traditional program models, such as learning in semester-length segments. There is no optimal academic calendar, so consider developing modular learning building blocks that can fit individual student needs, particular learning objectives, and various timeframes (McMurtrie 2020).

- 3. Integrate HE internationalization into core missions.** There are countless legitimate HE needs touted by diverse and powerful interests, but internationalization is not viewed as part of the institutional core at most institutions. A failure to *integrate* international activity into core teaching, scholarship, and community engagement missions seriously weakens its future within institutions under financial stress, and places it at a severe disadvantage in the competition for scarce resources.

Support for internationalization is not automatic. Opposition and weak support are reinforced by lack of knowledge and shared understanding about internationalization and its purposes and value; shared understanding in HE is not commonplace, especially outside the international education circle. Two factors are fundamental to building common understanding and integration: (1) an institutionwide culture of support for internationalization and (2) strategic inclusion.

- An institutionwide culture of support and understanding: an institutional culture for internationalization requires leadership (e.g., from presidents and provosts, academic deans, chairs, and influential faculty) and understanding and support from throughout the institution, developed through dialogue (Loveland 2011).

An effective campuswide conversation builds shared understanding and develops answers

to questions about internationalization, such as why do it, how does it enhance core institutional missions and values, and who has which roles to play. There are numerous examples of campuswide dialogue and integration strategies at various levels among the 151 NAFSA Senator Paul Simon Award for Campus Internationalization recipients over the last 18 years.

- Strategic inclusion: strategic inclusion of internationalization is highlighted by its incorporation into mission and goal statements; but equally important, if not more so, is the measurement of internationalization outcomes in institutional quality assessments. Strategic inclusion also means incorporating internationalization into annual planning and budget processes at the institutional level as well as within academic and support units. Participation of the senior international officer in these processes is important at the institutional level.

4. **Use resources for dual purposes.** There are not enough new funds available to any institution to fully fund standalone internationalization strategies. Tapping existing institutional resources expands funding support through a strategy called dual purposing. Dual purposing is inherently a type of integrating action because it leverages each partner's resources and objectives into something more than each could achieve on its own.

Among the more successful internationalization projects funded by the STINT Foundation, the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education, are those that dual purpose existing multi-unit institutional resources, partnering with STINT resources. Many projects employ techniques such as a modest retooling of the learning objectives and design of existing courses, which can expand the internationalization of curricula in cost effective ways. Hundreds of U.S. institutions are using such a strategy to internationalize undergraduate general education (Nair and Henning 2017). Accreditation and other self-monitoring quality control efforts in fields such as business and engineering champion

integration of internationalized components into degree programs and existing courses.

Another form of dual purposing involves utilizing existing faculty research expertise. If a faculty's expertise is used domestically, the expertise likely has applications abroad. In turn, applying that expertise in other countries and cultures further enriches the expertise for the home campus. The issue is not so much hiring dedicated new faculty or changing faculty research and teaching priorities as it is discovering ways to internationalize existing faculty activity and expertise. Faculty want research, funding, and publication opportunities; a well-designed effort to internationalize the research activity of existing faculty can produce desired benefits all around.

Overall, dual purposing helps reduce fear that internationalization means funding a separate fourth mission. Access to existing resources is facilitated if internationalization is seen broadly as a high priority for the institution (embedded in a campus culture and strategy). Equally important is whether faculty, staff, and departments see benefit *for them* from incorporating an international dimension into what they are already doing.

Through dual purposing, internationalization brings an orientation and an opportunity to enhance not only teaching but research platforms. Even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there is evidence that cross-border research collaborations continue and new ones form, but early data suggest a narrowing of team membership and favoring elite structures, such as large nations with strong research structures (Baker 2020). This narrowing of participation is troublesome.

GET STARTED TOWARD THE FUTURE OF HE INTERNATIONALIZATION

Mark Twain advised, “The secret of getting ahead is getting started.” Change will drive our futures whether we participate or not. Genuine openness to new ideas and ways of engaging internationalization is required, as is involving student, community, and institutional clientele in setting and implementing priorities for responding to this crisis.

Our biggest challenge may be ourselves. Innovation involves personal risk and giving up the comfort of the familiar. A challenge such as COVID-19 can appear so daunting in its scale and scope that we atrophy in searching for responses and hope to awaken from a bad dream. The challenge for the future is to get started with fresh thinking and action. Self-examination, change, innovation, open-mindedness, and drive are qualities that we need now more than ever.

HE, like almost anything big and complex, can take forever to change. If HE waits too long to change, it will be too late (Temmerman 2018). There needs to be a tolerance to make mistakes and “revise on the fly,” because the search for perfection delays action.

Massive disruptions like COVID-19 can also birth opportunity. But opportunities are not in defending the status quo and established approaches per se, nor in hoping for a return to normal. The big question for internationalists is: How do we aim to change and innovate to meet new realities? Not everything needs to change, but change is essential.

We have survived crises in the past and we will survive this one too by a commitment to refocusing and rethinking. HE internationalization will strengthen in the long run if those committed to its seminal goals and purposes take up the challenge of a world changing utterly in so many ways. The imperative for HE internationalization is as strong as ever, if not more so.

International educators must help to lead toward the future.

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