

An opportunity to change international higher education?

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The COVID-19 epidemic has struck a blow to physical mobility worldwide. Notices about institutional closures, social distancing and self-quarantining have compelled us all to part ways with our established routines, in one way or another. This could, however, be an opportunity to re-examine higher education internationalisation, including its objectives, scope, strategies and intended impact.

Such pondering should not be seen as a knee-jerk reaction to recent developments and the sudden severity with which they have problematised business-as-usual. Rather, as I have argued in my book *Internationalising the University: A spiritual approach*, the best way forward will emerge not “from problem-solving in a crisis mindset” but from “a completely new point of departure and framework of orientation”. There are several issues to consider.

Home and abroad

The imagination and discourse of internationalisation practice are built around the distinctive and opposing categories of home and abroad, host and home institutions, sending and receiving regions. If there is one thing that the sudden onset of a public health emergency reminds us of, it is that, as hosts, we really are home-away-from-home for international students.

We need then to ask ourselves: are we adequately prepared to respond to the needs of those students who may not be able to return to their countries of origin under the current circumstances?

Have they been sufficiently well integrated into their host societies or rather, in the wake of campus closures, do we suddenly face the limits of our reach and relationships beyond the bounds of institutional infrastructures and resources?

Moreover, how well do we account for the needs of those international students for whom the sudden prospect of returning 'home' brings considerations of financial security, personal safety or social inclusion?

Not dissimilar to social media and other technologies of globalisation, higher education internationalisation has blurred the distinction of home and abroad for generations of participants. We are reminded in these times of the work that still needs to be done to unpack the ethical conundrums and meet the emerging responsibilities that accompany this phenomenon.

Internationalisation beyond mobility

Calls for re-engaging with the mission and implementation of higher education internationalisation to de-emphasise the significance of physical mobility have stemmed from arguments in favour of greater inclusion. In my book, I have noted that the "emphasis on physical mobility through study abroad within internationalisation efforts ... has led the gains from internationalisation to accrue disproportionately to students with the financial wherewithal to participate".

More recently, universities and academics concerned with their carbon footprint have expressed their intent to find alternatives to travel, where possible. As emergencies come and go, they no doubt give us pause and a chance to reflect on the validity of some of the arguments in favour of restructuring the internationalisation project that have stood the test of time.

Looking back on the history of internationalisation, we observe that the forces of globalisation have assisted the transition of internationalisation from being a conduit of geostrategic rivalries to being an engine of economic competitiveness.

Anticipating the post-COVID19 scenario, eminent commentators on the subject have presaged that favourable student opinion about sought-after study abroad destinations in Europe is likely to remain unchanged, even as universities seriously consider reducing their dependence on fee-paying students from China and other populous countries with younger demographics.

As an internationalisation practitioner based in the Global South, such predictions strike me as a reflection of the inherent biases and binaries that plague our field. To my mind, the present circumstances are an invitation to direct our efforts towards engaging with globalisation and its discontents more proactively, particularly in order to grapple with the apparatus, mechanisms and vocabulary of othering.

The current crisis confronts us anew with the troubling realisation of internationalisation mirroring a conception of globalisation which views certain regions of the world as amenable to exploitation or exclusion subject to the interests of the hegemonic core.

In practice, both the above drivers, 'home and abroad' and 'internationalisation beyond mobility', push us to invest in capability development beyond our campuses and to find common cause with our surrounding communities through consistent and constructive engagement – the essence of the [Internationalising Higher Education for Society \(IHES\) agenda](#).

Training and sharing of learning

It is now that we need to equip internationalisation practitioners with the tools that will enable them to translate their on-the-ground experience into actionable frameworks designed to deliver reform.

If satisfactory alternatives to physical mobility have not been found it may be because we do not fully grasp the actual learning outcomes of internationalisation programmes and have not thoroughly researched how such outcomes may be realised via a range of alternative pathways.

When the dust settles on the current disruptions, international offices are going to be on the frontline of advising students and faculty members, inventing catch-up strategies and looking for solutions that accommodate the new normal. There will be important learning made in the process which could potentially lay the foundations of enduring frameworks and responses moving forward.

Practitioners may also rethink the utility of mammoth fares, annual conferences and regional summits and creatively discover ways in which learning could be meaningfully shared, allowing for greater access and embracing new articulations around impact.

Although trouble-shooting cannot be the optimal setting to sow the seeds of change, it is equally futile not to seize the opportunity to reimagine the future of internationalisation as we gain some distance from the international office and work from home.

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