Global Trends
in Higher Education Internationalization

the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Global Trends in Higher Education Internationalization

Over the past decade, higher education authorities and institutions have engaged in a process of rapid internationalization. The number of students studying internationally topped more than 5.6 million in 2020.[1] Internationalization, usually defined as the increase in students and scholars seeking opportunities abroad, actually encompasses more: It includes critical issues such as student and scholar mobility, creating new cultural awareness and curriculum opportunities at home institutions, as well as virtual exchanges and collaboration.

The United States and European countries continue to be global leaders in the internationalization of higher education. However, in recent years other nations have begun investing in internationalizing their institutions. Although in some cases this has created international competition, it has also led to more opportunities for students and scholars, and significant improvement in the rankings and stature of regional institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic created significant disruption to internationalization trends. But now, the abatement of the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for governments, institutions, scholars, and individuals to re-evaluate those trends and to globalize practices further. What will internationalization look like in the coming years? How have recent events changed trends? How can internationalization become more global?

To assess these questions and the new trends in global higher education internationalization, the Hollings Center conducted a virtual dialogue program from November–December 2021. Participants from the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia attended sessions that focused on the impact of COVID-19 on internationalization, the concept of internationalization "at home," and how to amplify the impact of higher education internationalization globally.

---

[1] Project Atlas, Institute for International Education, "A Quick Look at Mobility Trends," https://iie.widen.net/s/rfw2c7rrbd/project-atlas-infographics-2020.

During the dialogue, participants came to several conclusions about the future of higher education internationalization:

- The COVID-19 pandemic created a major disruption to internationalization efforts, as it cut off student and scholar mobility. However, the pandemic created a unique opportunity to conceptualize higher education internationalization outside of traditional perceptions. Online options, reconnection to locally based international communities, and regionally based partnerships are now available options.

- Many of the challenges facing the movement to internationalize higher education preceded the pandemic. Institutional and national elitism, lack of mutuality in exchanges, and misperceptions about the cost and value of internationalization were not caused by the pandemic, but have been amplified by it.

- Participants called for a greater amount of intentionality in design and availability of resources to improve higher education internationalization. The many lessons learned from the emergency period of the pandemic can be used for a better future experience.

- Participants proposed several suggestions to improve internationalization of higher education in the post-pandemic era, including:
  - Promoting hybrid, flexible options for exchanges and courses;
  - Creating linkages between Global South institutions to build regionally based international exchanges and course collaborations;
  - Improving global awareness and internationalization within local communities using resources and communities close to home;

- Re-establishing local community ties so that the benefits of internationalization can have an impact on service to the community —a key mission for most institutions.

The Pandemic Disruption

Internationalization of higher education was traditionally measured in terms of one criterion: student mobility. The COVID-19 pandemic impeded international student mobility almost immediately. Within a matter of weeks, most nations closed borders to prevent importation of cases from harder-hit areas. Universities locked down their campuses and scrambled to find

> "We flourished in international education and collaboration, but the pandemic created unprecedented movement in international activities."
>
> Dialogue Participant

accommodations for their stranded international students. The "emergency period" of ad-hoc responses in international higher education lasted for nearly two years, during which the traditional models of evaluating internationalization ceased. As one participant from the United States noted, "The reality is that for years we flourished in international education and collaboration, but the pandemic created unprecedented movement in international activities. But, many of these responses were just a Band-Aid."

Many of those pandemic-era "Band-Aid" responses revolved around the rapid conversion to digital learning. As a participant from South Asia noted, "The 'silver lining' [of the pandemic] is that with our partners and other stakeholders… everyone was very innovative. A global virtual classroom is emerging. Some of these things are here to stay and we will relearn and upscale ourselves." Indeed, while the responses to the pandemic seemed more reactive than deliberative, several participants did highlight the important period of experimentation that occurred. Because of the emergency, institutional barriers decreased, inertial barriers within softened, metrics were ignored, and some administrators adopted

a willingness to change. Active discussions now take place within institutions about what to keep and what to evolve from that period.

Challenges in Internationalization: Old and New

But for many institutions around the world, this promising pivot exposed both new and existing divides in education. Multiple participants commented that increased digital access to education does not mean access is equal. Participants from all countries, including wealthier ones, highlighted the problems of a "digital divide." Part of the problem is technical. Successful learning online requires a device for access, a stable internet connection, and a dedicated physical location "at home" to engage in learning. The other part is socioeconomic. Factors like poverty, abuse, and food insecurity often meant that for some home was not a safe, viable option for virtual learning. For those with limited or no access to online modalities, the lack of a physical classroom fostered learning loss and greater disparity to those that had the option to learn at home.

However, it is important to note that many of the challenges highlighted by participants throughout the dialogue preceded the pandemic. In such instances the pandemic did not cause the problems, but amplified their severity. Inclusion, access, and equity are critical issues facing internationalization of higher education. As a participant from Europe noted, "If you look at internationalization before, it was very elitist, benefiting very few of the academic world. We are talking about 1,000 institutions and 1 percent of the students in the world; whereas we have 30,000 higher education institutions globally." Participants called this challenge "mutualization," meaning designing better opportunities for the benefit of all rather than the elite few.

Even before the pandemic, little evidence existed of mutuality in internationalization. International exchange was typically one-way and controlled by elite institutions in the Global North. Few Western students study in the Global South. And those in the Global South who study abroad are typically in an elite

societal tier. One participant questioned whether the technological advances during the pandemic actually made this challenge worse as opposed to better. "Are we serving collective interests or are we serving certain countries and institutions? Or are we promoting individual growth or serving an industry where winners continue to win and losers continue to lose?" The necessity to improve two-way exchange and equity remained a critical theme throughout the dialogue.

Moving Beyond Current Perceptions

Participants underlined the need to overcome current perceptions and misperceptions about internationalization to set a new paradigm defined by improved equity and access. A recurrent question during the dialogue was whether internationalization required crossing a border. Could internationalization be pursued from home and local communities? Participants coalesced around the idea that internationalization needs to include more than the traditional notion of student and faculty international mobility. One participant stated the need for redefining internationalization. "Internationalization is globalizing of minds and diversifying perspectives." Broadening the definition to include different concepts of internationalization can change perceptions about how, when, and where it can take place.

But misperceptions on virtual education for internationalization persist. "Something we've struggled with is...because of the great disparity between elite institutions of higher education, we have this perpetual idea that virtual is less." In other words, virtual instruction and methodology, as well

> "Internationalization is globalizing of minds and diversifying perspectives."
>
> Dialogue Participant

as the faculty teaching the virtual course, are thought to be something of lesser value and quality than more traditional instruction. As a counterpoint, some participants contended that developing technology and concepts like the metaverse could essentially replace face-to-face exchanges. Although opinions on

the supremacy of online internationalization over in-person experiences varied, participants underlined the necessity of realizing that pandemic-era adaptations to digitization and "online-ness" are here to stay, and thus require dedicated financial resources and expert pedagogical planning. As the pandemic enters its third year, there is an undeniable sense that without direct, deliberate intervention, these ad-hoc approaches to internationalization will not be sustainable. Said one participant, "We've had a lot of internationalization efforts that were unintentional and not mapped. It should be an intentional process requiring changes in curriculum, incorporating global perspectives."

Another misperception that needs to be overcome to change the internationalization paradigm is the stereotype that online offerings do not require significant resources due to a lack of physical overhead. "There is a misperception that virtual is cheap or free," said one participant. Administrators and proponents often forget that virtual courses often involve expenses for faculty time, outsourcing of technological platforms, and IT support. Participants also noted that the "marketplace" for virtual international education is out of sync with reality. Elite institutions, treating study abroad opportunities as profit centers, charge as much per credit hour as in-person instruction. And this pricing model yields enormous influence globally, pricing many students out of virtual education options, and contradicting the argument that virtual can increase accessibility. At the same time, a different phenomenon occurs in economies that cannot support high tuition prices. According to one participant, in order to support financial margins, greater burden is placed on professors and educational staff to do more with less—a race to the bottom.

New Pathways to Internationalization

Throughout the three sessions, participants supported several ideas to improve internationalization of higher education, while fully understanding that education as a whole is currently in a state of flux.

- **Be hybrid and flexible**. Technology should be used as a tool to improve internationalization and not serve as a wholesale replacement for in-person exchanges. There is inherent value in longer-term cultural immersion when it can be achieved. As one participant noted, "I went through twelve years of studying abroad and was immersed in another culture, which is how I learned to value it. Having a hybrid kind of international experience [mixing technology, study abroad, and multiple locations] may serve as the new essence of internationalization."

- **Promote South-to-South cooperation**. Too often internationalization is seen through a Western lens, with most of the exchanges happening one-way from the Global South to the Global North. "Two-way traffic" is essential and a method to increase mutual exchange is to look at opportunities within regions and between Global South countries. Due to decreased mobility caused by the pandemic, there is a unique opportunity for new multilateral and bilateral agreements. The Asia-Pacific region has seen particular growth along these lines right now. However, one participant warned that this needs to happen in both the private and public sector. Most activity right now occurs almost exclusively in the private sector, leading to mass uniformity of experience over unique, individual experiences. Participants advocated the case for supporting public institutions in the Global South, which have the potential for greater societal service.

- **Promote global awareness and internationalization within local communities**. In this time of reduced mobility and increased costs, multiple participants advocated on behalf of internationalization "at home" by making the most of international communities already present within localities. Focusing on mobility, according to one participant, "would be too limited a dimension of internationalization." Participants suggested looking to local immigrant and refugee communities, student

groups, or other opportune populations nearby as sources for internationalization and cultural understanding. The added benefit of this approach would be improved service to the community.

- **Be intentional, not ad-hoc, when moving programs to virtual**. The understandable quick pivot to online program options due to the pandemic emergency opened the door to virtual being a permanent component of international education. Making intentional changes to curricula, program design, and community outreach will be critical to constructing meaningful virtual internationalization efforts. Said one participant, "This requires a lot of labor, intention, and extreme facilitation." Properly designed programs and courses can incorporate concepts like global awareness, equity, and social justice, while simultaneously giving a more satisfying experience to students and faculty.

- **Re-establish community ties**. Local communities can be an excellent resource for internationalization of higher education. As one participant aptly stated, "The ivory tower mentality cannot continue. You've got to get out and do service to the community." Community service should be one of the priorities of higher education. Students can be a major driver of this community service and outreach, and their contributions should not be underestimated. Intentional effort in establishing community ties will shift the institution's actions from service to an individual back toward service to society.