Internationalization in Isolation: COVID-19 Implications

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Internationalization is consistently referred to as an umbrella term that covers any and all processes of incorporating an international dimension into the purpose, functions, and activities of higher education in the hope of achieving educational, societal, economic, and political goals. Yet, international mobility has long prevailed as the most prominent mechanism for advancing internationalization, and, consequently, it is the most researched. With the COVID-19 pandemic putting all mobility on hold, including academic mobility, the wise words of Sancho Panza in Cervantes' 1615 novel *Don Quixote*, "Do not venture all [your] eggs in one basket," have never been more pertinent.

To make matters worse, international mobility has never been a quixotic endeavor. It is far from being an inclusive process, as it only caters to the minority of students and staff that have the means and resources to be mobile. By doing so, it excludes a wide range of institutions that have few, if any, mobile students and staff. As a result, mobility stratifies universities based on their attractiveness for mobile students and staff, favors research-intensive universities, follows the "spatiality of knowledge," and divides countries along language policy lines. It also privileges developed economies and networked global cities centralizing knowledge. Thus, the focus on mobility as the core component of internationalization is not idealistic: It has created, and continues to perpetuate, an unequal, elitist system that follows economic rationales and bypasses the majority of students, staff, and institutions.

Abstract

When a global health crisis renders mobility impossible, making all universities *de facto* isolated and remote, researchers should look at ways to redefine and generalize internationalization while removing the exclusive focus on mobility. Learning from the "unusual suspects" of internationalization—i.e., institutions that were considered remote *before* the crisis—is a unique opportunity to move the focus away from student mobility and foster more sustainable and inclusive internationalization practices.

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Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste

When a global pandemic was declared in March 2020, Altbach and de Wit called COVID-19 "the internationalization revolution that isn't." One and a half years later, their expectation that the corona crisis would not bring about dramatic medium-term transformations in higher education has been confirmed. Governments and universities are basically waiting it out. But, as Winston Churchill put it, we should never let a good crisis go to waste.

In particular, with no more mobility, many institutions have relegated internationalization to an afterthought. Yet, the COVID-19 crisis is the perfect opportunity to rethink internationalization in the absence of mobility, to design activities and reconsider curricula to allow for internationalized education on the home campus—i.e., internationalization at home. It is also the perfect crisis to think about increasing virtual connections when building international research projects, with the possibility of reaching out to every part of the world. Yet, none of that has happened in a systematic way.

One area in which the pandemic has had an impact is defining "remoteness." Oxford Languages found that, in 2019, the adjective "remote" mostly referred to village, island, or location. In 2020, it most commonly referred to learning, working, workforce, and instruction—showing a generalization of remoteness. The same is true in higher education: All universities became remote in 2020.

In an effort to propose a way forward for higher education internationalization that resists external shocks, we suggest paying greater attention to the internationalization strategies of universities that were remote/isolated prior to the global health crisis. These institutions have had to operate without almost any mobility and imagine different internationalization policies and strategies. Learning from these "unusual suspects" of internationalization is a unique opportunity to move the focus away from student mobility and foster more sustainable and inclusive internationalization practices.

What We Can Learn from the "Unusual" Suspects

Existing literature specifically discussing internationalization beyond mobility in isolated/remote contexts is rare, but promising. Case studies from sub-Saharan Africa, rural South Africa, the Balkans, and Siberia corroborate the claim that universities in these areas pursue internationalization in a deliberate manner, focusing on institutional cooperation and establishing a unique international profile. For example, universities in Siberia seek to boost their international visibility by highlighting, rather than hiding, their unique location. Using their rare ecosystem as a competitive advantage, Siberian universities promote themselves internationally through environmental and sustainability research, tackling global climate challenges.

While a supportive institutional environment is key to developing such internationalization strategies and practices, national policies also play a central role in steering the internationalization activities of these universities. At the national level, internationalization in isolated contexts has been linked to societal and academic objectives, not just economic ones. For instance, the island state of Mauritius has used internationalization to successfully increase access to education. To achieve this, Mauritius implemented regulations encouraging international universities to offer higher education locally and developed a framework to ensure the quality of programs and qualifications provided. Further research showcased at a Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) colloquium on higher education on small islands underlined how challenges posed by location lead to innovative practices. In turn, these solutions challenge the geographies and normative practices of the center–periphery framework, something that needs to be extended to the study of internationalization on a global scale.

These experiences encourage us to "de-center" internationalization. As the above examples show, when it comes to internationalization, institutions at the periphery do not just fall prey to mimetive, normative, or coercive isomorphism. As a result of their unique circumstances, they have had to design deliberate and innovative internationalization strategies, which, if studied, could become the norm in higher education. By contrast, institutions at the center are faced with the uncertain sustainability of academic mobility and could (should) be pushed to the periphery of internationalization research and practices.

Internationalization in Isolation: A Research Agenda
What is needed is a research agenda that provides a truly global account of internationalization strategies in remote or isolated universities. Moving beyond the "usual suspects" of internationalization to consider the experiences of universities in isolation will help to enrich our understanding of internationalization without perpetuating elitist strategies. It can uncover practices that benefit an array of higher education stakeholders, while being less vulnerable to external shocks. An inclusive internationalization research agenda, which takes advantage and notice of the unsustainability of mobility, could still very well transform the COVID-19 crisis into "the internationalization revolution that [is]." ◢

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