

# Internationalization of higher education in a post-pandemic world: Challenges and responses

## Abstract

This editorial discusses the impact from the COVID-19 pandemic on the internationalization of higher education, focusing on what general and specific challenges internationalization of higher education in individual countries and systems has faced and will face, and what strategies they developed to deal with these challenges in a post-pandemic world. Moreover, it outlines the COVID-19 pandemic and both institutional and national policies for internationalization of higher education in a comparative and global perspective. Finally, it presents key findings from nine articles that are included in the Special Issue.

COVID-19 is neither the first nor the last global pandemic. The 1918 pandemic “caused by the Spanish flu, swept across the world as a devastating global public-health tragedy, as an estimated 50 million people died in 2 years” (Nkengasong, 2021). By comparison, with more than 5 million people dying in the last 2 years (World Health Organization, 2022) the COVID-19 pandemic has had less fatalities, thanks also to advances in medicine and technology. Still, in many ways the current pandemic has been unprecedented as globalization has made us more connected not just economically, socially, culturally, politically, and educationally, but also—coupled with population growth—physically. In the context of the pandemic, this has been a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, our connectedness has made it easier to cooperate on finding and implementing consistent and coherent measures to keep the pandemic at bay. See for example, the initial efforts to “flatten the curve”, speedy diagnostics and vaccine development and diffusion, or the strong community support for at risk populations. On the other hand, our connectedness has meant an easier transmission of the disease and has exacerbated our vulnerabilities and led to more inequity. For instance, the fast spread of virus mutations coupled with protection measures such as “vaccine nationalism” has led to global health inequalities (Zhou, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education systems worldwide, leading the World Bank, UNESCO & UNICEF to jointly call it “the worst education crisis on record” (2021, p. 4). Like in other sectors, the “COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized global connectivity, vulnerability and inequities” (Nkengasong, 2021) in higher education as well. Two years into the global COVID-19 pandemic, there is little doubt that its effects on higher education (HE) are significant. The impacts are both broad and profound. The pandemic has disrupted and reshuffled not just activities related to internationalization (i.e., mobility, cooperation), but also activities related to the core missions of HE (i.e., teaching, research, and service to society) (QS, 2020, 2021). Moreover, the ongoing nature of the pandemic means that its impacts on HE are stronger and more enduring than expected.

The 2nd IAU Global Survey Report on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education (Jensen et al., 2022) concludes that higher education institutions have shown resilience but also faced major financial concerns, delays in research activities, overworked staff and slowed down recruitment, and noted in particular that “*International activities were among the most negatively affected by the pandemic*” (p. 13). Regarding the pandemic's impacts on activities of HE

internationalization, a rapid decline in global student mobility, accompanied by a restructuring of mobility patterns, was expected from the beginning (BridgeU, 2020; Studyportals, 2020). These concerns were warranted. As the QS report of 2021 states: *"With the evolving and unpredictable situation that COVID-19 created for higher education in the last two years, the data reflects a consistently high proportion of prospective international students altering their study plans in response and reiterates the continued potential for the pandemic to affect international student flows in the months ahead."* (QS, 2021, p. 5). Earlier studies also suggested that the pandemic would affect some countries and systems more radically than others (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Martel, 2020; Morris et al., 2020). This was also warranted. For example, the impacts of the pandemic are more evident and considerable in countries that have traditionally attracted a large number of inbound international students, such as Australia, the UK and the USA.

But the impact is broader than only the disruption of the physical mobility flows of international students. A report of the Coimbra-Group, a network of European universities, notes that *"The Covid-19 crisis has offered the opportunity to redefine internationalisation goals (...) the focus has shifted from numbers (of international students and staff on campuses)—which, according to university rankings, were one of the main indicators of internationalisation—to meaningful, content-centred internationalisation (...) internationalisation 'at home' emerged as a crucial concept at Coimbra Group universities."* (2021, p. 17) In addition to a renewed focus on internationalization "at home", this report as well as other analyses (for instance Jensen et al., 2022) emphasize the increasing importance of virtual exchange as a positive outcome of the pandemic, although accompanied by challenges such as students' and teachers' well-being, interactivity, and access to technology.

As for how to make HE become more responsive and relevant in the post-pandemic world, many strategies and suggestions have been put forward, even though still in a rather early stage. The IAU Global Survey (Jensen et al., 2022) observes that *"the pandemic had an effect on internationalization strategies at the majority of HEIs, but that for many this effect has not resulted in a change of the strategy yet. A reason for the lack of change is that HEIs possibly consider the disruption brought by the pandemic as temporary and that any disrupted activities would resume at some time in the future, so the ambitions of the strategy would remain relevant over time, despite this disruption."* (p. 13). Some argue that international educators must plan and work now toward new realities in the interest of local and global common goods (Marginson, 2020). Some suggest that keeping up to date with key changes in HE and predictions about what the future holds for HE will help us to reduce the risks HE faces (Huang, 2020). Some believe that 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 (Hudzik, 2020). Some propose to foster more sustainable and inclusive internationalization practices by learning from the strategies of the 'unusual suspects' of internationalization—i.e., institutions that were considered remote before the crisis (Crăciun & de Gayardon, 2021). However, others argued that it is getting harder to predict the future of HE, including internationalization of HE and that more thorough research is needed (de Wit, 2021). This is in line with the perspective of Rumbley et al. (2022) about internationalization in higher education as *"a multifaceted and evolving phenomenon. It touches on a wide scope of issues and can be defined in a multitude of ways"* (p. 19), and with Hunter et al. (2022): *"the concept of internationalization continues to be refined and revised, and theories and definitions adjusted to match new and evolving understandings"* (p. 70). In other words, internationalization is a constantly evolving process, responding to explicit intentions and policies; specific institutional, national and regional contexts; and changing circumstances, of which the pandemic is a crucial one.

Despite the numerous discussions over the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to the internationalization of HE in some specific countries and systems, and their responses to these challenges, a comprehensive and in-depth research into these two interrelated themes based on representative case studies is still rare. This Special Issue aims to explore from a global and international perspective what general and specific challenges internationalization of HE in individual countries and systems has faced and will face, and what strategies they develop to deal with these challenges in a post-pandemic world. Overall, the articles included in this Special Issue aim to answer the following broad research questions:

1. What challenges have individual countries and systems faced and will face because of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What general and specific challenges can be identified based on the comparative research into typical case countries?
3. How have individual countries and systems dealt and will deal with this challenge to shape “a new normal”?
4. What are the implications derived from this global and comparative study for the future of internationalization of HE?

In order to respond to these questions, typical case countries and HE systems from almost all regions and continents are selected for this Special Issue. They include the European region, Australia, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Russia, the UK, North America, and an institutional case from Latin America that exemplifies how the model of MARS (Mission, vision and values, Academic activities, Resource management, and Support activities) can be applied to respond to the future of internationalization of HE. To understand the challenges and responses posed by COVID-19 to institutions, countries and HE systems, the articles included in this Special Issue employ a variety of research methods and data, including the analysis of both national strategies and institutional actions, semi-structured interviews with international students and academics, national and institutional data, surveys, and so forth. In this introductory article, the three editors bring the findings and insights from the case studies together in a comparative overview.

## 1 | COVID-19 AND INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION

Internationalization policies and strategies are undertaken and influenced by a broad variety of stakeholders: national and local governments, international organizations, students, academics and administrators and their representative bodies, as well as the private sector. Over the past four decades internationalization has become a key component of the HE sector as a result of increasing globalization of the knowledge economy, the end of the Cold War and more international and regional academic collaboration. Institutions of HE have been the main actors in this process, driven by a diverse range of political, economic, social/cultural and educational rationales.

The 5th Global Survey (Marinoni, 2019), based on data from 2018, indicates that 90% of the institutions of HE mention internationalization in their institutional missions and plans. According to the survey, two-thirds of university leaders consider internationalization as a key agenda point in their strategy, although Marinoni and de Wit (2020) observe an increasing divide between institutions where internationalization is considered of very high importance and those where that is not the case.

From strategies driven by socio-cultural and education rationales, a gradual shift has taken place in the past three decades to more emphasis on economic (commercialization) and political (soft power) rationales. De Wit and Altbach (2021) observe a tension between short-term, neoliberal approaches, focusing on mobility and research, and long-term comprehensive approaches, focusing on a less elitist and more inclusive global learning for all. The internationalization at home movement, started in Europe twenty years ago, the call for a more internationalized curriculum in Australia and the United Kingdom, and the appeal for a more comprehensive internationalization policy in the United States, can be seen as a reaction to what van der Wende (2001) called a shift in paradigm from cooperation to competition in internationalization. The recent call for a more socially responsible internationalization addressing the key global social issues of our planet, “internationalization for society”, by Jones et al. (2021), can also be seen in that context. These counterresponses to a more competitive and market driven internationalization are reflected in the definition of internationalization of 2015 by de Wit et al., an update and extension of the generally accepted working definition of Jane Knight (2003, additions underlined): *The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary*

*education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society.* (de Wit et al., 2015).

Will COVID-19 reemphasize the process of a more competitive neoliberal approach or will it strengthen the countermovement towards a more inclusive and responsible approach to internationalization by institutions? Will there be an even stronger divide between institutions being more international and others which will go in the opposite direction? Will institutions return to old habits or learn from the pandemic that there are opportunities for new forms of internationalization? And how much do other factors such as increasing geopolitical tensions, nationalism, and climate change play a role?

Although it is too early to tell, several reports, such as the one of the Coimbra Group (2021), and the contributions to this Special Issue, indicate that lessons have been learned, particularly in the area of internationalization at home, internationalization for society and digitalization. For example, the article by Hunter and Sparnon argues that the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic have required individual institutions to link their strategies of internationalization to their visions and mission statements in a more inclusive way. Further, in their article, Ferencz and Rumbley point out that due to the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, HE institutions in European countries will pay more attention to social responsibility objectives of internationalization, equity and inclusion, and diversity of internationalization.

At the same time, the divide between more internationalized and other institutions might also increase due to economic, political and educational challenges. HE institutions have to respond not only to the short-term impact of COVID-19, but they also have to prepare for its long-term effects, such as possible budget cuts as a result of economic downturn or calls for more research and education to respond to and anticipate new (health) crises. But they also face challenges related to increasing geopolitical tensions, such as between China, Russia and the traditional high-income countries, which impact research collaboration and movement and exchange of students and academics; they have to respond to other social needs and sustainable development goals such as climate change; and they need to deal with an increasing divide between the North and the South, between the top research universities and the rest of the HE sector. These are all international(ization) challenges, which require (inter)national support and cooperation, as Minaeva and Taradina in their contribution to this issue on Russia conclude: Russian universities took an active role in sustaining internationalization during the pandemic, but support from the national government is crucial for their further internationalization. In addition, HE institutions also need to align internationalization with the overall institutional strategy and mission, as Hunter and Sparnon, state: moving away from exceptionalism and making internationalization meaningful to the university's mission.

## 2 | COVID-19 AND NATIONAL POLICIES FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION

As argued, there is a plethora of types of actors (e.g., public/private, governmental/quasi-governmental/non-governmental, political/administrative, etc.) at different scales (e.g., local, national, regional, international, supra-national) influencing the policy space of HE systems, and by extension internationalization processes within those systems, through their activities (e.g., regulation, legislation, advocacy, research, networking, funding). Depending on the national context some actors are more influential than others in setting the agenda for internationalization (de Wit et al., 2021).

Given these many different actors whose programs and activities bear upon the policy space of HE internationalization, the dispersed nature of information on these activities, and the different languages and levels of transparency in disseminating this information, "inventorying existing policies and programs is a formidable challenge" (Helms, 2015), even when only considering actors at the national level. Still, research surveying "a broad range of policies, across all regions of the world" (ibid.) has concluded that national government entities continue to hold the most significant role in the internationalization policy context. While the "role of 'other influencers' in

the shaping and implementation of internationalization policy” is also important, “[i]n many countries, a ministry of education or related office is the primary player” (ibid.).

As a global survey of national internationalization strategies suggests, the vast majority of countries worldwide do not have an integrated strategy to promote HE internationalization (Crăciun, 2022). While at the institutional level strategic thinking about internationalization is more widespread and has a longer history, only around 1 in 10 countries worldwide have an official strategic document guiding internationalization and these have appeared in the last decade or so (Crăciun, 2018). Recently countries such as the Netherlands, Canada or the UK have renewed their internationalization strategies in light of their achievements. National internationalization strategies are also more widespread in Europe and in economically developed countries (i.e., OECD members), but recently other national governments have also adopted integrated approaches to internationalization (e.g., see South Africa). Another characteristic of countries that have internationalization strategies is that they often conduct teaching and learning activities in English, the lingua Franca of internationalization (ibid.).

Like in the case of the institutional level, these trends also point towards the possibility of growing inequality between HE systems that have strategic plans guiding their internationalization efforts and those that pursue fragmented activities. Nevertheless, in a time of a global health crisis, the fragmentation of activities and responsibilities can be a blessing (i.e., isolating system failures and restricting their effects) or a curse (i.e., making the causes of failure harder to identify and creating policy interactions harder to disentangle). So, after 2 years of the pandemic, what have we found about the role of the national level in internationalization processes?

Research shows that during COVID-19 HE institutions have looked towards national governments for support and clarity in how to deal with the new realities that the pandemic brought about. In fact, a survey done by EAIE showed that their members “expressed a strong desire for better guidance at the national level as they work to navigate the many dimensions of the situation” (Rumbley, 2020). Institutions wanted national, local, and regional authorities to provide better and faster guidance, information, coordination between the actors on how to deal with the evolving pandemic (ibid.). When thinking about the future, HE institutions look to relevant authorities to help in being better prepared for a crisis response, engage in long-term planning that can help navigate uncertainty, improve partnership management, support digital solutions, and develop more effective communication processes (ibid.).

Another recent analytical report reviewing evidence on the impact of COVID on higher education concludes that “adopting a systematic approach to addressing some of the most pressing challenges and needs (...) could contribute to achieving much more favourable outcomes for staff and students” (Farnell et al., 2021). In addition, identified good practice system-level responses for internationalization during the pandemic included providing guidance for institutions, supporting students financially, making visa and residency procedures more flexible and providing funding for developing and scaling up teaching innovations (ibid.). The articles included in this Special Issue echo these findings.

### 3 | KEY FINDINGS

This Special Issue consists of nine articles. From a global and comparative perspective, the common theme of the COVID-19 pandemic and internationalization of higher education is addressed on the basis of case studies from Asia and the Pacific, the European continent, Russia, the UK, Canada and the US.

There are four articles about East Asia and the Pacific. The case study by Welch presents main issues Australian universities are confronted with due to the COVID-19 pandemic, together with other factors like campus and cultural wars. Two articles address impacts of the pandemic on internationalization of higher education in mainland China and Hong Kong with different focuses. Mok and Zhang’s article is primarily concerned with examining how the pandemic has affected the plans of Chinese students to study overseas. Li and Ai analyze the benefits and challenges of virtual mobility at a Chinese university and future projection of outbound student mobility. The case

of Japan by Huang concentrates on the discussion over both negative and positive impacts from the pandemic on full-time international faculty at Japanese universities.

Ferencz and Rumbley illustrate changes in internationalization of European higher education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study of Russia by Minaeva and Taradina provides a comprehensive analysis of Russia's transition through the pandemic and tackle the changes at the university level in 2020 and 2021. Hunter and Sparnon analyse the nature of internationalization of higher education and they developed the model of MARS in response to changing environments of higher education, including challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic. The article by Buckner, Zhang, and Blanco discusses how national policies relating to responding to impacts from the pandemic are different in Canada and the US, and how they affect international student enrolments in the two countries in 2020. The article by Ilieva and Tsiligkiris explores international student mobility and the changing role of transnational education, and compares the impact of the pre-COVID megatrends and the COVID *per se*. from the UK perspective.

Regardless of regions, countries and systems, according to the articles in the Special Issue, impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on internationalization of HE in all the cases are obvious and considerable. No surprisingly, common and general challenges include a disruption of physical movement of students and academics across borders and a decrease in the number of both inbound and outbound international students due to international travel restrictions, the wide implementation of online and blended teaching and learning activities, a decline in the revenues of universities largely relying on tuition fees from international students, virtual mobility, virtual research cooperation, online international student communities, etc. Despite differences in degree, these challenges are mentioned in almost all the articles included in this special issue. For example, according to Li and Ai, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to become the watershed moment for outbound student mobility in Chinese universities. From the perspective of inbound international student mobility, according to Buckner, Zhang, and Blanco though seeming to be relatively modest, at the national level, both Canada and the US experienced a slight downtick in overall international student enrolments in 2020, as compared to 2019. The UK case by Ilieva and Tsiligkiris reveals that the pandemic has accelerated the delivery of transnational education programmes either entirely online, through local education partners or a locally supported hybrid model.

However, there are some specific issues facing individual regions, countries and systems. As Welch noted, it is notably true in the case of Anglophone systems such as the USA, UK and Canada that have been a preferred destination for a high proportion of international students. Particularly, Australia presents an interesting case because of its high proportion of international students, and heavy dependence on their fees. Further, the problem is exacerbated by growing US–China tensions, and resultant pressures on Australia and its universities. From the European viewpoint, based on document analysis and comparisons in changes in European higher education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ferencz and Rumbley anticipate that remarkable changes will occur in the HE environment at the European level in the implementation of their overarching strategies and in the advancement of their internationalization objectives. They believe that the pandemic had immediate repercussions on internationalization strategy execution and increased the gap between strategy and implementation, while network participation provided a tool to address encountered challenges, and to support strategic adaptation. Moreover, they argue that changes have particularly happened to three selected internationalization areas—mobility, internationalization at home and the social responsibility agenda in relation to internationalization, which they see as a key development now and in the post-pandemic period in the European higher education environment.

Slightly different from what is discussed by Ferencz and Rumbley, the case of Russia by Minaeva and Taradina reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic initiated the growth of internationalization activities at the institutional level in Russia in two directions. First, it increased attention to the quality of work with current international students, including student support, adaptation issues, student engagement. Second, due to the risks in student enrolment, it brought universities to rethink their internationalization instruments and strategies for work with international applicants and future students. Their study also indicates that the resilience of different education systems during

the pandemic is a major factor for successful internationalization, the digital domain is most likely to become a tangible part of education in general and internationalization in particular, and online and blended degrees have the potential of becoming a significant part of education export, which makes digital infrastructure and digital academic culture important factors in creating a welcoming international environment.

Moreover, the comparative study of the impact of COVID-19 on international student enrolments in North America between Canada and the US by Buckner, Zhang, and Blanco shows that the Canadian federal government took more friendly policies to support international students and ensure that international students remain eligible for work visas, thus maintaining Canada's commitment and attractiveness to international students. In contrast, the U.S. federal government took a hostile attitude towards immigration, including international students, under Trump's international student visa policy. However, despite the contrasting policies of the two countries, their research found that both countries have seen only small declines in international student numbers.

Further, even within one national system, the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on some particular aspects of internationalization of HE vary depending on types of HE institutions. For example, the comparative study by Buckner, Zhang, and Blanco suggests that within Canada and the US, the impacts are uneven in terms of international student enrolments. In Canada, COVID seems to have affected colleges worse than universities. In the US, community colleges have also been hit very hard by overall declines in enrolments. Meanwhile, applications from international students in 2021 at more selective institutions are actually significantly up. Additionally, Huang's research shows that although the vast majority of the interviewees believed that the pandemic has had more negative impacts on their academic activities and life, the case study of Japan suggests that there are also positive impacts from the pandemic that are unique to international faculty's academic activities and life. Second, the study reveals that the impacts on international faculty vary according to the backgrounds of the interviewees such as their academic disciplines, countries of origin, work roles and duties.

Regarding how individual regions, countries and systems have dealt and will deal with this challenge to shape "a new normal", based on a critical analysis of how Chinese students assess and evaluate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility, Mok and Zhang suggested that it is required to remake international higher education for an unequal world by moving beyond the conventional theoretical framework that primarily focuses on economic, educational, and cultural factors to take the broader political economic context into account when analysing international student mobility. Moreover, in order to manage higher education development, the global community should collaborate to promote diversity in higher education and bridge the widening gap that prevents less fortunate social groups from accessing HE with an innovative/creative mix of traditional and high-technology-driven higher education. The case of study by Li and Ai mentions that as there is a high possibility that Chinese students will be mobile virtually after the pandemic and outbound numbers of students may experience certain degree of fluctuations, it is important to investigate the implications of emerging trend of virtual mobility of Chinese students from institutional, national and global perspectives. While Ferencz and Rumbley expect that more efforts should be made in facilitating internationalization at home and strengthening social responsibility in the internationalization of European HE, by emphasizing the importance to moving internationalization beyond exceptionalism using the MARS model, Hunter and Sparnon argue that internationalization activities should be seen as a transversal theme and embedded into all aspects of institutional operations in a way that is consistent with the hierarchy of priorities set out in the MARS model. According to Ilieva and Tsiligiris, impacted by the pandemic, several UK universities and colleges used their overseas partners' overseas campuses and online provision to support international students in their home country. It is expected that the use of online and blended learning would become an important element of the future HE model and more attention would be paid to internationalization at home, widening participation, decolonizing the curriculum, and embedding sustainability in the UK.

Several implications can be drawn from the studies above. With respect to the implications for future research, it is important to consider questions like what might be the short-term and long-term impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on internationalization of HE at a global level and specific to national contexts. How




has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted internationalization in different levels and types or sectors of HE within one country or national HE system, specific aspects of internationalization of HE such as physical and virtual mobility of students, staff and academics, educational and degree programs, media of instruction, strategies and missions of internationalization, institutional governance arrangements, and societal engagements? What factors have determined different changes to occur in internationalization of HE across regions, countries and systems because of the COVID-19 pandemic? How a “new” normal of internationalization of HE is understood and observed, and carried out and will be implemented in individual regions, countries and systems? Are there any generally agreed upon strategies and models of internationalization of HE that can be relevant and responsive to the ongoing and future impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic? In terms of implications for institutional practice, are there any models or good practices that can be generalized and applied to different national contexts or individual HE institutions to tackle challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic? How can individual HE institutions with various missions and goals create healthier and stronger mechanisms to deal with future crises? And how can they work out more supportive measures to help students and staff, domestic and international, to overcome issues resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in their teaching and learning, research and societal engagement activities.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in QS at <https://www.qs.com/portfolio-items/the-coronavirus-crisis-and-the-future-of-higher-education-report/>.

#### KEYWORDS

challenges, comparative study, internationalization of HE, post-pandemic world

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**How to cite this article:** Huang, F., Crăciun, D., & de Wit, H. (2022). Internationalization of higher education in a post-pandemic world: Challenges and responses. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 76, 203–212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12392>