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Gearing up higher education for a more resilient future post COVID-19

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Gearing Up Higher Education for a More Resilient Future Post COVID-19

Education is premised on an institution's ability to gather faculty and students, and to provide space and opportunities to produce and disseminate knowledge. Besides its direct medical and healthcare impact, COVID-19 has been a significant disruptor to the higher education sector. This paper highlights its impact on international student mobility, international collaborations, and the delivery of teaching and learning. To successfully ride out the recovery, institutions will need to build resilient strategies to operate in the new, post-COVID normal by engaging with stakeholders, ensuring financial sustainability, and embracing purposeful digital transformation in university operations, teaching, and learning.

1. COVID-19 Disruptions in Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused immeasurable loss of life around the world and brought devastating social and economic disruptions, affecting all aspects of humanity. It has led to a severe global economic recession and continues to pose a significant threat to public health (WHO, 2020). The pandemic has severely affected many sectors, including higher education's ability to gather and interact for knowledge production and dissemination.

Internationalisation activities

Prior to the border controls and travel restrictions due to COVID-19, international mobility and collaborations in higher education were flourishing in many forms, from short-term study trips to semester-long exchange programmes, and from full-time study outside of students' home countries to universities with international campuses. Internationalisation makes institutions more culturally and intellectually dynamic for students and faculty, fosters intercultural skills, enhances the creation of global networks, and offers a transformative experience (IIE, 2019).

Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 has disrupted higher education in many ways. This paper highlights its specific impact on international student mobility, international collaborations and related activities, and teaching and learning.

International Student Mobility

US$300 billion annual economic impact

The competition for international students is both intense and global, with many countries setting specific international student recruitment targets (British Council, 2017, as cited in Wiemer, 2017). Australia, for example, is targeting total onshore enrolment of 720,000 students by 2025. This is not surprising because international students generate a global economic impact of US$300 billion annually, not including intangibles such as soft power and intercultural relations (Choudaha, 2019).

Major sources and destinations of international students

More than 5 million students are currently enrolled in higher education institutions outside their home countries (UNESCO, 2020). About three quarters of internationally mobile students study in developed countries (Choudaha & van Rest, 2018), and half in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (UNESCO, 2019). China and India have emerged as the top source countries, with about 20% of total demand from these two countries. Students from China (about 370,000) and India (over 202,000) account for half of the international students at US universities (UNESCO, 2019).
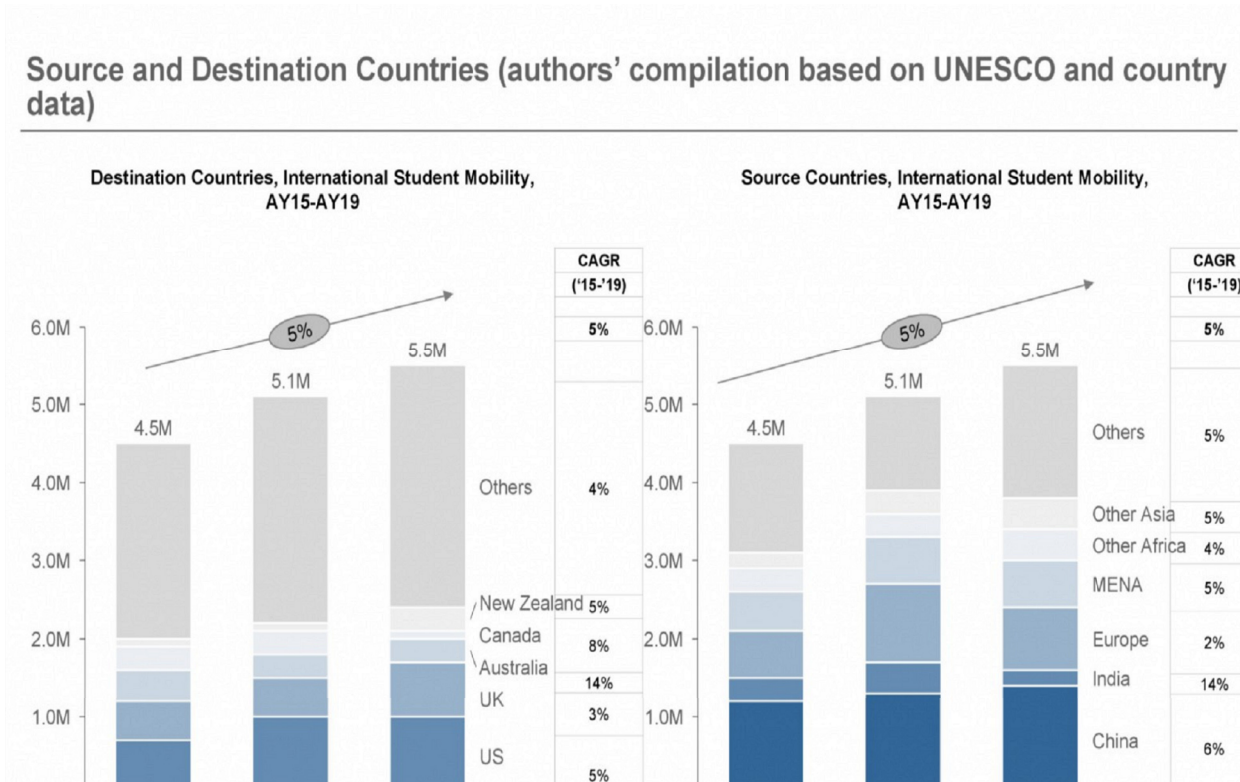
Source and Destination Countries (authors' compilation based on UNESCO and country data)

Destination Countries, International Student Mobility, AY15-AY19

	CAGR ('15-'19)
	5%
Others	4%
New Zealand	5%
Canada	8%
Australia	14%
UK	3%
US	5%

Bars: 4.5M, 5.1M, 5.5M — 5%

Source Countries, International Student Mobility, AY15-AY19

	CAGR ('15-'19)
	5%
Others	5%
Other Asia	5%
Other Africa	4%
MENA	5%
Europe	2%
India	14%
China	6%

Bars: 4.5M, 5.1M, 5.5M — 5%

Figure 1 *Source and Destination Countries (authors' compilation based on UNESCO and country data)*

Changing study plans

UNESCO reported that, at the beginning of April 2020, educational institutions were closed in 185 countries, affecting close to 90% of all total enrolled learners (Marinoni et al., 2020). Two thirds of prospective students' plans have been affected by COVID, and more than half are thinking of delaying their studies. A further 15% are now considering other study destinations (QS, 2020). Countries that rely heavily on international students as a source of university funding will suffer the greatest losses. Australian universities, for example, may lose up to A$16 billion in revenue (Universities Australia, 2020).

Expected shift in study destinations

While international student mobility will remain resilient in the long term, student mobility to traditional destinations like the United States and the United Kingdom is likely to see a decline in the coming years. BridgeU (2020) reports that the United States was originally the top destination for 32% of respondents. However, it is now the preferred destination of only 9%. Proposed government policies, such as cuts to work opportunities for foreign workers, can further lower the interest among international students who hope to obtain post-study work experience. Prospective students are also looking for countries that offer a perceived higher level of safety and stability. Canada and New Zealand have shown support to international students by making them eligible for benefits under several schemes.

Marketing and outreach events

Institutions are also facing challenges in connecting with their prospective students. For example, the traditional education fairs, information sessions, campus visits, and networking events have all been curtailed

due to travel restrictions, regulations restricting in-person events, and other safety and health management protocols. Like many other businesses, universities and trade fair organisers moved their efforts online in a very short time. GMAC (2020a) reported reductions in travel budgets for recruitment and a reallocation of these budgets to online engagements. Asia Pacific universities, for example, are spending up to 58% of their recruitment budgets now on online initiatives. Universities are also competing intensely for domestic students, who are not subject to travel restrictions.

For international students who have already accepted offers of admission, some universities in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand have reportedly organised chartered planes to bring students (Nott, 2020). Others have subsidised the cost of travel and, where required, the cost of self-isolation, quarantine, and COVID-19 tests.

Increasing pressure on international student numbers

Institutions have taken corrective actions to ensure the student pipeline remains as intact as possible, but many universities will face challenges. Top-tier universities, schools, and programmes will continue to attract their share of students, but those that are less able to connect and engage with their prospective students will see the international student market become incredibly competitive as universities compete for the same student population.

International Collaborations and Related Activities

Besides international student mobility, there are other equally important efforts in internationalising domestic students' experience. For example, many universities are engaged in building a network of exchange partners, thus enabling their domestic students to experience studying abroad and, at the same time, welcoming international students onto their campus to enrich student diversity.

International collaborations

The Erasmus programme (in various forms since 1987, including the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, or EMJMD) allows participating students to spend up to 12 months at another European institution in fulfilment of their own degree requirements. The programme enhances participants' intercultural awareness, skills, and employability, and promotes social cohesion in Europe as well (UNESCO, 2019).

Many universities feature "Internationalisation at Home" in their curriculum and learning outcomes (de Wit et al., 2015). This can be in the form of courses that expressly integrate some international, intercultural, or global dimension in their syllabi, or other forms of short-term international activities such as study missions and community service projects which typically involve trips that focus on specific social, cultural, industry-related, or community-building objectives. Students may also embark on internships or some form of "work + study" arrangements overseas.

For some universities with international campuses or partnerships, such as Xian Jiao Tong-Liverpool University (China), RMIT in Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), Monash University in Sunway (Malaysia), and INSEAD in France, Singapore, and Abu Dhabi, students have the option to spend

some time at different campuses. Additionally, joint- or dual-degree programmes are also very well ranked. For example, eight out of the top 10 EMBA programmes offer a multi-country campus experience (Financial Times, 2020).

COVID-19 has also resulted in the suspension of international learning activities. Student exchanges and study trips were casualties of international travel stoppage. Even when international travels are possible again, the constantly changing border restrictions, quarantine requirements, and other health protocols have heightened the risks involved in overseas travel.

Reduced international collaborations and activities

Teaching and Learning

As COVID-19 wreaked havoc on human health around the world, traditional teaching and learning ground to a complete halt in many places. Between February and June 2020, the duration of school closures ranged from 7 to 19 weeks across OECD and partner countries (Schleicher, 2020). The EU Commission reports that almost all institutions have replaced face-to-face learning activities with online courses (EU, 2020).

School closures

Many universities are already using content management systems, in addition to developing online or digital teaching materials and even apps. COVID-19 meant universities had to use some form of technology to deliver teaching and learning on a massive scale and at such great speed that they had never contemplated before. Even universities in Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Middle East, armed with emergency preparedness protocols and business contingency plans drawn up in the wake of outbreaks of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), were unprepared. The scale of disruption caused by COVID-19 exceeded any planned scenarios.

Rapid pivot to online delivery

As noted by Schleicher (2020), Marinoni et al. (2020), and others, many universities struggled with the technical infrastructure in terms of resources, capacity, and capability to deliver instruction and assess students' progress. Unequal access to technology creates a "digital divide," preventing equal access to teaching and learning. ITU (2019) statistics show that 87% of the population in developed countries has access to the Internet, compared to 47% in developing countries and only 19% in the least developed countries. Saeed (2020) described how COVID-19 exacerbated inequality in higher education, especially for the less developed nations and communities.

Unequal access to technology

In developed economies, where most international students are found, universities are luckily better situated to see the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to innovate through technologically enabled learning strategies.

Online teaching, whether to replace in-person teaching entirely or used as part of a hybrid or blended strategy, means faculty had to very quickly learn new ways of delivering course materials effectively over Webex, Zoom, MS Teams, and Google Hangouts, and use new tools to engage with students. Examinations were logistically complex, with many institutions cancelling or replacing final examinations with alternative

Online teaching and assessments

assessments. Those that continued with examinations had to quickly pivot to different technologies and processes to ensure that the integrity of the assessment is maintained even when it is conducted online.

Whilst online teaching and learning can replace instructional time, it cannot replace natural human interaction. Many reports confirm that students are concerned about their academic experience and prefer to meet in person whenever possible. "The sudden switch to online learning, with little warning or experience, has been difficult for many teachers and students" (Cowell, 2021).

2. Gearing Up for a More Resilient Future

As discussed earlier, institutions had to take many urgent and immediate steps in 2020 to react to changes in international student mobility, international collaborations, as well as teaching and learning activities. Three actions are critical as organisations gear up to build a more agile and resilient posture in anticipation of recovery.

Engage stakeholders

Rallying and uniting the institutional community

The early initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic focused on ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff. Universities that were able to rally and unite their community through an effective communication strategy with all their stakeholders are more likely to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic stronger. This had to be a deliberate effort, requiring the collective attention of senior university leadership, to ensure that stakeholder engagement and communication is as open, transparent, and inclusive as possible.

Support for graduating class

The graduating class of 2020, for example, faced enormous pressure to complete their academic studies. Aucejo et al. (2020) noted that 13% of students had to delay graduation and 40% lost a job, internship, or some other kind of professional offer. Kumari et al. (2021) observed that the graduating cohort worried about insecurities and noted that there is an urgent need to support the mental health of students. Universities should consider offering special and additional support to these students, such as recognising academic credits through alternative online courses such as MOOCs or platforms such as Coursera, providing extended career-service support, or even offering additional learning credits or internship opportunities after graduation. Knowing what commencement meant to these students, some universities have found

alternative ways to celebrate their graduation, from using robots (with iPads for faces) and avatars to a full-blown digital graduation in Minecraft.

As institutions gear up for the expected recovery period ahead, they should provide one-stop access to information and support structures for students. Kent State University, for example, created a "one-stop shop website, with call line, and email address for all COVID-19 questions, including telehealth and telemedicine information" (ACE, 2020, p. 3). In particular, the use of support groups has been effective in many places. These can be student-only groups, a mix of students and faculty, or other specific groupings. MacPhee (2020) added that "supportive relationships and feelings of connectedness to fellow students, family, friends, faculty members and mentors are protective factors that can help promote emotional well-being."

Access to help and support

As for faculty members, university leaders could consider reassessing expectations of productivity and show greater flexibility. Adjusting timelines for tenure, reappointment, and the evaluation and promotion process may aid faculty when they are called upon to learn new teaching tools, create online learning materials, and provide students with additional support.

New international students needed significant guidance and counselling on navigating the constantly changing immigration and border-control rules and regulations. Many went through weeks of isolation, quarantine, and tests upon tests before being allowed to settle down in the new country and start attending class. Many universities offered financial subsidies for the unforeseen additional costs that students had to bear, sent welcome or care packages for students during quarantine, and made regular in-person calls to make sure they were healthy in body and spirit. Additional initiatives like "buddy mentorship" programmes by senior students should be considered to help new students adjust quickly to their new surroundings and to acquaint them with their peers.

Ensure financial sustainability

At the same time, ensuring long-term financial sustainability is just as crucial. Whilst governments around the world put in place fiscal stimulus and financial support to save the jobs and economy, the level of direct assistance available to universities vary from one jurisdiction to another. Universities have different degrees of financial strength as well, some being blessed with larger endowments and/or substantial research funding to cushion the short- and medium-term financial impact of COVID-19. For many, however, international students represent a substantial funding source. And with the continued curtailment of global mobility in one form or another, the focus on effective cost management will remain of high priority.

Government support and potential funding shortfall

As campuses reopen, institutions need to adjust to a new normal, which will include smaller allowable class sizes, lower caps for student accommodation, lower foot traffic in commercial spaces, and higher overall costs to maintain safety, security, and health protocols. For many large

Larger capital expenditure will be required

universities, this means that some combination of face-to-face and on-line teaching will have to continue as well. Investments will be necessary to ensure that the human resources and infrastructure can prove flexible enough to accommodate changes in teaching delivery—especially when different COVID-19 waves may result in on-again, off-again campus access.

Working out the financials

Universities thus need to have a good understanding of their short-term liquidity requirements and critically assess changing cash flow needs in the coming periods. As they reflect on these changes, they should stress test and reforecast revenue and cost assumptions, review capital expenditure, and build modularity in all investment decisions. Universities with outstanding debt instruments should also check if their debt covenants or repayment schedule requires renegotiation (EY-Parthenon, 2020). Chief financial officers have a critical role to play in addressing immediate financial concerns and in stabilising university finances, eventually positioning the institutions for recovery (Agrawal et al., 2020).

Embrace deliberate, purposeful digital transformation

Adjusting to new digital workflows

Every university was already on its own digital transformation journey before the pandemic hit. COVID-19 brought an unprecedented level of urgency to digital transformation in many organisations. As university offices were closed, face-to-face classes cancelled, campuses and cities put under lockdown, new paradigms and operating modes were established quickly. For example, physical forms and signatures promptly gave way to digital copies and electronic signatures. Many "by email" workflows were created rapidly just to get things done.

In the early COVID-19 days, the teaching and learning pivot was similarly focused on just getting things done, often on an emergency, best-effort basis. For some classes, it was as simple as recording lectures and making them available asynchronously. For many, it was teaching over Zoom, Webex, or some other communication platform. Everything else was scaled down to the lowest common denominator available for all students, as access to technology and the Internet was—and still is—not uniform.

Turning proactive instead of reactive

What universities need to do now is pursue deliberate, purposeful change. What purposeful digital transformation should we make in university operations and with regard to teaching and learning?

The digital transformation occurring within international student recruitment, for example, includes the complete switch to virtual events. Fair organisers such as QS, The MBA Tour, and many others realised very early on that they could not conduct their business as usual, i.e., in-person fairs and exhibitions.

Since the outset of COVID-19, GMAC has built upon its legacy of responding to the ever-changing landscape of graduate management education, delivering the GMAT™ Online exam in April and more recently transitioning The MBA Tour events from in-person gatherings to an entirely virtual experience. Our role, consistent with GMAC's mission, is to provide schools and candidates the opportunity to

meet, explore and connect in this environment, in a data-driven way. (GMAC, 2020b)

Virtualisation opportunities

Universities also had to quickly "virtualise" other marketing and outreach efforts. Instead of welcoming prospective students on a tour to walk around and experience campus, student life, and facilities, many produced videos instead. For example, Georgia Tech University recently launched a student-focused YouTube channel with guide videos, student profiles, and "Day in the life of" videos. UC Irvine hosted a virtual open house for future students, providing them with opportunities to engage with UCI admissions counsellors and learn more about academic programmes and student life. UCI also offered a "Virtual Tour" programme that allowed students to explore their campus with a 360° view, hear directly from current students, and learn more about academic programmes and campus life.

Partnering in teaching in learning

The World Economic Forum suggests that some changes made in the last year will continue to be beneficial. These include the awareness and use of wider digital resources, more creative assessment methods, and a rethinking of the role of instructors and students as partners in learning (Cowell, 2021). Cowell further argued that "with time to plan, incorporating online teaching will allow lecturers to focus on what activities best suit the subject they are covering and design them to fit."

Collaborative online international learning

As it is uncertain when general travel will become possible, institutions need to find creative ways to offer the benefits of internationalisation without cross-border travel. One such possibility is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). It is not a new concept, although it has received renewed attention since the onset of COVID-19. Pioneered at the SUNY COIL Centre, COIL is premised on connecting professors and students to collaborate on teaching and learning across countries.

COIL facilitates meaningful learning for students across borders as they collaborate on subject-specific learning tasks. The curriculum designed by instructors in two countries allows students to appreciate the diverse cultural context of the insights that they collectively draw through synchronous and/or asynchronous collaboration with peers.

Rubin (2017) provided some additional examples of how COIL was implemented in a number of institutions around the world. More recently, since the pandemic, COIL has been innovatively used for virtual field trips (Coventry University), virtual exchanges (Durham University), and even a collaborative music composition (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and King's College London).

Keeping a tab on EdTech opportunities and collaborations

Universities should also pay strategic attention to the developments in the field of education technology (EdTech). Even before COVID-19, global EdTech investments totalled US$19 billion in 2019 (Metaari, 2020). HolonIQ.com lists 20 EdTech unicorns as at 1 March 2021, namely private companies with valuations of over US$1 billion which offer services from tutoring and language learning to study notes and online learning materials. Most of the educational content produced by EdTech companies would require investments beyond most individual universities' budgets for content creation. Many European universities are already pooling resources and partnering with other institutions and companies

to develop programmes, learning materials, and other joint student activities (EU, 2020).

3. Conclusions

The internationalisation of higher education had continued at an uninterrupted pace for many years. COVID-19 abruptly halted this development, with the curtailment of cross-border travel, as well as campus, city, and regional shutdowns, preventing international recruitment, collaborations, and learning. Clearly, the pandemic has significantly impacted international student mobility, international collaborations, and related activities, in addition to teaching and learning. Institutions have correctly taken immediate steps to ensure the continuity of their educational mission.

As is the case with other sectors, the impact of COVID-19 on higher education will be more permanent than temporary in nature. Universities should proceed from the assumption that the "new normal" is already here; institutions therefore need to put in place concrete action plans, having learnt a lesson or two from their own earlier responses. As the higher education sector prepares for a potential recovery, it has to engage with its stakeholders, ensure financial stability, and embrace deliberate and purposeful digital transformation in university operations and with regard to teaching and learning.

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