

IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION AND STUDENT MOBILITY

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Abstract. *With the global spread of Covid-19, the world has faced and is facing an unprecedented health, economic and social crisis. This pandemic has brought many challenges to higher education (in teaching, learning, research collaborations and institutional governance), but it also provides an excellent opportunity for different stakeholders to re-think and even re-design higher education with an effective management plan of risks to make this sector more sustainable and resilient in the future.*

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are significant in international higher education and in terms of student mobility. Travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the closure of university campuses have caused many students to change or even cancel their plans to study abroad. In this context, higher education institutions in the main destination countries, such as the USA, the United Kingdom and Australia, or the North and Western European countries anticipated a considerable decrease in international students for the next academic year.

The paper presents a brief analysis of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on global and European higher education, as well as on student mobility.

Keywords: *student mobility, university education abroad, COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions.*

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1. Introduction

Over the last 50 years, there has been a huge increase worldwide in the provision of education at all levels. One of the sectors that were extremely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic was higher education but

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especially the exchange of students. Covid-19 is the biggest challenge national education systems have ever faced. Many governments have forced institutions to stop face-to-face training for most of their students, urging them to switch to online teaching and virtual education almost overnight.

In March 2020, the vast majority of European universities closed their campuses, about 95% switched to distance learning throughout the institution, while the rest continued their activities in some faculties (especially those that required laboratory work, experience practice etc.).

This sudden and disruptive shift to distance education has varied depending on the size, governance patterns and disciplinary differences of higher education institutions.

Even though in the run-up to the health crisis many higher education institutions also offered some kind of digitally enhanced learning, and many of them had online repositories for educational materials, a center or teacher support units on digitally enhanced learning and teaching, as well as the development of digital skills, however, these capabilities proved insufficient with the sudden increase in demand during the pandemic (and not all employees and students were familiar with them).

Due to travel restrictions and campus closure, many students have changed or canceled their plans to study abroad. In this respect, higher education institutions in the main destination countries, such as the USA, the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, New Zealand and Australia, can see substantial reductions in the number of international students. Thus, the estimates made by CrossMark (2020) showed that the financial losses suffered by universities in the UK amounted to approximately 790 million pounds. If in fiscal year 2017, the U.S. tertiary education sector earned about \$ 44.6 billion from so-called ancillary revenue (such as bookstores, residence halls and summer camps) by 2020 the figure is likely to approach 30 billions of dollars. In Australia, its higher education sector is expected to lose approximately 34.6 billion Australian \$ for the 2019-2020 academic year.

The crisis has also exacerbated the digital divide, with not all students having access to high-speed technology and the Internet. Many socially disadvantaged students became even more vulnerable during the crisis (some of them lost their jobs and lost their jobs, becoming dependent on family support).

International student mobility is particularly high at the doctoral level, where one in five students travel, on average, abroad to obtain a diploma. These losses can affect both the education sector and the

economies of countries that have traditionally relied on international student mobility to facilitate the immigration of foreign talent and to contribute to both knowledge production and innovation at the national level.

The health and economic crisis will have a major financial impact on the global higher education sector, both in the short and long term. The economic shock generated by the pandemic is likely to lead to a sharp reduction in both private and public funding, with negative effects on the smooth running of universities and efforts on access to quality higher education.

Therefore, it can be said that 2020 was a year of change: there have never been so many students and teachers exposed to online learning and teaching. It can also be seen as a historic opportunity to make a major leap forward in the overall transformation of learning and teaching, but also in the way in which student services, counseling and peer support can be provided at a distance.

2. Literature Review

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 had a dramatic impact on the development of higher education in various aspects, including the shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching and learning, the cancellation of events and physical activities and the formation of a "new normal" in higher education (Tesar, 2020).

Although online learning has been treated as a remedy for higher education problems, both students and teachers have expressed some reservations about learning effectiveness and pandemic interactions (Herman, 2020; Xiong, Mok and Jiang, 2020).

Various studies conducted either by higher education institutions (e.g. Lingnan University, 2020), by international organizations (e.g. UNESCO (Goris, 2020)), research organizations and teams (e.g. International Institute of Education (Martel, 2020)), The British Council (Durnin, 2020) and World Education Services (Schulmann, 2020), predicted a decrease in the number of international students to the main destination countries and a decrease in the mobility of international students globally.

The influence of the Covid-19 pandemic is significant in international higher education, especially in student mobility (Altbach & de Wits, 2020; Mok, 2020).

In his paper, Marginson (2020) argues that the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on international higher education and student mobility

will lead to significant financial challenges for universities and countries that depend on the schooling of international students. In this context, it is possible for the international education sector to become a market for buyers, in which international students entering the system become scarce sources.

The fact that the pandemic is manifesting itself unequally in different countries and regions of the world can lead to the differentiation of student mobility flows in different areas. Thus, countries in East Asia that have a better situation and higher control over the pandemic can become potential major destinations.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the weight of every factor that influences students and their families in decisions and country choices for studying abroad. In pandemic conditions, personal safety and health have become priorities in the decision-making process (Marginson, (2020); Durnin, (2020); Tan, (2020)).

Many students have canceled their plans to study abroad during the pandemic and due to the policies and measures adopted by some popular destination countries. For example, the US federal government has implemented a policy of not issuing visas to international students if they take all online courses in the fall semester of 2020, but after strong resistance from international students and top US universities (Harvard, MIT and Carnegie Mellon University), this policy has been revoked (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020).

Some authors (Mercado, 2020) believe that the pre-crisis efforts to globalize and internationalize higher education in every region of the world have laid a solid foundation for student mobility, including compatible education systems, integrated credit transfer systems and stimulating policies for student exchange, which makes international student mobility remain strong even after the pandemic.

3. The impact of Covid-19 on education

With the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, governments have imposed blockages, travel restrictions, reduced or banned domestic and international mobility, and other measures to limit the transmission of the virus. In this context, higher education institutions have been forced to close their offices and have suspended international exchange programs. According to studies conducted by UNESCO, approximately 1.6 billion students in 190 countries (94% of the world's student population) have been affected by the adoption of these measures.

As a result, distance learning has become the ideal option for ensuring the continuity of teaching and learning. But if for some universities and colleges the use of virtual tools had been practiced for some time, for others, it was unexplored territory and in these conditions they had to make the rapid transition from traditional to distance learning or hybrids.

Some higher education leaders around the world (Erickson and Siau (2003); Kaplan & Haenlein, (2016); Xie, Siau and Nah, (2020)) see the implementation and refinement of digital learning as an improvement on traditional teaching. Among the motivations for this change can be mentioned: i) the opportunity to improve students' experiences,

ii) reducing tuition costs, iii) attracting more international students, iv) meeting Generation Z's desire for more flexible learning. In fact, in 2019, investments in education technology (Edtech) were 18.66 billion US dollars and it is estimated that the general market for online education will reach \$ 350 billion by 2025.

And yet, despite pre-pandemic digital learning investments, approaches such as e-universities, online certifications, micro-credentials, and nanodegree, most higher education institutions were still largely analog. Thus, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited's 2020 report, 82% of faculty members in the UK, USA, Australia and Germany offered less than half of the academic courses for distance learning before Covid-19.

The analyzes carried out by various institutions in the field indicate that larger universities are the ones that can offer online courses for the next academic term the easiest, compared to medium and small institutions.

In addition to disrupting traditional university operations, the pandemic has affected teaching and learning experiences on the one hand, and has also led to the reconfiguration of courses.

While this transition to distance education has provided valuable learning opportunities, it has also presented significant challenges for both students and teachers – from the availability of change and digital maturity to student involvement and equitable access. Thus, many students claimed that they do not feel mentally prepared for the online academic year that followed (2020/2021).

Existing research from either surveys or in-depth interviews with teachers and students in higher education indicates that many students are often unaware of what is expected of them in online courses. If many of them, before attending an online course, expected it to be easier than face-

to-face, after actual experience in online courses they found that it was actually more difficult and time consuming than the courses. traditional face to face (this is largely due to the fact that students have to spend more time programming, connecting with teachers and their colleagues, but also taking care of their own mental and physical well-being).

Among the challenges posed by the pandemic, both for teachers and students, can be mentioned the one related to accessing quiet spaces to study, or prepare courses, or teach. Regarding this, Michaela Martin, program director at the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, said: development where there is limited access to the internet or IT infrastructure to access online learning or teaching”.

Many students are also concerned about the adequate, equitable access to digital technology and tools needed to join distance classes during the pandemic, but also about the lack of social connection, minimal social interactions and opportunities to build communities.

While in Asia and the Pacific, America and Europe almost all higher education institutions have reported that they have the necessary infrastructure to move to the online education process, in Africa, just over half of the total number of higher education institutions do not have communications infrastructure, and many of them had closed campuses. This is a worrying signal, as the staff and students of these higher education institutions could completely lose contact with their institutions during the closure of these campuses.

Adapting to new distance learning environments and maintaining student involvement were two of the most important challenges facing both students and teachers after the pandemic broke out. Analyzes conducted internationally highlight the fact that many students claim that the pandemic has worsened their ability to stay focused and engaged in online courses, a fact reported by the Faculty. In this context, higher education institutions have acted quickly to adopt new technologies to provide students with exciting learning experiences: video conferencing tools, online platforms, web-based resources and live lectures, etc. and to quickly adopt a new pedagogical model.

Analyzes to date on the effects of the pandemic on higher education institutions show that this health crisis has accelerated the future of the distance learning revolution by at least a decade. In the first half of 2020, the largest investments in the world in the field of Edtech technology in the last 10 years were made (\$ 4.5 billion, three times higher than the average 6-month investment in the previous decade).

To be successful in online learning, teachers and students need to be trained in using platforms, installing software, downloading and uploading documents, and browsing the Internet.

The health crisis has also disrupted research activities due to restrictions on the international mobility of researchers, resulting in obstacles to research collaboration, the closure of laboratories and the transition to distance collaboration. The most affected are PhD candidates because they often do not have local support networks and may be further affected by the situation in their country of origin, as well as early career researchers.

The special session on education convened by UNESCO in October 2020 called for the renewal of commitments to meet the four-year goal of sustainable development ("Ensuring a fair, inclusive and quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all"). 2030 for sustainable development"), emphasizing the need to invest in inclusive and equitable lifelong learning, but also to strengthen global cooperation in the field of education.

Global Education Meeting Declaration on Extraordinary Session of the Global Education Meeting, Post-Covid-19: 2020 Education conveys the urgent and essential message of protecting educational budgets and supporting all educational institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. The declaration also contains commitments to the safe reopening of educational institutions; supporting all educational staff as front-line workers; addressing the shortage of trained teachers and the professional development of educators at all levels; and bridging the digital divide in education.

The Association of Commonwealth Universities, the Francophone University Agency and the International Association of Universities through the partnership agreement signed in 2020 also aim to increase the visibility of higher education in various approaches worldwide.

4. The impact of Covid-19 on Student Mobility

With the development of globalization and internationalization of higher education, the demand for students for higher education has expanded greatly and many of them intend to study abroad, which leads to increased cross-border education.

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the process of continuing studies consists in choosing to study abroad or stays in the country of

origin, choosing a country of destination for studies abroad and choosing an institution for higher education.

In general, “push” factors are linked to some negative aspects in the countries of origin that force students to go and study abroad, while “attraction” factors are associated with the positive aspects of the destinations that attract the students to study in other countries (Liu and Zhu, 2019). Both the pushing and the attracting factors are motivating / determining factors for students to study abroad.

A person's motivations to study abroad have become complex and diverse as students have more opportunities to choose their favorite destinations and fields of study (Wu, 2014).

In addition to causing major disruptions to teaching, learning and research, the Covid-19 pandemic has also negatively affected many internationalization activities of universities, especially in terms of student and staff mobility. International student mobility is severely affected by these effects, mainly due to the closure of many university campuses as well as international travel restrictions.

Studies conducted by various international bodies show that the current pandemic is a disruption to international student mobility, which is faster and more immediate than the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, or the global financial crisis of 2008-2009.

The decrease in the number of international students due to the pandemic has a significant impact on higher education institutions abroad, especially for those that depend financially on the schooling of international students (Marginson, 2020; Tesar, 2020).

Studies on international student mobility show that, while the Covid-19 pandemic has a negative impact on the internationalization of higher education, there is a tendency to regionalize it, a trend that is likely to continue in the post-pandemic period. For example, a British Council report on the intentions of Chinese students to study in the UK shows that for 22% of the 8481 students who applied to study in the UK in the fall of 2020, the likelihood of canceling plans is large, and 39% of them did not make the final decision. Universities UK (the body representing British higher education) have also issued a sober warning: in the 2020/2021 academic year, universities could see a drop in revenue of GBP 7 billion (about \$ 8.57 billion).

Australia has seen a significant decline in the number of international students, especially among Chinese students (in the first half of 2020, higher education will lose about 150,000 Chinese students).

Surveys conducted by the European Association for International Education among people working in higher education in various European countries found that almost three quarters of higher education institutions in Europe are expected to see a significant effect of the pandemic on the number of international students, even very significant.

The World Education Services report shows that 72% of international education professionals in North America expect a decline in the university market for international students.

According to Finnish statistics, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, a third of Finnish higher education students decided to continue their studies in the host country (they based their decision either on the perceived sense of security in the host country or on the problems (rent in the host country has already been paid for the full semester)). In the autumn semester of the academic year 2020/2021, given that almost all Finnish higher education institutions had lower mobility of international students compared to normal, they supported virtual mobility. Finland has provided reduced meals at student restaurants to higher education students in distress due to the pandemic.

For disadvantaged international students whose financial situation has been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, some Member States have allocated funds to help them. For example, France has established exceptional aid for international students, accessible to both scholarship holders and non-scholarship holders, regardless of nationality. It targeted students who lost a paid job/internship due to the Covid-19 pandemic. France has also initiated actions aimed at helping international students, both financially and psychologically, and has offered them other types of help (eg computer donation).

Germany has modified and extended its student loan program to 650 euros per month; this program was open to all international students (who were explicitly named as a target group of the new measure) and paid as a zero-interest monthly loan until the end of March 2021.

In Ireland, international students who have become unemployed due to the Covid-19 pandemic have been granted unemployment benefits (without violating their immigration conditions, which is not normally allowed).

In Belgium, the NGO Ontmoeting Buitenlandse Studenten Gent has taken steps to help disadvantaged international students by giving them access to a food bank and providing financial assistance to students from poor regions.

In Sweden and Norway, in some universities, private donations were used to support international students who were unable to return home due to the pandemic.

In Japan, too, eligible international support programs have been offered to eligible international students (loans of up to JPY 200,000 (approximately EUR 1587)).

In Australia, some regional governments have provided financial support to support students vulnerable to the pandemic. For example, in the state of Victoria, the international emergency aid fund for students (rent and utilities), amounting to A \$ 45 million (AUD) (approximately € 27.3 million) was administered by educational institutions superior. The Study Melbourne Student Center provided free counseling and support for international students.

Some countries have issued guidelines to higher education institutions to facilitate, as far as possible, international student flows, while respecting existing security measures to combat the pandemic. EU and OECD countries have taken different approaches to how to admit international students to their territory, but also to determine whether their studies are fully pursued online. Some encouraged students to apply for visas so that they could enter immediately after lifting admission restrictions.

Thus, starting with May/June 2020, Campus France broadcast several videos made by directors from universities and other higher education institutions to attract international students and promote online courses.

In Italy, the Government has updated the document governing entry, stay and enrollment in higher education institutions for international students for the academic year 2020-2021, in accordance with the guidelines to reduce the spread of the virus. Higher education institutions have been asked not to interrupt their international student recruitment procedures.

The Netherlands has provided a "service document" for higher education institutions containing all agreements and exceptions to the rules that may apply during the period in which anti-Covid-19 measures apply.

Norway and some EU Member States have not changed national policies on the admission of international students, nor have they provided educational institutions with instructions on the admission of international students during the pandemic.

The analysis of current trends in the regional geography of international student mobility shows an increase in the East. The number of international students from around the world recruited by China, Japan,

Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore is constantly growing. Since 2016, China has become the third global destination for international students (with 492,185 international students in 2018 (Felstead, 2020), with a strong increase in enrollment at postgraduate and doctoral level (UNESCO 2018), and most students come from countries along the former Silk Road trade routes.

Generous financial support for international students studying at Chinese universities (in contrast to practices adopted by some Western universities that tend to focus on the financial benefits of hosting international students) is an important factor in attracting students and a possible alternative for disadvantaged students.

As logistical barriers to travel diminish, many young people eager to study abroad will face psychological reasons to stay at home, including concerns about their health and well-being abroad. , the practices and costs of international travel, but also on job opportunities (reduced due to a projected global recession) after graduation. To these are added the administrative barriers related to delays in language testing.

Covid-19 has increased the visibility of students and highlighted the understanding of their undeniable importance for economies and societies.

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely disrupted higher education and will take some time to establish traditional student mobility flows. Even after the restrictions are lifted, new manifestations of the virus, the impact of a pending global recession will certainly lower the supply even further. In this context, in the future, international student mobility will take different forms, ranging from the dominant independent model of the individual consumer pursuing education abroad, to the more complex model of interinstitutional and intra-institutional mobility. Thus, virtual mobility should emerge as a means by which those who cannot physically cross borders can enjoy some of the qualities and benefits of international education. Virtual mobility is also available to young people at a lower cost, allowing for more accessible international experiences.

There is no doubt that the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic will accelerate the development of online education, but this does not mean that the demand for higher education will face dramatically or even significantly in the long run. As Marginson (2020) observes: “the organic classroom has irreplaceable personal and status benefits ... [and] if the next academic year starts online, the platforms will have to be of better quality than the temporary adaptations that are now put back together”.

5. Conclusion

White and Lee (2020), reflecting on the realities of the Covid-19 crisis in a paper published in *University World News*, said: “We are hunkered down in our homes in a sudden, harsh, no-mobility world. This complete shutdown of mobility has exposed an existing reality: We already live in a world in which mobility is not necessary, and sometimes perhaps not even desirable, for meaningful cross-border exchange or an international education. These events as a consequence of Covid-19 have hastened the dawn of a new post-mobility world, or one in which physical travel is unnecessary for the creation and transmission of knowledge across borders”.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of our lives and exacerbated existing inequalities. An important sector of society that has undergone a fundamental transformation is higher education, where, almost overnight, teaching has become digitized across the globe. In an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus, campuses have been closed, leaving classrooms once full of life, laboratories, dormitories and cafes abandoned. If local students returned to their parents' homes, many international students could not do the same due to closed borders and suspended international flights. In the context of uncertainties about education and the financial situation, but also about health care concerns, some international students, especially those in China and other parts of Asia, have experienced situations of social exclusion and xenophobic attitudes and sometimes have become victims of discrimination and verbal aggression.

It can be said that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought many challenges in higher education in terms of teaching, learning, research collaborations and institutional governance, but it has also provided an excellent opportunity for various actors in the field to rethink and even to re-design higher education to make this sector more sustainable and resilient in the future. At the same time, this crisis is forcing higher education stakeholders to reconsider the role of information and communication technologies, especially online learning in higher education.

While the pandemic has significantly reduced international student mobility, it is also changing the flow of international student mobility, and East Asian countries and regions are facing more and more opportunities in the increasingly competitive higher education sector for international students.

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