

## 6. Reclaiming International Student Mobility in a Post-pandemic World

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### Abstract

*International education was thriving pre-pre-pandemic, where massification of international student mobility was evident. An international education experience abroad was sought after by students to enhance their employability, gain global citizenship skills, and contribute to economic prosperity. Since the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic in early 2020, country borders remain closed, closing doors for students to experience international education abroad. This essay reflects international student mobility and prospects for a post-pandemic world. In addition, this essay seeks to find rationales and potential directions to critically address 'How will international student mobility look like in a post-pandemic world?' The value of international education will not diminish post-COVID, but it will take a significantly different shape online. Technology might be the leveler that the global higher education landscape requires in reimagining internationalization as a more inclusive experience for all.*

### Keywords

higher education; international students; pandemic, internationalization

### Introduction

Before the global COVID-19 pandemic, students moved across borders for tertiary education in record numbers. In 2018, a total of 5.6 million students went abroad for their studies, which doubled the figures recorded in 2005 (OECD, 2021). Between 1998 to 2018, the number of international students grew on average by 4.8 percent annually. The United States, Australia, Germany, and the United Kingdom were major hosts of international students, with China and India contributing to over 30 percent of mobile students in OECD countries. The movement of students has transformed higher education into a lucrative business; at least 20 percent of tertiary students in Australia, Luxembourg, and New Zealand in 2018 were international students.

When the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic by January 2020, the movement of international students across borders came to a standstill. National borders were shut for months on end to contain the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In April 2020, one of the earliest national responses was by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who was heavily criticized for his suggestion that international

students who faced economic hardship during the pandemic should return to their home countries. At the current point of writing, over 219 million cases were reported worldwide, with over 4.55 million deaths recorded. Countries experienced waves of reopening and lockdowns due to new virus variants. Today, the current priority for many governments is the inoculation rate of all population members.

This essay reflects international student mobility and prospects for a post-pandemic world. Given that global student mobility is the authors' research interest, a reflective lens on the subject is essential to ascertain the continuity and sustainability of their scholarly contribution in the broad field of higher education research. As the title of this essay suggests, we seek to find rationales and potential directions to the following question: How will international student mobility look like in a post-pandemic world?

### **A Hybrid Presence**

Before the pandemic, international education was a predominantly physical endeavor. Students had to travel to their host countries with a passport and a verification document issued by the host country, using a student pass or student visa. They travel either for short-term exchanges or full-time study, which lasts between three to five years. Today, a physical presence for international education is still possible but appears less attractive than before. Even when international traveling is possible, international students must overcome quarantine orders at the start of their studies. The quarantine orders vary in duration and must be served either at home or at designated quarantine facilities, at a cost that increases the strain on their budget. The students also were studying online at their dormitories or rented accommodation rather than on the university campus due to lockdowns or circuit breaker measures imposed to curb the community-based spread of the SARS-CoV virus. In addition, students found it hard to seek part-time employment as businesses are still in recovery mode post-lockdown.

As such, many international students look forward to studying hybrid arrangements. Through a mixed performance, students are allowed to undertake part of their study within their home countries online. They must continue the remainder of their studies, typically program core subjects that require a physical presence in laboratories and study sites in the host countries. Such arrangement reduces costs associated with international education abroad, consequently increasing access to international education for a larger pool of the student population.

A physical international higher education experience remains attractive and in high demand, both pre-and post-pandemic. Pham and colleagues (2019) and Singh & Fan (2021) offer three benefits of studying abroad within the context of social capital. One, students can develop international networks, which would be helpful for employment and business opportunities after graduation. Two, the students' experience immersing

themselves in unfamiliar environments and the ensuring competencies developed – problem-solving, intercultural communication, confidence, among others – are valuable assets in distinguishing themselves from other graduates during the job search. Finally, their ability to communicate in English, on top of their global mindset, intercultural competencies, and practical skills, are much sought out by corporations with multi-national operations.

Countries would likely have to review and redefine the current operational definition of an international student moving forward. Presently, students who are not citizens of the country they study in are considered international students. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) UK recorded students who enroll in educational institutions operating outside the UK as offshore international students. The agency keeps records of students enrolled in academic programs conducted entirely online, such as those offered by University College London (UCL) and Open University UK. These practices can be emulated in the long run to capture the international student cohort who opt to pursue their studies online and at a distance. As more universities conduct virtual exchanges with their foreign partners, indicators that reflect this growing trend should also be set up to capture the changing nature of student flow during the pandemic.

### **Online is International Too**

The main appeal of physical mobility is the informal learning happening throughout an international student's sojourn abroad, a different academic culture from their home country, and the immersive intercultural experience in a foreign environment are attractive pull factors for international students (Cheng, 2021). In the grand scheme of things, the *raison d'être* (reason for existence) of internationalization is the provision of quality higher education through exposure and meaningful experiences to international, global, and intercultural elements in the curriculum, research, and contribution to society (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

We agree with internationalization at a distance (Mittelmeier et al., 2019), which has been the predominant form of internationalization for the past two years. Internationalization as a distance includes all forms of education across borders where students, their respective staff, and institutional provisions are separated by geographical distance and supported by technology" (IBID, p.2). As new SARS-CoV virus variants emerge, it is essential to anticipate the continued closure of national borders and travel restrictions. Given that universities and colleges have improved their technological infrastructure for online learning, it makes sense to leverage the infrastructure to conduct virtual exchanges that mimic short-term semester-long trades but online.

An ongoing study conducted by the EU-Support for Higher Education in ASEAN (EU-SHARE) team reveals that universities in the Southeast Asian region are warming up to virtual exchanges. It provides an opportunity

for students to experience internationalization without the cost of travel (SHARE, 2022). Although physical mobility will return gradually once the SARS-CoV infection is controlled, virtual exchanges will grow as a niche offering within a multicultural, international learning environment. Virtual exchange can be an innovative solution in connecting the global student population by making it affordable for students to experience international mobility. It also develops critical competencies in virtual collaboration, as more companies and organizations are increasing their operations remotely.

### **Bringing the World into the Lecture Hall**

Before the pandemic, the physical lecture hall was where teaching and learning predominantly took place, despite the massive adoption of learning management systems (LMS) complementing the delivery of higher education. In each class, the individual faculty member orchestrated activities, read materials, gave assessments, and the students moved along with the flow, with the incalculable few struggling to catch up. As lectures were pivoted online during lockdowns, many adjustments had to be made to the processes, requiring a redesign and overhaul of standard norms and practices.

The past two years taught the university community that technology brings immense potential in transforming the learner experience. Learning can both be synchronous and asynchronous, diversified, and inclusive. The faculty member may choose to deliver lectures online independently or open their class to colleagues and industry players. Discussions can be done live or through forums and social media. Projects incorporating self-directed learning elements and guided learning from peers and faculty members are unique and engaging to all involved. Such implementation has widened access to quality content and expertise worldwide, subsequently enriching the overall learning experience of students and staff.

Underlying all the possibilities highlighted above is the need to be creative and innovative in our practices. In this sense, Yildirim et al. (2021)'s review might offer some insights on sustaining, to an extent, the experience brought about through physical mobility. Students and scholars can attend intellectual events organized by renowned institutions online across time zones. Academics can invite industry experts and researchers abroad into their virtual classrooms for interactive discussions with students, project assessments, or knowledge sharing sessions. The main challenge, which remained less discussed, is building a shared university identity sans physical facilities and campus areas. Anecdotal experiences shared by students who started their university life during the pandemic revealed that they have never experienced traveling to class, doing group discussions with their peers, or navigating offices and service providers on campus physically. They look forward to having such a physical connection with their campus once the spread of the pandemic is more contained shortly.

## Conclusion

We argued that the value of international education would not diminish post-COVID, but it will take a significantly different shape online. Technology might be the leveler the global higher education landscape requires in making internationalization more inclusive and accessible beyond the elite few who can afford the experience. Higher education institutions will need to think out of the box in offering competitive online courses and providing extracurricular activities, programs, and experiences to international students. The demand for online and hybrid education will continue to increase— for now, one must make the best of the current situation while waiting for the flow of international students globally to return to its pre-pandemic glory.

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