

**COVID-19 and the Need for Innovation in International Education:
Universidad San Francisco de Quito USFQ Case Study**

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ABSTRACT

The value of international education lies in facilitating meaningful cultural immersion as a catalyst for intercultural learning and the creation of global citizens. As the current pandemic poses a threat to the survival of international education offices across the globe, Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) are facing not only unprecedented challenges, but also opportunities to strengthen students' capacity to address the issues of the 21st century. This essay will include a brief case study and address the importance of innovation in international education given the current pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Ecuador, global citizenship, intercultural learning, international education

There has always been a need to make international experiences more accessible, and COVID-19 has pushed IHEs to shift approaches more urgently. The current pandemic is a disruptive challenge which could seriously threaten the stability of international education offices across the globe, but it also provides new opportunities for innovation in the field of internationalization. Decisions made today regarding how to connect with international partners, how to virtually immerse students, and engage them with other social contexts will be the foundation for developing citizens with

the cultural competencies necessary to address the challenges of a post COVID-19 world.

This essay emphasizes the need for long term innovation in international education given the challenges and opportunities resulting from the current pandemic. As such, it presents the case of Universidad San Francisco de Quito USFQ and its virtual international initiatives created in the wake of COVID-19.

In order to comprehend the implications of the current crisis on international education, it is important to understand how the pandemic has changed international education and its implications for cultural immersion, intercultural learning, and global citizenship. We can define cultural immersion as more than simply being physically present in a host culture. Rather, cultural immersion involves “challenging one’s cultural and individual assumptions and identity” (“What is cultural immersion?,” n.d.). While traditional perceptions of cultural immersion often imply the physical presence of a student in their host culture, other avenues such as virtual exchanges and online forums may provide opportunities to cultivate the most valuable aspects of cultural immersion such as active engagement with another culture, which can give way to intercultural learning.

In 2006, the European Federation of Intercultural Learning defined intercultural learning as “acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including one’s own, and developing greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange” (Bennett, 2009, p.2). In examining the link between this definition and that of cultural immersion, one can see that the ability to challenge one’s own perspective through active engagement is a necessary precursor to refining one’s ability to interact with sensitivity across various contexts. A third necessary definition is that of a global citizen. Oxfam defines a global citizen as “someone who is aware of and understands the wider world - and their place in it. They take an active role in their community, and work with others to make our planet more equal, fair and sustainable” (“Oxfam Education,” 2018).

Before entering into possible strategies for Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) to more effectively facilitate intercultural learning and global citizenship, it is important to consider the challenges to achieving this, both pre and post COVID-19. It must be noted that, while study abroad is often a channel for the development of cross-cultural competencies, the former does not necessarily imply the latter. Studies have shown that it is possible for students to physically attend programs in another culture and leave with little to no change in their world view and or cultural biases, showing that intercultural learning doesn’t necessarily happen through osmosis (Otten, 2003, p. 15). Student openness to actively engage with the host culture and analyze their worldview are necessary for this shift to happen. However, institutions and professionals who are in a position to

guide students in their learning should see themselves as facilitators for cultural exchange. This mindset as well as adequate preparation to accomplish these goals in person or online is key. While these challenges are not new, they must now be approached in a different way and take into account potential new barriers such as access to technology and connectivity.

Let's take a closer look at higher education in Ecuador and briefly analyze the case of Universidad San Francisco de Quito USFQ. Ecuador is a country with a population of over 17 million people (INEC, 2020). There are close to 60 universities (public and private) that provide education to 600,000 students (Senescyt, 2018). Unfortunately, not all Ecuadorian universities have established study abroad programs due to students' financial limitations and lack of institutional capacity. Many institutions do not have a dedicated office to support incoming and outgoing students, offer introductory Spanish language courses or, or provide courses in English.

USFQ, a private liberal arts university, is the exception. Since its establishment in 1988, USFQ has worked with international partners to develop exchange programs, dual degrees, short-term programs, and research. USFQ has over 100 international partnerships and in the last 5 years has received on average 80 international visitors per year. For instance in 2019, the university received approximately 1000 international students, more than 100 campus visits, and sent close to 200 local students to study abroad.

In 2020, in response to the challenges associated with in-person study abroad programs due to the current pandemic, the university reinvented its international program offerings in a virtual format, which has elicited broader conversations surrounding the facilitation of cultural immersion experiences in a distanced setting. USFQ has initiated the creation of virtual programs alongside universities in Latin America and the United States. In Fall 2020, these initiatives focused on Collaborative International Learning (COIL) with 30 programs executed, Online Virtual Research Opportunities with nearly 20 different research projects, and Virtual Exchanges with a variety of courses taught in English and Spanish. As a result, there was a 600% increase in the number of local USFQ students engaging in international education opportunities in Fall 2020 compared to Spring 2020.

In addition to academic opportunities and research offerings, USFQ has developed a series of activities with the goal of facilitating cultural immersion and intercultural learning. To give students an understanding of the local context, the university has provided a series of Latitude Zero Talks that give students a unique perspective on research and the local context in Ecuador. In an effort to build upon students' academic work and cultural immersion experiences, the international programs office has also created “Stories from Around the World” a virtual meeting space for local and

international students to share stories about their lives and cultures. This activity is guided by facilitators, but led by students, and each session focuses on a specific aspect of the students' lives such as culinary traditions, media, or gender and equality. Additionally, the university led and took part in an international series of dialogues centering around the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) and involving students from 12 different universities across the western hemisphere.

In a post event evaluation of the dialogues on SDGs, 95% of students surveyed reported that they would recommend the event in the future, and many cited the exchange of ideas and interaction with international peers as the highlight of their experience. These various virtual spaces are all consciously created to promote meaningful cultural exchange by engaging students in a voluntary discourse including a pre-meeting reflection activity, utilizing technology such as Padlet and TikTok, and a group reflection activity to share experiences and lessons learned. These online spaces require intentional planning and participation on the part of administrators and students in order to be successful thus mitigating the risk of creating international interaction without promoting intercultural learning. Whereas traditional study abroad students may find a perceived value in physically being in another country, believing that intercultural learning may happen through osmosis, students and administrators in a voluntary online forum must push themselves to create value through their willingness to share their experiences and learn from others.

Cultural immersion, intercultural learning, and global citizenship are widely used as buzzwords in the field of global higher education, and with good reason: they make up the “why” for study abroad. Effective intercultural learning results in long term cross cultural competencies that benefit students on an individual level academically and professionally. In a broader sense, it has the potential to create a generation of global citizens dedicated to a more just world. Worldwide organizations such as the United Nations point out the ways in which the current pandemic will disproportionately affect different populations and parts of the world. This could result in the widening of inequality gaps that have been closing over the past decade(s) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020, p.2). While we cannot ignore the effects of the digital divide on accessibility, IHEs can elect to take an innovative approach to study abroad education and use virtual channels to facilitate conscious cultural immersion and intercultural learning experiences. This may ultimately reach students who typically would not or could not go abroad, as was the case at USFQ in Fall 2020.

For USFQ, the pandemic has brought about an unexpected opportunity to strengthen internationalization at home and provide students who would not otherwise have the resources to study abroad with a chance to take part in intercultural learning. During the execution of virtual

initiatives at USFQ, the student experience was not limited by technological gaps or connectivity barriers, which might not be the case in other institutions. Additionally, a factor of success has been the institutional support for the international programs office. A future area of development for USFQ programs is related to the evaluation of the activities. It will be important to continue to evaluate the execution of the program, but a more refined analysis of the impact on cultural immersion, intercultural learning, and global citizenship would be beneficial.

The development of new virtual initiatives provides an opportunity for future research across the industry. For instance, further analysis could be done on the intercultural competence students develop through virtual interactions. There is limited data on intercultural competences gained through in-person exchanges, and therefore it is likely that there will be a gap regarding virtual initiatives as well. Furthermore, scholars could explore the correlation between students' participation in virtual initiatives and a future interest in pursuing graduate degrees outside of their home country. Also, new studies could focus on IHEs offering virtual initiatives to measure the impact on the number of students taking part in international experiences and what this might mean for post COVID-19 education. Finally, additional research regarding the digital divide, connectivity, and strategies for making virtual international exchange more accessible will be key to promoting meaningful intercultural learning initiatives. If we do not take this time as a breaking point to adjust traditional ways of learning and focus on research and innovation in virtual international education to promote global citizenship, we have lost the chance to shape students to the needs of the 21st century.

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