

The shifting mind set of the higher education internationalization landscape

El cambio de mentalidad en el panorama de la internacionalización de la educación superior

To say that 2020 kicked higher education (HE) internationalisation into grappling with a rapidly changing paradigm would be an understatement. Not only were university structures, process and policies caught in the global crossfire of the SARS-Covid-19 pandemic but students emerged as the primary victims because of their global mobility.

Nevertheless, as with any crisis the post-Covid-19 pandemic will offer a unique opportunity namely to reflect of the nature, future function and direction of HE and its internationalisation. Because of a common experience throughout the world's education sector all those involved in HE now have a stake in chartering the way forward for education and concomitently internationalisation of higher education. Not only does it open the debate about the nature of research namely who should be involved and what should be researched, but it also draws into focus the public's perception of academics and scientists in general. When Covid-19 emerged in China, the way scientists often contradicted each in dealing with the pandemic, as portrayed in both national and international media, opened a Pandora's Box about who should receive research grants and for what purpose, specifically where public moneys are utilised.

The global health crisis has also shown how vulnerable an academic institution is to global events, specifically those who based their solvency on recruiting international students and accessing foreign funding; a strategy that is underscored by seeing international students as a cash-cow has shown itself to be built on quicksand.

Internationalisation of higher education (in conjunction with other global organisations) rather than paving the way for a blurring of national boundaries during the past few decades witnessed

a stark realisation that national boundaries are more solid than ever, as a sense of self-preservation gripped many nation states.

What have current events highlighted and taught those involved in the internationalisation of higher education? Although not an exhaustive list, the following are evident:

That despite institutional autonomy, educational institutions are inextricably linked to state structures and policy, and foreign consulates. Although for many there has always been a tenuous link between the state and higher education institutions the virus has deepened that relationship. Going forward institutions of higher learning will have to be more prepared as to how to manage that relationship, while still ensuring their independence. However, in the short and medium term the stronger collaborative relationship that has emerged between educational institutions, the state and the private sector needs to be nurtured if countries want to advance their educational agenda. An unintended consequence of this is likely to be the conducting of research that is more driven by social development needs, and a curriculum that speaks more to the economic landscape of a country.

Events of the past few months have shown that such a tripartite collaboration between the state, educational institution and the private sector is underpinned by a strengthening of the nation-state. This is likely to lead to greater competition in the framing of a national educational space. Meaning that the value of a country's intellectual property is likely to be more guarded specifically as the intellectual battle lines deepen between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. A possible consequence of this for internationalisation will be more questions being

asked about whether foreign students and academics are working in for example research and development laboratories. This will place restrictions on where institutions recruit, and the national and institutional conditions of such student and academic placements. Research output will increasingly be defined as “national capital”, and consequently the conditions under which national funding is allocated to an institutions, specifically where there are foreign researchers or academics involved; the guarding of national capital for its competitive advantage will be of paramount concern.

Educational institutions and specifically international offices need to be more vigilant in their contextual scanning. This needs to speak to the decision-making processes in educational institutions. Rather than being highly bureaucratic and slow in decision-making and policy formulation, the future successful institution will be characterised by a more flexibility dynamic policy formulation process so as to respond to a rapidly changing environment. The latter will require better risk management assessment policies that are linked to adequate financial resources to enable optimal contingency manoeuvrability.

International offices will have to beef up their structures and services as there will be an initial resistance by students (and other academic staff) to moving beyond their country’s borders. The importance of clear recruitment material, and an adequate student induction programme, and providing safe accommodation, and ensuring food and health security are crucial.

Where educational institutions have been closed those who have the resources and infrastructures have switched to various virtual permutations to ensure the continuation of the academic project. With these investments in technology and an increase in training of staff and students the new normal is unlikely to see a return to the traditional system unitary face-to-face delivery and academic interaction.

However, looking ahead, how can an institution use the current pandemic to empowerment

their staff and students? Recognising that the new normalcy will be significantly different at a systemic level, such intervention strategy needs to be primarily focused on reducing stress to ensure the development of an adequate change management strategy. Such a strategy needs to take cognisance of the following:

There will be a need to navigate and negotiate people’s “new” attitude towards (and perception of) the internationalisation of higher education. In this regard caution must be maintained so as not to allow a crisis mentality to permeate the strategic direction of higher education internationalisation. Concomitant to this is an (re)opening of the debate about the role and function of an internationalisation office and the functionaries heading an institution’s internationalisation drive. In the interest of intellectual development, the captains of academia must strengthen the latter through the allocation of sufficient resources. In these processes we will see a reconceptualisation of internationalisation, and the beginning of an understanding of the difference between global interconnectedness and globalisation. There is thus a need to go back to the drawing board regarding the conceptualisation of the concept of *global citizenship*. The need for a (re)conceptualisation higher education internationalisation calls for unprecedented creativity, to avoid being kicked along the path of the past and the trap of adopting a traditionalist style and strategy. Considering the dynamic nature of current change and the lack of any benchmarking to base the direction of institutionalisation on the success of change will be premised on the extent to which an institution makes provision for psychological support to enable change that is coached in well-formulated change management coping skills.

Institutional policy needs to be flexibly to allow for more focus in internationalisation on social and economic developmental issues. This focus needs to be reflected in the institution’s approach to student and academic exchanges and future partnerships. Rather than institutional ranking being a

conditioning variable of such relationships, society use-value needs to define partnerships and other alliances.

Institutions need to capitalise on their current investment in digital learning technologies which has afforded many to work off campus. This way of working provides an incredible opportunity to strengthen internationalisation through the electronic linking of the global educational sector. Not only does technology provide for internal academic delivery but it enhances the way faculty lead programmes and short learning programmes will be delivered in the future. Takers in this new format will be influenced by, in many cases new focal areas, and the student's interest in new career opportunities which the pandemic has highlighted. Careers in such as virology, and health facility construction and health technology will have captured the youth's imagination.

The current pandemic gives impetus to the strategy of academics being employed by multiple institutions because of the strengthening and application of online delivery technologies. The latter provides an excellent opportunity to address the skills shortage in those disciplines where there is a shortage of experts globally. In this regard, international offices are in an excellent position to link the best minds with their institution.

If internationalisation offices immediately take a proactive position in addressing the current recessionary environment and its resultant challenges, they are likely to emerge as a stronger entity in the short-term by adding substantive value to an institution.

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