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# Covid-19 and the future of international student mobility

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### **Abstract**

This impact paper focuses on the immediate and longer-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for the higher education sector. We are already seeing disruption to the market through campus closures, travel bans, and restrictions on the mobility of staff and students. Many courses and activities have migrated on-line or have been suspended. It remains unclear how long such restrictions will last but few assume a full return to campus before the end of 2020 and all anticipate a long shadow effect. Focusing primarily on the impact of the crisis on international student mobility and futures, the paper addresses the challenges for institutions in managing and responding to changing mobility flows and dynamics. The paper touches on emerging arguments about the future of international education in a post Covid19 era and argues for measured adjustment to our prevailing mobility culture and practices. This is linked to research investigations into the benefits of mobility experiences for the development of both personal and professional skills.

Keywords: International education, Student mobility, Higher education

# **Covid-19 and the Future of international student mobility**

## **The phenomenon**

The cross-border movement of students is a defining feature of the higher education landscape. Annual growth rates in outward student mobility have averaged 10% over the last two decades and the number of HE students going abroad each year has reached somewhere in the order of 5 million persons.

But what does the Covid-19 pandemic mean for international student mobility (ISM)? Will growth rates slow or numbers even decline from their 2019 peak? With the OECD forecasting a future total of 8 million internationally mobile students by 2025 (OECD, 2017), is it time to correct this assumption and re-set? If so, what will the future of international student mobility actually look like after the crisis?

## **Assessing the damage of the coronavirus**

The Covid-19 pandemic represents a dramatic disruption to ISM flows and one more significant than either the global financial crisis of 2007/8 or SARS outbreak of 2003. The global impact of Covid-19 has been swift and immediate. In the spring of 2020, Australia saw a dramatic decline in international student numbers with its critical Chinese supply route all but cut off. Its semester one loss of an estimated 150,000 Chinese students will now be followed by second semester declines leading to across-the-board cost reductions and requests for emergency funding. A swathe of international exchange programmes and summer schools have been suspended or postponed as international students face lockdowns, travel bans, and campus closures. Millions are unexpectedly completing or continuing degree programmes on-line and the plans of many to study abroad from the autumn term look under threat with restrictions forecast to persist for months to come. Several popular study destinations including New Zealand, Australia and the United States remain closed to international entrants and it is unlikely that a full return to on campus education will apply in Europe and North America at the beginning of the academic year. Here in Europe, institutions are assuming significant shortfalls in Fall 2020 entry to programmes heavily reliant upon international registrations. Institutions are gearing for a mix of on campus and on-line provision, the former with some form of social distancing at least at outset. Universities UK, the body that represents British higher education, has warned of a potential drop in income in the coming academic year of £7bn, approximately one third of all tuition fees from international students (FT, Apr.21, 2020).

Indeed, a multitude of studies are reporting the seriousness of the coronavirus for international student flows throughout the remainder of 2020. Research by the EAIE on the European Higher Education Areas (EHEA) highlights quick impact. A survey based on 805 responses from individuals working in HEIs across the EHEA reveals that nearly three-quarters characterise the current and future effects on inbound student mobility as either somewhat significant or very significant. A Report by World Education Services (WES) reveals that 72% of international education professionals in North America expect a decline in the undergraduate market for international students. This assumed drop in institutional registrations by overseas students is also predicted at graduate level by 59% of professionals.

The British Council Report on Chinese student intentions published in April 2020 shows that of the 8,481 respondents who have applied to study at U.K. institutions this Fall, 22% say they are likely or very likely to cancel their study plans and 39 per cent are undecided. Finally, a large-scale QS survey published last month revealed that 1 in 2 respondents felt that the coronavirus had impacted their plans to study abroad. Of these respondents, 47% had decided to defer their entry until next year, 13% to switch country and 8% to abandon their plans altogether.

The general pattern of these studies and surveys will come as no surprise. Nor will identification of the likely barriers, both psychological and material, to students moving abroad to study this year. It is clear that apart from the threat of lockdowns and travel bans being extended into the summer months students looking to study abroad are concerned about health and well-being abroad, finances, language test delays, visa and applications difficulties. Problems are also anticipated with the practicalities and cost of international travel and diminished post-study work opportunities in the context of a forecast global recession.

## **Taking a breath**

So, what are the immediate and future prospects for international student mobility and how are these best managed?

Taking a breath here, one might say that whilst the short-term picture is less than encouraging, the long-term picture is not unhealthy. Most of the cited studies reporting disruption to study flows in 2020 also highlight people's longer-term interest in studying abroad despite the virus. People are willing to put their international study plans on hold for a while but seem less willing to abandon them entirely. Indeed, there are several reasons to believe that this interruption a to people's plans and to the normal character of things will last just as long as the coronavirus crisis itself and the cast of its shadow. Those maintaining this view will quickly point to the temporary impact of earlier crises such as 9/11, MERS, SARS and the 2007/8 financial crisis, although recovery times across the sector were not always short. The longitudinal data too shows that the global demand for study opportunities abroad has increased with remarkable consistency over the last 30 years with the total number of tertiary students enrolled outside of their home countries climbing particularly steeply from the late 1980s onwards. Whilst growth in outbound mobility flattened out somewhat over the last ten years, it has continued to climb under the combined effect of push (encouraging outward mobility) and pull (encouraging inward mobility) factors. As the OECD (2017) puts it:

“The skills’ needs of increasingly knowledge-based and innovation-driven economies have spurred demand for tertiary education worldwide, while local education capacities have not always evolved fast enough to meet a growing domestic demand. Rising wealth in emerging economies has further prompted the children in a growing middle class to look for educational opportunities abroad. At the same time, factors such as economic (e.g., costs of international flights), technological (e.g., the spread of the Internet and social media to maintain contacts across borders) and cultural (e.g., use of English as a common working and teaching language) have contributed to making international mobility substantially more affordable and less irreversible than in the past.”

In many countries, a record number of young people are entering the peak higher education age brackets. Increasing compatibility and comparability across national education systems, credit-system integration, and national action plans designed to stimulate mobility are other significant forces still very much at play.

Indeed, a defining quality of the present industry is that at both state and institutional level, leading players are competing for mobile students and talent in a semi-globalised market in which mobile students have become an important source of talent and revenue. The competition is aggressive and any shock to the market as in the case of the coronavirus is keenly felt.

### **Altered states?**

The Covid-19 crisis does not itself negate the strength of those drivers of growth, but it does throw up other developments that may point to real and lasting change. Indeed, several commentators have begun to point to the pandemic as a possible tipping-point. The growth and expansion of transnational education (TNE) provision and adoption of online teaching and learning had, in truth, begun to slow the rate of growth in ISM, with the former a question of bringing foreign qualification and providers to local settings. Today however, the world has been dragged to a new normal and some are entertaining a vision of a new type of international higher education.

Reflecting on the realities of the Covid-19 crisis in a recent thought piece published in University World News, White and Lee (2020) observe:

“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”

Such reasoning would direct attention to the power and accessibility of distance-based learning and/or to internationalisation “at home” strategies. It also points to viable alternatives to physical mobility such as Virtual Mobility (VM) where individuals in a virtual learning environment can engage in cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures with the effect of enhancing intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge (Vriens et al. 2010).

It is clearly true that international education has long been synonymous with mobility. We have been living and working in a mobility paradigm that has gone largely unchallenged. Even the first wave of TNE that focused on local market access and implants has given way to a second wave of regional hub operations and international campus networks fostering intra-regional mobility. White and Lee (2020) are right to remark that internationalisation has been “predominantly regarded as a border-crossing phenomenon”.

However, any championing of a “post-mobility” world or perspective should be questioned. Yes, physical mobility in international education leads to a carbon footprint that has to be reduced or “off-set”. This is a serious challenge to those of us associated with physical mobility of both staff and students. Yes, the vast potential of internationalisation remains untapped if most of the world’s students lack authentic international learning because of

barriers to their personal mobility. And, yes, private and collaborative on-line learning can provide learning gains and advances at relatively low cost. All of this is plainly correct, but a post-mobility model of internationalisation is difficult to envisage for as long as the majority of international students have an aversion to on-line solutions and a preference for study abroad. Participation challenges would also apply in the form of poor connectivity in many regions/countries and limits to international websites. Even in the current crisis period, providers have faced these difficulties including the effects of Chinese firewalls. Moreover, a post mobility world would come at some significant cost to the student consumer (if taken to the extreme) and begs the question as to what relationship should exist between the worlds of education and business. Do we also envisage a post-mobility world for business?

## **Mobility benefits and management capacity**

A number of detailed studies have in fact provided compelling evidence that study abroad experiences help to develop a wide range of soft or transversal skills such as problem solving and autonomous decision-making that are critical to successful management practice. Surveys based on participant feedback and/or interviews with returnees from mobility programmes and study abroad placements, have consistently emphasized the acquisition of such skills, also linking international mobility experiences to higher levels of independence and self-efficacy. Exposure to foreign cultures and environments is also associated with the development of multi-cultural skills, language skills, and a more international consciousness. According to one prominent study, mobility programmes “not only increase human capital in individuals but also their cosmopolitan orientation” (Jacobone and Moro 2015). There is also some evidence that one real benefit of international experience through study abroad is the kind of transformational learning that follows from the many disorienting dilemmas one faces when outside of the comfort zone of one’s home environment (Mezirow, 1991).

Looking at the relationship between personal attributes and professional development, many see study abroad in a country as a step and investment towards working or building a career there. But even where such ambition does not apply, research indicates that extended periods abroad for the purpose of study and/or training lead to the development of transversal skills (self-efficacy) and a strengthened ability to manage change and difference (see Brandenburg et al.: 2014). This also links to the relationship between study abroad and ‘global competence’ which equates with the capacity to “understand the cultural norms and expectations of others... [in order] to interact, communicate and work effectively outside of one’s environment” (Hunter, 2004, p. 130-131). Whilst academic mobility does not guarantee this competence it does typically require individuals to operate outside of their comfort zones and to engage with alternative cultural norms and attributes. The broad conclusion is that mobility experiences have the potential to contribute to graduates’ success by equipping them to work and manage across cultures and in international setting.

Another line of investigation has given highlight to the potential for improved degree outcomes and enhancement of academic learning. Pointing to earlier research that has given suggestion that outward mobility can improve academic performance (see Sutton and Rubin 2004), one UK focused study contends that the process of personal development linked to outward mobility is likely to result in improved course marks and enhanced degree outcomes, just as much as it is likely to improve career placement and prospects (Bridger

2015).

In sum, physical mobility across national borders for the purpose of study or training does have tangible benefits. These have been evidenced in relation to stand-alone mobility (where the consumer buys degree education or a course of study abroad and moves to consume the service) and in examples of inter-institutional mobility (e.g. exchanges, pathway programmes and double degrees). Though lesser researched, it would be assumed that cases of intra-institutional mobility (e.g. rotational degree programmes at multi-locational schools and universities) would lead to the same sort of benefits if not potentially a higher set of skills and stronger international networks. It remains unclear how courses delivered exclusively on-line or delivered to students sitting at home or in cafes could deliver such benefits despite the capacity for virtual mobility and on-line inter-cultural collaboration? This is not to say that they cannot do so to a greater or lesser extent but, at present, there is a less convincing body of evidence. Virtual Mobility (VM) promotion is a strategic priority for the European Commission at least and has clear potential. Nonetheless, traditional uptake of virtual mobility in higher education in Europe has been quite modest to date.

### **So, where next?**

The evidence suggests that even in the midst of this coronavirus crisis, many young people continue to choose to study abroad on an in-person basis. There is no doubt that the crisis will accelerate the development of online education, but this does not mean that demand for face-to-face higher education will decline dramatically or even significantly on a long-term basis. As Simon Marginson (2020) observes: "The organic classroom has personal and status benefits that cannot be replaced... [and] if the next academic year begins on an online basis, platforms will need to be better quality than the temporary adaptations now being put in place".

The crisis should in fact lead to an acceleration of the development of online education alongside and in complement to in-person education once resumed. Organisations will see the benefit of this combination after experience of migrating teaching activities on-line as a crisis measure. Different providers will clearly vary in emphasis depending on their experience, markets and positioning. Some already have vast experience and strong digital learning brands.

Higher education has again been disrupted and traditional mobility flows will take some time to settle or mutate. There is not least the weight of impact of a pending global recession and this will surely depress supply even after residual restrictions are lifted. Most analysts forecast a drop in globally mobile students the question is only how steep that drop will be and how long the aftereffects of the crisis?

The reality of Covid-19 has also been a patchwork of national realities, responses and scenarios. This means that some states having entered into their crisis first and/or will open up sooner than others. This will bring some distortion to the market for a period along with the reputational damage that some countries (including the U.K.) may have suffered or gains others may even have made. Student choices will, for a period at least, be informed by such considerations.

ISM itself will continue to take many different forms from the dominant stand-alone model of the individual consumer “buying” a degree course or course of study abroad to the varying forms of inter-institutional and intra-institutional mobility now evidenced. Open virtual mobility should now emerge more clearly on this landscape as a means by which those unable to move physically across borders can enjoy some its qualities and benefits.

What we should be targeting is less a “post mobility” world and more a “responsible” mobility world. One where traditional physical mobility in its different manifestations remains open to young people but to more of them at lower cost and with clear purpose. One where physical mobility can co-exist and intersect with virtual mobility, which can provide a useful platform for internationalisation at home. One where some of the concerns about international student mobility are rightfully addressed, not least in relation to the environmental aspect and to matters of personal safety and security. Though unwelcome and destructive to man and our economies, the coronavirus pandemic is a unique opportunity to transform the higher education sector and one which must be grasped.

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