Towards a global delivery model for international higher education

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Since the outbreak of COVID-19, there have been a large number of articles exploring the impact of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns on the future of higher education. One area of interest is the design and delivery of international higher education. Could the coronavirus be a catalyst for change?

Is the future online?

One of the few positive aspects of this crisis is that it has changed the perception of key stakeholders – including regulators, higher education providers, academics, students and families – when it comes to the value of online education.

Online education is nothing new. It has been around for many years and millions of students have completed higher education degrees through online delivery.

Despite the growth and broader adoption of online education in recent years, there has always been negativity around its parity as a substitute for traditional on-campus provision. For example, it was not long ago that a **report** by Protopsaltis and Baum (2019, 2) identified that *"faculty and academic leaders, employers and the general public are sceptical about the quality and value of online education, which they view as inferior to face-to-face education"*.

Today, several governments, academics and students have discovered that online delivery is a **good alternative** to the traditional face to face delivery model (Li and Lalani 2020).

This broader acceptance of online as a credible model of higher education provision has reignited the discussion about the use of MOOCs and the potential role of **microcredentials** as part of the future model of international higher education (Mitchell 2020).

It should be noted, however, that most of the post-lockdown provision models are not to be confused with online education. What we have seen so far is the technology-supported delivery of courses designed for face-to-face on-campus delivery.

The restrictions imposed following lockdown have had a profound impact on academics' and students' appreciation for in-class face-to-face interaction such as lectures and seminars.
There is a broad agreement amongst academics that online can replace and complement parts of the regular provision such as **lectures** (Hall 2020) and lead to **improvements**

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in student performance (Gonzalez et al. 2020)**.** At the same time, there is an appreciation that in-person interaction is an invaluable and irreplaceable component of teaching and learning (Ross 2020).

Looking ahead to the next academic year, universities realise that online education is not an 'off the shelf' process. Instead, it requires a substantial amount of resources and any economies of scale will only be realised in certain courses and in the long term. Online education goes far beyond the digitalisation of on-campus material and activities. Instead, online education requires careful planning and a **substantial investment of resources** (Vlachopoulos 2020).

Embarking on online education, either as a short-term contingency or provision model for the longer term without these prerequisites runs the risk of diminishing the student learning experience and education quality.

Impact on international student mobility

The pandemic has affected the cross-border mobility of students, which is at the core of international higher education. Many have predicted a prolonged decline in international student mobility, saying more students will prefer to study online or through local provision.

Undoubtedly, COVID-related safety concerns **will impact on mobility trends** (Raimo and Ilieva 2020), but this will be a short term issue.

There is a dynamic mix of push and pull factors that drive students to move overseas (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Amongst these factors are the search for better employability prospects, international exposure, and more broadly, the search for an educational experience of superior value to the one found locally.

Therefore, international students are not just treating cross-border mobility as a transactional process to access higher education of any kind. Instead, international higher education is seen by students as a **transformational process** (Tran 2016) to **achieve personal, social, economic and professional aspirations** (Findlay et al. 2012).

The most profound longer-term influence of COVID-19 it is likely to be on the scrutiny by international students and their families of the added value of cross-border mobility. At the same time, with the broader adoption of online and transnational education, there will be more choice available for international students to study locally/nationally.

To address this dual challenge of value and supply, universities will have to work harder in designing courses that strike an optimum balance between student experience, employability, cost and safety. In the future, any student mobility elements need to be purposefully designed for adding value to student learning and to meet employability expectations.

Alongside the other pull and push factors, the design and implementation of a unique

internationalised learning experience will be at the core of the decision-making process of international students when it comes to study abroad.

The emergence of a 'Global Delivery Model

Until now we have tended to distinguish between international students and transnational education or TNE students.

International students are those who travel overseas to study in the main/home campus of a foreign institution. They constitute an important source of income for most universities in traditional destination countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and most recently China.

On the other hand, TNE students are studying in their own country on a course run by a foreign university. This is possible via different modes of TNE, such as branch campuses, collaborative partnerships and online/distance education.

Previous research (Tsiligiris 2014; Levatino 2017) has shown that international students and TNE students are two separate markets which do not act as direct substitutes. However, in most instances, these two markets are complimentary, **with TNE students becoming international students** after a period of time (HEFCE 2014) .

Following the wider adoption of online higher education as a contingency response to COVID-19, **there is proof and a case for** the potential role of TNE as a short- or long-term component of international student mobility (Sutrisno 2020).

Today we are experiencing an accelerated convergence of the different modes of higher education provision into one universal approach that can be framed as a 'Global Delivery Model'. TNE, primarily as online education supported and delivered locally, has been at the core of university strategies as part of their COVID contingency planning, but could also be a potential springboard for the future model of provision.

Grand challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has put universities in change and innovation mode. Alongside short-term contingency planning, there is a growing discussion about the future model of international higher education.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 will shape the future of international higher education, primarily in the sense of safety concerns, but safety is just one of the many factors universities need to consider in their search for a future model for international higher education.
Well before COVID-19, the traditional model for providing international higher education was criticised as not being compliant with some of the grand challenges of the 21st century.

For example, there are concerns about **the environmental footprint of international student mobility** (De Wit and Altbach 2020) and the extent to which

the affordability of international higher education **creates inequalities** (Bilecen and Mol 2017) that undermine widening participation at the global scale.

Also, there has been an ongoing discussion about the need for universities to review their course structure and content for preparing graduates who are employable, locally and globally, in the 'future of work' caused by the **Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)** (Jahanian 2020).

Some of the key grand challenges for the future model of international higher education can be summarised as: environmental sustainability; widening participation and enabling communities locally and internationally; employability for the 4IR; and safety and risk mitigation.

For universities to be able to respond to these challenges, there needs to be a fundamental revision of strategic priorities and a redesign of universities' core activities. In the process of shaping a sustainable **'Global Delivery Model'**, universities need to consider how they can:

- **Design courses to allow for an *ad hoc* selection process and the mixture of on-campus, offshore and online delivery models.** In this course design approach, the location of the student does not act as a restriction to learning or lead to economic discrimination, but is seen as an opportunity. This lies at the centre of a model where universities become global social enterprises. Also, an embedded flexibility in the model of provision acts as a risk mitigation mechanism in case of future pandemics or other events that restrict mobility and face-to-face interaction.

- **Embrace internationalisation as an inseparable part of the learning experience**. Currently, internationalisation is often treated as exogenous to the learning environment and used superficially for branding and reputation purposes aimed at external stakeholders.

- **Assure that any student mobility is sustainable and value-adding.** For example, any student mobility component (for instance, incoming and outgoing student mobility) should meet three criteria:

  1. There is clear and transparent consideration of travel emissions against institutional and sector performance indicators.
  2. The design and implementation of the mobility activity generate unique outcomes for the participants that could not be achieved at home or via virtual mobility.
  3. The mobility activity generates a wider positive impact on key stakeholders or/and local communities.

The above are only some of the practical considerations that could be made in the search for a future model for international higher education. What is clear is that universities need to consider more holistically their role as global social enterprises with their key remit being to address sustainability and employability challenges.

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