



Internationalization and international academic mobility post-Covid-19:

#ACATHINKS



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In the spring and summer of 2020, ACA published a series of [Think Pieces](#) about the longer-term impact of the pandemic on international education and mobility. Since then, the situation has evolved and the discussion has continued, within ACA and in the wider international education community. An ACA Thematic Peer Group on the topic has met (online) monthly since March 2020. It may now be the time to condense these discussions into some preliminary reflections. These owe a lot to the Thematic Peer Group and, in particular, to ACA's Director Irina Ferencz, who has read and commented on previous versions of this piece, the entire responsibility for which rests, however, with the author and does not in any way commit ACA as an organization.

THE CHALLENGES

The pandemic is far from over, though the worst is hopefully *not* yet to come. We will probably need to live with it one way or another for years. Still, it seems reasonable that with the vaccination campaign under way in most developed countries there may be a return to some sort of “new normalcy” from the next academic year onwards. Higher education institutions and internationalization funding agencies did their best in the emergency, reacting with speed and many innovative ideas and tools to an unprecedented challenge. Some of those actions necessarily were stop-gap measures in the first place; others, particularly with regard to the use of new information

and communication technologies in both teaching and research communication, have meant a big push forward and much of that is here to stay.

While institutions, agencies, faculty and students are continuing to struggle with the emergency, it is now time to reflect on the longer-lasting impact of the Covid experience on international academic mobility and cooperation, as well as on the work of internationalization funding agencies. This is all the more pressing as some actors are declaring “internationalization without mobility” as a better (and cheaper) approach. Funding agencies will need to learn from the crisis *and* to defend their mission, programs and budgets in times where there are many actors and more sectors competing for attention and money.

The pandemic has gravely affected all sorts of (academic as well as other) mobility. The most radical impact (a decrease to close to zero) has been on **international short-term mobility** (including short teaching missions, research visits and conferences). Longer-term credit mobility (up to one Academic Year) seems to have decreased by at least one third and frequently more than half in most countries (much depending on the respective epidemiological situation in sending and receiving countries). “Virtual” alternatives to physical international mobility have, so far, not attracted the expected interest from students.

Recent data on **degree mobility** are not available for most countries. From those data that are available (for instance, the US and Germany), it seems that most international students already enrolled at the beginning of the pandemic have stayed put (following courses online, as are domestic students) rather than interrupting or abandoning their programs. The number of international first enrolments has heavily decreased in the US (even counting the 50% of first year students who are studying online from outside the country), though much less so in Germany. The differences may depend more on immigration and visa regimes and availability of consular services rather than students’ interest. Still, these are students who made their education plans before the pandemic. It is probably impossible to predict to what extent the pandemic will affect international degree mobility in the long run.

In some countries, international students, particularly from China, have faced some degree of hostility, mainly at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, while many have enjoyed broad societal support. Perceptions of how welcoming institutions and societies are will be an important factor in the future development of student flows.

As to **credit mobility**, and most notably the ERASMUS+ program, much of an entire cohort of students – both at Bachelor’s and Master’s level - have missed the international experience during the last two semesters. For many, the “mobility window” in their program may have already passed; for others, HEIs might not have the capacity to accommodate both those that have opted to postpone their mobility period to later times, hoping they can be physically mobile, and the new

cohorts that have started their programs during the pandemic (the cramped effect for next semesters).

This presumes that a comparable percentage of students will continue to be interested in, and their parents or governments willing to pay for, study abroad. Nonetheless, in some countries, we had already seen stagnant or even shrinking numbers of outgoing credit mobility before the pandemic. Now, with the experience or illusion that so much communication can also take place online and academic content transmitted perhaps as effectively as in a lecture hall, some students may wonder **what difference the physical mobility really makes** and if it is worth the extra effort in terms of cost and money.

Our member institutions, many of them Erasmus+ National Agencies, have seen that most students did not really opt for the virtual substitute to physical mobility. But that does not necessarily mean that they will continue to be eager for the “real thing”. This is all the more dangerous as there may be a **cumulative effect of several trends** that have been working against academic mobility in recent years; in addition to the health risks caused by the pandemic, these are

- a growing concern about the impact of any sort of travel on the environment and climate change (see the Green Erasmus+ ambitions, for example),
- increasing criticism that study abroad is mainly and too much something for the socio-economically advantaged students,
- doubts if physical and virtual interaction are balanced in accordance with today’s technological opportunities, and, maybe not least,
- the side-effects of the populist and nationalist backlash against globalization and cosmopolitanism.

Finally, after unprecedented amounts of money have been made available to cope with the pandemic, **public finances** will probably get tighter again (or even tighter than before) once the economic and financial impact of 2020 and 2021 is fully felt. Most efforts will likely be directed to the recovery of the economy and the modernization of essential social services including education, but not automatically the international higher education dimension. Some funding agencies have already suffered severe budget cuts and others might face them in the two or three years ahead.

The combination of all these factors may tempt more decision makers to look for “internationalization without mobility” and with much less money. Some such calls are guided by unproven assumptions, e.g. that digital would always be cheaper or more environmentally friendly than physical (in particular, when “blended” means combining virtual interaction with short travel), that students and academic staff would be eager, or even ready, for a digital revolution (many rather seem to crave for a return to the seminar room or lab), that insufficient inclusion in international mobility could not be tackled rather than physical mobility abandoned altogether, etc.

There is a strong need for **better evidence** on how exactly the pandemic is affecting behavior, what are the precise effects of virtual as opposed to physical classroom, lab and bedside teaching.

ACA and its individual members have for years carried out research projects on the measures and impacts of internationalization. Their expertise could now be used to study these new trends and related impact.

ELEMENTS OF ANSWERS

First and foremost, the international education community needs to develop a strong, novel and evidence-based narrative for physical mobility and face-to-face cooperation.

The pandemic has taught all of us once more, and most painfully, that global challenges require joint efforts in research and teaching, mutual trust and effective cross-border cooperation. The availability of several vaccines just one year into the pandemic is testimony to the value of scientific knowledge and its production by a global scientific community. Such communities and networks have been, and will continue to be, built through immediate personal interaction and joint experience. We are there to facilitate, and fund, precisely these exchanges.

The production and transmission of knowledge benefits enormously from **interaction between people with different cultural perspectives**. This includes differences in academic cultures, such as the role of algorithms and experiments. The “international classroom” is not just a nice-to-have personal experience. It positively enhances learning for all. That is why members tell us that most students are reluctant to embark on “virtual mobility”. In fact, many students apparently prefer travelling to the host country and studying online from there rather than from their hometowns. Besides the improvement of language skills, two of the main long-term effects of study abroad can probably never be substituted with technological tools.

One is the **“experience of the unexpected”**. Everyone who has ever lived abroad has had that sort of surprise, and at first even unwelcome, yet telling encounters: learning that people behave differently to each other, not only in the classroom but also at a dinner party, experiencing how it feels being the applicant for a temporary residence permit at an aliens’ office, learning to be identified, and critically identify oneself, with your home country and culture.

The other is the **development of lifelong friendships**, that normally start from chance encounters, but then will be the unmissable basis for professional and personal networks. The glue of such networks is mutual trust. And that trust will develop only in long-time interaction, sometimes under stress, sometimes with affection and love.

It is unfortunately true that **access** to the international experience has not been equal in the past and present (as it is not for most aspects and many institutions of higher education) and more needs

to be done to make internationalization more inclusive. Much can be further done to comprehensively enhance the inclusion and foster the belonging of underrepresented student and staff groups in international higher education. This is a necessarily nuanced area, but it is clear that fuller inclusion cannot be achieved without action in three key areas: 1) mechanisms used to fund student and staff mobility 2) the embedding of guidance resources fully aware of the layers of barriers that stand in the way of individuals and groups thriving while engaging in international higher education and 3) the more visible presence of relatable peer role models and mentors who have had positive experiences abroad. ACA has published a [Reflection Paper](#) on the topic and its members' best practice in 2019. Study or research abroad may also be a unique opportunity of international learning precisely for those from less advantaged backgrounds who have not been taken by their parents to international locations or supported to undertake language courses or internships with business partners. The Erasmus+ program has paved the way for millions who else would never even have considered a study experience abroad.

It would be frivolous to deny that, of course, the availability of **new technological tools** will also transform international higher education. Some of the positive aspects of virtual learning have been discovered and disseminated under the stress of the pandemic. The point is to avoid an either/or discourse – the choice should not be *between* physical or blended or fully virtual mobility, but rather for a **comprehensive, complementary approach**, guided by the quality of delivery, fitness for purpose and demonstrable impact. Not least, we will need a clearer definition of “virtual” and “blended” mobility and learning: on the spectrum between reading a book written and published in another country and sitting physically in a classroom abroad, one defining characteristic of “education” may be the actual interaction taking place between and among faculty and students. The use of a **new narrative for international mobility and cooperation** is, of course, not mainly to reassure ourselves that we do the right thing (helpful as that may be), but to **convince students, their parents, staff and governments** that study abroad and international research cooperation are worth the very considerable time and money they are spending on it. We need a **paradigmatic change of narrative and key messages** from promoting international higher education as a value of and in itself (an approach that does not resonate with all parents, nor students and that generated backlashes) to promoting the **positive impact international higher education brings** students, parents, institutions and ultimately society at large.

LEARNING SOME LESSONS FROM THE EMERGENCY

While there is a very strong case for the resumption of physical mobility as soon as health conditions allow, there are also a number of lessons we should learn from the emergency, some of which we probably should have learnt even without it.

All of us have been through multiple Zoom, Skype or Teams calls these months and all of us crave to interact again face-to-face. Yet, **much more training will continue to be delivered online, also**

internationally: faculty and students have learnt better how to make use of digital solutions and how they can make far-away intellectual resources available at one's own desk.

We have also witnessed that much distance teaching and learning tends to be somewhat culturally sterile. MOOCs are disseminated worldwide but except for, perhaps, English or Chinese subtitles there is little to reflect the diversity of the audience and their different angles and approaches to the subject matter. There is a general need to develop a **specific academic pedagogy for online teaching**, provide support to faculty members who wish to embark on it, and disseminate good practice as well as good material. This concerns the entire student cycle from admission to secure examinations. We need to strengthen the inter-cultural component in virtual education; make it **more sensitive for cultural difference**, let students experience that difference and interact on it, but also understand what virtual international education *can* and also *cannot* achieve. New formats of teaching and mobility also need to be reflected and measured in the **quality assurance** and accreditation processes as rigorously as more conventional transmission modes.

Virtual tools may also provide **access** to some sort of **international experience for the majority** of students who for various reasons cannot or do not want to travel themselves. We also discovered that in fact more people and from a wider geographical area have taken part in online conferences. There is potentially much to learn from this experience, and to explore if and how this widening of participation can be replicated in institutional contexts via digitally mediated international teaching and learning.

We will need to learn how to better **combine and complement physical mobility with online interaction**. Study and research visits may be prepared online, and the actual stay thus made more efficient. Teams that have formed during a visit abroad may continue their joint work after everybody has gone home. Many of these options will be piloted via the 'blended mobility' options that will be funded under the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 program.

In the past, most ACA member agencies have offered scholarships and grants only if, and as long as, the recipients were actually staying in the host country. Some agencies had already made exceptions for blended programs that required full-time attendance. Under the pandemic, rules have become more flexible in order to avoid financial difficulties for students who were already enrolled and needed to switch the medium of instruction and also to attract sufficient numbers of new candidates. More systematic and nuanced approaches need to be developed for the post-Covid-19 time.

We have also learnt that much day-to-day business can be conducted online and can help avoid time-consuming and climate-unfriendly short-term flight travel. For instance, many institutions and agencies are now using online tools for student recruitment with great success and relatively little expense and will probably continue to do so. In general, in the future we will need to weigh more

carefully what is travel-worthy and what is not, as well as what length of stay is in a reasonable relation to the distances travelled. Why not combine a number of objectives in one trip: a conference, a research stay at a nearby lab, a meeting with fellow or former students, maybe a couple days of vacation ...? In short: put more emphasis on **longer stays with a smaller footprint and a stronger impact** and be more strategic and deliberate about such choices. This applies not only to faculty and students, but also to administrative staff.

Finally, while during the current emergency it mattered most to provide teaching and research opportunities online as quickly as possible, critical issues like **security and privacy, academic freedom, and, not least, existing inequities** in access to hardware and internet bandwidth need to be addressed.

LOOKING AHEAD

The pandemic has also highlighted other trends and fissures in the global education and research landscape that the international education community, institutions and funding agencies will need to cope with over the years to come.

The pandemic itself is a **globalization** phenomenon, or else it would never have spread worldwide in a matter of weeks. It has also highlighted the risks involved in global supply chains. Governments have tried to protect their citizens first and imposed export controls on medical supplies and vaccines. Borders have been closed even within the Schengen area. These very weeks, the wealthiest countries have secured for themselves the bulk of the first supply of vaccines. Globalization is, and has been for some time, no longer seen as automatically positive, even by countries that have benefited most from it. Populist, nationalist and authoritarian governments are in ascendancy around the globe. Policy experts are seriously discussing the advantages of decoupling economies. The period of unhindered and unlimited globalization may be over. If that were the case, would we not need to think again about “educating for an ever more globalizing world”?

While the pandemic has highlighted and sometimes reinforced existing inequalities in our societies, it has also widened the **gap between developed countries and much of the global South**. It starts with the (non-) availability of vaccines for the majority of mankind and does not stop with the wide differences in access to computer hardware and the internet, not least for high school and university students.

Also, long before the pandemic, the secular dominance of the North Atlantic area in (not only) higher education and research was coming to a close. Its share of scientific publications has been shrinking for years and China is now the second most productive research nation in terms of publications. The **global research and education landscape is shifting eastwards**. Many of the rising actors do not share our ideals of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and human rights. What will that

mean for the work of European internationalization agencies and for the European higher education sector as a whole?

Finally, the pandemic has also been yet another stress test for the **European Union**. Overall, the forces of solidarity and cohesion seem to have prevailed. Educational and research cooperation, mainly under the Erasmus program and the research framework programs, have been an important factor in making Europe more cohesive through the formation of a European Education and Research Area. International educators and the funding agencies working together under ACA's umbrella are willing to play a constructive role in the recovery from the pandemic and in the building of a still closer European Union.

Like it or not, Covid-19 has already and will continue to shape the international higher education landscape in profound ways with or without our voices. The question then becomes: "How will actors in our sector collaborate to counter Covid and engage with one another to shape the reality and the narrative in the years ahead?"

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*The **World after COVID-19** was a series of 'think pieces' which ACA published in the Spring and Summer of 2020. The pieces were authored by well-known experts in the field of international higher education. The basic question posed to them all is if and how the post-COVID-19 world will differ from the one we have until recently been used to. You can find [the full compendium of ACA's COVID-19 'think pieces' here.](#)*