

Research Article

**Internationalization of Education during the Epoch of COVID-19 Pandemic:  
The Way Forward**

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 global pandemic has imposed many new but grave challenges in the field of education. Researchers have taken the next step to study on ways to resolve the myriad problems created by this sudden shift caused by the global pandemic. This paper reviews the many impacts of COVID-19 on internationalization, focusing on the challenges in the education field such as international student mobility, closure of campuses, enrolment for international education and classroom teaching-learning delivery. In addition to that, this paper signifies the challenges of internationalization during the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper concludes that the mobility of students is essential in reaching the peak of internationalization.

**Introduction**

The eruption of COVID-19, otherwise known as the 2019 novel coronavirus (Toquero, 2020), at the end of the fourth quarters of 2019 marked a historic turning point in the recent history of man. Like every other system in human existence, the education ecosystem – both at the national and international level - is not spared its fair share of the disruption the on-going global pandemic has occasioned. To contain the spread of the virus and its attendant consequences, schools at all levels had to be put on lock-down in countries and counties which were most hit by the novel virus. Tough restrictions were imposed, especially, on international mobility through flight suspensions. International students' enrolments witnessed a sudden drop and students admitted for studies abroad could not travel for the pursuit of their academic programmes. In fact, a state of new normal inevitably set in and the way we conduct every facet our lives changed, since the status quo can no longer be sustained.

In a bid to address the myriads of problems created by this sudden development, researchers from all different works life began to conduct investigation on how to respond to the enormous challenges posed by

the situation as it affects them. Soon, full-scale applied and basic inquiries from diverse academic field, not the least medical, began to emerge in the scholarly literature. And in less than no time, academic literature became replete with investigations on the way forward. This being the case, the battle for survival became a matter of mounting concern to all.

The field of education, is without doubt, is not left out of this struggle for survival owing to the huge challenge posed to it by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since normal classroom teaching and face-to-face lesson delivery could no longer be held, researchers in education management rose to the challenge by swinging into action. They began to write papers to guide policy formulation and find an alternative to the continuation of teaching and learning under the lingering pandemic (Daniel, 2020; Reimers *et al.*, 2020). Abruptly, education became fully digitalized and instructors and students - both local and international - have to resort to online teaching and learning (Korkmaz and Toraman, 2020). While a number of studies have appeared in the literature on online education at the local levels, findings reveal a paucity of investigation on the fate of international students and the attendant challenges online learning poses to the pursuit of academic goals abroad (De Wit and Hunter, 2015; Yang, 2020).

In this paper, an attempt is made to explore the challenges posed by this ugly development with a view to charting a course for the way forward in the case of further waves of the virus so as to have sustainable teaching delivery and access to education for international students across the world. This become all the more important for international students whose field of interest cannot be completely divorced from face-to-face and classroom learning.

### **Literature Review**

A review of the literature gives several definitions of the concept of internationalization depending on the context in which it is used (Knight, 2007; De Wit and Hunter, 2015; De Wit and Altbach, 2020). Broadly speaking, the term internationalization has been used to refer to any human activities such as business, education, research, projects, etc., that wear international dimensions (Knight, 2007). In other words, any cross-border activity can be rightly referred to as being internationalized. However, for the purpose of this study, internationalization, as a new phenomenon in education, has been defined as the delivery of educational services to non-natives of a particular country through different media which include international mobility, branch campuses, and so on (Knight, 2007). Mostly, internationalization is synonymous with international education at the tertiary level (Wildavsky, no date; De Wit and Hunter, 2015; De Wit and Altbach, 2020).

COVID-19, short for coronavirus disease 2019, is a contagious viral disease which broke out in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020; Heyang and Martin, 2020). In no time, it began to spread dramatically to different countries of the world from Asia, to Europe, America and Africa (Marinoni, Land and Jensen, 2020; Mok *et al.*, 2020). Sometime, in March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, having spread to over 217 countries with more than 17 million confirmed cases and close to 700,000 deaths (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020). According to Wordometer (2020), as at mid-December 2020, the number of confirmed cases had risen to 76, 620,721 around the world and recorded deaths running to about 1,691,772. Some jurisdictions like Malaysia, Nigeria, among few others, has been hit by a second wave of the disease. To contain its further spread and subsequent waves, forced lockdowns were, and are still being, imposed by authorities of severely affected nations (Marinoni, Land and Jensen, 2020).

The impacts of the total lockdown soon began to take a serious toll on the socio-economic lives of the people. Within a short time, it became obvious that the status cannot be maintained and at the same time, measures to contain the spread of the disease had to be taken. No doubt, internationalization or international

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education has been seriously affected by the state of new normality COVID-19 has forced on over 180 countries of the world (Marinoni, Land and Jensen, 2020; Mok *et al.*, 2020; Tesar, 2020). Variables that measure internationalization such as international students' enrolment, student mobility, face-to-face classroom teaching, students' physical interactions on campus, all plummeted due to campus closure and mobility restrictions (Mok *et al.*, 2020) (Reimers and Andreas, 2020).

But if the lockdown should persist protractedly without the discovery of COVID-19 vaccine, how would the marked impacts of COVID-19 on internationalization be withstood and the challenges it posed to it be taken on. Before suggesting the solutions to these problems, it will be necessary to reassess these impacts and challenges.

### **Impacts of COVID-19 on Internationalization**

Results from studies conducted on the influence of COVID-19 on internationalization reveals a number of adverse economic, social, cultural and educational effects (Chertoff *et al.*, 2020; Mok *et al.*, 2020; Tesar, 2020). However, its effect of main concern to this study is how it has impacted international education owing to the new normality brought about by the pandemic. It is worth noting that its impact are felt on all aspects of education as confirmed by Yang (2020). In what follows, this study identifies some of the impacts of COVID-19 on internationalization.

#### **International Student Mobility**

Generally, the rate of international mobility has been greatly affected by the restrictions created by physical and social distance measures imposed in various jurisdiction (Chertoff *et al.*, 2020; Hebecci, Bertiz and Alan, 2020; Tesar, 2020). In internationalization, restriction of mobility at the international level is the most critical factor upon which other internationalization variables depend (De Wit and Altbach, 2020; Marinoni, Land and Jensen, 2020). Due to travel restrictions around the world, international students who have secured admission, just as those who are on vacation, could not resume for their studies abroad for safety reasons (Marinoni, Land and Jensen, 2020; Mok *et al.*, 2020). Since internationalizing depends heavily on student mobility and ability to travel abroad, the sudden cancellation of international travels and restrictions to global movement has dealt a heavy blow to international education in the real sense of the concept.

#### **Closure of Campuses**

Another major impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is the closure of university campuses for the same reasons for which international mobility has been restricted (Mok *et al.*, 2020; Yang, 2020). Campus operations had to be put on hold and physical presence for teaching-learning activities was suspended till further notice (Heyang and Martin, 2020). Like the impact of mobility restriction, the closure of campuses is also of adverse effect on internationalization.

#### **Enrolment for International Education**

As an immediate consequence of the outbreak of COVID-19, its attendant spread and eventual global lockdowns, universities around the world decided to suspend the enrolment of international students (Yang, 2020). This led to a drastic drop in the enrolment of international students for studies abroad.

#### **Classroom Teaching-Learning Delivery**

Following the closure of university campuses around the world, it follows that face-to-face classroom teaching-learning processes was no longer possible. So, normal classroom teaching and learning become disrupted while the lockdown lasted. This resulted in a shift to online teaching and learning (Mok *et al.*, 2020).

### **Challenges of Internationalization During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The student mobility factor of internationalization which has been greatly affected by the challenges COVID-19 posed the most serious challenge for the pursuit of education abroad. This is because other factors depend heavily on it (Knight, 2012). According to Knight (2012), the mobility of student has brought about fundamental transformation to internationalization. It is therefore obvious that without the movement of students, the gains of internationalization in the last few decades of its development will be affected.

The closure of classroom teaching and learning is another challenge. Universities resorted to online learning and instructional delivery (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). In other words, international education become digitalized - instructors and students - both local and international - have to resort to online teaching and learning (Korkmaz and Toraman, 2020). However, this does not come without its challenges. First, the impacts of face-to-face instructional delivery is lost - classroom interaction and socialization among students from different countries and diverse cultures occur. In a study by Adnan (2020), it was confirmed that aside from the fact that online learning cannot produce the desired results compared to the physical classroom system, underdeveloped and developing nations are at a disadvantage. This is because students and other academics from such nations will not be able to access such services because lack of access to the internet, thereby denying them access to international education outside the classroom. Short and epileptic supply of electricity is also another problem in the underdeveloped nations (Assunção Flores and Gago, 2020). This, inter alia, apparent informs the reason why some students and instructors have a negative perception about this mode of instructional delivery. The results of a study confirm a respondent as saying: "It is a little bad because I was used to one to one education. I prefer to listen to the teacher in the classroom. (Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan, 2020)" In this regard, online delivery posed a great problem for internationalization.

Aside from electricity supply issues and the problem of internet access, internet literacy is another major issue for students from underdeveloped nations to have access to instructions via online medium during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have confirmed that the rate of internet literacy in the most developing and especially underdeveloped nations is very low (Leigh and Gibbon, 2008; Bruce, 2019). In this case, students from those countries would find it difficult to receive instructions online. However, all of these challenges can be overcome through the provisions of these facilities. The only major challenges which is difficult to address while the pandemic lasts is the restriction of mobility upon which rests other factors. This is because without lockdowns around the world, mobility is generally not a problem.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Of all these challenges posed to internationalization as a result of the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study concludes students' mobility is key to the effectiveness of internationalization. It is the only factor of internationalization that seem not to have an alternative since the virtual environment cannot be compared to the real physical world. Campus life have many social and education advantages. Real classroom interaction, socialization among students from different countries and diverse cultures, the real life experience of campus life, and the prestige of travelling abroad are all lost completely. No virtual world can fill this vacuum.

For internationalization to really serve its purpose, this paper puts forward the following recommendations while the tentative alternative of instructional delivery persist in the face of the ongoing pandemic:

1. All universities that provide internationalization services should come together in a concerted effort to conduct medical research in developing vaccines for the disease. This will go a long way in addressing the problem of mobility.

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2. If eventually discovered, universities should work on creating special funds for making the vaccine affordable to international students in case it is very expensive.
3. In the meantime, these universities should also collaborate with international bodies like the UNESCO to support the provision of online instructional delivery facilities to underdeveloped nations.
4. They should also work on promoting information technology literacy in these less privileged countries.

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