



The world after COVID-19

#ACATHINKS



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POST-COVID-19, THE WAY FORWARD IS THROUGH

The past few months since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have been unquestionably unprecedented in multiple respects. Shaping a ‘new normal’ – the recurrent label often used both within and outside the field of international higher education – current times remain characterised by unusual volatility, far-reaching uncertainties and novel glimpses of possibility. Although what the ‘new normal’ fully means, both now and in the future, is yet to be uncovered and defined, this has been a period of many *1st times*: a larger-scale emergency response in higher education than ever seen before, a previously unimaginable degree of flexibility in educational modes of delivery, funding programmes and forms of international cooperation, and, what was named by some, as an overnight digital revolution in education. In a nutshell, a period of higher education and internationalisation not “as we know it”, in which constant adaptation has become the norm of the day.

A period as particular as this would naturally leave its legacy, beyond the immediate, and possibly restrictive, short-term consequences. Past trying to forecast upcoming trends, what can be learnt from the response of the field of (international) higher education to the pandemic and what kind of internationalisation might we be engaging in, in the (near) future?

1. Beyond dichotomies – truly comprehensive internationalisation

While theoretically committed, as a field, to comprehensive internationalisation, in reality, scholarly discourse and institutional action have often been artificially polarised – internationalisation abroad

vs. internationalisation at home, physical mobility vs. virtual mobility, face-to-face vs. online education – into a discourse of either/or. Path-dependency, different leadership visions and priorities, limited resources, expertise, and personal preferences explained the choice of some forms and models over others. It is invariably easier to focus on differences than on finding links and potential synergies.

And yet, the recent months have questioned some of the past assumptions, creating a fertile ground for new openness and experimentation, and revealing critical interlinks and complementarity. They showed, for example, that internationalisation abroad and physical mobility, while essential for most higher education institutions, are far from guaranteed. And that online education and virtual mobility need not be, by default, second best, having provided the much needed salvation in these unusual times. Physical mobility is and will remain an irreplaceable, life-changing experience, but so can quality-driven international online exchanges bring clear added value to students' education, and constitute a valuable choice.

Post-COVID-19, frontrunner institutions will have reconciled this debate and will pursue a variety of mobility modes (physical, blended, and fully online) and models, without sacrificing one type over another. The question will not be which type of mobility, but how and with what purpose? Comprehensive internationalisation thrives on such innovation and presupposes connecting all activities into a meaningful whole. Comprehensiveness will require, even more than in the past, intentional strategic choices and sustained actions, through a combination of both at home and abroad activities, of face-to-face and online modes, in a fitness for purpose paradigm. It is the only way forward, to better deliver on institutional missions and contribute to tackling bigger societal challenges. However, these changes will not happen overnight. They need to be thoughtful, driven by institutional rationales and objectives, and not by the forms of delivery, which are secondary.

2. Physical mobility – in need for more support than ever

The containment measures put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have, amongst others, literally done the unthinkable, namely put a stop to most physical student mobility, be it for credit or degree purposes. As an immediate response, institutions and funding agencies have done the impossible to ensure that the previously-mobile individuals could still benefit from their international experience by enabling them to finish the mobility periods online. For the autumn semester 2020 great uncertainties shape institutional responses. Most institutions expect a significant drop in incoming degree-seeking students, while an increasing number of institutions are opting out of student exchanges on the short-run, due to the inability to guarantee reciprocity with partner institutions, and to the remaining health risks.

Bringing back physical student mobility to pre-COVID-19 levels will require greater resources, support and institutional commitment than ever before: be it to ensure a safe study environment,

to promote student mobility in new ways, to motivate and appease worried students and parents, to compensate for the decrease of purchasing power due to the ensuing economic recession, or all of the above.

Although often taken for granted in the past, physical student mobility is far from guaranteed in the (near) future. It will be thus crucial that higher education institutions and funding bodies use the coming period wisely: innovate by responding to the new realities with revamped models (e.g. shorter, blended, more integrated, environmentally sustainable) and secure necessary resources to fully boost physical mobility as soon as technically possible.

3. Continued flexibility – a booster for innovative internationalisation

Perhaps one of the most surprising elements of the higher education response to the health crisis, at least in the European context, has been the immense flexibility rapidly enabled by higher education institutions, funding organisations, at both national and European level, and by other stakeholder bodies, in order to safeguard the internationalisation of higher education – be it in the form of partnerships, mobility, joint programmes, or internationalisation at home.

This flexibility went well past what was previously possible, and has proven to be crucial for the speed of response, for developing customised approaches, for finding innovative solutions, and overall, for ensuring that internationalisation remains a living reality.

Maintaining a high level of flexibility in institutional activities and funding instruments also beyond the pandemic, as a new *modus operandi*, would be essential for finding new ways to mitigate the medium and longer-term impact of the crisis on international education. It would nurture continued experimentation and institutional innovation, resulting in the development of new models and creative approaches. Such flexibility is for example already the cornerstone of initiatives like the European Universities, but could be truly mainstreamed.

4. A new era of cooperation AND coordination

The containment measures put in place by many governments, the search for national rather than joint and solidarity-anchored solutions, combined with general restrictions on international travel, have also contoured the risk of new era of political isolationism. Within higher education, however, where isolationism is a synonym to mediocrity, the indispensable value of international cooperation has been strongly and clearly reconfirmed. Individual higher education institutions, no matter how excellent and at the top of whichever ranking, are too small to tackle greater and deeper societal challenges alone. The interconnectedness of international higher education is the field's biggest strength, but when limited, also its biggest weakness. Therefore the only way forward is through:

supporting more and strategic in nature cooperation, which might need to happen in increasingly new ways, mediated by new means.

The epitome of international cooperation in higher education – university networks and associations – have become, particularly in these troubled times, a vital rallying point. Looking at the impressive amount of intellectual productions, of services, online events and tools developed by most associations in our field to support member institutions in this period, one might even conclude that crises are a thriving time for associations. One when they can decisively demonstrate increased relevance.

The pressing need for enhanced cooperation rests, however, not only *within* individual associations, but also *between* such representative bodies, along the multiple and fast multiplying issues that require system-level coordination. From, for example, joint advocacy to adapt funding rules for European level programmes in a similar way that is applicable to all participating countries, institutions and students; to much needed coordination of the reopening of borders and the treatment of international students; in the alignment of practices in the autumn semester for student exchanges; on admissions for international students; on further advocating to secure funding for international education. This is a growing space of indispensable coordination that needs to be inhabited and used strategically. Within it, networks and associations have a key role to play, and could even take the driving seat.

5. Final words on funding – step-up and speak-up

Last, and very briefly, a few words on funding-related prospects. Beyond the anticipated decrease in income from international students, many systems fear larger cuts in the budgets for higher education due to the economic recession and to other competing priorities. Many of these concerns are justified. If the 2008 economic crisis can serve as a compass, governments are likely to again respond in different ways – while some will prioritise investments in education, seeing it as a motor for the economic relaunch, others will treat it as an unnecessary expense. Although the leverage on these decisions will likely differ across countries and individual higher education actors, as a field we should nevertheless be able to articulate what we strive for and what we need. Clarity of purpose is one of the key principles of advocacy work. So rather than waiting to see how the dice will be cast, the momentum could be used to step-up coordinated advocacy efforts. And through joining forces, speak up about the indispensable contribution of international higher education, while showing decisiveness, innovation capacity, and via a new discourse that resonates better with society at large.

Many colleagues have already defined this crisis as a 'reset' moment. Some see it as an opportunity for reinventing international higher education, while others think it will be a reset to the default mode, to business as usual once the short and medium-term consequences are over. Both are likely right – the direction in which different institutions, actors and countries will go will be a factor of visionary leadership, resources, innovation potential, commitment at the grassroots level, and chance. The internationalisation of tomorrow, at least for some, will be fully comprehensive, foster new modes of delivery for long-standing core activities (e.g. physical student mobility), show great flexibility and innovation, be more deeply anchored in cooperation and coordination, and avail of proper resources.

The **World after COVID-19** is a series of 'think pieces' which ACA is publishing every Tuesday since early May. The pieces are 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.