

# The Future of International Educational Exchange is Bright

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## ABSTRACT

*The future of international education and academic student and scholar exchange is bright. Though the term “virtual” transformed from an adverb to a noun since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic two years ago, our belief is that international educational exchange in all its forms will continue. This essay outlines the importance and need for internationalization on U.S. higher education campuses throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, learnings from the last two years from U.S. higher education institutions, and critical considerations regarding the future of international educational exchange.*

**Keywords:** international student mobility, COVID-19 pandemic, internationalization, U.S. higher education institutions

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## Introduction

The future of international education and academic exchange is bright. This is not because the world turned out to be flat or that globalization was a good tide that lifted all ships. Instead, there is something in the human spirit from the earliest days of Plato's Academy that appears to prefer the exchange of ideas and a location outside of one's home to spur academic thinking and collaboration. And even though the term 'virtual' transformed from an adverb to a noun since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic two years ago, international educational exchange in all its forms will continue and thrive.

The subset of students who planned for an international exchange experience in the last two years have not abandoned their plans or dreams, and their ranks are only growing. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, internationally mobile students numbered over six million according to the OECD, with a year-on-year growth rate of six percent. And while some have indicated that it may take years for global educational mobility to recover, our conclusion is more optimistic for two reasons.

The first is that throughout the pandemic, even in-person international education exchange never actually stopped. The *Open Doors 2021 Report on International Educational Exchange* indicated that the total number of international students at U.S. higher education institutions decreased by 15 percent in 2020/21. At the same time, the report noted that over 145,000 new international students had begun their studies at U.S. colleges and universities. This was in addition to the over 760,000 international students already in the United States at the start of COVID-19. Despite travel restrictions, quarantine requirements, and going virtual, students continued to pursue study at U.S. colleges and universities in large numbers.

Second, some positive trends are already apparent. The *Fall 2021 International Student Enrollment Snapshot* indicates a rebound of international student numbers in 2021/22, increasing 4 percent overall and a significant 68 percent for new international students. Perhaps even more uplifting was that 65 percent of these international students were located on campuses in the United States. There is a strong indication from prospective students that they intend to pursue academic opportunities overseas in future years. Recent reports indicate that students from large sending countries, including China, India, and others, intend to study abroad.

### **Support for Inbound and Outbound Mobility at U.S. Institutions Continues**

In the United States, higher education institutions are prepared. Throughout the pandemic, colleges and universities took multiple steps to reach out to international students continuing their studies regardless of location and to prospective applicants and new students to assure them that their interest was welcome and would be accommodated. Institutions offered continued support to international students on their health and well-being and provided virtual and in-person study support. Most institutions offered COVID-19 vaccines to all international students on campus in fall 2021.

Support for U.S. study abroad has not waned either. According to *Open Doors 2021*, study abroad offices across the United States launched a massive emergency effort in spring 2020 to return over 55,000 American students home early from their study abroad experience amid the COVID-19 outbreak. In the aftermath, programs in global online learning, virtual internships abroad, and other opportunities for global and local experiences highlight the ways institutions

pivoted and adapted when in-person study was not possible. Looking ahead, forecasts indicate that American students have their passports ready, and their intention is to travel abroad. In the latest IIE COVID-19 Snapshot Survey, over half of the institutions (54%) plan to have in-person study abroad programs in spring 2022.

Coming out of this global pandemic, it is important to prepare for future ones. The COVID-19 pandemic is the 12<sup>th</sup> such event in IIE's history. IIE was founded in 1919, amid the Spanish Influenza and at a time when the then-Commissioner of Immigration of the United States needed a way to admit the growing numbers of international students who U.S. colleges and universities wanted to have pursue their degree here but at a time when a non-immigrant visa did not exist. The solution involved turning to IIE to register the incoming students and scholars, conduct an annual census, and then inform the Commissioner when the course or degree program had ended. This was the origin of what today is known as the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. We know from our records that exchanges continued during each pandemic, and once the pandemic was brought under control, student flows continued and increased.

### **Lessons Learned from the Last Two Years**

There are some features to this pandemic that make it unique from our perspective and are changing how we practice international education. Interestingly, most were already in process or being explored before COVID-19 struck. Others have provided an opportunity for higher education institutions to reconsider how they do their work, provide support to their students, and run their programs. First, the truly global nature of this pandemic and the fact that it occurred in the middle of the spring 2020 term required all institutions to become more expert at arranging for evacuations for students who could not travel home. Finding ways to house, feed, and employ many who suddenly had few ways and even fewer resources to cope with a summer where internships, housing, and the expected return to their home countries all disappeared.

Many institutions noted that they were not prepared for this emergency response, and shared takeaways around emergency and risk management protocols, guidelines on staff mental health, and institutional support to students in the U.S. and abroad during an emergency. We need to thoroughly review the emergency support provided to the one million international students we normally host when pandemic-type events break out. How institutions of higher education and the countries in which they are located respond to the needs of international students and the plans they have in place in the future should become an element of how universities are ranked. Such protocols will ensure that institutions across the U.S. and worldwide will be prepared for when, not if, the next emergency arises.

The way we deliver education has evolved as well. Historically, when a pandemic struck a country or region, schooling simply ceased to avoid further in-person contact. But schools have figured out how they could and should continue to function, albeit in limited ways. More recently, U.S. institutions had already been exploring how an international component could be infused more broadly into U.S.-based curricula, how students who could not travel could nevertheless get a global perspective, and how we could all practice internationalization at home by engaging with the

multicultural communities adjacent and nearby to our campuses. This was further catapulted by the growth of virtual exchange programs and global online learning experiences.

In the last two years, 'global' actually became 'local' for everyone. In response, institutions created options for international and U.S. students to participate in global virtual experiences, whether through online learning, internships, or virtual exchange, so that location was not the prerequisite for global interaction. There are lessons we need to learn about how hybrid courses and semesters impacted students and faculty, as most institutions noted that offering virtual programming provided options for their students and allowed them to continue their studies from abroad or in their homes or apartments. Many institutions noted that while the virtual format was not a substitute for in-person programs, it was possible to deliver high-quality education and services.

Another takeaway is the need to address a pandemic's effect on students, faculty, and staff's mental health. We need to know a lot more about how students navigated the pandemic and the advice they would give to future students — international and domestic — on how to be prepared. Institutions noted that they planned to take forward many of the protocols they had set up around mental health advising for their students and staff. Frequent check-ins on health and well-being, often virtual, proved critical during the pandemic, and these practices should continue well beyond this year. The resiliency of faculty and staff who went through the pandemic, typically discussed in association with other words such as 'patience,' 'grace,' and 'adaptability,' also point to the need to look inward and support those on the frontline in international education.

Finally, it will be important to examine the institutional effects that the pandemic had on institutions and their administration. From staff furloughs and layoffs to programs being canceled and defunded, the effects of the pandemic on U.S. higher education and the international education field in some institutions were dramatic. Yet even here, there is an opportunity to learn. Offices had to take a hard look at their offerings and their methods of operation. This led to abandoning outdated practices and making important decisions about which programs and services to cut. The necessity and reality of the COVID-19 pandemic forced some institutions to adopt a more streamlined approach.

### **Where We Stand and the Way Forward**

What will international educational exchange look like moving forward? For three-quarters of the twentieth century and all of the present one so far, more young persons between the ages of 18–24 sought access to higher education faster than their home countries could supply it. They had relatively few places where they could go. Today, international students have more destinations and choices than at any time in history. There is already an unprecedented global trend toward seeking international students as part of national education economic growth strategies, and foreign policy. And of the 100 top-ranked world universities, nearly two-thirds are no longer based in the United States; a decade ago, only 47 of the top 100 were non-U.S. institutions. As state-sponsored investments in universities in nearly all regions enable more to attain rankings, will growing numbers of students prefer to stay in their region instead of switching continents? Or will the opportunity of traveling abroad where the chances of getting vaccinated could be higher, or

where research may lead to rapid development of vaccines for the next pandemic, now become a part of an international student's calculus in considering where to go?

For much of the past 100 years, promoting international education and exchange has not been easy, and efforts to impart a global perspective and international frame of mind across higher education here and elsewhere have not always been seen as a priority. COVID-19 may not have changed those realities for professionals in our field. But as the world we share recovers from this pandemic, more higher education institutions than ever before will be engaged in making 'international' a central element of what it means to be educated.

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