The COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned in Promoting Student Internationalisation

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Abstract—In higher education, a great degree of importance is placed on the internationalisation of the student experience. This is seen as a valuable contributor to elements such as building confidence, broadening knowledge, creating networks, and connections and enhancing employability for current students who will become the next generation of managers in technology and business. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all areas of people's lives. The limitations of travel coupled with the fears and concerns generated by the health risks have dramatically reduced the opportunity for students to engage with this agenda. Institutions of higher education have been required to rethink fundamental aspects of their business model from recruitment and enrolment, through learning approaches, assessment methods and the pathway to employment. This paper presents a case study which focuses on student mobility and how the physical experience of being in another country either to study, to work, to volunteer or to gain cultural and social enhancement has of necessity been replaced by alternative approaches. It considers trans-national education as an alternative to physical study overseas, virtual mobility and internships as an alternative to international work experience and adopting collaborative on-line projects as an alternative to in-person encounters. The paper concludes that although these elements have been adopted to address the current situation, the lessons learnt and the feedback gained suggests that they have contributed successfully in new and sometimes unexpected ways, and that they will persist beyond the present to become part of the "new normal" for the future. That being the case, senior leaders of institutions of higher education will be required to revisit their international plans and to rewrite their international strategies to take account of and build upon these changes.

Keywords—Trans-national education, internationalisation, higher education management, virtual mobility.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE advent of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has had far-reaching implications across all aspects of working and social lives. The impact in education has been profound with the actual effects most likely not becoming evident for a long time [1]. Amongst the issues already identified by students includes a concern about their future professional career and studies [2].

For senior managers and leaders in Higher Education an agile approach to management has been essential with rapid decision making and novel approaches becoming the norm. Decisions of the greatest significance need to be taken which affect the in their current educational experience and the future prospects of young people [3]. Although there is an inevitable temptation to "hunker down" and firefight the most immediate issues as they become apparent, there is a great danger of losing the longer-term view; of prioritising the operational over the strategic. This paper focuses on the internationalisation agenda in Higher Education and looks at the challenges in maintaining an international learning experience for students in an environment where travel is highly restricted or impossible.

II. CONTEXT

The University of Lincoln is one of approximately 130 public Universities in the United Kingdom. Although like many Universities it can trace a history back through many decades of predecessor institutions functioning under similar names, it usually anchors the origins of its current presence to a major restructure and adopting of the name University of Lincoln that took place in 2001. In the years since then it has grown from a small provider of around 4,000 students to a population of over 15,000 students, commensurate with other cathedral cities such as York and Durham. Over that period of time, it has risen dramatically in the rankings to the point where it regularly outperforms a number of the traditional Universities; in 2020 it was awarded Modern University of the Year [4].

The relatively recent history of the University means that in some agendas it has been striving to catch up with its competitors. One of those is the internationalisation of the student experience where the institution has historically had fewer contacts, connections and networks than others that were established longer ago. That situation has changed in recent years with increasing attention paid to: international research activity and funding; growth in enterprise and business with multinational companies; Trans-National Education; staff and student mobility. The establishment of a dedicated Global Opportunities department to coordinate, develop and support projects and individuals evidences the importance placed on this aspect of the University's mission.

III. CASE STUDY

This case study focuses on student mobility and how the physical experience of travelling to and living in another country either to study, to work, to volunteer or to gain cultural and social enhancement, has of necessity been replaced by alternative approaches. Three aspects of this problem are considered: Trans-National Education as an alternative to physical study overseas; virtual mobility and internships as an alternative to shorter periods of international work experience; collaborative projects as an alternative to face-to-face encounters.

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A. Trans-National Education

Trans-National Education (TNE) has been defined as "all types of higher education study programs, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based" [5].

Institutions cite the advantages of TNE including: building global reputation [6]; addressing resourcing capacity and skills shortages of international governments [7]; increasing the opportunity for student and staff mobility [8].

Significantly more international students attend a UK higher education programme delivered in an overseas country compared to those who travel to and study in the UK. Students cite reasons for studying a TNE programme such as: cost of living and studying in the UK; greater career prospects compared to a single certificate award; increased internationalisation prospects [9].

The pandemic has reduced international student enrolments in most countries which many not prepared to travel in the current circumstances. It would be expected for this to be the case for students travelling from countries of low incidence of the virus to the UK where incidence has been high throughout. However, where countries have successfully maintained very low levels of infection through the use of strict immigration controls or travel bans such as in Australia, the effect of falling international recruitment has been stark [10]. One strategy to address this has been to promote the opportunity to study on a locally-hosted programme in the student's own country on a TNE partner programme as a stepping stone to transferring to the UK to undertake their international study. Where a UK University provides an equivalent programme of study on a TNE basis a student could, for example, remain in their home country for the first year of undergraduate study and transfer to commence Year 2 in the UK. A similar approach can be adopted using distance and on-line learning approaches. Where a programme is being delivered in a remote mode with students accessing their learning through on-line electronically mediated channels it is possible for them to undertake those initial stages of their study in their home country and transfer across to the UK at an agreed later point such as at the end of their first semester or at the start of Year 2.

TNE was rapidly gaining in popularity even before the pandemic. Since the start of 2020 there is evidence that growth in TNE has at least been maintained and in some cases has increased. The University of Lincoln has secured one new major TNE partnership and has expanded the range of programmes offered at another. Reasons for this continued interest include the desirability to students of studying at home and also the attractiveness of studying a UK programme in a country where the incidence and effect of the pandemic is less than is the case in the UK. It has also been the experience at the University of Lincoln that conducting international communications, with all the inherent problems of time differences and varying patterns of working weeks, has been easier during the pandemic for two main reasons: one is that the general improvement in experience and skills in using on-line communications tools and shared repositories has made the organisation and participation in electronic group meetings a commonplace rather than exotic activity; secondly, the enforced pattern of working from home rather than the traditional mode of travelling to offices, meeting in locations across a campus, taking days out to attend conferences in other cities etc., has brought about an increase in availability. More often than was the case previously, people from around the world can be found in the same place – at home, in front of their laptop or desktop computer! This aspect of "presenteeism" [11] has made the negotiation of new or extended partnerships much easier to bring about.

B. Student Mobility

In the years prior to the pandemic, student mobility had centred primarily on traditional academic exchange programmes. Under schemes such as the European Erasmus+ programme, students would undertake a period of their study in a country overseas. Typically, students would spend a semester or a year of their programme as a block of study, embedded within their overall curriculum, at an international partner University. Sometimes the study would result in the award of transferrable credit that contributed to the student's final award classification, in other situations the credit would be recognised by the international partner but would not be a contributory element to the home award.

Even before the pandemic, many institutions such as the University of Lincoln were broadening their view as to what a period of student mobility might entail and had started developing other forms of international experience [12]. The motivations for this include: consideration of the climate emergency and reducing international travel and therefore carbon emissions; widening participation in international student mobility for those with family or other caring commitments, or those who are dependent on part-time employment for their financial support; widening access for those with disabilities for whom travel or extended stay abroad might be problematic [13].

Amongst the newer approaches being adopted by the University of Lincoln are the following: blended study abroad, where a student makes a short visit to the partner institution but then completes the rest of the semester or year-long experience from their home institution; shorter experiences such as summer/winter schools or other vacation-based programmes; virtual mobilities or internships.

Although the University of Lincoln has been successful in developing a range of new models, the experience of introducing virtual internships has probably had the greatest effect. During the pandemic a number of providers of physical mobility experiences have switched their business model to provide students with an on-line alternative. There are many examples of this: one is a company which for many years provided placements for student volunteers to travel and work abroad, largely renumerated by the provision of their food and accommodation, on projects around the world particularly in developing countries. At the outset of the pandemic, it has adjusted the engagement model such that participants can participate in projects based in the same countries but working

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Educational and Pedagogical Sciences
Vol:16, No:3, 2022

remotely, on-line on these projects. These range from more administrative projects through to teaching younger students to use media generation software. Others have specialised in developing soft skills for students by employing them in activities that require them to showcase their skills in presentation and communication, project management, group leaderships etc.

The impact of the introduction of virtual internships has been significant. Students whose long-standing plans to travel abroad had been shattered by the pandemic found they could still engage productively on projects on an international basis. Others who had family responsibilities which prevented them from taking an extended period out to travel were able to build international networks and friendships that would persist after the programme had finished.

C. International Collaborative Student Projects

There is a long history of students working together on jointly structured international projects and other collaborative activities with students based overseas. The best known of these initiatives is probably that of Collaborative On-Line International Learning (COIL) [14]. These activities might be assessed and credit-bearing; for example, a group of students from both institutions could work together to undertake an assessed project or assignment. Projects like this would normally be managed by the institution. Alternatively, the activity might be extra-curricular or taken for interest or for career enhancement; for example, students could come together using on-line communication to participate in hackathons, elevator pitches, crits and peer reviews, joint challenges, competitions etc. [15]. Often these projects are student managed.

Groups of students can be formed to participate in these collaborative ventures either from the same cognate subject discipline and therefore have similar and shared expertise, or might be brought together from complementary areas and bring a range of different skills to the group.

At an early point in pandemic, it became apparent at the University of Lincoln that student horizons would be limited by the travel restrictions imposed. It was quickly appreciated that for students whose movement was going to be largely restricted to their campus accommodation or their family home, the need to widen those horizons and introduce an element of international connectivity in their programme was even more important

In previous years, collaborative on-line projects have often been introduced by academic colleagues across institutions where a shared interest, such as in a research endeavour, existed. At the University of Lincoln, it was decided to build on that existing practice by formalising the process such that the already developed TNE partners or the receiving institutions in our student exchange and study abroad partnerships were involved at an early stage. Where appropriate, commitment was made to introduce collaborative projects bringing together the students of each institution. Projects were considered which were contributory to the student's degree outcome as well as those which were available on a voluntary or opt-in basis.

The evaluation of the outcomes of these joint projects is still being undertaken but early signs are that the interest generated amongst students is considerable and the benefits might reach beyond the purely academic aspects and into the personal well-being and the soft skills development of those who participated.

IV. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked devastating havoc across the world. Like other sectors, Higher Education has been required to act quickly and decisively to protect students, staff and others associated with the delivery of its objectives.

The restrictions placed on international travel and movement control have limited the opportunity to provide students with an international experience as an integral part of their programme of studies. Internationalisation has increasingly become acknowledged as being an important element in preparing students to become global citizens and to take up roles in multinational organisations. The benefits of internationalisation have over time become embedded in national strategies. At the institutional level, Universities have included internationalisation in their strategic plans through collaborative partnerships in research, industry links and though programmes of staff and student mobility. The pandemic has severely restricted the opportunity to deliver this key aspect of learning and development. The management response to this has required a level of flexibility, nimbleness and adaptability. It has required a speed of response and reaction to a situation which has been changing rapidly in real time. Initiatives which might normally take time to present, develop and finesse have needed to be advanced quickly to ensure that the overall institutional objectives are being met.

In the case of TNE partnerships, it was found that the changes that had taken place in the working patterns of people across the globe where they were more likely to be contactable than was the case prior to the pandemic made it easier to conduct international negotiations and led to an increase in the formation of international partnerships. In addition, new progression routes were proposed whereby students could defer their travel to start a programme in the UK by commencing their studies at a TNE partner institution in their home country.

For student mobility, the travel restrictions have created the greatest challenge. An agile approach whereby a change towards more virtual mobility, particularly virtual internships, has been very well received in terms of student feedback. Students who found their physical exchange placement had been cancelled were able to undertake a virtual placement thereby gaining valuable international experiences, albeit remotely. In addition, it has been found that virtual mobility provides international opportunities for students whose other responsibilities such as caring or family commitments would otherwise prevent them from travelling overseas.

Looking finally at collaborative international student projects, the managerial decision to formalise this approach and embed it into the mainstream of student learning has provided students with a wider window out onto the world at a time when their horizons would have been otherwise constrained. Although much good work was already being undertaken in this respect,

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Educational and Pedagogical Sciences
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the accelerated development of this approach during the pandemic means it is likely to become adopted as a more explicit part of the programme offering, possibly to a point in the future where it can be claimed that every student will gain an international experience as part of their programme.

In this case study, three adaptations to the student experience have been investigated. The paper presents work in progress and invites a subsequent publication to evaluate more deeply the effects of these interventions.

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