

POSITION PAPER

Higher Education Internationalisation in South Africa in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impact on International Students

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world in unprecedented ways. Apart from causing major disruptions to teaching, learning and research, it has also adversely affected many internationalisation activities of universities, most notably regarding the mobility of students and staff. While COVID-19 is a truly global phenomenon, its impact on the internationalisation of higher education (HE) has not been felt equally and evenly across the globe. Specific responses to the challenges brought about by the pandemic should be informed by national and institutional circumstances.

The purpose of this position paper is to reflect on how internationalisation of South African HE has been impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, we intend to highlight how international students at South African universities have been affected by national and institutional responses to COVID-19. Hoping to garner support for internationalisation in a post COVID-19 world, we also offer some reflections and recommendations for the continued advancement of HE internationalisation in South Africa.

Based on the collective experience of IEASA's members, especially the directors of international offices in South Africa, the paper highlights the specific challenges and constraints international students face and appeals to universities and other HE stakeholders to ensure that international students are not left out of considerations for the successful completion of the 2020 academic programme.

Government and Institutional Responses

The South African government's initial response to COVID-19 was decisive and far-reaching, following a science-based approach focussing on limiting the spread of the pandemic and on saving lives. In mid-March 2020, the Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (DHESI) established a dedicated COVID-19 Team led by the Deputy Minister. Following government directives, universities implemented restrictions on travel and public gatherings. On 18 March, university campuses were closed, and a week later the entire country was put under a strict lockdown. In this context, teaching, learning and research activities of universities came to a grinding halt and have been resuming to varying degrees. Under lockdown conditions, several universities embarked on delivering their teaching and learning programme remotely as an emergency measure. When university campuses reopen on 1 June 2020, contact teaching will not resume to the same degree as before. Instead, institutions will need to be innovative and adopt blended approaches to teaching and learning, with some components delivered face to face and others virtually.

Impact on Internationalisation

As immediate consequences of COVID-19 related restrictions on travel and public gatherings, several internationalisation activities of universities such as international conferences and events have been cancelled so far, both in South Africa and abroad, and the trend continues. None of the annual conferences of international education associations such as APAIE (Asia-Pacific), FAUBAI (Brazil), NAFSA (USA), EAIE (Europe) and ANIE (Africa) will be held as physical events in 2020. Similarly, IEASA

had to cancel several internal meetings and events and is, for example, considering a virtual alternative to its annual conference to be held at a date to be confirmed. Cancellations of conferences have a considerable impact on budgets and work plans. They also result in institutions missing out on opportunities for networking, training, marketing and student recruitment.

Impact on International Students

International students, who made up almost 7 per cent of the total student population in 2017¹, are present on most campuses around the country. When universities closed, they were requested to return home. Such requests, given at rather short notice, created challenges for students, local and international alike, particularly when travel home was linked to fears of health risks as well as logistical and financial difficulties. International students faced additional challenges caused by flight cancellations and border closures in the wake of international travel bans. In some instances, their situation was further exacerbated by visa-related concerns, especially in cases where students were awaiting the outcome of their visa applications and were therefore unable to leave the country without risking being declared undesirable and unable to return. For these and other reasons, not all international students were able to travel home. Whether they remained on campus or were moved to alternative accommodation off campuses, their host institutions were required to address issues of continued care and service provision for them. As the specific circumstances of international students are complex and varied, institutions have to develop differentiated approaches to adequately respond to the needs and interests of different groups such as, for example, short-term (study abroad) students and degree-seeking students. This means that universities often have to accommodate international students on a case-by-case basis, requiring ad-hoc and tailor-made solutions. Institutional approaches to the treatment of international students have been varied, differing from one university to another.

The Challenges of Inequality

In part, the difference in institutional responses to COVID-19 related challenges can be linked to the differentiated nature of the South African HE system, which distinguishes between historically advantaged institutions (HAIs) and historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) as a legacy of apartheid. To this day, HAIs tend to be better equipped and resourced than their HDI counterparts. Some, especially those who have achieved world-class status and sought-after places in international university rankings, tend to be better equipped to deal with the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, all South African universities have registered students who live in poverty and who are generally reliant on face to face teaching and learning.

The global pandemic highlights existing inequality and poverty in South Africa, for which the move to online teaching serves as a case in point. Underprivileged institutions and individuals find themselves on the receiving end of the digital divide. The main burden of online provision falls on institutions that are ill-prepared and under-resourced, as well as on students who are poor and live in conditions that are not conducive to online learning, without access to computers and laptops, affordable data, reliable internet connectivity, electricity or a dedicated physical space in which to study. Such circumstances affect the extent to which students can avail the online teaching and learning arrangements offered by their universities. For many international students at South African institutions, the majority of whom are African, these issues are often further exacerbated in their home countries.

The capacity of institutions to deal with COVID-19 related challenges varies in accordance with the availability of relevant structures, digital platforms and other resources. The better staffed and

¹ Council on Higher Education (CHE). 2019. *VitalStats: Public Higher Education 2017*. p. 8.

resourced an international office is, the better the services and dedicated attention it can afford to international students. An institution's ability to comprehensively respond to the needs of international students is symptomatic of its overall capacity to promote and manage internationalisation more broadly. In South Africa's unequal HE sector, internationalisation has not been advanced evenly across the country's universities. While some initiatives such as the Erasmus Mundus programme funded by the European Union specifically targeted historically disadvantaged individuals and institutions, the DHESI has recognised that HDIs still do not have extensive international relations and are not benefitting from internationalisation as much as they should².

Given the uneven advancement of internationalisation across the South African HE sector, the impact of COVID-19 related restrictions on universities' internationalisation efforts has varied considerably. On the one end of the spectrum, institutions focus their responses mainly on the presence of a small number of international students. At the other end, a whole variety of international activities are at risk. For institutions that rely on income generated through international activities such as study abroad programmes and winter/summer schools, financial losses suffered due to COVID-19 potentially threaten the sustainability of the very same initiatives and programmes.

IEASA's Community of Practice

While there is no "one size fits all" approach to HE internationalisation in South Africa, the ongoing crisis has highlighted the need for internationalisation professionals to exchange information and experiences and work towards common solutions to shared challenges. Through its Directors Forum (DF), IEASA provides a platform for directors of international offices of its 23 member institutions to engage regularly and, under current circumstances, with increased frequency. The DF members use informal communication platforms such as a WhatsApp group to help keep each other abreast of the latest COVID-19 related developments, identify common obstacles and share examples of institutional responses to them. In this way, IEASA facilitates a community of practice, enabling exchange between institutions and allowing them to learn from each other's good practices. This is particularly important as institutional approaches to the implementation of government policy and directives as regards internationalisation are not coordinated and aligned at the national level. As a result, institutions differ in how they have treated international students amidst campus closures and travel bans concerning, for example, notice periods as well as assistance with travel arrangements and alternative accommodation off campuses.

Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa in a post COVID-19 World

What HE internationalisation in a post COVID-19 world will look like is uncertain. However, we can expect that there will be significant changes at global, regional, national and institutional levels. On the one hand, the experience of COVID-19 can be used as a powerful argument for the importance of internationalisation, as it illustrates that grand challenges such as a global pandemic cannot be solved by any one institution, nation or region alone but require collaboration that transcends borders and disciplines. On the other hand, COVID-19 highlights poverty, inequality and marginalisation.

COVID-19 has made inequality in South African HE and HE internationalisation even more starkly visible. Both the global pandemic and the global trend of internationalisation do not act as equalising forces in the country's HE sector. On the contrary, they bring existing inequalities to the fore and can further deepen existing divides between those who have – for example, opportunities to benefit from online teaching or study abroad places – and those who do not. To help mitigate disparities,

² Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). 2017. *Draft Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa*. p. 17.

internationalisation efforts of universities should be permeated by an agenda that focuses on inclusion and social justice. In view of challenging times ahead, there is a risk that HE internationalisation may be de-prioritised and de-funded. Faced with budget cuts and increased competition with essential services for limited resources, internationalisation endeavours need to be relevant to national and institutional goals and aim to contribute to nation-building, transformation and the public good.

In 2014, IEASA hosted the first Global Dialogue on HE internationalisation and, as a signatory of the *Nelson Mandela Bay Global Dialogue Declaration on the Future of Internationalisation of Higher Education*³, made a commitment to “the importance of decision-making and practices in the development of internationalisation activities that are imbued with ethical considerations and inclusivity”. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic provides another opportunity to critically examine traditional concepts, models and practices of internationalisation and to reimagine internationalisation from the perspective of South Africa, Africa and the global South. With COVID-19 acting as an accelerator, we have been prompted to be innovative and creative in increasing our capacity to work, teach and learn remotely in the shortest possible time. We need to find ways to use this momentum to work towards a more equitable and inclusive advancement of internationalisation in South Africa.

Opportunities worth exploring, particularly with a focus on strengthening internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC) and internationalisation at home (IaH) dimensions, include but are not limited to the following:

- Using Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) to internationalise the curriculum;
- Using online technologies and pedagogies to foster intercultural competence and multicultural learning and to enhance graduate attributes;
- Using virtual experiences instead of physical mobility to increase the number of students and staff benefitting from internationalisation opportunities;
- Focussing more strongly on the exchange of knowledge rather than the mobility of people to facilitate equality and mutual benefit in international partnerships;
- Hosting virtual events instead of physical events to promote more inclusive participation of previously underrepresented institutions and individuals.

Navigating a Way Forward

In ongoing and future responses to COVID-19 related impacts, internationalisation considerations need to be given more prominence. So far, national and institutional planning for academic continuity has, for the most part, been concerned with local students. To truly leave no-one behind, the needs and interests of international students must be taken into account when designing initiatives and programmes. To illustrate this, the DHESI made an announcement on 30 April 2020 regarding the controlled return of clinical training students in their final year to assist with ongoing health management efforts of the Department of Health (DoH). However, this directive did not make explicit provision for the return of international students. In the absence of national provisions, institutions are required to make their own individual arrangements to accommodate international students affected by the decision.

Other issues that need to be considered in this regard include the provision of online teaching to international students in their home countries. So far, institutional efforts to provide data, laptops and zero-rated services to students have, for the most part, been limited to local and international

³ http://ieasa.studysa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/nelson_declaration.pdf

students in South Africa. However, challenges with internet connectivity and bandwidth are often even more pronounced in the countries of origin of international students, especially on the continent.

As far as the resumption of contact teaching is concerned, the reintegration of international students needs to be carefully considered. Various concerns have arisen in this respect. For example, as universities reopen before borders do, international students will not be permitted to return to campuses until the lockdown has been lifted to level 1⁴. This raises the question of how teaching will be conducted for these students until travel bans are lifted. Once international students are allowed back into the country, their reintegration into classes and campus life will involve additional time and resources, especially as requirements for quarantine and self-isolation have to be met. Furthermore, international students might experience challenges with their visas, especially if they, following the instructions of their universities to vacate campuses and return home, left South Africa without awaiting the outcome of their ongoing visa applications.

In all of these efforts, South Africa's universities would benefit from guidance and coordinated support at the national level. The country's first internationalisation policy, published as a draft in 2017, is still awaiting finalisation and adoption. In light of COVID-19, this process should be expedited. Furthermore, a comprehensive national study into the impact of the global pandemic on internationalisation in the South African HE sector would provide vital insights into current and future internationalisation trends. This would assist institutions in forging the way ahead, especially regarding the implementation and adaptation of government policy, once adopted. Such a study would also assist universities in positioning and prioritising their existing and new internationalisation activities, particularly in light of expected changes in global HE and internationalisation trends in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

IEASA Commitments and Calls for Action

To ensure the inclusion of international students in considerations for the successful completion of the 2020 academic year and to garner support for HE internationalisation in a post COVID-19 world, we put forward the following:

IEASA is committed to:

- Being an advocate for HE internationalisation in South Africa,
 - As the voice of South African HEIs, working with a variety of stakeholders including government departments and relevant national organisations such as Universities South Africa (USAf);
 - Focusing on the special circumstances and needs of international students.
- Facilitating a community of practice for university staff engaged in HE internationalisation.
- Establishing a webinar series to assist HEIs with sharing of information, experiences and good practice examples regarding challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Hosting a virtual IEASA conference in 2020.
- Increasing the scope of its website as a resource and networking tool.
- Networking with international sister organisations such as NAFSA, EAIE etc. to learn and share best practices and lessons learnt around internationalisation during COVID-19.

⁴ South Africa distinguishes between five lockdown levels, with level 5 being the most restrictive and level 1 the most relaxed. For more information: <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/infographic-south-africas-lockdown-level-5432-and-1/>.

IEASA calls on South African universities to:

- Ensure the ethical and equitable treatment of international students.
- Regularly communicate with their international students, in consultation with all relevant institutional stakeholders.
- Focus on the use of technology as well as new ways of working, teaching and learning remotely to advance IaH and IoC dimensions of internationalisation.
- Review their institutional policies to mitigate and circumvent challenges unique to short-term and degree-seeking international students.
- Adopt internationalisation approaches that focus on equity and inclusion.

IEASA calls on the South African government to:

- Facilitate and assist with the reintegration of international students.
- Facilitate the alignment and coordination of efforts to combat COVID-19, where possible, for example, by considering the following:
 - Fostering inclusivity by agreeing on minimum common denominators in developing initiatives;
 - Pooling of resources to create regional or national platforms for online teaching;
 - Promoting collective (bargaining) approaches regarding, for example, the sector-wide negotiation of data-related deals with internet providers and mobile phone companies.
- Reaffirm the commitment to HE internationalisation in South Africa by adopting the national internationalisation policy and supporting its implementation across the sector.
- Facilitate the alignment and coordination of initiatives affecting international students across government departments, including the DHESI, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) and the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO).

For further engagement, please contact the IEASA office via email: admin@ieasa.studyisa.org.