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ACADEMIC COOPERATION AND MOBILITY: IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. In the article, through the prism of the analysis of the founding documents, policies and practices of the EU for the development of higher education, formulates and argues the author's position regarding the strategic perspectives and prerequisites for internalization of higher education against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some major challenges have been formulated that hinder the natural connections between universities around the world. Some expected long-term benefits from the development of full internalization in the conditions of digitalization of higher education are substantiated on the example of the activity of Sofia University and the conducted research. In conclusion, the author argues that the mission of universities to stay connected is a priority, even in the pandemic situation.

Keywords: European Union; internalisation of higher education; academic mobility; digitization, pandemic COVID-19

Higher education plays a unique role in building a better future for citizens, especially in the context of the European unification process. The Communication on the Renewed EU Agenda for Higher education in 2017 emphasized that “effective education and training systems are a foundation of fair, open and democratic societies and of sustained growth and employment”¹⁾. On the one hand, in the period up to 2025, half of all jobs are projected to require high-level qualifications and the situation in Europe demonstrates that high-level skills gaps already exist. On the other hand, driven by digital technology, jobs are becoming more flexible and complex and this raises significant social issues related to job security with a level of security at the workplace diminishing sharply. A number of initiatives supporting modernization of higher education within the EU have been effective and the focus on ensuring their role in the programme period starting from 2020 has been maintained and further developed. Reforms of higher education is the responsibility of Member States and part of their efforts to develop world-class education and training. The EU can help Member States with their educational reform efforts

through its initiatives at European level and by enforcing and providing conditions for international cooperation between the Member states and by supporting higher level of exchanges of students, teaching staff and by creating effective formats of enhanced cooperation. From this perspective internationalization of higher education in the European context has been a major focus. The European Semester²⁾ is a key driver of reform, namely through education-related country specific recommendations. As part of the Europe 2020 strategy and the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training³⁾, the Council agreed that 40% of young people should have a tertiary education qualification or equivalent by 2020. EU funded programme like Erasmus+ and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions support international mobility of students, staff and researchers and have proven as a way for them to develop their experience and skills with great potential.

COVID-19 pandemic and internationalization of higher education

To understand the impact of COVID-19 on education mobility and international educational exchanges, it is significant to refer to the trends in international mobility flows prior to the pandemic. What was observed in the 20 years prior to the pandemic is the rapid increase in global mobility flows, which has brought students within the EU and worldwide an opportunity to pursue education outside their home country. There is a steady growth in mobility both of degree-seeking students and of students exchanges for part of the education. In 15 years between 1999 and 2014 the number of mobile students more than doubled from 2 to 4.3 million. According to UNESCO (2020)⁴⁾, the total number of international students pursuing an international educational experience reached 5.6 million in 2018, more than doubling over the last 20 years. However, in the same 15 years total student numbers grew approximately equally - from 94 to 207 million. This means that although there is a growth in absolute number of mobile students, the growth in proportion to all students remains stable at around 2%. In fact, the average per year growth in the number of international higher education students is 4.8 percent. From 2008 to 2018, the pool of globally mobile students grew by 2.4 million students or 75 percent, but most of the growth (1.5 million students) took place in the last five years⁵⁾. With the increase of the number of international students over the last 20 – 25 years, there is also a dynamic in the education destinations of these students, which also reflects increased global competition among countries attracting international students. The United States remain the top host country in 2020, similar to 20 years ago with around 20% of all globally mobile students⁶⁾. Leading hosts from Europe, however, lost their share during this period, including the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. Additionally, USA host the largest number of international students at MA and PhD level (26% of the total), UK hosts 15%, France 10%, Germany 10%. International students represent 6% of all students 3 times the world average in most important destination countries and

according to OECD data the higher the level of studies, the greater the proportion of international students. Intra-European mobility represents 25% of all mobile students in Europe – 75% come from elsewhere⁷⁾.

Mobility in the European context has been considered as part of a broader internationalization process in a relatively recent perspective (last 2-3 decades), likely due to EU programmes. EU's mobility schemes remain unique in design and levels of funding and are marked as essential for the understanding of internationalization. However, often academic mobility is seen as the only or the most important dimension of internationalization.

Internationalisation is closely related to mobility and very often represents the most important aspect of its practical implementation. Most generally accepted definition of internationalisation is as a multidimensional, intentional process, bringing international/intercultural perspectives to learning/teaching, research, outreach and management of an institution. A top priority for higher education institutions' leadership, increasingly viewed as an integral/inescapable aspect of their overall development strategy. Recently it is increasingly seen as a process contributing to improved quality. If internationalisation is as high a priority as policy makers and higher education institutions' leaders affirm, mobility must either be greatly expanded or must not be viewed as the main or only instrument. The reality is that participation in international exchanges, despite the stated priority, remains small in numbers. Despite the increasing EU support, mobility remains available to a small minority of students and staff. Funding constitutes a major obstacle and often opportunities are only available to those who can pay at all levels – individual, institutional and national. Often there are visa difficulties for entry into and from many countries and also for expanding the period of stay in the host country for several years after graduation, which is often feared as potential brain drain. Recognition of credits and prior qualifications is also among the main difficulties for mobile students and often they have to have bigger load in terms of examinations and courses to attend after a period of mobility to a foreign university.

Both mobility of students and the internationalization of higher education have been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic causing higher education institutions and systems globally to reconsider the context and realities of academic mobility. The pandemic affected negatively the main trends of mobility of students and teaching staff by the need to shift to remote online teaching globally including at Sofia University “St Kliment Ohridski”. Sofia University “St Kliment Ohridski” is the major, the biggest and the oldest university in Bulgaria with a mission of setting up high standards of quality of higher education in its three levels. It is a comprehensive university with 16 faculties with a total of around 24,000 students and 1700 academic staff. Despite the fact that there has been experience in various forms of remote teaching and use of educational platforms, these modes of teaching were predominantly used as supplementary forms for students and teachers. The

shift to online teaching required significant technical capacity, provision of support and trainings for teachers, upgrade of the capacities of the existing platforms and shift in the mindset of teaching staff related to the potential and effectiveness of this mode of conducting the educational process.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced all teaching and learning to migrate to the online environment at all faculties of the university and since the first lockdown in February 2020 this is practically the dominant mode. Although many teachers had been involved in designing distance-education courses, in practice the different faculties were not prepared equally well in terms of digitalized learning resources, teachers' pedagogical and technical skills or in terms of access to suitable hardware or specialised software. At the institutional level efforts were made to bridge this gap by organising online training courses in the use of learning technologies and their classroom application for academics. In fact, since February 2020 to this day (January 2022) the University has remained unusually empty with strict social distancing imposed during the very short periods of studying face-to-face at the beginning of academic years 2020 – 2021 and 2021 – 2022. During this time both teachers and students participate in classes from their homes.

Perceptions and attitudes to remote online teaching and learning

To a large extent the implementation of the task to migrate to online teaching for a longer period of time (one semester or a whole academic year) depended on the attitudes of various groups of academic staff. Surveying these subjective aspects was of specific research interest with a view of describing major discourses related to online teaching both at institutional level (students and teachers). The introduction of a comparative cross-university perspective in different national and educational contexts is also of significance in rethinking of the visions for internationalization.

According to an independent study carried out in the summer of 2021 among students and teachers from the Faculty of Philosophy⁸⁾, the technological limitations of online learning prove to be a fundamental obstacle to the adequate and effective conduct of training sessions, both according to faculty and students. The survey analysis outlines several basic differences between the first academic year affected by the pandemic starting from the second semester of 2019/2020 and the situation during the next academic year including the first semester of the academic year 2021/2022. The main challenge in the first period was the swift and unexpected shift to entirely online teaching. The main focus at institutional level was provision of support for conducting the remote teaching process related to ensuring technical capacities of the platforms, providing support for the academic staff, ensuring the access of students. The expectation was that this is a temporary situation and the task is to manage the educational process for a limited period of time until everything goes back to normal. The situation in the following academic years influenced the general attitudes of

academic staff and students and it became clearer that this was not going to be a limited temporary solution of managing the education process during the pandemic, but that there were more indications that this was going to become a dominant, if not a major part of the educational process. Significant new aspects of the impact of the pandemic came to the fore as for example, the lack of any face-to-face contact with the students throughout the whole period of teaching a specific course and the effects on students' motivation and quality of education as a whole⁸⁾. There is decline in motivation on both sides and rising levels of stress and fatigue of continuous virtual communication despite the fact that both teachers and students acknowledge that the distance mode is more flexible and accessible space and time-wise.

A survey conducted among students and academic staff at Sofia University using Q-methodology⁹⁾ identified three major discourses dominant among student population and similarly among academic staff. One of them can be defined as traditionalist discourse. The students sharing this discourse consider online learning far less effective than traditional learning in a face-to-face mode. This attitude refers to almost all aspects of the educational process – teaching, interactivity, communication with the teacher, assessment, interest stimulation, etc. They think that online learning leads to passivity and lack of attention and are particularly concerned about a lack of contact and interaction with teachers and other students. It also creates physical and psychological problems for the learners (muscular pain, eyestrain, a feeling of isolation, boredom). Features such as potential for distraction, conditioning passivity and lack of concentration characterise this discourse. Students are not happy with mixing family life with studies. The strongest reactions in this discourse regard the quality of teacher-student communication and communication with other students and the effectiveness of an online learning process. Relationships are considered to be much worse than those in face-to-face mode because there is no discussion and dialogue. In addition, much less can be done and achieved online compared to the physical classroom. This discourse is also marked by distrust in the objectivity of assessment when done online.

At the same time an equally represented discourse is that of the practical enthusiasts about online teaching and learning. This discourse suggests considerable enthusiasm for online learning as something normal, and does not agree that it creates a sense of isolation. It particularly values the practical advantages of online learning – convenience of access, relatively low cost, abundance of quality web-based learning materials and the removal of time and space constraints and stress. An important aspect of this involves support for slower learners and the opportunities for frequent contact between teachers and students, although this does not establish better relationships. It is quite relaxed about teacher competence in the context of online learning, but does have concerns about practical aspects of using the internet. The opportunity to access a course and to communicate with teachers and other students regardless of physical space/distance and not having to spend time travelling are also characteristic of this discourse. However, this convenience

of access is not correlated to other aspects of the teaching and learning process. This discourse is not associated with a feeling of loneliness and isolation nor with a need for efforts in getting organised for learning online (time-management and self-directed learning). However, there is a certain level of being negative towards teachers' skills to conduct online lessons and a concern about possible failures in the quality due to deficiencies of the internet infrastructure.

A third discourse is relatively relaxed about online learning, seeing a number of practical advantages – mostly related to convenience in terms of space and time and the removal of stress. It has no particular difficulty about having to adapt to different online tools and platforms, online assessment or teacher competence. It does regret the absence of informal contact and sees it as beneficial to acquiring new knowledge and skills. Engaging in discussions online is not seen as difficult and providing feedback online is deemed beneficial for learners. It is necessary to provide recordings to secure the availability of teaching material regardless of the potential difficulties with learning in a synchronous mode. The greatest concern is related to practical issues and in particular to the lack of equal access because of cost and internet failures. This discourse considers that the type of digital tools used to teach online affect the quality of the process and that online teaching exacerbates the digital divide. Hence, support on part of the educational institutions including financial support is highlighted as a critical prerequisite for migration to online education in general and in the specific circumstances of the pandemic.

Students Mobility amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

With the continuation of the pandemic research has emerged from countries around the world documenting the effect of COVID-19 on global mobility flows. Although there is not yet sufficient data concerning the official international student enrolment numbers, there is evidence that international student enrolment in most leading host countries for the 2020/2021 academic year declined. However, the drop is not that significant as anticipated.

Interest in a stay abroad within Europe remains as strong as ever. Both the University and students have adapted to the extremely challenging situation. However, we are also very aware of the fact that health and safety must be top priorities of the Erasmus+ programme and there has been precaution in recommendations to travel to any high risk area. Short-term exchange students number decreased markedly with some programmes postponed or cancelled or short-term exchange students opted not to travel or have in-person study programme abroad. Travel restrictions and public health policies related to quarantine periods additionally rendered the opportunity for exchange abroad impractical. For example, the ERASMUS program that facilitates exchange between countries in the European Union found that more than half of ERASMUS students remained at home due to border closures or because institutions had moved all courses to a virtual environment – EAIE 2021.

There is no doubt that mobility will remain a cornerstone of internationalisation, and new models will evolve in the current pandemic situation such as virtual mobility, students exchanges combining online and face-to-face attendance. But universities must go beyond mobility to make internationalisation of higher education benefit a wider audience, particularly in the current situation. There are several directions of reflection on the overcoming of the current challenge of higher education internationalization. *Firstly*, there is the need of more focused support for online and distance learning as a dominant form of education in a number of institutions due to the pandemic situation. This support is related to better engaging academic staff and students in more dynamic forms of teaching and learning, which can overcome the inevitable drop in motivation and students' engagement. The uncertainty around enrolment, mode of learning, and all other logistical aspects of a students' academic study created stress and anxiety for many students. Therefore, it has become part of the universities responsibility to provide mental health and wellness support for their students. For example, providing even a small amount of in-person study positively affects students' satisfaction with their learning experience.

Secondly, more emphasis in the general understanding of internationalization of higher education has to be put on internationalization of curriculum and on more international focus in degree programmes. There is experience and good practices in the process of internationalization of curriculum at Sofia University. Let me refer to broadening and deepening of the multilateral cooperation among the universities of the world teaching and conducting research on a wide scope of foreign languages and cultures. Sofia University is the most renown and internationally recognised educational, research and cultural centre in Bulgaria. Our Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology has 22 bachelor programmes teaching more than 50 foreign languages. In addition, our Faculty of Slavic Philology has programmes teaching more than 10 Slavic languages and languages of the Balkans. This makes Sofia University central in promoting foreign language teaching and more generally foreign studies in Bulgaria on the one hand, and instrumental in promoting international cooperation with other universities, public institutions, diplomatic missions and cultural institutions from all over the world, on the other.

Internationalization of curriculum

Internationalization of the curriculum is the incorporation of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study. It signals an inclusive teaching and learning, which goes beyond mobility and international exchange programmes. There could be some confusion, for example, in the statements that claim mobility programmes as evidence of internationalization of the curriculum. Mobility programs are a means by which students *might* develop desired international and intercultural perspectives¹⁰.

Identification of ‘international’ competencies for all, for example, as part of the process of internationalization of curriculum is related to improving the learning outcomes of students. Therefore, international collaboration is needed in the design of programmes and courses and the process of incorporation of international, intercultural and global dimensions in the content of the curriculum. We believe that it is through staff and student engagement in an internationalized curriculum that the internationalization agenda of universities connects with students. The participation in European and international networks is a significant aspect of our vision for further internationalization. Among these a primary focus is laid on the European Universities Initiative of the European Commission and our participation in the Transfor4Europe Alliance of seven European universities committed to attain an enhanced level of cooperation in all aspects of academic life. EU policy and funding support remains essential within the European Union and in other regions too. In a series of seminars organized by Sofia University on digitalization and education in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic academic staff and university leaderships exchanges views on practices and innovative solutions in higher education with a special focus on countries in Central Asia thus opening a path to enhancing cooperation and better utilization of existing opportunities under various educational programmes. In general. It has been agreed that mobility as part of an inter-institutional partnership will have great institutional impact, but there is the need of a more comprehensive strategic approach.

Conclusion

Universities have duty to collaborate on global challenges and mutual understanding of peoples and countries is among them. COVID-19 has added to a long list of severely disruptive global challenges, like climate change, social inequality, etc. *the threat to international collaboration and exchange*. The pandemic has also served as a test of sustainability of internationalization strategies of higher education institutions. Through this test, we now understand the effort needed to overcome threats of this magnitude and we have proven that even closer collaboration will be needed to overcome future challenges. The mission for universities to remain connected is, even in the pandemic situation, a priority. Universities should not leave behind their aim to deepen their engagement with the world and to cultivate innovative talents who possess global competence.

NOTES

1. The Communication on the Renewed EU Agenda for Higher education in 2017. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017DC0247&from=DA>

2. The European Semester is a cycle of economic and fiscal policy coordination within the EU. It is part of the European Union's economic governance framework. Its focus is on the 6-month period from the beginning of each year, hence its name – the 'semester'. During the European Semester the member states align their budgetary and economic policies with the objectives and rules agreed at the EU level.
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