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Challenges and Opportunities in the International Higher Education “Post-Pandemic” Landscape

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International education is a vast field of scholarship and practice. Internationalization of higher education (IHE) has been contested, debated, deconstructed, and reconstructed. While some have discussed the end of internationalization (Brandenburg & De Wit, 2011), others have discussed reimagining or rebuilding this field of practice (Stein, 2021). Since the post-World War II era, the international education sector has faced many challenges including the Cold War, 9/11 and its responses, the election of Donald Trump, and Brexit, but perhaps nothing compares to COVID-19. The pandemic has severely impacted the core of the internationalization of higher education – human mobility. CISN reached out to three IHE scholars and leading practitioners in the USA and Canada to learn about their visions for the future of IHE in the “post-pandemic” landscape. We encourage readers to send us their comments about their own responses to the following questions and their thoughts on the responses from Dr. Sonja Knutson, Dr. Harvey Charles, and Dr. Adel El Zaïm outlined here.

CISN: What are some challenges and opportunities you see for IHE in the post-pandemic landscape?

Dr. Harvey Charles: The challenges that currently face international higher education are not generally unknown. The economic devastation unleashed by the pandemic has impacted institutional budgets to varying degrees, but few have escaped unscathed. Colleges and universities in many industrialized countries have benefitted from partial government relief in one form or the other, but the same has not been true for the overwhelming majority of institutions in the developing world serving the overwhelming majority of post-secondary students. Enrollment declines have also led to the closing of colleges, the cessation of programs of study and even reductions in faculty positions and salaries as well as student stipends (where applicable). The pandemic has also created economic havoc in the lives of millions of families across the world, impacting the ability of students to afford tuition fees and related expenses. These challenges have been compounded by new modalities for teaching and learning and new paradigms for post-secondary education that will accelerate and prove incredibly disruptive in the post-pandemic landscape. Every passing day makes more remote the possibility that IHE will ever return to the status quo pre-pandemic.

The pandemic has been so disruptive, that it has provided an opening for institutions to seriously grapple with more fundamental questions about their future and their identity. Whether

recognized or not, this is an opportunity for institutions to determine how best to retool, redefine, and reassert themselves in the new era going forward. The issue of academic quality will become an even more pressing issue going forward as institutions struggle to meet high academic standards with fewer resources. Another opportunity comes in the form of what the unmistakable narrative of the pandemic has helped us to recognize, that being the fragility of the human experience, how tightly our fates are bound as humans, and the global context within which our lives are lived. These realities, although not new, offer a prescient reminder of how necessary it is to center global perspectives in the strategic outlook that institutions adopt, and how critical it is to prepare not merely competent graduates, but globally competent graduates. We are in the midst of a fundamental shift in human history. Institutions that do not acknowledge and adjust to this transition in terms of the programs of study they offer, the research agenda they pursue, and the preparation that they offer students are guaranteed a fairly swift demise.

Dr. Sonja Knutson: I am not yet able to envision IHE post-pandemic simply because the pandemic remains an ongoing factor in IHE, and we continue to struggle to support students. The pandemic is limiting our students from traveling due to variant concerns, impacting students' ability to access campus due to vaccination regimes, and generally leading to greater costs to international students to enroll in foreign institutions. The ongoing uncertainty has effects on student anxiety levels as well as their overall ability to finance their studies. Opportunities for IHE are going to centre around institutional ability to pivot as needed to support their students, regardless of where the students live.

My concern is that remote learning is seen as "second best" both by students and by institutions. There was a rush to get back to normal in September for the majority of course offerings. This is understandable, but while in person classes are now the "norm" again, the lack of ongoing remote course offerings disadvantage students who are stranded in their home countries due to the continued impacts of the pandemic. In order to support all our students equitably, remote offerings need to continue for the foreseeable future.

Dr. Adel El Zaïm: The backlash of commercial globalization, the lack of trust in science and in politicians, added to the pandemic and to the rise of nationalism in some countries created a wave of doubt about the benefits of IHE. Higher education institutions and specialists need now to prove again the relevance and the positive impacts of internationalization by being intentional and serious about internationalization at home and internationalization of the campus and of research. By doing so, we will then touch 100% of our students and not only those who can afford to travel.

CISN: *How do you reconcile between the push for increased student mobility and the climate crisis?*

Dr. Harvey Charles: There has never been a time that climate change has deserved our attention and concerted efforts to address more than now. Indeed, it is now clear to most scientists, policy makers, educators and even high school students that confronting and seeking to resolve climate change is not an option but rather an imperative. The academy has a special responsibility in this regard, because it can shape and/or influence the attitudes of students towards this, the most consequential issue of our times. In fact, climate change, as a manifestation of one of globalization's impacts on the academy demands that the internationalization agenda (internationalization as higher education's response to globalization) reflect as robust a response to this existential threat to human existence. But does engaging with climate change imply a zero

sum game? Does it mean that the work of the academy that involves research collaboration, building new facilities, heating and cooling our places of work and study, publishing new books, and engaging with stakeholders near and far is incompatible with good faith efforts to mitigate climate change? Does it mean that a virtual environment is the only context in which higher education can perform if it is to be true to the ideals of sustainability?

The one institution that has stood in the vanguard of pursuing truth, innovation and discovery, and indeed, of understanding the factors that are driving us to the brink in terms of climate change has been the academy. And the academy delivers only when the best and the brightest minds gather from all corners of the globe to collaborate in defining the problems that confront humankind, and investigate ways to solve these problems. This process, necessitating pilgrimages centuries ago, has changed only in the sense that we now know a lot more, and new technologies facilitate quicker forms of communication and transportation. But the heart of this process (the coming together of the best possible minds) continues to constitute a fundamental approach to science and discovery, be it in understanding the processes that unleash devastating earthquakes, or in researching and finding cures for COVID-19 that continues to destroy economies, livelihoods and lives. Even when student mobility is undertaken to extend cross-cultural understanding, this is not a junket, but rather part of the brief of what it means to educate the next generation of professionals and citizens. To compromise the singular work of the academy in the name of climate change would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater and arguably set back the project of human advancement much more than climate change could. Climate change abatement and increased student mobility are not necessarily at cross purposes, especially if there is an active commitment to understand and overcome it, both as a global challenge and in terms of practices that institutions adopt internally. Understood in its highest sense, student mobility may actually aid in climate change abatement.

Dr. Sonja Knutson: My sense is that more education about the climate crisis and IHE is needed overall. All our programming should be aimed at mitigating and not aggravating the climate crisis. This doesn't mean "cancelling" student mobility programs, but it does mean understanding how travel to a new location impacts the climate and balancing that with the positive impacts of learning abroad experiences.

What is the impact of a student undertaking a learning abroad experience? Do such experiences help students commit more deeply to global issues, and if not, should that be the goal? To me, these and other questions need to be addressed not only at the global level, but also at the institutional level – to ensure what we do tallies with our institutional values.

Dr. Adel El Zaïm: Traveling for study or for acquiring new knowledge and culture is not a new phenomenon. For centuries, Humans traveled around the world and they will resume traveling as soon as possible. The responsibility of higher education is, on one side, to do more research and accelerate innovations that aim at mitigating risks and impacts of the climate crisis. On the other side, education on climate change and sustainable development, in general, is key. IHE might be the ultimate opportunity to educate more students and more decision-makers about the interdependency of human society and the need for more solidarity among countries and communities.

CISN: During the pandemic, many social injustice issues have resurfaced. From your position, what are some of the tensions you are navigating when talking about social justice given your positionalities and the places you occupy?

Dr. Harvey Charles: Negotiating issues of social justice is often fraught. It is further complicated by issues of power, privilege, class, race, educational status and sexuality, among other factors. I am a tenured full professor teaching undergraduate and graduate students, many of whom are first generation college students coming from financially stressed backgrounds. It would not be surprising, however, if some of my students were to question my ability to understand the circumstances from which they come and the challenges they face as they try to juggle jobs, family commitments, assignments and exams, given the job security and relative comfort I enjoy as an academic.

As a seasoned international educator, a tenured professor, an international education consultant, a board member on academic journals and organizations, a mentor to many younger professionals, and a scholar, some of my colleagues may think that I am perfectly positioned and have it made. And yet, as an African American, I question my ability to be credible to white audiences when addressing issues of social justice and anti-racism. In fact, just inhabiting black skin makes me suspect, certainly outside the confines of the academy, but sometimes, even within. My broad and deep experience as an international educator is matched by few within the field, yet there are times when I have wondered about the extent to which my racial status has been held against me as I have competed, unsuccessfully, for positions for which I was eminently qualified.

The quest to advance social justice in the communities in which we live and the policies that touch and shape our lives is never ending. To retreat from this work is not an option, yet, it is tiring, unforgiving, sometimes depressing and disillusioning. However, it is also necessary, because it is all we have at our disposal to more favorably impact our quality of life and even our survival, and it is the only way we can leave the world a better place for our children.

Dr. Sonja Knutson: Throughout the pandemic I've held a full salaried job, been able to easily work from home or the office, and not suffered any major disruptions to my normal life. So I am in a privileged position, yet often asked (by government, community stakeholders, media, and my own institution) to articulate the issues of students. I am very reluctant to speak on behalf of equity-deserving populations, and it is tough to navigate that balance of advocacy without "speaking for".

I have worked to develop a diverse office that includes student staff from diverse backgrounds and to empower their voices, through encouraging their participation in discussions, workshops, and media events and publications. Our community needs to hear the voices of those impacted by social justice issues, and while I may be able to draw attention to an issue, it shouldn't be me that shares the stories. It is definitely challenging to navigate the balance as there are some tables where these voices are not yet welcome, but we continue to push for change, leveraging allies and grounding our work in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion values.

Dr. Adel El Zaïm: Members of the senior leadership of a university are in the first row to witness tensions that impact the whole institution. Being proactive about equity, diversity, and inclusion in all aspects of academic life is probably the most serious issue. Pushing for and supporting education that builds professional, human, and social competencies, and skills is not

an easy task. Higher education institutions need also to seriously examine to what extent they are really training students to acquire critical thinking skills and to develop a science culture.

CISN: *During the pandemic, other means of international engagement, like virtual exchange, have emerged as viable options for students. How do you see these options being integrated into standard international program offerings at your institution?*

Dr. Harvey Charles: Virtual exchange and collaborative online international learning (COIL) are two options that have now found a seemingly permanent home among international program offerings. They have effectively extended opportunities for international engagement. While COIL had a fledgling life prior to the pandemic, virtual exchange was virtually unheard of in a situation where in-person exchange was uninhibited. Might more faculty elect to collaborate with colleagues around the world through COIL initiatives to enrich the learning of students and expand internationalization at home opportunities? Will education abroad advisers succeed at engaging students in virtual research abroad or virtual study abroad who might otherwise never consider leaving home? Some campuses will see these virtual strategies as a replacement for conventional programs that have been ended due to budget cuts. Others will drop these programs and pivot back to pre-pandemic practice. Others still will continue these virtual strategies alongside the more conventional programs as a way to give students more options and expand levels of participation. Whatever path an institution chooses, what ultimately matters is that every effort is made to prepare globally competent graduates. The pandemic has taken us over a threshold from which there is no return. The paradigm of the future we now inhabit is global, and students must be prepared to meet its challenges and opportunities.

Dr. Sonja Knutson: Virtual international engagement, including virtual exchange, has been a priority for our office for many years, and when the pandemic first began we were very pleased that it suddenly became more globally acceptable. However, since we pivoted away from remote learning in the Fall, we are back to struggling with virtual exchanges. We simply don't have the courses available now to attract students to virtual exchange, and neither do our partners. That optimism we had about normalizing virtual engagement already feels like a blip, even though we are far from out of the pandemic.

It did surprise me how quickly we closed down remote learning and focused on in-person teaching and learning again. I would like to see remote learning more generally offered again. I should say that what I mean by remote learning is synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for students to meet each other regularly over a technological platform, build relationships, and truly engage in an exchange experience. Of course, for this to work with our bilateral partnerships with overseas institutions, they would need to offer the same opportunities. At this time, I don't see the virtual options being integrated in standard international program offerings, but I hope I am wrong and that course offerings become more flexible in delivery choice again.

Dr. Adel El Zaïm: At the beginning of the pandemic, IHE specialists entered into a debate about the "new normal" and what it will look like. Two years later, we still do not know what and how exactly we will be teaching. Obviously, we have invested a tremendous amount of effort, resources and we learned a lot about virtual exchange, distance learning, mixed teaching modalities. In my humble opinion, higher education will witness more and more developments and innovations in the months and years to come. We will probably see more new modalities and new players from emerging countries and institutions who will be agile enough to offer new solutions and opportunities. While some western universities are closing their campuses abroad,

other countries are becoming regional hubs for international education in the global south. This is very encouraging. The international research collaboration will be more visible and higher education institutions and research funders will support it despite the International lack of trust vis-à-vis China and other countries that hinders science collaboration and knowledge sharing.

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEES

Dr. Harvey Charles is Professor of International Education in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership at the University of Albany. He has served as the Chief International Officer at a number of universities across the United States, including, most recently, at the University of Albany where he was the Dean for International Education and Vice Provost for Global Strategy.

Dr. Sonja Knutson is the Director and Senior International Officer of Memorial University of Newfoundland. As an internationalization and student affairs professional and scholar, she currently has a complex university-wide mandate to implement the Strategic Internationalization Plan (SIP) 2020 at Memorial University. She is also an acting director of the writing centre and an adjunct professor of education at Memorial.

Dr. Abdel El Zaïm is the Vice-Rector for Research, Creation, Partnerships, and Internationalization at the Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO). In this role, he is responsible for the development and implementation of institutional strategic orientations concerning research and internationalization as well as the development and maintenance of partnerships.
