

# The pandemic has shown us the imperative for global engagement in higher education

Global pandemics require global responses – that’s why producing globally competent graduates should be central to universities’ missions, say Harvey Charles and Darla Deardorff

May 29, 2020

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There is a great deal of talk about the extent to which online education may transform the post-pandemic academy. But a preoccupation with the virtues or the perils of online education as the dominant pedagogical approach in tertiary education is in essence a concern with *how* higher education should be delivered.

This obscures a more fundamental and therefore a more consequential concern, which is *what* higher education delivers to prepare our graduates to live and succeed in a

globalised world where there may be shorter intervals between pandemics and where the threats to human survival from other global challenges continue to proliferate.

The savagery of this pandemic is probably the most tangible case study in recent memory of how deeply institutionalised globalisation has become in our 21st-century lives.

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Globalisation is the most dominant force impacting human experience, touching every nation, industry and institution, including higher education. But there are other global challenges beyond the pandemic that are being accelerated by globalisation; climate change, food insecurity, economic inequality and civil wars are major threats to human civilisation as we know it.

In fact, we have a comprehensive catalogue of these challenges, enshrined in the pronouncements of the National Academy of Engineering's Grand Challenges, the National Science Foundation's Ten Big Ideas and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

More than just being global in nature, these challenges can only be resolved with global effort. The academy is the only societal institution with the breadth of intellectual resources that can be strategically marshalled to address these global challenges. Yet the kind of intentional and broad-based institutional response to match the urgency and immediacy of these challenges simply does not exist.

Interestingly, the framework for an institutional response, articulated in terms of internationalisation, provides us with a pathway that can enable colleges and universities to make global learning a key organising principle of the university.

Internationalisation, as defined by Hans de Wit, director of the Center for International Higher Education at [Boston College](#), is "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society".

Furthermore, the curriculum, the co-curriculum and learning outcomes constitute one of the six pillars of comprehensive internationalisation discussed by the American Council on Education. And herein lies the key to moving forward in the post-pandemic academy: higher education must place global learning at the core of the academic enterprise.

Moving the academy in this direction requires that global learning become an organising principle for teaching, research and learning. Too many college administrators believe that student mobility (study abroad and international student enrolment) is the only and fullest extent of internationalisation.

But internationalisation goes much further than this and requires, for starters, that colleges and universities make a fundamental commitment, articulated in their mission and vision statements, to prepare graduates to be globally competent.

It requires that the academy be intentional about teaching courses from a global perspective, a position endorsed by an increasing number of accreditation agencies. It requires that faculty be empowered, through international teaching and research opportunities, and especially through a reward structure, to be effective in this work with students and in their scholarship.

Strategic relationships with institutions around the world need to be pursued to support deeper internationalisation within the home institution. And experienced institutional leaders need to be invited to coordinate, sustain and advance the internationalisation agenda on campus, a worthwhile investment even in a time of economic scarcity. Internationalisation matters to such an extent that it is part of the criteria used to determine the global rankings of universities.

Among the few instances where institutions make global learning an organising principle is [Worcester Polytechnic Institute](#) and its project-based learning initiative. All students participate in research projects where they apply the principles they learn in the classroom to real-life problems in communities, mostly abroad. By collaborating with community partners and their faculty advisers, students are able to sharpen their problem-solving and cross-cultural skills, and become more sensitive to the challenges that confront humanity.

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Another example is the international engineering programme at the [University of Rhode Island](#) where experiences including study abroad, internship abroad and second language study are strategically packaged for engineering majors to acquire real-world problem-solving skills in cross-cultural settings. Other universities such as [Northern Arizona University](#), [Georgia Institute of Technology](#) and the University at Albany, SUNY use a variant of this model to achieve similar objectives.

Although the models may vary, there must be an institutional commitment to facilitate for students, multiple, substantive and intentional encounters with global perspectives. Students must be socialised to leverage their classroom experiences in solving real problems in communities around the world. These principles can radically transform how the academy is organised and can help prepare our students with global-ready skills and knowledge.

Ultimately, there are no enclaves that can protect us from the ravages of global threats to human survival and there is no chance of total self-sufficiency in a globalised world.

It is only in our collective strength and vision of a shared global future that we can face and overcome the grand global challenges that now confront us.

The universalisation of online education may save us money in the short term, but it is only in a deeper embrace of internationalisation, and the adoption of global learning as a central organising principle of the academy, that the academy can extract the central lesson of this global scourge that has stolen lives and livelihoods – we ignore the global challenges facing humanity at our peril.

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