



How the pandemic changed outbound US student mobility

By Anna Esaki-Smith

Short-term factors

According to UNESCO, the total number of globally mobile international students exceeded 6.1 million in 2019 before the outbreak of the pandemic and had grown significantly in the prior decade. By December 2019 the experiences of outbound students began to be disrupted. While some students were already in-country when the pandemic broke, others had not arrived and either abandoned their plans, delayed their studies, or took advantage of remote learning opportunities. While domestic and continuing students were more likely to remain on their programmes, new and short-term international students were generally more severely affected. Even now, some short-term exchange programmes remain on hold.

Much has been written about the ways in which institutions responded to the pandemic and their efforts to continue to deliver teaching and learning despite travel restrictions and lockdowns. Most HEIs around the world attempted to shift to virtual or hybrid models of instruction. Institutions were also required to reorganise resources to cater for the emotional and financial impacts on students.

Most destinations saw significant falls in their numbers of US enrolments as the pandemic disrupted academic life: in 2019-20, US enrolments in Asia fell by 64 per cent, by 51 per cent in Europe, by 55 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean and by 60 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa. In China, US enrolments fell by 79 per cent, in India by 48 per cent and in Japan by 62 per cent.

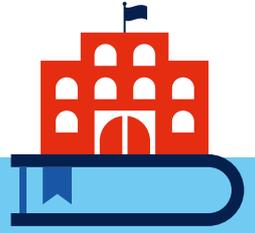
Europe continued to attract the largest share of outbound US students enrolling on credit-bearing programmes. In 2019-20, 94,230 US students studied in Europe, accounting for 58 per cent of all US study abroad. Europe also hosted the largest number of US students pursuing full degrees abroad, with more than 30,000 students in either Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia, Spain, Sweden, or the United Kingdom in 2019-20.

Long-term considerations

Some study providers closed operations permanently, others lack appeal due to a dearth of robust health care facilities or low COVID-19 vaccination rates. The shifting nature of the virus means travel restrictions and lockdowns are still in place in some countries, such as China. Most institutions now offer teaching in hybrid modes, but students are concerned about quality and value for money.

Much has been written about the ways in which teaching, and learning was adapted so that it could be delivered digitally during the pandemic. More than 10,000 US students received academic credit for online global learning experiences in 2019-20.⁷⁵ Online learning has been devised for a wide variety of programme types including remote internships or consulting opportunities with global companies, collaborative project-based learning (such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)), and video conferencing. The digital transformation extends beyond teaching and learning, with most institutions implementing online procedures for entry applications, immigration documents and testing, and investing in smart campus solutions.

As restrictions on in-person study have been lifted, activities such as study abroad are expected to resume pre-pandemic levels. In summer 2021, 43 per cent of US institutions surveyed by the IIE reported study abroad cancellations, but only one per cent of institutions expect study abroad to be cancelled in spring 2023. Around 11 per cent of institutions surveyed reported that they had delayed confirming plans for spring 2023, while they wait to see how the COVID-19 pandemic evolves. Nearly a third of colleges and universities surveyed said they plan to offer online global learning in 2023, though in 2022-23, less than two per cent of institutions expected to offer international programmes that were only delivered in online format and the majority (83%) expected study abroad numbers to continue to recover in the 2022-23 academic year.



How the pandemic changed outbound US student mobility

By Anna Esaki-Smith

Pre-pandemic, concerted efforts were underway to diversify destinations, but when asked where institutions plan in-person study abroad in 2022-23, only four of the top fifteen planned programme destinations were outside Europe: in Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Costa Rica. Fewer than a quarter of the institutions surveyed expected to send students to China in 2022-23. Regional hubs will likely be boosted by the impact of the pandemic, providing destinations that are closer to home.

The pandemic revealed how vulnerable institutions are to global challenges and how important it is to be nimble, flexible, and ready for change. As well as the requirements of the digital transformation, the importance of other issues such as student support mechanisms for health and wellbeing, have become priorities.

Sources:
<https://www.iie.org/en/Why-IIE/Announcements/2021/11/US-Institutions-Top-Choice-for-Intl-Students#:~:text=The%20Open%20Doors%C2%AE%202021%20Report%20on%20International%20Educational,for%20academic%20study%20during%20the%202020%2F21%20academic%20year>
<https://opendoorsdata.org/open-doors-2021-annual-data-release/>

