PERSPECTIVES FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT:

The university internationalization process is, at the same time, necessary for survival in an increasingly competitive and globalized world and a tool for intercultural collaboration between different peoples. This process was largely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. It was then necessary to create and develop different strategies that could minimize such impacts. The biggest product from this effort was the virtualization of internationalization, which is democratizing and inclusive.

Keywords: Internationalization; Higher Education; Virtual Education; Pandemic; Coil.

I. THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF BRAZILIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The desire of a university to go international is, in fact, a question of survival. Internationalization is necessary so that the institution can compete on equal levels with the best national and foreign higher education institutions. This competition is one of the contradictory principles on which the internationalization of higher education is established, since on the one hand there is competition in a global market for education and knowledge, and on the other, a kind of international solidarity in which educational institutions collaborate with others in search of a common good, the development of their students and the opportunity for international experiences.

As paradoxical as this may seem, these contradictory principles can be seen working together, since the internationalization of education would have international cooperation as a tool that favors a more competitive standard of teaching, research, professional training, the learning process throughout life, in addition to enabling the development of countries and regions, since it represents an intention to create opportunities for the interrelation of cultures, activities, and knowledge.

In Brazil, the National Education Plan (PNE) from 2014 to 2024, in its article 214, presents guidelines, goals, and strategies to guide the development of educational policies. Within the scope of this Plan, internationalization is established in the “humanistic, scientific, cultural and technological promotion of the Country” and its execution is provided by the “establishment of a target for the application of public resources in education (...) that ensures meeting the need for expansion”. The PNE also guarantees the need to value education professionals through which the entire process is conducted.

Thus, there is, supported by the Brazilian government, the hope of support for the elaboration and execution of articulated actions in favor of the internationalization of Higher Education, since the guidelines proposed by the National Education Plan, as a whole, lead us to the understanding that it is not possible to design international cooperation projects, for instance, without at least, simultaneously, enabling the creation of mechanisms that corroborate the universalization of education and the construction of citizenship.

II. THE IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON INTERNATIONALIZATION

In Brazil, for the past months, students are at home, professors are at home, and classes are now either taught by videoconference or have been canceled. The Covid-19 pandemic imposed new realities and limits on traditional social contact in higher education, in Brazil and worldwide. In addition to the classes being affected, several services and organizations that have their lives linked to the student movement, such as libraries, university restaurants, stationers, bars, and street vendors, are at a standstill or have had a strong negative impact on their daily lives.

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It is in this context that the three traditional missions of higher education - teaching, research, and service - have undergone substantial changes. In Brazil, although some universities have chosen to follow their calendar with online courses, many of them completely stopped their activities, at least for a certain period.

Thus, as far as possible, teaching has migrated from classrooms to videoconferencing applications. The research closed their laboratories, projects were interrupted and, mainly in the Health and Biological Sciences field, many researchers and resources are now being used to act against the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, university service was severely hampered by the simple fact that it was unable to interact and carry out actions in communities linked to higher education institutions. With closed campuses and people in isolation, the interaction between students, professors, and the external public has become much more difficult, except for remote courses and events.

In addition to the three traditional missions of higher education, a fourth mission has emerged in national and international literature, the internationalization, has perhaps been the most affected scope of action in universities, at least immediately - and the one that was thought that would take the longest to recover and resume the intensity of levels before the Covid-19 pandemic. International flights have been reduced and even suspended, borders have been closed, partner universities abroad are also paralyzed, and international congresses, symposia, seminars, and fairs had to be canceled. Some mobility students, sandwich doctoral students, and fellow researchers/professors got “stuck” abroad. Although the return to classrooms in the short term seemed a distant reality, traveling thousands of kilometers, embarking on international flights, and holding scientific meetings with people from all over the world appeared to be even more distant realities.

In recent years, the internationalization of higher education has gained new impetus, being considered the “fourth mission of the university”. This process is entitled to courses, seminars, congresses, panels, lectures involving researchers of different nationalities, it represents exchanges of researchers and professors, it corroborates the establishment of agreements, as well as the opening of research centers, language studies, and participation in international networks or even publication of papers and books in co-authorship. One of its main components, however, is found in the so-called academic mobility, that is, the exchange of students at the most varied levels, from undergraduate to doctorate students.

Besides and specifically dealing with the outgoing modality, that is, Brazilian students or researchers who are or wish to go abroad, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought at least three more limiting factors. Firstly, although the dollar has global proportions, the Brazilian Real was the most devalued currency in February and March 2020, falling more than 15% concerning the US currency, with a devaluation to European currencies, such as the Euro and the British pound. Earlier this year, the global economic turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic led to massive investor selloffs, particularly of emerging market currencies, as investors sought safe-havens. As a result, the Brazilian real depreciated to all-time lows. The Central Bank of Brazil has been aggressive in its attempts to prop up the currency and stabilize the economy, with mixed results. Secondly, the cancellation of numerous flights and the destabilization of the airline industry represent another limitation of international mobility. And thirdly, the stoppage of government agencies responsible for issuing visas and passports also complicated these students’ lives.

Each in its way, the impact of the pandemic on the internationalization of higher education is already evident. The university is itself, a locus of socialization, coexistence, and integration. And this is revealed to be an area of great importance in the training of students and the professional performance of professors, civil servants, and administrative staff. In Covid-19 times, this reality is diametrically altered and remote and virtual meetings that started as palliative measures, have now become a new force and opened up a range of possibilities for our universities. The fact is that these opportunities existed before, we already had several examples of virtual initiatives, but for our reality, only the real need for the expansion of these virtual actions was the trigger for Brazilian institutions to notice the full potential of virtualization of internationalization. Gradually, teaching, research, and service have already been resuming, and internationalization will eventually follow the pace, in-person internationalization perhaps more slowly for the various reasons presented here.

III. NEW OPPORTUNITIES ARISE

We can proudly say that we are already reaping exceptional rewards from the new experiences provided and created during the pandemic. Whether with the creation of courses in partnership with global universities, using,
for instance, the COIL methodology - Collaborative Online International Learning; either through research projects and the preparation of papers and events together; or by improving institutional processes that are the result of an interaction between our departments and university departments around the world.

According to Suny Coil\(^1\), these types of collaboration are developed by bringing together professors from different institutions that enrich their courses with student interaction and collaborative learning. Professors work together to design and implement COIL Collaboration, allowing COIL to be customized to meet the needs of any class, in any discipline. It takes planning and attention, in order to benefit students, teachers, and institutions. The design of those projects often works out best when faculty balances the responsibility for and input into project frameworks. Collaborative learning works best when instructors co-develop courses and modules, and students co-create their own innovations for understanding the differences between regional perspectives. On the other hand, a major victory that I would like to emphasize here is the inclusion and the democratization of global education. Because with the virtualization of internationalization, it is possible to offer international opportunities to students who would never have the chance to participate in face-to-face mobility, due to several factors that are beside the point. It is, therefore, an extremely inclusive internationalization because that student who could never leave Brazil, through digital means, is now able to study anywhere in the world. This is a crucial moment to reinforce investments in research and international cooperation between higher education institutions so that we can seek solutions and lead our institutions in these volatile and uncertain times of the pandemic. We are now more open to the world than ever before. In the face of so many benefits of global online education, such as reduced costs, less bureaucratic processes, accessibility, and ease of sharing, I can say with certainty that this is a big bet for the upcoming year. This model, therefore, allows the development of super connected schools and, with them, a fertile scenario for the results to appear in the short term.

REFERENCES

5 https://coil.suny.edu/