

## Internationalisation 2021: The Perspective of the Director of International Relations at a Spanish University

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The RANEPA Department for International Development continues a series of conversations with leading international experts about the trends and prospects of international education, which began back in 2020. Larisa Taradina, RANEPA Director for International Education and Cooperation Development, says: "The world of international higher education is going through global changes right now, and it depends on us what it

will turn into. The experience and opinions of colleagues from universities in Europe and the USA are extremely important for developing our own path and making decisions that will influence the quality of education of our students."

Marina Casals, Director of International Relations at University of Rovira i Virgili (Universitat Rovira i Virgili), Spain, which is a member of the Alliance of Russian and Spanish universities, has shared her opinion on the situation in the internationalization of education exclusively for the RANEPA website.

### Assess what has been achieved and find mistakes

Let us think for a moment about whether we are taking this pandemic as a real opportunity or simply reacting and adapting to circumstances as best as we can.

It is true that the pandemic came as a tsunami and shattered all the carefully constructed strategic plans that we had conceived to internationalise our institutions. But after the initial shock and the clearing of the debris, it is now time to assess our new world and build upon it. We may still be in that assessment phase. There are plenty of webinars and articles that try to make sense of what has happened and where we stand. But the question remains: how can we move forward?

In my humble opinion, taking this pandemic as a real opportunity implies identifying where we have gone and are going wrong in internationalising higher education and conceiving innovative solutions to right those wrongs.

This being said, my suggestion is to look 'inward'. Internationalisation makes us look outward, towards the whole world, and at how our institution relates to all that is outside. And this is what we have focused on. But what about starting 'at home'? What about being truly inclusive and not working only for the few who are or can be mobile? What about transforming our institutions to become truly international from the inside out, and to become all-encompassing?

### Modern inclusive formats to replace old statistics

In the past, we had already identified and criticized extensively the fact that international education was often considered a synonym of mobility, or of the use of English for that matter, but somehow we keep on counting the number of students that we send abroad and receive or the number of courses that we offer in English, as if this alone shows how international we are.

If there is one thing that this pandemic has done well, it is to show us that we need to change, that mobility of students is not always possible and that we should finally think out of the box and find new ways: sustainable, inclusive and quality-driven new ways.

## **Initiatives for Change**

'Looking inward' is an invitation to transform our institutions from within. Comprehensive internationalisation has pointed in that direction for some time and many of us have held it as an ideal, but have we truly managed to implement a comprehensive approach to internationalisation or have we just gone on as usual?

I cannot claim to have the magical formula to do so, but there are some interesting initiatives that can provide tools to help us move in the right direction:

- SUCTI (Systemic University Change Towards Internationalisation) aims at empowering administrative staff by providing them, at home and in their own language, with knowledge and skills related to their university's internationalisation process. Administrative staff represent the backbone of universities, and if they are convinced of the importance and added value of internationalisation, they can become genuine change agents. <https://suctiproject.com/>

- SUCTIA (Systemic University Change Towards Internationalisation for Academia) is based on the SUCTI model but targets academic staff. Teachers and researchers are expected to internationalise their teaching and research activities but often lack the knowledge, skills and motivation to do so. SUCTIA gives them the tools to do this. <https://suctia.com/>

- EQUIIP (Educational Quality at Universities for Inclusive International Programmes) provides support for educational developers and lecturers aiming to ensure quality in international and intercultural classrooms in HEIs. It offers an integrated, flexible programme of continuing professional development modules, as well as an International Competence Profile for Educational Developers and a set of Recommendations. <https://equip.eu/>

- COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning), also referred to as globally networked learning or virtual exchange, is a teaching and learning methodology based on interaction and collaboration between two classes in two different countries that complete an activity together. This way, it promotes the development of intercultural and collaborative competences across shared multicultural learning environments, by connecting academics and students across borders, languages and disciplines, with the help of digital collaboration technology.

- Virtual Mobility refers to taking a class online, generally involving credit transfer. It is not collaborative in nature and it does not normally take into account the intercultural competences learning aspect. Nevertheless, there are surely some good practices in virtual mobility worth exploring and implementing.

## **Great chance to build something new**

In our COVID-world we are missing a lot of our former life. Let me go personal here: I am missing the human interaction, I am missing the coffees in the office, I am missing the birthday breakfasts with the team, and I am missing the traveling and the interaction with people from different cultures that I find so enriching. I am missing friends and colleagues from all over. I am missing our physical conferences, where apart from the interesting content sessions, you would share moments over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine talking about life; conversations that may lead to signing a collaboration agreement or getting a friend for life. We now have screens and interesting webinars and fun interactive formats, but I do miss the hand-shakes and the hugs, that can never be replaced by technology. In short, I am missing the human warmth. I have always said that international relations are mainly about human relations, and now, we have to get by with technological surrogates. Nevertheless, these are interesting times in which we are learning to be flexible and adaptive, times that have its good sides and challenging sides.

In these times of building on the wreckage, we have the chance to construct something new. So here is an idea: let us not go back to normal; let us at least try to go back to 'better'.