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CHAPTER 8

Internationalization of Higher Education in Argentina upon the Arrival of COVID-19: Reactions and Lessons from the Perspective of International Relations Office

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INTRODUCTION

The arrival of COVID-19 in early 2020 imposed a series of unprecedented challenges to higher education institutions around the world. Teaching and research had to be adapted to the new reality of social distancing and

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lockdowns. Although the adaptation was mostly successful and professionally managed, the administrative challenges caused by closed borders and semi-frozen economies posed countless demands to those systems highly dependent on international students. The interruption of face-to-face classes and flight cancellations paralyzed mobilities and stranded students, researchers, and professors away from home, often in situations of financial and emotional distress.

The concept of internationalization of higher education is not univocal and, as observed by Knight (1994), its purpose and meaning vary between institutions. However, in all cases, it encompasses a variety of activities, policies, and services aimed at incorporating an "intercultural and international dimension to teaching, research and the institution's services." To clarify even further these multiple purposes, Scott (1998) defines four main objectives: (1) student mobility between countries; (2) flux of professors and researchers between universities beyond their own geographical borders; (3) interinstitutional international collaboration; and (4) exchange of ideas that crisscross nations. Knight (1994) also highlighted the need for commitment, support, and involvement of the institution's top leadership as well as that from a substantial body of faculty and staff in order to further strengthen the international profile of an institution. Additionally, she underscored the need to have an international office suitably staffed to manage the internationalization efforts. This sector must rely on adequate financing in addition to internal and external support. Finally, she highlighted the role that communication and information exchange mechanisms play so that the whole university community is aware of the existing initiatives regarding internationalization.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze how universities in Argentina reacted to the pandemic and how the work done by the International Relations Offices (IROs) shifted in response to the restrictions in global mobility brought about by COVID-19. To capture this, we conducted a series of interviews with key actors at two public and two private universities. The objective was to assess how universities responded and adapted to the challenges. These conversations also analyzed whether changes imposed by the pandemic were conducive to accessing new markets. The institutions were selected under a purposive approach. To contrast theory and evidence, we used some principles that emerge from Resilience Theory (Pinheiro & Young, 2017; Van Breda, 2018; Duchek et al., 2020). In our

analysis model, the construct resilience was defined through four categories (collaboration and cooperation; innovation and creativity; adaptability and visibility; opportunities and evolution).

RESILIENCE: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Even in situations of presumed environmental stability, organizations are constantly exposed to pressures. Internally, diversity of preferences, behavior, and even conflicts of interests between co-workers make routines unstable and organizational goals difficult to achieve. Additionally, external constraints and turbulence resulting from political, technological, social, or economic factors, and even natural disasters that affect habits and behavior, require organizational flexibility and adaptability for survival (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008; Ployhart & Bliese, 2006; Burke et al., 2006). In such circumstances, a key objective is to find a way to transform these negative forces into new opportunities (Kantur & Isery-Say, 2015). Thus, institutions should be ready to constantly resolve conflicts, innovate, and adapt to the demands imposed by a new and changing context (Pulakos et al., 2000). In other words, organizations must respond resiliently to these challenges if they want to survive.

Resilience refers to an entity's capacity to adapt while also taking advantage of a chaotic environment to make adjustments that will enable growth and a positive evolution (Duchek et al., 2020). Universities are resilient institutions. Pinheiro and Young (2017) propose categorizing them as adaptive-resilient entities instead of strategic bodies, as the latter rely on a linear perspective in relation to the way in which they behave. A strategic actor, for example, values efficiency to maximize key assets, while the resilient one has at hand a certain slack of financial or human resources to better adapt to changes. While strategic universities seek to win all the battles they choose to fight, resilient ones look for a specific niche in order to excel.

Nonetheless, only some universities are always prepared to react resiliently. For the most part, these organizations seek to preserve their identities, and their adaptation to the changes imposed by the market or public agendas is slow. Therefore, they could be defined as cautious adaptive entities. This does not mean, however, that they reject change itself, but rather that they defend their own goals and values (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2013).

In order to better respond to an unexpected situation, Storms et al. (2019) focus on what they call "community resilience." This term

specifically refers to how well the university interacts with its surrounding community and its stakeholders in a situation where collaboration and cooperation are beneficial for the whole group; while "collaboration" refers to working together to create something new, the latter entails gathering for a common benefit (Power, 2016). In case of an emergency, community and alumni groups, and local and federal governmental authorities, can help to reduce or mitigate major injuries.

Innovation and creativity are key components of resilience processes, mainly in situations where an organization interacts in an environment that changes rapidly and unexpectedly. To adapt to these dynamics, the institution must be flexible and have the capacity to innovate. Flexibility implies to change in a natural and unforced way (Melin, 2010). To enable such a process, leaders must view their organizations not as rigid entities but as complex systems that are capable of creating and innovating (Lee, 2010). Thus, the institution learns and adapts to new market demands.

In the face of recurring impacts caused by unexpected or extreme events, such as a pandemic, it is desirable that organizations have an adaptation plan in place to strengthen them and minimize the damages caused by external circumstances (Comfort, 2002). We understand adaptation as "behaviors demonstrating the ability to cope with change and to transfer learning from one task to another as job demands vary" (Allworth & Hesketh, 1999, p. 98). Additionally, the objective is not only to return to certain normalcy in the accomplishment of tasks but also to reorganize to maintain the institution's structure (Boin & van Eeten, 2013).

Universities tend to be conservative organizations, not prone to change. Thus, they usually maintain their routines and rituals over time. Yet, such behavior is debilitating. Pushed by global forces, they must innovate not only in terms of their research and pedagogy but also in relation to their own organizational structures (Tierney & Lanford, 2016). However, the arrival of COVID-19 exposed them to utterly unforeseen circumstances, forcing them to be creative and adaptive. Technology, oftentimes underused, was fundamental for generating change. In fact, new models of access to higher education were experienced through remote online learning. In addition, innovative ways of interaction between an organization's human resources took place.

In the case of Argentine universities, for the most part, they adapted successfully. Because of effective management of their physical and human

resources, they managed to reduce their own vulnerabilities. Also, through changes in certain pedagogical paradigms, many of them found new opportunities to project and offer their services to new consumers.

The Role of International Relations Offices in Argentina

A university could be represented through its academic mission and by the values it embodies. In a way, this defines its strategy and organizational charts, as well as the resources allotted to each academic or administrative unit, aspects that also carry a symbolic value affecting their impact and influence in society. As a result of this heterogeneity, there is neither a single standardized nor a unique model with regard to the position within the organization, the functions, or the name of the sectors in charge of leading and managing university internationalization. However, at a global level, to date, all institutions that praise themselves for offering quality education have a specific area that is responsible for some or most internationalization activities. Even in a peripheral and not as internationalized a region as Latin America, 97.4% of university institutions have personnel dedicated to international collaborations (Massiona & Mejía, 2019).

Regardless of the name they are known by, the sector that is in charge of internationalization mostly deals with promoting and administering collaboration agreements for mobility, joint academic activities, and double degrees; coordinating and collaborating in the implementation of international cooperation initiatives; directing the institutions' international positioning and recruiting students from overseas; designing and administering the policies and tools to manage internationalization; representing the institution in university networks, international fairs, and with consular and academic authorities from other nations; and developing internationalization at home initiatives.

At large-scale public universities in Argentina, such as the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (UNC), or the Universidad Nacional de La Plata (ULAP), there are Secretariats for International Relations that coordinate the internationalization initiatives and contribute to the strengthening of the International Relations Offices (IROs) that function in each academic school. At private institutions, as well as in the smaller and medium-sized public universities, there is usually one single unit—with very varied names—in charge of the international efforts. In most cases, these sectors report directly to the Rector or

President; sometimes, their direct supervision comes from the Provost, or from an intermediate instance that is under the institution's main authority. While in private institutions the staffing positions are not fixed-term, at public universities these have a pre-established duration, often associated with the length of the Rector's mandate. Therefore, it is not unusual that these designations may be based on ideological or political affinity with the institution's leadership at the time rather than on technical knowledge and professional experience.

The teams that make up the IROs in Argentina, and throughout Latin America, are usually smaller than in countries that are highly internationalized. Indeed, 61.5% of the IROs in the region have teams composed of one to five persons (Massiona & Mejía, 2019). As a result, their professionals tend to have more generalist profiles. For instance, while in Argentina those who are in charge of these sectors are often also responsible for communications and marketing, in more recruitment-driven countries, these tasks often fall on specialists.

The economic crisis caused by COVID-19 significantly impacted institutions that are highly dependent on income generated by the export of educational services. This was mainly due to border closures and flight cancellations. The IROs were not immune to this shock. However, in Argentina, where the education system has a low dependency on international student fees, the National Government prohibited layoffs, and IRO teams were small, and the sector's layoffs and furloughs were relatively low. Indeed, there were very hardly any cases in which staff was fired or where voluntary retirement options were offered.

THE CONTEXT

The university system in Argentina has slightly over 2 million students (21% in the private sector) and 131 universities and university institutes (61 state-run, 64 privately owned, and 6 provincial ones). In relative terms, the non-public sector is small in comparison to others in the region such as Brazil, Chile, and Colombia, where more than 50% of students attend private institutions. Under the logic of a model of higher education where the public sector shows its supremacy, at least when it comes to the demand for post-secondary education, the degree of internationalization of higher education in Argentina over recent years has witnessed a considerable increase due to the presence of a growing number of international students. This inbound mobility has made the country a net exporter of

higher education services. However, it is worth noting that in relation to the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, which are among the largest players in terms of their capacity to attract non-local students, Argentina still has a long way to go. In 2018, almost 90,000 foreign students were enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. This number represents 4% of all enrollees, a percentage that is fairly aligned with the degree of internationalization found in the main systems of the region and the world. Most of the incoming international students are from the Americas (95%), and a very small portion from Europe (4%).

Methodological Aspects of the Analysis

The methodology selected for this study is fundamentally qualitative, characterized by a processual style, that is to say, for recording and analyzing sequences in view of capturing processes from an analytical perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The sources for data collection used are of a primary nature. In-depth interviews with the Directors of the International Relations Offices (DIRO) of four universities (two public and two private) were held to define the organizational and administrative strategies adopted to face the new reality brought by COVID-19.

Case selection was done on a non-probabilistic approach under the logic of purposive sampling, based on an analysis of all the private and public universities that make up the entire Argentine university system. The degree of internationalization of the chosen institutions in terms of the number of non-local students (high and low) as well as their geographic location—as representative as possible—was a key selection criterion. As a result, institutions considered to be highly internationalized were those with more than 500 international students, and those with less than that figure were categorized as low internationalization. The figures for each institution were obtained from the official statistics yearbook (SPU, 2018). The sample selection is also representative of different regions of the country: Metropolitan, Center, Buenos Aires Province, and New Cuyo.[1]

Finally, pseudonyms protect the confidentiality of the names of the participating institutions. Thus, those in the private sector take the reference PR (for private). This identifier is followed by its level of internationalization. The institution PRH refers to the private university with the highest internationalization, while PRL describes a private university with a low level of internationalization. Under the same logic, public universities are

denominated PU (for public). Therefore, PUH refers to a highly interna-
tionalized public institution and PUL represents a low internationalized
public university.

To assess the different strategies developed by the IRO in four universi-
ties in Argentina in face of the challenges brought about by COVID-19 in
early 2020, an adaptation of the model developed by Smit et al. (2008)
was used. It was adjusted so as to capture the capacity for resilience of
Argentine universities in the face of COVID-19.

In our model, the construct resilience was defined through four catego-
ries with their respective indicators:

1. Collaboration and cooperation (refers to the organizations' capacity
   to develop bonds with other IROs, the community, and the State)

   (a) Repatriation
   (b) Emotional support
   (c) Collaboration between IROs and the community
   (d) State support

2. Innovation and creativity (represents the skills displayed by human
   resources to adapt to new conditions/situations)

   (a) Institutional support given to the IRO
   (b) Transformation in the role of the IRO
   (c) Human resource adaptation to the contingencies caused by
       the pandemic

3. Adaptability and visibility (refers to changes in routines as a conse-
   quence of a greater use of technology in work processes)

   (a) Experience in remote management
   (b) Adaptation to remote work
   (c) More visibility of the sector as a result of the technologi-
       cal changes

4. Opportunities and evolution (indicates the University's capacity to
   take advantage of and generate opportunities for the future)

   (a) Regionalism, virtual mobilities, access to online resources, vir-
       tual collaborations, COIL, research
   (b) Access to new markets
   (c) Viability and sustainability of virtual exchanges

The Cases

Collaboration and Cooperation

In spite of the natural competition existing between organizations to lure new clients or to position themselves within certain market niches, collaboration and cooperation also take place through temporary or permanent strategic alliances. Therefore, on occasion, institutions align their behavior to achieve a certain goal that is beneficial for both parties (Gulati et al., 2012). While universities interact in a competitive market, initiatives fostering collaboration with other higher education institutions or state entities have expanded over time (Muijs & Rumyantseva, 2014) as a means of reducing the stress that could be produced by excessive individualism.

Argentine universities reacted swiftly to the pandemic to ensure the continuity of education, research, and knowledge transfer. This was no minor feat considering that the pandemic arrived only a few days after the academic year had started and that, for most of them, remote education was a novelty.

The need for transformation to guarantee the continuity of their operation resulted in an increase in cooperation between different areas within the institution. Additionally, understanding that the rules of the game had changed abruptly was also key. As explained by the Director of the International Relations Office (IRO) at the PUH:

> The area in charge of mobilities quickly understood the new dynamics. This was very positive. However, the sector in charge of cooperation, which has different operational times and works with other stakeholders, was slower to respond. Still, this sector eventually came to realize that they had to work more closely with their peers in charge of mobility.

As a result, these two units, which worked quite independently before the pandemic, started collaborating more, thus increasing their efficiency. Consequently, the emergency caused by an external shock factor, such as the pandemic, highlighted the benefits resulting from a collaborative approach. "One of the changes that were brought about by the pandemic is that the boundaries between these two sectors (cooperation and mobility) became more diffuse and collaboration grew stronger" (PUH). Similarly, the Director of the IRO at PRL noted: "I believe that the

pandemic pushed us to do it (to collaborate with other areas of the University) and brought us closer together."

Furthermore, collaboration and cooperation went well beyond the universities themselves. According to the IRO Director of PRH: "Indeed, a working group bringing together public and private universities in the province was created. These institutions worked side by side as never before." The different public entities also played a decisive role in the repatriation of international students who were in Argentina and domestic students who were overseas.

> for us, (the arrival of the pandemic) was a very strong shock … since students were already on their way (to Argentina), we could not tell them not to come. The academic year started but a few days later we had to suspend all classes. It was then that we made a joint decision with the Provincial Government, the Minister of Education, and the Governor, to keep the student residences open … a residence that became like a giant house with 700 students. (PRH)

The support provided by the different National and Provincial organizations was key for student repatriation, especially for those who had run out of financial resources, and those who could not come back to Argentina due to border closures.

> we had to work with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, of Education … of State Affairs, especially with Migrations, and also with the PIESCI [Program for the Internationalization of Higher Education and International Cooperation] which periodically checked on us to find out how our students were doing. PIESCI also decided … to authorize universities to reassign the 2020 funds that it had granted to some of them (so that they could help those students who were stranded overseas). (PUH)

There were neither preferences nor differences in terms of the support provided to public and private universities. Indeed, the IRO Director of PRH commented: "the truth is that we received outstanding support … both from the Provincial Ministry of Education, as well as from the Provincial Ministry of Health; their support was very significant in educative matters … and with regard to … health."

A key responsibility that IROs had to deal with, and in which State collaboration was fundamental, was repatriating students and providing emotional support.

Yes, (there was great support), especially with regards to repatriation. It was fundamental for us to work together, as a consolidated group, to maximize the institutional ties that each one of us had, and to ask PIESCI for specific mechanisms, letters, for example … Indeed, the database containing information on the students stranded overseas did not exist and we—as the Committee (composed by public universities throughout the country) promoted its creation (and access to all private and public universities in the Argentine higher education system). (PUH)

In agreement, the IRO Director at PRL explained, "I believe that we worked together to a great extent. The State organizations were concerned (and supportive); they offered training events, seminars, talks … There was also significant emotional support and accompaniment."

While public funding was used by some institutions for repatriating students, other universities financed these costs themselves. The IRO Director at PUL explained,

we managed to repatriate all of our students within the first few months, and in all cases with additional financial support to that which had already been assigned to the students. This was aimed at covering new or extra flight costs.

Innovation and Creativity

It is known that certain organizational features are necessary for the effective internationalization of a university. One of them is the need to have a special unit with skilled individuals (Knight, 1994) to organize and handle internationalization initiatives (Knight, 1994). IROs are integrated within the organizational structure and generally show autonomy to resolve complex situations. This freedom helped them to manage the pressures imposed by the pandemic.

According to the Provost of PRH, "the IRO has total and absolute autonomy. We fully trust the person who is in charge of the area." The Director of the IRO at PRL also highlights this trait: "in my case, I am very autonomous. Additionally, in general, I do not get a 'no' for an answer to the things I propose. Therefore, I consider that freedom to do as support." Along these lines, the IRO Director at PUH explains, "We have a lot of autonomy." She also stresses the significance of the support received and adds "whatever we asked for, we had without any impediments". She continues to explain that they also had direct communication

with the Minister of Transport to ensure that students would be able to get transfers or board flights. Similarly, the IRO Coordinator at PUH affirmed that:

> Within our budget, which we negotiate yearly, we have complete independence. We have a fluid dialogue with the International Relations Advisory Committee, in which each School is represented and to whom we bring the initiatives … There, evidently, there is a back and forth to improve them. This does not work against our independence but helps implementation.

The different roles taken on by the IROs in face of the pandemic led to a reflection on their possible transformation and the new functions they may take on. The Provost at PRH saw two possible scenarios that the IROs should be ready to work with:

> on the one hand, there could be nationalism, fear, for example, a trend for waiting for things to settle even further before traveling. Students who choose to complete a degree overseas are a minority and have always been more adventurous than traditional ones. That is how things used to be before the pandemic. On the other hand, the exact opposite may take place, meaning that we spent so much time inside, that now students may be more eager to go out to see what is on the other side.

The IRO Director at PRL warns, "I believe that the future of our field will be hybrid. We will continue having virtual exchanges and some in-person ones." The colleague at PUL agrees: "In my view, in-person mobilities will be resumed. I think that universities need to continue working as well on virtual exchanges. Additionally, they must carry on using the remote modality to continue the internationalization efforts." This professional also highlights the different transformations that took place in the role of the IRO during the pandemic:

> I mentioned this in two senses: a humanitarian one, having to do with support, with being connected to students in individual or group meetings where we could have in-depth conversations. Also, in relation to a sanitary role, due to how we created awareness in students, not only us, as we also worked with qualified professionals. Furthermore, we also had a more active role in the creation of the Virtual University Program and in the incorporation of new courses for which we worked side by side with the Academic Secretary and with all Schools. (PUL)

Similarly, the IRO Coordinator at PUH noted: "We saw an increase in the sensibilization towards everything international as a result the collaborations and mobilities would be done for good. As a result, we strongly supported those who had projects, mobilities, and specific activities." She also stressed the fact that new roles were assumed:

> We strengthened the training provided to the faculty. Indeed, when we had physical mobilities and [cooperation] projects as the two key main areas, we did not pay that much attention to faculty training. Now, we have a program that is focused on internationalizing the curriculum. (PUH)

The IRO Director at PUL stated something along the same lines: "Indeed they became broader because today, in any project, action, or activity, virtuality is included and new possibilities appeared, such as the opportunity to do remote courses in addition to the mobilities that we have always done, or faculty collaborations."

Argentina is a country with a low number of international students and, because of this, most IROs have small teams. According to the Provost at PRH, the IRO is staffed by just one person. What we did immediately was to provide support to her as the workload was overwhelming. We incorporated new people and reassigned others to collaborate with her …. Similarly, the Director at PRL commented that

> at the beginning of the pandemic I was the only one working at the IRO. Now I have a small team which I am training." For the IRO Director at PUL, whose team is formed by five people "in terms of the number of people [in the team], we are OK …., three in one campus and two on the other …; in our case, we did not incorporate any new personnel.

Likewise, the IRO Coordinator at PUH explained

> our staff size did not change. It is true that at some point some of them were idle. Their dedication changed. In the initial six months, everyone was there and it was very intensive, but there was a readaptation process in which tasks were not the same, many had diminished.

Adaptability and Visibility

Due to the full lockdown of universities, more than 2 million students in Argentina were left waiting for a decision as to how their studies would be

resumed. In some cases, the institutional response was immediate: a swift transformation to remote teaching and learning. Other universities took longer to recommence their activities due to the lack of connectivity at the university itself, insufficient access to the internet or devices by students and faculty, or a shortfall in faculty preparation for the new means of working. Before the pandemic, only 8% of all university students in Argentina were studying remotely.

Out of the four institutions studied, only PRL offered online learning prior to COVID-19. Indeed, more than 20% of their students followed this modality, a number that is higher than the national average (SPU, 2018). As a result, for three-quarters of the analyzed universities, the pandemic brought about an abrupt change in their routines. As expressed by the IRO Director of PUL:

> Well, initially the impact was like everywhere else, at the university as a whole. In our case, we did not offer remote teaching in any of our under-graduate or graduate programs. In 15 days, everything that used to be taught in-person was migrated to a virtual modality; all of our academic degrees, all of our courses. (PUL)

Before the pandemic, distance education was considered to be of less quality than in-person teaching and learning. Thus, universities had to adjust and rapidly accept a new way of working. In the words of the IRO Director at PUH,

> We adapted everything from one week to the next. There were only five days without class … to be honest, we did it as best as we could … It was a shock, a bucket of cold water because it was something that we had been with-standing. Before the pandemic, distance education was like a bad word and we resisted it.

A benefit that resulted from the change in the existing work modality was a higher degree of communication between the IRO and other areas within the university. This led to an increased visibility for the IROs. According to the IRO Director at PRL,

> for the Direction of Internationalization, it was truly beneficial in the sense that it gave the area more visibility … all of us are very, very connected these days and everyone has to read … (and to know) about the need for interna-tionalization … I believe that everyone is now aware of this.

Actions like the use of social media to communicate with the parents of international students who were in Argentina led to a higher involvement of other areas of the university. This also impacted on the IRO's importance, as explained by this area's Director at PRH:

we started to share our social media meetings with 20 students and from other countries, people would tell us "How are you doing such craziness?" Over there they were having daily deaths. This taught us that the person in charge of our social media had to not only have a local vision … but also a global understanding; (this implies) all of the areas of the University getting involved (and thinking globally).

For universities with lesser experience in the use of remote technologies, the support obtained through the Interuniversity National Committee (CIN, for its acronym in Spanish) was substantial. New connectivity scholarships were created to aid students with financial and technical vulnerability. According to the IRO Director at PUH:

a census was done … to identify (students) who had connectivity problems and they received funds to pay for their data. That was the first thing we did. At the end of last year and the start of this one (2021), we gave out computers to students who did not have one.

The technological change resulted in the creation of new types of collaboration, even for some universities that were not highly internationalized, for example through Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). Indeed, the IRO Director at PRL comments:

in each COIL we have (about) 40 students. Last year we did two; this year …, four. We had never done a COIL before …, we had offered some open Masterclasses, though … I think that the pandemic generated a mental transformation … pushed us to do it.

The use of online technology was also a catalyst for broadening institutional audiences, thus helping universities become even more internationalized. This was also true for those institutions that were already well positioned before COVID-19. According to the IRO Director at PRH:

virtuality obliged us to do many of the very local events, which we used to do in-person online: commencements, special programs, conferences … It

was very easy to find renowned speakers for events that in the past had been quite small and domestic … and to now use that event as a way of positioning the University.

Also, the use of virtual technology helped PRH to enlarge its audience. "We started doing concerts which, before the pandemic, used to have 6000 in-person spectators … Now those events had 15,000 or 20,000 viewers worldwide."

Opportunities and Evolution

The adverse contexts created by COVID-19 generated the need to rethink and redesign the internationalization strategy of higher education institutions, generating new opportunities and ways to collaborate. Online resources, virtual academic and research collaborations, and COIL, among others, have been the new tools adopted by universities.

As explained by the IRO Director at PRL: "remote education opens new markets and opportunities; indeed, the programs that we are presenting (for accreditation) that have international students, are being presented in two modalities: remote and in-person." New market niches also appeared on the horizon. The IRO Director at PUL points out:

> We are aiming at the continuity of certain programs that have had a positive impact, such as language courses, mainly Spanish. There will be an opportunity there to offer these courses both in remote and in-person modalities. I think that virtual teaching and learning are here to stay and we will have to take advantage of that and rethink our functions.

Similarly, the IRO Coordinator at PUH states: "this broadened our terrain, especially when it comes to graduate programs. Most of our graduate offerings had a virtual component before the pandemic but it was not so broadly developed. Therefore, this situation gave us the opportunity to attract large numbers of international students to our graduate courses and seminars." However, she also identifies opportunities and challenges that institutions will have to bear in mind:

> I believe that the opportunity also has to do with a threat, which is the unlimited access to any higher education institution around the world. This menace also opens an opportunity that forces us to focus more on quality and on developing international collaborations. That is where I see that this

threat becomes an excellent opportunity. Now, with virtual teaching and learning and such a large offering of universities, rankings appear as increasingly important reputational and brand-value indicators. Therefore, it is a matter of taking up the opportunity to truly have an international level. (PUH)

Mobility was the main internationalization initiative at most universities in Argentina prior to the pandemic. Now, it seems to be adopting more innovative mechanisms to adapt to the post-pandemic reality. Therefore, a new model of internationalization seems to be evolving, one that is less focused on physical exchanges and more based on a tool that all universities had and had not developed to their maximum potential: remoteness. Along this line, the Provost at PRH expressed this view:

we have adopted many technological tools, very diverse apps … I personally think that learning and teaching will be sensibly enriched as a result of this. We will also be able to incorporate a mix of in-person, remote, and hybrid support. We have adopted tons and tons of tools in many areas.

This professional also points out:

I believe in complementarity; in-person mobilities will not be fully replaced as they entail a lot more than taking courses in another country. However, there will be a lot of complementarity between what is virtual and what is in-person. (Virtuality) is also a tool that, if well used, will help us better showcase internationalization within our institutions through different types of activities: virtual mobility, international Chairs, faculty, and so on.

However, for public universities, internationalization activities could be challenged by financing. The IRO Coordinator at PUH states, "realistically, when it comes to financing, there is less and less support from the State for everything. Therefore, at a national level, I do not foresee a very bright future." This view is shared by the IRO Director at PUL, who considers that

the IRO's challenge, within each university, will be to ensure that internationalization continues to be an institutional policy, even if this requires more financing. We will also have to think about how we use our funds. I think that funding for public universities will be a major issue after the pandemic.

In general, there is a positive view about the future of internationalization. The IRO Coordinator at PUH states that "at an institutional level, networks were strengthened. I think that several Argentine universities have positioned themselves well within international networks. This is promising due to the number of relationships that result from them." Also, he poses the idea that a new paradigm of internationalization will be one more aligned to a "south-to-south" interaction. In this sense, he concludes that "internationalization related to the substantive functions of the university …, (and) through (it) we could foster impact innovation and research initiatives, thus making internationalization even more potent."

Conclusions and Key Matters

During the initial months of the pandemic, IROs had enormous stress due to the logistical challenges caused by closed borders and canceled flights. Additionally, during this first stage, they also needed to provide special support to families and students, many of whom required special assistance. This aid often had to do with acting as liaison with the local or national authorities to expedite repatriation or to secure funds for survival. The support provided also entailed assisting anxious, scared, and worried students and families. Many of these activities led to the incorporation of new technologies for communicating, and even for processing documents and agreements. Paperless became the norm.

After the initial chaos was overcome, the IROs adopted a new role as propellers of COILs, for example, and other types of academic collaboration. This new responsibility brought about many coordination challenges but also allowed this sector to become more visible to faculty and deans. In a way, the pandemic acted as a lens focused on the activities carried out by IROs. The interviewees agreed on the fact that this unexpected situation pushed other areas of the university to work more cooperatively. Of course, this behavior was the consequence of the need to solve a problem imposed by an external shock, the pandemic, and not part of a previously deliberated strategic plan. It is difficult to predict how much of this cooperative behavior will persist over time, especially after face-to-face activities are resumed.

Paradoxically, the pandemic "forced" some universities to internationalize their activities even more, regardless of the level of internationalization shown before the arrival of COVID-19. For instance, in one of the analyzed cases, the pressure imposed by the sanitary situation led it to

"find out" the benefits of COIL and also shone light on the advantages of having international guest lecturers in courses and seminars. Somehow, the situation modified the pre-pandemic appreciation of online technologies. Indeed, these shifted from being tools with a questioned effectiveness to being broadly used, even for activities that would have been unimaginable before the pandemic. In this sense, according to the interviewees, the universities "discovered" new routines that led to a relationship with a broader world. In fact, for some institutions, remote teaching and learning became an opportunity to broaden horizons, thus achieving greater visibility of their own internationalization activities. This change of perspective was reflected both internally and externally, leading to broader networks of contacts and connections with peers from other countries. An opening to unexploited market niches, such as that of language courses and graduate programs for international students, also took place. Additionally, a new model of internationalization based on the use of new technologies, in lieu of physical mobilities, was broadly adopted.

In all cases studied, universities were able to align to a dynamic and changing context resulting from an unforeseen situation. Under extreme pressure, the IROs created flexible structures and, in a way, were "forced" to innovate to adapt to their new functions. Also, in the cases of PRH and PUH, the presence of significant leaders was key to the creative, innovative, and adaptive processes that were put in place to respond to the new reality. In short, reorganization and adaptation processes to strengthen the IRO and institution and minimize the damage caused by the pandemic were implemented and these led to new opportunities for development.

The pandemic also led to what is known as "community resilience," a behavior based on collaboration and cooperation processes between an institution and its surrounding community and stakeholders. For example, universities and public organizations, together with PIESCI, had a key role in the unification of data concerning Argentine students, faculty, and researchers stranded abroad. Working alongside universities, it identified the places of residence of those who were stranded, as well as their individual economic and sanitary situations. As a result of this joint effort and the obligation to share information, PIESCI could, for the first time ever, gather complete and updated data about the number of domestic students, faculty, and researchers abroad. Therefore, we may conclude that the pandemic forced the institutions that make up the entire higher education universe, universities and public entities, to repair a deficit, such as the

lack of information, which was an obstacle for planning Argentine internationalization policies in a rational manner and with a macro-systemic perspective.

The interviews evidenced that, in the four cases analyzed, there were obvious benefits of working as a network, and in a cooperative manner with the whole system, to reduce the costs brought about by the pandemic. IROs also joined forces with the foreign diplomatic representations in Argentina to assist them in the coordination of return flights for international students, faculty, and researchers who were in the country. Public universities, which have traditionally had larger bodies of students and researchers abroad on scholarships, had to obtain alternative funding to support those individuals who had run out of means and were unable to return to the country. These institutions approached the State as well as their contacts and communities overseas to provide aid to those in the direst circumstances. Also, public funding was assigned to strengthen virtual infrastructure, train lecturers, and provide repositories of tools and resources to facilitate the transition to virtual teaching and learning (Rabossi et al., 2022). These collaborative actions did not generate any type of preference from the State toward public universities. This is significant, considering that in Argentina, even for matters related to internationalization, public universities receive funding that is either not available or often notably more generous than that on hand for their private counterparts.

However, through the interviews it became evident that public funding for internationalization activities will be a major issue in the future, especially at public universities. This situation is likely to affect exchange scholarships and in-person participation in overseas activities. On the other hand, the devaluation of the local currency in relation to the dollar or euro, together with increased knowledge on how to deliver quality education online, may be an opportunity for domestic universities to attract new cohorts of regional students who would not be able to afford to live and study in another country, but who may be attracted by an overseas program that does not entail living costs in a foreign land. Public policies focused on increasing the country's visibility as a quality and affordable student destination will be key to position the Argentine educational system in an increasingly competitive global higher education market.

In conclusion, the initial shock caused by the pandemic seems to be far behind us thanks to increasing knowledge about the virus, prevention measures, and greater vaccination efforts. However, some of its effects

appear to be here to stay. Indeed, the visibility acquired by the IROs, the need for all areas of a university to think about internationalization and its effects, and the adoption of technological tools to embed a global component to the educational experience of students, seem to have become entrenched. In this way, they have become an opportunity amidst the crisis, to grow and evolve positively toward a new way of projecting internationalization. It is still to be seen if these aspects will impact the IROs' staffing policies and student and staff mobility.

Note

1. This region comprises the provinces of La Rioja, Mendoza, San Juan, and San Luis.

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