

Internationalisation in higher education in times of crisis

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of internationalisation staff

Internationalisation in higher education has been challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. How have internationalisation professionals in Dutch higher education institutions experienced the crisis and dealt with it? What do they need to work under the new circumstances and what can this crisis teach us for the future? This report gives an overview of the experiences of 19 professionals in 13 different higher education institutions in the Netherlands.

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January 27, 2021

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Abstract

We explored the topic of internationalisation in Dutch higher education in times of crisis by studying the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with internationalisation professionals from 13 Dutch Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences. The main findings are:

- Institutions had to quickly establish COVID-19 policies and deal with various challenges and dilemmas. We discuss some lessons learned from the crisis. According to staff, students were mostly disappointed with the cancellation policies, but also showed understanding.
- Internationalisation at Home initiatives became a common practice, and staff had the opportunity to learn a lot about the online possibilities. We analyse the various advantages and limitations of online education. According to staff, students differed in their reactions to online education. We discuss future implications.
- Staff worked online from home. They experienced their work mostly as stressful, busy and frustrating. Their opinions about working from home, communication and cooperation differ.
- To cope with the challenges of their work, staff found it useful to exercise, take enough free time, ask support from others, and maintain an optimistic, flexible, and active attitude.
- Staff members mostly needed support from their managers and co-workers, clear directions, as well as technical facilitation.

Introduction

Worldwide, higher education institutions have undergone various crises over the last years. Some examples of such crises are outbreaks of illness, fires, natural disasters, political unrest and terrorist attacks (Dassance, 2007). In the context of Dutch higher education, such crises are less common due to the general socio-economic stability and safety in the area. International offices of Dutch higher education institutions have sporadically taken measures in relation to crises happening to partner universities abroad, such as cancelling outgoing student exchanges with specific countries due to high safety risks (Universiteit Leiden, 2019). The spread of the COVID-19 virus is not a crisis located somewhere abroad, but an emerging situation also occurring in the Netherlands. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented nature and extent, it can be characterised as one of the largest public health crises worldwide over the past century.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of our lives (Nicola et al., 2020). International student mobility has been no exception, since the impact of COVID-19 on internationalisation has been remarkable (Schleicher, 2020). Internationalisation of education consists of different types and sorts of activities. Nuffic identifies curriculum, languages, and mobility. We have chosen to focus on student mobility, since this is one of the forms that has been more severely affected by the pandemic. Due to travel restrictions and lockdowns all over the world, going abroad for studies or an internship has been especially difficult or even impossible. Activities that require physical presence have been cancelled, postponed or changed to online platforms (Gabriels & Benke-Aberg, 2020). International students interested in studying in the Netherlands (incoming mobility) have indicated that they might postpone their study until face-to-face, on-campus education is possible again (Nuffic, 2020). Students interested in going abroad (outgoing mobility) also face a lot of uncertainty and doubts on whether their stay abroad will even be possible. Studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic and other pandemics can have a negative impact on the psychological state of students, sometimes resulting in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Cullen et al., 2020).

In these times of crisis, internationalisation staff in higher education might also face difficulties in their work. They cannot promote exchange programs the same way as before and they are not able to physically meet as much with colleagues and students anymore. Moreover, it might be even more crucial to support students dealing with insecurity, stress and various other practical issues caused by the pandemic. The need to immediately adapt to a new reality can result in higher levels of stress among internationalisation staff in higher education. Previous studies suggest that during an emergency, high levels of stress can affect the working environment and the performance of health care staff (Müller et al., 2009). Even though stress can have strong effects, people respond to critical situations in various ways and use different coping mechanisms (Folkman, 2013). At the same time, the need to adapt to a new reality can also lead to innovation. For instance, some institutions have found innovative ways to stimulate an international experience without physical presence. To achieve this, institutions are currently focusing on online and blended educational methods that still make internationalisation in higher education possible (Bowman, 2020).

Aim of the study

This study examines how internationalisation staff in Dutch higher education have experienced and dealt with the COVID-19 crisis. We also explore what they have learnt, how they can be supported in their work, and how they imagine internationalisation in higher education after the pandemic. We conducted this research in the context of the research project 'Internationalisering in Beeld', which is mapping internationalisation in education in the Netherlands, and is funded by the ministry of Education, Culture and Science of the Netherlands.

With this study, we aim to get a clearer picture of internationalisation in higher education in the Netherlands during the pandemic. The results of this research are relevant to higher education institutions in the Netherlands and elsewhere and to the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. This study can help higher education institutions and the ministry to gain more insight into current challenges, experiences of staff, and alternative ways to deal with this crisis. This could stimulate more awareness and understanding within higher education institutions and the ministry on topics such as how to support internationalisation staff. Last but not least, sharing experiences of some staff can help other staff to get new insights and ideas on how to deal with issues they encounter in their own work.

The value of this study goes beyond the purpose of learning more about this specific crisis. Since crises are an inevitable part of life, the question of how people deal with them is timeless. Of course, every crisis and historical period has unique characteristics, and therefore we do not attempt to draw universal conclusions. Nevertheless, examining the reactions to this current crisis can give us some indication on how people may react to a similar future crisis. Important lessons can be learnt when it comes to dealing with similar unforeseen situations in the future. Facing a crisis can have important long-term effects on internationalisation in education and shape its direction. Conducting this research as the situation unfolds is crucial. The crisis is currently influencing people's daily lives "here and now", so their experiences are still vividly on their mind. Therefore, we considered the period between September 2020 and December 2020 to be the best time to investigate this topic.

Methodology

We recruited nineteen participants via relevant contacts of Nuffic colleagues and via a LinkedIn post. Participants were higher education staff members involved in internationalisation activities, mainly with students. They held job titles such as Internationalisation Officer, Exchange Coordinator, Internationalisation Coordinator, and International Relations Officer. To get a broad picture of the different experiences, we interviewed participants who held positions in 13 institutions with different characteristics; institutions of different size, various regions in the Netherlands, and with different type of education and fields of study (7 Research Universities and 6 Universities of Applied Sciences). These institutions are: Radboud University, University of Twente, Utrecht University, Tilburg University, Wageningen University, University of Groningen, International Institute of Social Sciences, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, University of Applied Sciences Leiden, University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen, Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, and Fontys University of Applied Sciences.

Given the explorative nature of our research question, we opted to conduct semi-structured interviews. This method allows us to dive into the staff's individual experiences by asking specific open-ended questions, while also maintaining structure and giving space for additional clarification questions if needed (Newcomer, 2015). We conducted the interviews in English, online with videocalls. Participants could choose the platform (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Skype), date, and time that was convenient for them. At the beginning of the session, we reminded participants that their personal information will not be shared, and that the data will only be used for the purpose of this research. In this introduction, we also asked their permission to record the interview. Prior to the interviews, we created an outline of planned topics and questions to be addressed in an order that anticipated the most likely and smoothest sequence. The planned order of questions was the following:

1. To what extent has your work been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic? What has changed?
2. What are the consequences of these changes in your work?
3. How did you adapt to the new circumstances? What has helped you?
4. What were the reactions of the students towards the new situation and to what extent have these reactions affected your work?
5. What do you need to be able to fully do your work during the pandemic?
6. Which possibilities do you see for Nuffic to support you?
7. What have you learned from this situation?
8. To what extent do you expect these changes in your work to remain after the pandemic is over? How do you envision the future of internationalisation in education?

We transcribed the recordings, and analysed the transcriptions with NVivo. NVivo is software that helps to organise, analyse and find insights in qualitative data. We identified and categorised various themes, and have structured the presentation of our findings accordingly. As we found that the answers did not differ much between institutions, we will not go into institutional differences. The answers to question 6 were discussed with Nuffic colleagues, and are not included in this report.

Findings

We structure the findings of this study in five parts. The first part refers to the decision making within institutions with regard to their cancellation policies. We discuss relevant challenges, dilemmas, lessons learned and staff's perception of student reactions. Secondly, we examine the advantages and limitations of online learning, and the perceived student reactions towards online education. In the third part, we analyse the changes in the work of internationalisation staff, and the psychological impact of these changes. We also talk about the different perspectives on working from home, communication, and cooperation. In the fourth part, we refer to different coping mechanisms of staff when dealing with the pandemic. Lastly, in part five, we examine what staff need to be able to fully function under the circumstances. Below we describe and illustrate the main findings with relevant participants' quotes.

1. COVID-19 policies

In this part, we examine how higher education institutions shaped their COVID-19 policies. We examine the limitations and dilemmas in decision making, and the lessons participants learned. We also refer to how staff perceived the students' reactions towards the cancellation policies.

Cancellation policies

In an emerging public health situation affecting people worldwide, with numerous travel restrictions and high insecurity, higher education institutions were not able to continue with their internationalisation efforts as always. Physical exchanges were postponed by a year when possible. Higher education institutions were forced to quickly make decisions including, for example, cancelling exchanges and asking students to return to their home institution. The vast majority of the institutions taking part in our study decided to cancel physical exchanges as a whole.

However, some exchanges were still allowed in a few institutions taking part in our study. In one institution, exchange was allowed within Europe if the travel advice was not negative (i.e. travel advice of green colour indicating that it is safe to travel and yellow indicating that some safety risks exist) and in consultation with the students and the partner universities. A participant from another institution explains that they decided to examine every student case individually:

"We did not strictly forbid going on exchange. We customised our support and guided the students on their path, helping them make their decision. This was not always easy and sometimes it led to cancellation after all, but we also helped students that did go abroad and were very happy they could go. [...]. Keeping study abroad options open allowed for incoming exchange as well, partly online and partly on-campus."

With regard to the academic year 2020-2021, in many cases student mobility was initially only cancelled for the fall semester 2020, but that decision was later also made for the spring semester 2021. In some other cases, no decision has been taken yet for the upcoming semesters at the time of writing, and the staff is waiting for new guidelines from the government and their board. It is important to note that, even though most incoming and outgoing exchanges were cancelled, the situation is different for international students studying in the Netherlands for a full bachelor or master program. These students mostly started and further continued their studies as planned.

Challenges and dilemmas in decision making

When taking important decisions such as establishing cancellation policies, some limitations can arise. One participant mentioned that the existing policy was not sufficiently designed to include crisis situations such as the outbreak of a pandemic:

"Actually, we realised that our plan, our policy on how to deal with this kind of situations, was not sufficient for dealing with a worldwide problem."

A few participants indicated that it was sometimes difficult to decide and act quickly due to the fact that a lot of people need to come to an agreement, especially in big institutions. Due to the complicated decision processes, there were sometimes delays in decision making:

"Our university is very big. And before a decision is made, it takes weeks and so many people have to share their opinion."

However, others said that, considering the circumstances, they are satisfied with how they dealt with the crisis. One participant mentioned:

"I guess that everybody was caught by surprise, and we don't plan for calamities such as a pandemic of this magnitude in emergency planning. So we all had to decide quickly, and improvise while moving ahead. Considering all this, I think that things went remarkably well. Sometimes we did have to wait for a decision from higher up in the organisation, but in most cases we could already start preparing because we could anticipate what was going to happen next."

Dilemmas in decision making are related to weighing the benefits and downsides of physical mobility. Staff often wants to let students decide, but at the same time staff is responsible for preventing an unfortunate situation for the student:

"We're in a situation where we have to, on the one hand, let them make their own decisions, because they're adults, and we're just a facilitator. And on the other hand, we're a higher education institution that is actively supporting this by using our exchange contracts. So, if the student abroad is in a situation that is really difficult, if they get sick, if they have to follow very strict quarantine regulations, if they have to follow classes from their student housing and can't go outside while they are abroad, these are situations we have to grapple with. It's hard to imagine that students will have a good time."

Lessons learned from the crisis

Dealing with an unexpected situation can be a big challenge, but it can also lead to innovation and positive social change. Some participants underlined the positive side of crises and the importance of utilising the opportunities that they bring:

"Crises usually also bring about opportunities for change and innovation, and we can play an active role in bringing this about and benefit from the new possibilities that arise. We owe that to our students as well."

During a crisis, people can become wiser and more experienced. Most participants said that they have already learned some important lessons from this crisis. For instance, one learned more about travel advice and institutional regulations. Another participant realised the importance of anticipating unforeseen situations:

“Different principles of crisis management were very useful, and I experienced that during this period. It also became clear that what you had already arranged, more or less runs by itself, you didn't have to worry about that. It was very important to anticipate quickly and effectively on matters that were previously impossible or difficult to foresee. You have to take the time to think about it carefully, but you also have to anticipate quickly. Anticipation and resilience, think in solutions and not in problems.”

Participants also learned important lessons about their contact with students. One mentioned that good communication is essential and that students should know who to contact in case of emergencies. Another concluded that it is necessary to better prepare students for dealing with this kind of crisis situations in the future:

“I realised that sometimes students are really young and they are not always up to facing these stressful situations, and that is something I believe we really have to pay more attention to when we prepare the students for a semester abroad.”

Lastly, staff also got the opportunity to reflect on their culture in relation to the COVID-19 policy in the Netherlands and worldwide:

“What I learned myself is how different countries handle the pandemic because you see culture coming back in that as well. For example, in the Netherlands the prime minister is calling for the responsibility of the citizens all the time. In the Netherlands, when you give strict rules and regulations, people will protest. They don't accept it. So, what our government is doing is looking for the intrinsic motivation of people and trying to get people to comply with rules and regulations by addressing this intrinsic motivation, whereas other countries are more strict and maybe also more successful in handling the whole pandemic. So, I see culture coming back in the way the countries handle the pandemic. And I always keep learning about the cross-cultural things, and this is such a good example.”

Student reactions towards cancellation policies

The majority of the participants mentioned that students reacted in different ways towards the cancellation policies. According to the staff, common reactions of the students were disappointment, stress, sadness, confusion, uncertainty and anger. In some institutions, students did not agree with the cancellation policy. Staff sometimes received calls and e-mails from angry students and their families complaining about the cancellation of their exchange. In institutions where exchanges were not cancelled as a whole, students were often confused about which rules apply to their case. Those who could still go abroad were happy (for instance within the EU), but students who were not able to join an exchange were dissatisfied. Students also experienced financial problems and stress about finding job opportunities in the Netherlands during the pandemic. Despite these negative emotions and experiences, staff also reported that students showed understanding about the decisions made by their institution:

“The reactions were different. There were students that said: ‘Okay, if it's not happening now, perhaps it will happen another time, I will choose another minor.’ They took it very well. But, of course, there were also students who were very sad because they feel like: ‘This is the only chance I have to go abroad for a long time with the scholarship, and I already have the scholarship and now I can't go!’ So, they were very disappointed.”

Due to the difficult circumstances, staff mentioned that students need more time and support from them than normal:

“Students just need a lot more support, and it is not always clear to them what the situation means for their education, for their exchange plans and what they have to do next. Basically, I think they may be less independent than they were before. They need a lot more guidance.”

Summary

- Most higher education institutions cancelled exchanges as a whole. International students following a whole degree program (bachelor or master) were mostly able to start their studies and some of them still came to the Netherlands.
- There might be limitations in decision making within bigger institutions and institutions with insufficient crisis policies. Staff sometimes face dilemmas related the benefits and risks of physical mobility, and their responsibility.
- Staff learned a lot about crisis management and how to better communicate with students.
- Students were mostly disappointed and sad about the cancellation of their exchange, but also showed understanding.

2. Online alternatives

In this second part, we focus on the development of online education during the pandemic. We examine the views of staff on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning and the perceived student reactions towards the online alternatives. We also discuss staff's opinions on future directions.

Advantages of online learning

During this emerging situation, higher educational institutions demonstrated flexibility and strived to find online alternatives for students. Many participants felt the duty to find online alternatives for students and devoted considerable effort to achieve it. Online education and virtual exchanges for both incoming and outgoing students were also coordinated in cooperation with partner institutions. Through these online alternatives, students still had the opportunity to gain study credits and some international experience:

“We have to offer something that could replace the physical semester abroad. And for that reason, we developed the virtual exchange program for students, so that they could still graduate on time, and still have at least a partly international experience.”

Some participants mentioned examples of Internationalisation at Home opportunities such as the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) programme. One participant explained how they created an online 15 credits module about intercultural competences of teachers. This module included a variety of online activities and assignments related to culture and teaching. Another example is the opportunity to complete an internship from home using advanced technological methods:

“We're working quite a lot with earth observation techniques or satellite images, aerial photographs, things like that. And certainly, because of the fact that everything can also now be done online, we have got a lot of contact with one of the biggest space industries in the world, where people now simply log in for an online two-week or five-week internship. And that's

something that actually never happened before. So, people are getting very creative in finding solutions for what we are now running into.”

Facing a crisis such as a worldwide pandemic can also have a positive impact on education. Before the pandemic, people were more hesitant and sceptical towards online education, while there is currently more awareness about the advantages of online learning:

“The most important thing that I and a lot of other people have learned is that what we usually considered impossible before, has now suddenly become common practice. We are changing the way of working. People normally would say that we are never going to do this because it is too complicated, too costly, and it is not going to be very efficient. And now suddenly, because circumstances have forced our hand, this all turns out to be much more possible and effective than anybody expected beforehand.”

Some advantages of online education are flexibility and accessibility. Students who cannot travel abroad due to their financial situation, health and personal circumstances are currently able to participate in a virtual exchange. In that sense, online education can contribute to more accessibility and inclusion in internationalisation in higher education:

“Even though we still believe that physical presence is actually very important, on the other hand maybe the online version will open up opportunities for some of our students as well. The students who don't have finances for a semester abroad, for example, or students who are ill, who can't travel abroad or students who have to take care of parents or children. So, in that respect, I actually see room for more inclusion in the possibilities that we offer our students.”

Limitations of online methods

The online alternative options offered to students also had limitations according to some participants. For example, when it comes to learning about each other's culture, face to face contact can be very valuable, so online methods might not be as effective:

“The first reason why students want to come here is because of the diversity at our campus. It means you're mingling with students from 50 different countries every year. You can't do that online. The physical aspect of it, to talk with someone from, let's say, Ghana or Argentina and to learn, is different.”

Another limitation of online learning is that it is sometimes difficult for teachers to monitor students' challenges and needs and know if they are able to follow the lectures online:

“We inventorised which students have not been online at all and we just started calling them to find out what was actually going on, why they didn't follow the online education, what challenges they were facing. We try to do everything we can to keep everyone on board, but it's not easy.”

Lastly, one participant mentioned that these limitations should not discourage internationalisation staff and result in negative emotions:

“There certainly are limitations and disadvantages to online education, but we should not let ourselves be ruled by negative sentiments.”

Student reactions towards online education

Participants mentioned that students generally reacted positively towards the online alternative options. Students were happy to see that there were offered alternatives such as virtual exchanges:

"Last semester when there was a panic, our students were just very grateful that we had alternatives, and the same went for incoming students. The incoming students who remained here, they also did parts of an online module instead of certain activities that they would normally have done. So, they were really positive and grateful that we had alternatives."

Some students managed to deal with the situation, despite various difficulties such as isolation. They adapted quickly to online educational methods and some liked the flexibility of watching the online session at a different time. However, according to staff, some students are more interested in physical mobility rather than virtual exchanges. Staff mentioned that some students expressed that they would prefer face to face contact over online learning:

"Students are very different. Some of them really like the online meetings because they feel a little bit more freedom, because sometimes they can choose to watch it at a different time. For example, we record most of the meetings and they can choose for themselves. [...]. Other students say 'No, I don't like this because I want to have contact. I want to be in one room with the teacher and my fellow students'."

Future directions

Participants indicated that they expect online learning to be more common in the future. Most of them believe that a possible scenario is a combination of online and on-campus learning:

"Maybe when it comes to virtual exchanges, that's something that we could also keep working on once the pandemic is over. I don't think we need to see it as a substitute for the physical exchange, but something we could also run in parallel."

Summary

- Staff worked hard to find alternative options for students. Institutions managed to switch to online education, improved digitalisation and used innovative and creative educational methods online.
- Some advantages of online learning are flexibility and accessibility. Online learning can promote inclusion, since students who cannot go abroad can still gain international experience.
- Some limitations are that online learning might be less effective when getting to know other cultures and that it can be difficult for teachers to monitor if all students are participating.
- According to staff, students generally reacted positively towards online learning and they like the flexibility it offers, even though others found learning online less interesting.
- Staff members expect that online learning will remain an important topic in the future. Some suggested that online educational methods could also be used after the pandemic in parallel with physical exchanges.

3. The impact of COVID-19 on internationalisation staff

In this part, we examine the main changes on the work of internationalisation staff in higher education as well as their psychological impact. We also analyse the different perspectives of staff members on working from home, communication, and cooperation. Future directions are discussed.

The main changes

Internationalisation staff in higher education have had to deal with various changes in their work since the pandemic started. All participants mentioned that, due to the pandemic, their work was mainly done from home and online. That was a drastic change for everyone, since it was previously not common to work so much from home. Another big change was that they could not go abroad anymore for business trips. The majority of the participants mentioned that their workload increased considerably when the pandemic started, and as a result they often needed to work even in the weekends to support students:

“People were online and trying to be available for students as much as possible, even in the weekends.”

Staff needed to devote more time to developing new initiatives such as online education. They also had to devote more time to changing their work processes:

“100% of the work has changed, because we always have to take coronavirus into consideration now with every step. And our usual processes never apply without additional thought anymore.”

The psychological impact

The pandemic was a new and sudden situation for the staff members, which they found stressful and particularly difficult to deal with. Many of them described the situation as hectic, confusing and unclear (see also Figure 1):

“It was quite a confusing and stressful time, because all the information, everything was unclear of course.”

Someone mentioned that even though they have had to deal with other insecure situations in the past, the level of uncertainty has increased due to COVID-19:

“Going abroad always had a kind of uncertainty. It's COVID now, but you might go to areas where there may be volcanos or strong winds, tsunamis or political unrest such as the Hong Kong protests. So, this is not new in internationalisation, and it's also not something we can fully control. How much we focus on all the uncertainties is still something we will have to deal with. So you can't arrange everything. [...]. The level of uncertainty is a lot higher now because it's not centred anymore in one place, like before.”

Staff experienced stress and worry for different reasons. They were stressed about their own performance at work, such as making the right decisions and quickly adapting to online methods. They were also worried about students' wellbeing and adaptation to online education:

“We were worried about our students, if they were feeling okay, if they could cope with online education, if they all have access, if they had computers, if they really have the tools necessary to not be left behind.”

They also had to deal with negative emotions stemming from cancelling student mobility:

"For me that was very hard, to disappoint them, to say you cannot go abroad anymore."

Despite the negative experiences and feelings, some participants also mentioned positive experiences such as feeling supported and happy that they succeeded in their efforts:

"We managed to do it, so that's the thing that made us happy and motivated us to keep going."

Others felt optimistic, and liked to work under pressure:

"I like stress, it gives me a good vibe, I love to be under pressure, so particularly when something new is happening. Even though this was of course extremely negative and dangerous, and it's concerning health and people could die, I like just the fact that something new, something hectic is going on and we have to deal with it."

Figure 1. Word cloud about staff's feelings and experiences. Grey words (small size) are mentioned by some staff. Words in black colour (medium size) are mentioned more often than grey. Orange words (large size) are those mentioned the most and by multiple individuals.



Different perspectives on working from home

Working from home was not easy for everyone, especially for people with insufficient facilities and facing disturbances at home, such as children needing attention. Some participants found it difficult:

"I have two small children and they are home a lot, and my partner mainly works in the weekend and he is home a lot too. So for me it's really difficult to work properly and with focus."

Some staff who did not have disturbances at home enjoyed working there:

"I'm living by myself, so I have no children or partner around me asking me questions. So working from home is perfect. I can work very quietly. No students just popping into my office, no colleagues with 'I have this question or that question'. [...]. I had no idea that working from home was so relaxing and much more focused."

Even though being home alone can be useful for concentration, others say that it can also cause loneliness:

"I think if you don't have kids, a pet or a partner at home, it can be really isolating."

Staff reported that having pets at home can be helpful for some people. Having a well-equipped working space at home is also beneficial:

"Having no kids, having your own room, having sufficient equipment helps. Having pets in the house helps with stress."

With regard to health, working from home can come with some physical complaints such as back and vision problems. On the other hand, participants mention that they like the fact that they do not need to commute to work and therefore can be more flexible with their working hours and sleep longer.

Some participants mentioned that working from home might remain common after the pandemic:

"I think we will never go back to five days at the office anymore."

However, others indicated that people will have missed physically working together so much that they will return to working at the office:

"I think once we can, we will have missed the physical context and interacting, seeing everyone's faces, we will have missed that enough that we will try and do that again as much as possible. That's my feeling."

Different perspectives on communication and cooperation

Participants have different perspectives on how communication has been affected during the pandemic, with some arguing that communication has been hindered while others are arguing that it has improved. Some participants miss travelling abroad and physically meeting their international network, colleagues, and students. Due to the absence of face to face contact, they feel that they need to put more effort into meeting others:

"For the networking part I believe it is still important to have physical events as well. And the same goes for the students. [...]. So, right now we have to put in much more effort to reach people because you don't have coincidental meetings on the street, at university, physical events."

However, other participants mention that dealing with the difficult circumstances of the pandemic can also help people feel closer:

"We were in touch with each other more than we would normally be in the office. And we still are, so actually these horrible circumstances turned out well for us."

They argue that people are now more reachable because they are constantly online, which has improved communication:

"What we now see is that people are online and that they are reachable. And how good it actually is to just call someone up and have a quick discussion about something. [...]. It feels like there is a barrier taken away from getting in touch with people. You know where people are at the moment. They're online. And so it feels less of a hurdle to contact them. And I think that goes, of course, also for other universities trying to reach us."

In times of crisis, people are often deprived of things they had previously taken for granted. Some participants expressed that, due to the pandemic, they learned to appreciate travelling and human contact more than before. Missing meeting their colleagues in the office and their international partners abroad helps them realise the value of it:

"I'm very much looking forward to meeting my colleagues again. So, I can imagine that in this pandemic, we learned especially to appreciate the contact with our colleagues and with our international relations and also the physical aspect, the traveling."

Some realised the importance of cooperation in a crisis situation:

"I think it makes you really appreciate working in a team and you see the little strengths that everybody has. And I think that's what it teaches you, that you have to do things together in these times."

As for international cooperation after the pandemic, they expect that higher education institutions will be more selective with partnerships and mainly organise exchange programs within Europe. Meeting international partners virtually might also remain common after the pandemic, since they have now become more knowledgeable and used to it:

"Maybe the virtual fairs will stay, because it's interesting to see that you can host a virtual fair, you can ask people from any side of the world to be present. Maybe that's something that will stay, the virtual ways of promoting your universities and sending videos rather than sending a fact sheet and being present, maybe."

Some participants expressed that having more meetings online instead of physically can have a positive impact on the environment:

"What will stay is that we will fly less, which is good for the environment, because we have seen that we can do a lot of things with Microsoft Teams."

Summary

- There have been many changes in the work of internationalisation staff: They work online from home, they take no business trips, and their workload has been increased. The topics of discussion among colleagues are very much related to COVID-19 and their tasks are mainly focused on arranging exchange cancellations and online learning alternatives.
- Staff experienced the situation mainly as difficult, stressful, busy, insecure and frustrating. They worried a lot about students' wellbeing, their decision-making processes and their success in quickly setting up online education. Despite the majority of emotions being negative, some participants feel optimistic, supported and happy with what they achieved.
- Working at home has not been easy for everyone. Being alone can help concentration, but it can also feel isolating. Working at home can have negative effects on health, but it can also offer more flexibility in working hours and the possibility to sleep longer.
- Some participants think that working from home will be common after the pandemic, while others believe that people might have missed face to face contact so much that they will prefer to work at the office again.
- Some staff members see obstacles in the communication with students, partners and colleagues and they are missing face to face contact. However, others argue that due to the fact that everyone is currently online, people are more reachable and communication has improved.
- Travelling abroad to meet international partners might be less common after the pandemic. There might be more digital networking events and fairs, which could also benefit the environment.

4. Coping mechanisms

In this part, we analyse the various coping mechanisms that helped participants to deal with the challenges in their work. These can be categorised as: 1) free time and physical exercise, 2) connection and support, and 3) optimistic, flexible, and active attitude.

Free time and physical exercise

A coping mechanism that participants used to be able to deal with the demands of their work was adding enough breaks in their working routine and taking time to rest. Doing some physical exercise such as walking helped them to relax and adapt to the new demanding situation of working at home during the pandemic:

"You have to make sure you take breaks in between to give your eyes rest, to give your head rest, and that's not always easy, because even online we are running from one appointment to another. So it is really important every time to tell yourself: take a break, go outside, even if it's just for 10 minutes, that's really important."

Connection and support

What participants found very helpful was maintaining regular and informal contact with colleagues, exchanging ideas, and speaking about their problems. Turning to others who can provide a listening ear and show empathy can be a great way to alleviate stress:

"It helped a lot to talk to colleagues about it, to get support from colleagues who are in the same situation. I think that was the most helpful in the whole process, and to exchange uncertainties and ideas, and how do you deal with the situation? What kind of decisions are you making in your institute? And to reconsider what you have in mind. So that was very important. Yes, exchange ideas."

According to some participants, open communication with the students can also be a successful strategy to cope with the new situation. That can be done in various ways, for example by demonstrating empathy towards students and trying to understand their perspective:

"I try and remember the time when I was a student and I put myself in those shoes. [...]. So I tried to think what advice I would be looking forward to, what guidance I would be looking for. And that's how I adapt, to try and give them what they're looking for, what they are hoping for."

Another coping mechanism is asking students' help and understanding:

"I am also teaching, and that has been a big challenge for me, as it was for the students. But I ask the students for their support as well because in my experience students are better in the digital world than we are. So, I ask for their help, and I ask them to excuse me for not being very good at it, right from the beginning, and I ask for their understanding. And that really helps if you are just honest and you say: 'Well, I don't know everything and if you can help me.' And it also gives them a good feeling if they are able to help you, so together we made it happen. And that was really good."

Optimistic, flexible, and active attitude

Participants mentioned some qualities that can be helpful in dealing with the challenges in their work during the pandemic. Having an optimistic mindset can help deal with negative feelings.

Demonstrating flexibility can help people to quickly adapt to an unknown situation. For instance, some participants were flexible when it comes to learning online methods, going to the office when possible, making short-term plans and adapting them to new developments:

"Taking it day by day...Because you cannot look much further, you can but it doesn't lead to security. The only thing you can do is try to do your work the best that you can and step by step to see how far you can go, and not to try and arrange things that cost money for instance."

Another important coping mechanism is having an active attitude. For instance, someone mentioned that keeping up to date with the news was helpful. Taking action to solve work-related issues also helped another person:

"It helps me a lot that I was able to do something, to give answers, to organise, that we had a lot of people behind that mailbox to answer those questions, to be in contact with our students. So, it helps me to get results in a very strange and unknown situation. For me it helped that I had a feeling I really can do something."

Summary

- Physical activity has helped some participants to deal with the difficulties in their work during the pandemic. Taking some holiday and breaks to relax and 'recharge' has been an effective coping mechanism for many.
- Turning to others for support can be an effective strategy in dealing with frustration and loneliness while working from home. Some participants mentioned that they actively stayed in touch with colleagues, asked their advice and talked about their worries with loved ones. Showing empathy to students and asking for their help helped some participants to deal with the difficulties of their job during the pandemic.
- Other coping mechanisms are being optimistic, flexible with planning, and active.

5. Needs

In this last part, we will analyse what participants mentioned as necessary for functioning well under the circumstances of the pandemic. Staff mainly needs support from management and co-workers, clear guidelines, and technical facilitation.

Support from management and co-workers

Some participants expressed the importance of getting support from their organisation and specifically from the management team. This support is crucial for facilitating their internationalisation efforts. Some of them already feel very supported by their management team:

"Support from the management is very important, and I'm lucky, because if I prepare a good short message and say what I need and why I need it, my manager will immediately support it, so then I can move on in the organisation."

However, others expressed their dissatisfaction with the amount of support they have received so far. They mentioned that more acknowledgement of the content and the importance of internationalisation is needed. One participant emphasised how important it is that the management team considers their internationalisation efforts vital, and pays attention to international students as well:

"Support from management also on the practical side. [...]. We were not supported in that by management at all. So, we need support from management and interest in internationalisation, because what also happens is that they start thinking about our own students first. Our core business is that our students are doing well, and it's like as if international students and exchange students are not our own students. They register at our institution, they bring money with them, but for some reason they are not considered a priority, as valuable as the others, and that also needs to come from management. [...]. Because without a management who sees international students as equal to our own students, I can't do my work anyway."

Someone reported that it would also help to hire more personnel to take on the extra workload. Others mentioned that they need more advice from their colleagues and organisation, especially on how to deal with the difficulties of working online. Understanding and psychological support from colleagues is needed to be able to deal with the challenges of their work:

"From the university and from my personal department head I need a lot of open ears to share the worries I have or the issues I see in the team, because it helps me to work better."

Clear guidelines

Internationalisation staff needs more guidance and clear instructions on the details of the policy decisions as well as the exceptions that apply. That would help them to be able to inform students sufficiently and on time:

"I think we need timely decisions. [...]. For both semesters, we waited a long time before we could communicate anything to our students. And it was frustrating for both us and our students. So I think it would be better if we would have timely decisions, when we know what to do, when exchanges are gradually getting cancelled. Then we can immediately help students with alternatives or answer their questions, rather than 'you'll hear about that midway through September' and then it turns out to be the end of September, and then it's the beginning of October, and then it's midway through October."

Technical facilitation

Participants needed technical facilitation such as online teaching tools and IT support. For instance, someone mentioned that they needed online tools that could facilitate them in scheduling digital sessions for international students:

"We needed a lot of digital facilities in a short time. [...]. If you have students from Australia, students from the United States, you have a time difference. If it's 12 o'clock in the Netherlands, it's 8 o'clock in Australia, but it's 6 o'clock in the morning in the United States. How to figure it out so all students who participated in the program could still participate with the time difference and time zones? So, all these facilities, all these things we wanted to turn around quickly, it wasn't always as easy as we would have liked."

Another point is that partner institutions need better facilities, for instance partners in Africa where the internet connection is not sufficient:

"We are currently working closely together with Ethiopian universities, and internet is really problematic, not only because of the bandwidth, or quality of the equipment, but also because the government shuts off the internet when they please. So, you can't just assume that you will have a good internet connection there. If this is going to last longer, we really have to look

together with our partners into setting up better facilities there, because normally you get on a plane and go there, and that's not possible. So, you really have to work on improving the facilities on the receiving end, if this is going to continue for much longer."

Summary

- The main needs of internationalisation staff during the COVID-19 crisis are related to being supported by the management of their institution and their co-workers. It is important for them that the management acknowledges the value of internationalisation and gives them time and attention.
- Some staff need clearer guidance and directions from colleagues taking important decisions in the organisation. They would like to receive instructions on time so that they can in turn inform students properly.
- Some participants mentioned that to fully do their work, they need technical facilities such as digital planning tools. It is important that some partner institutions also receive help on technical facilities such as better internet infrastructure.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many people worldwide, but how did it impact internationalisation in higher education? We explored the implications of COVID-19 for the work of internationalisation staff in Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands by interviewing 19 professionals. Their responses indicate that almost all exchange programmes were cancelled when the pandemic started and institutions switched to online education. Making policy decisions did not always run smoothly, and staff often had to deal with several challenges and dilemmas. Students were often disappointed with the cancellation of their exchange programme, but at the same time understanding and grateful for the alternative options.

In general, the work of internationalisation staff has changed considerably during the pandemic. The workload increased, the work topics of discussion were mainly related to COVID-19, and staff needed to focus their efforts on internationalisation at home. Some found that communication with colleagues, students and partners was hindered due to a lack of face-to-face contact, although others argued that it improved due to increased online reachability of others. Working from home has not been easy for everyone, especially for those facing disturbances at home such as noise and children needing attention. Most participants experienced their work during the pandemic as difficult, stressful, busy, insecure, and frustrating. Despite the negative emotions, there was space for optimism, motivation, and team spirit.

Struggling to find solutions during an emergency can also lead to innovation, as shown by the professionals in this study. Besides the difficulties, dealing with the crisis gave staff opportunities to learn and develop. They gained more knowledge on internationalisation at home and crisis management. Moreover, they gained new insights and realised the value of personal contact. The pandemic gave a boost to online education, since the prohibition of physical contact forced staff to improve the digitalisation of their institution. The lessons and experiences of dealing with this crisis may also be useful for a similar crisis in the future.

In addition to researching the main impact of COVID-19 on work, we examined other elements such as coping mechanisms and needs of staff. To deal with the various challenges in their work during the pandemic, participants made time for rest and physical exercise, turned to others for support, and tried to maintain a flexible, active, and positive attitude. Functioning well during a crisis requires clear guidance, facilities, and support from their managers and colleagues. The management team of higher education institutions should therefore provide the necessary support and tools that will enable staff to deal with the negative consequences of the pandemic. The ministry of Education, Culture, and Science can also support higher education institutions by offering them more support and guidelines. Even in the absence of a pandemic, online possibilities may be utilised to promote inclusion and sustainability in internationalisation in higher education.

Limitations and future research

Although our study has offered insight into how higher education institutions handled the pandemic, some limitations should be kept in mind. One limitation is that this is just one sample and we did not have the opportunity to interview staff from all Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences across the whole country. However, with participants from 13 different institutions, we believe that our study offers a good indication of the overall picture. Future research can incorporate quantitative methods such as surveys to examine generalisability.

Another limitation concerns the findings on student reactions to the crisis. Since we only interviewed staff, we only have second-hand reports on the students' reactions. Future research could interview students directly to gain more insight into their experiences. In addition, more research is needed on how students and staff view the future of internationalisation in education and on internationalisation trends after the end of the pandemic. This could help higher education institutions to shape their strategy, choose suitable partnerships, and better prepare for the future. A follow-up study one or two years after the pandemic could investigate which changes remained and how internationalisation in higher education developed in the longer term.

Final remarks

To better prepare for a future crisis, higher education institutions could devote more time to creating policies and emergency protocols for handling different types of unforeseen situations. Of course, these protocols will need to be flexible and adaptable to the unique characteristics of each crisis. It could also be useful for staff to be equipped with knowledge on crisis management, stress management, and digital skills. In times of crisis, people need clear guidelines, facilitation and support from others. The creation of a good working environment where people feel heard and supported is even more crucial under difficult circumstances. Investing in good relations, communication and cooperation in 'normal' times, can help people deal with problems in hard times as well.

We have seen that people have different opinions when it comes to working online from home. Some staff members found that working online helps them concentrate better, while others found it hard to concentrate and missed having face to face contact with their colleagues, partners, and students. After the end of the pandemic, higher education institutions could benefit from customising working from home based on individual needs. For instance, team leaders could show flexibility and discuss with staff members what the ideal balance would be for them. Finding individual solutions could increase work happiness and productivity.

The same suggestion holds true for students. As showed in our study, some students find going abroad very valuable and are very interested in communicating face to face with fellow students. Other students would normally hesitate to make this step, or they cannot go abroad because of other commitments, physical impairments or limited finances. These students could still gain international experience if they are offered the opportunity to do an exchange online from the comfort of their home. Our suggestion is that after the pandemic, there should be different options for all students. For instance, higher education institutions do not need to see physical exchanges and virtual exchanges as mutually exclusive. Both types of student mobility can co-exist and serve the needs of different students accordingly. The ministry of Education, Culture and Science could facilitate higher education institutions in the creation of both physical and virtual alternatives for students.

A crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen from different points of view. It has brought many difficulties, but it has also taught us important lessons, and has initiated a push for development and innovation in higher education. The changes brought by the pandemic can be crucial for how internationalisation in education will be shaped in the coming years. It is up to us to learn from these lessons and use this opportunity to bring internationalisation a step forward. Keeping an open mind and utilising the technological opportunities can be to our advantage.

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Texts

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Final editing

Metamorfose



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