

Spanish Universities Reveal their International Strategies for 2020/21

Executive Summary

In March 2020 Spain was at the forefront of countries facing the COVID-19 pandemic, and its universities were some of the first to address the emergency needs of their international students. In April we collected and analyzed the responses of Senior Internationalization Officers (SIOs) to a survey on the three sequential stages that universities had faced, which we defined as: reaction to the emergency, adapting to the new scenario, and strategic planning for an uncertain future. Our findings were made public in mid-April¹.

In September 2020, again with the support of the SEPIE [Servicio Español para la Internacionalización de la Educación]², we followed-up with another survey to inform the strategies adopted by institutions in regard to delivery methods both for teaching and extra-academic learning goals. We also wanted to know how the pandemic would likely impact enrollment figures, and what Government support measures SIOs considered more effective in the quest to reposition their universities as higher education destinations.

According to respondents, during the fall 2020 semester 81%³ of institutions hosting international students will have programs with an onsite component, either using hybrid models or starting in-person and shifting to online if needed (19%). At more than 92% of the universities, instructional models and options for internationals will be the same as those offered to local students.

While 26% of SIOs will use their existing institutional online communities (OCs) to promote intercultural interaction, an additional 41% plan to create virtual forums for cultural exchange. Of the 61% of institutions that acknowledge having implicit or explicit extra-academic goals for internationals, 70% have adapted their objectives to the media they will employ during the current scenario.

SIOs predict an average loss of 57% of the international students they had in the previous academic year (2019/20). When asked to select those Government measures that would be most effective to help them recover and improve their previous enrollment, 66% of participants chose "more flexibility in legal requirements and processes ..." closely followed by an additional six potential actions.

SIOs have assessed their divisions and prepared them for a new and challenging reality. For those who have the vision to reposition their institutions in the new global chessboard and take full advantage of the public resources that are already available, the opportunities are tremendous. But this is not only an individual task for each university. Institutions of all types and sizes need to work together, and the Spanish Government must evaluate the need for additional resources to support joint initiatives to attract increasing numbers of quality international students.

¹ Spanish Universities Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic, at <http://www.spaineduprograms.es/wp-content/uploads/Spanish-Universities-Respond-to-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf>

² Additional information on the SEPIE can be found at <http://www.sepie.es/educacion-superior/index.html>

³ All percentages have been rounded to whole numbers

Introduction

This report follows our initial survey of April 2020 in which we collected and analyzed the responses of SIOs on three sequential stages initially faced by their universities, which we defined as: reaction to the emergency, adapting to the new scenario, and strategic planning for an uncertain future.

With the continuous support of the SEPIE [Servicio Español Para la Internacionalización de la Educación], we reached out again to the International Relations divisions of Spanish universities to find how they have prepared for the new academic year.

Scope of the Study and Expected Outputs

SEPIE sent our follow-up cross-sectional⁴ survey to 101 accredited institutions of higher education, all of which have enrolled international students in the past. We gathered n59 responses, which amount to 58% of the population, a strong level of participation at a time when institutions of higher education are extremely busy managing the start of the academic year.

Our main goal, in gathering and analyzing these data, was that our findings would inform:

- Spanish universities, helping them plan for positive change
- the Spanish Government, identifying the resources that need to be allocated for the recovery of this sector
- public administrations, encouraging them to lessen the obstacles that hinder the expansion of international education
- public agencies, supporting the quality and advance of international education
- the global international education community, sharing experiences and perspectives they can draw upon

Research Design, Methodology and Methods

To gain a better understanding of the strategies adopted by Spanish institutions of higher education for the upcoming academic year, we wanted to apprise five areas: the shift in teaching delivery methods; the intercultural interaction media that universities are making available to their international students; the aim for extra-academic meaningful outcomes; the projected loss of international students, over last year's figures; and what Government measures, according to SIOs, will help them recover and advance the number and quality of their international enrollment.

We adopted a quantitatively driven mixed methods approach incorporating some qualitative elements. The population comprises Spanish institutions of higher education with an international unit, whose SIOs were asked to complete an anonymous survey. We gathered data from a n59 sample (58%) within the n101 population.

We analyzed eight of the items in the questionnaire using basic statistical methods and used three additional open-ended questions to inform results with emerging qualitative themes. The quantitative analysis was performed using tools provided by the survey's digital platform, while

⁴ The link to the survey was open to participants from September 9th through the 16th (2020)

open-ended items were analyzed using pausing⁵ and term repetition analysis. Qualified sources were consulted to further inform statistical results. The limited amount of qualitative data collected made the use of word-processing software unnecessary.

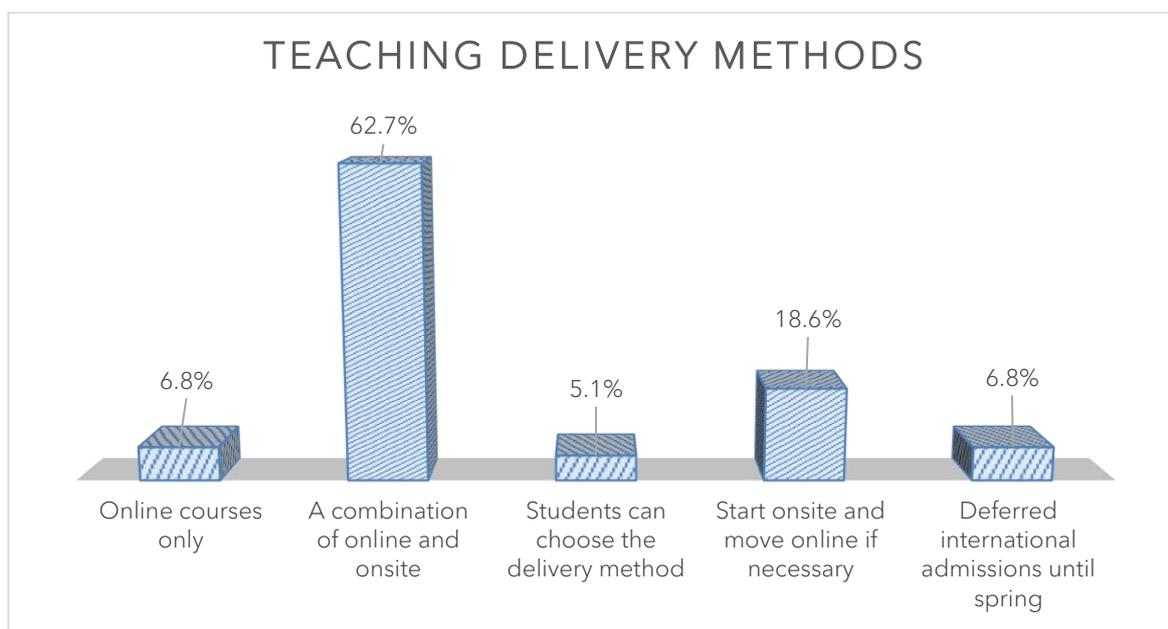
Research Outcomes

The results of our data analysis are presented in the following pages.

TEACHING DELIVERY METHODS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

During the fall 2020 semester 81%⁶ of institutions hosting international students will have programs with an onsite component, either combined with online instruction or as a starting attempt which will shift if needed. The remaining 19% combines universities which will offer only online programs⁷, will give their students a choice between various methods, or have opted to defer admission of internationals until the spring semester (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: Teaching delivery methods for international students, in fall 2020



According to respondents, international students will have the same instructional models (95%) and options (92%) as their Spanish peers.

INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION MEDIA

When asked about the media they will employ to promote the intercultural interaction of students, 67% of institutions responded they will use online communities. Among those, the largest group is composed by respondents who intend to create a virtual forum (41%), followed by universities that already had one (19%) and those that have recently created it (7%).

⁵ Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2000). Techniques to identify themes in qualitative data. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

⁶ All percentages have been rounded to whole numbers

⁷ We acknowledge the limitations of this research, where we are not differentiating between public, private, and online accredited institutions of higher education

Among those who stated they intend to promote intercultural interaction through other means (33%), we found a mix of institutions that have planned onsite activities, hybrid opportunities, and those that expect students to participate in other non-institutional online forums, such as: “international online events and seminars with our European partners”, existing student associations, buddy programs, Facebook groups, language and cultural exchange programs with locals, and “the associations ESN⁸ and AEGEE⁹”.

EXTRA-ACADEMIC LEARNING OUTCOMES

When asked about extra-academic outcomes, 61% of participants responded that they do have explicit or implicit personal development goals for their international students. Among the institutions that seek these effects, 70% have already revised them or intend to do so to adapt them to the new scenario while 30% do not consider that their current goals need to be modified.

IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL ENROLLMENT

On average, SIOs estimate that their institutions will lose 57% of the international students they had in the previous academic year (2019/20).

THE NEED FOR GOVERNMENT MEASURES

We included an item with a list of effective Government actions that had been suggested by SIOs in our April 2020 survey¹⁰. Now participants were asked to identify those that would help them attract increasing numbers of international students, from the list below,

- More flexibility in legal requirements and processes, including access to undergraduate degrees, obtaining student visas, and opening bank accounts
- A scholarship program for international students
- Coordinated European Commission actions for ERASMUS+ programs
- An increase in actions promoting Spain as a quality educational destination
- An economic stimulus package to help finance higher education institutions' initiatives
- Funding for the international and intercultural development of faculty and staff
- Issuing official measures that will help guarantee that the semesters will be completed

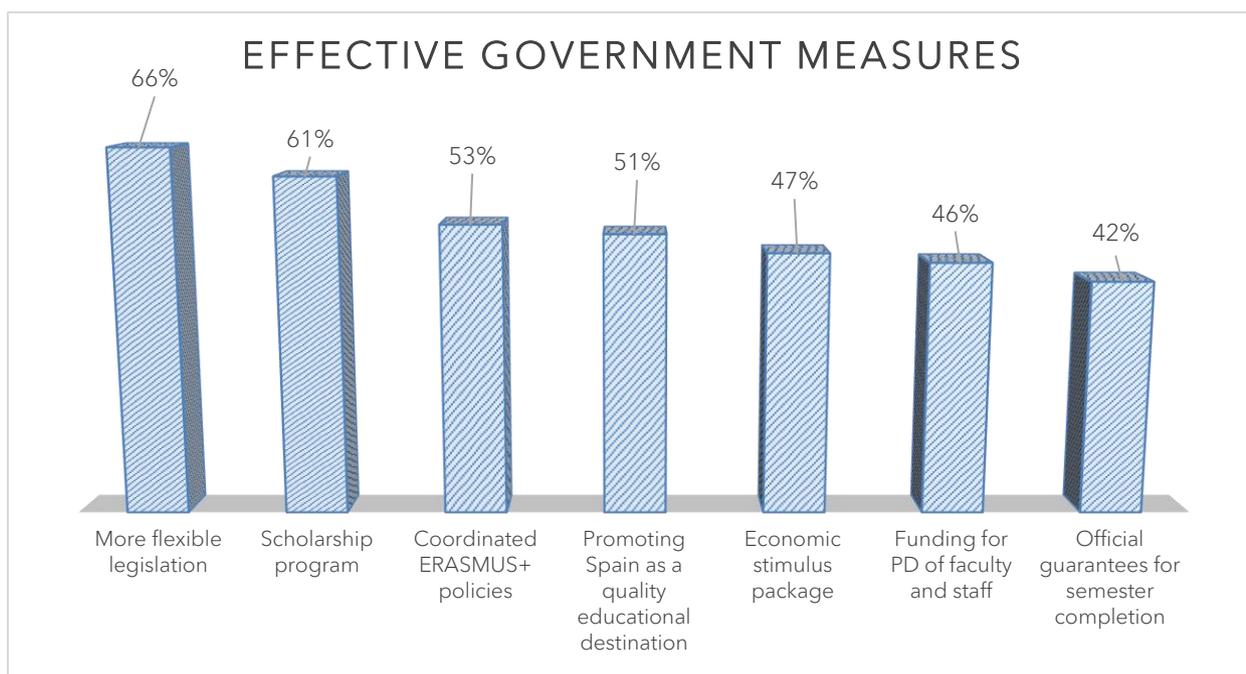
This survey item also allowed participants to suggest additional measures, an option which none of the respondents chose. The percentages of SIOs who supported each action are displayed in Chart 2.

⁸ More information on the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) can be found at <https://esn.org/>

⁹ More information on the Association des États Généraux des Étudiants de l'Europe (AEGEE) can be found at <https://www.aegEE.org/about-aegEE/>

¹⁰ See Spanish universities respond to the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020), at <http://www.spaineduprograms.es/wp-content/uploads/Spanish-Universities-Respond-to-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf>

Chart 2: Government measures that would help increase numbers of international students



Conclusion

According to SIOs, international students will have the same instructional methods (95%) and options (92%) as their Spanish peers. Including an onsite component within teaching delivery in the fall 2020 has likely been an institution-wide strategy adopted by rectors for their universities, and within that scenario it will be up SIOs to make that approach work for their cohort.

The same strategy has been adopted by other global leading destinations. In the UK, “97% of the universities surveyed said they will provide some in-person teaching to students at the start of term this year, whilst 87% are planning to provide in-person sporting, fitness and wellbeing activities”¹¹. While there will be challenges ahead it seems reasonable that countries with a history of high levels of incoming students strive to maintain an in-person component in their programs. With the term already on its way, we have been unable to find data on the success or failure of this strategy in the UK.

In August 2020, many US colleges started the semester with onsite teaching/learning to reverse their decision shortly after¹². But Spanish universities do not have residential campuses as those of institutions stateside. Most of the students are commuters still living at home, while internationals typically also live off-campus. That, along with strict regulations for participation and enforcing health measures for onsite components, should diminish contagion risks. Thus, the US trend would not necessarily apply to Spain.

¹¹ Studying in the UK and Coronavirus (COVID-19), Retrieved September 22, 2020, from: <https://www.studyin-uk.com/studying-in-the-uk-coronavirus/>

¹² Whitford, E. (2020). *Hundreds of colleges walk back fall reopening plans and opt for online-only instruction*. Retrieved August 13, from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/12/colleges-walk-back-fall-reopening-plans-and-opt-online-only-instruction>

The impact of this strategy on international programs in Spain remains uncertain, but our prediction is that working with lower numbers –respondents foresee a decrease in their international enrollment of 57% from last year’s figures– will allow dedicated staff to assist these students almost on an individual basis. Success during the first term, and documenting results to partners and interested candidates, will be especially important as it will determine each institution’s ability to raise numbers in the spring.

The experiential component has played a key role in the success of the country as an international destination; with our combination of diverse cultures, climate, food, art, monuments, and welcoming people as traits that appeal to students. According to the World Economic Forum’s travel and tourism ranking¹³, in 2019 Spain was the “most travel-ready nation” in the world. It has been the top destination for ERASMUS+ students for over a decade and is consistently listed in the Open Doors reports as the third receiving country for US study abroad students¹⁴.

The use of online communities (OCs) to promote intercultural interaction is far from widespread with only 19% of universities having used one and 7% having just created that type of forum, adding up to barely over a quarter of all institutions. However, an additional 41% of participants in the survey have realized the importance of these virtual spaces and plan to create an OC. In their 2019 study, De Pablos, Colás, López Gracia, and García-Lázaro¹⁵ confirmed that the use of digital platforms was already prevalent at Spanish institutions of higher education well before the pandemic. Learning how to apply the virtual resources available at those platforms, to promote positive intercultural interaction, should be a priority at all universities.

Well-structured facilitated OCs can provide the media and tools to connect with locals, to compensate for the currently restricted experiential activities, and more so if events in the upcoming months temporarily impose an all-digital scenario. Administrators at the remaining 33% of institutions, that will seek to promote immersion through onsite activities, should contemplate plans to develop virtual forums in case in-person options must be discarded.

OCs, which will exist in 67% of Spanish universities, could gain additional strength as institutions better understand how to align them with specific extra-academic meaningful outcomes. Extra-academic goals for student development typically include the changes in skills, attitudes, and behaviors associated with intercultural competence (IC), including elements such as “greater self-awareness, openness, respect, reflexivity, empathy, increased awareness of others, and in the end, greater cultural humility”¹⁶.

In the current scenario, for that 61% of universities with explicit or implicit personal development goals for their international enrollment, it will be important to find “ways to encourage students to

¹³ *These are the top countries for travel and tourism in 2019*. Retrieved September 21, 2020, from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/most-travel-tourism-competitive-countries-2019/>

¹⁴ Grasset, C. & García Menéndez, B. (2019). *The Economic impact of international students in Spain*. Retrieved September 17, 2020, from: <http://www.spaineduprograms.es/wp-content/uploads/Economic-Impact-of-International-Students-in-Spain-2018-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁵ De Pablos, J., Colás, M., López Gracia, A., & García-Lázaro, I. (2019). Los usos de las plataformas digitales en la enseñanza universitaria. Perspectivas desde la investigación educativa. REDU. Revista de Docencia Universitaria, 17(1), 59-72. Retrieved April 8, 2020 from: <https://doi.org/10.4995/redu.2019.11177>

¹⁶ Dearnorff, D. (2020). *Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies*. London: Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429244612>. Retrieved September 22, 2020, from: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780429244612>

become committed to meaningful goals¹⁷ complementing lesser onsite immersion with effective virtual technologies. While there is a consensus that studying abroad can promote intercultural competence, that link could be difficult to establish if more or all interaction is virtual. It will be interesting to see how OCs evolve and perform during the fall 2020 semester.

In sum, as Tal Frankfurt stated in a recent article, this crisis has fast-forwarded “the application of technological processes and thought patterns that would have taken many more years to adopt in a time of relative peace¹⁸. The implementation of technology across the delivery of some or all aspects of international programs, brought about by the pandemic, is much more than switching our resources to a virtual environment. Spanish institutions of higher education face the additional challenge of providing a cultural experience, that has played a key role in their combined success as educational destinations, in a new changed scenario.

Enrollment predictions made by SIOs for the upcoming academic year, with 57% less international students, will have a huge but not devastating impact. This is a global issue, that both sending and receiving countries are facing. However, how we manage the fall 2020 semester will have an enormous effect not only on spring 2021 but on future years. We should continuously ask ourselves whether and why we are losing our prospects to other global destinations.

This leads to our next point, which is the need for Government support to help our institutions of higher education recover and surpass their previous status. In April 2020 SIOs suggested what public resources would be most effective, and these now rank as follow according to the percentage of support received in the September 2020 survey.

More flexible legislation	66%
Scholarship program	61%
Coordinated ERASMUS+ policies	53%
Promoting Spain as a quality educational destination	51%
Economic stimulus package	47%
Funding for PD of faculty and staff	46%
Official guarantees for semester completion	42%

International educators in Spain have been advocating for “more flexible legislation” for years, especially for the processes of obtaining visas, accessing undergraduate degrees, and opening bank accounts. In our view this is a limitation that could be reduced by coordinating the roles of the numerous Government agencies involved and having them commit to lessen bureaucracy. Progress needs to be made in addressing this claim.

¹⁷ Trooboff, S., Cressey, W., & Monty, S. (2004). Does Study Abroad Grading Motivate Students?. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10(1), 201-217, (p.216). <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v10i1.136>

¹⁸ Frankfurt, T (2020). *How The Pandemic Could Forever Change Higher Education*. Retrieved September 8, from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2020/05/08/how-the-pandemic-could-forever-change-higher-education/#1f98b97b7b93>

Efforts to “promote Spain as an educational destination” are addressed by at least two Government agencies. The SEPIE sponsors opportunities to participate in international education fairs worldwide for all accredited Spanish institutions of higher education. In the past months, the agency has moved rapidly to organize subsidized online events for universities to publicize their programs and communicate directly with interested international candidates. According to the representative of a participating institution, referring to a showcase for Latin America earlier this month, “it was a well-organized and successful fair at a fraction of the cost and time that traveling to that world region would have required”¹⁹.

ICEX²⁰, also a Government agency, continues to launch actions to promote Spain’s educational exports, including financing studies that raise awareness on the relevance of this sector to the Spanish economy and sponsoring specialized training to improve the effectiveness of our international education professionals. In addition, through SEPIE, faculty and staff can apply for funded ERASMUS+ mobility not only to and from European countries but to destinations throughout the world²¹. These opportunities are also made available to candidates coming to Spain from accredited institutions in all world regions. All these initiatives should be acknowledged and stimulated within the universities, that can use them to advance their internationalization.

The combined efforts of SEPIE and ICEX address two of the items on the list of *Effective Government Measures* (Chart 2): Promoting Spain as a quality educational destination, and funding for the professional development of faculty and staff. It would be important to evaluate whether institutions of higher education are maximizing the use of public resources that are already available to them, and whether more means are needed. As for SIOs’ request for “Coordinated European Commission actions for ERASMUS+ programs”, it could reflect a petition to the European Commission for more exchange resources with countries outside the EHEA.

The Spanish Government co-finances ERASMUS+ higher education programs, allocating 29 million euros each year for students attending European universities and one additional million for mobility to and from Latin America. Yet more resources, in the form of an “Economic stimulus package” (see Chart 2), might be needed during the present crisis. How to endow additional public funds ensuring these will produce a high ROI, through the growth of international enrollment and its economic and social impacts on the communities where universities are located, is a complex matter that would require evaluation, planning and field-wide agreement.

In the past months SIOs have assessed their divisions and prepared them for a new and challenging reality. For those who have the vision to reposition their institutions in the new global chessboard and make use of all the resources that are already available, the opportunities are tremendous. But, in a pandemic, this is not only a fight for each university. Institutions of all types and sizes must work together and continue to collaborate with Government agencies, to ensure all resources are aptly employed to attract increasing numbers of quality international students. Not doing so will come at great economic and social costs, not only to universities but to their extended communities throughout Spain.

¹⁹ Ms. B. Valencia, UFV Promoción Internacional, personal communication, September 28, 2020

²⁰ Additional information on ICEX España Exportación e Inversiones can be found at <https://www.icex.es/icex/es/index.html>

²¹ Mr. José Manuel González Canino, Director de la Unidad de Educación Superior at the SEPIE, personal communication, September 30, 2020



Acknowledgements

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Dr. Cristina Grasset / [Spain Education Programs](#) / In Madrid, on September 30, 2020