Spanish Universities Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Executive Summary

Spain is at the forefront of countries facing the COVID-19 pandemic, and its universities have been some of the first to address the emergency needs of their international students. After reacting to the initial immediate challenges and having adapted to the new scenario, senior internationalization officers (SIOs) have focused on strategic planning. Their goal will be to regain and advance their place in the world, in a hard-hit country that is also a leading educational destination.

With the support of the Spanish agency for the internationalization of education (SEPIE), we collected the responses of SIOs to a survey on the three sequential stages that universities have faced, which we defined as: reaction to the emergency, adapting to the new scenario, and strategic planning for an uncertain future.

Eighty seven percent of Spanish universities implemented exceptional measures to protect their international population prior to the declaration of the country-wide *State of Alert* (SOA). An additional 10% implemented actions at the time when the SOA was announced by the Government, and only 3% of the institutions reacted later. More than half of respondents (54%) placed *communicating with their international students* at the top of their initial priorities and for 42% the main effort was to *provide access to online courses*. When asked about their health and safety protocols, 96% of participants expressed that this experience has served to improve their emergency procedures for international students.

According to SIOs, students have continued taking their courses online at 99% of the institutions. As for ongoing communication between the international units of the universities and their students, 99% continue their interaction online while 1% do so over the phone. At half of the universities (53%), more than a third of their internationals have decided to remain in Spain.

Regarding the return to on-campus classes, 40% of SIOs are planning for either fall 2020 or earlier while the remaining 60% stated the date is uncertain. When asked about resources that will be available to their unit for the next academic year, 88% of respondents do not anticipate a reduction even in an economic crisis scenario while 12% are planning for lesser means. On the most-efficient Government measures to minimize a potential decrease in the numbers of international students, respondents favored a *stimulus package for global initiatives of institutions* and *facilitating access to degrees and visas*.

Suggestions for additional measures toward increasing international enrollment included: improving the quality of the current regulations, increasing Government funding, informing effectively, and transforming educational experiences.

Spanish SIOs understand that in the new global scenario organizations will need to ensure the health and safety of their communities, as they come up with flexible and accessible programs that will make learning outcomes possible in an uncertain future. To help Spain maintain and even advance its place in the world as a leading educational destination, this effort must be assumed collectively.

Introduction

Spain is at the forefront of countries facing the COVID-19 pandemic, and its universities have been some of the first to confront the emergency needs of their international students. After reacting to the initial immediate challenges and having adapted to the new scenario, senior internationalization officers (SIOs) have focused on strategic planning. Their challenge will be to regain and advance their place in the world, in a hard-hit country that is also a leading educational destination.

On April 1st, 2020, we requested the support of SEPIE[1], the Spanish agency for the internationalization of education, to gather data from university SIOs on their reaction, adaptation, and strategic planning. The results of our data collection and analysis are detailed in the following paragraphs.

Scope of the Study and Expected Outputs

SEPIE sent out our survey to the 101 accredited institutions of higher education enrolling international students during spring 2020. In four days, we gathered n72 responses for a 70% participation rate. Our main goal in gathering and analyzing these data was that our findings would inform:

→ Spanish universities, helping them plan for positive change

→ the global international education community, sharing experiences and perspectives they can draw upon

→ national governments, 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 recruitment

→ public agencies, supporting the quality and advance of international education

Research Design, Methodology and Methods

We wanted to address three sequential stages that universities have faced, which we defined as: reaction to the emergency, adapting to the new scenario, and strategic planning for an uncertain future. We employed a mixed-methods approach, using a survey to collect data which we analyzed performing statistical and theme analysis. The quantitative analysis was performed using tools provided by the survey's digital platform[2]; while pawing[3] and term repetition with word-processing software[4] served to identify themes emerging from the qualitative data.

Research Outcomes

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

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[1] Servicio Español para la internacionalización de la Educación, at http://sepie.es/internationalisation.html
[2] All percentages rounded to the closest whole number

[3] 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*

[4] Vs. employing more sophisticated software such as Nvivo, ATLAS.ti or Nud·ist, which would only have been efficient for a much larger database and sample.

REACTION TO THE EMERGENCY

We asked SIOs about the point in time when they had implemented exceptional measures, to assess their institutions' level of awareness and capacity to react when the health and safety of their international students was at risk. Eighty seven percent of Spanish universities implemented exceptional measures to protect their international population prior to the declaration of the country-wide *State of Alert* (SOA). An additional 10% implemented actions at the time when the SOA was announced by the Government, and only 3% of the institutions reacted later.

When asked to choose what type of support/service had been their priority during the first reaction phase, 54% of respondents placed *communicating with their international students* at the top of their list and for 42% the main effort had been to *provide access to online courses*. Several participants noted that both had been equally important and indicated they had also helped secure flights home, found alternate housing if needed, provided access to counseling, and assigned mentors.
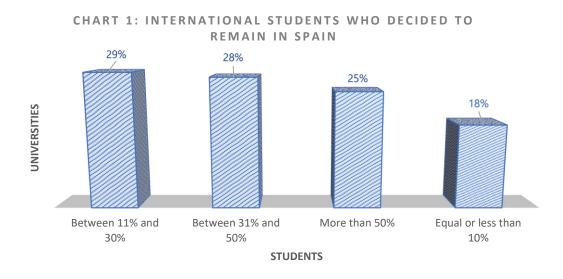
When asked about their health and safety protocols, 96% of participants expressed that this experience has served to improve their emergency procedures for international students.

ADAPTING TO THE NEW SCENARIO

Although the use of digital platforms by Spanish universities was already prevalent[5], we wanted to learn how many institutions had already transitioned to all instruction and evaluation through online media. According to SIOs, students have continued taking their courses online at 99% of the institutions.

As for ongoing communication between the international units of the universities and their students, 99% continue their interaction online, while 1% do so over the phone.

To learn what percentage of international students had decided to remain in Spain vs. return to their home countries, we gave participants four choices ranging from less than 10% to more than 50%. The results[6] are shown in Chart 1.

CHART 1: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WHO DECIDED TO REMAIN IN SPAIN

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[5] 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
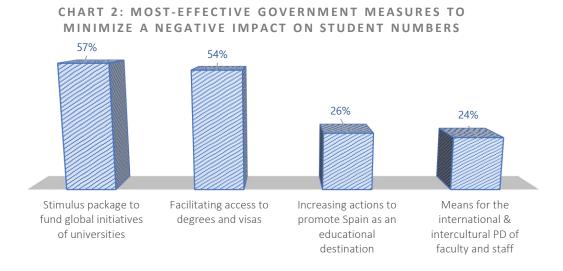
[6] These data could change over the course of the next few weeks

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Regarding the return to on-campus classes, 40% of SIOs are planning for either fall 2020 or earlier, while the remaining 60% stated they do not know. These percentages are likely to change within the next few weeks as reports on the pandemic's effects in Spain continue to be updated and once the status of the country-wide home SOA has a clear end date.

When asked about future resources that will be available to their unit for the 2020-2021 academic year, 88% of respondents stated they do not anticipate a reduction even in an economic crisis scenario, while 12% are planning for lesser means.

On the most-efficient Government measures to minimize a potential decrease in the numbers of international students in Spain, respondents[7] favored a *stimulus package for global initiatives of institutions* and *facilitating access to degrees and visas*. The four categories were rated as shown in Chart 2.

CHART 2: MOST-EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT MEASURES TO MINIMIZE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON STUDENT NUMBERS

Stimulus package to fund global initiatives of universities	Facilitating access to degrees and visas	Increasing actions to promote Spain as an educational destination	Means for the international & intercultural PD of faculty and staff
57%	54%	26%	24%

The final item in our survey was an open-ended question, where SIOs were asked to suggest additional measures to increase the number of international students attending their institution. The predominant themes emerging from responses to this question are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Improving the quality of regulations

The need to improve regulations emerges as a prevailing theme within two contexts: a request for increased administrative efficiency and the need for greater flexibility in all bureaucratic procedures. Visa-related themes surface as a problem to address and as an example for the necessity for more flexible regulations. To address this specific issue, SIOs suggest establishing an online process[8] and creating a nation-wide support center with easy access for students and institutions.

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[7] Respondents were asked to pick two from four possible options
[8] One of the problems has been that students need to travel long distances to request their visas. That, under the present circumstances will be impossible to do. An online process was suggested as a potential solution.

Additional suggestions include:

→ Waiving the current quotas of international students admitted to degrees

→ Easing the admissions and residency bureaucracy

→ Granting flexibility to combine on-site with on-line instruction

→ Allowing students to open bank accounts

Increasing Government funding

This theme appears both in connection with the need to increase actions promoting Spain as a quality destination and a suggestion to grant international students the access to scholarships.

SIOs see the need for increased promotional actions portraying a secure quality destination, with the means for international students to achieve their learning goals even in scenarios of global emergency. Their suggested focus for these actions is:

→ Placing the emphasis on quality

→ Adopting and publicizing common protocols for Health and Safety

→ Promoting flexible programs

Respondents also advocate for several funding initiatives that will allow institutions to attract exceptional students who are economically disadvantaged, such as: offering merit-based scholarships, financing acceptance in less-accessible locations (e.g., islands), and negotiating student loans with banks.

Informing effectively

This theme emerges in connection with the relevance of quality and clarity of information to be provided to international students considering attending study abroad or ERASMUS exchange programs and those reflecting on the possibility of completing a degree in Spain. Respondents specifically suggest the need for coordinated European efforts to clarify how the ERASMUS programs will operate and what participating students should expect.

Some of the specific measures SIOs deem relevant are:

→ Having strong health and safety protocols in place

→ Promoting quality

→ Publicizing clear information

→ Coordinating European efforts

→ Defining a common agreement for ERASMUS

Transforming learning experiences

According to respondents, their strategic planning is now focused on improving the current structure and outcomes, allowing flexibility for students to combine on-site with on-line experiences, and developing standards of good practice for on-line education.

While the use of digital platforms in Spain was widespread, these have now become the foundation for instructional programs and evaluations as well as for communications and procedures with student populations that are no longer on campus. In this scenario a lot can be learned from fully online Spanish universities where, as their representatives expressed, there has been no need to transition to a new or enhanced system.

Conclusion

Spanish SIOs have identified regulations and bureaucracy as roadblocks in their efforts to attract increasing numbers of students. In our survey, 54% of respondents chose facilitating access to degrees and visas as one of the two most-effective government measures for the growth of this sector. And, the need to improve quality of regulations was a theme that emerged across responses from the analysis of our qualitative data.

While international educators understand that legislation needs to be applied, Government officials should assess the potential lack of quality of current rules and find ways to facilitate compliance. Participants suggest that allowing for online access both to the visa request process and Government-sponsored media providing advice and support services, are measures that would help address this challenge.

Popular destination countries will now be competing for a smaller pool of students considering the possibility of going abroad. Spain will also have to overcome the enormous impact of the pandemic on its population, which has made headlines worldwide. Candidates, now looking at options closer to home, might no longer be prepared to endure complicated visa procedures and or choose destinations where bureaucracy will hunt them before and after arrival. Facilitating access and easing bureaucracy will be prerequisites if we want our figures to be anywhere close to where they used to be. It will also be important to add flexibility to procedures, programs, dates, and on-site requirements.

"If countries want to return to a major role in international education quicker than they otherwise would then assistance from government in the form of ramping up the industry and subsidizing some student movement will become very important" (¶9)[9]. Much in line with Dr. Marginsson's statement, 57% of our survey respondents identified a *Stimulus package to fund global initiatives of universities* as one of the two Government measures that would help minimize a potential decrease in international students' numbers.
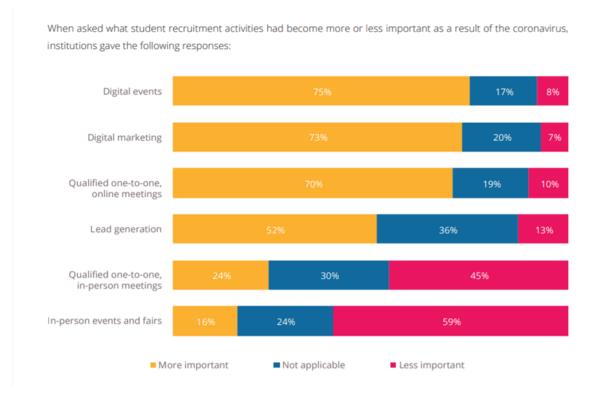
A stimulus package should be directed to enhancing recruitment campaigns promoting Spain as a safe and flexible destination. SIOs also suggest merit-based scholarships as a specific action to be funded with Government resources, which would serve to attract excelling but financially-strapped candidates that would otherwise not be able to study away from their home country.

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[9] Simon Marginson in Bothwell, Ellie. *Coronavirus: Global student flows to suffer 'massive hit' for years,* Times Higher Education, March 22, 2020. Retrieved April 2, 2020, from:
https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/coronavirus-global-student-flows-suffer-massive-hit-years

The new scenario has not only impacted institutions of higher education and their current enrollment but has also influenced how we need to reach out to candidates to recruit them. In a recent survey, QS asked university representatives worldwide "what student recruitment activities had become more or less important as a result of the coronavirus" (p. 11)[10]. Their responses are displayed in Chart 3.

CHART 3: WHAT STUDENT RECRUITMENT ACTIVITIES HAVE BECOME MORE OR LESS IMPORTANT AS A RESULT OF THE CORONAVIRUS?

When asked what student recruitment activities had become more or less important as a result of the coronavirus, institutions gave the following responses:

Activity	More important	Not applicable	Less important
Digital events	75%	17%	8%
Digital marketing	73%	20%	7%
Qualified one-to-one, online meetings	70%	19%	10%
Lead generation	52%	36%	13%
Qualified one-to-one, in-person meetings	24%	30%	45%
In-person events and fairs	16%	24%	59%

■ More important　■ Not applicable　■ Less important

Adapted from QS, *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Global Higher Education*
https://www.qs.com/portfolio-items/the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-on-global-higher-education/ (p. 11)

In Spain, both the public agencies and associations that have been supporting international recruitment efforts (such as SEPIE, the ICEX, EDUESPANA, and PEI[11]) and all universities should consider ways in which attending global conferences and fairs can be substituted by online events, digital marketing, and video-conference meetings. Innovative organizations, such as Verto Education in the US, are already offering online college fairs to their gap year candidates[12]. While it is too early to assess how successful these actions will be, waiting to see what works might prove to be a costly strategy.

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10 The Impact of the Coronavirus on Global Higher Education. Retrieved April 2, 2020, from:
https://www.qs.com/portfolio-items/the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-on-global-higher-education/

[11] Profesionales por la Educación Internacional (PEI) at: https://profesioneduinternacional.org/

[12] "Verto Education is excited to announce a Virtual College Fair on April 17th from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. ET. You are invited to attend. Verto is expecting to have 40 colleges and universities attending the virtual fair". Personal communication from Michael Kabbaz, on April 10, 2020

In 2013 Natali Helberger researched how digital technologies can make "consumer information more effective" (p. 31)[13]. While her paper focuses on law and policy, her findings are applicable to international education,

> One important insight from behavioural research is the importance of framing and presenting information in a way that corresponds to the personal information needs of consumers. Doing so can have positive effects on the attractiveness, usability and persuasiveness of information (p. 48)[14].

Framing and presenting information on opportunities available in Spain is more important than ever, as health and safety have become decision-making factors for students considering an international experience, their families, and their home countries and institutions.

Distributing news and reports, with usable and persuasive information, to stakeholders worldwide is a task to be led by the Spanish public administrations. There should be additional resources assigned to agencies, such as SEPIE, to develop and distribute clear and accurate information on Spain as an educational destination.

In our analysis, we found that 96% of Spanish universities have improved their health and safety protocols as the result of this experience. Spain has faced a much greater challenge than many other countries, being among the first 3 to face the pandemic and leading in the percentage of fatalities. We must now transmit our readiness to the world. Promoting country-wide safety protocols and or health and safety standards of good practice, that all institutions of higher education would voluntarily abide by, would be a good starting point.

Spanish universities demonstrated their ability to adapt, by providing online learning for 99% of their students promptly. Now is the time to design programs that will fulfill the new needs of internationals, by combining that digital foundation with unique cultural and experiential elements. We predict more demand for programs where a significant part of the work can be fulfilled online, with opportunities to interact and work on projects with local students, and including an intensive on-site component that can be completed on-demand at flexible dates within the semester. In the short term, this will allow fall students to defer their travel until November 2020 when international education worldwide will have found its new normal.

The authors of a recent McKinsey report stated that "universities were at the forefront of some of the most proactive responses to the virus" (¶1)[15], and this certainly applies to institutions of higher education in Spain. However, the challenge is far from over and in the new global scenario organizations will need to ensure the health and safety of their communities, as they come up with flexible and accessible programs that will make learning outcomes possible in an uncertain future. To help Spain maintain and even advance its place in the world as a leading educational destination, this effort must be assumed collectively.

Dr. Cristina Grasset / Spain Education Programs / In Madrid, on April 15, 2020

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[13] Helberger, Natali, Form Matters: Informing Consumers Effectively (November 15, 2013). Amsterdam Law School Research Paper No. 2013-71. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2354988
[14] Retrieved March 28, 2020, from: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2354988
[15] Illanes, Law, Mendy, Sanghvi, and Sarakatsannis. *Coronavirus and the campus: How can US higher education organize to respond?* March 2020. Retrieved April 11, 2020, from: https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/coronavirus-and-the-campus-how-can-us-higher-education-organize-to-respond#