Internationalization of Higher Education in Universities in the Global South during COVID-19: A Case Study of a Mexican University

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ABSTRACT

The internationalization of higher education (IHE) is beneficial for students, universities, and society. Hence, higher education institutions (HEIs) carry out diverse strategies in this regard; mobility being the most important one. But the outbreak of COVID-19 has harmed internationalization activities, especially in universities in the Global South. The objective of this case study was to describe

the strategies for internationalization that a Mexican university adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using qualitative analysis, findings reveal two main themes: the response of the International Affairs Office and the future of internationalization. Implications include the potential for collaboration among stakeholders and the use of technology to deal with uncertain times. Future research may inquire into students' perspectives and development of intercultural competencies through virtual mobility.

Introduction

The internationalization of higher education (IHE) phenomenon has received more attention in recent years due to its benefits for students, institutions, and society. IHE is a response of higher education institutions (HEIs) to globalization needs and challenges (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013; Oranga et al., 2020). Buckner (2019) uncovered that internationalization is "one manifestation of a 'global cultural frame' that is affecting education in diverse ways" (p. 316), making higher education unfold in different manners. It emerged four decades ago as a phenomenon moved by political, economic, socio-cultural, and academic reasons (de Wit, 2020a; de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Bustos-Aguirre, 2020) evolving and gaining impetus over the last 20 years (Knight, 2020). During the last few years, research on internationalization developed as one of the most important fields in higher education studies (Bedenlier et al., 2018). A vast number of studies on IHE are related to how it is carried out (Buckner, 2019; Knight, 2020; Seeber et al., 2020) showing that student mobility is the most requested activity (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013; Dias et al., 2021; de Wit, 2020b; de Wit & Altbach, 2020). However, the COVID-19 outbreak brought international travel and student mobility to an abrupt halt (Shu-Jing et al., 2020). Several universities in

the Global South, for example, in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, implemented online activities allowing students to participate in virtual mobility (Bustos-Aguirre & Cano, 2021; Perrotta, 2021; Woicolesco et al., 2022).

This paper describes the strategies for internationalization adopted by a Mexican university during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to inform the practice of IHE during the disruption of the pandemic.

Problem and Purpose Statements

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, HEIs were already dealing with strong challenges for IHE. For example, Mexican HEIs coped with competition for attracting talent, better brand positioning, focusing on international publishing, using English as a teaching and research language, creating collaboration models, enhancing ways to increase student and staff mobility, generating joint investment models, and managing the issue of interculturality as a transversal axis (Barrientos Amador & Cartín Quesada, 2020; de Wit, 2020a).

The effects of the COVID-19 outbreak have not stopped and will continue impacting the work that HEIs forged in previous decades regarding internationalization (Lemoine & Richardson, 2020); student mobility was undermined by the spread of the pandemic, particularly in universities in the Global South (Gimenez, 2020; Woicolesco et al., 2021). In the case of Mexico, the negative impacts in the medium and long term are not yet known (Malo Álvarez et al., 2020). For example, limitations on travel and the closure of embassies and consulates impacted students planning to study abroad; international students could not experience cultural immersion in the host countries. In addition, the reduction of financial resources for scholarships and support caused the postponement or cancellation of students intending to study abroad. Universities in Mexico grappled with the uncertain conditions brought by the pandemic outbreak, and the resulting restrictive measures hitting the performance of IHE (Bustos-Aguirre & Cano, 2021; Castiello-Gutiérrez & Camacho Lizárraga, 2021).

Given this situation, it is time for HEIs to make changes and reinvent their strategies and activities to continue with the internationalization work, allowing students, institutions, and society to reap the benefits of IHE. This qualitative study aims to understand how a Mexican university implemented strategies for internationalization during the COVID-19 pandemic. The comprehension of

strategies would open the options to continue with IHE during contingency situations. The research questions driving this study were:

- What strategies for IHE are being used because of the COVID-19 outbreak?
- In what ways is IHE carried out during COVID-19 lockdown?

Literature Review

Despite IHE arising several decades ago, its concept remains fuzzy as are the processes for its implementation (Oranga et al., 2020). Knight (2008) described IHE as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 21). In this sense, IHE is a means to improve the quality of teaching, research, and service to society (de Wit, 2020a; de Wit & Altbach, 2020) boosting the functions of higher education. By doing internationalization, HEIs primarily seek three benefits: to enhance reputation, increase student learning, and improve the quality of teaching (Buckner, 2019; de Wit, 2020b). It is worth recognizing that the greatest benefit of IHE is the transformation of graduates into global citizens rather than national citizens (Oranga et al., 2020). As a result, graduates could meet the intercultural competencies that the worldwide labor market demands (Atiku & Fields, 2020; Czarnecka & Szymura-Tyc, 2016). This is precisely why Mexico's HEIs perform internationalization to improve the quality of education (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013). By developing students' international awareness, they prepare graduates to work in the globalized labor market (Berry & Taylor, 2014; Lizárraga González, 2022). Even though IHE has a long history in Mexico, there is scarce research about Mexican HEIs performing internationalization (Berry & Taylor, 2014) and limited information about the progress made by such institutions in this regard (González Bello, 2016; López López, 2016). This study seeks to address this gap in the literature.

The Relevance of IHE

The benefits generated with IHE cover not only the academic realm but also the social and economic aspects (Nyame & Abedi-Boafo, 2020). For example, through mobility students develop skills that will influence their future job performance, thus impacting organizational outcomes (Shu-Jing et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, perceptions still diffuse about the competencies and the values that internationalization promotes and its effect on the substantive functions of higher education (Oranga et al., 2020). This is due to the lack of validated indicators to measure such impact (Pedraza Nájar, 2016).

In Mexico, universities use internationalization to improve the substantive functions of education (Bustos-Aguirre & Cano, 2021). Several Mexican universities have identified mobility as key to enriching the curriculum and providing their students with opportunities to develop intercultural competencies. This is achieved through agreements with foreign HEIs to add programs and internships abroad to their national educational offering (Romero León & Lafont Castillo, 2022). Thus, by having such agreements, Mexican institutions seek to help their students develop international awareness through cultural immersion in host countries (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013; Berry & Taylor, 2014; Drabier et al., 2020). Likewise, when Mexican institutions receive students from abroad, domestic students, as well as professors, are exposed to cultural exchange, generating intercultural knowledge and development (Lizárraga González, 2022).

Mexican universities also use internationalization as a marketing strategy to enhance their branding and raise the institution's reputation for competitiveness in national and global markets (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013; Berry & Taylor, 2014). In doing so, institutions seek to attract talented students.

It is worth remembering that IHE development reached the point of creating a new industry (de Wit, 2020b) which was estimated in 2016 to be worth around US $300 billion from global student mobility (Choudaha, 2019). Such mobility generates revenues for all stakeholders in different societies globally (Oranga et al., 2020; de Wit & Altbach, 2020). As a result, a climate of competition appeared among universities (Nyame & Abedi-Boafo, 2020) in the last decade, trying to attract five million talented international students (de Wit, 2020b). The estimation for 2030—before the pandemic—was above 6.8 million international students (Choudaha, 2019). However, for Mexican HEIs, international students do not represent a source of income because outgoing mobility exceeds incoming mobility by 50% (ANUIES, 2017).

Implementing IHE

Multiple HEIs pay strong attention to the development of internationalization (González Bello, 2016) by including it into both their mission

and vision (Raby, 2020), integrating it into strategic planning (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013), and investing resources in this regard (Altbach, 2010). Several universities in Mexico follow this trend (González Bello, 2016; López López, 2016). A survey reported that 45% of Mexican HEIs included internationalization in their mission, 89% in their institutional development plan, 70% have a specific section for internationalization within their institutional plan, and 40% have developed a strategic plan for IHE (Gacel-Ávila & Vázquez-Niño, 2022). However, the successful planning of internationalization must consider several external and internal factors, not just including internationalization as part of the institutional identity.

External factors are those molding the context and impacting any type of institution. These factors are social, cultural, economic, and political forces at local and global levels (Barrientos Amador & Cartín Quesada, 2020). Such external factors have a substantial impact on the way of planning internationalization, making education systems differ from country to country (González Bello, 2016). Mexico, as part of Latin America, faces many challenges such as poverty, crime, social inequality, an unstable economy, and fragile democracy (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013). On the other hand, internal factors are those governing forces specific to an institution like policy formulation, implementation of strategies, and leadership (Oranga et al., 2020). These elements will enhance or hinder the implementation of internationalization in each institution.

The process of implementing internationalization is complex because it involves multiple dimensions (i.e., institutional autonomy, academic freedom, branding reputation, and ranking of programs) as well as stakeholders at various levels (Camacho Lizárraga, 2017; de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Oranga et al., 2020). Therefore, several HEIs have an office dedicated to managing such a process (Raby, 2020). The person leading such an office makes decisions to build partnerships, create strategies, coordinate international activities, and orchestrate solutions for unusual situations (Heyl & Tullbane, 2012; Taylor, 2010). Thus, the leader of the International Affairs Office is critical for strengthening and expanding internationalization and achieving institutional objectives.

Some Mexican private universities have professionalized the management of internationalization by establishing a functional area for this purpose (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013). For successful management of IHE, International

Affairs Office leaders must consider external and internal factors and all stakeholders before, during, and after internationalization unfolds. The analysis of such factors and the engagement of stakeholders provide the basis for determining strategies and activities for the implementation of internationalization.

Strategies and Activities

For the implementation of internationalization, HEIs use two strategies: internationalization at home and internationalization abroad. The first one refers to on-campus activities (Bustos-Aguirre, 2020; Gimenez, 2020) to "develop international or global understanding and intercultural skills" (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 45). This strategy eliminates travel and living expenses in a foreign country, allowing a more significant number of students to have an international experience. In Mexico, most universities allocate resources to provide courses in a second and third language as part of the internationalization at home strategy (Berry & Taylor, 2014).

Universities worldwide implement internationalization at home through activities, such as adopting a global vision into curriculum content, co-curriculum activities, offering distance education and online classes with the collaboration of abroad universities, publishing research in international journals, collaborating in international research teams, visiting lecturers and professors, and offering international seminars (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013; de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Gimenez, 2020; Pedraza Nájar, 2016). Before the pandemic, Mexican HEIs sporadically focused on these activities for IHE, thus, neglecting the internationalization at home strategy (Gacel-Ávila, 2020).

Mexican HEIs should devote efforts to the internationalization of the curriculum (Bustos-Aguirre, 2020) to allow domestic students to develop intercultural awareness. Institutions must consider the challenges that the internationalization of curriculum represents. The first challenge is professors' resistance to making changes in the structure of the courses (Oranga et al., 2020). The second challenge is language. Just as in globalization, the English language is fundamental to participating in the IHE (Shu-Jing et al., 2020) but, in Latin America, most faculty and staff lack language skills (Berry & Taylor, 2014). A third challenge is the adaptation of the curriculum to meet the needs of domestic and international students at the same time (Oranga et al., 2020). The development of the curriculum content becomes complex when considering cultural, religious,

and political differences. The fourth challenge is that no national policies promote such activity (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013).

The second strategy for IHE is internationalization abroad, "understood as all forms of education across borders: mobility of people, projects, programmes and providers" (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 45). Some activities related to this strategy include studying a language abroad, training faculty abroad, student and scholars exchange, and international master and doctoral programs for international students (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013; Pedraza Nájar, 2016). Such activities receive much attention from HEIs (de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

For the internationalization abroad strategy, the two activities that best work for Mexican HEIs are summer exchange programs and dual degree programs (Camacho Lizárraga, 2017). Summer programs have lower costs because the program's length allows more students to participate in cultural immersion. Dual degree programs are longer and entail higher costs. The benefit of this type of program is students graduate from two institutions; that is, the student gets one degree from the home institution and another degree from the host institution. Regarding this strategy of internationalization abroad, Mexican universities focus on having various programs for students as well as for academic staff, mostly with European and North American institutions (López López, 2016). It is worth mentioning that among Mexican students in mobility, 50% of them opt to go to the United States (ANUIES, 2017).

In support of the activity of mobility, governments and institutions formulate policies to facilitate the crossing of borders to create and transfer knowledge (Shu-Jing et al., 2020; Veerasamy, 2021). In Mexico, *Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología* (CONACYT, National Council of Science and Technology), a government agency, is the most important promoter of IHE (González Bello, 2016; López López, 2016), yet, Mexican government initiatives are still few (Berry & Taylor, 2014; Bustos-Aguirre & Cano, 2021).

Despite the number of activities for each strategy in the implementation of IHE, its development is in two directions: research and publications, and student and staff mobility (Gimenez, 2020).

Research and Publications. One of the activities of IHE is to carry out international research, which is a collaborative activity due to its nature of creating knowledge through sharing (Woldegiyorgis et al., 2018). This is possible by

eliciting opportunities for joint research to address communities' problems (Gimenez, 2020). A rationale for conducting and collaborating on international research is the complex social challenges that go beyond the perspective and study capacity of a single institution (Woldegiyorgis et al., 2018). In the case of Mexico, several HEIs collaborate in international research (Berry & Taylor, 2014) allowing them to strengthen research quality and researchers' productivity (Woldegiyorgis et al., 2018). When participating in international joint research, Mexican universities also become a part of an international network, getting the possibility to apply for international funding (Berry & Taylor, 2014; Pedraza Nájar, 2016).

Student and Staff Mobility. Mexican HEIs' approach to IHE is based on mobility (Bustos-Aguirre & Cano, 2021). Mobility refers to students, professors, or administrative staff migrating to acquire a degree or training in an academic program in a host institution (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013). Institutions of higher education promote mobility through inbound and outbound programs. Inbound programs are those that admit international students while outbound programs are education programs abroad (Raby, 2020). The inbound programs of Mexican universities result in international students accounting for less than 0.5% of the student body (Bustos-Aguirre, 2020). On the other hand, there are several activities for student mobility related to outbound programs, such as exchange programs and dual degrees. Although there is a wide range of outbound programs, only 0.75% of the Mexican student body enrolls in such programs due to the costs and lack of language skills (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013; Berry & Taylor, 2014; Bustos-Aguirre, 2020; de Wit, 2020a; de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

Mexican HEIs' internationalization efforts are insufficient to provide students and researchers equal opportunities for access. A key point to note is that though Mexican universities have agreements with institutions abroad for the exchange of students, professors, and researchers, more than half of such agreements are not active (Berry & Taylor, 2014).

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on IHE

Before the pandemic, HEIs' expectations of mobility were good because the number of students seeking international programs was increasing (Oranga et al., 2020). However, with the emergence of COVID-19 and the travel bans, such expectations plummeted. In Mexico, seven of the 35 universities registered in the *Asociación Mexicana para la Educación Internacional* (AMPEI, Mexican

Association for International Education) continued with face-to-face internationalization activities during the second half of 2020 (Lizárraga González, 2022). Among Mexican universities offering international programs, 73% canceled student mobility and 75% canceled the programs for academia (Gacel-Ávila & Vázquez-Niño, 2022).

Universities took action to continue promoting IHE during campus closures. For example, Cordova and colleagues (2021) reported the response of eight private universities in Latin America to pandemic restrictions. Such institutions faced the situation with a strategic renewal based on reinforcing previous alliances. Several institutions in Argentina and Brazil implemented strategies based on the use of technology to give students access to international virtual experiences (Perrotta, 2021; Woicolesco et al., 2021, 2022). In Mexico, 76% of universities started to implement internationalization at home (Gacel-Ávila & Vázquez-Niño, 2022).

Concerning research and publications, the crisis caused by COVID-19 created a window of opportunity to return to cooperation (de Wit, 2020a), pushing universities and researchers to collaborate and exchange knowledge as never seen before in the world's educational systems (Barrientos Amador & Cartín Quesada, 2020). For Mexican HEIs, this collaboration resulted in content and structure advances and transformations like designing digital applications and implementing orientation campaigns for the population (Malo Álvarez, 2020).

Methodology

The epistemology underpinning this study was constructionism, which asserts that knowledge is contextually constructed from people's interactions in their world; and the theoretical perspective was interpretivism, which attempts to elucidate human and social reality (Crotty, 2012). A case study was used because it allowed a holistic view and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The single case study focuses on particularity (Stake, 2006) and proximity to reality, a key characteristic of such methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Setting and Participants

To select the site for this study, I analyzed that the university should have the following two characteristics: the university should have a leading position in international programs, and the university has formalized and professionalized the

issue of internationalization at the institutional level. I selected a university located in the central-south region of Mexico that leads in international programs offer (Moreno Rosano et al., 2013); its institutional development plan also includes the objective of internationalization and has an international functional area. This institution is a private, not-for-profit university with more than 50 undergraduate programs, more than 50 graduate programs, and more than 12,000 students. Hereafter, I will refer to the site as the University.

For selecting participants, I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). The inclusion and exclusion criteria were that participants should work in the International Affairs Office of the University and make decisions concerning the change of strategies and activities used for internationalization during the pandemic closure. Fifteen people work in the International Affairs Office and two of them fit the inclusion-exclusion criteria. One of the participants is the Director of the International Affairs Office and the other participant is the Director of the United States Liaison Office. These two individuals were responsible for the decisions to change internationalization strategies during the pandemic. I contacted the two potential participants by email; they were willing to participate in the study and I interviewed both.

Data Collection and Analysis

Concerning data collection, the primary data were semi-structured interviews conducted via digital media and observation of an online activity in which I participated. The secondary data were the website of the institution and three documents gathered from participants. It is worth mentioning that all data collected was in the Spanish language. The Institutional Review Board approved this study and participants were asked for written consent.

I used the Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 2017) for data analysis. This theory explains that the basis of an organization's value creation lies in the relationships generated through the cooperation of each group or individual that can affect or be affected by the organization's performance (i.e., customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and government).

Data analysis involved the triangulation of in-depth individual interviews, observation, and review of documents employing two strategies. The first strategy was understanding members' meanings to identify what was relevant and important to participants (Emerson et al., 2011). This strategy helped me to engage

with the data and to get closer to the reality of each participant to understand their perspectives. According to Emerson and colleagues (2011), the researcher must delve into the terms, descriptions, explanations, stories, theories, contrasts, and typologies. I conducted this task through the 40 pages of transcripts.

The second strategy was analyzing the data by coding (Saldaña, 2021). This strategy involved three stages. First, I used In-Vivo, Process, and Descriptive Codes for coding the data. Second, I compared the three resulting lists of codes to identify similarities and differences. Third, I integrated the lists of codes to obtain one and proceeded to categorize the information. Also, I developed a word cloud for each transcript using an online tool (tagcrowd.com). This helped me to identify the most frequent words during interviews, such as networking and virtual mobility, which could then be used as codes. For organizing the data during the coding and categorizing steps, I followed the suggestion of Ose (2016) by using a spreadsheet.

After employing the strategies of members' meaning (Emerson et al., 2011) and coding (Saldaña, 2021), I cross-checked the information to find patterns and discover emerging themes. During the process of using both strategies, I analyzed the data in the original language and then translated it into English for the description of the findings. I conducted this study in the year 2021.

Findings

I studied how a Mexican university implemented strategies to continue IHE during the global health contingency to address the following research questions.

- What strategies for IHE are being used because of the COVID-19 outbreak?
- In what ways is IHE carried out during COVID-19 lockdown?

From the analysis, I identified two findings. First, how the University continued internationalization after the emergence of the pandemic. Second, how the University envisions advancing internationalization in the post-pandemic era.

Finding 1. Response of the International Affairs Office Amid the Pandemic Outbreak to Continue the Internationalization Work

COVID-19 emergence posed a problem for internationalization due to travel bans affecting mobility, which was the activity with the largest number of participants. To address this problem and continue with IHE, the University leveraged the following resources.

Focusing on Internationalization at Home Strategy

Participants indicated that the University is focusing on helping students "to achieve this professional [preparedness] by having ... an international experience." In this way, the mission of the International Affairs Office is "to make them [students] grow or help them grow in intercultural knowledge ... to generate in them intercultural competencies." The International Affairs Office manages ways for students to develop skills that corporates want in college graduates through international experiences, specifically via mobility. Participants described that the pandemic affected mobility by decreasing it due to travel restrictions. However, this led them to think differently to continue to foster IHE in the University community.

The University took advantage of the momentum generated by the pandemic outbreak, when HEIs moved online, to enhance the implementation of the strategy of internationalization at home. As one participant mentioned, they "created the concept of [the University] where we not only offer on-site programs … but we also have virtual and hybrid programs." Among the virtual programs that increased during the lockdown, the University offered webinars, collaborative online international learning (COIL), and global speakers. Another example was the virtual conference organized by the International Affairs Office. During such a conference, I observed students participating in various activities. For example, a virtual tour of a chocolate factory and the chocolate-making workshop including a question-and-answer session.

Collaboration Through Networking

The University collaborates with a network of Catholic Latin America and Caribbean universities. With the pandemic outbreak, collaboration among the members of the network was enhanced. Participants highlighted the work of such a network to face the challenges together and move forward with IHE. One participant shared that due to the lockdown, "a platform was developed to have virtual exchange ... And all of that was done in two or three months ... Then the possibilities of internationalization grew exponentially." The common virtual

platform allowed institutions collaborating in the network to share courses and activities by uploading their academic offer; students of any participant institution have free access. The activities range from one single lecture to an entire course. Through this, the University multiplied the internationalization at home activities, having a greater number of students who were able to have an international experience. It is worth mentioning that all the universities belonging to the network did the same.

Participants also emphasized the strength of the network in addressing the pandemic and turning the situation around for IHE. One participant shared that with the implementation of the common platform, they had "daily participation in the promotion of internationalization among all the universities [in the network]." More students are benefiting by being able to have an international experience. For example, one participant claimed that "students from Mexico are doing a research project with students from Argentina, and they are socializing, learning from another culture." Collaboration among the members of the network not only focused on providing virtual activities for students but also on generating joint research.

Leveraging Strategic Partners

It is worth noting the difference between the University collaborating as a strategic partner and participating in a network. Participants explained that the relationship of strategic partners is focused on the issue of internationalization by carrying out the tasks of student mobility, faculty mobility, and joint research. On the other hand, participating in the network includes internationalization among other objectives such as the generation of educational proposals fostering equity and the formulation of public policies. However, the dimensions of internationalization (i.e., student and faculty mobility, and joint research) are not strictly carried out.

The University relied on strategic partners to offer virtual activities from North American universities, specifically, lectures from the United States. One participant said that "by becoming virtual ... we gave access to people from our [Latin American] countries being able to listen to these [American] speakers talking about very interesting topics ... that was something new." In this sense, the lockdown was beneficial for IHE because it helped "to understand a little more how to make internationalization work for everyone." During the interviews, as

well as in the documents, I could appreciate the emphasis on the relationship with universities abroad as part of the strategy for internationalization. For example, documents displayed that in 2019, the University had 190 agreements with abroad institutions; by 2020, those agreements increased to 229.

Tapping on Technology to Strengthen Virtual Mobility

The fact that HEIs moved all their courses online, in response to lockdown, opened some opportunities for IHE. Technology offers a potential advantage in providing access to classes, no matter where the students are. This resource, enhanced by the collaboration in the network, allows students to access activities at universities in different countries, virtually. As a result, students could have an international experience through virtual mobility. The event I observed used technology to connect speakers from different countries with the students of the University. Also, one participant said that "the opportunity to access a virtual exchange ... was enhanced [by the platform]. So there is no longer an excuse for professors or students not to have the [international] activity." Participants also mentioned that virtual mobility was not a new activity, but, before the pandemic, it occurred sporadically.

Through virtual mobility, the University offered a series of activities such as webinars and COILs from different countries. These were rarely performed before the pandemic. By increasing the offer of international experiences, the University was able to count on a greater number of students participating and experiencing diverse cultures in one sitting. For example, one participant commented that "guys from [Mexico] ... can take classes with universities from Colombia from Peru to Argentina from all the ones that are partners [of the network]" during the same semester.

Students' participation in international programs increased significantly due to virtual mobility. The information in the documents showed that during the pandemic, the University had more than 800 students in virtual mobility before the end of 2020. One participant said, "In the last year, in 2020, there must have been more than a thousand students with international experiences of very different types, from short term to long term." The other participant talked about students being involved in virtual events of an American university during the 2020-2021 school year, "I can tell you that we have had more than 2000 participants from [the University] in activities during this period." Also, in the virtual conference I

observed, students participated in lectures, workshops, panel discussions, and even cultural events provided by institutions abroad.

Just as the participation of students in virtual mobility increased, so did the number of inbound courses for international students. Before the pandemic outbreak, documents displayed few courses were offered for international students. When the University moved courses online, the demand for such inbound courses increased. One participant gave an example of one course they usually offered on a one-month per year duration, "and instead of having 15 [international] students [face-to-face] ... we had groups of 60, of 70 [international] students" and even it was "the fifth time it [the same course] has been done [virtually] in less than a year."

Involving Professors

It is important to consider professors to catapult internationalization. There are two ways in which the International Affairs Office of the University works with professors. This functional area connects with the Academic Area through a person who takes on the role of liaison; that person is usually a professor. When professors get to know and get involved in internationalization, they become promoters of the programs offered by the International Affairs Office. One participant asserted that "if a professor who is engrained with his/her students promotes that the international [experience] is important, then many more students go [to an international program]."

The University established the guideline for professors to integrate an international component into their courses. An international component is an element within the course that encompasses an international experience (e.g., a lecture with a foreign professor, participating in an international conference, and inviting an international speaker). The International Affairs Office staff supported professors by managing and coordinating the implementation of the international component. This has been achieved through the engagement of both areas. For example, one participant shared that professors can "play a video or invite a Latin American professor to their class. Those [professors] who know English [invite] an English-speaking lecturer." This is an example of collaboration among International Affairs Office personnel, Academic Area, and international partners.

The collaboration between International Affairs Office staff and the Academic Area was being performed before the pandemic. However, because of

the increase in the offer of virtual international experiences, more and more professors are integrating an international component into their courses, facilitating greater cooperation among personnel of both areas.

The possibility of implementing an international experience in every course offered by the University increased due to the breadth of international activities offered by the International Affairs Office after the emergence of the pandemic. Each of the three methods of data collection shows the expansion of the supply of international experiences, now in virtual mode.

Finding 2. Envisioning the Future Path of Internationalization

The pandemic outbreak changed the implementation of internationalization in the University. Such change is generating benefits for students because, with virtual mobility, students have free access to different activities with various universities in diverse countries. With this, students are having international experiences and the possibility to develop intercultural competencies by socializing with professors and students from several cultures. For example, one participant shared that "[students] are taking classes with professors from other institutions" and "gaining knowledge from different experts at an international level." Likewise, during the virtual conference I participated in and observed, I had the opportunity to listen to speakers from different continents. However, to continue to expand internationalization benefits to students, it is important to think about the opportunities and challenges ahead.

Opportunities for Internationalization

Based on the experience of IHE during the global health contingency, participants think that the University and HEIs in Mexico have a great opportunity to keep increasing internationalization at home through technology. For this, the University should continue with virtual mobility; at the same time, it must also integrate hybrid programs. As one participant said:

> So, in this new virtual world ... there's a hybrid world left ... where there is physical mobility ... but let's not forget the learning that has been had in the pandemic, from what we have done in this more virtual or hybrid world internationally.

On the other hand, institutions are returning to face-to-face mode, and with that, to physical mobility. Participants expressed that it is time to design short programs to have a lower cost offer. These programs would be in addition to the

programs already offered. One participant asserted "we have to think about these short programs ... as medium and short term to give more possibilities to more students to aspire to have an international experience, [and] continue with virtual [mobility]."

Concerning Mexico, participants believe that there are several opportunities to work on. One thing to do is to replicate what the network of Catholic universities in Latin America did by sharing a common platform for internationalization. That is, Mexican universities could join in to share their international program offer. One participant said they "are going to work towards the existence of an internationalization platform for all the private universities [in Mexico] in order to generate much more movement [with virtual mobility]." The aim is to create value for students by offering more international activities, either inbound and outbound, physical, or virtual.

The other opportunity for Mexico is to use its cultural and geographic diversity to attract international students. With this, it is possible to create programs that encourage international students to participate in online classes and visit the country for a short term. One participant expressed:

> [Mexico] have a golden opportunity to grow in this area [internationalization] ... because it is [a] so beautiful [country] … we have a golden opportunity to make hybrid programs, that if it is going to cost a person from the Netherlands to come and come to Mexico, well, maybe you can't do a whole semester [exchange program] but maybe you can do a one-week program.

With plans like this, the University would create value for various stakeholders.

Upcoming Challenges

For the University to continue advancing in internationalization, it is crucial to have the involvement of different stakeholders, especially professors. Before the pandemic, professors seemed to be the last to react to internationalization. During the pandemic, it was key to work together with professors to expand internationalization at home. However, one participant noticed that the work with professors must move towards internationalization around research. The other participant shared that they are working to connect professors of the University with professors of strategic partners universities to

perform research projects "and the idea is that they [professors] will be writing together."

A noticeable challenge for the University is the international component implementation in all courses. With this, the goal is that each student has the feasible opportunity to have an international experience. One participant expressed:

> [The University] is trying to achieve ... that 100 percent of the students at the university have an international experience, whether it is a webinar or a doctorate dual degree … because in some way it is useful for the student to have an experience with another country.

Documents show a diversified international offering being used as the international component in courses, such as global speakers, webinars, and COILs. Faculty needs to work on syllabi to take advantage of virtual events offered through the network or through strategic partners of the University.

A third challenge is to maximize the opportunity to reach more students through technology. Technology offers the possibility of breaking costs, downtime, and space barriers. The participants believe that the recorded virtual courses could remain permanently open, allowing students to access them anytime. This multiplies the possibilities for students to have an international experience. One participant affirmed that "[w]hen it is virtual it does not really exist [a limit] ... because the session is recorded ... The student is going to click on it [anytime] and see the session regardless of where he or she is." The conference I observed was recorded and the students have free access to watch it again, and they can see all the activities as often as they want.

Finally, it is important to keep moving in collaborative networks by encouraging openness to share information. One participant affirmed that networking "is very important ... Because many of these ideas we have shared with other universities, … we openly share the information." It is worth remembering that internationalization at home advanced by leaps and bounds during the pandemic lockdown as institutions shared their courses online for free. That is the power of collaboration for value creation.

Discussion and Implications

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Internationalization at home became a key strategic move for the University to continue with IHE during the lockdown. Findings demonstrate that this strategy has potential outcomes with a greater number of students having international experiences (de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Woicolesco et al., 2021). With this, the University is seeking to create value by preparing its students with international awareness.

This study exposed how an organization can enhance its value creation through cooperation among different stakeholders (Freeman, 2017). Findings display the resources that the University used to implement internationalization at home. Participants highlighted the relevance of networking which allowed them to shift from competitiveness to collaboration to perform a common virtual platform. Collaboration has been a lever to combat these unprecedented times in the history of IHE (Barrientos Amador & Cartín Quesada, 2020; Finardi & Guimaraes, 2020; Gimenez, 2020; Tjulin et al., 2021; Woicolesco et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 lockdown, virtual mobility gained momentum due to the combination of travel bans and the enlargement of international online activities. Findings exhibit the importance of having strategic partners to carry out such activities (Cordova et al., 2021; Gimenez, 2020; Tjulin et al., 2021). The University has several partners, and with that, created an extraordinary dynamism in IHE because the students could have international experiences with different universities from several nations (Bustos-Aguirre, 2020; de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

Regarding the international offering, the University gave students virtual access to events that could only be in person before the pandemic. With this, the cost barrier was eliminated because students did not need to travel (Berry & Taylor, 2014). The fact that the University offered all the activities free of charge was something new. In addition, the University offered English and Spanish activities, allowing students to choose the experience they preferred. Findings reveal more students had an international experience because the language barrier was overcome (Cordova et al., 2021). Still, if students choose to participate in more activities in Spanish rather than English, it could foster a lack of language skills (Berry & Taylor, 2014; Shu-Jing et al., 2020).

Before the pandemic outbreak, professors had already begun integrating the international component into their courses. However, the COVID-19 lockdown accelerated this process due to the wide range of international activities offered.

Findings denote that several professors integrated such a component, overcoming the challenge of resistance to make changes in their syllabi (Oranga et al., 2020). The proximity in the work of the International Affairs Office and the Academic Area to provide students with elements that allow them to improve their intercultural awareness and competencies is another example of value creation through stakeholders' collaboration (Freeman, 2017).

In virtual mobility, domestic students socialize online with professors and students from other countries. A weakness of virtual mobility could be that students do not live the cultural immersion. Some studies pointed to the development of intercultural skills through virtual mobility (Barbosa et al., 2020), but the impact of such activity on intercultural awareness remains unclear (Cordova et al., 2021).

The pandemic outbreak triggered the use of technology as a means for HEIs to continue their operation. Findings reveal that the University took advantage of technology to open several international activities generating virtual mobility. With such actions, the number of students with at least one international experience multiplied. As a result, the University put diversity, inclusion, and equity into practice in the work of internationalization (Tjulin et al., 2021; Woicolesco et al., 2021), exposing technology as an enabler for pursuing social justice in IHE (Finardi & Guimaraes, 2020). So, it could be possible to remove the emic term that internationalization is for elite students (Bustos-Aguirre, 2020; de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Finardi & Guimaraes, 2020; Gacel-Ávila, 2020).

Limitations

Given its nature as qualitative research, the case study approach, and the usage of purposeful sampling, findings are not generalizable but transferable (Patton, 2015). The data collected are fully contextualized to the University. Therefore, the experiences of other universities in the Global South may differ. However, this study helps readers learn about strategies for IHE coping with the COVID-19 lockdown. Readers can adapt and/or adopt such strategies depending on their context. Another limitation of this study is having two participants. However, I sought to obtain information-rich sources for the purpose of the research through the selecting criterion (Patton, 2015). Thus, the individuals

participating were the ones who made decisions regarding internationalization strategies and activities during the pandemic.

Conclusion and Future Research

COVID-19 outbreak is affecting the work that HEIs in Global South have been doing for decades regarding IHE. This study aimed to display the strategies a Mexican university implemented amid the pandemic lockdown. The University, like many other HEIs in Latin America, redirected efforts to work with the strategy of internationalization at home. Such strategy not only meant continuing the operation of IHE, but also broadened the scope in terms of the number of students participating in an international activity through virtual mobility. With this, paradigms about IHE are changing. Students moved from physical to virtual mobility, professors and international staff moved from focusing on internationalization abroad to internationalization at home, and HEIs moved from competitiveness to collaboration.

From this study, several themes arise for future research. For example, learning about students' perspectives on virtual mobility during the COVID-19 lockdown would be interesting. Research could also be conducted on the development of intercultural competencies through virtual mobility amid the pandemic. Another future study could be to compare the intercultural awareness development among students experiencing physical mobility and those experiencing virtual mobility.

The long-term effects of this pandemic are not yet apparent and HEIs will be developing defense strategies as these effects appear.

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