

The Response of International Higher Education Associations to COVID-19

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The ongoing coronavirus pandemic is causing significant concern within the higher education sector with devastating effects, in particular, on the student exchange community. Layoffs at many international exchange organizations testify to the gravity of the pandemic and are a warning of what colleges and universities may expect. Yet, COVID-19 can also be seen as a test of the ability of higher education institutions and their associations to adapt and accelerate the pace of change.

International education professionals have had to make difficult decisions to safely repatriate students and faculty, advise and reassure international students, and cancel exchange and study abroad programs, while also facing the enormous financial implications of their decisions. These professionals are members of numerous academic and professional associations, which, like in other academic fields, provide information and guidance, but are also expecting contributions from their members at a time when professional activity in almost every sector is in complete disarray.

Cancellations

The early months of 2020 witnessed an avalanche of conference cancellations. As the crisis expanded through Europe and North America, many organizations have had to cancel their events or hastily move them online. The Asia Pacific Association for International Education (APAIE) was the first one, and postponed its March 2020 Conference in Vancouver to next year. NAFSA: Association of International Educators, canceled its Annual Conference and Expo held at the end of May. The Comparative International Education Society (CIES) turned its 2020 conference into a virtual event. The European Association for International Education (EAIE) is tentatively planning to postpone its annual conference from September to October 2020, a period that will be exceedingly crowded if conference activities are at all allowed to resume in the fall. Such decisions have enormous financial implications as a result of prior contractual obligations with venues and vendors. The issue of refunds is being extensively debated on social media. CIES is issuing refunds only to students and low-income country members and is appealing to its members' understanding, while others are promising refunds but anticipate delays in processing them.

Decisions to cancel, postpone, or digitize conferences have clear parallels with decisions to cancel exchange programs, or advising whether or when international students and scholars should return to their home countries. These are momentous decisions that have to be taken rapidly, often with insufficient information, as nobody knows what borders will close or reopen, or whether commercial flights will be available. Canceling a conference can send the budgets of smaller associations into the red. The longer-term outlook is not promising: in the aftermath of the crisis, universities will likely implement austerity measures, starting with limiting travel and professional development funding.

COVID-19 has forced teaching and learning to innovate and, in a similar way, it is forcing the international education community to rethink how conferences and professional development should be delivered. When the pandemic passes, we will most likely be looking forward to connecting with each other in person again, but hybrid or remote participation from presenters, instructors, and members of the audience will likely be the new normal.

Abstract

COVID-19 impacts not only students and staff at colleges and universities, but also academic associations, including international higher education associations, forcing them to adapt how they provide support and expertise to their members.

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Professional Development and Public Engagement

Webinars and virtual town halls have become normal spaces for sharing expertise among colleagues grappling with similar issues. Many of these virtual forums are managed by international education associations. Resource pages with advice or information digests have been created. NAFSA, for instance, has made many of its COVID-19 resources accessible without requiring a membership. The Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) is organizing virtual town hall meetings, and the European Universities Association (EUA) is replacing its annual conference with free webinars. Other associations such as the International Association of Universities (IAU), the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education (IOHE), and the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) are also organizing webinars on the impact of the crisis on internationalization and higher education. This is a positive development, which also demonstrates the concern of organizations to position themselves online as reliable sources of updates and expertise.

As representatives of large professional sectors, associations have mobilized to represent their constituents' needs before public authorities. AIEA has sent a letter to US legislators requesting financial relief for international exchange organizations, as part of the effort to stimulate the economy. The EAIE has addressed an [open letter to the European Commission](#), urging flexibility and a timely response on a range of fronts, in particular in support of Erasmus+ students and, in general, of students who have been adversely affected by the crisis.

During this period when people are locked in their homes and borders are closed, it is more important than ever that international education associations sustain their advocacy effort in favor of international exchanges and cooperation. ▲

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