

Internationalization of the foreign language curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract. The current reality has challenged higher education globally. With border closure and distancing, provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic, the paradigm of internationalization in higher education has considerably altered the way and scale of incorporating intercultural and international components into the academic agenda. The curriculum of the foreign language field at non-linguistic higher education institutions has always been positioned distinctively apart within the context of internationalization. This study is focused on the key changes that the internationalization of educational programs for foreign languages has undergone in the COVID-19 and post-pandemic periods. The paper analyzes and systematizes scientific works on internationalization, and also uses a comparative-analytical method to describe approaches to implement the internationalization of language programs. As a result of the study, the key characteristics of the internationalization of higher education in the pre-COVID, COVID, and post-COVID situations are summarized. The pre-COVID opposition of physical mobility vs internalization at home has been smoothed out by virtual format in the COVID period. In the post-COVID era, the changes have resulted in greater flexibility and diversity in teaching, learning, professional collaboration, and development through and/or physical, virtual, online, and/or digital delivery, hybrid forms of introducing an international and intercultural component into programs; reduction of the duration of mobility programs in favor of their effectiveness.

Keywords: intercultural education, multiculturalism, intercultural communication, language education

1 Introduction

The current reality challenges higher education globally. With border closure and distancing, provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic, the paradigm of internationalization in higher education (IHE) has altered the way and scale of incorporating intercultural and international components into the academic agenda.

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Today, internationalization has become one of the key elements in the implementation of higher education programs and at the same time one of the most significant topics related to higher education research [1, 2]. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find a term that would accumulate a similar variety of understandings and directions implemented at different structural levels of institutions and require completely different strategies and tactics to manage and develop. This study is based on the assumption that the priority of scientific research and economic indicators is increasingly shifting towards the development of quality. This tendency has been fixed in multiple nominations: “internationalization of the curriculum” (further on – IoC) [2, 3], “internal internationalization” (further on – II) [4, 5], “internationalization at home” (further on – IaH) [6, 7], “comprehensive internationalization” [8] to name a few. The above-mentioned terms share the point of bringing internationalized teaching, learning, assessment, and delivery to all students and faculties, which is one of the main advantages of this direction. The way how to internationalize courses has been in the focus of II and attracted attention, raising debates [9]. Language training programs have been occupying a distinctive place in the context of II.

Aimed at II, ambitious higher education institutions (HEIs) have to embrace the skills and cultural understanding that learning foreign languages instills. The investment required to foster the culture of language learning is regarded as the investment in the global employability of an institution’s graduates whereas from the institution’s perspective it acquires traits of an internationally trusted and genuinely open-minded organization. This position highlights the paramount importance of foreign language education. Thus, the internationalization of language educational programs stands apart. On the one hand, languages are a tool for enhancing II. On the other hand, II functions similarly towards language education; it is the means to establish an authentic environment to learn a foreign language for a professional in a non-linguistic sphere.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has completely disrupted the way in which universities traditionally operated and bewildered most international activities. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the development and forms of internationalization [10]. The threat of the virus is still great; classes have been moved to online or hybrid modes, and mobility programs have been restricted or banned. Nevertheless, this situation has opened up new opportunities and forced educators to rethink the II of higher education.

Founded under the auspices of UNESCO, the International Association of Universities conducted The Global Survey on the impact of COVID-19. The respondents from 424 universities and other HEIs from 109 countries were completing the survey available online from March, 25 to April, 17 in 2020. The overall results demonstrated a consistent negative trend. Due to COVID-19, international student mobility has dramatically plummeted by 89%. At the same time, 60% of universities also reported that COVID-19 has increased virtual mobility and/or collaborative online learning as alternatives to physical student mobility. This may safeguard internationalization to some extent but this shift will have to be analyzed in more detail [11].

Given that the pandemic is far from over, as well as how it has already affected higher education around the world, there is a clear need to review and restructure internationalization strategies and operational plans.

The study is aimed at identifying key areas for ensuring the internationalization of language education programs in the context of changes in the COVID-19 and post-pandemic periods.

2 Methods

The research is based on the analysis, generalization, and systematization of scientific works on the stated problem, as well as a comparative-analytical method for describing approaches to the internationalization of language programs. The sources represent the pool of scientific articles selected by the number of citations in indexed bases in the IoC, IaH, and II in the pre-COVID period. The articles for analysis of data in the pandemic were chosen due to the representativeness of the material relevant to the criteria of date and fixed changes. The concrete data were illustrated with the cases implemented by the Department of Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication at the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation (further on FU) from March 2020 up to July 2021.

3 Results

The coronavirus outbreak has made educators think about restructuring institutional cooperation in order to overcome the barriers that have arisen and effectively use the opportunities that have opened up.

Virtual mobility and virtual exchange have emerged as effective solutions for the short term in times of closed borders. There is a difference between virtual mobility and virtual exchange. Virtual mobility refers to students and teachers of HEIs who use an educational institution outside their country for a limited time, without physically leaving their home. Virtual exchange refers to sustainable, technological educational events, in which there is constructive communication and interaction between groups from different cultural backgrounds with the support of teachers [12]. The implementation of II through virtual exchange gives an impetus to the development of all participants. The development of virtual exchange courses requires careful and purposeful course design, which is based on close and trusting cooperation between partner scientists.

Virtual format expands perspectives in classroom discussions and introduces students to other forms of knowledge production, as well as ways of conducting scientific research. Students gain access to knowledge not available on their home campus, or, in more collaborative formats, improve their intercultural skills.

Considering language education in the context of internationalization, it is important to take into account two essential aspects:

1. The role of internationalization of the language programs themselves [13, 14].
2. The role of internationalization of programs mediated by language learning (i.e. programs in which language is a means of obtaining knowledge) [15].

Speaking about the internationalization of language programs of higher education, it is necessary to note their fundamental role in the context of the use of content and language integrated learning, in which a foreign language is a tool for studying the chosen subject area (languages of instruction), and the development of the subject area in turn becomes a reliable means of language learning [5].

As a result of the study, the key characteristics of the internationalization of language educational programs of higher education in the pre-COVID, COVID, and post-COVID situations are summarized (Table 1). Through the formats and methods of implementing specific internationalization measures, the dynamics of the transformation of the internationalization process of these programs are demonstrated.

Table 1. Internationalization formats in normality, new normality, and post new normality.

Components of internationalization / types of normality	Normality / pre-COVID	New normality / COVID	Post new normality / post-COVID
Relevant opposition	Physical mobility vs II	Virtual mobility vs virtual exchange	Flexibility and diversification of models (vs/and): physical mobility vs/and virtual mobility vs/and virtual exchange vs/and blended mobility
Curricular activities: Lectures/seminars	Physical visiting professors, online courses	Virtual visiting professors, online courses on global learning e-platforms, online simulations	Hybrid
Co-curricular learning activities	Visiting international partners to participate (maximum two students)	Virtual international Olympiads (all volunteering), international events online (all volunteering)	Hybrid
Professional cooperation	Scientific conferences with predominantly local participation	Virtual scientific conferences online with balanced local and international participation	Hybrid
Professional development	-	Mutual webinars and lectures online from and to international partners	Hybrid
Term-orientation of exchange programs	One term exchange programs (average six months)	Virtual exchange programs with shortened duration	One term exchange programs (average 6 months) and short-term programs in growth (1-3 months), including virtual exchange

4 Discussion

Due to the restrictions provoked by the current epidemiological situation, the concept of the “post-mobile world” is included in the public discourse, “home (internal) internationalization” is being developed, which makes it possible to move from the export of education and the transactional nature of relations to joint models within the framework of which it is possible to take into account the experience of different countries within the framework of international partnerships.

Rethinking the discussion in terms of internationalization goals, rather than the process, would allow an “and/and” approach rather than an “either/or” approach and will require skills [16].

The lessons of the pandemic have shown that the balance of distance learning techniques and physical mobility of students for obtaining practical skills will be crucial in the post-school internationalization of language educational programs. According to experts, after COVID-19, the trajectories of internationalization should be more flexible and diverse. With virtual mobility, joint work can be carried out within the framework of joint projects and/or online courses, applied to any subject area/academic discipline and cycle, be interdisciplinary.

A foreign language should be considered as a system-forming element in the professional training of a specialist and a means of forming professional consciousness [17].

In the context of the conducted research, the following directions of transformation of internationalization of language education are identified:

1. Ensuring greater flexibility and mobility of learning through the use of online educational tools and hybrid forms of learning.

2. Teamwork of teachers and university administration to achieve interdisciplinarity and the introduction of an international context in educational programs.

3. Teaching critical thinking and intercultural communication skills in the process of learning a foreign language.

4. Individualization of educational trajectories through the use of artificial intelligence and modern educational technologies.

5. Reducing the duration of educational programs in favor of their effectiveness.

5 Conclusion

The coronavirus outbreak has forced higher education to restructure institutional cooperation in order to overcome the barriers that have arisen and effectively use the opportunities that have opened up. Having adapted the tools and mechanisms of international cooperation to the new realities, different countries and regions have adopted flexible approaches to changes. The materials presented in the article indicate that restrictions on mobility have significantly affected the growth and development of digital formats of II, in particular, in the field of virtual and online methods of II, virtual mobility and exchange. Digital change is not just the development of technologies, but institutional and systemic innovations that affect all areas of higher education and the education system, affecting all parts of universities, including the content of teaching, because, in such unknown conditions, students will need new skills.

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