

Name of presenter : Jabu Makhubela
Name of institution : University of Fort Hare
Department : Office of International Affairs and Partnerships
Designation : Manager: International students
Topic : Investigating the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on
internalization of higher education in South Africa.





Structure of the presentation

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Methodology
- 1.2 Conceptualization of operational concepts
- 1.3 Internationalization of higher education in South Africa

2. **The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on internationalization of higher education in South Africa.**

- 2.1 The bad
- 2.2 The good
- 2.3 The ugly

3. Recommendations and Conclusion

- 3.1 Recommendations
- 3.2 Conclusion





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

Abstract:

This paper examines the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the internationalization of higher education in South Africa. It delves into the positive, negative, and challenging aspects that have emerged as a result of the global crisis. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper sheds light on the transformations, opportunities, and pitfalls faced by South African higher education institutions in their pursuit of internationalization.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic and internationalization of higher education





1. Introduction:

- ❖ Higher education institutions play a crucial role in fostering global knowledge exchange, cultural understanding, and collaborative research. Historically disadvantaged institutions of higher learning in South Africa have long aspired to expand their international reach as part of their broader mission to overcome historical inequities and achieve academic excellence (Hagenmeier, 2020).
- ❖ The pursuit of internationalization, characterized by international student mobility, cross-border research collaboration, and global partnerships, has been integral to these institutions' endeavors. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to these aspirations, demanding a comprehensive investigation into the pandemic's impact on their internationalization efforts.
- ❖ The landscape of higher education has been profoundly reshaped by the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cleophas, 2020). For South Africa, a nation with a rich tapestry of cultures and a legacy of academic excellence, the pandemic's influence on the internationalization of higher education has been both transformative and tumultuous.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

- ❖ The intricate interplay of global mobility, cross-cultural collaboration, and the pursuit of knowledge has undergone a metamorphosis, prompting South African higher education institutions to navigate uncharted territory. It is against this backdrop that this paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted impact of Covid-19 on the internationalization of higher education in South Africa, highlighting both the positive transformations and the challenges that have emerged. It underscores the need for adaptative strategies to navigate the evolving landscape of global education in a post-pandemic era.

1.1. Methodology

- ❖ This study employs a desktop research approach to comprehensively examine the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the internationalization of higher education in South Africa. Desktop/secondary research is well-suited for exploring complex and context-dependent phenomena, allowing a better understanding of a particular topic.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

- ❖ A comprehensive review of books, journals government gazettes, academic literature, institutional reports, and policy documents pertaining to internationalization in South African higher education was conducted. This analysis provided a historical context and informed the understanding of the existing landscape.
- ❖ A comprehensive review of books, journals government gazettes, academic literature, institutional reports, and policy documents pertaining to internationalisation in South African higher education was conducted. This analysis provided a historical context and informed the understanding of the existing landscape.





1.2 Conceptualization of operational concepts

Covid-19 pandemic

- ❖ The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, has had a profound and far-reaching impact on a global scale. First identified in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, the virus quickly spread across the world, leading to widespread illness, death, economic disruptions, and changes in daily life. Healthcare systems faced unprecedented challenges as hospitals became overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, leading to shortages of medical supplies and healthcare personnel. Governments worldwide implemented various measures to slow the spread of the virus, including lockdowns, travel restrictions, and the promotion of hygiene practices such as handwashing and mask-wearing (Tesar, 2020).
- ❖ The pandemic had a significant impact on the global economy. Lockdowns and restrictions led to business closures, mass layoffs, and disruptions in supply chains. The travel, hospitality, and entertainment industries were hit particularly hard. Governments implemented fiscal stimulus packages to mitigate economic damage, but recovery has varied across countries.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

- ❖ Education systems were also greatly affected. Schools and universities closed their physical campuses, leading to a rapid shift towards online learning. This transition exposed inequalities in access to technology and the internet, affecting students' learning experiences. Remote work became the norm for many professionals, transforming the way people work and interact (UNESCO, 2021a).
- ❖ The pandemic highlighted existing social disparities. Vulnerable populations, including the elderly and those with preexisting health conditions, were at higher risk of severe illness. Marginalized communities faced disproportionate health and economic impacts (WHO, 2020). Additionally, women were disproportionately affected as they often shouldered increased caregiving responsibilities and were more affected by job losses in sectors like retail and hospitality.
- ❖ The development and distribution of vaccines brought hope for controlling the spread of the virus. However, global vaccine distribution faced challenges due to supply shortages and distribution inequities between high- and low-income countries (Zhang, Wang, Yang, & Wang, 2020).





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

- ❖ The pandemic also influenced public behavior and attitudes. People became more aware of hygiene practices and the importance of public health measures. Misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly, challenging efforts to communicate accurate information.

Internationalization of higher education

- ❖ Internationalisation of higher education can be defined as ‘the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society’ (De Wit, H, Hunter, F, Howard, L and Egron-Polak, E (2015). However, according to (Knight,2007), Internationalization of higher education refers to the intentional process through which institutions and individuals engage with the global community to enrich teaching, research, learning, and cultural experiences.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

- ❖ It involves the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into various aspects of higher education institutions, encompassing academic programs, research collaborations, student and faculty exchanges, cross-border partnerships, and the development of a globally aware and culturally sensitive academic environment.
- ❖ Senhoras (2021) posits that internationalization seeks to go beyond the geographical boundaries of a single country and encourages institutions to embrace diversity, promote cross-cultural understanding, and prepare students to navigate the complexities of a globalized world. It is driven by the recognition that knowledge and innovation have no borders, and that exposure to a variety of perspectives enhances the quality of education and research.





1.3. Internationalization of higher education in South Africa

- ❖ The internationalization of higher education in South Africa has been a multifaceted and dynamic process that reflects the country's historical, social, and economic context (Hagenmeier, 2020). Over the years, South Africa has become an increasingly popular destination for international students seeking high-quality education, cultural diversity, and unique academic opportunities.
- ❖ South Africa's history of racial segregation and apartheid had a profound influence on its higher education landscape. Prior to the end of apartheid in 1994, the country was largely isolated from the international academic community due to sanctions and political turmoil. However, the post-apartheid era marked a turning point, as the nation sought to rebuild its reputation and integrate into the global academic arena.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

❖ Academic Excellence and Diversity

South African universities have emerged as strong contenders on the global stage. Institutions such as the University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University, and the University of the Witwatersrand consistently rank among the top in Africa and even the world. The country's academic reputation, coupled with its cultural and geographic diversity, has attracted a growing number of international students seeking a unique academic experience.

❖ Diverse Offerings

One of the driving forces behind the internationalization of higher education in South Africa is the diverse range of programs and courses offered. South African universities excel in fields such as medicine, engineering, natural sciences, social sciences, and arts. This array of disciplines appeals to a wide range of international students looking to specialize in their chosen fields while experiencing the rich cultural environment of the country.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

❖ International Student Enrollment

The influx of international students into South African universities has been on the rise. Toro, (2020) alluded that these students contribute to the cultural richness of campuses, bringing with them diverse perspectives and experiences. Additionally, the revenue generated from international student tuition fees has become an important source of funding for universities, allowing them to invest in infrastructure, research, and academic development.

❖ Collaborative Research and Partnerships

The internationalization of higher education in South Africa is not limited to student mobility. The country has actively pursued collaborative research initiatives, faculty exchanges, and joint academic programs with institutions around the world. Such partnerships enhance research capabilities, knowledge sharing, and cross-cultural understanding.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

❖ Challenges and Opportunities

While the internationalization of higher education in South Africa has brought numerous benefits, challenges persist. These include issues of equity in access to education, quality assurance, and the potential brain drain of talented individuals leaving the country after completing their studies. Balancing the needs of local students with those of international students and maintaining academic standards remains a complex endeavor.

South Africa's higher education system has long been committed to internationalization, viewing it not only as a means to enhance academic quality but also as a conduit for fostering global citizenship and cross-cultural understanding. The nation's universities have actively sought to establish international partnerships, facilitate student and faculty mobility, and engage in collaborative research initiatives that transcend geographical boundaries. These efforts have positioned South Africa as a vital hub of intellectual exchange within the global academic community (Knight, 2007).





2. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on internationalization of higher education in South Africa.

- ❖ Cleophas, (2020) posits that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 thrust the world into a state of uncertainty and disruption. The ensuing global crisis swiftly upended established norms and routines, leaving no facet of society untouched. In the realm of higher education, South African universities faced a myriad of challenges that tested the resilience of their internationalization endeavors.
- ❖ The very essence of internationalization, characterized by mobility, cultural interaction, and physical exchange, was called into question as international travel restrictions and lockdowns became the norm. Before the pandemic, South Africa had been steadily growing as a hub for international students seeking quality education.
- ❖ Du Troit, (2020) posits that the country's diverse cultural landscape, coupled with its universities' academic reputation, had attracted students from across the globe. However, with the onset of COVID-19, travel restrictions and lockdowns imposed to curb the spread of the virus disrupted the traditional model of international education. Many students were unable to travel to South Africa, leading to a decline in the number of international students on campus.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

- ❖ One of the most immediate impacts was the shift to remote and online learning (Haniff, 2020). South African universities had to rapidly adapt their teaching methods to accommodate virtual classrooms. While this allowed some continuity in education, it raised challenges related to technology access and the quality of online instruction. International students faced additional hurdles such as time zone differences, unreliable internet connectivity, and difficulties in engaging with the local campus culture.
- ❖ Furthermore, the financial impact of the pandemic also played a role. Many families faced economic hardships, leading to reduced spending on education. This affected not only South African students but also international students who depended on scholarships or financial aid. With decreased funding opportunities, some international students had to reconsider their plans to study in South Africa.
- ❖ On the flip side, the pandemic also spurred innovation and adaptation in the higher education sector. South African universities started offering hybrid learning models, blending online and in-person instruction. This approach allowed institutions to continue attracting international students who could not physically travel but were still interested in pursuing a South African education.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

- ❖ Additionally, virtual events, webinars, and virtual tours helped universities reach out to prospective international students, showcasing the academic offerings and campus life (De Wit, & Altbach, 2021).
- ❖ The pandemic also prompted universities to collaborate globally in new ways. Cross-border partnerships for research, knowledge sharing, and joint academic programs gained traction. The increased reliance on digital communication platforms facilitated international collaborations, workshops, and conferences that were not bound by geographical limitations.
- ❖ Looking ahead, the impact of the pandemic on internationalization in South African higher education will likely have lasting effects. Universities may continue to integrate online and hybrid learning methods to cater to diverse student populations. This flexibility can increase accessibility for international students who may not be able to relocate due to various constraints





“The bad, the good and the ugly”

- ❖ This section delved into the "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" sides of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on internationalization of higher education, offering in-depth analyses of each facet. The exploration of digital transformation, inclusive access, and innovation constitutes the "The Good" segment, shedding light on the opportunities that emerged from the pandemic. Conversely, the "The Bad" section delves into the challenges of mobility constraints, financial strain, and reduced cultural exchange. Finally, the "The Ugly" portion delves into the complexities of technological disparities, mental health concerns, and geopolitical tensions, underscoring the intricate challenges faced.
- ❖ Therefore, it is the researchers hope that readers will gain a comprehensive understanding of the diverse and intricate implications of the pandemic on the internationalization of higher education in South Africa, ultimately guiding us toward a future marked by adaptability, inclusivity, and the continued pursuit of global knowledge.





2.1. The bad

Mobility constraints

- ❖ Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, Malkwai, Burton, Mangi, and Lam, (2020) alluded that the restrictions on international travel and mobility heavily impacted the flow of students, faculty, and researchers. South African universities, known for their diverse and multicultural campuses, faced challenges in maintaining this vibrant mix due to visa limitations and quarantine regulations.
- ❖ The absence of in-person interactions led to a loss of cultural exchange and hindered the development of a global perspective among students. Additionally, joint research projects and collaborative academic pursuits were impeded by the inability to physically meet and engage in meaningful discussions.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

Financial strain

- ❖ The pandemic strained the financial resources of both institutions and students. The closure of international borders disrupted the inflow of international students, who often pay higher tuition fees. This financial setback hindered the ability of universities to invest in enhancing internationalization efforts.
- ❖ Scholarships and funding opportunities for students looking to study abroad or participate in exchange programs were also affected. The economic downturn resulting from the pandemic further strained resources, potentially slowing down the development of internationalization initiatives (Amemado, 2020).





Cultural exchange

- ❖ The reduction in face-to-face interactions and campus activities resulted in a decline in cross-cultural exchange (de Wit, H, 2019). South African students lost the opportunity to immerse themselves in different cultures and perspectives through interactions with international peers. This had a direct impact on the development of intercultural skills and global citizenship, which are integral aspects of international education.
- ❖ The absence of cultural exchange experiences may lead to a generation of graduates with a narrower worldview, potentially hindering their ability to engage effectively in a globalized workforce.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

2.2. The good

Digital transformation

- ❖ The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for digital transformation in South African higher education. Institutions rapidly transitioned to online learning platforms, enabling access to quality education beyond geographical boundaries. This shift not only allowed students to continue their studies during lockdowns but also opened avenues for global collaboration (Bassett, 2020).
- ❖ Virtual classrooms and international webinars facilitated cross-cultural interactions and knowledge exchange among students and faculty members from different corners of the world. As a result, internationalization became more inclusive, reaching individuals who might not have been able to participate due to financial or logistical constraints.





Inclusive access

- ❖ One unexpected positive outcome of the pandemic was the democratization of access to international events and conferences. With the shift to virtual formats, South African students and scholars found it easier to attend global academic gatherings that were previously financially or geographically unfeasible (Czerniewicz, Agherdien, Badenhorst, Belluigi, Chambers, Chili & de Villiers, et al., (2021).
- ❖ This newfound access to international networks and knowledge sharing led to the exchange of ideas that transcended borders. Moreover, South African higher education institutions hosted virtual events, enabling them to showcase their research and initiatives to a broader international audience.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

Innovation and research

- ❖ The pandemic fueled innovation in research methodologies and collaboration. South African universities expedited their digital research initiatives, leading to novel approaches to problem-solving and interdisciplinary research (Muftahu, 2020).
- ❖ Collaborative efforts with international partners became more flexible and dynamic, as researchers harnessed digital platforms to bridge geographical divides.
- ❖ The rapid advancement of technology during the pandemic encouraged cross-border research projects, contributing to the global body of knowledge while solidifying South Africa's position as a hub for cutting-edge research.





2.3. The ugly

Technological disparities

- ❖ The shift to online learning accentuated existing technological disparities among students (Cloete, 2020). While some had access to reliable internet connections and necessary devices, many others, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, faced challenges in participating in virtual classes.
- ❖ This exacerbated inequalities in education and limited the extent to which internationalization could be embraced by all students. The "digital divide" underscored the need for targeted interventions to ensure that no student is left behind in the pursuit of global education.





Mental health concerns

- ❖ International students faced unique mental health challenges during the pandemic. The isolation from their home countries, coupled with the uncertainties brought about by the crisis, took a toll on their well-being.
- ❖ Many students experienced feelings of loneliness and anxiety, and the lack of a support system exacerbated these issues (Dei, Osei-Bonsu, & Amponsah, 2020).
- ❖ The inability to physically connect with peers and access on-campus mental health services further compounded the problem. Universities had to quickly adapt their support mechanisms to address the mental health needs of international students, highlighting the importance of comprehensive student welfare programs.





Geopolitical tension

- ❖ Hudzik, (2020) suggested that the pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of international collaborations and partnerships in higher education.
- ❖ Geopolitical tensions and travel restrictions strained relationships between South African institutions and their international counterparts. Political decisions made in response to the pandemic, such as travel bans and changes in visa policies, impacted the mobility of students and faculty members.
- ❖ These challenges prompted universities to reassess their reliance on specific regions or countries for internationalization efforts, emphasizing the need for diversification of partnerships to ensure resilience in the face of geopolitical uncertainties.





3. Recommendations and conclusion

3.1 Recommendations

Hybridization of internationalization efforts

- ❖ South African higher education institutions should adopt hybrid models that blend online and in-person internationalization strategies.
- ❖ This approach allows for continued digital collaborations while reinstating the value of face-to-face interactions. By combining the benefits of technology with the richness of in-person experiences, universities can foster a holistic internationalization environment that caters to diverse learning styles and preferences.





3. Recommendations and conclusion

3.1 Recommendations

Hybridization of internationalization efforts

- ❖ South African higher education institutions should adopt hybrid models that blend online and in-person internationalization strategies.
- ❖ This approach allows for continued digital collaborations while reinstating the value of face-to-face interactions. By combining the benefits of technology with the richness of in-person experiences, universities can foster a holistic internationalization environment that caters to diverse learning styles and preferences.





Diversification of partnerships

- ❖ The pandemic highlighted the risks of over-reliance on specific regions or countries for international collaborations. South African universities should proactively diversify their partnerships to enhance resilience in the face of geopolitical tensions and global crises.
- ❖ Building a network of relationships across a wide range of countries and institutions ensures a more robust and adaptable internationalization framework.

Bridging the digital divide

- ❖ Efforts should be made to bridge technological disparities among students. Universities should invest in initiatives that provide equitable access to digital resources and tools, ensuring that all students can fully participate in online learning and global interactions.
- ❖ Partnerships with private sectors, government agencies, and non-profit organizations can play a crucial role in narrowing the digital divide





Embracing global citizenship education

- ❖ Incorporating global citizenship education into the curriculum is paramount. South African universities should focus on developing courses and programs that cultivate intercultural competence, ethical global engagement, and a sense of responsibility towards addressing global challenges.
- ❖ This emphasis on global citizenship will equip graduates with the skills and perspectives needed to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.
- ❖ As we navigate the uncharted waters of a post-pandemic era, South African higher education institutions stand at a pivotal juncture.
- ❖ The lessons learned from the "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" sides of the pandemic's impact can serve as guiding lights, steering the course of internationalization efforts towards a future that is more adaptable, inclusive, and resilient.





3.2 Conclusion

- ❖ In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the traditional landscape of internationalization in South African higher education. It presented challenges related to travel restrictions, online learning, and financial constraints. However, it also catalyzed innovation in teaching, collaboration, and outreach.
- ❖ As the higher education sector evolves in response to these challenges, South Africa has the opportunity to reshape its approach to international education and strengthen its position as a global academic destination. The pandemic has undeniably left an indelible mark on the internationalization of higher education in South Africa.
- ❖ As we reflect on the nuanced impact of this global crisis, it becomes evident that the transformation brought about by the pandemic carries a mix of positive advancements, detrimental setbacks, and complex challenges. The threefold lens of "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of this impact.





3.2 Conclusion

- ❖ In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the traditional landscape of internationalization in South African higher education. It presented challenges related to travel restrictions, online learning, and financial constraints. However, it also catalyzed innovation in teaching, collaboration, and outreach.
- ❖ As the higher education sector evolves in response to these challenges, South Africa has the opportunity to reshape its approach to international education and strengthen its position as a global academic destination. The pandemic has undeniably left an indelible mark on the internationalization of higher education in South Africa.
- ❖ As we reflect on the nuanced impact of this global crisis, it becomes evident that the transformation brought about by the pandemic carries a mix of positive advancements, detrimental setbacks, and complex challenges. The threefold lens of "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of this impact.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

- ❖ While the pandemic necessitated swift adaptations and exposed vulnerabilities, it also spurred innovation and reaffirmed the importance of global interconnectedness. The digital transformation prompted by the pandemic opened doors to new opportunities for virtual collaboration, expanding the reach of internationalization efforts.
- ❖ The inclusive access to virtual events bridged geographical gaps and enabled knowledge sharing on an unprecedented scale (Gu, & Teng, 2021). Simultaneously, the challenges of mobility constraints, financial strain, and diminished cultural exchange serve as cautionary tales, reminding us of the fragility of established internationalization models.
- ❖ As we navigate the uncharted waters of a post-pandemic era, South African higher education institutions stand at a pivotal juncture.
- ❖ The lessons learned from the "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" sides of the pandemic's impact can serve as guiding lights, steering the course of internationalization efforts towards a future that is more adaptable, inclusive, and resilient.





University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

Inkomo

Thank you

Enkosi

25th IEASA Annual Conference | 22-25 August 2023

