

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OFFICERS (IROS) DURING PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT - One of the main challenges IROs faced was the sudden shift to remote work, which required significant adjustments to communication and collaboration processes. The pandemic also resulted in the cancellation or postponement of many in-person events, such as conferences and meetings, which are crucial for networking and building relationships. This forced IROs to find new ways to connect with colleagues and partners virtually. Another significant challenge was the impact of travel restrictions and border closures, which severely limited the mobility of IROs and hindered their ability to carry out their duties effectively. This also had a negative impact on international education, as many students were unable to travel to their desired study destinations. IROs also had to navigate the constantly changing public health regulations and guidelines, which differed from country to country, adding an additional layer of complexity to their work. This required them to stay up-to-date on the latest information and adjust their strategies accordingly. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges to IROs in the field of international relations. While these challenges have been significant, they have also provided opportunities for innovation and creative problem-solving in the face of unprecedented circumstances.

Keywords International relations, pandemic, challenges of International Relations Officers (IROS)

1. INTRODUCTION

Internationalization has been one of the priorities, especially among higher education sectors. As a result, global engagements of institutions have flourished like academic mobility, research collaborations, and dual degree programs. Implicitly, there is the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and integration of culture. But internationalization is a tedious process and sometimes confusing. When an unprecedented situation occurred years ago, the world was unprepared for it. During the first quarter of 2020, a pandemic was declared by World Health Organization, prompting countries to close their borders to foreigners. COVID-19 has brought tremendous effects and a major impact on many aspects of education [1, 2, 3, 4]. The internationalization initiatives stopped as everyone scrambled to keep afloat in the extraordinary situation. Institutions designed various strategies to answer the call of times and continue with their internationalization undertakings. Institutions are trying to hold still and observe where this pandemic would lead.

As internationalization faces a new landscape, the question arises: how shall the global engagement of Higher Education be undertaken in these critical times? In light of this dilemma, the researchers felt the need to conduct a study to help IROs of the SUCs improve and promote their internationalization initiatives by understanding the challenges

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that involved seven International Relations Officers from different State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) They were purposely selected following the set criteria: they are handling an office that caters to internationalization, have lined up activities prepared before and even during the pandemic, whose SUC is a partner of Central Mindanao University. The participants were interviewed through an online platform and data was analyzed using qualitative analysis.

In qualitative research, data analysis is carefully reviewing and interpreting non-numerical data such as text, photographs, and observations to identify themes, patterns, and relationships. The data in the study followed phases of

analysis that included: preparation, familiarization, coding, categorization, analysis, and interpretation. In this study, the researcher prepared the data and transcribed it with the help of **Nvivo** Software. Then, the researcher went over the data multiple times in order to become comfortable with it. This helped spot the themes and connections in the data. This was then followed by locating the sections of the data that pertain to a specific idea or theme and giving them codes. Codes are labels that provide a brief description of the contents of a piece of data; they may be both interpretative and descriptive. After the data have been coded, the researchers started categorizing or classifying related codes. In order to identify commonalities and differences, the codes are scrutinized and contrasted in this process. Then the analysis of the data followed to find patterns, connections, and overarching themes. This could be manually evaluating and categorizing the data or employing tools to aid in the analysis of the data. Next was interpreting the data. By creating a narrative that highlights the themes and patterns that emerged from the analysis and summarizes the primary findings, the researcher examines the data. The researcher should also think about the study's biases and limits as well as the implications of the results for theory or practice. Finally, verification of data was done through the process of triangulation wherein involves verifying or confirming the findings utilizing observation of SUC's activities through the official website, group chats, and CHED's updates.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

International relations officers (IROs) have faced numerous challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

Challenge 1: Halt in Internationalization Activities: The pandemic has caused significant disruption to international travel and mobility, making it challenging for IROs to support the mobility of international students and faculty members. This has led to the cancellation or postponement of study abroad programs, as well as the suspension of international student visas and travel restrictions. IROs have had to pivot to online and virtual programs to ensure that international students can continue their studies.

Support for **Challenge 1.**

Previous international engagements can't be done now. We have one program which should be done every year-twice. Also, our leadership training of students because students can't go to Singapore. There are some activities that can be done virtually, but in this particular program, the learning expresses which need community engagement can't be done.

IRO 2

We have a project with our partner in France. Prior to the Pandemic, we ought to visit each other to conduct our study. Now, it seems impossible to proceed through online mode. How can we survey the lakes virtually? IRO 3

It was a challenge also because our partners wanted to come here and study English. But it's pandemic IRO 4

According to Hagar [5] there was a decline in international student enrollment that is fueled by the disruption of internationalization programs, such as student recruitment and study abroad. Countries accepting international students were affected due to lockdowns and travel restrictions brought about by the pandemic [6].

Challenge 2: Unprepared shift to offer online courses: The pandemic has caused significant changes in the demand for international education, with many students reconsidering their plans to study abroad due to health concerns and travel restrictions. This has led to a decrease in international student enrollment in some institutions, which has had financial implications for IROs and their institutions.

Support for **Challenge 2.**

We were able to have an international MOU, but it was hard to make MOA. I told colleges to prepare what they want and the program they want to offer. Like UMAP, we don't have programs to offer yet. We have to prepare because it's an online offering. Internet connection is a priority. -IRO 2

We could have participated in a virtual exchange, like UMAP. But we are not ready to offer online courses. I cannot force our faculty to teach online to international students. The faculty have too many things to do and teaching on this kind of platform, Coursera-like, will give them stress. -IRO 7

The sudden shift to online courses has been a challenge for many educational institutions, particularly those that offer courses to foreign students. The shift to online classes due to the pandemic has made it difficult for universities to ensure that their students have the necessary resources, support, and guidance to adjust to the new environment.

The shift from face-to-face to more indirect teaching approaches has put schools into a flow of learning that is fraught with difficulties and constraints [7]. Moreover, some schools found the transfer to be easy, but others found it difficult, particularly those from developing nations with limited infrastructure [8].

Challenge 3 Change in the Dynamics of Internationalization: The pandemic has required IROs to adapt to remote work and online learning, which has presented new challenges in terms of communication, coordination, and technology. IROs have had to learn new tools and techniques for remote work and online communication, as well as find new ways to support international students and faculty members in a virtual environment. Support for **Challenge 3.**

Another problem, and this is common is the connectivity. Like during webinars, it's hard to facilitate the programs

because of these technical matters. There are many activities which are on hold like our international conferences. -IRO 1
We send new profiles, videos, and emails like Christmas greetings to our partners and future partners. We prepared promotional materials, if somebody will inquire, we send immediately promotional materials. It's hard cause partners don't get to see you. IRO 6

Well especially during the pandemic, my budget is cut. So, what I did, especially if I have contests, I asked for sponsorship. IRO 3

According to Knight [9], the pandemic has hastened the internationalization of higher education by increasing demand for online education and cross-border collaborations. She claims that the pandemic has compelled universities to adapt and innovate, opening up new avenues for internationalization. Similar to this, there are still significant infrastructure and pedagogy gaps that need to be filled in order for the higher education community to be fully ready to implement internationalization in the digital space [10, 11]. There is a need to strengthen the acceleration of online education and cross-border collaborations to the need for greater flexibility and resilience in internationalization efforts.

Overall, the challenges encountered by IROs during the pandemic have been significant and wide-ranging. IROs have had to be creative, adaptable, and resourceful in order to continue their internationalization efforts and support their institutions' global engagement in the face of these challenges.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for international relations officers, requiring them to adapt quickly to rapidly changing circumstances. One of the biggest challenges has been the disruption of international travel and in-person meetings, which has made it more difficult to build relationships and negotiate with stakeholders from different countries. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of effective communication and coordination among international organizations, as well as the need for more collaboration between governments, civil society, and the private sector. The economic fallout from the pandemic has also created new challenges for international relations officers, as they work to support economic recovery and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations. In addition, the pandemic has brought new attention to issues such as global health security, vaccine diplomacy, and the role of science and technology in international cooperation.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Embrace virtual communication: International relations officers should embrace virtual communication tools, such as video conferencing and online collaboration platforms, to stay connected with stakeholders and continue their work despite travel restrictions.

Build strong relationships remotely: International relations officers should work to build strong relationships remotely by investing time and resources into virtual relationship-building

activities, such as virtual coffee chats or online networking events.

Foster collaboration: International relations officers should prioritize collaboration and coordination among international organizations, governments, civil society, and the private sector to address the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Stay up-to-date with the latest developments: International relations officers should stay up-to-date with the latest developments related to the pandemic, including scientific research, policy changes, and economic trends, in order to anticipate and respond to emerging challenges.

Advocate for global health security: International relations officers should advocate for increased attention and resources for global health security, including pandemic preparedness and response, as a key component of international cooperation.

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