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Study Abroad Programs in Transition from Pandemic to Endemic

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The language that is used to refer to COVID-19 is changing to reflect how the disease evolves. One of the changes is the use of the word *endemic* to replace *pandemic*, a modification that implies far reaching effects on goals for language acquisition and cultural integration, particularly in the context of study abroad. Study abroad programs need to be constantly responsive to living, working, traveling, and studying within a framework of the continued presence of a disease that shows no sign of abatement. In this chapter, the author will compare past goals of study abroad and new goals that administrators, faculty, and students are collectively creating as they adapt to acquiring language and culture in a learning environment that is now, by default, in flux requiring hybridized and flexible activities and objectives. Focal comments by administrators, faculty, and students are included in order to present perspectives on how COVID has impacted each of these groups.

INTRODUCTION - FROM PANDEMIC TO ENDEMIC

Many world events have affected study abroad over the years; terrorist attacks in numerous cities, war, financial crises, and widespread disease, the worst being COVID-19 that is still causing uncertainty and fluctuating enrollments. The international nature of study abroad programs makes them particularly sensitive to such events, causing the programs to change formats and perspectives. Because this latest event is proving to be more extensive in duration than any previous event, many seem to be going through phases of wishful thinking, waiting for the pandemic to become endemic. As Molteni (2022) indicates, it is becoming more like the flu as it becomes “uniformly infectious, more treatable, and more genetically predictable.” However, we are not there yet. COVID is not like the flu, it is not endemic. Molteni writes: “SARS-CoV-2 remains a long way from being ordinary. It has not yet found seasonal cadence—take the recent surge in Europe and the U.K., which comes just weeks after the initial Omicron wave subsided—and it’s still capable of inflicting mass death and disability (see Hong Kong’s lethal last few months)” (para. 3). Fortunately, the consequences are not as dire as they were initially, but the effect on study abroad continues after more than two years. That is a very long time for a field such as study abroad to withstand adversity while exercising extraordinary patience, flexibility, improvisation, immediate response decisions, and above all, resilience and financial robustness.

That said, the pandemic has evolved toward what might be considered pre-endemic, indicating that it is becoming both more predictable and manageable, albeit not as much as would be desired. Klobucista (2022, para. 1) writes:

Epidemiologists say a disease is endemic when its presence becomes steady in a particular region, or at least predictable, as with seasonal influenza. But there’s no consensus on the conditions for meeting this benchmark. By this broad definition, endemicity doesn’t

necessarily mean a disease is rare or common, mild or severe. For example, infection rates can still be high; they just have to remain static.

It is still far from static, as Klobucista (2022, para. 4) points out: “The course of the pandemic has rapidly changed with the emergence of new coronavirus variants, sending countries that had been experiencing monthslong lulls into a tailspin of infections and hospitalizations.” Yet, immunization either by vaccination or infection, or both, have certainly improved the situation. An article published in *The Lancet*, Watson et al. (2022, para. 3) indicated that “Based on our model fit to officially reported COVID-19 deaths, we estimated that 18.1 million (95% credible interval [CrI] 17.4–19.7) deaths due to COVID-19 would have occurred without vaccinations worldwide during the first year of the COVID-19 vaccination programme (Dec 8, 2020, to Dec 8, 2021). Of these, we estimated that vaccination prevented 14.4 million (95% CrI 13.7–15.9) deaths due to COVID-19, representing a global reduction of 79% of deaths (14.4 million of 18.1 million) during the first year of COVID-19 vaccination (Table 1).”

The question that is posed in this chapter then, is how is study abroad changing during these unpredictable times, and how are these changes affecting study abroad perspectives, practices, and outcomes. I use the present continuous verb tense intentionally to indicate a continuous and ongoing development.

GOALS OF STUDY ABROAD: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND CULTURAL LEARNING

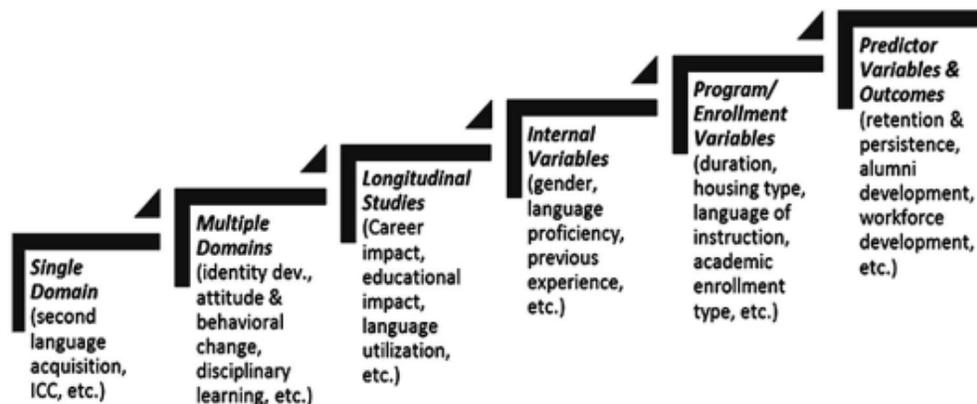
According to a 2021 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021; also see OECD, 2022), worldwide student mobility increases yearly at roughly 5.5%. A publication by the *Instituto Internacional de Educación Superior de América Latina y el Caribe* expresses this situation in real terms: “The number of internationally mobile students in higher education has grown dramatically from 0,3 million in 1963, to 2 million in 2000 and up to 6 million in 2019. However, this is just 2.6% of the total world student population.” With regard to the Spanish language, one of the reasons for this increase is due to heritage language learners (HLL) that have increased interest and accessibility to study abroad. (See Quan et al., this issue, for a further discussion of the accessibility of study abroad).

For two years, international mobility has suffered a significant disruption due to the COVID pandemic. Most higher education institutions all over the world shut down in-person operations completely or partially, transitioning to emergency remote education. Students were not allowed to travel because of world travel restrictions or institutional restrictions, leaving a limited number of study abroad programs that managed to continue to operate under complicated conditions.

Onsite staff were fully or partially furloughed for an undetermined time frame. Nevertheless, energetic interaction took place in forums such as the *Asociación de Programas Universitarios Norteamericanos en España* (APUNE), The Forum on Education Abroad, and the NAFSA: Association of International Educators as well as through discussions among study abroad personnel at home and abroad. The future of study abroad and what it might look like as the pandemic progressed on its way to becoming endemic became the focus of discussion and debate. Would new models of study abroad arise? Would new goals have to be established? Would study abroad even continue to take place...abroad?

Increased interest in learning outcomes from study abroad has been building up for the past twenty years, as can be seen by the rising number of articles in study abroad literature. Ogden and Streitweiser (2016) describe the different categories of the developing complexity of research since the 1990s, which is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1
 Categorization of study abroad research. From Ogden & Streitwieser (2016, p. 2).



Note. Reprinted from Research on US Education abroad: A concise overview. *Handbook of Research on Study Abroad Programs and Outbound Mobility*. Ogden, A., & Streitwieser, B. 2016. IGI Global. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-0169-5.ch001>

Ogden and Streitwieser (2016) point out: “Overall, the proliferation and diversification of education abroad research are positive indicators that US HE [Higher Education] as a whole is gaining a greater understanding of the learning and growth that results from education abroad programming” (p. 2).

According to Ogden and Streitwieser (2016), higher education institutions (HEIs) have been driven in recent years to justify their value by documenting student learning. “As educators grapple with pressure(s) to accommodate this growth while striving to ensure quality, observers have become more vocal in their calls for less reliance on superficial program evaluations, mere tabulation of participation figures, or anecdotal accounts as ‘evidence’ for meaningful education abroad” (p. 2). Some institutions and accreditation agencies are now including study abroad programs in the accreditation process, subjecting the programs to an external review including mission statements, faculty qualifications, and curricular offerings through self-evaluations, peer and committee visits and reports, as well as proof of strategic plans for the sustainable future of the program.

Overall, before the COVID pandemic, the goals of study abroad and the outcomes of these goals were mainly concerned with language acquisition, intercultural knowledge, and other skills associated with becoming immersed in an unfamiliar world of lifestyle differences, communication complexities and, of course, global citizenship resulting from moving beyond familiar personal and academic territories. As Ogden and Streitwieser (2016) point out: “The existing research has generally utilized an array of theoretical models that can loosely be grouped along five broad lines of research: (1) student learning; (2) intercultural understanding; (3) student development; (4) student engagement; and (5) communication (pp. 9-10).” These authors then add a list of topics that need to be addressed in order to fill in the gaps of consolidating research on the value of international study experiences. They are as follows: “1. Programming 2. Program Mobility Models 3. Experience Types 4. Curriculum Integration 5. Career Integration 6. Technology 7. Host Community Impact 8. Institutional Impact 9. Financial Issues 10. Participation 11. Global Citizenship 12. Push and Pull Factors 13. Institution Type” (p. 14).

The pandemic seems to have pushed the need for adding to the research base in all of these areas even further as institutions and study abroad professionals search for ways to adapt programming and adjust goals.

ADJUSTMENT OF GOALS AND A RENEWED PERSPECTIVE OF STUDY ABROAD

The sudden closing of study abroad programs in the spring semester of the 2019-20 academic year was a shock to all: administrators, faculty, and students. Initially, the priority was making sure that current students were able to continue their studies as best as possible under nearly impossible circumstances so that they did not lose credit for the second semester of the 2019-20 academic year. Emergency remote instruction from abroad to students now locked down in their homes after a traumatic uprooting and emergency relocation from their study sites was a complex undertaking for all. Professionals, on lockdown themselves, organized instruction almost overnight in conjunction with home campuses and international university partners overcoming challenges that faculty, staff, and administrators were ill-prepared to manage. Rotoli (2021) writes “This pandemic-induced scramble forced institutions to expand their capabilities rapidly—and often uncomfortably. Yet, international education leaders persisted. And their hard work and innovation resulted in expanded possibilities for students’ global education that not only solved for the short-term chaos, but also created exciting new opportunities for the future” (para. 4).

Even though programs handled the logistics of maintaining credit-bearing content, students struggled with the psychological effects of having been sent home on extremely short notice, having their study abroad dreams interrupted, and in many cases dealing with illness and death of loved ones. In reference to the 2022 UNESCO IESALC report titled *Resuming or Reforming? Tracking the global impact of the COVID-19 on higher education after two years disruption*, a UNESCO publication (2022, May 18, para. 4) indicates the following:

The report shows how HEIs were generally unprepared for the COVID-19 disruption. Good management practices were based on flexibility, strong communication, crisis team creation, digitalization and remote work. Services were greatly impacted and virtual delivery was dependent on the availability of infrastructure. Institutional finances were also impacted. The mental health of students, faculty and staff became a major concern.

As the pandemic raged with no end in sight, institutions settled into a new abnormal, which in most cases meant finding a way to continue study abroad remotely. As observed by Rotoli (2021), “When the pandemic hit and affected nearly every student’s ability to travel, study abroad professionals had to think deeply and quickly about how to effectively deliver global education experiences to everyone—resulting in new opportunities for robust virtual study abroad and cross-cultural events online” (para. 10). Very few programs were able to receive students on site due to institutional restrictions, host country restrictions, or travel restrictions. Some programs remained closed indefinitely while others scrambled to create innovative ways to attract students who were not allowed back on home campuses and who were sorely disappointed at not being able to spend time abroad.

Administrators in home campus study abroad offices and study abroad program directors faced additional struggles as they were confronted with full or partial furloughs and prospective job reduction or even loss when it became apparent that the pandemic would last longer than expected. Faculty abroad, already in a somewhat tenuous position, suffered job loss or lower pay even as they were required to change and adapt to online instruction, working in complex personal circumstances and sometimes having to take on unfamiliar tasks outside of their normal purview. Many students, concerned about how to manage credits, requirements, and the effect that COVID would have on their ability to graduate, put study abroad on hold or gave up the notion altogether.

Nevertheless, in spite of the anxiety and uncertainty, a collective sense of reviving and even reimagining study abroad arose with surprising strength. As an example, APUNE became a beacon of light for study abroad program directors as weekly meetings, frequent topic-specific forums, breakfast get-togethers, and research groups served to create a force that would influence home campus perspectives and actions. The interaction that went on among APUNE members became a quest for ideas to deal with post-pandemic international mobility.

Similar conversations and discussions were taking place among professionals on the home campuses. Rotoli (2021) suggests that the current situation and health crisis could even provide a unique opportunity to solve some of the problematic international study issues. “During this historic time, collegiate professionals have a unique chance to improve their approach to international programming and engagement and execute a new playbook for the long term” (para. 7).

So, looking back to how research in the past 30 years has been pointing to an alignment of goals and accountability of study abroad with home campus and student expectations in several different areas, the need to establish practices based on theory and research and validated by demonstrable outcomes has intensified in order to gain back the confidence in how study abroad works and why it is so important in today’s world.

PARADIGMS FOR FLEXIBLE RESPONSES TO FLUX IN STUDY ABROAD

Conversations among onsite directors of study abroad programs within the APUNE forums led to a series of presentations regarding the decision-making process and the roles of home campus administrators and study abroad administrators and staff. The onsite cohort of study abroad administrators, mostly permanent, professional program directors, began to discuss changing paradigms related to the loci of decision-making, risk assessment and management, and underlying assumptions of study abroad.

A presentation titled, *Learning and growing in adversity: APUNE at the helm while navigating uncharted waters*, given by APUNE members at The Forum on Education Abroad in October of 2020, highlighted decisions that were being made by home campus administrators regarding student travel and whether or not programs could remain open (Griffin et al., 2020). The question was whether ethno-centric decision-making (home campus central administration only) or poly-centric decision-making (home campus central administration, home campus study abroad administrators, and onsite program administrators) was taking place and how effective each might be. In the end, it was suggested that a possible alternative of geo-centric decision-making (contribution from all agents with information and perspectives ranging from local environment to program location environment to global environment) might make sense given the unstable nature of the pandemic and future endemic.

The following excerpt from Ludwig (2022) points to the sea change with regard to program administration and supervision:

Resident Directors (RDs) were in the spotlight in unusual ways during the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020, and did great things: the achievement of managing a large-scale, short-term student evacuation operation on a historically unprecedented scale can hardly be overestimated.

In addition, they have mostly assisted home institutions in providing academic continuity, by helping students finish the endangered spring semester elsewhere or even offering online courses themselves, to help students get their much-needed credits.

Their skills and knowledge of local conditions were more important than ever, especially since their employers or clients back home were, after all, dealing with even greater problems in maintaining the overall institution and were dependent on their expertise.

This could lead to an adjustment of the distribution of tasks in the future – in conjunction with more intensive communication online.

Ideally, all this may result in home institutions gaining an increased appreciation of the competencies, skills and professionalism of their local representatives and the importance of their knowledge of local structures and cultures which, in turn, may lead to an increased appreciation of their work. (paras. 51-55)

Finally, with regard to the underlying assumptions of study abroad, the pandemic has given rise to a concept also suggested during the APUNE presentation, that moving from a local (home campus) to a global perspective on study abroad might be necessary given the need for flexible responses to the current and future state of COVID. Rather than the traditional paradigm based on the assumption of *managing* risks in order to attain *certainty* in attaining academic standards and assimilating cultural differences, the pandemic and its future state as endemic may lead study abroad toward a new paradigm in which the main assumption is that risk is a given, that uncertainty is the new base, and that the only thing that can be managed are restrictions that are established, modified, and eliminated literally from one day to the next, necessitating a new tolerance for flexibility by everyone involved. The end result is experiential value rather than managed certainty. The outcome of this new perspective could have an effect that extends to all aspects of study abroad from curricular programming to language methodology to cultural options and views.

TRANSITION FROM PANDEMIC TO ENDEMIC STUDY ABROAD: FORMAT AND OPERATIONS

Since the spring of 2020, programs abroad have been forced to examine and re-examine every aspect of their operations, including teaching formats, personnel and responsibilities, budgets, income and expenses, technology equipment and training, academic standards, program evaluations, program orientation, marketing, recruitment, curricular offerings, co-curricular excursions and activities, faculty relations, and student satisfaction.

When a crisis hits, everything is placed under the microscope and is judged to be viable, viable with modifications, or non-viable. Time-honored traditions that had been in place for years, even decades, were tossed out as the risk of contagion took the place of traditional risks that had more to do with student behavior than with global viral transmission.

As students and faculty struggled with remote teaching and learning, administrators searched desperately for ways to create a simulated study abroad experience. Some programs involved host families who invited students *into* their homes for remote lunchtime conversations, while others hired local youth to show students around their universities and cities via webcam in an attempt to create conversation connections and opportunities for spontaneous language acquisition. Online resources such as virtual tours of museums and monuments became vital tools in the attempt to make students feel like they were experiencing real travel to the host country.

In spite of a 91% decrease in study abroad enrollments (Institute of International Education, 2022), the true test for study abroad programs came with the few programs that reopened immediately in the fall of 2020, as well as those that operated in the spring of 2021. In the specific case of Spain,

the second most popular study abroad destination after Italy (Institute of International Education, 2022), even in the fall semester of 2021 discussions among APUNE program administrators indicated ongoing experimentation and modifications of hybrid, blended, and onsite programming in response to restrictions that were imposed by municipal, regional, provincial, national, and international authorities. Managing restrictions regarding travel boundaries, size of group gatherings, access to cultural venues, distancing and space metrics, transportation, and visa documentation became a game of trying to work around conflicting laws and rules imposed at a moment's notice, enforced with a certain randomness, and obeyed in differing degrees. At the same time, programs took serious steps and imposed protocols to keep students, staff, and faculty safe, healthy, engaged, and academically sound, not to mention providing the learning opportunities expected from a study abroad experience.

One of the results of pandemic-affected study abroad was that students who were restricted to local spaces and the programs that they attended were forced into what could be termed bound-to-place learning. In other words, study abroad learning goals focused on immediate surroundings because there was no other choice. Students who chose to study abroad during this time accepted the fact that their experience would be very different from their predecessors who, as most undergraduates did, spent a good share of their weekends and holidays anywhere except the place where they had chosen to study.

Apart from occasional references in student evaluations to the fact that they could not travel during their time in the country, students were grateful for the opportunity to get to know their host city and region on a deeper level.

A quote taken from an undergraduate thesis presented by McDougall (2022) at South Carolina Honors College expresses what many students felt while studying abroad in an environment of travel restrictions:

I had the opportunity of spending the entire semester exploring the region of Navarra when I studied abroad at the University of Navarra in Pamplona, Spain throughout the spring of 2021. Given the circumstances of Coronavirus and the rules put in place by the government of Spain, I did not have the option to leave the region for the entirety of my time spent abroad. This provided me with the chance to explore Navarra thoroughly and experience its natural diversity, small towns, cuisine, culture, and history. I was able to see just how much the region can offer to a tourist wanting to experience much of what Spain has to offer without taking a trip to Madrid or Barcelona or spending my time lounging at the beaches in the south. I wish I had known more about the region I would be spending four months in before arriving. (pp. 3-4)

In the 1990s, the term place-based education (PBE) was created principally by the discipline of environmental studies. One of the first people to put PBE into practice in collaboration with The Orion Society, was John Elder, a professor at Middlebury College, where environmental studies has had a very long tradition. Others such as Laurie Lane-Zucker, David Orr, and David Soebel also published material about learning in place (Elfer, 2011). Elfer (2011) gave the following definition of PBE: “a contemporary educational term which refers to those forms of pedagogy that seek to connect learning to the local ecological, cultural, and historical contexts in which schooling itself takes place” (pp. 1-2). The idea is, therefore, to teach the local context and associate it within a global perspective. As an example, a student in the Programa de Estudios Hispánicos en Córdoba (PRESHCO) based in Córdoba, Spain, studied the history of water management in Córdoba from Roman times through the present and associated the strategies to his native city of Los Angeles, California.

Progressive educators have advocated for place-based or place-conscious education since the times of Dewey (1915), who wrote, “Experience [outside the school] has its geographical aspect, its artistic and its literary, its scientific and its historical sides. All studies arise from aspects of the one earth and the one life lived upon it” (p. 91). This was mostly a pedagogy for elementary or secondary education that took place outside of the classroom, sometimes called *outdoor education*. More recently, the term has

taken on a global sense to reflect the following definition from Woodhouse and Knapp (2000): “It connects place with self and community. Because of the ecological lens through which place-based curricula are envisioned, these connections are pervasive. These curricula include multigenerational and multicultural dimensions as they interface with community resources” (para. 14).

As the concept reached tertiary education, the term and concept has taken on an even broader, global sense. Nothing says place-based learning better than study abroad. It is the epitome of learning in place with the overall goal of connecting one’s identity with that of others in the world through immersion in another place and its language, society, customs, and culture. That said, connections to and understanding of a study abroad destination depend on the individual student and how much time and effort is invested in taking on the challenge. The COVID pandemic may have provided the motivation for a new look at PBE. What needs to happen for PBE to become a regular feature of study abroad programs?

Factors that include interaction with host nationals, acceptance of others’ identities and habits, adaptation of self-identity, motivation to attain knowledge of a place, and length of time immersed in the culture need to work in unison, preferably contributing in equal parts to the goal of learning in place and about place. Traditionally, knowledge in place was mostly an academic, intentional exercise with some incidental learning along the way. Acceptance and adaptation of identity is where study abroad has mostly left students to their own devices, leading to a vague concept of culture shock and its various stages or definitions. Recently, this area is where the most innovative work is taking place as intercultural skills have become the focus of research and numerous evaluation instruments.

Virtual versions of study abroad, as well as physical study abroad in restricted conditions, promoted a renewed consideration of what *place* means. With the confinement and restrictions on mobility in 2020, being in one place suddenly became a critical experience for everyone. *Shelter-in-place* was a term that was little known to the general public, and then only as a reference to spontaneous emergencies that required staying put until the emergency was resolved. Because this expression was confusing, some governments issued *stay-at-home* orders instead (Schwiegershausen, 2020). In any case, where one should be and where one could go created tension and expectations, turning places into desired destinations. When study abroad programs were canceled or turned into virtual reality, the desire to experience a study abroad site in person increased as an object of desire. The attempts to help students know the place virtually were successful only in as far as to create the intentional, academic, and formal knowledge that students could then get credit for. As a caveat, virtual study abroad did *democratize* the experience in a certain way for students whose financial options would not allow for a physical presence in another country.

The programs that were able to continue receiving the few students who were allowed to travel by their institutions, came to understand the meaning of place in study abroad. Students who arrived overcame many obstacles ranging from convincing concerned family members to jumping through bureaucratic hoops posed by transportation and border controls. Going to a place and getting to know it became a global act of courage that led to a unique and intimate knowledge of people from that place and how they were managing the COVID-19 crisis.

Programs looked around their place of operation with a changed perspective. Ludwig (2022, para. 14) wrote:

We humans learn through shocks and crises and the first step to learning is being forced to take a step back and look at the familiar in a new way. Many actors in the field have taken the study abroad industry for granted for decades, certainly noting that it has changed gradually, but they have not often had the leisure or cause to look at that change holistically.

Previously, programs found it difficult to fit activities in around students' busy travel schedules to other cities and countries. The study abroad destination city was secondary to seeing as many other places as time and budgets would permit. All of a sudden, the concept of place was limited to a municipality and for programs in cities other than Madrid or Barcelona, programming classes and co-curricular activities meant finding ways to use their restricted space in a meaningful way. Onsite administrators managed the challenging logistics and while students lamented the fact that they could not freely travel, they appreciated being physically present. As seen in the quote by McDougall above, students reported that staying in one place for four months offered an unusual opportunity to reach a closeness with others and a depth of knowledge about the place, its people and its culture, which turned into a rare gift. More time spent with host families, considerable time spent walking and observing, and quiet time reflecting on self and others generated a special place-based knowledge and experience. One of the most significant observations included how people in this new place were reacting to a pandemic. This depth of perception and sense of self in a closed place and space was significant in a way that study abroad has never touted before.

TRANSITION FROM PANDEMIC TO ENDEMIC STUDY ABROAD: SUSTAINABILITY

Perhaps now more than ever, study abroad offices in the United States in conjunction with financial administrators and high-level decision-makers have brought the financial stability and sustainability of operations abroad into the limelight of scrutiny. Many programs were already struggling as the result of shifting, unpredictable enrollments as well as a chain of economic crises that affected higher education to such a degree that entire universities closed down in spite of long and successful histories. The pandemic was the crushing blow to an already fragile situation for some, or even an excuse for institutions to shed the increasingly expensive and complex business of running study abroad programs. Even those with strong enrollments and cautious budgeting and spending are, and will continue to be, vulnerable. According to Ludwig (2022, para. 10):

The financial aftermath of the pandemic will continue to plague colleges and universities for years to come; there may be re-allocations, cutbacks or deferrals. Trends in language instruction at US institutions, global competition and profit-making trends may be increased or shifted.

In earlier times, study abroad programmes were seen as a way to enhance an institution's reputation and bring in money. Now there may be occasional voices in faculty and college governance that believe international programmes actually *cost* money and take resources away. Could there be distributional struggles ahead?

Distributional struggles have always been an issue at higher-education institutions, but in many cases, study abroad was a part of an institution's mission, and so was allowed a bit of financial leeway. That has come to a screeching halt, and financial stewardship, responsibility, accountability, and sustainability are now forever branded onto study abroad's operations. A sustainable program is a program that will survive the constant world crises that seem to occur with frightening frequency; economic, health, political, or climate induced or a combination of any or all together. The question is: What is needed to make a program resilient enough to be considered sustainable in these circumstances?

VOICES AND REFLECTIONS ON COVID AND STUDY ABROAD

Administrators

In February of 2022, an international conference of universities from Spain and the United States sponsored by APUNE, the University of Córdoba (UCO), and PRESHCO took place. The title was “*Diálogo entre culturas: Identidades Compartidas, Compartiendo Identidades.*” The opening panel included José Carlos Villamandos, Chancellor of the University of Córdoba and Andrew Shennan, Provost of Wellesley College, who spoke at length about the future of international programs from the European ERASMUS platform as well as from the U.S. study abroad perspective. Provost Shennan quoted a letter that reflected the feelings of study abroad programs in Spain.

Study abroad is a place where young people of all identities and backgrounds, together with their host culture communities, find ways to change the world...literally. My plea is that universities should consider international programs as a top priority...now more than ever. It is more than money well spent. It is a critical investment in lessons on precisely the issues that concern us now; systemic discrimination, empathy, *us* and *them*, color, race, ethnicity, equity, inclusion, intercultural understanding, global health, and language, not just foreign language, but the power of language in general, particularly in response to implicit bias. As a study abroad professional, I firmly believe that living in a different culture is a vital step in the direction of effecting local and global changes. (K. Griffin, personal communication, June 8, 2020).

In fact, the UCO and Wellesley College allowed student mobility within a carefully monitored and controlled environment as the pandemic continued. This meant making difficult decisions regarding risk management while believing in the value of international experience as an extraordinary opportunity to observe first-hand how other countries managed a health crisis that knew no boundaries.

Faculty

Faculty at programs such as PRESHCO comment frequently on the positive aspects of continuing to host U.S. students during the pandemic. Learning of language and culture took place inside and outside of classrooms against a background of tension and uncertainty. But students were attentive, grateful, introspective, and inquisitive—much of which came from living in close quarters with a pandemic in a foreign land. Without formal research, these faculty comments may only be considered as anecdotal, but the general sense is that students who participated in study abroad during the worst of the pandemic (2020-21) made progress. As the pandemic shows signs of becoming endemic, faculty comment on what they perceive as students who, after a year or more of remote or hybrid language and culture learning, arrive abroad with a lower level of proficiency and knowledge (see Davidson & Garas, this issue). Again, these impressions come from informal observations rather than true statistical data, but bear consideration as a base for future research.

Students

A pilot survey of PRESHCO students conducted in May 2022, revealed different views of the impact of COVID during their international stay as a function of their individual experiences. The 12-question survey (See Appendix A) asked for self-report on the impact of COVID on language level and cultural integration during time abroad in Córdoba, Spain. Of a total of 29 students, 14 responded (48%).

Questions 11 and 12 were directed at finding out how students perceived the impact of COVID on their progress in language acquisition and cultural integration. The findings are not conclusive because of the very small sample size and the fact that it was an exploratory pilot survey, but some of the answers are interesting indicators and merit further discovery.

In response to Question 11 (see Appendix B), “Do you believe that the COVID-19 health crisis helped or hindered you in achieving your language goals? How?”, follow some relevant comments:

- I experienced a lower language level previous to arrival because of not being on home campuses
- I had difficult times with listening comprehension because of masks
- I had less opportunity for interaction with host country nationals
- I lacked motivation to learn language previously due to remote learning

Regarding Question 12, “Do you think that the COVID-19 health crisis altered your perspective on becoming more proficient in a language and knowledgeable about culture? If so, how?”, their comments ranged as follows:

- no change, always thought study abroad was important
- more interest in study abroad and grateful for the opportunity
- additional interest in seeing a health crisis in another context

A comparison of pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic/endemic study abroad experiences needs to be addressed in future research on study abroad. Such research of the impact of COVID on at least two cohorts of students; those who missed the opportunity to study abroad, and those who suffered a diminished learning experience while abroad in difficult circumstances, may reveal a significant difference in language acquisition and intercultural learning.

CONCLUSION

In an article from *Inside Higher Ed*, Carrasco (2022) points to an increased interest in study abroad on the part of students and strong enrollments at least in countries deemed such as France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and the U.K. This increased interest may be the result of what Ludwig (2022, para. 35) suggests when he says:

Perhaps students have also understood what the real intercultural aspect of studying abroad is, which cannot be learned entirely on the computer, nor in short, almost tourist-like stays, but through prolonged and reflective living and working in a foreign cultural context.

In a recent article titled, *Endemic COVID-19 Looks Pretty Brutal*, Wallace-Wells (2022) paints an unflattering picture of the near future. No one is completely comfortable in changing the virus status from pandemic to endemic as yet. Statistics are too uncertain to consider the virus in a stable state. However, the percentage of vaccinations, boosters, and new boosters to keep up with the evolution of new variants give hope that COVID may someday be more endemic than pandemic.

With regard to the professionalization of study abroad, again as Ludwig (2022, para. 55) notes, study abroad professionals are in high demand due to the new responsibilities in managing world crisis situations. Also, it appears that there is a new appreciation for the skills that they possess: “Ideally, all

this may result in home institutions gaining an increased appreciation of the competencies, skills and professionalism of their local representatives and the importance of their knowledge of local structures and cultures which, in turn, may lead to an increased appreciation of their work.”

Home-campus decision-making may be changing to include a more global focus involving study abroad experts. Again, onsite staff and administrators have shown that at the very least there needs to be a hybrid format of making decisions that takes into account the perspective and knowledge onsite as well as back on the home campus.

Study abroad curricula now include topics related to world issues influenced by the COVID-19 crisis including global health, economics, climate, and environmental management. This can be seen at study abroad fairs organized by U.S. colleges and universities where promotional materials focus on tracks or programming that correspond more closely to home campus majors, minors, and concentrations. This focus on specific academic areas is occurring not only in the larger service providers, but also at the smaller college-based offerings.

Broader and deeper place-based knowledge with a global association may replace, or at least complement, a more traditional perspective of topic-based culture and language study during study abroad. Study abroad with a goal of social change is making inroads with students who are interested in learning about different places and the challenges that they face. These include environmental, economic, equality, human rights, and socio-cultural issues. Place-based experiential learning and high-impact education in study abroad instead of a more generalist, purely academic focus is becoming a desired commodity. As Pipitone (2018) says: “My conceptualization of place, which may be described as a relational materialist approach, conceptualizes place as landscapes full of sociocultural and historical meanings to be engaged with, not as empty spaces to be colonized. The meanings we make of place, even on an individual level, are shaped by places, which also shape us” (p. 59).

Study abroad programs from the U.S. are, as the 2022 UNESCO report states, resuming and possibly reforming because of the pandemic. Are students who come to study abroad programs different because of the pandemic? Certainly, perspectives have changed, as have expectations. The important task now is to gather information on how the changes affect students, faculty, and administrators in order to provide a clear picture of how these changes may steer study abroad toward a more diversified and equitable option for students to learn about a place, its customs, and its peoples.

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APPENDICES APPENDIX A

Effects of the COVID-19 health crisis on study abroad, language learning, and cultural integration

1. What was your estimated level of Spanish in 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 crisis? From 0 (no proficiency) to 10 (native speaker).

0 None 10 Native speaker

2. Did the COVID-19 health crisis have an impact on your language learning experience BEFORE you came to Córdoba? If so, how?

3. What was your estimated level of Spanish when you arrived in Córdoba?

0 None 10 Native speaker

4. Do you believe that your language level when you arrived in Córdoba would have been greater had it NOT been for the pandemic? If so, how or why?

5. How much Spanish language progress do you feel that you made in each of the following areas?

	General vocabulary	Better knowledge and use of grammar	Academic writing	Listening comprehension	Oral fluency	Colloquial expressions
Not much	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Average amount	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Much progress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. How would you describe and rate the cultural integration that you achieved during your time in Córdoba?

	With host family or residence hall	With Spanish UCO students	With ERASMUS students	With people at my internship
Not much integration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Average amount of integration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Very integrated	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Otro (especifique)

7. What is the overall level of satisfaction with your language progress after your semester or year in Córdoba?

- Very dissatisfied
- Satisfied
- Very satisfied

Otro (especifique)

8. What is the overall level of satisfaction with the cultural integration that you were able to achieve in Córdoba?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Very dissatisfied

Otro (especifique)

9. Looking back, what would you have done differently to achieve more language proficiency?

10. Looking back, what would you have done differently to achieve more cultural integration?

11. Do you believe that the COVID-19 health crisis helped you or hindered you in achieving your language goals? How?

12. Do you believe that the COVID-19 health crisis altered your perspective on becoming more proficient in a language and knowledgeable about culture? If so, how?

APPENDIX B

Table 1
Individual Answers to Question 11 of COVID-Impact Survey

Effects of the COVID-19 health crisis on study abroad, language learning, and cultural integration

P11 Do you believe that the COVID-19 health crisis helped you or hindered you in achieving your language goals? How?

Respondidas: 11 Omitidas: 3

#	RESPUESTAS	DATE
1	It honestly did not affect me much. The way it most affected me was that it kept delaying our meetings with the Spanish conversation partners. I feel like that was a missed opportunity.	6/24/2022 11:34 AM
2	I do not believe that the COVID-19 pandemic affected my language learning goals while in Cordoba in any significant way.	6/13/2022 1:58 AM
3	I think that my initial level of Spanish was less than it could've been when I got to Spain, but once I got there I immediately felt a difference in my skill because I had to use it everyday	6/11/2022 10:10 AM
4	I think that with COVID-19, its hard to talk and go out as much but I am very glad that I went out as much as I did.	5/26/2022 9:39 PM
5	I think masks made it a lot harder to comprehend my UCO professors. Also having Covid during the semester was disruptive to my learning of course	5/24/2022 6:09 PM
6	Definitely hindered, the masks may be one of the hardest parts for gaining listening and speaking skills.	5/23/2022 12:26 PM
7	It hindered it because there were less opportunities to gather at events and less incentive to hang out with Spaniards at places like restaurants.	5/22/2022 1:07 PM
8	I think I got frustrated at times because it was harder to hear and understand people with the masks. Not being able to see facial expressions was another challenge. However, if I can understand people with masks, I think that will make it much easier to understand people without masks.	5/21/2022 7:28 PM
9	Having masks on makes it difficult to be heard and to hear, so I felt like I had to try 10 times harder.	5/21/2022 6:22 PM
10	hindered, because it made classes go online and also totally crashed my motivation	5/21/2022 2:31 PM
11	I would have probably had a higher level of Spanish before coming here, and had I had two full years on campus I may have spent the full year here instead of one semester.	5/21/2022 12:23 PM

^a Three participants failed to answer this question.

Table 2
Individual Answers to Question 12 of COVID-Impact Survey

Effects of the COVID-19 health crisis on study abroad, language learning, and cultural integration

P12 Do you believe that the COVID-19 health crisis altered your perspective on becoming more proficient in a language and knowledgeable about culture? If so, how?

Respondidas: 11 Omitidas: 3

#	RESPUESTAS	DATE
1	No.	6/24/2022 11:34 AM
2	The COVID-19 pandemic did not alter my perspective on becoming more proficient in a language and knowledgeable about culture.	6/13/2022 1:58 AM
3	Being stuck at home made me really want to do study abroad and travel as soon as I could, but I don't think it affected my desire to study Spanish	6/11/2022 10:10 AM
4	Well, I did get COVID while in Spain and I was at home for a week.	5/26/2022 9:39 PM
5	The way that the pandemic has prevented important cultural events from taking place for multiple years now and generally prevents people, especially those from different countries and areas, from meeting and conversing I'm sure has put a damper on things. Having the fear of not being able to go abroad due to the pandemic made me realize I can't take for granted any opportunity to integrate into a new culture	5/24/2022 6:09 PM
6	The fear and constraints of covid made it so that I held back from some of the activities that could have let me connect with more people or speak more spanish. But it was also interesting that the pandemic was such a universal phenomenon that that was something that I could connect with spaniards about without cultural differences.	5/23/2022 12:26 PM
7	Not really	5/22/2022 1:07 PM
8	I think I was extra grateful that I was able to have this experience despite COVID-19.	5/21/2022 7:28 PM
9	NO	5/21/2022 6:22 PM
10	I don't think so	5/21/2022 2:31 PM
11	I've always thought that knowing another language is one of the best skills a person can have so that has not changed.	5/21/2022 12:23 PM

^a Three participants failed to answer this question.