



How Universities can Manage the Impact of International Crises

Description

When an international crisis occurs, it's crucial that your institution takes the correct measures to keep students safe. Our blog explains how your university can prepare.

The number of people diagnosed with the coronavirus is increasing each day.

[The World Health Organisation](#) has declared the virus outbreak a “global health emergency”, acknowledging the threat the virus poses to countries all over the world.

In response to these warnings, higher education institutions, both inside and outside of mainland China, [have had to adopt measures](#) to prevent the coronavirus reaching their staff and students.

While this outbreak is a particular concern for international and domestic students at Chinese universities, it's also a concern for students in other countries.

Those who have recently returned from an affected area could unintentionally spread the disease, and with [cases being confirmed outside of China](#), it's important that universities everywhere prepare for all eventualities.

The spread of the coronavirus has highlighted the importance of developing a [detailed and expert-approved crisis management plan](#), so that future international emergencies can be dealt with efficiently.

While the term “[international crisis](#)” is difficult to define in absolute terms, it's generally considered to be an event or phenomenon that has the potential for far-reaching effects.

With over [200 million students](#) studying in higher education institutions across the globe, an international crisis can have a serious impact on the sector.

The primary focus of institutions during periods of international emergency must be the protection of students and the preservation of their safety.

For some international crises, the effect of the event can be seen even after the initial aftermath.Â Â

Given the level of uncertainty and fear that can often surround an international crisis, institutions can sometimes witness negative consequences to their international recruitment and mobility.Â Â

In the years after the 9/11 attacks, the US saw itsÂ [rate of growth for international student numbers](#)Â hit an all-time low of only 0.6% (2002-2003).Â Â

Enrollment growth then continued to decline over the next few years with some reporting the 9/11 attacks as beingÂ [a deterrent for overseas students](#).Â Â

This is not always the case of course, with some students maintaining strong interest in international study regardless of any potential impact that a crisis might have on them.Â Â

In fact,Â a recent poll conducted by QSÂ revealed that only 5% of those who were interestedÂ in studying in Australia said they were less likely to pursue this path as a result of the Australian bushfires.Â Â

Regardless, it's vital that your institution has the necessary measures in place to deal with both the immediate and long-term effects of an international crisis.Â Â

In fact,Â [it's been reported that](#)Â "thousands of learners" are currently "left stranded" in China as a result of the coronavirus; demonstrating the effect it's already having on student mobility.Â Â

Below are just a few steps your university should take when faced with an international crisis.Â Â

Information and communication

During an international crisis, students and their family members will have many questions.Â

To ensure the information they receive is accurate and up-to-date, institutions should act as a reliable source; maintaining regular communication and informing students on the correct course of action at each stage of the crisis.Â

This is a great way to prevent widespread panic resulting from misinformation and uncertainty, and to ensure that crisis management protocol is consistently adopted throughout the institution.Â Â

As a crisis develops, governments and officials will release regular updates on how citizens should act, and it's important for universities to relay this information to students in a clear and calm manner.Â Â

For example, in response to the coronavirus,Â [China's National Education Examinations Authority](#)Â cancelled all February sittings for the Graduate Record Exam, the Graduate Management Admission Test, International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).Â

It's imperative that information of this importance reaches students, and with the university communicating these details, recipients can be reassured that the information is trustworthy.

Complying with regulation

Universities face a unique challenge when it comes to international crises.

A university campus is often densely populated, meaning that a virus or disease has the potential to spread incredibly fast.

Equally, given that large groups of students assemble in university buildings and accommodation, if a natural disaster were to strike locally, the chance of this affecting a significant number of university students is high.

As a result, it's critical that universities listen closely to government instructions, and act quickly to stop the situation escalating further.

However, it's not enough for universities to simply wait for instructions from officials.

Preparing for disasters and emergencies before they occur is a huge part of keeping students safe.

For example, due to the increase in mass shootings in the US, [universities are developing](#) evacuation and emergency strategies for staff and students to follow.

In the case of international crises, make sure your university has a strategy in place that can be activated at a moment's notice, while simultaneously awaiting instructions from experts and officials.

Flexible management

Having a well-functioning university means developing and implementing efficient processes for students to follow.

Exam attendance, coursework submissions, accommodation applications, and payments are just a few of the steps university students must complete as part of their university experience.

Many universities will apply deadlines to these processes and may even use automatic systems to help process information.

However, when an international crisis hits, these timelines and systems can be disrupted as society deals with the ripple effects.

It's important that management processes are reviewed during this time, and that your university is flexible with deadlines and applications to account for any changes that occur during the crisis.

As a result of the political unrest in Hong Kong in 2019, universities had to become flexible with plans and assist students through these disruptions.

[In August 2019, it was reported that](#) more than 100 students had to postpone exchange programs at Hong Kong universities this semester on advice from Singapore's education ministry.

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Instead of this being an end to their exchange experience altogether, universities assisted students in finding alternative arrangements.Â

Universities began â??helping students with insurance claims and refunds for their cancelledÂ trips, andÂ would help themÂ enrollÂ in courses for the current semester and identify other exchange programs for the second semester.â?Â

Itâ??s important that your institution is adaptable during an international crisis so that as many students as possible can access higher education in the long run.Â

For example, if students cannot access campus during the time of the crisis, the university should help them work remotely via online resources and regular communication with lecturers.Â Â

Emotional supportÂ Â

It goes without saying that natural disasters, virus outbreaks, political unrest, and conflicts are all incredibly challenging scenarios to navigate.Â Â

Depending on the details of the crisis, students may be directly affected by being injured or unwell, have family members who are affected, or be in quarantine and unable to continue with their regular study plans.Â Â

No matter what scenario your students are faced with, support should be available to help them process it.Â Â

Re-building your brandÂ Â

After an international crisis, your university might need to look to a more long-term crisis management plan.Â

Even if the crisis has subsided, fears may persist around student safety, and the overall perception of the university or country may have shifted.Â Â

In order to reduce the negative impact on student recruitment, universities must work quickly to reassure students and re-build a positive brand image.Â Â

The best way to do so is to learn from the incident and implement real and visible changes to protect students from future threats.Â Â

In 2009, the city of Lâ??Aquila in Italy experienced a magnitude 6.3 earthquake.Â

As a result,Â [55 students at the University Lâ??Aquila were killed](#), of which 8 died in the collapse of one university dormitory.Â

In the year after, the university experienced a slight decline in enrolment (-4.7%) and as a response, [launched an investigation](#) into the university's preparedness and management of the disaster.

After interviewing students for the report, it was exposed that 95% of respondents ignored the emergency plan prepared by the university, and many did not know what services had been brought in to help.

The report concluded that the university was caught unprepared to cope with the disaster and that the information, training, and drill activities were not enough to produce an acceptable level of emergency preparedness among students.

Ultimately, while the university had measures in place, these were not adequate, and were also not communicated well enough to students prior to the event.

[As a result of this](#), L'Aquila University and the surrounding area were forced to review their emergency response protocol; ultimately reassuring prospective students that positive changes had been made.

It's important that in the aftermath of an international crisis, prospective students are made aware that the university remains a safe and welcoming environment.

Funding

With a possible dip in student numbers, and disruptions to term time, universities will need to reflect on how this may impact their financial status.

Kesh Patel, a consultant at QS, explains: "Many institutions are reliant on the revenue generated from the dwell time of students on campus; students spending money in shops, restaurants, and social activities. These can be a significant source of income for institutions, and a crisis that takes students away from campus can have an impact on this."

While it's difficult to plan for all eventualities, creating a financial strategy that considers the possibility of an international crisis is a great way of reducing the extent of the impact on university finances in the long run.