

Changes and the Pandemic: A Look into the Pandemic's Impact on York International

York International provides York University students with global learning services and programs that enrich students' academic and research experiences. Both domestic and international students are offered transnational opportunities to enrich their skills in their prospective field of study. Since York International's focus is on exchanges and internships, our most recent pandemic has had a direct impact on its missions. As stated on *ApplyBoard* (2021), the number of study-permits submitted by international students declined from 350,000 in 2019 to 90,000 in 2020. Understanding the need to address the challenges and changing needs, employees at York International proposed virtual opportunities for international and domestic students. For this publication, we interviewed a Project Officer at York International, Dr. Mario Guerrero. During this interview, we have learned that Dr. Guerrero has been overseeing three projects: Sustainable on the Go, Effective Intercultural Communication and Publication of an e-book on the proceedings of the 2021 Sustainable on the Go Conference. Dr. Guerrero's new role was driven by a desire to assist in granting students the same opportunities he was offered when he was a doctoral exchange student. Although Dr. Guerrero does not directly work with international students, his role is to advocate for international students' and Faculty needs at our university. Below is a recount of the information we gathered from our interview.

After meeting with Dr. Guerrero, we learned that accommodating international students was one of the main changes that took place within York International. At the start of our health crisis, since students, staff and faculty were no longer allowed on campus, services went through the

inevitable switch from in-person to virtual services. The academic department within York International was greatly impacted by the pandemic. Lastly, changes in administration helped York International to modify the way services were offered (M. Guerrero, personal communication, March 24th, 2022).

The changes imposed by our health crisis have affected everyone's habits and lifestyle: impacting workplaces, places of worship, governments (Haleem et al, 2020) and educational settings. For the latter, with the pandemic affecting our daily lives, many of us have been regulated to study and work from home, limit our outings by avoiding all unnecessary indoor and outdoor gatherings and wearing masks. As argued by Dr. Guerrero, "there were changes at the administration level, influencing, how York International operated, how students came to the university, the requirements for students to belong and be part of the university" (M. Guerrero, personal communication, March 24th, 2022). This massive change robbed opportunities from many students at York, especially international students.

Vaccination policies affected international students' ability to come or return to Canada. For many, this implied forfeiting their full university experience. An added challenge affecting all students was the mandatory shift in course delivery and, hence, students' need to adjust to remote learning. This mandatory shift in educational experience has been mostly felt by exchange and international students. As suggested by Dr. Guerrero, many of our international students were forced to return to their native country, and study in front of their laptops without experiencing what it is truly like to study abroad, meet new people, and face new challenges through the process of immersion.

York International has been forced to adapt to this unprecedented situation, with other procedures and a different process, such as remote working for many employees, and virtual meetings. Furthermore, our interviewee, Dr. Mario Guerrero, has been working on one of York International's projects, Sustainable on the go, which is highly related to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations established in 2015. To summarize, by 2030 the United Nations aim to solve the main educational, political, egalitarian, environmental, and social issues faced by our current world. It was very interesting to find a direct relation between this project and Sustainable on the go.

As highlighted by Dr. Guerrero, the restrictions involving travel during the initial months of the pandemic have affected programs run by York University in partnership with other universities. Learning experiences with students from other partnering universities were restricted to virtual exchanges. This has taken place, for example, with the Globally Networked Learning (GNL). Through this program, students became involved with "an approach to research, learning, and teaching that enables students, faculty, and non-academic researchers from different locations around the world to participate in, and collaborate on, knowledge making processes and concrete research projects" (York International, n.d.). Some of the technologies that helped make GNL possible included, but were not limited to, "learning management systems, video conferencing software and hardware, cloud computing and social media" (York International). As argued by Dr. Guerrero "this effective intercultural communication course was an initiative that we hoped it would give even if in a very small scale, an opportunity for students to go abroad and become

interculturally competent, which is key to becoming a responsible global citizen” (M. Guerrero, personal communication, March 24th, 2022).

When examining change and how our health crisis has impacted our university, we must also look at the economic impact it has had on the administrative department at York International. As imagined, we have learned that the number of students applying to the exchange opportunities offered by York International has had a drastic decline. Another important change involved students’ arrival process when entering Canada. For those arriving from abroad, a quarantine plan was implemented. Students had to abide by policies put in place by Canada’s federal government. These new policies required students to stay in a hotel for determined periods of time to ensure they were not contagious when entering the country. (M. Guerrero, personal communication, March 24th, 2022). This became a huge setback to the enrolment process. In addition, many students were not allowed into Canada without proof of vaccination. This had a further impact on international students’ decision to study abroad.

As students who have either been in high school or university during the start of the pandemic, we know how closures due to COVID-19 have impacted our education. As all interactions that would have been done in person were offered remotely. Dr. Guerrero stressed how staff, faculty, and students had to adjust and adapt in order to keep courses and programs running. Equally important, he continues, there were changes and cancellations of conferences, orientations, and international exchange programs (M. Guerrero, personal communication, March 24th, 2022). This created hardships for students in international exchange programs as they were unable to travel abroad due to lockdowns and restrictions that were in effect.

Through our interview we conversed about the many changes imposed on us by the pandemic. Student life and student learning were at the center of our discussion. While acknowledging changes we as students, know too well, we also learned that although in-person university exchange programs were forcibly put to a halt during the initial stages of the pandemic. That being said, York International continued to provide inter-cultural learning opportunities and experiences that, within mandated limitations, granted students a taste of what it may be like to study abroad. As Dr. Guerrero mentions, “going online was not the same hands-on experience the students were anticipating. Yet providing the limited choices we all had, our department was still able to create a positive virtual experience” (M. Guerrero, personal communication, March 24th, 2022). In other words, although the pandemic has brought a number of limitations to students’ university experience, York International helped students, however possible, in making the most out of their academic year.

References:

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