

UNDERSTANDING

EXTERNAL GLOBAL FORCES

When the financial crisis in Greece escalated a few years ago, the staff at the N.U.*in* Program at Northeastern University, which sends first-year students abroad during their fall semester, scrambled to understand the situation and provide answers to parents. Greece was under austerity measures to curtail government spending and reduce debt. The country had failed to make payments to creditors who provided debt relief, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

“People were calling our office not really familiar with the IMF or the concept of austerity measures. They just wanted to know if their most valuable assets—their students—were going to be safe in Greece,” says Lauren Kettler, Ed.D., Assistant Dean, The N.U.*in* Program. “So we had to buckle down and dive into the economic and political situation in Greece.”

That led Kettler to think more closely about external forces that affect study abroad programs, from the rise of terrorism in Turkey to more recently, President Trump’s executive orders on immigration. Her musings eventually led to a doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania on the topic. “How higher education institutions take into consideration such external forces can, ultimately, affect their internationalization efforts, strategies and successes,” says Kettler.

OUTSIDE FORCES,
RANGING FROM
ECONOMIC CONDITIONS
TO POLITICAL
LANDSCAPES, AFFECT
INTERNATIONALIZATION
STRATEGIES AT HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS



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SEVEN

INTERNATIONALIZATION FORCES

Kettler's qualitative study explored how external forces affect inbound and outbound mobility programs, as well as how universities adapt to those forces. She used data from *Open Doors: Reports on International Education Exchange* and the *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* (IPEDS) to study internationalization strategies at three leaders in inbound and outbound mobility programs: Boston University, Northeastern University and the University of Southern California.

Kettler's study revealed common themes among the universities that she grouped into seven external forces, which she dubbed Internationalization Forces:



1 Economics

Competition with other higher education institutions, the cost of education and global economic instability



2 Geography

The location of both the higher education institution and the study abroad program



3 Globalization

Forces pushing greater international involvement, such as shifts in the job market, technology, and access



4 Political and Cultural Landscape

The political and cultural backdrop within the U.S. and abroad



5 Safety

The safety of both inbound and outbound mobility programs, as well as the perception of safety



6 Soft Power

The persuasive approach to international relations, particularly as it relates to U.S. soft power



7 Internal University Forces

The influence of institutional authorities, such as university presidents

THE **EFFECT** OF EXTERNAL FORCES

“One of the major findings of my study was that forces can be positive and negative, and their effects can be positive and negative,” says Kettler.

“I was able to plot different scenarios that could happen, and they boiled down to four quadrants: creative, beneficial, harmful and stressful.”



Creative

“The creative quadrant includes negative forces that result in positive effects,” says Kettler. For instance, one negative economic force is the rising cost of education, which could lead to a decrease in study abroad participants. However, a positive outcome to this external force would be the creation of new policies or programs to increase access to study abroad programs. This might include scholarships for study abroad or the addition of less expensive short-term programs in more affordable locations.

Beneficial

When the external force and its effect are both positive, then it is beneficial to the institution. Kettler cites the recruitment of international students as an example. If such recruitment is viewed positively by universities, it can have positive effects, such as an increase in tuition for the institutions.

CREATIVE

BENEFICIAL

HARMFUL

STRESSFUL

Harmful

The harmful effect occurs when both external forces and their results are negative. “An example is a policy such as the executive orders on immigration out of President Trump’s office that is perceived as being negative, then has a perceived negative effect because it increases the workload for employees in global education offices,” says Kettler. External forces related to safety typically fall in this category, too. For instance, the series of terrorist attacks in London in 2017 were negative, as were the potential results for universities, which could include student fatalities or injuries.

Stressful

On the flip side, a favorable external force can be stressful to an institution if the effect is adverse. So, for instance, a rise in international students on campus may tax a university that has limited resources and isn’t fully prepared for that increased population. “It can cause increased stress on the institution, which was discussed [by study participants] as working longer hours, doing work that is unfamiliar and having to hunker down to get jobs done,” says Kettler.

ADVICE

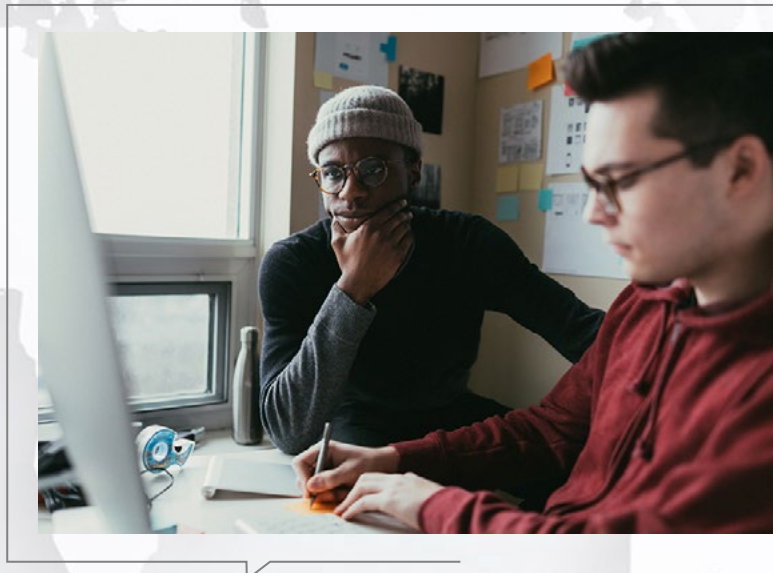
FOR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Kettler asserts that universities looking to create or expand upon their internationalization efforts should reflect upon the external forces that may affect their strategies and how they can adapt to them. “These forces are really volatile. They can cause both a lot of harm and a lot of wonderful results for students and institutions,” she says. “I recommend that universities try to understand their internal landscape, which in turn will help them to respond and adapt to situations created by external forces.”

She adds that institutions that are “loosely coupled”—ones with organizational structures that allow individual departments or entities more power to do things on their own—may be better able to take hold of a situation and mitigate the outcome. For example, when an economic crisis like the one in Greece occurs, can your study abroad office make unilateral decisions on how to react? Who else needs to be involved, and in what decisions?

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Many institutions have external affairs offices however, Kettler says they are often focused on local or U.S. issues that directly impact the university. “When issues in other countries occur, the office is forced to quickly become a subject expert on areas regarding that region’s politics and cultures,” she says. Some universities are using outsourced resources, such as insurance companies and lobbyists, to assist with incidents as they happen. Others hire full-time staff to address external forces or utilize other institution departments as needed, such as the university police department or legal team.



Whatever the strategy, universities may need to alter their structure to focus on internationalization forces.

While global education and international student offices may have little influence over their university’s overall infrastructure, they can examine their offices and decide how to handle external global forces. “My hope is that people start to think about these forces rather than react to them when they happen,” says Kettler. Begin to have conversations about how you would adapt to situations related to the seven internationalization forces.

“Understanding the volatility of the international forces can further assist higher education institutions in the facilitation of their internationalization strategies,” says Kettler. “My advice would be to start thinking about your institution, your mission and how your current resources are aligned to help respond and adapt to external global forces.”



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