

# International Student Exchanges: Mobility for Impact

**Santiago Garcia** and **Gladys Alicia Rey Castellanos** discuss Mobility with Impact, a fundamental shift in the nature of student exchange which will help mitigate some of the environmental costs of student travel and create greater benefits for society



**M**uch has been written on the subject of business schools as agents of change and generators of real positive impact on society. Similarly, much has been argued about the negative externalities of student mobility, accepting that moving students around is a necessary (evil) means if we are to bring the world to our classrooms.

Whereas the general consensus is that business schools must create positive impact and that student mobility comes with an environmental and sustainability price tag, no comprehensive solution has until now been proposed to make sure that such mobility ceases to be seen as a liability, turning it instead into a major actor and generator of wellbeing, sustainability, and positive societal impact.

We want to demonstrate how a business school has transformed this seemingly unsolvable paradox by bringing the classroom to the world, and not just the world to the classroom, while delving on a pedagogical model based on action-oriented learning, *Grow by Doing*, designed to create impact beyond borders through a new concept of student mobility: *Mobility for Impact*.

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The environmental costs of student mobility in terms of CO2 emissions could be easily exemplified just by a simple calculation provided by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). According to the ICAO, a round-trip economy class trip from Amsterdam to San Francisco will have the negative effect of releasing 876 kg. of CO2 into the atmosphere. Much changes for the better when a trip is made within a continent using a more sustainable means of transport such as train, which is estimated to emit 30 to 50 times less CO2 than their equivalent air transport. Whereas intra-European credit-mobility graduates, who could use the train in the context of their exchange programmes, number 390,000 according to the European Union portal Eurostats, there are roughly 6 million students worldwide moving across countries for their tertiary education according to UNESCO. Most of these students, even those moving within a continent for short credit-mobility stays, tend to use air transport when moving across borders (Shields and Lu, 2023).

According to the Higher Education Internationalization Levels Model (Garcia Rodriguez, 2023) the bulk of international activity at educational institutions rests on two types of student mobility: credit-mobility exchanges and degree-seeking mobility. It is essential, therefore, that the sector of higher education finds alternatives to address the growing environmental problem sending or receiving overseas students.

Whereas some small steps and recommendations for educational institutions are being put forward (e.g. Green Erasmus Guidelines for Environmental Activities during Mobility Exchange), we believe that the organisation of bike tours, green marathons, hikes, or promotion of bike mobility within a city are not sufficient measures to compensate the negative externalities of student mobility. Also, it should be our responsibility to make a real difference and impact on the communities where we operate beyond our borders by creating alternatives that generate true and sizable positive impact.

What can educational institutions do, in this context, to make sure the negative effects of student mobility are somehow offset by the creation of positive impact?

We propose that a new concept of student exchanges, 'Mobility for Impact', is one solution that through a multi-prong approach contributes to three goals: pedagogical innovation based on action-oriented learning, sensitisation of students to world problems, and creation of real impact on the host communities.

### What is Mobility for Impact and what are the four pillars?

#### First Pillar: Impact Challenge

Programmes of Mobility for Impact will first identify a key activity in a given area and establish an action plan to provide communities receiving international students with structured assistance in one, or various, of the following areas: Economic, Social, or Environmental Development. This notion of deploying resources to contribute to the societal wellbeing in any of these three key pillars for the development is at the core of Mobility for Impact. Each community, with their different realities and challenges, benefits from the direct intervention of a team of students working together in groups, forming a task force of consultants, with the goal of finding a solution to previously defined economic or business needs, social problems, or environmental issues.



#### Second Pillar: Structure

Structure is the second defining factor of Mobility for Impact and constitutes the key difference between programmes providing ad hoc stay abroad experiences or awarding academic credit for working at an NGO or completing an internship in an organisation. In this manner, the structured nature of a Mobility for Impact programme implies larger sizes and coordinated cohorts which range typically from 15 to 50 students per semester and destination. In addition, the more permanent nature of the initiatives, which rather than being an ad hoc placement of a student in a project, means ties with the local organisations are established, maintained, and enhanced through long-lasting partnerships that benefit the local community. Usually operating with a local academic partner onsite, the three actors jointly define the different areas of intervention or existing problematics that will lie at the heart of the experience and on which the students will be working with the final goal of providing tangible recommendations, solutions or plans for implementation.

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# 876kg

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**Third Pillar: Length of Stays.**

The third characteristic of Mobility for Impact is length of stays. In Mobility for Impact, students reside in the local community where they operate for a minimum of one semester. This longer duration is in contrast to some shorter-term study abroad (STSA) programmes where students travel to far away destinations for one week to two months of understanding and discovery of different business practices, local realities, economic environments, or cultural immersion. Whereas it is certainly enriching for participants in such STSA programmes (Iskhakova and Bradly, 2021) to become aware of different realities and contrast them with their own, the environmental costs of these activities seem obvious and the general trend and consensus among educational institutions is towards reducing or eliminating such STSA programmes. In contrast, Mobility for Impact initiatives understand the negative externalities of student mobility and try to offset it by lengthening the stays of students in their destinations.



Figure 1. Higher Education Internationalisation Levels Model, Garcia Rodriguez 2023



#### Fourth Pillar: Pedagogical Value

The fourth pillar of Mobility for Impact constitutes the pedagogical structuring of the experience using a 'learning by doing' methodology based on hands-on models such as Experiential Learning (Morris, 2019; Kolb, 1984), Challenge Based Learning (Nichols et al., 2008) or our own educational framework, 'Grow by Doing' in the case of KEDGE Business School. Should we opt to create our own model, this ought to take into consideration the value of the project, the real input of students, appropriate guidance, reflection, and assessment of the experience to ensure real learning while providing maximum impact. In this manner, prior to the hands-on experience, students should be familiarised with cultural, linguistic and subject-specific knowledge of the environment where they will complete their consulting or hands-on project. The guidance by academics and/or practitioners throughout the project aims to ensure students create a tangible deliverable that can be evaluated for academic credit and implemented by the host organisation.

#### Colombia & Senegal Challenges: Pioneering Experiences

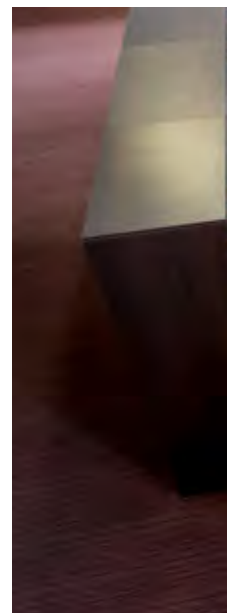
Far from understanding Mobility for Impact as a merely theoretical construct, KEDGE Business School (France) has committed to this type of mobility, aiming to transform first its outgoing student exchanges. To this end, two ongoing projects provide students and the communities they serve with a symbiotic experience of high added learning on one hand, and of real impact on the local milieu on the other.

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The Colombia Challenge, focuses on the economic development of the province of Santander (Colombia). In this project, a group of 30 to 50 students per semester travel from France to spend one semester in Bucaramanga, the capital of Santander province. Once onsite, the cohort follows 6 weeks of intense training on language skills, culture, and legal-economic background to acquaint them with the local environment where they will operate. Thereafter, groups formed by 3-4 foreign plus one domestic student are presented with a real business problem faced by a local company. The tie up with the regional chamber of commerce, the economic promotion agency of Colombia (Procolombia), and the association of business (FENALCO), ensures that the main economic actors of the region are represented and actively





participate in the project. Thereafter, under the guidance of a professor who ensures adherence to and structure of the learning process, students alternate between life at the company and the Business Consulting Center of Universidad Santo Tomás, which acts as the local academic partner. Finally, students present their solutions to the leadership of the company and are assessed by the partner university onsite to evaluate the pedagogical value of the experience.

The Senegal Challenge follows the same structure, though this time students complete one and a half months of courses relevant to their activity abroad and prepare the deployment of a humanitarian project instead of an economic one.

A paradigmatic shift in student mobility is to happen if we are to ensure we want to expand our impact beyond the immediate communities we serve while offsetting the negative consequences of the student journey abroad. The move towards Mobility for Impact may be a key solution to educate, conscientise our future leaders on the multiple challenges the world faces, and provide solutions to current business, societal, and environmental issues while students Grow by Doing.



#### About the Authors

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