Challenging times, changing perspectives?

When I started writing this blog two weeks ago I was in Cairo in Egypt, attending a conference organised by the British Council which had over 400 delegates from 35 countries.

The conference coincided with the spread of Coronavirus and the backdrop of climate change, with the consequence that many educators, particularly from mainland China, were prevented from travelling either because of quarantine restrictions or a growing sense of unease that we were in a global pandemic. The conference was also taking place at the end/beginning of widespread protests about climate change and, in particular, international travel. The combination of issues started me thinking that this may be a time when we need to reconfigure what we mean by the internationalization of the curriculum, one of the key themes of the conference.

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organization for cultural relations and educational opportunities. The council is operationally independent from the UK government, but financially and philosophically sponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth office to (amongst the objectives of its overall charter) encourage cultural, scientific, technological and other educational cooperation between other countries and generally promote the advancement of education. The purpose of the Schools Now! Conference 2020 was to explore the theme of '*Developing global learners: Preparing young people for life in school and beyond*'.

The intention was thus to bring together educators to investigate how the core conference theme was being addressed across the respective school systems, with various presentations and workshops to be led by practitioners. What we witnessed was multiple and laudable examples of how young people were being encouraged to understand social cultures other than their own, mainly through use internet services consisting of online forums and communication software. Meanwhile, what we were witnessing were the twin concerns of health and climate change, magnified by the threat of a Coronavirus pandemic that had led in the first instance to many potential delegates being unable to travel. Several contributors also discussed the spectre of climate change with many references to the attitude of young people worldwide, currently led by the teenage Swedish activist Greta Thunberg.

Time to change perspective?
This got me thinking about the concept of internationalization in the current and emerging era. For most of my life there had been a general expectation that we would explore the world first hand, by travelling. Now, it seems, I am expected to rethink that approach and evaluate the impact of my

transport on the climate. My air ticket from the UK told me, for example, that my CO_2 emissions for each leg of my journey would be 662kg which apparently would mean that I need to plant about 60 trees to offset my carbon footprint for this trip. There is now a common feeling of guilt for people like me – educational tourists – which is starting to see us re-evaluate the benefit of being there as opposed to participating. Such feelings were thrown into stark relief with the absence of a large number of colleagues from Cairo who nevertheless participated through live streaming of the conference.

I then faced the trip home in a time of seeming growing panic which has subsequently seen multiple public events being cancelled through the threat of virus spread and government encouragement for social distancing and working from home. I was health screened at departure and arrival airports and stood the risk of returning to the UK of being quarantined for a minimum of 14 days if I showed any symptoms (never mind get the disease).   Fortunately, I have presented no symptoms, but now am effectively confined to my home and local neighbourhood (for shopping) as a consequence of revised work conditions from my employer and my age (which apparently puts me in the 'vulnerable' category).
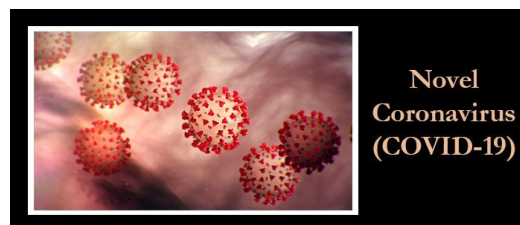
Meanwhile, supermarket shelves are being stripped bare as the UK public prepared for (yet another annual) national emergency, this time caused by the threat of mild illness (in most cases) rather than the winter weather we get most years. Additionally, the university I work for has suspended all face to face teaching with immediate effect with instructions to staff that teaching now has to be online (as will personal tutorials and supervisions). I have an evening teaching session scheduled for this week which will now be live streamed, a process for which I have no experience or expertise (that's my main task for first part of week – everything else will have to wait)!

Is this the new normality?
All of what has happened this month has led me to anticipate the emergence of a different perspective on international communication, travel and understanding. Maybe the remainder of my days of being an international scholar will be enacted vicariously rather than first hand? Similarly,

will the current and future generations of young people only meet in virtual reality than in the flesh? As a part of my recent visit to Egypt I offered a lecture to alumni of my employing university entitled 'Educating Citizens for the 21st Century' which highlighted to need to develop the capability, disposition and skills of young people to deal with the growing impact of globalization and technologies and the responsibility of educators to develop appropriate learning opportunities. My experience of this trip may need me to revise that presentation to take account of the possibility of less travel and more communication through online mechanisms in the future. Challenging times maybe signalling a need to change perspectives?