
Latitudes: Why an international-education leader is moving on after two decades

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Latitudes

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“We need to resist ‘us versus them’”

Darla Deardorff attended her first meeting of the Association of International Education Administrators as she was finishing up her doctorate. By the next year, she was running the same conference.

But after 19 years, Deardorff is stepping down as executive director of the leadership and professional organization, known as AIEA, departing for what she calls a dream job as the chairholder of the new UNESCO Chair on Intercultural Competences at Stellenbosch University, in South Africa.

The chairs lead global university partnerships to develop knowledge and build capacity around areas of common priority. Deardorff's position is the first to focus on intercultural competence, the ability to engage and communicate across cultural differences. It will focus on the intersection of cross-cultural capability with the United Nations' sustainable-development goals of gender equity, climate action, and peace building.

Deardorff has long worked with UNESCO — the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization— on developing workshops known as "[story circles](#)," which bring together people from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences and deepen their mutual understanding.

Before Deardorff began her new appointment this month, she sat down to talk about the shifting challenges for international education, how the field can attract more diverse employees and advocates, and why global citizenship means not just appreciating difference but seeking common ground. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Is international education today the same as when you started?

It has changed so much, and to me it's been really quite exciting. It's become a lot more diverse. I look at the composition of AIEA's board today versus when I started, and the comparison is stunning. Now over half the [senior international officers] who complete our survey are female, and the age has gone down. It hasn't just happened; it's been intentional. AIEA has really worked hard to cultivate leadership

from different backgrounds. And AIEA has benefited from that diversity of membership and leadership.

It's important that the field of international education be more accessible to all. Students need to see themselves in those who are in international offices, to be able to see that there are many opportunities and possibilities for them. If they don't see themselves, I feel like, as a field, we're doing ourselves a disservice.

That seems like a difficult cycle to break. How do you diversify who holds these jobs a decade from now?

It's questioning the status quo. It's questioning the policies. For example, if we advertise for jobs and it says "master's required" or "master's preferred," then we're only hiring those with a master's degree. Who are we leaving out of that process? I think we need to question the systems, the structures, the policies. There's more we could be doing, especially at the institutional level — not just accepting that this is the way things are. What can we do to make this more accessible, more equitable for all?

In the United States, and in many parts of the world, there's a certain hostility now toward [being global](#). For international education, has that meant new pressures?

[There is] growing backlash toward global *and* toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, which also impacts our work. I'm glad of the role that AIEA plays in supporting leaders, especially during such turbulent times. It'll be interesting to see what the future holds with the geopolitics, with the current backlashes that we're experiencing. But the interest and desire to connect with people around the world is not going to go away. It's becoming only stronger. We'll just need to reimagine ways to lead higher education in different ways moving forward.

I'm wondering if international educators and interculturalists have done a disservice by focusing on difference. Where our societies are, and how polarized we are, it might behoove us to focus more on our shared humanity. We need to resist "us versus them," even though that's a natural part of who humans are. That's what the story circles are: You might think we have nothing in common, but if you truly listen for understanding, then you begin to see yourself in others and discover our shared humanity.

We need to step back and ask, "What does it mean to be a global citizen?" In some ways, I feel like the current generation of students is showing us how to do that, and they are taking up that global-citizenship mantra with the protests that have been going on. They are showing empathy and compassion as global citizens and standing up for human rights. Of course, they're doing it in different ways. But if you look at what the common thread is, they're taking action. And I find it heartening that students today are doing that.

Are there things you're leaving undone that you would have liked to do?

A priority of AIEA in recent years has been around climate action. That's one area that I feel needs a lot more attention and work. We have to get serious about what it means to be a sustainable leader. I don't think we're there yet. We're just getting started.

So why leave now?

AIEA's in a strategic-planning process, and I think it's a good time for new leadership to come in and to take AIEA forward.

AIEA will always be part of me. It's been such a part of me for 19 years. I look forward to coming back to conferences in the future and just enjoying them with colleagues, being a part of the conversation, not behind the scenes putting out fires!

Tell me about your new role as a UNESCO chair.

Why I got into international education was a vision of working toward a more peaceful world. That's always been at the heart of everything I've done: What's necessary for us to get along together as humans on this planet? That has been my burning question all the way through. International education is one way, one approach to helping to build a more peaceful world. When this opportunity came along, it came back to my why — why I'm even in this field to begin with. I find it so invigorating to think about all the possibilities. It's very cliché to say it's like a dream come true, but it is. There was no choice other than to say yes, yes.

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Higher-ed groups raise alarm about student-visa delays in India

The American Council on Education and 20 other higher-education associations are asking the U.S. Department of State to do more to ensure that students from India get their visas in time for the fall semester.

In a [letter](#) to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the groups said they were worried that a [surge of new students from India](#) could delay visa issuances. Although the American embassy in India has said it is prioritizing student visas, some applicants report delays of as many 200 days just to get a visa interview.

The organizations don't ask for specific steps but urge the State Department to take action in India and other countries where there may be a visa backlog. They also requested a briefing about the department's plans.

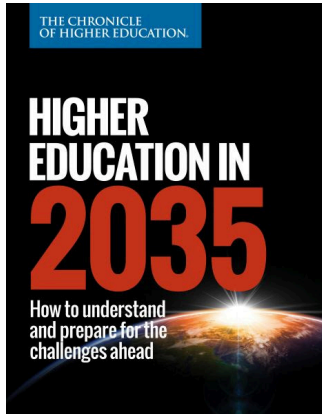
While India is dealing with a flood of applicants, in Africa, high student-visa denials continue to be a problem. In 2023, refusal rates for African students were 57 percent, according to [updated figures](#) from the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration and Shorelight, an international-education company.

In 2022, the groups [reported](#) African visa-denial rates of 54 percent. Refusal rates for student-visa applicants from Asia also ticked up, to 38 percent. By contrast, only 8 percent of European applicants were denied a visa.

Africa, with its enormous youth population, has been seen as a [potential new source](#) of international students, but the unpredictability

of visa issuances could make American colleges think twice about recruiting there.

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New report highlights Chinese admissions trends

Six in 10 Chinese high-school counselors report that at least half of their students applied to colleges in multiple countries.

The finding is part of a [newly released survey](#) by the China Institute of College Admission Counseling, a professional association of high-school counselors and college-admissions officers. That's a decline from a year earlier, when 85 percent of counselors said the practice was commonplace.

Applying to two or more countries spiked during the pandemic as a hedge against the uncertainty caused by travel restrictions and health and safety concerns. Before Covid, Chinese students typically focused their college searches on a single country.

American colleges are closely watching admissions trends from China, which was long the top source of international students in the United States before being [overtaken by India last year](#).

Around the globe

Republicans meeting for their national nominating convention next week will vote on a [party platform](#) that promises to reinstate the [travel ban](#) and calls for revoking the visas of international students and others who “support terrorism and jihadism.”

A bill introduced in the U.S. House would [cancel the visas](#) of international students, faculty members, or other exchange visitors who are found guilty of participating in violent acts or rioting. A number of public officials and political candidates have called for [deporting students](#) who take part in anti-Israel protests.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has extended special student relief for students from [Yemen](#) facing economic hardship because of the conflict and crisis in their home country through March 2026.

Canada is the latest non-European country to join [Horizon Europe](#), the EU’s research program.

It’s not clear what the [electoral victory of Britain’s Labour Party](#) will mean for visa policy, international-student recruitment, or other issues facing higher education.

College leaders in the Netherlands are threatening [legal action](#) over proposed budget cuts and reductions in the number of international students.

Nepal's universities need to do more to [stem brain drain](#) of talented young people, said Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the country's prime minister.

South Korea will loosen rules for [recruiting international students](#) studying science and engineering as part of a plan to attract more overseas talent.

A German professor teaching at China's Jilin University was [fired](#) after he did an interview with *Voice of America* about President Xi Jinping's recent trip to Europe.

Hong Kong's anti-corruption agency will review [admissions policies and processes](#) at eight public universities following accusations of admissions fraud.

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And finally ...

When ISIS, the extremist group, seized control of parts of Iraq, they outlawed the playing of music.

But Ameen Mokdad kept playing in secret, uploading recordings online. He kept playing even after militants raided his house and destroyed all his instruments.

"I was so angry. And I just wanted to protest and say, 'I'm going to keep doing this, I'm not going to stop,'" said Mokdad, who built a replacement instrument from scratch with his cousins. "When you sacrifice part of your freedom, you end up losing it all."

Eventually, his occupation-written compositions became an album, *The Curve*. Wesleyan University recently accepted him into its master's program in music and gave him a full scholarship.

Of music, he told [NPR](#), "I learned it by humanizing it."

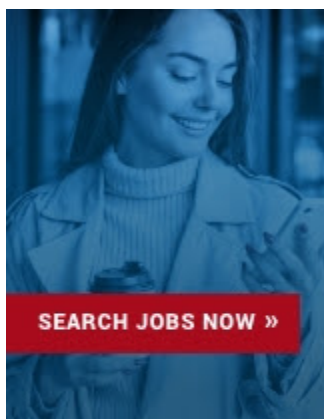
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