

# 4 What Lessons are we Learning from COVID-19?

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## 4.1 Introduction

The months that followed the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, after the immediate urgent actions and policies were into place, were a highly fertile ground for reflection, scenario exploration and future imagining. The higher education sector was not left outside the scope of this process and webinars, blogs and papers began to be available with regular frequency. Each one was organized or sponsored by an institution or organization which wished to focus more or less on a particular aspect of higher education and research.

The following paper is based on a presentation I was invited to give by the Magna Charta Observatory, a global organization whose primary focus is the promotion and protection of fundamental university values such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy and increasingly, the responsibility of higher education towards society at large, locally and globally. My assignment for the presentation was to look at the broader picture and to reflect on the lessons we were learning from the pandemic. This makes the presentation highly time-sensitive (September 2020), as we continue to learn from a situation that continues to evolve around the globe.

## 4.2 A difficult time for learning

During this unprecedented health crisis, whose impact was felt almost immediately around the world, learning lessons has been difficult. The uncertainty that the pandemic brought affected individuals, communities, nations and institutions. At each level, all of us – decision makers, shopkeepers, academics, and students had to learn daily how to act and interact with others in ways that were both safe and allowed by the rules being implemented.

The multiplicity, not to say cacophony, of views and opinions about what to do, what solutions or responses to adopt was a constant with impact analysis and predictions for the future being disseminated in the traditional and social media alike. As these were often contradictory, at best partial and at times raised false hopes in the population, the level of uncertainty and anxiety was also a factor to contend with, making it difficult to draw lessons from what was taking place.

In this context, it is important to underline that my comments are personal, both optimistic and pessimistic, both hopeful and realistic rather than naïve.

## 4.3 Seeking a new normal

Though we are far from finding a 'new normal', which seems a frequent theme of discussion and pondering, we can observe and note many trends. The pandemic is shaking up our traditional schemas of dichotomies such as those between rich countries and poor countries - this emergency has been mishandled with disastrous consequences by the wealthiest nation in the world. It blurs the line between rich and poor people with infections and death, at least initially, appearing to disregarding economic status. In higher education, there were impacts felt and dilemmas to resolve in both student sending and student hosting nations.

In general, the pandemic raised questions about the established order of things, made many re-consider what is essential, what is valuable in society and whom we esteem and admire.

The respect for health care workers, bus and metro drivers as well as cashiers in our grocery store became something that was perhaps unprecedented and unexpected.

The responses and reactions to the pandemic differ on many levels. Important parameters in this regard are the health and health infrastructure conditions at the beginning. The presence and widespread use of technology in everyday life was also a determining factor in the response put in place and its subsequent effectiveness, especially in maintaining many operations of the socio-economic sectors.

What became quite striking were the ways in which value systems and various cultural norms and habits in different countries and among different groups came to play an important role in the reactions to the emergency and to the rules and regulations that were imposed. The initial shut down of Wuhan was at first deemed impossible and unimaginable to implement in Western nations where civil obedience to imposed rules is often contested and circumvented. Yet, the impossible did occur though became hotly debated and criticized loudly almost immediately in many countries.

## **4.4 COVID's Impact on Higher Education**

Change in HE, as a result of the epidemic is inevitable and, in some respects, it will likely be long-lasting. However. Just as the impact has been varied, changes will not be the same everywhere, nor in all aspects of the higher education mission – teaching/learning, research, community outreach. The long-term impact on higher education values is an area that is of utmost interest, and is perhaps the least predictable.

In some respects, the pandemic served to blur many boundaries, including those between higher education and society. It served to lift the cover on huge socio-economic disparities within countries and major inequalities in education. The need to shift to online learning showed that capacities to do so successfully were uneven and dictated mainly by access to and readiness for use of technology. Inequities were exacerbated and revealed in society as well as in higher education. Other differences in approaches and understanding of issues such as individual rights and responsibilities, namely the right to privacy, collective vs individual rights and freedoms, the notion of personal space, respect of rules, etc. became important dimensions in the effectiveness of responses to the health crisis both in higher education and in society more generally.

In the speed of the spread of the epidemic as well as in its treatment exposed the strengths and weaknesses of different political and economic regimes and underlined in stark ways the risks and limits of economic and political globalization and its related interconnectedness of our lives. Very quickly, the concerns with local developments undermined trust in multilateral and regional institutions and even in bilateral relations when facing a threat. Borders closed and national policies and strategies prevailed above all others.

Such major upheavals in economic, political, cultural scientific relations impact on and cannot be ignored by the Higher Education and academic institutions cannot ignore these critical issues at home or in international cooperation.

## **4.5 Current realities for and in higher education**

The rapid spread and the danger posed by the COVID 19 pandemic brought to light humanity's vulnerability despite the progress of modern science & technology. In many ways, it also showed the existence of tremendous resourcefulness and capacity for adjustment as almost overnight education was provided online to multitudes of higher education students. Communities also responded rapidly and with a strong sense of solidarity to cater to the most vulnerable in their midst.

Though all over the world science and research were at the center of the analysis of what was taking place and expected to bring answers and solutions to the crisis, there were leaders who displayed a undeniable and deep mistrust and disdain in scientific expertise and undermined the public's confidence in science. The complexity and unpredictability of the virus meant that there were, especially at the beginning of the crisis, no hard-fast truths and consensus among scientists was not always reached. This relatively frequent and acceptable state of affairs among members of the scientific community, where dialogue and disagreement offer paths to new discoveries was at times used to discredit scientific advice in several countries.

As international academic mobility of both faculty and students came to a sudden and complete stop, the high price of this aspect of internationalization, with its huge ecological footprint came under more scrutiny and questioning. The beneficial and positive aspects of the interconnectivity of higher education internationally ceased to be taken for granted and the discussion of various and necessary alternatives became far more frequent and taken more seriously.

However, more than any other impact and concern brought forth by the epidemic, it was the risks of exclusion of vulnerable groups. This was the case in terms of society at large, but also in the higher education sector, where many calls were issued to ensure that students with disabilities, international students, students without access to broad bandwidth or to computers to pursue their studies, not be forgotten as alternatives to face-to-face teaching were being put in place.

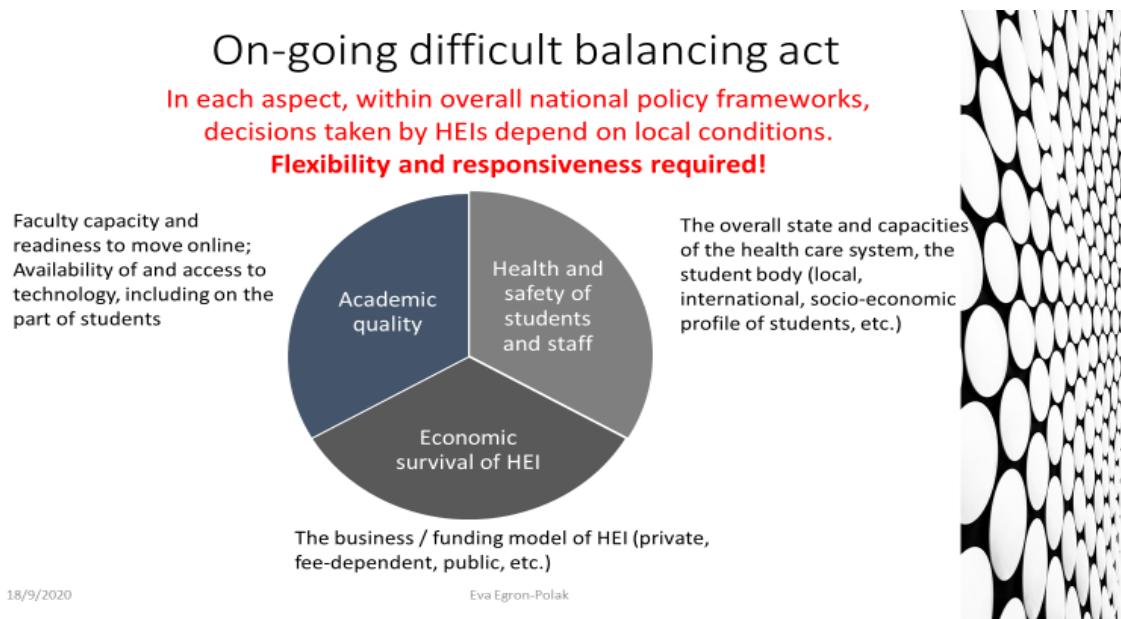
The relative success with which the transition to online teaching, management and communications in higher education took place in early and mid-2020, demonstrated how essential it was to have crisis management strategies in place and how such basic preparedness for crisis was in place in numerous universities around the globe.

The pandemic brought home the reality that universities and the higher education sector are deeply rooted locally – subject to local/national policies - despite their commitment to be global and/or international institutions. The crisis showed that both in the positive and in the negative sense, higher education institutions are essential for social and economic reasons locally. Their closing brought smaller, predominantly university towns to a near standstill socially and economically; their re-opening brought about the fear of and accelerated spread of the virus.

As every other sector, higher education has felt the economic impact of the pandemic and many universities have seen their bud gets decreased, even as the push for research to find a viable and effective vaccine has seen funds routed to the life and medical sciences. Universities that are highly dependent on international student fee revenues, have seen their finances crumble in several parts of the world. The systemic surplus capacity that has been built up to cater to international students may not be needed for several months if not years and constitutes a serious financial drain. And, of course, students who have paid high fees to study abroad feel unjustly treated when their classes move online and their international experience is reduced to an online link across the globe.

As the first wave of the pandemic was reaching its highest peak, uncertainties about re-opening raised even more difficult issues of the long-term impact on learning, socialization, mental health and international academic mobility. Working exclusively online increased isolation, levels of anxiety and stress as well as burnout, and these were being experienced by many among the students, staff and faculty members, requiring that universities pay attention to health risks that often needed to be treated, again, online.

In a nutshell, higher education leaders and their colleagues have a difficult balancing act on their hands, as depicted in the graphic below.



*Figure 1: On-going difficult balancing act.*

## 4.6 Importance of values revealed

These difficult months in 2020 also served to bring forth tremendous acts of kindness and solidarity expressed by citizens around the world first and foremost towards the health care providers, towards those who continued to work so that access to food and first necessities remained possible, to those who kept our daily lives as close to normal as possible. In urban centres and the countryside, the elderly living alone were catered to by their neighbors, people came together to share art and culture online, strangers became virtual friends and social media served to connect communities often for the benefit of the needy.

Values of solidarity, empathy and partnership were on everyone's lips, including among the leadership and faculty in higher education institutions who were deeply committed to ensuring that learners would not suffer unduly due to the health emergency.

Very quickly it became apparent how central transparency and honesty, on the part of decision-makers and those in charge, were to the trust in decisions made, to the acceptance of proposed measures that were taken and, in the rules to be obeyed. Unfortunately, there were instances when this trust was eroded or undermined because important information was not communicated fully or in a timely manner. The need for and efficacy of wearing masks, provides a case in point of such partial or even faulty information that was initially shared with the public (in many countries) at a time when masks were a rare commodity.

However, looking at reactions in different nations, the value of inter-cultural understanding about why and how individuals respond to and obey new rules and responsibilities also became evident. Even in the same country, not all groups responded in the same way and some of these differences have to do with cultural traditions.

Another value that became central in the race to find a vaccine is that of scientific integrity. The crisis stimulated scientific collaboration driven by a common cause and even if competition did not completely disappear, teams of researchers around the globe worked together and shared their insights in an effort to speed up the lengthy process of finding a vaccine against COVID 19. Unfortunately, as this goal neared achievement, competition was gearing up for both financial and prestige reasons. As well, people's distrust in the vaccine's efficacy and safety was being questioned by many. So, in addition to the value of scientific collaboration,

for the sake of transparency and thus trust, scientific integrity and honesty was underlined during the pandemic.

As mentioned earlier, this health emergency brought to light inequalities of intolerable and untenable proportions in many societies, including the wealthiest. So, the values of inclusion and equality were underlined in both political discourse but also in many universities where it became very obvious that different groups of students suffered to different degrees from the complete or even partial shift to online learning. The digital divide joined the other divides – socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and race, as a key marker of inequity.

The rhetoric (and hopefully the commitment to) of the value of cooperation for finding and sharing solutions and innovation instead of competing for market share was strongly present as universities were adjusting to their new realities – insufficient expertise to shift courses online, poorly prepared academics and staff to adopt a virtual mode of delivering courses and communicating with students and colleagues, fewer international students, etc. But judging by the vast number of webinars and zoom conferences, there is a real thirst for sharing of lessons and a real commitment to improve online teaching, maintain academic quality and learn from the new research methodologies that have had to replace face-to-face research collaboration.

## **4.7 Learning for the future**

There are few certainties in this experience of the COVID 19 pandemic. One that appears more and more likely though, is that a return to ‘business as usual’ in the near or even longer-term future is unlikely. For many it is also quite undesirable, given that in many parts of the world, reality, including in higher education, has been shown to be inequitable, ecologically unsustainable and financially not viable. The experience of the past 9-10 months has shown that it is imperative to invest in improving online teaching and learning. Though there are success stories and universities whose past engagement in online, open or blended learning has made them exemplars, these are few and far between. For most universities this will require an allocation of financial and human resources to these new tasks. Yet, the economic fall-out from the pandemic will be very serious and so allocating scarce resource will most likely mean reductions elsewhere, perhaps in the areas of international marketing and mobility.

The lockdowns and reductions in travel – both domestic and international, require that much more serious consideration be given to all the various ways of taking education to the learner, using blended learning for both domestic and international students, possibly growing more off-shore programs or campuses.

Certainly, at least for the foreseeable future, the way universities pursue internationalization will require an overhaul and perhaps the time has finally come for a veritable focus on internationalizing the curriculum and on deepening inter-cultural learning through activities at home. Though mobility will most likely resume eventually, it may not regain its ‘mass’ nature for quite some time. In the meantime, though, international education remains essential for all graduates if they are to understand the world around them and successfully navigate the complexities of modern life.

It is essential, however, to monitor the impacts of the changes being made, whether temporary or more long-lasting. A wholesale and even partial shift to virtual/online learning, for example, is not without drawbacks. Starting already, but especially in the months to come, systematic assessment of the benefits, risks and merits of this mode of education will need to be put in place. Similarly, examining the impact of the shift to virtual modes of for much of academic work – research, conferences, seminars meetings, etc. will become important, especially if higher education wishes to retain some of its benefits and remedy some of the less positive aspects.

Finally, as the root causes of this pandemic, and the predictions of others to follow are linked to the current unsustainable livelihoods and practices, the increasing engagement of higher education institutions in addressing the UN Sustainable Development Goals will most likely deepen in the future. Along with a stronger focus on redressing inequities based on socio-economic, gender, ethnic and racial status, universities may deepen their social responsibility as a result of the unprecedented developments in 2020.

## **4.8 Learning for the future beyond higher education**

Deeper social responsibility means as well, that higher education must assume a more prominent role in inventing, predicting and planning for new socio-economic and geopolitical realities. In many respects, the pandemic changed the way decision-makers and citizens view globalization. All of a sudden, the idea of being dependent on others for necessities to our well-being is no longer acceptable. Higher education institutions will be called upon to prepare graduates for the adjustment to re-localisation, including in the efforts to build local production capacity to counter the current reliance on product provision from elsewhere. A similar trend may take place in higher education, with students seeking locally what they had beforehand sought elsewhere. Regional mobility may accompany this trend in parts of the world.

The past few months have demonstrated that society will need to plan for increased automation and new uses of technologies and most likely fewer and new jobs. University research and foresight will be required to prepare for these major changes. The economic impact of the pandemic will certainly be far-reaching and of long duration. In light of the different approaches that were adopted in various nations, the impact is likely to result in a shift in the importance of various world regions and to change, at least in the short-term, production and trading patterns. The relative success of China, South Korea and other Asian nations in controlling the spread of the virus can only mean a faster recovery whereas the continued failure of the USA to respond effectively will contribute to these geopolitical shifts and changes.

Other trends that began during the pandemic may become more perennial as the world moves forward. The exodus from large urban centres that was seen during after the lockdown in many European countries may continue as working remotely makes moving to smaller centres or into the country possible. Of course, this is not possible for everyone, and may in the long-run stratify society even further. However, shift in the balance between urban and rural populations may be one of the consequences of these past several months.

## **4.9 Concluding thoughts**

2020 has witnessed a confluence of several crisis – the pandemic's disruption in all aspects of daily life, the globalization of the Black Lives Matter movement, a world-wide economic slowdown, a realization of the causal links between the arrival of the COVID 19 virus and the unsustainable nature of man's livelihoods and exploitation of resources among others. These will leave deep and on-going scars. It was also a real-time global experiment which mobilized scientists in all disciplines, in all parts of the world, all seeking the right response to stop the spread of the virus and viable prevention approaches to end the pandemic.

As we are all fond of stating frequently, challenges and crisis also offer opportunities. Judging from the numerous conferences, webinars, online meetings and discussions, higher education stakeholders are already assessing what lessons to learn from this harrowing experience and how to change the mission and ways of operating of universities, what trajectory to adopt for their institutional development. For many, the starting point will be the identification of what is truly important, what central purpose higher education serves and what values underpin this work. Certainly, higher education is learning valuable lessons; its future role in society and its international dimension will not be the same.