ViewPoint

Challenges for Higher Education in Crisis Stricken Times – The Effects of Covid-19 in Preparing Universities for Future

Mariam Al-Maadeed
Vice President, Research and Graduate Studies, Qatar University, Qatar
m.alali@qu.edu.qa

Miguel Athayde Marques
Vice Rector, Strategic Development, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon, Portugal
athayde.marques@ucp.pt

Abstract

This viewpoint analyses the status and transformation of Higher Education institutions during unpredicted great challenges such as the current Covid-19, which disrupted most of the economies on the planet. The changes facing Higher Education are not new, transformation has been seen in different areas, but shifts are expected to be deeper and faster after the pandemic. We show how the Higher Education institutions can resist and transform during the pandemic and we also discuss how these institutions can come out of the recession stronger and become capable of achieving long-term sustainability. For that aim, a leaner and more effective institution system with modified flexible policies that contribute to society and, at the same time, are mission-driven, is expected to be achieved. Universities in their recovery efforts must look far ahead and should not miss the opportunity to reassess their usefulness to society, nor to refocus their sense of purpose. We suggest that institutions of Higher Education play a more important role in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and contribute decisively to the several SDGs. In addition, we argue that the strategic direction of universities must be focused on stakeholder responsibility principles known as Environmental, Social, and Governance – ESG. Finally, we argue that the governance dimension is particularly critical for Higher Education institutions if they if they aim at achieving sustainability and long-term goals.

Keywords: Higher education; Covid-19; SDG; Challenges; Viewpoint; Governance

وجهة نظر

تحديـات التعليـم العالـي فـي أوقـات الأزمات: تأثيـرات جائحـة كورونا فـي إعداد الجامعات للمستقبل

مريم المعاضيد

نائب رئيس الجامعة للبحث والدراسات العليا، جامعة قطر

m.alali@qu.edu.qa

ميغيل أتايد ماركيز

نائب الرئيس، والتطوير الاستراتيجي، الجامعة الكاثوليكية بالبرتغال، ليسبون

athayde.marques@ucp.pt

ملخص

تحلل وجهة النظر هذه وضعيةً وتحولات مؤسسـات التعليم العالي خلال الأزمات غير المتوقعة من قبيل جائحة كوفيد-19 الحالية، التي أدت إلى اضطراب غالبية اقتصادات العالم. إن التغيرات التي تواجه التعليم العالي ليست جديدة؛ إذ إنها حصلت في كل المجالات، لكن المتوقع أن النقلات سـتكون أعمق، وأسـرع بعد الجائحة. يُظهِر البحث كيف يمكن لمؤسسـات التعليم العالي أن تتكيف وتتحول خلال الجائحة، كما تناقش كيف لتلك المؤسسـات أن تخرج من الأزمة أقوى وتصبح قادرة على تحقيق الاستدامة طويلة الأمد، التي يمكن من خلالها، الإسـهام في المجتمع بنظام أكثر رشاقة وفاعلية، تحركه سياسات مرنة ومهام محددة تسـدي خدمة للمجتمع، مدفوعة برسالتها في الوقت نفسـه. يجب على الجامعات أن تتسم ببعد نظر، ولا تفوت فرصة إعادة تقييم فائدتها للمجتمع، وإعادة تركيز المعنى في الحاجة إليها. نرى أن مؤسسـات التعليم العالي تلعب دورًا بارزًا في تحقيق جدول أعمال 2030 للتنمية المستدامة، وتسـهم بشكل فاعل في أهداف التنمية المستدامة (SDGs)، كما نعتقد أن الاتجاه الاستراتيجي للجامعات يجب أن يرتكز على مبادئ مسـؤوليات شركاء المصلحة، المعروفة بالحوكمة البيئية والاجتماعية وحوكمة الشركات (ESG). أخيـرًا، نجادل في أن بُعد الحوكمة - تحديدًا - أساسيٌ لمؤسسات التعليم العالي؛ لتحقيق الكفاءة والاستدامة والأهداف طويلة الأمد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم العالي، كوفيد-19، أهداف التنمية المستدامة، التحديات، وجهة نظر، الحوكمة

Introduction

The world is facing unprecedented challenges. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) has disrupted most of the economies on the planet, which are now suffering from a sudden drop in consumption, industrial production, logistic chains, transportation, and employment; and is threatening the financial viability of institutions, corporations, and states alike. A deep economic and social crisis is looming. We know it will be profound and far-reaching, but no one knows how long it will last. Most expert opinions appear to agree on one thing; the world as we now know will undergo significant change, and as a result economies, sectors of activity, businesses, institutions, and individuals have to embrace this change, and, in many aspects, there will be no turning back.

Universities are no exception. They will be subject to the same threats to their survival during the pandemic and during the recovery. They must be resilient and carry on with minimal disruption emerging from such a turbulent period. At the same time, universities will have to prepare themselves to adapt so that they are operational when the world gradually returns to a semblance of normality, the new normality.

The challenges facing Higher Education are not new. A significant transformation has been necessary in response to disruptive technology, new social trends, changing public policies, and new jobs and skills needed for the times ahead. Education has been one of the slowest adapting industries in the past decades. One sign of such immobility is the classroom layout, which has not seen any major changes for centuries. As Lawrence Summers puts it in an appropriately named publication titled *An Avalanche is Coming – Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead*: "Just as we have seen the forces of technology and globalization transform sectors such as media and communications or banking and finance over the last two decades, these forces may now transform Higher Education. The solid classical buildings of great universities may look permanent but the storms of change now threaten them"[1].

The global Higher Education environment was changing before the pandemic, and it will change even deeper and faster thereafter. A report published recently in the UK debates the transformations in postgraduate education during the decade following the 2008 global recession, which started in the US with the subprime mortgage crisis and then spread to Europe and the rest of the world. In this decade, there were many changes and threats to the British Higher Education system, perhaps the most grievous being Britain's exit from the EU. How the system reacted to these challenges is revealed by looking at the trends and "pouring over the many policy changes over the last decade, which have driven fluctuations in UK, EU and other international student numbers" [2].

In this article, we show how the Higher Education institutions can resist and transform in order to accommodate the challenges created by the current pandemic, and we discuss how can these institutions come out of the recession, stronger and capable of achieving sustainability in the long term.

---

1 - Lawrence Summers, "Foreword" **In** Barber, M., Donnelly, K., & Rizvi, S., *An avalanche is coming: higher education and the revolution ahead* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2013), p. 1.

2 - Ginevra House, *Postgraduate education in the UK* (Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute, 2020), p. 63.

Resist and Transform

The main mission of Higher Education could be described as having three key components: teaching, research, and service. Due to the acceleration of the pace of change and communications, new challenges are facing the leaders of universities. Unpredicted demands and challenges started a few decades ago through recessions and the fourth industrial revolution, where new student preparation methods were needed for the workforce. Research and services in Higher Education led many activities in the fourth industrial revolution[3,4] period, such as robotics, 3D printing, and e-health systems. This showed the ability of the Higher Education systems to manage challenges and adapt to changes.

With the current pandemic, universities are continuing their mission and are managing not only to survive during this crisis, but to lead and launch many initiatives through the online teaching system with the remote meeting programs. Universities are also working to face the pandemic through new research grants, policies, and the focus on new priorities. Scientists are finding a more supportive research environment especially through the free open-access databases available by most publishers on Covid-19 related research. They are deeply involved, moving fast and generating a considerable amount of knowledge and publications to help in fighting the virus.

Transferring the challenges to new opportunities is the key to improving the community and overcoming the current Covid-19 pandemic. This is clear in many areas where universities are participating in a unique way through preparing volunteers for the health system, initiating new scientific methods for testing the virus, developing new drugs, and arranging public health safety requirements with the stakeholders. However, more questions require answering in order to survive the depth of the crisis.

What is the future of globalization in the context of international mobility? It is well known that universities create and disseminate knowledge. International exchange of this knowledge through mobility and exchange of students, faculty members, international conferences, and symposia are important for the academic community. The pandemic affected the movement of people through mandatory lockdowns and sealed borders. Although Higher Education institutions partially overcome this dilemma through the online working systems, international collaboration through meetings in various cultures and exposure of students and young researchers to international activities are halted in the physical sense. Furthermore, the involvement of international research collaboration is scaled down.

Another uncertainty is the recruitment of future students; this crisis can reduce the number of students who will be enrolled in Higher Education institutions, which in turn will reduce tuition revenue.

Universities' adaption to environmental change while staying determined to the core mission despite the setbacks will continue to attract students to Higher Education. Universities are expected to adopt proper procedures and teaching pedagogies to prepare students for new challenges and future jobs.

---

3 - AlMaadeed, M. A. A. and Ponnamma, D. "Role of Research and Higher Education on Industry 4.0, Material Science as an example," *2020 IEEE International Conference on Informatics, IoT, and Enabling Technologies (ICIoT)*, Doha, Qatar, 2020, pp. 435-439.

4 - AlMaadeed, M. A. A., Emergent materials and industry 4.0 contribution toward pandemic diseases such as COVID-19 [published online ahead of print, 2020 May 6]. Emergent Mater. 2020, pp. 1-2.

The damage to globalization has also harmed the economy, which accordingly affects university income. This includes public funding for state-owned universities, and reduced tuition revenue for public and private universities, which makes up about 25-35% of the revenues in US[5]. A decrease in the availability of fundraising and sponsorship possibilities is also expected.

A transformation is needed to come out stronger from this unfortunate situation. A leaner institution system, with mission-driven modified policies that contribute to society, is expected to be mapped out by each university. In addition, modifying programs, teaching pedagogies, policies, and services to be in harmony with the stakeholders' requirements and community needs is essential. Another crucial step for transformation is the improvement of the effectiveness of criteria assessing the use of resources along this journey.

Technology developed during the current fourth industrial revolution is a vital step to lead this transformation. This is seen by modifying the pedagogy of teaching with the new adopted learning systems for students. Universities can prepare students for future jobs by ensuring the availability of modified tailored academic resources and training, such as involving Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Augmented Virtual Reality (AVR) in online teaching and related activities.

The Covid-19 crisis created challenges that are similar worldwide, and there is an urgent necessity to tailor the accelerating transformation of Higher Education.

Recover and Sustain

The forthcoming world recession is expected to bring daunting consequences across human society (for an early and farsighted vision of the shape of things to come, see footnote[6]). Weathering this recession out will take an enormous amount of energy and skill, and universities will not be insulated from this looming turmoil. They will be endangered too, and they must react and help global recovery by raising their standards, contributing to the new initiatives and fulfilling what society expects from them.

One should keep in mind that the recovery of the world after Covid-19 will not depend on economic and financial recovery alone, but also on human and social wellbeing[7].

As a matter of fact, universities in their recovery efforts must look ahead beyond the short-term and should not miss the opportunity to reassess their usefulness to society, nor to refocus their sense of purpose. This would lead to a unique strategic approach, linked to sustainability values and more focused on a wider group of stakeholders.

In order to achieve this, what path should universities follow? How does one chart the course of purposeful change that ensures long-term sustainability for the institutions of Higher Education, as we know them today?

---

5 - Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, (n.d.). Accessed on: June 15, 2020, at: http://nces.ed.gov/

6 - Gita Gopinath, "The great lockdown: Worst economic downturn since the Great Depression". Accessed on: June 10, 2020, at: https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression

7 - Amin Mohseni-Cheraghlou, "The aftermath of financial Crisis: A look on human and social wellbeing," *World Development,* Vol. 87 (2016), pp. 88-106.

We suggest that universities play a more important role in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[8], which offers an ambitious and thorough set of initiatives aimed at protecting the planet, ending poverty, reducing inequalities, and tackling climate change. Indeed, its 17 Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs – are highly affected by this pandemic, at a time when the world was already not on the right path[9] in achieving them before Covid-19 arrived.

Universities should consider, that there is a perceived SDGs fatigue[10] which can only grow with the current challenges and cause more siloed approaches to world development. Better sustainability initiatives through university international collaboration, teaching procedures, and heavier use of new technologies are needed in order to react and prepare for the uncertainties ahead. Higher Education institutions are expected to be in the forefront of action, taking into consideration previous lessons learned from other pandemics,[11] including the health and safety of students and staff, improving tracing and research on the disease, and overcoming financial and legal constrains.

Acknowledging the need to assure long-term survival and sustainability and at the same time to contribute to the SDGs, corporations have been gathering around an initiative known as the UN Global Compact, which is the world's largest corporate sustainability initiative involving some 12,000 signatories in over 160 countries[12].

More recently, attention has been focused on sustainability principles known as Environmental, Social, and Governance – ESG. This is an approach which aims at offering companies and their stakeholders sustainability criteria against which the wider impact of their operations and long-term strategy can be measured. According to the ESG view, environmental criteria examine how an organization performs in its relation to nature and the planet, social criteria consider how it manages its relations with communities, society and people in general, and the governance criteria deal with how the organization accommodates a balanced relationship with its stakeholders. In particular, governance looks at investors and sponsors, creditors, employees, customers, and other stakeholders. It judges the capability of an organization to accommodate these stakeholders' respective rights, and avoid conflicts of interest among them, while scrutinizing management action and other high-level bodies of administration.

Today, markets are screening for companies with high ESG standards. In effect, companies that consider environmental and social factors in their strategy and action, and that abide, in addition, by standards of good corporate governance, are considered better equipped to resist a downturn and to

---

8 - "Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable Development," Department of economic and social affairs. (n.d.). Accessed on: June 10, 2020, at: https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

9 - Jonathan D. Moyer and Steve Hedden, "Are we on the right path to achieve the sustainable development goals?" *World Development,* Vol. 127 (2020), pp. 1-13.

10 - Fadi El-Jardali et al, "Changing roles of universities in the era of sdgs: Rising up to the global challenge through institutionalising partnerships with governments and communities," *Health Research Policy and Systems,* Vol. 16. No. 1 (2018).

11 - Barry van Wyk and Jimmy Pieterse, "Institutional Response to HIV/AIDS from Institutions of Higher Education in the Southern African Development Community," A Report Commissioned by the Southern African Regional Universities Association, Centre for the study of AIDS University of Pretoria, South Africa, March 2006.

12 - See "About the UN Global Compact", United Nation Global Compact, (N.d.) Accessed on: June 2020 at: https://www.unglobalcompact.org/about

recover quickly into profitability and growth[13].

Higher Education institutions adhering to ESG standards proved to be successful in terms of performance and instigating wise management approaches. Continuity in the long run and responsibility are a pre-condition of survival and this can only be achieved by curating the three dimensions of sustainability: the planet, the people, and the organization with its stakeholders and its governance.

In summary, the governance dimension of sustainability is particularly critical for Higher Education institutions. Governance in universities around the world may widely range from an autistic approach centered upon a closed inner-circle of academics, to a very open market profit-seeking approach, where fundamental roles of academia and science are forgotten. In the former case, the autistic approach, institutions are oblivious to their stakeholders and to communities, and they will miss their potential of realizing an important role in society, which is needed for long-term survival. On the other extreme[14], institutions miss their founding reason to exist and erode trust among their most essential constituencies, compromising in this way their long-term development and viability.

---

13 - Billy Nauman, "Coronavirus is strengthening the hand of ESG investors," *Financial Times,* May 15, 2020. Accessed June, 2020, at: https://www.ft.com/content/19047cda-0648-48a9-a512-87653149026c

14 - François Furstenberg, "University Leaders Are Failing – The pandemic reveals ineptitude at the top. Change is needed", *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* May 19, 2020. Accessed June 2020 at: https://www.chronicle.com/article/university-leaders-are-failing

References

AlMaadeed, M. A. A. and Ponnamma, D. "Role of Research and Higher Education on Industry 4.0, Material Science as an example". *2020 IEEE International Conference on Informatics, IoT, and Enabling Technologies (ICIoT)*, Doha, Qatar, 2020.

AlMaadeed, M. A. A., Emergent materials and industry 4.0 contribution toward pandemic diseases such as COVID-19 [published online ahead of print, 2020 May 6]. Emergent Mater.

El-Jardali, Fadi et al. "Changing roles of universities in the era of sdgs: Rising up to the global challenge through institutionalising partnerships with governments and communities". *Health Research Policy and Systems*, Vol. 16. No. 1 (2018).

Furstenberg, François. "University Leaders Are Failing – The pandemic reveals ineptitude at the top. Change is needed". *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 19, 2020. Accessed June 2020 at: https://www.chronicle.com/article/university-leaders-are-failing

Gopinath, G. (2020, April 21). "The great lockdown: Worst economic downturn since the Great Depression," Accessed on: June 10, 2020, at: https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression

House, Ginevra. *Postgraduate education in the UK*. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute, 2020.

Mohseni-Cheraghlou, A. "The aftermath of financial Crisis: A look on human and social wellbeing". *World Development*, Vol. 87 (2016).

Moyer, J. D., & Hedden, S. (2020). "Are we on the right path to achieve the sustainable development goals?". *World Development*, Vol. 127 (2020).

Nauman, Billy. "Coronavirus is strengthening the hand of ESG investors". *Financial Times*, May 15, 2020. Accessed June, 2020, at: https://www.ft.com/content/19047cda-0648-48a9-a512-87653149026c

Summers, Lawrence. "Foreword" In Barber, M., Donnelly, K., & Rizvi, S., *An avalanche is coming: higher education and the revolution ahead*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2013.

van Wyk, Barry and Pieterse, Jimmy "Institutional Response to HIV/AIDS from Institutions of Higher Education in the Southern African Development Community," A Report Commissioned by the Southern African Regional Universities Association, Centre for the study of AIDS University of Pretoria, South Africa, March 2006.