HOW IS COVID-19 IMPACTING HIGHER EDUCATION? A BRIEF REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

In 2020 the world woke up with the news of the existence of a new virus and quickly spread all over the world and changing our lives and our "normality". From the night to the day, society shut down, and people had to stay at home, (re)adapting to the circumstances. Among all these changes, one needs to refer the education, and in almost 48 hours, teachers had to provide education remotely, using the tools available. After almost three months after the beginning of the shutdown, slowly, institutions are starting to open up the doors and trying to come back to "old" normality, not without wounds. One of the institutions where we witness these changes is higher education. In this paper, we present a brief reflection about what might be the impact of the pandemic crisis not only in education per se but also in higher education, including its management and financial issues. In conclusion, the reflection shows that this virus can be an opportunity to disregard old behaviours and embrace change as an occasion to grow.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, COVID-19, Challenges, Research, Learning, Management.

1. INTRODUCTION

After some initial uncertainty, higher education institutions, a little bit all over the world, are analyzing the situation and evaluating how the COVID-19 is impacting education. At the intersection of the disruption with unpredictability, a new model emerges for the world economy and higher education, compelling institutions to (re)think processes and update the crisis management strategies that allow us to face the unknown and, if possible, anticipate the future and the new normality.

The objective of this paper is not to do futurology but identify possible changes, some of them already present in our lives. It represents a personal thought about the situation enacted by the pandemic crisis in Higher Education and its effects. The order by which they are presented is not related to their importance as all of them are important. Moreover, they are also connected, and even a small change in one will have an impact on another one. The topics presented in the next section serve only as an excuse for a broader reflection. Let's look at this moment, not as a problem, but as an opportunity to reflect on education, pedagogy, and even the role of technology in education, the role of teachers, and even the role of higher education institutions.

2. IMPACTS OF COVID-19

As mentioned above, the impacts of the Coronavirus can be seen in several aspects related to Higher Education. These concern the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, the learning process, the assessment, the admission / recruitment process, the management of the educational institutions, including the financial issues, the insertion of the students in the labor market and the role of the higher education. In the next paragraphs, each aspect is presented and briefly discussed.

a) Demand / Mobility

The landscape of Higher Education in the last decade can be described as a melting pot of different nationalities. In fact, nearly 5 million students go abroad each year for the purpose of studying. The OECD has predicted that this number could rise to 8 million by 2025. However, the fear of another flu surge makes most students and teachers (re)think their mobility and consider staying in their country/region/city in the next academic year. This situation concerns, not only international students but also national ones and will affect, in particular, the institutions more dependent on students from a specific country or geographical area, forcing them to ponder about their management strategy necessarily. As an example, in the spring of 2020, Australia saw its international student numbers drop and its critical supply of Chinese students all but disappear. Moreover, in Europe, institutions are anticipating significant shortfalls in fall-start programs that rely upon international registrations.

b) Online learning

A Pandora box concerning online learning / distance learning / remote learning has been opened. The need to increase presence and online courses can no longer be denied. Thus, the institutions will consider which part of the training will be offered face-to-face and which part can be delivered online. The fear of the replacement of the lecturer by the technology is giving place to the understanding of how the tools are complementary and do not replace the intimacy, the immediacy of face-to-face learning. Probably we will watch the increase in the use of different teaching strategies, such as the flipped classroom, seeking to use classroom time / synchronous sessions for discussions, debates, and guided practices.

c) Challenges of remote learning

There are still many inequalities concerning remote learning. According to a survey carried out by McKinsey (cited by Kim et al., 2020), the ability of students to succeed in a remote-learning environment may differ significantly by income levels as less than 40% students coming from lower-income households report having the necessary equipment for remote learning, compared with 72% of students from high-income households. This situation also concerns internet access as a high number of students do not have an internet quality connection. This means that remote/online learning is not the same for all students. Some inequalities need to be put in evidence and institutions, and society needs to find strategies to overcome them as all youngsters have the same right to education.

d) Increase in the use of videoconferencing

Many activities and educational institutions ended up with non-essential trips, including displacements to attend face-to-face classes, replacing them by videoconferences, and using apps such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Webex. However, one has to consider that constant participation in videoconferences may cause stress, anxiety, psychological wear and tear on the participants, believing that this will be an area of study and exploration in order to minimize these effects. Moreover, lecturers are still struggling to maintain the same depth of engagement with students as they had in a classroom setting. In this case, online education platforms such as Coursera can play a useful role by tapping their expertise in online program design, choice of tech platform and digital marketing to develop the best content.

e) Student assessment

In many educational institutions, traditional exams will be replaced by online assessment. Now, this is an opportunity to rethink the form of evaluation, with the exploration of other possibilities such as the portfolio, problem-solving, reflections, summaries, diaries, among others. Anyway, problems as fraud, cheating, and similar are a reality, and institutions are still identifying possible strategies to overcome them or at least minimize the possibility of their existence.

f) Admission/recruitment process

Recruitment and admission practices will change. Exams, in some parts of the world, are already being postponed, which could have an impact at the beginning of the next academic year. It is thought that more flexible terms and even a review of admission requirements will be needed. Student recruitment fairs may no longer be possible, as may be the case with student receptions and orientation weeks.

g) Financial issues

The funding of higher education will also, be in crisis, both in the countries/institution depending on the public funding, as the available amounts will be channeled to other priorities, in particular those related with social security and public health, and in the countries/institutions depending on international students, as these will prefer staying in their own countries. Moreover, institutions, especially those more vulnerable, will see their financial problems increase as, in some cases, the accommodation, catering, and conference income has evaporated. This situation might have been exacerbated by the fact that, even during the shutdown, they had to continue paying the staff, cleaning the facilities, and mothering research project. Finally, a word concerning the families that have suffered some kind of unemployment, lay-off, or reduction of the income due to the pandemic crisis. For them, it will be difficult to send the youngsters back to university and continue paying their studies, which might mean a reduction in the number of students entering the university in the next academic year. Of course, one should also take into consideration that usually, recession periods, induce people to enter or stay in university, as investments in education tend to be countercyclical and the alternatives – sub employment and unemployment – are even worse than trying to support the expenses related with education.

h) Research, teaching, and academic departments

Due to financial problems, some universities will adopt strategies that include immediate hiring freezes in academic departments. Full-time faculty members with low teaching loads and no externally funded research might be encouraged to teach more hours. Older faculty members can be incentivized to take early retirement. At a second stage, in some universities, there might be reforms consisting of scrutinizing academic departments for research contributions, degree productivity, and students' return on investment. Low-performing departments might be eliminated or consolidated.

i) Management of educational institutions

All these changes imply that institutions rethink their management at different levels - from the demand for students to the forms of financing, the provision of training, and even the management of spaces, ensuring the physical distance between the institutions. In some countries, it is evident that the number of students per class exceeds the counsels for the space available. Additionally, one must take into consideration that at the moment of writing this reflection, the Health Administration bodies in each country are providing recommendation concerning all aspects of our everyday life and the social distance is one of them. As such, how can higher education institutions make sure that this social distance is a reality in each class? In order to follow these recommendations, classes need to be divided, and more teachers will be needed, and of course, more money will be needed to pay the salaries, not to mention the spaces… This may mean that the face-to-face classes might be still compromised for the next academic year or that a hybrid solution (a mixture of both face-to-face and remote learning) will need to be adopted.

j) Insertion in the labor market

Here are some aspects to consider, the first being the possibility that employers might think that the online model does not adequately prepare students for the labor market. Besides, online assessment,

especially in times of little experience, such as what one experiences, may include some "noise", not fully reflecting the students' knowledge and skills. Also, some studies state that the interruption in the assessment, as well as graduation at the beginning of a global recession, can cause more precarious working conditions, instigating young people to accept lower-paid jobs, with permanent effects on their careers.

k) Role of higher education institutions

Along with COVID-19, we are witnessing an economic and social crisis that has increased inequalities, poverty, unemployment, psychological problems, among others. Besides, the problems related to globalization, technological development, the environment, and democracy crisis, the crisis of international institutions and the crisis of values, will become more evident and widespread. Furthermore, in this context, we will see the emergence of new expectations about higher education institutions, in terms of connections with the community, education, international strategies, mobility, and even in terms of values. Thus, these institutions will have to rethink their mission and values. They will have to look for answers to some questions such as: What kind of institution do we want to be at the end of the pandemic? What kind of society and people do we want? Moreover, this means (re)thinking about their roles concerning their audiences and their social responsibility. One thing is sure, educational institutions will have to operate in a different economic, social, and political environment than the previous one and will have to respond to these challenges.

3. CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration the scenario described above, it is time for Higher Education Institutions, to define strategies to cope with it, for instance, by providing help, care and social funding, equipment, or other kinds of support to minimize the inequalities experienced by the students. Moreover, this crisis can also be seen as the opportunity higher education needed to put some dysfunctional strategies behind and embrace some renovations. Of course, turning the crisis into an opportunity requires a degree of change at the institutional level, whether these are breakups, mergers, and closure of faculties, that only a few will want to embark on until it is too late.

The problematic moments make us stop, look inside, and reflect. These are moments for change, for growth. If we know how to take advantage of this opportunity, we can come out of this situation more robust, more responsive, more human. Better people. We believe that the script of our lives is written by every one of us, knowing that together we will always be stronger.

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