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The Future of Higher Education

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Abstract

The future of higher education is greatly uncertain. Although higher education institutions and other stakeholders possess much power over their course of action, a vast array of factors threaten higher education in the years to come. This policy brief aims to explore those factors and ponder possible measures that could be taken to prepare for future challenges. Special attention is given to factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the environmental crises that have wreaked havoc on our planet, and geopolitical happenings in light of the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine. Additional circumstances that could enormously impact the future of higher education are taken into consideration.

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Acronyms

HE – Higher education

HEI – Higher education institution

Introduction

Higher education is responsible for producing knowledge that advances understanding of the natural as well as social worlds and enriches humanity's accumulated scientific and cultural inheritances and heritage; disseminating knowledge in ways that contribute to the formation and cultivation of the cognitive character of students as well as the general public; and engaging in community needs by being responsive to its political, economic, and social contexts. However, human interaction with dynamic and changing cultures, as well as a changing world due to globalisation, pandemics, epidemics, geopolitics among other things, has called into question the premise of higher education. These challenges are accompanied by students' concerns about the types of competence that are relevant to society's economic needs due to the growing rate of youth unemployment, access, quality, and equality for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education sector for nearly three years, and it has served as a continual reminder for all stakeholders to understand the significance of establishing solutions and coping mechanisms for unprecedented events in the future. In a brief highlighting how prepared the global education systems is for future crises based on the COVID-19 experience, some scholars posit that previous health emergencies such as H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009 and the Ebola outbreak of 2014-2016 have caused short term and long-term closure of school in several countries, yet the COVID-19 pandemic caught most of the world's education systems off guard. The most vulnerable learners from low-income families have been most affected. Countries, as well as regions and towns within them, had to decide how to continue providing access to education and related services in the face of numerous quickly growing methods and content to implement large-scale distance learning for the first time¹.

It has thus exacerbated an already-existing education problem and deepened inequities. School closures have ranged from none in a few countries to more than a full school year in others. At least one-third of students were prevented from pursuing remote learning due to a lack of connectivity and gadgets (UNESCO). Many concerns have been clouding around the future of higher education prior to COVID-19, including rising geopolitical tensions, the development of nationalism and populism, immigration bans, anti-globalisation rallies, and anti-integration attitudes (e.g., Brexit). The pandemic has expedited these transitions, magnified pre-existing challenges, introduced new challenges, and provided new opportunities².

While acknowledging that education in a knowledge society is the ability to be creative in the face of particular uncertainty, as well as the ability to effectively handle the cognitive conflict that causes our inability to understand reality, this brief highlights challenges prior to and during the pandemic and proposes recommendations for the future of higher education.

1 Higher Education as a Common Good

Higher education is a core pillar of society. Enabling people to obtain higher education strengthens the fabric of their community and provides them with countless opportunities to make their world a better place. In order for higher education to become a common good, it is important for higher education institutions to keep their primary goal in mind: to educate the masses. As of late, HEIs have been side-tracked by other interests. These interests can often be

¹ Memon, Asif Saeed; Rigole, Annika; Nakashian, Taleen Vartan; Taulo, Wongani Grace; Chávez, Cirenía; Mizunoya, Suguru (2020). COVID-19: How prepared are global education systems for future crises?, Innocenti Research Briefs no. 2020-21.

² Liu, J., Gao, Y. Higher education internationalisation at the crossroads: effects of the coronavirus pandemic. *Tert Educ Manag* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11233-021-09082-4>.

profit-driven in nature, as universities across the world charge students exorbitant fees³. This clearly closes off higher education to a select few and thereby rendering it a private luxury rather than the common good that it should be.

To ensure that higher education becomes a common good, it is crucial to disincentivise pursuing any goals that do not have the interests of the people in mind. This can be done by getting to the root of problems that HEIs perpetuate by certain practices. As highlighted above, many HEIs have developed a greater interest in generating a profit as opposed to educating people for the future. This can be combated by governments providing HEIs with sufficient funds so that students will not be encumbered with astronomical fees that may be associated with higher education. To this end, it is possible for governments to implement Nordic or Nordic-like models into their welfare systems. Doing this would give students additional security as many of their basic needs would be fulfilled, making HEIs more accessible to less socio-economically privileged groups in society and therefore truly transforming it into a common good. The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden in this case) do this by implementing labour activation policies and uplifting all levels of education. Getting individuals into the workforce and formal education provides workers with more skills, which then in-turn boost the economy of these countries⁴.

2 Critical risks and changing educational environments

The pandemic has revealed the need for a forward-looking, sustainable, and future-oriented approach to HE. Learning paradigms must adopt accommodating critical and changing learning environments, while anticipating and embracing diversity, creativity, and variety in knowledge⁵. Addressing critical and changing education environments now requires the adoption of a flexible model that supports human flourishing, by prioritising the importance of democratic partnership that reflects the needs of the learner and their context.

Sustainable development requires seeing HE as an opportunity for socio-ecological transitions for innovative pedagogies and learning, in addition to supporting institutional capabilities for societal change⁶. Migrant communities continue to struggle due to a lack of harmonisation of quality assurance standards and mechanisms for the bilateral, regional, or global recognition of degrees⁷. In 2019, only 1% of refugee youth had access to HE, suffering from barriers including cost, language accessibility, lack of documentation or acceptance of qualifications for prior learning, or restricted access to programmes⁸. Increased inter-state conflicts in addition to the post-pandemic environment identify how essential HE monitoring systems have become, to build resilience into student cohorts to whom mobility equates to lack of recognition or learning loss. With hopes for the restoration of post-pandemic student mobility, intra-regional partnerships and multilateral agreements between HEIs remain essential for vulnerable communities.

³ Selingo, J., Clark, C., Noone, D. (2018). The future(s) of public higher education: How state universities can survive — and thrive — in a new era

⁴ Jieru, X. (2013). Learning from the Nordic welfare model: what and how?

⁵ Salem, A. (2020). Learning for uncertainty: Higher Education and sustainability.

⁶ Bauer, M., Rieckman, M., Niedlich, S., & Bormann, I. (2021). Sustainability governance at higher education institutions: Equipped to transform? <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsus.2021.640458/full>

⁷ GEM Report 2019 UNESCO World Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications for Higher Education.

⁸ 2019, June 18-19. The other 1%: Refugees at institutions for higher education worldwide. Conference Report. https://www2.daad.de/medien/microsites/the-other-one-percent/report_2019.pdf

Climate migration and poverty require the development of pedagogies and research in sustainable sourcing, energy efficiency, and protecting biodiversity.⁹ With more than 1,000 universities globally committing to lower their carbon emissions to zero by 2050 at COP26, a coordinated implementation and outworking of this commitment is key. HEIs need to champion zero-carbon innovation in research and curricula for clean production, green living, and fossil-free environments. This includes building an “all-dimensions approach”: a cross-sectorial model for stakeholder engagement for knowledge-sharing and collaboration, between local, national, regional, and global networks.

Traditional modes of educational delivery have been too prescriptive for certain stakeholder groups. The knowledge economy of consumption and production has made intellectual capital exclusive, and requires democratisation to combat growing inequities. Where there has been access to such capital it has not met the needs of diverse publics – such as technologies that do not suit disabled learners – or addressed the structural weaknesses in HEIs. The long-standing structural weaknesses in technical and vocational learning in comparison to the need of the labour market exemplifies how strengthening stakeholder engagement and minimising bureaucratic silos in HEIs aids the training of future frontline workers through apprenticeship schemes and work-based learning models.¹⁰ The possession of knowledge and minimal flexible modes for education delivery – whether in-person, digital or hybrid form – requires innovative pedagogical models that suit the needs of the subject or discipline, and the individual, community, society, and nation.¹¹

Such integration should prioritise treating crisis as an opportunity to address inequity through innovation between stakeholder groups, rather than fragmenting learning experiences through knowledge consumption.¹² This requires minimising the burdens on the young from large amounts of financial debt, addressing “hidden” fees for technologies or additional education-related materials,¹³ and incentivizing employability programmes that reflect the current and future labour market.¹⁴ Financing HE at an organisational and governmental level is essential to sustain HEIs in emergency conditions, but also to aid the implementation of agile and effective post-crisis contingency plans.

3 Long term trajectories in higher education for sustainable societies

Climate change and global warming are some of the key planetary challenges that have stirred nations and international bodies across the globe to come together and find viable solutions to the crises. These environmental crises are a clear outcome of modernity and its inherent logic of man-nature dichotomy. An anthropocentric approach towards the planet, its life-worlds and resources has led to a no-holds barred decimation and exploitation of our planet. In this backdrop, it becomes very crucial to make a radical break from the existing conventional ways of talking about sustainability and seriously rethink and consider alternate paradigms to address the state of affairs. The exploration of alternative ways to deal with issues like global

⁹ Nugent, C. (2021, 16 April). The unexpected ways climate change is reshaping college education. <https://time.com/5953399/college-education-climate-change/>

¹⁰ Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Beijing Declaration on MOOC Development. <https://mooc.global/gmc/beijing-declaration-on-mooc-development/>

¹³ Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

¹⁴ UN. Policy Brief: The World of Work and COVID-19. June 2020 https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/the_world_of_work_and_covid-19.pdf.

warming needs to be visible not only in state actions but also in the means of education about the issues. This would require a proper focus on the education sector, particularly higher education. The future of higher education needs to be charted along these lines, such that sustainability is treated as a question of our existential crisis and our concerns and probable remedies are reflected in the higher education curricula across the globe. To this end, it is high time we produce meaningful literature suggesting policy recommendations regarding the same.

The starting point for any policy formulation and implementation in this direction needs to be an explicit acknowledgement by the international community of the current environmental crisis mainly being a direct consequence of Western modernity. Through a decolonial analysis, it has been observed that “we remain invested in the continuity of a modern-colonial system that is both modern higher education’s condition of possibility and the root cause of climate change”.¹⁵ Institutions of higher education have served as the primary sites through which modern promises are both cultivated and fulfilled. Thus, these institutions have both benefited from and contributed to the reproduction of the colonial processes that decolonial analyses identify as the primary causes of climate change. This severely limits their ability to serve as sites for learning to disinvest from modern promises.¹⁶ A total break and disinvestment from higher education as it is now would be needed for a decolonial shift towards the idea of sustainability¹⁷. Not only do we need to stop visualising our futures within the dominant framework of higher education, but also we need to realise the limits of “modernity’s universalizing impulses” so as to create an “ecology of knowledges” which allows us to prioritise contextualised and indigenous modes of thought and learning.¹⁸ We shouldn’t deter ourselves from going about thoroughly critiquing, and if required, rejecting the notion of sustainable development itself as a limited anthropocentric conception of life, in favour of owning up responsibilities and duties head-on for decolonial, eco-centric futures.¹⁹ This would require an explicit academic repositioning of our higher education institutions from “education for sustainable development” to “education for the end of the world as we know it”, which would largely involve a disintegration of the modernity-coloniality matrix deep rooted in our institutions.²⁰

4 Implications of disruptive change for educational, research and civic missions

Major changes in a society are largely impactful and affect many different aspects of it. Disruptive change in the world strongly impacts the realms of education and research as well as civic participation. It is important that HEIs, governments, and other stakeholders learn to navigate times of great upheaval so as to lessen the negative impact on students and others lower in the hierarchy. Disruptive change can manifest itself in a multitude of ways and can have a huge ripple effect in ways that one might not have initially imagined.

Disease:

As highlighted above, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous influence on HE in the past two years. Much of university work and studies have been conducted in a completely

¹⁵ Sharon Stein. The Ethical and Ecological Limits of Sustainability: A Decolonial Approach to Climate Change in Higher Education. *Aus. J. Env’tl. Edu.*, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 199.

¹⁶ *ibid* p. 203

¹⁷ *ibid* p. 205

¹⁸ *ibid* p. 206

¹⁹ Cash Ahenakew et. al. From “education for sustainable development” to “education for end of the world as we know it”. *Edu. Phil. Theory*. Vol. 54, No. 3, p. 274.

²⁰ *ibid*

different manner than ever before, making HE simultaneously more and less accessible. Some HEIs such as the University of Iceland saw a record-breaking number in applications in light of the onset of COVID,²¹ perhaps due to university studies becoming more accessible to those in rural areas. However, students' mental health suffered, as only about 54% of university students in Iceland rated their mental health as being "very good" or "good" as of Spring 2021,²² thereby rendering HE less accessible to students struggling with these invisible disorders as said students must juggle both their declining mental health as well as their studies. While it is important for HEIs and other stakeholders to respond proactively to the dangers that COVID-19 and other diseases may pose, it is also important for HEIs and other stakeholders to mitigate the ill effects of measures taken.

Geopolitical Disruption:

Shifts in geopolitical power, complex cross-border flows and general political disruption continues to not only disrupt the educational experience in HEIs, but has also seen attacks on academic scholars, staff and students. The influence of military and police forces, government authorities, militant and extremist groups have each been recorded to contribute to disruption due to geopolitical contexts, constricting public discourse on social, cultural, political, and economic topics of import.²³ HEIs whose scholars, staff and students are in danger of immediate influence due to conflict and other disruptive forces, need to implement monitoring systems to avoid human rights violations and uphold academic freedom on and off campuses.

Geopolitical disruption and the pandemic have increasingly seen university campuses become sites for explicit racism and ethnic stereotyping. The rise of hate crimes on campuses from mass shootings to sexual assault and verbal abuse has prompted the need for HEIs to strengthen their policies and procedures to clearly address acts of bias, hate or prejudice to protect minority communities. Often these incidents have been due to welfare pressures upon nation states in current conflict and pandemic contexts, moving from "microaggressions" to hate-based incidents. Such incidents have even occurred within conflict zones, where international HE students have been discriminated against in war and conflict zones.

Geopolitical disruption also has an impact on education funding particularly for international students, such as recent considerations as to whether scholarship programmes should be included in sanctions for conflicting countries. The uncertainty that this creates for students at all levels of higher education is disruptive to the learning and research experience, and should be discouraged. While scholarships and stipends need to consider their financial origins, geopolitical context, and the need for ethnic, gender and social inclusivity, such funds should not be inconsistent in funding throughout the educational experience. This also applies to grant funding for HEIs themselves, which should consider that the educational experience on and off campus is consistent regardless of regional context.

²¹ Einarsdóttir, A. S. (2020). Aldrei borist fleiri umsóknir um nám í HÍ.

<https://www.ruv.is/frett/2020/06/16/aldrei-borist-fleiri-umsoknir-um-nam-i-hi>

²² The (former) Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture. (2021). "Könnun á líðan stúdenta á tímum COVID-19". <https://www.stjornarradid.is/efst-a-baugi/frettir/stok-frett/2021/03/30/Konnun-a-lidan-studenta-a-timum-COVID-19/>

²³ SAR. Free to Think 2020.

<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Scholars-at-Risk-Free-to-Think-2020.pdf>

Policy recommendations

- Ensure HEIs incorporate holistic, “wrap-around” systems and services that serve the interests of disadvantaged and underrepresented student groups
- Continue to harmonise the quality assurance standards and mechanisms for the bilateral, regional, or global recognition of degrees to aid the mobilisation of student bodies
- Foster inclusive intra-regional partnerships and multilateral agreements between HEIs to further educational ease for mobile student populations, especially vulnerable communities
- Ensure HEIs commit to an “all-dimensions” or cross-sectoral approach to address climate change, lower their carbon emissions, and further climate education to support the planet and society
- Move beyond a narrow “knowledge economy” narrative, by building into flexible and inclusive learning systems that suit various stakeholders, and support pragmatic learning in areas such as vocational and training learning
- Finance HE at an organisational and governmental level through creating effective crisis and post-crisis contingency plans to aid the implementation of agile and effective responses to emergency contexts
- Support HEIs championing the protection of the human rights and exercise of academic freedom by scholars, staff and students in complex political environments
- Support inclusive educational environments that do not tolerate hate crimes, including the creation of policies, practices and procedures to protect and aid the flourishing of vulnerable communities on and off campuses
- Create sustainable plans for financial support of students through complex and disruptive political and socio-economic environments
- Ensure that the quality of HE does not suffer in times of wide-scale societal change
- Ensure a strong collaboration and responsibility sharing between educators and other stakeholders in terms of policy, processes, governance, and support systems
- An explicit acknowledgement on part of the international community and by UNESCO about the operation of a “caged colonial mentality”²⁴ in academic and research institutions and the need for shedding off the modernity-coloniality matrix.
- The recognition of decoloniality studies as a legitimate field of academic research and the need for prioritisation of supporting work in this direction across former/existing colonies.
- International bodies should come together to explore the possibility of setting expert-level transnational committees with substantial representation from former colonies to work on decolonial responses to climate change and sustainable

²⁴ Nyoni, Jabulani. Decolonising the higher education curriculum: An analysis of African intellectual readiness to break the chains of a colonial caged mentality. AOSIS. Vol. 4, No. a69, p. 1-10.

development in collaboration with higher education institutions of the postcolonial nation-states.

- UNESCO should take up the task of persuading individual nation-states to introduce radical reforms in the academic curricula promoting indigenous knowledge systems as viable methods to tackle various aspects of environmental crises. This should be done by the individual states by parallelly working with the indigenous communities to learn their praxis of handling such issues and mapping out their knowledge systems in their own terms.
- Higher education institutions should not only pursue cutting-edge research on the various facets of a decolonial approach to environmental crises and sustainability, but this should be modelled as community-driven research where the needful unlearning and learning happens as per the knowledge and practices of indigenous communities. Rigorous research methodologies and frameworks should be developed to that effect. To the extent possible, modern scientific policies should allow space for the incorporation of such knowledge systems and praxis which are better suited and locally contextualised for the community stakeholders.

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