Sustaining the Values of Tertiary Education during the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

In the rush to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic—eliminating pathways for spreading the virus by closing physical campuses—institutions the world over turned their initial focus toward teaching, and, to a lesser extent, research. This response is important in the first flush of change. It is imperative, however, to maintain a commitment to some core values in tertiary education—such as equity and social responsibility—to ensure stability during and after the crisis.

As of April 6, 2020, universities and other tertiary education institutions are closed in 170 countries and communities, and over 220 million postsecondary students—13 percent of the total number of students affected globally—have already had their studies ended or significantly disrupted due to COVID-19. What we are seeing globally is impact in every region and a notably pronounced effect on upper- and lower-middle income countries. In general, this distributed effect reflects the spread patterns of the coronavirus from the middle-income countries of East Asia to Europe and North America and,

to a lesser extent, Latin America. As the virus spreads into the African and South Asian regions, the numbers of affected lower-middle and low-income countries have risen. Few countries today are claiming no impact from the pandemic. Tertiary education around the globe has been affected in a way not seen since World War II.

In the rush to respond to the immediate health and social welfare threat—eliminating pathways for spreading the virus by closing physical campuses—institutions the world over turned their initial focus toward teaching, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, research. Key concerns have included: how do we teach to those we have an obligation to teach? How do we support research continuity where possible? This response is logical and important in the first flush of change. It is imperative, however, that those in a position to think beyond immediate survival—by providing remote learning via a plethora of modalities—keep an eye on core values in any tertiary education sector, so that when the crisis abates, fundamental values such as equity, a baseline assurance of quality, accountability balanced with institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and social responsibility remain within the mission of all tertiary education systems.

The Myth of Technical Adaptability in Tertiary Education

Online and distance learning have forced massive adaptation in how information is delivered, strongly impacting how (and whether) students learn. But the implicit bias in this move, which assumes and requires a level of technical capacity, has left literally millions of students without any form of continued learning once they left their campuses. There is a myth that tertiary students and tertiary education would be more easily adaptable to this remote learning environment, but why should this be? Students enrolled on campuses that are fully equipped with technology and infrastructure return home to the same neighborhoods as their primary and secondary school neighbors. If there is no internet penetration into their cities or regions to bring remote education to primary and secondary school students, there is none for tertiary. Moreover, tertiary education is a largely bespoke endeavor, where students craft their academic calendar according to their fields of study and their interests. Such academic work cannot be delivered by radio or television, as is an option for younger students.

Expanded Inequality in the Move to Online Course Delivery

As seen in Ethiopia and the Philippines, among a growing number of countries, students are now protesting the equity disparity that is exacerbated by access to distance learning technology. Students without access or the resources to afford the technology are being left behind. Student with learning challenges are being left behind. Students with disabilities are being left behind. Students who rely on their institutions for housing, food, healthcare, and community find themselves uprooted and uncertain about their options. Students who work on campus or receive scholarships as their main income are faced with a crisis of earnings. Institutions away from urban centers, often without robust infrastructure, are being left behind. Institutions with missions to teach those most likely to fall out of the education pipeline are being left behind. This was true before the pandemic, which is exacerbating the speed at which disparities are affecting student persistence and institutional survival. And this is true all over the world.

Few institutions, including the wealthiest and most respected universities, had emergency plans to instruct and inform their closures and moves to distance learning. Even fewer had plans for a sustained mass evacuation of their campuses. Now is a sound time, while leaders are living the experience, to study every step of this pandemic response to assess and document lessons learned, what they wished they had known and prepared ahead of time, what information is still needed to support their academic staff to become better at remote instruction today and for the remainder of this academic year, to plan for medium-term adaptations, and, eventually, a reopening of campuses with the resilience to face challenges of campus closures in the future. Such analytical efforts today can inform how management can provide a better support for students tomorrow and in the future.

What Can We Learn from the Crisis?

Education leaders and stakeholders must also seek and produce evidence from the learning sciences while embracing technological innovations, to ensure that this push to change the delivery of teaching to online or future blended platforms delivers on the promise of learning and skills development. Such changes must be studied for efficacy and to understand best what works and does not, and for whom. To date, most online learning approaches do not have comparable, evidence-based foundations or focus on the socioemotional skills delivered via traditional campus-based learning, and this should be concerning enough to drive investments in the science of teaching and learning.

In doing so, and while leading their tertiary education systems into the postcrisis world, policy makers and practitioners alike will need to focus their efforts on the most vulnerable students. They must ensure that teaching and learning solutions, technological set-up, infrastructure investments, and funding modalities are geared toward keeping these students engaged and connected, and support their learning process and outcomes. ◢

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