

The Impact of COVID-19 on Global Higher Education

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On March 11, 2020, COVID-19—an infectious respiratory disease caused by a novel coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan, China—was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. As of April 1, 2020, more than 3.4 billion people, representing 43 percent of the world population, are in lockdown in more than 80 countries and territories around the world.

Lockdown and social confinement measures have an enormous impact on higher education. Higher education has been disrupted as never before, but the fact that campuses are physically closed does not mean that higher education institutions (HEIs) have stopped functioning. On the contrary, faced with multiple challenges, they have had to respond quickly and find new solutions to previously unknown problems and new ways in which to continue teaching, conducting research, and serving society.

Challenges to Internationalization

The first aspect of higher education impacted by COVID-19 has been internationalization, in particular student mobility. At the beginning of the epidemic, HEIs in countries not yet affected had international students on their campuses who were citizens of affected countries, or had their own students on exchange at HEIs in affected countries. With the imposition of travel restrictions, international students deciding to interrupt their stay either managed to return to their home countries or found themselves forced to remain in their host countries. HEIs adopted different solutions to these situations, such as working with governments to ensure the repatriation of students and providing additional support to international students held up in host countries (e.g., allowing them to remain in student dormitories even after the end of term).

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is having an enormous impact on higher education. In many countries around the world, campuses are closed and teaching has moved online. Internationalization has slowed down considerably. Despite these challenges, HEIs have reacted positively, often implementing new solutions to continue providing teaching, research, and service to society.

Collaboration with governments, businesses, and nongovernmental organizations is vital to ensure that no student is left behind.

Impact on Teaching

The lockdown posed other, more complex, challenges to campuses. The primary challenge related to continuing teaching when students, faculty, and staff could no longer be physically present on campus. The obvious solution was to expand online teaching. In a relatively short time, HEIs have been able to move whole programs of study online with some having to start a new term fully online. HEIs in China have been the pioneers of this evolution toward online teaching and were soon followed by HEIs in other parts of the world.

However, there are several challenges to moving teaching and learning online; the most obvious is unequal access to information and communication technology. In some countries, such as Brazil, internet access for students is so limited that some HEIs have decided to close completely. Moving their teaching online would only benefit a very small percentage of their student body, thus perpetuating and enhancing a huge inequality and disparity in opportunities, allowing rich students to continue their studies and leaving poor students behind. Another, less obvious, challenge is the quality of on-line provision when staff are unprepared, in a context of emergency.

In such cases, collaboration with governments, businesses, and nongovernmental organizations is vital to ensure that no student is left behind. This is the approach adopted by the UNESCO Global Education Coalition, an initiative to support countries in sharing and scaling up their best distance learning practices. The coalition's main focus is on primary and secondary education, but higher education is included as well.

Impact on Research

COVID-19 is having both negative and positive impacts on research. On the negative side, COVID-19 is making it impossible for researchers to travel and work together properly, and is therefore complicating the completion of joint research projects. On the positive side, many HEIs are committing their labs and teams to research on COVID-19, searching for a vaccine and/or for drugs capable of treating the disease, or collecting and disseminating information on the disease. The COVID-19 Data Center of John Hopkins University, for instance, tracks daily global trends on COVID-19 worldwide.

Societal Mission of Higher Education

Besides HEIs with medical hospitals, which are at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19, many HEIs around the world are helping their local communities by housing patients on their premises, making research publications publicly available, or informing local communities on preventive measures against the spread of the disease. While COVID-19 is an unprecedented challenge for HEIs around the world, HEIs are actively undertaking initiatives to fight the virus and minimize the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Global Cooperation Paramount

Due to the unequal share of resources and capacities among HEIs around the world, global cooperation is paramount. Without cooperation, the search for a vaccine and/or a treatment for COVID-19 would be slower and inefficient; teaching would only be beneficial to part of the student population, exacerbating inequalities; and the benefit for society would be reduced to a minimum. We do not yet know the medium- and long-term effects of the pandemic on health, the economy, and the sociocultural dimensions of our societies, but they will be multiple and complex to mitigate.

Actions of the International Association of Universities (IAU) to Promote Global Cooperation

In order to promote global cooperation and support HEIs, the IAU has developed various initiatives. First, IAU launched a global survey on the impact of COVID-19 at HEIs around the world. The results of the survey will help better understand how the epidemic is affecting HEIs in different parts of the world. Once the pandemic is over, IAU plans to conduct a second version of the survey in order to monitor its medium- to long-term effects and map actions undertaken by HEIs both as immediate responses to the pandemic and for the future. IAU is also collecting and sharing resources on COVID-19 and will conduct a series of webinars reflecting on the future of higher education in a post-COVID-19 world.

This unprecedented crisis reaffirms that in such difficult times, sharing resources is the only way for the global higher education community to rise to the challenge and proudly claim its fundamental role in society. ▲

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