

# Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education from an Equity Perspective

Jamil Salmi

**W**hile the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are affecting both rich and poor countries, students from underrepresented groups have faced greater challenges. In countries with limited internet deployment and low broadband capacity, opportunities for online learning have been drastically constrained. Colleges and universities in low-income nations have struggled to put in place quality distance education programs for a lack of experienced academics and adequate resources.

## Short-Term Effects and Reactions

- Closures and transition to online education: The degree of readiness was highly unequal across countries and institutions. Universities and colleges in developing countries have faced serious IT infrastructure and internet access difficulties.
- Impact on students: The commotion brought about by the abrupt closure of campuses and the rapid switch to online education have disrupted the lives of students all over the world. Students from underrepresented groups have been hit especially hard, suffering economic hardship, connection difficulties, and emotional distress.
- Assessment and exams in transition: Many higher education institutions have struggled with difficult choices about online assessment and the risk of increased cheating.
- Universities rising to the COVID-19 challenge: A positive development has been the generous responses of universities worldwide in contributing their scientific knowledge and resources to fight the pandemic. Universities developed a faster and cheaper COVID-19 test, donated surplus equipment to help hospitals, and produced medical supplies, sanitizing equipment, and medicines.

## Longer-Term Effects

- Reopening in the fall: In countries where the pandemic is still raging, decisions about reopening have been heavily influenced by political and economic considerations. In the United Kingdom and the United States, COVID-19 denial and the threat of economic difficulties have led many higher education institutions to take chances with the health of their students.
- Diminished learning and increased student failure: Many students will have an incomplete learning experience during the 2019–2020 academic year. Besides the adverse impact on the quality of the educational experience during COVID-19, mental health problems among students have risen.
- Reduced resources, shifting demand, closures, and restructuring: The crisis has revealed structural weaknesses in the existing financing models of many higher education systems and institutions. For private higher education institutions fully dependent on tuition fees and/or on international students, financial survival will be seriously tested. Large numbers of students with limited resources could drop out of higher education altogether. In many low-income nations that have traditionally allocated insufficient public funding to higher education, usually less than 0.5 percent of GDP, consequences could be dire.
- Impact on research: The closure of labs and travel restrictions mean that researchers are unable to continue their experiments or field investigations, except when remote lab work and collaborations are possible. A growing concern for all research universities is the likelihood of reduced funding in the coming years, except for programs directly related to COVID-19. Data on research production have revealed that women

## Abstract

While the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are affecting both rich and poor countries, students from underrepresented groups have faced greater challenges. In countries with limited internet deployment and low broadband capacity, opportunities for online learning have been drastically constrained. Colleges and universities in low-income nations have struggled to put in place quality distance education programs for a lack of experienced academics and adequate resources.

*The crisis has tested the leadership skills of college and university presidents in an unprecedented way.*

academics have been affected more seriously than men, reflecting the skewed division of labor within households.

### National Mitigation Policies

- Financial support: A number of high-income countries have rapidly approved economic rescue packages for colleges, universities, and/or students. But few low-income nations have been able to provide a sizeable support package.
- Capacity building for connectivity and online education: Many countries have tried to increase connectivity for higher education institutions and their students. Governments in sub-Saharan Africa have strengthened broadband capacity through national research and education networks (NRENS).
- Flexibility in quality assurance and assessment: The third type of national-level intervention has been efforts to bring greater flexibility to the application of quality assurance criteria and assessment methods.

### Institutional Mitigation Policies

- Innovative educational approaches: The first step to ease the transition to online education has been to offer crash courses in the use of digital platforms and application of effective techniques for online teaching and learning. Institutions with fully functional teaching and learning services have found themselves better prepared to support their academic community. At the core of a successful online education experience is the alignment of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Also important is the recognition that teaching online is not about recording a traditional lecture and posting it on the institutional website, but adopting pedagogical methods that engage the students in a stimulating educational experience. Finally, many institutions have found it indispensable to strengthen their academic and psychological support systems for students who have been personally impacted by the health and economic crisis and have struggled to adjust to online education.
- Governance beyond the pandemic: The crisis has tested the leadership skills of college and university presidents in an unprecedented way, forcing them to make quick and vital decisions to protect the health of the academic community and maintain business continuity. A lesson of the crisis has been the importance of effective and frequent communication to explain, in an honest and transparent manner, the challenges and the unknowns brought about by COVID-19.
- Inventing new economic models: New opportunities may arise from the postpandemic period. Higher education institutions could become serious about embracing adult learners as a legitimate segment of their target student population. Adopting lifelong learning stresses the primacy of the learner, recognizes competencies acquired on the job, and addresses the training needs of a more diverse clientele. Higher education institutions can also explore alliances to offer joint degrees, teach courses collectively, and conduct research collaboratively, combining their talent and financial resources more effectively.
- Equity-focused responses: One of the priority tasks for many higher education institutions, immediately after the closure of on-campus activities, has been to alleviate the hardships experienced by students from low-income families and other vulnerable groups. Financial help has come in the form of additional grants, interest-free loans, and access to food banks. To reduce the digital divide, many institutions have donated devices to students and offered internet bundles to provide online access.

### Conclusion

Never before has the strength of colleges and universities been tested as painstakingly as during the current pandemic. The health crisis has revealed that the digital gap and economic inequalities were uncomfortable realities that influenced directly the capacity of students to cope with the COVID-19 crisis.

While the world's top universities are unlikely to suffer adverse long-term consequences, for many higher education institutions financial survival will be a serious challenge. Millions of students with limited resources could drop out of higher education altogether.

Since the pandemic has exposed the extent of the digital divide and the socioeconomic inequalities that perpetuate glaring gaps among nations, higher education institutions, and the students themselves, it is essential to consider measures, at the national and institutional levels, that focus on achieving fairness in higher learning for students from low-income families, female students, and racial and ethnic minorities. ▲

*Jamil Salmi is a global tertiary education expert and research fellow at Boston College's Center for International Higher Education, US. Email: [jsalmi@tertiaryeducation.org](mailto:jsalmi@tertiaryeducation.org).*