

GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION BEYOND PANDEMICS IN A FUTURE OF UNCERTAINTIES

Emmanuel Ojo¹ 
Elisiane Lorenzini² 

¹University of the Witwatersrand, School of Education. Johannesburg, South Africa.

²Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Programa de Pós-graduação em Enfermagem. Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brasil.

Globalisation has significantly impacted on higher education since the advent of the internet in the late 90's. It opened the opportunity for massification including the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to reach a wider audience and make higher education assessable to the unreached. Universities initiated satellite centres and thus gave rise to greater university internationalization. With less funding accessible to universities due to the 2008 global economic downturn, the opportunity for international students brought in a stream of income for universities in their countries to service students especially from Africa and Asia. About twenty years into the twenty-first century with the advent of a global pandemic, higher education as we have experienced has changed in unimaginable ways¹⁻².

The lockdown of March 2020 started an unprecedented impact on how every aspect of higher education is conducted. Universities moved away from the traditional, talk-and-chalk approach in the classroom to solely online. Unexpected and unplanned, more than 1.3 billion learners including university students were locked in at home³. The notion of 'emergency remote teaching and learning' came into being with universities teaching online to manage the disruption the pandemic caused. While the pandemic is still on though the access to vaccines across the world is increasing, higher education is still not the same as it was pre-pandemic. Many universities in 2021 are still using a hybrid approach to teaching and learning, with a greater part done asynchronously.

In view of the current context of global higher education, this piece asks the overarching questions, 'in what ways is the pandemic redefining global higher education and what are the implications of this for the future?' To answer this, we draw on the literature and our personal reflections as professors

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and researchers in higher education to present an argument that exemplifies higher education into the future. There is an acknowledgment in the literature that skills acquisition occurs most efficiently with social interactions and networks building on campus. It is a key aspect of student experience that has added so much value to higher education over these years. The pandemic has truncated this and negatively impacted on peer-to-peer interaction on campuses and the opportunity to build the kind of traditional networks from pre-pandemic. Teaching and learning including student's supervision have gone online, thus banning students and faculty to use the social engagement they were used to on campus. Studies have shown that this has implications for mental health going forward⁴⁻⁵. This is an aspect that though we acknowledge the situation, we still do not know the longer-term implications on our societies.

Innovation has especially increased during the pandemic especially⁶. Many relied on the use of online services for consumables unlike before. With artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics redefining our world and the way we live, this has implications for university curriculum and the future of work. Unlike a pre-pandemic era, universities must rethink and redesign the curriculum students are taught going forward especially because of the increasing need for a different kind of workforce skilled enough to work remotely and engage more with using technology as a mediator. There is an urgent need for curriculum change to take into consideration the interdisciplinarity of knowledge. This is an imperative to meet diverse needs emerging as a result of the implication of the lockdown. This should be at the heart of defining the future of higher education. In other words, the pandemic is displacing knowledge as we know it and bringing about knowledge in a changing world embedded in uncertainties.

Mobility of students across the world was impacted as a result of the global pandemic. Countries like Australia and Canada which used to attract many international students are failing to attract students⁷. Both private and public universities are affected, and this has implication not just from an economic perspective, but from the opportunity of attracting skills. Many global companies for example have attracted immigrants with high-level skills through attracting students who moved for the purpose of studying and later settled in to do start-ups or work to gain experience in the nation. On the other hand, an important outcome of the pandemic is the generation of big data⁸ as the world turned online to live, work and learn. How we use the data we are generating through the pandemic will ultimately be useful in defining the way forward. The shaping of global higher education in a future of uncertainties will require drawing on current knowledge on the state of the academe, including such studies as Bączek, Zagańczyk-Bączek⁹ and Ojo and Onwuegbuzie¹⁰ to explicate how the current pandemic is impacting on higher education.

The way we conduct research across disciplines will have to be reconsidered. The world of sciences especially through the participation of universities as training grounds for the next generation of the labour force will have to harness the possibility of big data for research with emphasis on interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary and crossdisciplinarity. We can no longer afford the dichotomy in research methodologies but train university students to be pragmatic researchers¹¹ who are able to combine qualitative and quantitative research approaches especially in the humanities and social sciences. Students irrespective of their field of study must be exposed to university education that is customised to the evolving challenges of the twenty-first century now than before.

There is an ongoing argument about the next pandemics and when possibility this could be¹². Increasingly as the debate continues even as nations across the world are striving to vaccinate the populace to be able to have herd immunity as soon as possible, global higher education must find a way to make a hybrid approach to higher education teaching, learning and scholarship more efficient to accommodate the welfare of students and faculty. Processes must be put in place to support a

'new' skilled young generation socially and emotionally intelligent enough to engage in jobs that do not yet exist and resilient enough to adapt to a changing world of work. We argue that global higher education cannot afford to waste the COVID-19 pandemic. While there has been massive disruption in the higher education value chain, the current pandemic presents a unique opportunity for governments and universities to work together to redefine the remit of universities in the twenty-first century. What academics teach, how they teach it and train students, how they are assessed and what outcome expectations are as outputs through university education must be consistently engaged to cater for a changing labour force in a changing world. Research collaboration across disciplines must be increasingly encouraged using mixed methods approaches to answer increasingly difficult questions in the society. Staff and students alike must be supported to thrive through a different kind of higher education in the age of pandemics. Increasingly as the global knowledge economy continues to evolve, the opportunity for higher education to reinvent itself means that a new kind of labour force could be trained to contribute to national and global prosperity.

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