Re-Thinking Higher Education for a Post-Pandemic World | Snapshot: Quality

Introduction

In this conversation, we focus on the challenge of maintaining quality in higher education since the Covid-19 crisis began in the early part of 2020. Our analysis rests on a small survey of media reporting and, to an even lesser extent, institutional research that has preceded peer-reviewed publications beginning to appear. We have attempted to take stock of where things stand, identify missing information that could inform a research agenda, and consider the high-level viability of pandemic-inspired solutions.

A primary concern ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic has centered around the question of educational quality, brought about by a sudden switch to mostly online learning, at all levels of education, from primary to higher education. No country and educational system has been spared the urgency to think quickly and innovatively about how to respond for the good of their student populations. A new global survey by the International Association of University Presidents of 760 public and private higher education institutions around the world found that less than half felt ready for a global pandemic of this nature. The tenor of speculations over the year about what the future of higher education might bring, both in the United States and around the world, could be graphed onto a continuum. That continuum would span from one end that speculation claiming unprecedented changes will be enacted in the Academy and "hundreds of colleges will perish," to the other end of the spectrum, where minor adjustments may occur but essentially we will "return to normal routines." Yet other analysis are already suggesting many expectations turned out much differently.

According to an August 2020 UN Policy Brief, "The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle income countries (p. 2)." According to the Economic Policy Institute's 'lessons learned' September report focusing on performance and equity in U.S. secondary schools, the impact of Covid is almost entirely driven by sociodemographic realities: access to technology, the home environment, availability of resources, child support, summer activities, all combine to determine opportunity.

For the higher education sector, it is much the same. The report from the National Conference of State Legislatures points out that all aspects of life in the academy have been affected: the student experience, admissions, enrollment, sports, dining and activities, the financial bottom line. Again, financial background is *the* determining factor. In the U.S., one-tenth of college employees have lost their jobs and freshman enrollment is down nationwide by 16.1 percent. For international student enrollment, the American Council on Education estimates a 25-30% decline, cited in a Pew report, and an attendant $3 billion revenue loss. McKinsey and Company's higher education report released in October, *Re-imagining Higher Education in the United States* finds that while the core mission of higher education and benefits graduates accrue will continue to hold, chronic challenges have only grown and significantly deepened the existing inequality chasm and disparities in access, quality and the student experience. Brendan Cantwell and Barrett Taylor writing in *Change Magazine* (July 2020) attribute much of the educational inequality plaguing education today to the growth of hyper partisanship and resulting lack of public consensus about education serving a common good. A special 2020 report by Boston College's Center for International Higher Education indicated that Covid would indeed bear significant implications for higher education worldwide, with the most dire impact hitting the lowest-income countries and its poorest inhabitants.

Debra Humphreys of the Lumina Foundation pointed to three main issues needing careful attention to safeguard quality of students' learning during and after the Covid crisis. These include more deeply understanding learners' attributes, particularly non-traditional, first generation and of color; (re)considering skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in a changing workplace; and giving more

measured thought to programs, courses and the totality of the educational experience within and among many diverse types of institutions. Faculty will largely need to spearhead this challenge; those remaining out of touch with today's student reality hinder those changes.

Another major factor Covid has put front and center is technology. Philip Altbach and Hans DeWit of Boston College's Center for International Higher Education do not predict Covid's impact on technology producing a higher educational revolution, just as MOOCs failed to do so a decade earlier, but others see more technologization of learning, virtual content delivery, and the growth of learning management systems continuing to corporatize the academy to the detriment of faculty and students. More positive views, both for secondary and higher education, on the other hand, predict that technology will create new and unforeseen opportunities for more high-impact activities that would not have been considered before this crisis.

In terms of one important revenue source for universities, international students who pay full tuition, the steep drop off in mobility occurred in tandem with the near stoppage of all international travel. Predictions about the recovery of educational mobility range from short-term to five years, but many analysts see Covid also providing an opportunity to rethink education abroad and bring about much needed changes. What is clear is that a revision of the existing paradigms behind international learning are necessary, stakeholders need to rethink issues around cost, resources, institutional priorities and mission. John Hudzik for NAFSA: Association of International Educators poses this challenge: "The big question for internationalists is: How do we aim to change and innovate to meet new realities? Not everything needs to change, but change is essential (p. 5)."

Questions

- What factors in the higher education experience—from money and resources to students' social life and faculty engagement, among countless other metrics—are impacted by, but may also be able to transcend, the Covid crisis?
- With the rapid shift to course-management systems and delivery of online learning replacing in-person faculty-student contact, some critics have charged that "the Covid-19 university is remarkably similar to Uber and Lyft (McIver)." Is this a fair accusation?
- To safeguard enrollments and stem growing doubts about the value of higher education, do administrators and practitioners need to work harder to justify tuition and rebuild a sense of the "campus community" in new and innovative ways?
- Will educational technologization driven by the Covid pandemic reinforce a capitalist instrumental view of education or promote holistic human growth?
- Has Covid-19 already caused, or will it still cause, a revolutionary shift in internationalization—including in education abroad and international student exchange—or will the accustomed trends, patterns and operating procedures soon return the status quo?