

# Fighting for Funding and against Inequality post COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has opened a Pandora's box of options for and predictions about the future role of higher education. On the one side are those who predict that nothing will change and that things will return to "business as usual" after the crisis. These conservative views seem currently more realistic than those, on the other side, who foresee a revolution through which higher education will be radically transformed. Numerous articles in *University World News* and elsewhere have argued that radical change is both desirable and inevitable—and that reimagining postsecondary education is an urgent necessity.

This is not the first call for revolutionary change in one of the two oldest institutions in the world (the other being the Roman Catholic Church). Not long ago, many argued that MOOCs would transform higher education—this, of course, did not happen. As Henry Mance writes in the *Financial Times* ("The Future of the University in the Age of Covid," September 18, 2020), "In fact the pandemic has underlined the demand for what universities do." At the opening of the academic year in Europe and North America, governments and institutional leaders have been calling for reopening campuses, so too have some faculty and many students. Online education was acceptable for a short period to tackle the first wave of the pandemic. But it has become manifest that institutions of higher education are more than education providers. They are living communities of faculty and students, inside, but even more outside of the classrooms. "Students are unlikely to commit large amounts of time and money to consume online content. Students go to universities to meet great people, have inspiring conversations with faculty, collaborate with researchers in the laboratory and experience the social life on campus," the *Education at a Glance* report of the OECD writes correctly. And while there were concerns that student numbers, both locally and internationally, would drastically drop, the reality at the start of the academic year is that they seem to have gone up, including for international students, although countries and postsecondary institutions have been affected differently. This is not surprising, since in times of unemployment education becomes an alternative. The coming years will tell if this continues to be the case, especially with respect to international students.

That returning to "normal" has a price, is certain. Where universities have opened for on-campus or hybrid instruction, student enthusiasm has led to flouting rules and little attention to safety, thus to a significant uptick of COVID-19 infections. Further, the revival of campus life is noticeable mainly at top universities in high-income countries, contributing to increased inequality and exclusion. Universities everywhere are under severe financial constraints, due to the additional costs of COVID-19 management, loss of revenue, and, increasingly, budget cuts. For these reasons, although revolutionary changes are unlikely, there is no going back to the prepandemic status quo. Changes will happen, reforms will be implemented, but gradually and with active steering and attention to the voices of students, faculty, and the outside world.

## The Future of Research

Although only a small minority of the world's 20,000 or more universities have a significant research mission, research done in universities is of central importance for both the research university sector and for society. Universities around the world are currently engaged in COVID-19 research, and the large majority of public health experts appearing in the global media are university professors. Universities are in general protected from the politicization of science that is evident in some countries, and are being recognized

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened a Pandora's box about the future role of higher education. Online education was acceptable for a short period, but made clear that institutions of higher education are also a living community of faculty and students. The pandemic has put a spotlight on the importance of international research collaboration. But because of severe economic downturns, the pandemic has dramatically worsened inequalities within the higher education and research sector.

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as key contributors to solving the most dramatic global health crisis in modern times. The pandemic has put a spotlight on the importance of research and research collaboration. “Global research collaboration is a good news story in a difficult time,” writes Simon Marginson (*International Higher Education* #104). If one looks at the approximately 30 initiatives currently working on a vaccine, all depend on international partnerships of researchers—located in multinational companies, research institutes, and universities that all need access to the best minds, sophisticated equipment, and testing opportunities in different parts of the world. The effort is truly global and illustrates the necessity of the globalization of science and scholarship.

The COVID-19 crisis also shows that solving the problem is fundamentally interdisciplinary and that universities are the only institutions capable of easily marshalling expertise from both the hard and social sciences. Further, most research-oriented public health scholars are based in universities, and academic public health institutes have been at the forefront of understanding the various aspects of COVID-19. Social scientists from a range of fields, including economics, sociology, anthropology, and others, provide needed expertise.

### Challenges

But there are also concerns. The OECD has warned that if the number and quality of international doctoral students and postdocs decreases post COVID-19, research will be significantly weakened since they constitute a significant proportion of laboratory staff. The funding boon predicted by David Matthews in his September 14, 2020 article in *Times Higher Education* (“European universities are set for a stimulus funding bonanza”) is relative. The research budget of the European Commission for 2021–2027 is likely to be cut back from EUR 94 to 86 billion, as a result of an agreement on recovery funds between European leaders. There are also concerns about nationalist actions limiting international research collaboration. The most dramatic examples are manifested in the tensions between the United States and China and between Australia and China, and in the efforts by some governments to avoid equitable vaccine distribution.

Because of severe economic downturns as a result of the pandemic, research funding will probably shrink further in lower- and middle-income countries, where it is already limited. An exception may be China, and primarily in the hard sciences, as a result of recent massive investments in research universities and early signs of economic recovery—but ongoing constraints on academic freedom in the social sciences and humanities put interdisciplinary research at risk.

The pandemic has dramatically worsened inequalities within the higher education and research sector—among students, faculty, and institutions—and between countries. Addressing this negative trend “will require a long-term vision, structural changes, and collective commitment from all academics, stakeholders, institutions, and countries around the world” (Xin Xu, “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Global Research,” *International Higher Education* #104). ▲