

UNICA Rectors Seminar

The impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education in Europe: challenges and opportunities

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SYNTHESIS OF KEYNOTE AND PANEL DISCUSSIONS

by **Xavier Prats Monné**

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Xavier Prats Monné introduced the discussion with comments on the topics of the two panels: current challenges and future perspectives for higher education in Europe:

Current challenges

While there is great diversity between countries and institutions, the pandemic has shown systemic shortcomings in education institutions and systems: few countries and organisations were prepared, be it in human capital, strategy, infrastructure, or technology. It has also shown that access to education is critically important for social inclusion. At the same time, the pandemic will likely accelerate three global trends in higher education:

- An exceptional expansion of the demand for higher education, of internationalization, of physical and virtual mobility. For the first time in human history, we have no idea what the labour market will be like in 20 years. This uncertainty can only be addressed with more and better education - although we do not know what kind of education or skills we will need. Quality assurance will be a key concern;
- A new mindset among policymakers, including in the EU, i.e., an awareness of the potential of universities: to address environmental and socio-economic challenges; to uphold critical thinking and democracy; and to reduce inequalities;
- The digital transformation of higher education. Our societies have been digitized for 25 years; with the pandemic, technology has invaded the only sector that was still insensitive and sometimes even indifferent: education. Technology offers an unprecedented opportunity to develop the potential of the human mind; it can be an incentive for better collaboration between science and humanities. But it also presents

unprecedented challenges: not just inequality but also the risk of determinism; since technologies forget nothing, students can be limited by their own past from an early age, as failure in youth can become a lifelong handicap.

Future perspectives

These three trends – expansion of higher education; a focus on societal impact; digitalisation - mean that universities have a great future. But it will not be universities as we know them. Universities are losing their monopoly on the creation, on the transmission, and on the certification of knowledge. Digital learning creates new business models and new audiences: international students off campus; broader demographic profiles of students; unbundling, modular courses, and micro-credentials rather than full degrees.

If universities are losing their monopoly on knowledge, what is a university for in the 21st century? A good university is one that defends its identity and responds to the needs of its environment. This has not changed, but the needs of our societies have changed: they are far more complex than they have ever been, and more dependent on knowledge.

That is why the mission of universities takes a new meaning: they can aspire to have, and demonstrate, a greater impact on society: to assume a more strategic and active role in the public debate on the future of our societies and the challenges of the XXI century. Perhaps the future is not the university but the platform of universities, and this is the time for UNICA, and other networks, to offer by example a new model of multilateral collaboration.

It is difficult to imagine a better argument than COVID-19 for networks, for strong multilateral institutions and global governance. And yet, trust in multilateral institutions, in the value of science, is crumbling in most countries. So perhaps the truly strategic task of the university is to help establish a new governance, and new models of cooperation and partnership. The challenges are similar, despite the diversity between countries and institutions: demographic changes, non-traditional students, internationalization. And faced with these challenges, the reform agenda is similar for any institution and country.

PANEL DISCUSSION

The discussion, divided in two panels, was moderated by UNICA President, Luciano Saso. The members of the first panel (current challenges) were: *Professors Jón Atli Benediktsson, Rector,*

University of Iceland; Verena Blechinger-Talcott, Vice President for International Affairs, Freie Universität Berlin; Alain Fuchs, President, Université Paris Sciences & Lettres (PSL); Rafael Garesse Alarcón, Rector, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid; and Anastas Gerdjikov, Rector, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

The second panel (future perspectives) was composed of: *Professors Andrew Deeks, President, University College Dublin; Nouria Hernandez, Rector, University of Lausanne; Alojzy Z. Nowak, Rector, University of Warsaw; Ivanka Popović, Rector, University of Belgrade; and Edita Sužiedėlienė, Vice-Rector and Pro-Rector for Research, University of Vilnius.*

Synthesis:

The panellists seemed to share a similar assessment of the challenges and future perspectives of universities, particularly in the European region:

- On the one hand, despite the considerable challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, higher education institutions – particularly in Europe – have weathered the sudden storm of the pandemic remarkably well, including the temporary cancellation of onsite teaching and learning and the drastic reduction of international (physical) mobility of students. The pandemic highlighted that universities do not just deliver courses: they provide a formative and holistic experience;
- On the other hand, the Covid-19 crisis and the emergency measures adopted since Spring 2020 represent an exceptional opportunity to adapt higher education institutions (HEI), both as concerns education methodologies and management. Universities can be bridge-builders between countries, and they can become more relevant, inclusive, and impactful, although they will need more funding and resources from policymakers to fulfil that role.

Highlights:

- We can be very optimistic about the future. The pandemic helped higher education institutions (HEI) adopt new technologies, and students are happy and eager to come back to campus. Plans to digitalise HEI were already there: the pandemic accelerated them and was an opportunity for teachers to acquire digital skills. Virtual mobility should improve, but physical mobility will remain important. Two main post-pandemic challenges: how to use technology to reduce the workload, and how to increase the

quality of teaching and research. There is more pressure now on HEI to make education more inclusive and more widely available (Jón Atli Benediktsson).

- The pandemic has been a transformative experience: HEI found new ways to interact with students (e.g., seminars with faculty from other universities), and they are willing to adapt. We will work more in networks of universities. Digitalisation will change the core business of higher education but will not make universities redundant. Several things could be done better together at EU level, for ex. a “digital student journey” or a European accreditation could be facilitated by the European Commission: System cybersecurity is also an issue, and there is a potential contradiction between fee taking and non-fee taking HEIs. Inclusion will be very important, also to help capacity-building in low-income countries through digital education (Verena Blechinger-Talcott).
- The pandemic has shown the resilience of HEI. Universities offer a holistic experience; they will thrive and retain the monopoly in the transmission of knowledge. The demand for international mobility will increase, while the administration of HEI will be digitalised. Interdisciplinarity is important, but it requires disciplines: to study is to learn the language of a discipline; quality assurance will be important, but it will continue to be carried out at national level, since countries want to verify the proper expenditure of public funds. Accreditation is an obstacle to mobility: students are not taking mobility opportunities just because of accreditation issues (Andrew Deeks).
- Higher university institutions (HEI) did well and learned many lessons from the pandemic, including as concerns internationalisation at home. The suspension of onsite activities has underscored the importance of the campus experience for students, and the opportunities that remote technology offers to allow students to work together. We need to find progressively an equilibrium between physical and virtual mobility; we could start by sharing online content by high-quality lecturers (Alain Fuchs).
- We had the technology, but we did not use it until the pandemic came. Covid-19 has shown to all of us the importance of cooperation between HEI, since we now realise that globalisation has a global impact. The challenge is to find a balance between going back to normal and preserving the progress and achievements made during the pandemic. We need a lifelong learning approach, virtual mobility, and open degrees. The lesson from Covid-19 is that HEI have a great potential for social and economic impact, as shown by the success with vaccines; a stronger civic engagement and more inclusivity by HEI will be of key importance (Rafael Garesse Alarcón).

- There is a big difference between online education and the emergency remote teaching developed in haste at the onset of the pandemic. Many teachers did not change their pedagogy, they just did the same but online rather than onsite; many students did not have sufficient access to computers or connectivity. Physical mobility remains very important (Anastas Gerdjikov).
- A recent survey at the University of Lausanne showed that an overwhelming majority of students (80%) wanted to go back to “normal” physical classes. Yet going back to normal will include a significant increase of online content and a diversification of the students’ profile. Interdisciplinarity will increase, but it consists of experts working together to meet a challenge: specialists will not disappear. With digitalisation, many more people will obtain a degree; the challenge for EU member states will be to establish clear criteria for quality assurance and accreditation (Nouria Hernandez).
- Mobility has a transformative effect in higher education institutions: it would be disastrous if the pandemic resulted in permanently reduced mobility. Universities are losing the monopoly in the transmission of knowledge. Societies will expect more from universities. Digitalization will be an incentive for interdisciplinarity (Alojzy Z. Nowak).
- The erosion of trust in science is a problem: universities have a role in ensuring and increasing trust, but it requires complex strategies (e.g., to fight against vaccine hesitancy). The European University Initiative is very important, as shown by the European Parliament’s increased allocation of resources: they can make a difference, but their new governance approach cannot be imposed on faculty top-down, and the initiative should not create a two-tier university system in Europe (Ivanka Popović).
- We all face similar challenges: we need to increase the quality of teaching and learning, to find new ways to address future pandemics (since covid-19 will not be the last), and to address the significant skills gaps of faculty as well as students. Strong interdisciplinary work is of key importance (Edita Sužiedėlienė).

Xavier Prats Monné - 25.06.2021