

Opportunities and Challenges: Internationalized Higher Education in the Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Age

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented crisis all over the world, while it also marks the coming of a new era of opportunities and challenges, especially for higher education. Universities should be more inclusive and innovative in communication and cooperation, promoting opportunities for collaborations in all aspects and reshaping international education.

Keywords: higher education, pandemic, cooperation

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One and a half centuries ago, British writer Charles Dickens wrote in the opening of *The Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us” (1).

The world we are living in now might indeed be described as the worst of all times, and also the best of all times: COVID-19 has dramatically changed everything and everybody, including you and me. Today we are meeting here at IAUP Conference, talking about the challenges and opportunities of higher education in the pandemic and post-pandemic age.

A health crisis at the outset, COVID-19 soon turned into an unprecedented global economic and social crisis. No one could ever have imagined that its consequences would be far beyond what we had experienced ever before. We have lost more than four million lives since the outbreak of the virus. Along with ever-increasing international travel restrictions and ever-growing tensions in politics and economics, there has been a huge negative impact on tourism, academic conferences, research cooperation, and cultural exchanges. Education, especially in higher education, has too suffered great losses. Now students can only see their professors and classmates on screen, and commencement ceremonies can only be held virtually. Worse is the situation where many students and scholars have little or no access to the resources needed for their study and research, let alone visiting their campuses in person.

Yet, this pandemic will not mark the end of globalization. The trend that people are more and more connected is inevitable and irresistible. There are more ways of learning than ever before, providing more opportunities for universities to exert their influence and offer their functions to serve

society. Globalization requires innovative talents with global perspectives and competences, and the pandemic highlights the interconnected nature of our planet. This boosts higher education to not only instill knowledge in and train students with the skills required to participate in global affairs, but also to recognize our willingness to engage with one another in our shared love for the human world as a whole. With more diversified methods and advanced technology, I am sure that such integration will combine online and offline methods to serve the ultimate purpose of sharing top-quality education. The pandemic has been a reminder of the importance of information technology in education, and has created innovative opportunities for internalization through the wide application of big data, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence. We should invest in digital technologies, develop online resources, provide digital and networking tools to professors and students, and encourage a hybrid combination of online and traditional teaching.

In this polarized moment, higher education is booming in developed countries, yet remains stagnant in poorer areas, and the pandemic only widens this gap. We need to reshape international education to provide less developed regions and disadvantaged groups with equal and fair opportunities to access high quality education. This makes the mission of higher education more pressing than ever before. In the face of contemporary issues, universities around the world should work together in an effort to erase physical boundaries, political barriers, technical bottlenecks, public misunderstandings, and general unawareness to enhance trust, cooperation, and mutual benefits.

As T. S. Eliot once wrote, “It is in fact a part of the function of education to help us escape, not from our own time—for we are bound by that—but from the intellectual and emotional limitations of our time” (410). The pandemic has exposed appalling problems in public health, climate change, and ecological devastation, and we need to jointly tackle these issues as our top priorities and launch substantive cooperation, such as establishing joint laboratories and major research projects. At this time, we should be more open and unite together in dealing with global threats and challenges. University leaders should have a broader vision to look beyond the limitations of ideology and social systems, to try to initiate more programs and build better platforms to deal with common issues that threaten the survival and safety of our species, and the natural world.

Historical and cultural differences embedded in national perspectives should not hinder cooperation and collaboration. Statistics show that in pre-pandemic 2019, there were more than 700,000 Chinese students studying abroad, and China received in that year about 400,000 students and scholars from across the world (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China web). The pandemic, however, tells us it is the time for universities to work together. Take Hunan Normal University as an example: we have been working on the Internet plus Education project for years and have offered 103 online Chinese and English courses, available to the students all over the world. Meanwhile, our students also enjoy high-quality online courses offered by universities that cooperate with our project. Academic exchange and cooperation are necessary for all universities, students, faculty and staff, and countries.

Chinese President Xi Jinping once said: “Civilizations have become richer and more colorful with exchanges and mutual learning” (web). Now that the Chinese government encourages opening up and international cooperation in education, Hunan Normal University—though the name is Normal University it is not normal in many ways—wishes to establish substantial cooperation in all fields with universities and institutions of higher education around the world. Hunan Normal University, founded in 1938, is located in central China. We have seven campuses, reaching out to different parts of Changsha City, the capital of Hunan Province. Hunan Normal University, unlike other Chinese universities, is

not enclosed within walls, and this symbolizes that no barriers or obstacles of any kind can or will stop us from collaborating with the world. At present, as one of the leading comprehensive universities in China, it has 188 partner universities from different countries. We have established international research institutions such as the Humboldt Interdisciplinary Research Center and the Ecological Civilization Research Institute. Now, we are seeking more cooperative opportunities in polyploid fish studies, new chemical materials, artificial intelligence, geospatial data mining, public health, arts, and social sciences. These are the fields that my university has been exploring for years and I believe further cooperation would tap into our potentials to address common problems in human development.

The pandemic will end sooner or later, and humankind is sure to overcome the difficulties we have been facing. After the pandemic, we will continue to work with more topnotch universities around the world to further collaborative study and research in more disciplines and areas. I look forward to a new era of global higher education with more diversity, vitality, and creativity.

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