

Towards a flexible and adaptable HE after COVID-19

As the global coronavirus pandemic continues and discussions of education's 'new normal' continues, key issues of access, equity, quality and relevance should anchor any discussions and initiatives about the future of higher education.

Considering that these issues have lingered over higher education for the past three to four decades in spite of all the policy recommendations and initiatives, any discussions or initiatives on the delivery of education during and after the pandemic should address these age-old challenges. Furthermore, internationalisation and globalisation of higher education should not be seen as being at a dead end given the limitations on the mobility of students and faculty.

Back to basics

In 2014, I wrote in University World News about **'the ongoing and future crisis in higher education'**, arguing that current policy recommendations have failed to address the basic challenges (access, equity, quality and relevance) of higher education and that there was a need to re-evaluate and develop new policy recommendations to address these perennial challenges.

I have also argued that higher education should **be seen as a public good** and advanced a vision for a **flexible and adaptable education for the fourth industrial revolution** anchored in UNESCO's 'Learning to do', 'Learning to be', 'Learning to know', and 'Learning to live together'.

I would like to argue that 'Going Back to Basics', such as addressing the basic challenges and the four pillars of learning (learning to be, to do, to know and to live together) should be at the heart of all education initiatives across timelines, industrial revolutions or a post corona new normal of education.

Quality and relevance

When it comes to the quality and relevance of education this is very subjective and relates to the question: for whom are we educating? The learner, society, the economy or all of them.

Another question is whether education should be more general or specialised? The shift from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning seems to highlight the importance of educating for the learner, and the ongoing focus on lifelong learning arguably supports such thinking.

However, higher education systems and universities seem currently to be educating learners to develop human capital purely tailored to the needs of the economy rather than in a more comprehensive way that ensures personal development, skills and competencies for an ever-changing socio-economic and cultural environment.

Although the development and implementation of national and regional qualifications frameworks enhance the quality, relevance and recognition of education, there may be a need to revisit the criteria and learning outcomes of these frameworks to ensure that learning occurs for the learner and in conjunction with developing flexible and adaptable skills and competencies that enable learners to work and contribute to societal development across different industrial revolutions.

Recognition of learning

The terms lifelong learning, validation and recognition of prior learning and recognition of higher education qualifications (including those of refugees, stateless and forcibly displaced persons) are often heard in higher education policy discussions.

In addition to revisions of the UNESCO regional recognition conventions in the past years, the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention was recently adopted in late 2019, which provides both regional and global policy guidelines on recognition of higher education issues.

However, the actual implementation of regional recognition of higher education qualifications (aside from within the European Higher Education Area and for signatories of the Lisbon Recognition Convention) remains in its infancy with few nation states and universities providing for automatic recognition of higher education qualifications within their respective regions.

Another important, but less discussed issue is the proliferation of online courses and their recognition of the actual learning undertaken. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, there has been a huge increase in free and paid online courses on offer, but there is often little recognition of courses delivered by non-university learning partners and there are quality concerns about many.

Considering that learning occurs through different delivery channels and different learning environments, issues of quality, recognition and whether these online learning providers are authorised by their relevant national authorities need to be revisited.

An important take-away from the proliferation of online courses during the coronavirus pandemic is that there is a need to ensure quality and recognition of learning undertaken across different learning environments and a realisation of the importance of revisiting validation and recognition of prior learning.

Envisioning a flexible and adaptable higher education

As a child I was fascinated by how LEGO blocks could be used to build various structures and since 2014 I have been looking at how the education system can build on this concept to improve access, equity, quality and the relevance of education.

Although initially hesitant to write my thoughts related to this issue, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and discussion of the 'new normal' in education has given me the courage to present my thoughts on how the future of education, particularly higher education, could be conceptualised.

Learning, learning outcomes and eventually qualifications are all interconnected and can be broken down into small blocks of learning similar to how the LEGO blocks form different structures.

From a constructivist perspective, learning within different learning environments, be it within formal, non-formal and informal learning environments, produces learning outcomes that can be validated and should be recognised. Blocks of learning can therefore be constructed into higher education qualifications subject to validation and recognition of learning.

Learning from traditional institutions and delivery channels, massive open online courses (MOOCs), seminars and life experiences, if possible, should produce learning blocks that can be used to construct qualifications that enable learners to participate in relevant social and economic sectors.

Given the limited process, and the cost, of validation of prior learning over the past decades and the fact

that ensuring quality of learning is very difficult, this conceptualisation of a flexible and adaptable higher education is challenging. However, history has proven that significant innovations in technology and socio-economic environments are possible with what we normally call industrial revolutions.

As such, I believe firmly that the future of education, including higher education, should not be limited to what is currently in place and to business as usual, but rather the possibilities should be expanded through blue sky thinking and the development of policies, technology and practices that enable the development of new flexible, adaptable and innovative education systems.

The coronavirus pandemic has challenged internationalisation and globalisation of higher education. However, the same pandemic has also brought forth innovative discussions and approaches to address internationalisation of higher education. In fact, in the European region we have seen projects focused on the co-development and delivery of higher education courses and programmes, virtual learning environments and micro-credentialing.

Moving forward

The global higher education architecture has been developing over many years within interrelated regionalisation and globalisation projects. In fact, the right to education, national and regional qualifications frameworks, and regional, and more recently the global recognition conventions provide for the ongoing development and construction of global higher education architecture.

However, such developments linked to the future of higher education need to be anchored in the basic issues and pillars I have outlined above. Blue sky thinking centred on envisioning and developing a future higher education that addresses these, needs to be encouraged and funded.

In particular, the notion of building blocks of learning (including micro-credentialing) and flexibility around the creation of qualifications which bridge formal, informal and non-formal learning environments need to be further researched and developed.

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