

Iranian Higher Education Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19): A Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Approach

As the world was struggling to fight one of the most catastrophic pandemics in its modern history, on 19th February 2020, Iran reported two coronavirus deaths, becoming 28th country or territory to report infections. The spread of COVID-19 in Iran concurred with the highest ever politically induced sanctions against the country. All aspects of prevention, diagnosis, and treatment are directly and indirectly hampered. The role US sanctions have played, and continue to play, in the devastation caused by the coronavirus in Iran led to renewed discussions on the effectiveness, legality, and legitimacy of sanctions not only in Iran and the US but also across the world. Political leaders, diplomats, civic organisations, and many activists from around the world have urged the US administration to ease its sanctions against Iran to help the country's fight against coronavirus. Iranian government has also admitted that the sanctions make it difficult to obtain vital medical supplies and equipment to cure COVID-19 patients and has called for their immediate lifting. Iran's Foreign Minister Dr. Javad Zarif, regarded this behaviour as a shift from "economic terrorism" to "medical terror" as US declined to lift the sanctions after the beginning of the outbreak in Iran.

However, the other side of the coin, according to WHO Representative in Iran, Dr. Christoph Hamelmann, in an exclusive interview with the Tehran Times said: "Iran is benefiting from strengths in fighting against the coronavirus epidemic, including strong primary health care system, production surge in a reasonable time, and multisectoral response." It is argued that thanks to the experience of dealing with the sanctions, Iran has made a very early decision on production of the needed items in trying to be self-sustained and resilient in the health sector. For example, Iran was one of the few countries in the world that has developed test kits early despite problems such as licensing and evaluation. In December 2020, Iran launched its first phase of clinical trial of a vaccine developed in the Islamic Republic. Vaccination of the first vaccine which was developed by Iranian researchers was conducted onto three people by injection. To this end, Iranian universities and research centres have played an important role within the scope of public service, i.e., Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). For example, Iranian university researchers have produced Coronavirus Test Kits, Ventilators, and Anti-Viral Masks to hit market. CSR amongst others relates to universities contributing to solving important problems

faced by society – problems which call for various kinds of innovations. Iranian Higher Education responses include but not limited to the following measures:

- Transition to Virtual Learning during the Coronavirus
- Developing domestic video chat and communication platforms
- Begin to support the medical society in the fight against COVID-19
- Adopted measures to prevent, control, and treat the coronavirus disease.

On the other hand, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we are sensing a surge of nationalism throughout the world. For example, Donald Trump was deliberately using the term 'Chinese virus' instead of coronavirus. It is important to understand that we should not be labelling a virus based on geographic location and/or a group of people! Internationalisation as an element of CSR in Higher Education is a solution to this challenge. The global pandemic has shown us how interdependent we all are! Helping others should not be considered as a charity but one of the best investments we could possibly make in helping ourselves. Higher education, as a potential hub of interdependence must strongly affirm its commitment to internationalisation.

What we also learnt from COVID-19 is the suitable governance for higher education and universities. It is discovered that a transition towards a networked governance approach is highly recommended for higher education! In this governance approach, observing from the Iranian case, the higher education sector is much more attentive to the pressures, stimuli and opportunities created or faced by civil society. Furthermore, it is argued that the transition towards a networked governance approach in higher education can increase collaboration between various actors in different countries. This governance focuses on the inter-organisational relations and interactions between public sector with different players in civil society, including users. The main emphasis is placed on the service nature of most public sector activities and on the role played by higher education and universities in facilitating and shaping the interactions between the stakeholders involved in public service development.

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