

# Higher education in the global quarantine: Disruptions and transitions

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## Abstract

This work analyzes some of the preliminary implications that the COVID-19 pandemic has had in Higher Education. Faced with the panorama of global repression and immediate impacts, different Higher Education Institutions decided to adopt distance education. The same that has not only led to re-inventing teaching and reorganizing the teaching-learning process. But besides, it also deepened the gap and the real structural conditions of a disadvantaged student population. Consequently, it is doubly meritorious to strengthen a distance education that does not only include the mere participation of the training institutions themselves. On the contrary, given the extraordinary situation, it will be necessary for the different levels of government to intervene in order to redouble efforts in educational measures, programs and policies that effectively guarantee the right to distance learning at this level of education.

**Keywords:** higher education; pandemics; distance education.

## Educación superior en la cuarentena global: disrupciones y transiciones

### Resumen

Este trabajo analiza algunas de las implicancias preliminares que ha tenido la pandemia del COVID-19 en la Educación Superior. Frente al panorama de la represión global y de los impactos inmediatos, diferentes Instituciones de Educación Superior decidieron adoptar una educación a distancia. La misma que no solo ha inducido a re-inventar la docencia y reorganizar el proceso de enseñanza aprendizaje. Sino que además, llegó a profundizar la brecha y las condiciones estructurales reales de una población estudiantil en desventaja. En consecuencia, resulta doblemente meritorio reforzar una educación a distancia que no solo incluya la sola participación de las propias instituciones formadoras. Por el contrario, dada la situación extraordinaria, será necesario de la intervención de los diferentes niveles de gobierno en poder redoblar esfuerzos en medidas, programas y políticas educativas que garanticen de manera efectiva el derecho a aprender a distancia en este nivel de enseñanza.

**Palabras clave:** educación superior; pandemia; educación a distancia.

## Ensino superior na quarentena global: interrupções e transições

### Resumo

Este trabalho analisa algumas das implicações preliminares que a pandemia COVID-19 teve no Ensino Superior. Diante do panorama de repressão global e dos impactos imediatos, diversas Instituições de Ensino Superior decidiram adotar a educação a distância. O mesmo que não só tem levado a reinventar o ensino e a reorganizar o processo ensino-aprendizagem.

Em vez disso, também aprofundou a lacuna e as reais condições estruturais de uma população estudantil desfavorecida. Consequentemente, é duplamente meritório fortalecer a educação a distância que não conte apenas com a participação exclusiva das próprias instituições formadoras. Pelo contrário, dada a situação extraordinária, será necessária a intervenção dos diferentes níveis de governo para poder redobrar os esforços em medidas, programas e políticas educacionais que garantam de forma eficaz o direito à educação a distância neste nível de ensino.

**Palavras-chave:** educação superior ; pandemia; educação a distancia.

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## Introduction

After a tense evaluation on March 11, 2020 in Geneva (Switzerland), the headquarters of one of the largest specialized global health intervention agencies, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the current Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), amidst unreasonable fear, government inaction, and an alarming and uncontrolled spread of the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and its potential disease (COVID-19), was finally able to reach the predominant conclusion of our era and categorize it as an unprecedented pandemic, which, today, more precisely, has reached a new phase, advanced and more lethal (WHO, 2020).

Since the global pandemic alert was declared, the contractionary impacts on the different economic, political, social, and medical structures have not stopped. Consequently, given the cataclysmic severity of the pandemic in various regions, governments around the world have not stopped with the imposition and implementation of emergency health measures, suspension of activities, border containment, social isolation, and multiple rigid, flexible, dynamic, and localized quarantines, all this, with the only maximum possibility of stopping the speed and detriments of the virus to the population. However, despite this and in the face of unexpected and hardly foreseeable scenarios, the current pandemic has overwhelmed the mitigating response capacity of the state, social,

and health sectors, and even of extremely tense efforts implemented at the global scale.

Thus, the unsustainable increase in the number of dead and infected not only destabilized the premeditated order of modern society. The intensity, size, and volume of the epidemic revealed, at deeper levels, problems previously overlooked and not taken so seriously by the public administration. The collapse of health systems; food insecurity; lack of resources; family, professional, and labor destabilization, in addition to other collateral damage to the welfare system and states (Barrón, 2020) corroborated the fragile situation of most countries in adapting quickly to an international emergency of this type.

Faced with this scenario, Higher Education (HE) institutions resorted to a total or partial closure, making it temporarily or permanently impossible to continue with face-to-face education, at least, until the higher education system can be stabilized and the latent imminence, under control. Until this happens, and for as long as the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic lasts, a teaching model has been promoted to overcome space limitations and reach students in real time with the important role played by information and communication technologies (ICTs).

This is what distance education is all about, an education modality in which the teaching and learning process between professor and participant (scholar/student) is mediated by technology and means of synchronous or asynchronous interactivity, where the value of self-learning—self-directed, autonomous, and

self-regulated—takes on a great importance and prominence at the moment of establishing learning goals (Heedy & Uribe, 2008). In all respects, this modality proposes to be comprehensive, since the teacher, besides assessing the conditions of the student and the nature of the curriculum, must also assume his/her own self-training in order to fully develop the skills and abilities required in the use of virtual environments (Cerdas-Montano, Mora-Espinoza, & Salas-Soto, 2020).

However, the rapid shift from face-to-face to virtual environments in higher education has meant responding to different extends to the same challenging and disruptive context. Given that the rate of connectivity or network access shows a wide spectrum asymmetry between countries in the Latin American region (Fanelli, Marquina, & Rabossi, 2020). In this sense, the efforts made to develop such educational purposes in the face of the pandemic have been enormous, being implicitly greater or extreme in Higher Education Institutions (HEI), where the availability and connectivity of digital technologies (DT) are lower (Álvarez, Maldonado-Maldonado, Gacel-Ávila, & Marmolejo, 2020).

Indeed, the onset of the pandemic has not only made more perceptible the deficiencies and great inequities existing within and outside the public and private HE spheres at the regional and international levels, but also, due to the immediate challenge it poses, the initial reaction of higher education institutions was to manage the risk in the best way possible and to neutralize the negative impacts of the pandemic as they dealt with previous and unresolved global challenges. Subsequently, given the correspondence of the moment and the inconsistency of the environment, it has demanded to promptly articulate and restructure the operability and substantive functions of HE in times of emergency and multidimensional contraction. Likewise, the decision to reform higher education does not end there; the day after the pandemic, the challenge will be to plan the return to the new normality, that is to say, to reinvent HE for the future, but in an abrupt manner and in a random space.

In this vein, this theoretical study briefly analyzes some of the preliminary implications

of the COVID-19 pandemic in HE. It has not only induced to reinvent teaching and reorganize the teaching-learning process, but it has also deepened the gap and the real structural conditions of a disadvantaged student population and the careers of university professors at such a tense moment. Consequently, it is doubly meritorious to reinforce distance education that does not only include the participation of the education institutions alone. On the contrary, given the extraordinary situation, the intervention of the different levels of government will be needed to redouble efforts through educational measures, programs, and policies that effectively guarantee the right to distance learning at the higher education level.

### **Higher Education and Tensions in the Context of the 2020 Pandemic**

While the current scenario has forced to incorporate the intensity of new tools available that adhere to a distant education as never before, this widespread and vertiginous adoption of distance education through digital platforms has been one of the most widespread decisions made by governments and educational authorities at the higher education level. However, the massive nature and the compulsiveness of maintaining a virtualization of face-to-face classes has encountered various technical-pedagogical problems and emerging challenges to be addressed in the role of teachers and students in an unfavorable context (Ramón, 2020), so much so that the estimates presented by UNESCO in reference to HE at the present time show that, in Latin America, some 23.4 million students and 1.4 million professors would be drastically affected by this global quarantine, which represents 98% of the university population in the region (International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean [IESALC], 2020).

Analyzing it in depth, this change in the figures can, on the one hand, determine that universities are facing a period of adjustments aimed at maintaining their structural sustainability due to budget cuts, reduced revenues (Toro, 2020), low demand for admission, enrollment, and fees (Ordorika, 2020). On the other hand, the abovementioned digits may also give two or more

preponderant ideas about the consequences of the pandemic among university faculty and students. Particularly, such negative effects and the strong impact of the pandemic will occur in impoverished and deprived regions (Jimenez-Sanchez, 2020).

From the above, a first idea is that everything points to the fact that the health emergency has suspended any activity that goes against social distancing and has ended even with the usual or traditional academic symmetry of undergraduate and graduate professors in both public and private universities. This defines the strengthening of the capacity and the deployment of all pedagogical, didactic, technological, and emotional competencies of faculty to assume the formative management and the teaching-learning process of future professionals in the midst of adversity (Lema, 2020).

Thus, given the possibility of responding to the irruptions of the pandemic in a different but effective way, many of the professors, using their own inexperienced resources, did not hesitate to immediately reorganize and reinvent their teaching virtually with the aim of maintaining the emotional bond that had been recreated between students and their university classrooms since before the COVID-19 crisis broke out. To achieve this, they had to learn to incorporate and use different digital resources in their communication and distance learning platforms, in addition to video-conferencing systems (Moreno-Rodríguez, 2020), and to redefine a more flexible and resilient curricular design while accommodating to the modern need to introduce new virtual teaching modes or to work in alternative and investigative pedagogies.

However, after this inevitable overflow of digital duties for university faculty, the impact on job stability (Paredes-Chacín, Inciarte, & Walles-Peñaloza, 2020), and the overload of remote work in an environment of socio-educational isolation are currently generating certain tractions that translate into economic, socio-emotional, physical, and health problems (Gil, 2020; Mérida & Acuña, 2020). Similarly, their performance in virtual environments has not only been conditioned by a hard reality that demands digital competencies and capabilities or by various factors associated

with the pandemic.

So far, virtual teaching has been intensively implementing a chain of teaching and digital management strategies and methodologies (Briceño, Correa, Valdés, & Hadweh, 2020; Abad-Segura, González-Zamar, Luque, & Gallardo-Pérez, 2020). Similarly, this has implied recognizing new didactic inputs and materials in the higher education task of seeking alternatives to gather evidence, of the evaluation process, and of the learning achievement of students through online resources. Despite this, few professors have managed to achieve an adequate and innovative level of competencies related to the creative, critical, and safe use of ICTs (Martínez-Garcés & Garcés-Fuenmayor, 2020).

In this sense, the modality of teaching and learning in confinement has not only presented a mutable challenge and a constant burden of difficulties for this sector, or created and promoted an open debate on the possibilities, risks, and consequences of adopting distance education (Pedroza, Soares, Teodoro, Gonçalves, & Ferreira, 2020); It has also revealed an enormous and unquestionable disparity between different groups of students when accessing online classes, or more precisely, an online education that allows them to continue receiving curricular content with the minimum quality standards, while continuing to learn without jeopardizing their academic development or educational cycle due to lack of timely access to the network (Arriagada, 2020), either due to geographical distance, financial issues, lack of communication with their peers, fatigue and discouragement caused by the lack of preparation of some teachers in the use of technologies (Elgueta, 2020), or other factors that may condition their permanence and regular attendance.

Thus, the second idea represents a particularly complicated dimension for developing countries or those with fewer resources, where difficulties of access, permanence, and promotion constitute decisive barriers that limit the participation and learning of students at the higher level (Maturana & Mahecha, 2020). Even when certain criteria of accessibility, availability, and digital inclusion are identified within the context of distance education, there are still difficulties related to the

provision of connectivity services, unequal access to the Internet, and insufficient technological and computational tools that undoubtedly widen the gap between those who study and those who do not (Salinas & Benito, 2020; Crisol-Moya, Herrera-Nieves, & Montes-Soldado, 2020). However, all of them—not very strange, of course—add tremendously to the classic inequities that existed and that universities were faced with shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic (Quintana, 2020).

With such characteristics, there is a great probability that in regions strongly fixed and atomized by policies of social retrenchment and neoliberal educational reforms, modulated in turn by a predatory higher education system with high levels of segregation, exclusion, rurality, poverty, and inequality (Canaza-Choque, Supo, Ruelas, & Yabar, 2020), the pandemic, in any case and from end to end, may deepen the structural flaws (Elgueta, 2020) and the real conditions of a student population at high risk of dropping out of school, while bringing not only difficult consequences that will end up, with much accuracy, reversing the progress made in past years, but also, very likely, tending to infringe on the full right to equal and equitable access to universal education for all (Jiménez & Valdés, 2020).

From the above, it can be inferred that the deepening and emergence of gaps in HE in difficult times may be closely linked to regressive and counterproductive structural conditions that students maintain (Acevedo, 2020), particularly, when it turns out that the context becomes too negative to be resisted and remain in the tertiary education system. Therefore, the 2020 pandemic has not only been a potent threat at different levels and an explanatory factor as to why there are occasional and high dropout rates in HE. In this sense, it is quite logical that the current scenario is a cause for growing concern on the part of universities and central authorities of the higher education sector to develop public policies for student protection and retention that can give continuity to permanence instead of abandonment of higher education in the midst of this transcontinental crisis.

In this sense, it is possible to take a moment to recognize that the pandemic has redirected a number of political, economic, and legal

decisions to contain and lessen the impact caused by the coronavirus, while diverting attention from other problems still latent in the Latin American region. However, the challenges have not been minor. In any case, whichever way you look at it, not only this conjuncture of our time has evidenced strong transformations in technological innovation and rapid changes in teaching and learning within the university pedagogical model, but also, modern conditions and the high digital transformation have strongly burst overnight with sudden and unforeseeable educational changes in universities around the world. This global suspension of face-to-face classes could reveal that we were not prepared for a disruption on such a scale (IESALC, 2020).

### **Redoubling Efforts and Reinventing Higher Education in the Aftermath of the Pandemic**

According to estimates by UNESCO's specialized agency, globally, more than 1.5 billion students in 165 countries have stopped attending schools because of the pandemic (United Nations [UN], 2020). In the face of this response, the scale of the issue has forced more than 25,000 HE institutions around the world to undertake a solution unequal in time and form for an estimated 200 million students who attended their classes prior to confinement (Fanelli et al., 2020).

This way, institutional responses were more strongly aimed at maximizing and remodeling the different substantive operations in university management, training, research, and extension (Marinoni, Land, & Jensen, 2020). In each and every one of them, it has been necessary to introduce a chain of deferred mechanisms and guidelines that allow universities, on the one hand, to adapt to the dominant scenario of great educational fracture, and on the other hand, to mitigate the harmful impacts and the new normality in the post-COVID-19 era (Ordorika, 2020).

In this sense, the emergence of the health crisis has not only challenged internally or externally the capacity for institutional response or to redirect its guiding functions in the face of the discriminatory impact of the pandemic. It has also revealed broad structural issues of poverty, inequality, and the digital breach, which, for the time being, continue to be denominators

and eternal institutional challenges of Higher Education Universities (ESU). Similarly, moving towards profound transformations that contribute decisively to the construction of welfare states (Canaza-Choque, 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2020), does not stop universities from redirecting their attention to problems that still dominate their educational domain, and which, as a result of the pandemic, have lost priority.

In this context, and in the face of a reality to change the environment as a whole, the challenges of inclusion and education quality in HE have not ceased to be present (Ramos, 2020), even when health systems and social welfare policies have collapsed in different countries and the connectivity to maintain distance education has become even more difficult, especially, in regions of high sensitivity that, ultimately, have probabilities of participating in this online modality that have been determined by migration status, gender (Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020), ethnicity, geography, reduced income, or family status (Granja, 2020).

So, given the asymmetry of the moment and the limitations of higher education during quarantine, it was possible to perceive in different countries the lack of a far-reaching national education project that would benefit all social sectors, whose needs to respond to a regular higher education development have exceeded all their possibilities (Barrón, 2020). Consequently, it is doubly meritorious to strengthen distance education and to ensure the right to HE in a context of equality and non-discrimination. In this sense, this will imply not only the participation of the education institutions themselves. Given the extraordinary situation, it will be necessary the intervention of the different levels of government and multisectoral agencies in order to redouble efforts in the form of measures, programs, and educational policies that guarantee in an effective way the right, protection, and quality of distance learning at the higher level.

For this purpose, it will be unavoidable to re-vamp quality management in HEIs affecting all their functions and activities: academic programs, personnel, research, faculty, students, infrastructure, extension services to the community and the university sphere (Orozco, Jaya, Ramos,

& Guerra, 2020). There is no doubt that the above will evidently be one of the many challenges in overcoming the global problem and the barriers that intensify it. On the other hand, its impact has also proposed the final moment to rethink the future. In that regard, addressing every difficulty traced so far in a special manner will not end once the pandemic is controlled and receded.

In any case, within the context analyzed, today, giving mobility and dynamics to students and teachers is important in an era full of digital platforms and in a context of marked convergence of communication technologies, which will not only demand that the intensive use of technological resources and virtual educational platforms of all kinds are evaluated. Also, it is undeniable that everything learned so far will allow re-inclusion, innovation, and network cooperation in higher education as never before. In that line, the need to strengthen digital competencies and to instill computational thinking in the training sector (Cotino, 2020), in addition to addressing the magnitude and diversity of gaps and closing them are fundamental requirements to continue with these transformations at the turn of the century that the university will have to take into account.

At the same time, this rapid transition to online education in the context of a comprehensive HE problem has served not only to recognize and find alternative ways of learning to be, to know, to do, or to live together in a fragile higher education system, since, besides the negativity, it has also proved to be a disruptive and constructive change by being able to restructure the current conventional educational system (Rajhans, Memon, Patil, & Goyal, 2020) or to exceptionally redefine a new higher education model capable of promoting and projecting the development of new forms and methods of learning in critical times (Núñez-Cortés, 2020).

Thus, this pandemic will provide, on the one hand, the necessary opportunity to review the different curricula over and over again, redesigning them in more resilient and flexible ways. There is even a strong probability, due to the current situation, that topics related to public health and medical education can be integrated in their deeper structure and in a transversal manner in the different schools and academic units, in ad-

dition to including other elements and programs that allow educating and preparing undergraduate and graduate students for similar or more difficult complex scenarios due to their impact.

Likewise, these adjustments will also require a paradigm shift (Herrera-Villalobos, Salazar-Arias, Obando-Arias, & Vargas-Oviedo, 2020) and a fair and supportive approach, free of structural flaws and permanent damage, since the health context will require education at all levels not only to strengthen its links with the health sector, but also to strengthen intersectoral and coordinated responses in order to respond appropriately to the following post-pandemic stages (Granja, 2020). Thus, these atypical processes and abrupt adaptations at the higher level will require a great deal of pedagogical flexibility, academic understanding, collaborative work, and ongoing reflection on teaching and learning processes in turbulent times (Cerdas-Montano et al., 2020).

On the other hand, as recommended by the UNESCO, once the pandemic is over, it will also be necessary to set certain guiding principles for the international agenda. In this way, in line with the United Nations' global goal for 2030, promoting and ensuring the right to HE for all people within a context of equal opportunities will be a key element in the coming decades. This means leaving no one behind, much less outside the system once the pandemic has passed, or whatever the imminent scenario may be. In that sense, both governments and HEIs should open up mechanisms to generate a greater capacity for resilience in higher education in the face of future global difficulties. Finally, the resumption of face-to-face activities should be seen as an opportunity to rethink and redesign teaching and learning processes governed by attention to equity and social inclusion in whatever time and space (IESALC, 2020).

## Conclusions

Toda la fuerza de la pandemia ha puesto en énfasis de que nada será como antes una vez que pase la marea. En esa línea, no existe la menor duda que el actual escenario de la pandemia ha reorientado la ruta del funcionamiento de las sociedades

modernas y de toda actividad adherente a ellas. De igual modo, neutralizar su daño no solo ha tensionado la capacidad decisoria, legal y económica de los gobiernos a corto, mediano y largo plazo. Sino que además, la extensibilidad y la magnitud de un alcance potencialmente global de emergencia sanitaria, ha colapsado la salud pública de una manera que resulta poco medible por sus daños. De esta manera, mientras dure el espectro de una emergencia de salud pública mundial que impida a la población retornar a su estado original y, mientras no se tenga alguna vacuna, medicamento o tratamiento efectivo contra la COVID-19. Las medidas de prevención, aislamiento, cuarentena y distanciamiento social resultan, por el momento, ser los más efectivos para prevenir la propagación masiva del patógeno.

The full weight of the pandemic has emphasized that nothing will be as before once the tide has turned. In this regard, there is no doubt that the current pandemic scenario has reoriented the way modern societies and all activities related to them function. Likewise, neutralizing its damage has not only affected the decision-making, legal, and economic capacity of governments in the short, medium, and long term. In addition, the extensibility and magnitude of a potentially global health emergency has collapsed public health in a way that is difficult to measure in terms of damage. Thus, as long as the specter of a global public health emergency lasts, preventing the population from returning to its original state, and as long as there is no vaccine, medicine, or effective treatment against COVID-19, preventive measures, isolation, quarantine, and social distancing are, for the time being, the most effective in preventing the massive spread of the pathogen.

In this context, higher education has not ceased to intensively restructure its substantive guiding functions to give continuity to its operation. To this end, it has temporarily adopted the modality of distance education that allows both professors and students to continue the process of teaching and learning interaction. However, as described, the pandemic has not only weakened the fragile global system of HEIs, but also, in regions such as Latin America, has deepened various structural problems that are not very noticeable to the State. In this sense, the digital breach, low network

connectivity, and the limited technological resources available, added to situations of poverty and economic inequality, among others, have had a strong impact on the large number of students who seek to remain and continue with their university studies. In view of this, it is essential to strengthen national, intersectoral, and coordinated responses with public higher education in order to include the most vulnerable sectors while maintaining a virtual education with minimum quality conditions.

Ultimately, redoubling efforts and reinventing HE after the pandemic will undoubtedly be a never-ending endeavor. Nevertheless, two ideas can be drawn from these considerations. First, it will not only be enough to reinforce pedagogical capacities and digital competencies or to promote with more precision education quality that gives everyone the same right to distance learning. Also, moving towards a post-pandemic stage will require addressing permanent challenges inside and outside HE. Second—and perhaps last—, the current transformations in a period of global immobilization will not only call for redefining all the governing functions of HE, but also, the day after the pandemic, will demand that the lessons learned are not forgotten and that the accumulated global risks that await us are taken seriously.

In that sense, and for all that has been expressed, establishing an agenda of transformations for HEIs in general and for each one of them in particular, will inevitably require a deep reflection on the different digital mechanisms and pedagogical models used during the pandemic. Similarly, once the weaknesses and strengths of distance education and the intensive use of technological resources have been evaluated, it will be necessary to consider the implementation of new virtual teaching-learning processes and hybrid systems for professors and students. However, all of this will undoubtedly involve repairing the damage caused by the pandemic and remedying previous problems related to educational inequality; poverty; social, racial, and gender exclusion, in addition to closing the digital breach and overcoming pedagogical, infrastructural, and research deficiencies, as well as the worsening of interrelated threats to the sustainable development and sustainability of UHE. For the latter, and in view of

how aggressive the risks and their impacts are, it will be equally important to develop mitigating, adaptive, and protective educational policies to safeguard and guarantee the state of well-being of the different HEIs.

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