

Consequences of COVID-19 on Future Society: Some Reflections from the Higher Education Sector

Giorgio MARINONI

Higher Education and Internationalization
International Association of Universities (France/International)

Hilligje van't LAND

International Association of Universities (France/International)

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing a huge disruption on the way human beings are living and interacting all over the world. The present article is a collection of thoughts on the possible consequences of the pandemic on society and higher education in particular. It is a reflection on the role of higher education in the current context and its potential to shape future society.

Keywords: internationalisation, globalisation, COVID-19, higher education, society, transformation

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is neither the first nor will be the last pandemic in the history of humankind. If we look back, pandemics have always been part of history and often a decisive factor in the development of human relations and societies. Pandemics not only are part of history, but somehow pandemics made history.

COVID-19 is neither the deadliest pandemic the world has ever seen, the current 863,020 deaths as of September 2020 (World Health Organization 2020a) are nowhere near the staggering 50 million of the Spanish Flu in 1918 or the 56 million deaths of native Americans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, caused by diseases such as smallpox, measles and bubonic plague, imported by European conquerors, which wiped out 90% of the indigenous population of the Americas (History.com Editors 2020).

However, the perception that many of us who are living at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic have, is that the world has never seen something like this before. This could be partially understood due to our human nature, each of us tends to give much more importance to events which are influencing his or her own life or the life of people close by, than of people distant in time and space. A loss of a relative is a personal tragedy that affects our own lives deeply, whereas the death of 56 million people in the sixteenth century generates in us much less empathy. Probably, people living in the midst of previous pandemics would have had exactly the same feelings many of us do have right now concerning the pandemic of their own times and all previous ones.

However, there is something different concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is not the fact that the virus is new and we do not know exactly how it behaves and evolves. People in the middle ages did not have a clue of what caused the plague and they were probably more frightened and immersed in uncertainty than we are. What is new of the COVID-19 pandemic is a completely different attitude: our perception of being somehow in control of it, which can be exemplified by the words of World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus: “Now that the virus has a foothold in so many countries, the threat of a pandemic has become very real, but it would be the first pandemic in history that could be controlled. The bottom line is that we’re not at the mercy of the virus.” (World Health Organization 2020b)

Probably never before in history has our society been so anthropocentric. The achievements in controlling nature that human beings have reached in the course of time have multiplied in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Advancement in medicine since the discovery of Benzylpenicillin in 1929 by Alexander Fleming, allowed human beings to completely defeat diseases that afflicted them for thousands of years and caused millions of deaths, at the point of declaring some of them eradicated (e.g. smallpox) (World Health Organization 2020c).

Prior to COVID-19, the world was not free from diseases, both ongoing, such as malaria, or new ones, such as Ebola, SARS or MERS, but somehow human beings managed to contain them geographically and timewise. COVID-19

instead spread fast and almost everywhere in the world, thus challenging our assumption that we had the capacity to control it. This has a deep impact on our own and our society's self-confidence.

In order to contain the virus, extreme measures had to be taken which have deeply affected our way of living. Strict confinement measures were seen as something necessary, but temporary, which would lead to the containment of the disease and eventually allow us to go back to live as we were used to in pre-COVID times. The hope that the development of a vaccine or a treatment of the disease would completely solve the COVID-19 crisis is still present, but this may not be true. The vaccine might not give 100% immunity, the virus might mutate, and even immunity might just be temporary with a second infection possible.

The hypothesis that human beings would have to live with COVID-19 is less-and-less uncertain.

Living with COVID-19 might imply a profound transformation of our society and the way we are used to living. Considering that COVID-19 is a human-to-human transmissible disease has profound consequences on social relationships. Any human being is a potential source of infection and any social gathering becomes 'a dangerous activity'. Whereas in the recent past interpersonal connections were promoted, government campaigns now call for 'social distancing' and to protect one another *from* each other.

The large-scale implementation of social distancing measures might be effective in containing or slowing down the spreading of the disease, but what are their consequences on society? Can human beings live socially distanced from one another?

Fortunately, technological evolution provided us with tools that allow keeping the communication flows between human beings open, even at distance. In today's world we can speak to and see somebody living on the other side of the world, we can work collaboratively online, we can study and learn online, we can play online and we can even 'meet' online. However, technology cannot completely replace physical interaction, at least, not without consequences on our way of living.

2. Possible consequences on the world of work

In a world where social distancing becomes the norm, the world of work would be completely transformed and with it the global economy. During these first few months of the pandemic, we are already witnessing some important transformations. While global GDP, a measure of the so called 'real economy' is plummeting all around the world (International Monetary Fund 2020a), the NASDAQ composite stock market index which includes the major information technology companies, after an initial drop from 9.817 points on 19 February 2020 to 6.860 on 23 March, had already recovered at 9.814 on 6 June and it is presently (3 September) at its 5-years maximum of 12.056 points (NASDAQ 2020). This means that while traditional businesses are suffering, technological companies are thriving, which can be easily perceived due to the fact that neighbourhood shops have closed due to the fact that customers have moved to buying online.

In a way the COVID-19 crisis accelerated a transformation already impacting the job market. Indeed technological developments and automation have already made certain types of jobs disappear while creating new ones. Will this increase or decrease unemployment? That is a question which still is in need of a response (World Economic Forum 2016; Menon 2019). The effect of the pandemic so far has resulted in an increase in unemployment, at least for advanced economies, those for which data is available (International Monetary Fund 2020b).

A steep rise in the unemployment rate coupled with a large scale move to online working could have profound consequences on social tissues, especially in big cities. While before COVID-19 the world was experiencing growing urbanisation (United Nations 2018), the current transformations could lead to a reverse process of de-urbanization. With more and more people working at distance, companies could decide to close their expensive offices in cities. The closure of offices would lead to a closure of all those businesses such as bars, restaurants and shops which are dependent on the expenses of people working in those offices. At the same time, people have already decided to leave the city for the countryside, where real-estate prices are lower and houses are bigger, maybe even with a garden. All of this could lead to a process of de-urbanization. The consequences of such restructuring of societal tissues should be monitored and analysed closely.

COVID-19 also accelerated de-globalization by introducing border closures, limiting travel, repatriating production and shortening supply chains.

In the world of work, it has been mainly jobs requiring high skills and ensuring a high income which could easily move online, while, low-skills and low-income jobs continued to require physical presence. Middle income jobs simply stopped, accelerating a process already in the act of polarization of the job market (OECD 2019).

3. Possible consequences on higher education and research

The polarization of the job market would call for an increased demand for higher education, but this might be mitigated by its affordability, especially in countries where higher education is considered more as a private good and an individual investment than a common good. The risk of growing inequality is particularly high in countries where higher education institutions have high tuition fees; the middle class, impacted by the economic crisis, might not be able to afford to pay for the education of its children. Once more, technology could help by making education more affordable, but technology itself is not enough to prevent the risk of growing inequality. Indeed, access to technology is unequal with major differences between countries and inside countries between urban and rural areas and especially between high-income and low-income areas.

Access to technology is not the only problem, distance teaching and learning is not simply a matter of moving ‘classic’ and classroom teaching online; it requires a paradigm shift and preparation by both teachers and learners. Once more, it might be the wealthiest higher education institutions that will have the capacity and resources to provide true online teaching. At the same time, the socio-economic background of learners plays a major role. First time, isolated students are those most exposed as they cannot rely on help from family and friends.

The risk is therefore that fewer learners, those who are already in a privileged position, will really benefit from online learning, while disadvantaged students might find themselves in an even more disadvantaged situation.

The same risk of inequality is visible in the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on research. Being a global challenge, it would seem obvious that the pandemic calls for global collaboration in research. However, this is probably a naïve expectation. Judging from how research on the development of a vaccine is conducted around the world, we see much more competition than collaboration. Countries and pharmaceutical companies are involved in a race to be the first to develop a vaccine for reasons of prestige, economic reasons and accessibility. Researchers at higher education institutions are also involved in research on a vaccine and they are not indifferent to these competition measures. Competition is not the only factor which might lead to growing inequality in research. One factor which might lead to a growing inequality are the consequences of the economic crisis. Some higher education institutions might simply not have the resources to engage in research. Another factor is due to the increased online nature of collaboration. Online technologies are good in keeping relations but less so in creating new ones. In a world where scientific conferences and congresses would be mainly online, the opportunities for networking and for creating new collaborations could drastically be reduced. The risk is the creation of ‘islands’ of research groups, created by institutions with similar characteristics or simply by researchers who know each other. This could lead to a growth in inequality and a loss of diversity.

4. The future is also how we shape it

Therefore, as written before, is the world inevitably fated to become fragmented, de-urbanised, de-globalised, with less human interactions and more inequalities?

Not necessarily. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that human beings are part of nature and cannot pretend to have complete control over it, and that the future is unpredictable and might reserve surprises. However, at the same time, not everything is determined by fate. Intentional human activity has consequences and the future is also shaped by the decisions we take today.

Being conscious of the possible consequences of the pandemic doesn’t mean that they will necessarily happen, nor that we have to accept them passively.

The world will become de-globalised not because it will be more complicated to travel, but because we will decide to narrow our outlook and close ourselves. The world will become more unequal not because it is destined to do so, but because we will not act to make it more equal.

Higher education, and universities in particular, have been the place where knowledge is created and transmitted. Knowledge is what distinguishes human beings from all other species in the world. It is thanks to the creation of new knowledge and the transmission of this knowledge to future generations that human civilization has and is continuously developing.

Universities might change their forms and ways of working, but they should not forget their missions of discovering and developing new knowledge through research, transmitting this knowledge to new generations and doing this for the improvement of society.

It is the way knowledge is used and shared that will determine the future, if knowledge is kept in restricted circles and used as a tool to assert power of these circles, then the world will necessarily become more unequal and unfair. On the other hand, if knowledge is pursued with the purpose of improving both human conditions and our planet, if it is created through shared research, profiting from cultural variety and different ways of thinking, if collaboration and solidarity will be the guiding principles in both knowledge creation and dissemination, then the world would be more equal and fairer.

In a way, the COVID-19 pandemic is a great opportunity to rethink the functioning of higher education, to move away from an exacerbated anthropocentrism, to move to a more holistic approach which could be more humanistic, one in which the relation between human beings and nature is not forgotten.

Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the associated sustainable development goals of the United Nations are already a step in this direction. Higher education plays a very important role in the overall dynamics leading to a more sustainable world, yet it can do much more. Higher education is to enhance its engagement with all global goals, to rethink the way it teaches and undertakes research and strategize about what to teach and offer

learning opportunities for and what to do research on. Education and research for sustainable development are more important than ever. However, in this time of crisis, there is a risk that higher education overlooks this because of other priorities perceived as more urgent. But this would be a mistake, as if there is something that COVID-19 is reminding us forcefully and that is that we, as human beings, are part of an ecosystem with which we need to live in harmony.

References

- History.com Editors (2020). Pandemics that Changed History. *HISTORY*, May 19. <<https://www.history.com/topics/middle-ages/pandemics-timeline>> [Accessed: 2020.9.4].
- International Monetary Fund (2020a). *Real GDP Growth*. <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD> [Accessed: 2020.9.21].
- International Monetary Fund (2020b). *Unemployment Rate*. <<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/LUR@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>> [Accessed: 2020.9.4].
- MENON, Jayant (2019). Why the Fourth Industrial Revolution Could Spell More Jobs – Not Fewer. *World Economic Forum*, September 17. <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/fourth-industrial-revolution-jobs/>> [Accessed: 2020.9.4].
- NASDAQ (2020). *NASDAQ Composite Index*. <<https://www.nasdaq.com/market-activity/index/comp>> [Accessed: 2020.9.4].
- OECD (2019). *Under Pressure: The Squeezed Middle Class*. Paris: OCDE.
- UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018). *68% of the World Population Projected to Live in Urban Areas by 2050, Says UN*. United Nations, May, 16. <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>> [Accessed: 2020.9.4].
- World Economic Forum (2016). *The Future of Jobs*. Geneva: World Economic Forum.
- World Health Organization (2020a). *WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*. <<https://covid19.who.int/>> [Accessed: 2020.9.4].

- World Health Organization (2020b). Rolling updates on coronavirus disease (COVID-19). *World Health Organization*, July 31. <<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>> [Accessed: 2020.9.4].
- World Health Organization (2020c). Smallpox. *World Health Organization*, 2019.12.13. <<https://www.who.int/csr/disease/smallpox/en/>> [Accessed: 2020.9.21].