

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Higher Education in Europe

Hans de Wit*

Futao Huang

I think we should move and invite our second speaker. Our second speech speaker is Professor Hans de Wit, who used to be a director of Center for International Higher Education at the Boston College in the United States. Hans de Wit, are you there?

Hans de Wit

Yes. Thank you. And I will share my screen. Thank you Futao Huang for inviting me for this interesting panel. And thank you Professor Kobayashi for his introductory remarks. And congratulations already on your anniversary. The Boston College Center for International Higher Education just had its 25th anniversary. So, you're twice as old as we are. And we always have been appreciating the collaboration between our two centers. I've been asked to talk about the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in Europe. It is an important topic, but we have two challenges to address. The first one is that the pandemic in itself is already having an enormous impact on higher education, but there are other challenges globally as well, which also in Europe play an important role. So, we should combine those challenges together as a major challenge that impacts on higher education as it does also on the whole of the society. To

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mention other challenges, there is the increase in nationalist developments in countries like Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere, the development of all kinds of nationalist populist parties around Europe, issues which also have an impact on higher education. And there are geopolitical tensions which affect, for instance, the relation between Australia and China, and in Europe the tensions with Russia around Ukraine, also having an enormous impact on society and on higher education.

Then there are the economic challenges that we face as a result of the pandemic increase inequality and exclusion, as we face within Europe between different countries, the immigrant population, etc. There are also all kinds of ethical challenges related to corruption, happening in different parts of Europe. Of course, there are the environmental and health challenges: climate change and the pandemic. So we have to keep in mind when we are talking about the impact of the pandemic, it is part of a much broader context of challenges that we are facing with an impact on higher education.

The second observation to be made is that talking about Europe is not easy. Europe, in many cases, outside of Europe is seen as the European Union, but the European Union is only one part of Europe, an important part and increasingly more powerful conglomerate, but there are other countries in Europe that are not part of the European Union.

There are quite big differences between different parts of Europe and that also is related to how we are dealing with the impact of the pandemic. There is very little European common approach to addressing those issues. The handling of the pandemic is still much more an issue of each of the different countries, and sometimes there are even conflicting measures happening between different countries. And that also impacts higher education differently. To give an example, the obligation for vaccination is quite different in a country like Austria, where they now have an obligation to be vaccinated. Soon also in Germany that will happen. In other countries, in Southern Europe, like Italy, it is targeted to specific groups, but increasingly stronger, France as well. In other countries like the Netherlands, it's nearly impossible to have that vaccination obligation. The approach is quite different in different countries. The implication of COVID-19 in Europe has been that overall institutions of higher education had to close and had to move online. They had to adapt to an online delivery of higher education, like everywhere else in the world. That also was the case in Australia and Japan

recently. But the different rules by countries have implications for universities with respect to opening up for students and for faculty.

The closing of universities and moving online had an enormous impact, as also has been mentioned by Professor Kobayashi on the well-being of students. And to certain extent, on faculty. One of the lessons that we see from COVID-19 in my view is that, although we are able to adapt to online learning, the reality is that the brick-and-mortar universities have become much more important, because students and faculty and administrators lost their feeling of being a living academic community inside and outside the classroom. And that has negatively impacted the student body and the faculty. All the figures that Professor Kobayashi gave before for Japan are also very clearly the case in Europe. What we have seen is that research became more relevant in the debate because of the vaccines that have been developed. But at the same time, we see a science strongly challenged by fake news, complot theory, etc., which creates a challenge for higher education to deal with that. How to deal with academic freedom and freedom of speech and access to information at the same time, to be much more communicative to the outside world. That's a big debate in Europe as it is elsewhere. I mentioned already, the well-being, we saw in several countries where access to higher education became less selective. Because given the fact that secondary education has all kinds of constraints on delivery, the entrance to universities was not really possible in a selective way as was happening before. So, governments had to make, for instance, in my own country, the Netherlands, access much more open to students who had been passing with lower grades to avoid that there would be a gap happening. We don't know what the impact of that will be on quality, but certainly it is an issue that has to be discussed. Student loan debt seems to have increased, because students couldn't work anymore, etc., which is also a serious issue. And international mobility, inbound and outbound was coming to a stop. The whole Erasmus scheme for exchange, for instance, had to stop. And also, the recruitment of international students from abroad had basically come to a stop. The universities increasingly had more to focus on virtual exchange and virtual mobility of collaborative online international learning. That was the positive aspect of it. But the physical mobility has been seriously impacted negatively. In the current situation in the second half of 2021, higher education has opened again in Europe in most cases and the inbound of international students as well, even in high numbers. It's not likely that they will be closed again because of the negative impact that would have, both on well-being of students and teachers, and on the quality of the next generation of

graduates.

So, the universities are open with some restrictions in certain countries as an vaccination obligation, in some countries with the combination of testing, and also with the freedom of students and faculty to teach online if they have reasons not to be able to take vaccines and/or tests. What is quite interesting — I think that's also the case in the United States — is that access to research universities has increased. But the European universities of applied sciences, like community colleges in the US, have seen a decrease, partly that has been also the case for international student mobility. But it's interesting to see that the trend seems to be that the access to research universities is higher than to universities of applied sciences or professional schools, where in society there is an increasing shortage of professionals and graduates from these institutions.

The higher education sector in Europe can benefit in the short term from recovery funds from the European Union, in particular in the European Union member countries. There is massive support offered by the European Union for recovery of the economies in the different countries and packages have been delivered for that. Higher education can benefit from that if they have a right plan, and if it is a priority of governments. For instance, we see that the new government in Germany has already made announcements that they will increase very much the budget for higher education, in particular for research.

In summary, the concerns about the negative impact on well-being are continuing. We see also that research and research collaboration might benefit from its role in advancing the pandemic. As is the case, again, for instance, Germany.

Going to the next decade, post-COVID-19, what we hope is that as a result of all this, we see a return to a much more cooperative and less market-oriented approach to higher education. Richard James referred to some debate about it in Australia as well. There is clearly a need for more funding, for public higher education and, for research. And that will be on the agenda of many governments. I mentioned Germany. Currently, the Netherlands is also starting a new government. And this is high on its agenda. France will have elections next year, and that will be an important topic there as well etc. We have Brexit and we have to see what impact Brexit has on education, research cooperation. There are still uncertainties about the research cooperation between the European Union and the UK and also with Switzerland. The UK already stepped away from the Erasmus

program and created its own Turing program, and one has to see what will be the impact of that. The European Union takes a much more aggressive role in everything, and that's a positive sign. But it's challenged by national trends in different countries like Hungary and Poland, etc. The stronger role of the European Union is also to higher education's interest.

Recent announcements by the European Commission make clear that it wants to stimulate much more cross border cooperation in higher education, even to have a common university charter for the European Union, and also to increase the emphasis on the European University Initiative Alliances. These are alliances which are created to stimulate much more collaboration between universities to create 'European Universities'. This 'European University Initiative', following an idea by French president Macron is an interesting development, with already over 40 alliances created and supported, although also with a lot of questions about its perspective.

Mobility was an important aspect of the initiative, but we have to take advantage of lessons learned from the pandemic with online learning as an alternative. And as I said, there is this tension between the two aspects that Professor Kobayashi mentioned, as well in Europe: between on the one hand an increasing need for taking care of well-being of students and faculty, and on the other hand, the lessons learned to use online learning; we have to find the right balance. It's not about replacing on-site learning, but incorporating online learning into the old-style in-person learning, which I think is much more beneficial. For instance, the European Commission now has opened the Erasmus program much more to virtual cooperation and virtual exchange, which is a positive sign. The pandemic has increased the emphasis on the relevance of the university's third mission of service to society and supporting the sustainable development goals. There's an increasing goal also from the European Union towards green universities.

We also see a movement from mobility to global learning for all people. It's quite interesting, by the way, if you compare the case of Australia with a country like the Netherlands, where international students have at the start of the academic year of 2021, 2022, increased substantially. 23% of the student body is international students. This is quite surprisingly high and is creating a whole kind of concern in the academic community. And also, in politics and media there is intensive debate about 'are we not needing to reduce the number of international students, because does that number not impact negatively on the quality of

education and also on the quality of the services that we provide two students like, for instance, accommodation'. And that's the debate that you see also gradually elsewhere happening. So that's another interesting aspect of the post COVID-19, its implications on internationalization. And with that, I end my presentation and look forward to the questions and answers, thank you very much.

Futao Huang

Thank you, Hans, for talking about the impacts of the pandemic on higher education in the European countries. Can you see the questions in the chat room?

Hans de Wit

I can read them. This is by [Participant A]. Good to see you. In the wake of COVID-19, cross border student mobility has been largely suspended and various international education practices using ICT rapidly were spreading as an alternative to study abroad and student mobility programs and as a new form of virtual mobility of international education. Now is the time to respond to the climate crisis. How should higher education institutions respond to it? What is the high priority issue in this regard? Thank you. This is indeed a topic which I think is quite relevant. Recently Philip Altbach and I wrote about that for University World News. We think that it is important that universities also in the area of international education be much more aware of the need for change. We have to change our trends to be easily going mobile, that applies to study abroad for exchanges. Why is it necessary for students to go on a plane for just a few weeks for study abroad? We have to make much more use of online learning. But even more important, I think it applies to us, academics, administrators, senior administrators, we also have to learn that we can do many more things, like webinars like we do now, and all kinds of activities, workshops and professional development, online.

By that we will be able to reduce our mobility and create a much more greener society. It's not completely abolishing mobility because mobility and personal contacts are essential, but we have been too much pre-pandemic on the automatic pilot that we go for a presentation, travel long distances, for instance. Maybe if we would not have COVID-19, we all now would have been in Hiroshima. That would be very nice in itself and to see you in person. But it would take us a long travel and a lot of money and a lot of time, and it will negatively impact society. So, we can be much more effective if we are using the experience of COVID-19

to do much more online than we have been doing before. Thank you.

Futao Huang

Thank you very much, Hans. Thank you for your questions. As we shall have a panel discussion, you're welcome to make questions and comments. Hans, thank you for your wonderful talk.



The impacts of COVID-19 on Higher Education in Europe

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1



Pandemic a key factor in Changing global climate and its impact on HE

Increased inward looking

- Geopolitical tensions

Economic challenges

- Inequality and exclusion

Ethics challenges, and

- **Environmental and health challenges**

2



Direct implications of Covid-19

Institutions of HE had to close

Serious threats to well-being of students, faculty and administrators

Institutions, faculty and students had to adapt to online learning

Access to higher education less selective

Research became more relevant

Student loan debts seems to have increased

Science more accepted although also strongly challenged by fake news

International mobility inbound and outbound halted, more focus on virtual exchange



Current situation

Higher Education has opened again and like other levels not likely to be closed as fears for long term implications

Serious concerns about negative impact of pandemic and closures on wellbeing of students

Access to research universities increased, to universities of applied sciences decreased (impact also of international student mobility)

Research and research cooperation might benefit from its role in addressing the pandemic

The HE sector can benefit from recovery funding budgets EU



The next decade post Covid-19

A return to a more cooperative and less market oriented approach

More funding needed for public higher education and for research

Addressing challenges resulting from Brexit for education and research cooperation

A stronger role for European Union,

challenged by nationalist trends

The European University Initiative (EUI)

Taking advantage of lessons learned in the pandemic with online learning

Increasing relevance of the third mission, service to society (SDGs)

Call for a Green University

Internationalisation, from mobility to global learning



Thank you

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