

Higher Education And Its Ongoing Role In An Increasingly Turbulent World

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Abstract: The period 2020-24 has seen global disruption on a scale that is unprecedented in lived experience for most global citizens. The unholy trinity of public health crisis, climate change and geopolitical conflict has challenged the global order and opened the door in some regions for political and social change that would have been unimaginable a decade ago. This paper considers the role of Universities within that new dynamic and how the generally accepted mission and values statement might usefully be adjusted to address changing societal needs.

Keywords: Vibrantz, technologies, Sustainable Growth

INTRODUCTION

The world's oldest Universities trace their origins back to the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries and tend to be clustered around the Mediterranean sea with al-Qarawiyyin (present-day Morocco), Al-Azhar University (Egypt) and Bologna (Italy) being 3 of the earliest examples. Those in the Arabic nations found their origins in training scribes and clerics whilst Bologna was probably the first to evolve along secular lines and an early crucible for legal training and discourse[1]. Similar centres for scholarship followed, largely within prosperous European cities such as Oxford, Paris, Salamanca etc. providing the foundation for emerging disciplines such as the physical and medical sciences and providing havens for scholars and researchers whom in unhappier times may have been persecuted for following "dark arts". Institutions refined their missions and business models over the next millennium in many cases transcending regional conflicts, global pandemics, invasion and religious persecution. Their longevity and sense of timeless mission led the celebrated UK public servant and educational reformer Lord Ron Dearing to coin the phrase "Castles of the Third Age" with reference to a place of safety for education, scholarship, discovery and commerce.

Globally, around 30,000 institutions holding or using University status represents a heterogeneous group – public or private, specialized or comprehensive, local or regional or international, education or research focused. Despite this heterogeneity it is arguably possible to overlay a fairly generic set of values or objectives that would reasonably cover a large swathe of the sector:

- a. Developing human resources to support technological, cultural and societal aspirations
- b. Advancing scitech developments (and economic growth)
- c. Promoting and evolving arts and culture
- d. Informing public policy development
- e. Informing societal development

f. Promoting lifelong learning

The purpose of the following discussion is to examine to what extent this articulation of HE purpose remains valid (or complete) in the context of recent externalities[2] including the global pandemic, regional conflicts, climate change and its consequences, AI and the role of disinformation and trickle-down effects of populist politics and government.

Impacts of Populism

Universities are, at their core, curators and dispensers of knowledge. They deal in facts, interpretation, truth and nuance. From time to time this can be uncomfortable for politicians who seek to drive the narrative in a particular direction. The COVID-19 crisis was a primetime example of this when several western leaders sought to devalue, disregard or discredit expert scientific opinion on virus transmission to maintain political advantage. Populism is usually associated with nationalism[3] which, in turn, fuels isolationism and that is contrary to an ethos of open scholarship and the benefits of international scholarly exchange, not to mention long term impacts on international trade and investment.

Uncertainty and Its Costs

The world has essentially been exposed to elevated risk levels since the World Trade Centre attacks of 9/11 and successive conflicts have unsurprisingly ratcheted global risk index. Such heightened tensions have resulted in travel restrictions, conservative investment strategies and stagnation in growth with consequent tightening of public spending and a general suppression of household spending power. Since international conflict is usually driven by ideology with no underpinning business plan (such a seizing control of high value assets) the long term outcome is generally a high tax burden for citizens (on both sides). Quite apart from the more visible catastrophic destruction of life and physical assets the long term impact on education access, mobility and economic opportunity are profound and long term.

Responding to Uncertainty

Education leaders, as must others in public office or other business leader need to navigate political, economic and geopolitical turbulence[4]. As ever, we must anticipate the educational and welfare needs of our current and future students and adapt our traditional missions to new levels of uncertainty. Interventions can arguably operate at 3 levels:

- a. Policy - Using our platforms
- b. Practice - Redefining our products
- c. People - Being true to our communities

The COVID19-intense period 2020-22 , whilst traumatic and challenging has likely made the sector more resilient as institutions and their learning communities learned to pivot rapidly to innovative delivery models. In very many institutions blended delivery has persisted which, definitively, builds in greater resilience to withstand further uncertainty from multiple causations.

Policy

Policy measures include using our platforms to promote objectivity, truth and transparency in the establishment, operation and governance of institutions, whilst cultivating activities that support our values of openness, internationalism and freedom of speech. It also means putting our long term values ahead of short term opportunism. This implies being well connected to governments, NGOs and international partners to respond in a coordinated way to Black Swan events such as COVID as well as future opportunities. Management and governance bodies would reflect on whether they are fully engaged and are using our platforms effectively to promote truth, objectivity and ethics, acting in the best interests of our institutions and the sector or pursuing agendas of personal advancement. Threaded through each of these issues are our responsibilities under the

SDGs. Southeast Asia is one of the greatest carbon sinks on the planet. It is also responsible for some of the most distressing pollution of marine and estuarine environments. Some ASEAN countries are emerging as regional leaders in Marine Plastics Pollution policy, making a huge difference over a short period. HEIs across the region could network these resources to share the values and benefits.

Practice

Practice-led measures include considering whether our programs imbue a sense of personal responsibility and ethical governance, engaging students across all disciplines in a sufficiently pluralistic debate. New programmes need to reflect the future employment needs of the next generation as well as the pressing needs of society due to changes in the operating environment. At the same time, new technologies and shifting expectations mean that pedagogic practices and study modes should be adjusted to take into account these new opportunities. Table 1 below attempts to summarise emerging external factors and the new opportunities for HE that might flow from these.

Table 1 – Emerging Trends and Potential Development Opportunities for HE

Regional trending	Opportunity
<i>Climate Change Related</i>	
Migration to clean energy systems	Microgeneration & microgrid mgt
Migration to sustainable chemicals & polymers	Chemical Engineering BioEngineering Circular economy
Migration to alternative proteins	Food science and safety Behavioural economics
Rising temperatures and sea levels	Plant and crop science
<i>Geopolitical</i>	
Global increase in defence spending	Strategic studies
Ongoing recovery and management of tourism sector	Sustainable THM Medical tourism
<i>Demographic driven</i>	
Population structure and continuing urbanization	Growth in enrolments Public Policy studies Affordable nursing and AI-based care programmes
Increased familiarity and capability for on-line delivery	Blended learning and work-based learning
Perception of region as (mostly) safe, stable and tolerant	Inbound mobility Digital nomads
<i>Legislative</i>	
Softening of legislative framework for overseas providers Availability of local capital and cost-effective delivery opportunities	International branch campuses
Enhanced scrutiny of public institutions	Governance and Government
<i>Technology driven</i>	
Emerging & powerful regional tech/AI sectors	AI systems & IoT esp unmanned vehicles 6G Mobile networking Assistive learning technologies Governance of online platforms
Rapidly improving transport and comms infrastructure	Digital nomads Native GPS and GNSS systems

People

The COVID-19 intense period was a stark reminder of the importance of community and our roles in supporting and protecting those individuals and families in our immediate orbit. It was a test of character or integrity for most institutions and their leadership teams, teaching us the importance of putting people first, balance the interests of students and staff with corporate objectives. Politics, economics and climate change are leading to increasingly intense and volatile people movements. Most SEA countries offer fairly accessible visa regimes for well qualified foreign migrants. Tying this to UG or PG study can be an attractive offer for students looking for startup or remote working opportunities combined with affordable/lifestyle.

Geopolitical tensions and climate change means that humanitarian crises will increase in frequency and intensity for the foreseeable future. Southeast Asia has been a particularly large inbound target for certain regional groups. As with all immigrant communities this brings subcultures, disruptions to business dynamics and even less desirable features such as organized crime. These large scale people movements appear likely to be an ongoing challenge for multiple governments. There is an urgent need for international cooperation to manage the impact in specific regions. Outsourcing is not even a short term solution. As academics we have a duty to observe, report on trends and policy impacts within a disciplinary context. As brokers of knowledge and truth we have a duty to inform policymakers with data and modelling. We can also contribute at a local level with support measures and our commentary platforms. At the same time, political swings in traditionally safe outbound markets such as UK, US and AU mean more limited outbound opportunities for domestic students and a greater diversity in international partnerships for institutions and agents alike will help to assure the continuation of study abroad and related opportunities.

Conclusions - Emerging Priorities for HE in present global situation

- a. To uphold truth and objectivity especially in mass media
- b. To imbue a doctrine of integrity in public office
- c. To provide safe havens for free speech, within local contexts
- d. To monitor and maintain mental health and well-being in our communities
- e. To open minds to diversity and pluralism
- f. To maintain internationalism as a value, transcending national politics
- g. To champion issues relating to climate change, net-zero and SDGs

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