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Universities beyond the coronavirus crisis – What awaits?

Michael Murphy 02 May 2020

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The coronavirus crisis has challenged universities in many new ways; being places that gather many people, they cannot open their doors to students, but this does not mean that they are closed. In a short time, many have moved their learning and teaching online. For a sector serving more than 20 million students in Europe, this is no small feat.

Moreover, universities remain active in the research of new treatments and possible vaccines, while in the fab labs and incubators, innovative solutions for producing respirators and facial protection, for example, are being tested out. Responding to the challenge through expertise in virology, epidemiology or sociology, supporting society in so many ways, universities have demonstrated the dynamism and flexibility of the sector.

Now we are entering a phase in which we can catch our breath and begin to look forward, assessing the opportunities and threats that the crisis poses.

There are still a number of immediate challenges to be met. Regulations concerning study times, examinations and grants need to be adapted in a short time, in light of the need for students to stay at home. Teachers in many places still need to fine-tune their skills to make the most out of the new learning environment.

More broadly, the **economic consequences** of the pandemic have deepened social inequality, for example, for students who depend on jobs in the service sector to fund their studies, and not all students have the same access to technology.

Lessons from the crash

Europe's economies are being hit hard and the need for governments to support businesses and workers in the short and medium term will strain public budgets and debt. This will undoubtedly challenge the financial sustainability of universities in the years to come.

The impact will vary across Europe, depending on the funding models used, but will be manifold and will affect the level of public funding, revenues from both international and national tuition fees and cooperation with business and industry. The European University Association's work on the **public funding of universities** demonstrated the deep impact that the financial crisis 10 years ago had on the university sector and may offer guidance.

Europe's universities need to brace for difficult times. The crisis has given visibility to the importance of research and innovation, as well as education and talent to overcome the pandemic, but it would be foolhardy to assume that this will automatically mean more money during the austerity that we will be facing once the cost of the crisis will have to be paid.

This will not only be the case for national budgets, but also for the long-term EU budget that is being negotiated now. Universities will have to argue hard for each euro and continually demonstrate the value for money that they provide.

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Avoiding the MOOCs hype

Like all others, this crisis is also an opportunity for universities, not least through the greater use of digital tools for enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. This leap forward must be followed by further investment in digital learning and in digital infrastructure.

Again, universities will have to argue for this investment, as funding will be tight. There will be a temptation to resurrect the myths of the MOOCs (massive open online courses) hype 10 years ago when many believed spending on learning and teaching would be reduced by having large numbers of students following online courses.

Now we know that providing quality online education is an expensive affair that will need further investment. It is not a shortcut to savings. We also need further evidence to ensure that the new opportunity for digitally enhanced learning is taken up in the right way.

The European University Association is currently conducting a major survey to map the landscape of digital provision as well as universities' plans and strategies for the future. The results will be available later this year.

From open science to autonomy under threat

Regarding 'open science', the crisis provides an unprecedented opportunity to show how important it is to openly share data and results. As with digital learning, this area has seen great advances in a very short time. This has happened bottom up, as researchers from around the world have shared results and data about the virus, for example, its genomic sequences.

Political leaders too have realised the importance of open research. The European Commission has launched its European Data Platform, enabling sharing of both research results and data among researchers working on combating the virus; this is intended to be a first building block of the European Open Science Cloud.

Finally, **university autonomy** and academic freedom could be at risk. In some countries, emergency rules have been established, giving powers to the executive beyond the common checks and balances. One big risk for the time after the crisis will be the temptation of governments to cling to their new powers.

We have seen university autonomy and academic freedom under pressure in recent years as some states have grown more authoritarian. If increased government control becomes widely accepted, there is a danger that universities will end up with less autonomy.

Here, it will be necessary to remind society and governments of the value of autonomy and academic freedom in their own right, as well as the fact that universities fulfil their missions better when they are free and strong.

As the short-term implications of the crisis are being addressed, we must consider immediately the possible long-term consequences, the challenges to come and how we are going to react as universities. There is no time to lose, we must act now.

*Michael Murphy is president of the European University Association. The **European University Association** represents more than 800 universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries.*

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