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COVID-19, Sustainable Development and Higher Education: towards a recovery path

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Abstract

This Viewpoint describes the overall impacts of the COVID-19, especially those related to higher education, and outlines the implications to sustainability efforts at universities. It also describes some of the measures universities may implement so as to improve or upkeep their sustainability profiles, as part of a path towards recovery.

Keywords

Pandemic – sustainability – higher education – impacts- recovery

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most significant societal challenges of modern times. Since it has been declared a pandemic, it has spread itself in an unprecedented way (Cucinotta, Vanelli 2020), a process supported by the current globalisation and movement of people. Here, both industrialised and developing nations are being affected in significant numbers (WHO 2020), especially in nations in Africa (Mbow et al 2020), Asia (UNESCAP 2020) and Latin America (Burki 2020). Due to its scope and wide range impacts, the pandemic is undermining the progress so far achieved towards sustainable development as a whole, and in respect of the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular.

Recent models have identified the fact that the overall population is still at a considerable risk (Clark et al 2020), as the so-called “second wave” follows the surge of infections seen in the first half of the year 2020.

Overall, the pandemic is having severe economic effects, characterised by dramatic reductions in the GDP of virtually all countries in the world - coupled with a worldwide recession - and disruptions to many industries, such as the travel and tourism sector, arts and entertainment, or gastronomy, to name a few. In some cases, the lockdowns

have been undermining business models and activities that were previously successful, such as the organisation of conferences, congresses or fairs, as well as sports events, whose numbers and frequency have been significantly reduced.

The high levels of unemployment associated with COVID-19, especially in the developing world, are also a side effect of the pandemic, which continues to negatively affect their economies. But the impacts of COVID-19 are not only of an economic nature. As shown in Figure 1, they have been wide-ranging.

Figure 1- Some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic



The pandemic has also revealed serious weaknesses in governance and policy-making across many sectors. Regarding the higher education sector, the crisis caused by COVID-19 has also severely affected the standard operations and processes followed at universities. In many cases, the drops in student numbers are forcing many universities to cut costs and reduce provisions for materials and staff in order to cope with an unprecedented phenomenon.

In the field of research, the lockdowns have also led to many challenges, including delays in the execution of research projects. One of the problems is that, due to delays and the fact that some of the running costs of projects - especially those that were expected to be completed in 2020 - still continued during the pandemic (e.g., salary costs, use of equipment and rent of office and facilities), their budgets have often been exhausted. This, in turn, means that substantial financial losses are expected, since the non-planned additional costs will add a further burden to the budgets of universities, some of which are ill-equipped to afford such cost increases.

The COVID-19 pandemic and sustainable development: paving the way for a recovery

As far as sustainable development is concerned, the pandemic has shown how much can be achieved through an emphasis on sustainability. Many universities were able to reduce their energy consumption and waste production during the pandemic,

whereas others have used the time to reflect on the sustainability of some practices such as business travel by members of staff.

As the recovery efforts now become intensified, there is a unique opportunity to rethink about some of the business models used by higher education institutions, and perhaps revise some practices, with a view to making higher education institutions more sustainable.

A **five-point** plan that higher education institutions could find helpful might include the following approaches:

1. Prepare and implement institutional strategies based on knowledge on how to cope with the virus, coupled with a sustainability approach. Stopping the spread of the virus is a priority. In this context, in addition to measures related to hygiene and social distancing, it is important to reflect on and redesign the ways universities consume resources such as water and energy, identifying ways to curb consumption, lower their environmental impacts and, inter alia, reduce costs as part of institutional efforts to cope with the pandemic.
2. Use the wide body of information now available on the many socio-economic and health impacts of COVID-19 as part of teaching courses, also outlining how unsustainable some practices are (e.g. consumption of animal products, unnecessary travel) and reflecting on them.
3. Explore the opportunities to expand the spectrum of interdisciplinary research on the connections between COVID-19 and sustainable development. The transformative power of research can help to both cover the substantial knowledge gaps and also generate income by securing external funding for interdisciplinary projects that may, inter alia, alleviate the pressure on the budgets of universities, many of which are no longer able to provide large-scale funding for internal projects.
4. Reflect on ways to reduce the carbon footprint of higher education institutions by using environmentally friendly means to reduce the constraints in academic activities and international cooperation. For instance, the large amount of CO₂ emissions associated with the energy needed to power servers for on-line meetings may be compensated by switching to internet service providers whose servers are powered by renewable energy. This is a simple yet effective step.
5. Mobilise staff and students likewise, not only to promote measures to keep them safe from the virus, but also to reflect on their own contribution towards their sustainability and that of their institutions. For example, during times of social isolation or home office, staff and students can be encouraged to avoid use of plastic packaging, plan the right amount of food needed so as to avoid food waste, or engage in saving energy with home appliances.

The future success of many universities in the long term will depend not only on how they respond to the financial challenges that COVID-19 poses to them, but also on how they address the sustainability ones.

It is hoped that the measures herewith described may be helpful in drawing a recovery path, as well as in aiding universities to become more resilient long after the pandemic has subsided.

Note: The European School of Sustainability Science and Research (ESSSR) <https://esssr.eu/> has setup a support programme to those universities which may need support or advice on how to engage of a sustainability path in the face of the pandemic. Interested organisations should contact ESSSR at: esssr@ls.haw-hamburg.de

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