



# **Opportunities and Risks in Higher Education in the Postpandemic Period**

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## Opportunities and Risks in Higher Education in the Postpandemic Period<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In the first half of the 2020, we all have witnessed the measures taken to stop the spread of the novel Coronavirus which causes the COVID-19 disease and slow down the pandemic in almost the whole world. One of the most significant measures which was taken to prevent gatherings in public spaces is to stop in person education altogether and move education into digital platforms. On the other hand, in the second half of the 2020, we expect to observe a controlled normalization process until a vaccine is found. Considering that until a vaccine is found, the pandemic will keep affecting people and it will take time to turn back into regular social life, higher education institutions are also expected to adopt into this controlled social life which will last a while longer and keep increasing its educational and scientific activities in this environment. Although, it is still not certain how the higher education institutions will take shape and take its place in the “new normal”, it is possible to say that there are many risks and opportunities waiting for the higher education institutions. While developments in distance and digital learning may be considered as a big opportunity for the universities, travel restrictions, economic stagnation, problems faced in distance learning and obstacles which was encountered in the internationalization process of higher education may be considered as ominously awaiting risks for the higher education institutions.

### Keywords

*Pandemic, Higher Education, Internationalization*

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## **Introduction**

As higher education does not serve a basic need of the human beings, in a crisis, it is usually suspended and not seen as an essential phenomenon until the things are back to normal. In this sense, it seems evident that the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the whole world from the beginning of 2020, will prevent the higher education to be conducted as usual. The global pandemic affected the educational processes everywhere in the world adversely. UNESCO's report which was announced in March 13, 2020 shows that, in 188 countries and in all the educational cycles, education of 91,3% of all the students (which is 1,576,021,818 students in total) are interrupted (UNESCO, 2020). Hence, it is quite apparent that we are in need of new adjustments to improve the sustainability and continuity of education in the world.

In order to continue higher education, the higher education institutions should be able to function in crisis situations and the education that they provide should be found acceptable by both the lecturers and the students. At this point, the experience that we acquired through the global pandemic is a valuable opportunity to take lessons from for the higher education institutions in order to be prepared to continue education in all kinds of crisis by planning adequate education and set up a substructure for the academics and students to conduct education and research in a safe and healthy environment. In this sense, the higher education institutions which take the lessons from the pandemic and put forward the necessary adjustments in a timely manner will shape the future of the higher education in the world.

## **Risks and Opportunities**

When the novel coronavirus originated in China and spread worldwide the COVID-19 disease was named as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. At that point, many higher education institutions unilaterally

decided to close their campuses and continue their education in online platforms. Afterwards, in many countries like Turkey, education was first suspended by the regulatory bodies and later decided to conduct education in online platforms by any means necessary. On the other hand, while many universities did not have the necessary infrastructure to continue education online, the academics did not have the experience in distance learning tools and materials. Although some faculty members managed to start teaching in online platforms like Google Classrooms, WebQuest and Adobe Connect, many other academics have not even heard of those platforms before and they needed in-service training and time to adjust the online teaching systems (Toquero, 2020). Thus, one can say that the first distance learning experience of many higher education students was just chaotic. At the same time, many students were only used to the formal education and did not have any distance learning experience, it was also not an easy process for them to attune. After receiving the distance education, the process of assessment and evaluation created a complication as well. As many lecturers are used to relying on traditional paper examination systems in assessment and evaluation, topics of examination security, management, fairness, and ethics became to be the matters of discussion both among the students and academics.

On the other hand, since, hundreds of millions of students and lecturers started to use internet and online education tools suddenly, it was inevitable to face connection problems everywhere in the world. Many countries did not have the online infrastructure to handle the overload. Demand for the online education tools and systems were skyrocketed and software companies were swamped. Furthermore, prices of the online education tools increased by almost 75 percent and it was difficult for many higher education institutions, especially in countries where they are suffering from economic stagnation, to obtain enough of the distance learning tools. As the libraries were closed, students could not use libraries and paper recourses in their studies and research. Although many universities, libraries and publications opened their online databases for public use for free of charge, all the stakeholders of higher education could not benefit from those resources equally.

Besides education, maintaining the academic study and research during the global pandemic was proven to be a challenge for the higher education institutions. As the campuses of many universities are closed and imposed lockdowns in some countries, most of the academic studies and research projects came to a halt because of the global pandemic. Although, support for the studies on the novel coronavirus that causes the COVID-19 disease and research on the vaccine and treatment is mostly provided by the universities, protocols to provide continuance to the other research and study areas for the global pandemic circumstances were not formed (Govindarajan, 2020). This is ominous for the maintenance of the scientific development. Many research projects were suspended as the laboratories and clinics are closed. Many experiments that was being conducted were left unfinished. Field studies have been pared to the bone. Many universities which were running social

responsibility projects together with the domestic industrial enterprises had to slow down or stop their projects altogether. As it is not known how long we will need to lead our lives in these conditions of the “new normal” universities need to figure out how they will continue with their research and social missions.

The global pandemic also ineradicably affected the internationalization of higher education processes in a negative manner. International mobility for education which came to a stopping point due to the global pandemic, carries the risk of being the number one area which was affected the most by the pandemic. Mobility of the students and the faculty totally stopped since many countries sealed their borders. Many of the international joint programs decided not to admit students in the academic year of 2020-2021 because of the uncertainty of the pandemic situation. Many regulatory bodies and universities made legislative changes in order to facilitate transfer into the higher education institutions in their own countries for the local students who were studying abroad. In the meanwhile, many universities decided to continue education via distance learning, it was expected of the international students to continue their education in their own countries, without traveling.

**Table 1.** Top 1000 universities in the world which announced that they will continue education with distance learning in the fall semester of 2020-2021 Academic Year (As of June 2020, the number of the universities which will continue education online are increasing)

Country	University
United States of America	California State University
	Harvard Medical School
	Wayne State University
	Northwood University
	Boston University
Canada	McGill University
	University of British Columbia
	University of Ottawa
United Kingdom	University of Cambridge
	University of Manchester

*Source:* Data collected from the announcement pages of the university websites.

Furthermore, International mobility or scholarship programs are either suspended or indefinitely postponed. As international faculty members are not able to travel, they can take part in the online education, but they are not able to contribute to the international joint research projects apart from the exceptional cases. Although we were able to grow the international education in quantity in the last decades, we had the opportunity to see how fragile it is in the sense of sustainability through the pandemic. In this sense, we face the risk of localization in education if we do not build internationalization processes which can survive even in a global pandemic.

On the other hand, the economic stagnation which is looming on the horizon after the pandemic is more important and vital than all the above-mentioned issues. Because, a significant portion of the whole students in the world study by paying tuition fees to the private or foundation universities or other higher education intuitions which continue functioning with tuition income. Even if the students study tuition free in another country, they will have to spend money at least for the basic living expenses. It is a gospel truth that education-related expenses are the ones that are waived the first in an economic crisis. Thus, it is highly probable that many of the current higher education students will have to suspend or stop their education altogether in a case of economic constriction. It is only rational to expect that there will be a decrease in the number of freshman students who will join higher education abroad. On the other hand, among the students who are still able to afford higher education, there is a gawning expectation to pay less tuition fees for distance learning than formal learning. Responding to this legitimate expectation will make income loss inevitable for the higher education institutions. When we add the contraction in the student mobility in general, it is only logical to expect that higher education institutions will downswing in the next academic year (Govindarajan, 2020).

When we consider the fact that university life is not all about academic studies and research but it is also an important asset in the social and physical development of the students, while the university campuses are closed, millions of students who have been carrying cultural, social, artistic and athletic activities in the universities had to stay idle in those areas. Although some activates could be moved to the online platforms, many students were not able to continue their extra-curricular activities during the pandemic.

If we imagine the situation as a chain reaction, the decrease in the number of local and international students who will continue their higher education and moving the education in distance learning tools will be followed by a decline in income of the universities and cause them to cut staff and impose budgetary savings and skimp on research and development. In the following years, except the universities which are located in the countries where there are imposed measures by the law about the share of research funds in the university budgets, like Turkey, we will witness widespread cuts in research funds in the universities in the United States and in the European Countries. Many universities will choose to employ the minimum number of academic staff to carry out the distance learning. In recruiting international faculty members, cost will be a determining factor along with academic merit and skills. As we do not know how long we shall continue only with the distance learning, universities tend to save on the necessary space for formal education and the administrative staff to maintain the campus space which is no longer in use, due to pandemic and distance learning. This also means that on campus jobs which are usually offered to the international students for them to earn some of the educational expenses that they are bearing, will no longer be available to them.



Finally, many countries send their citizens abroad for education, especially for postgraduate studies, with the funds that they spare from their national budget. The global pandemic and the economic stagnation that it causes are expected to reduce the national funds which are used for educational purposes. Countries which provide scholarships for students from abroad are also expected to reduce their scholarship budgets for the same reasons. Alongside those risks, there are also opportunities for higher education institutions in this global pandemic. The pandemic provided a chance to make the distance learning widespread and become an essential part of the education. In order to turn this chance into an opportunity, universities should make use of the lessons learned from their distance learning experiences of the spring semester of 2019-2020 academic year and shape the applications and update their educational plans.

Nevertheless, the pandemic that we are experiencing today is not a brand-new phenomenon. In the years of 1918-1919 we have experienced a global pandemic which was called the Spanish Flu. In the spring of 2009, a novel influenza A (H1N1) virus emerged. In the meanwhile, there were local contagious diseases that affected a significant number of people like measles, Ebola and SARS. During those pandemics many changes and irregularities in higher education were recorded and published (Emekci, 2010) (Brawley, 2020). During the AIDS pandemic which mainly affected the African continent, universities were first seen as a source of infection and then considered as a source of hope and healing (Katjavivi, 2003). In this sense, the most important conclusion that we come up with considering the pandemic experiences that we faced throughout the history, the universities should be prepared for all kinds of diseases and pandemics.

In 1918, as the treatment options were fairly limited to cope with the Spanish Flu, quarantine was proven to be the most effective public health measure which can be taken at the time. Hence, we know that many universities suspended their education for one semester and the ones which did not suspend a whole semester, prolonged the summer or spring breaks in order to prevent contagion. On the other hand, while education continued, many classes were cancelled because of the infected lecturers. In the meanwhile, measures were taken in order to limit the social interactions as much as possible. For example, varsity sport teams played their games without an audience or the games were cancelled altogether (Brawley, 2020). However, we can say that the measures that were taken in order to prevent the infection to spread, were not very effective when we consider the number of students who lost their lives because of the Spanish Flu. As there were not distance learning tools back in 1919, the most important experiences of the Spanish Flu that we can take lessons from are in the measures imposed in order to limit the social interactions on campus and limitations imposed on the number of students which can be present in a given classroom in order to create social distancing.

A survey which was conducted among the students and the staff members of the universities in Australia and New Zealand where H1N1 virus has largely been affected, shows us the fact that the awareness on the pandemic was considerably low among the students and they tend to show resistance even to a basic lifestyle change in order to protect them from the disease. Despite all the warnings, the ratio of the students who acquired the habit of regular hand washing was only 20 percent (Van, 2010). In this sense, although the awareness towards the COVID-19 pandemic is considerably higher today, it is important to consider the possibility of students resisting the basic lifestyle changes and refusing to acquire new habits for health reasons. In the same incident, universities in the United States started the academic year of 2009-2010 with extensive crisis management plans and it was seen that they were basically relied on their online education infrastructure for the continuity of education. However, universities do not only provide education but also provide food and accommodation to its students (Emekci, 2010). Planning further measures for the universities to continue their services outside education is essential for them to continue with their services and social life on campus.

Further than to those, student reactions to the changes in the universities that we have witnessed with the break of the COVID-19 pandemic and the limited academic studies on the field showed that what we know about the distance learning was completely changed when so many students moved their education to distance learning. Those studies mostly show the negative reaction of the students to the distance learning, the effects of it on the quality of education and how the internationalization on higher education is interrupted during the process. A research which was conducted in the Peking University, which was teaching online longer than the universities from the other countries as the pandemic was originated in China, shows us that most of the students (60 percent of them) were spending most of their studying time with the in-class activities in order to get a passing grade. Which means that students tended to learn more by listening to the lecturers in the classroom. Because of that, the process of distance learning during the pandemic is being carried out with the students who are not used to learn through out of class activities which is the most important part of learning online (Bao, 2020).

As many universities moved their education to the online platforms only within a couple of days, the educational materials and visual aids could not be redesigned in order to comply with the distance learning in the pandemic. This way, we could also see that the curricula and class schedules which were designed for the formal education where concentration of students could be attracted through gestures and facial expressions of the lecturers, were not as effective in distance learning settings. In this sense, redesigning the teaching aids and reorganizing teaching by changing the difficulty level, amount of information and duration of teaching may be beneficial to make distance learning more effective. Furthermore, it can make a difference if the students and lecturers are encouraged and guided to develop new ways of teaching and learning which are more compatible with the distance learning settings

(Bao, 2020). Students become isolated during the online education and usually choose not to ask for assistance even when they need the most. Our assessment and evaluation methods are also limited to the ones that are designed solely for the formal education. In this context, we teach the students online, but we evaluate their performances in a traditional way. This situation is widely considered as unfair by the students and it creates an adverse opinion towards distance learning among the students.

It seems that, in the light of all the experience that we gathered during the pandemic, the precautions that they will take in order to make the distance learning an inseparable part of the formal learning is the biggest challenge and opportunity for the universities today. If universities will manage to keep distance learning up and running even after the pandemic, it will be a great opportunity to make the students who do not have the financial means to support their formal education to join the higher education with lower costs. Especially in economic constriction, this may be a relieving source of income for many universities which will be struggling financially. If the technical difficulties and insufficient infrastructure which were experienced during the pandemic as the universities were caught unprepared are fixed, universities will be able to teach tens of thousands of students all at the same time. Students who could not join a university abroad due to visa issues or the students who had to interrupt their education due to health concerns during the pandemic may be able to join their planned education. Additionally, it will be an opportunity for the students to improve their self-learning skills which formal education does not specifically encourage. It is also a gain as it improves the learning opportunities for the students to be able to reach the educational materials and lectures of the distance learning as they are recorded and made available for the students to be benefited at a later date. With the result that, the process that we are going through by the necessity because of the pandemic, made us to climb many psychological barriers and gave us the opportunity to show that distance learning does not necessarily mean poor learning.

With all being said, we should keep in mind the fact that the distance learning cannot totally substitute the formal learning. The most important reason for it is that practical courses cannot be conducted with the same productivity and some courses can only be taught through practical applications. Besides, university life is not only about teaching, social and extracurricular activities are an important part of the higher education. Work placement and co-op projects which give the opportunity to learn through experience can only be affective as a part of the formal education. As Vijay Govindarajan puts it in his article the best, although Amazon started the online commerce 30 years ago, e-trade had a share of only 9 percent of all the retail carried out in the United States in 2019 (Govindarajan, 2020). Thus, it will not be a clever planning to think that e-learning will replace the formal learning all together. In this sense, the most important step that the universities must take is to manage the return of the students and staff to the campus while ensuring their safety and health and be prepared not to totally interrupt the formal learning in

a pandemic or any other kinds of crisis in the future. In order to do that, classrooms and common areas should be redesigned based on the rules of social distancing, the food and accommodation services should be restructured accordingly, and health and hygiene conditions should be improved and made sustainable even after the pandemic. For the universities which could manage to do all of them, not only the educational infrastructure, but also the whole higher education experience will become sustainable and uninterrupted under any circumstances.

The most important benefit of managing all these for the universities is the ability to conduct academic studies and research, which are usually overlooked in a crisis, under any circumstances. Interrupting education because of a pandemic also means interrupting academic research and scientific development. Especially in economic stagnation, interrupting research and development only deepens the economic crises and creates a vicious cycle.

### **The Effects of the Pandemic on the International Student Program of Turkey**

Turkey decided to take action in international student recruitment in the late 2000's, especially with the support of the Ministry of Trade. With the abolishment of the centralized placement exam (YOS) for the international students in 2010, Turkey started to host rapidly increasing number of international students. The education councils established under the Turkish Exporters Assembly (TIM) and the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey (DEİK) motivated especially the foundation universities in recruiting self-funded international students. When the international student quotas are increased by the Higher Education Board of Turkey (YOK) the number of international students who have chosen Turkey as a study destination has also increased incrementally. Especially, after the new presidential system of Turkey, it became easier to take decisions and move faster in this strategic area. We learn through the Turkish Higher Education statistics that currently; more than 172 thousand international students are studying in Turkey. When we consider the fact that the number of international students was only 48 thousand back in 2014, it is safe to say that there was an exponential increase in student numbers in the last 5 years. Based on the same statistics, we can sort the top 10 countries which send students to Turkey for higher education.

**Table 2.** Top 10 countries which send international students to Turkey for Higher Education (Based on the statistics of the Academic Year of 2018-2019)

Country	Number of Students
Syria	27,606
Azerbaijan	18,830
Turkmenistan	16,592
Iran	7,144
Iraq	6,468
Afghanistan	6,632
Germany	4,310
Somalia	3,077
Bulgaria	3,003
Egypt	2,752

*Source: Prepared based on the statistics announced by the Turkish Higher Education Board*

Countries which send the most international students to Turkey are also among the ones which are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is not easy to reach data about the pandemic situation in Syria, most of the Syrian students chose Turkey for Higher Education come from the other Gulf Countries or they are already in Turkey where they immigrated after the Syrian crisis. In this sense, we can say that those students come from Saudi Arabia which is the 16<sup>th</sup> country in the world in the number of COVID-19 cases or from Kuwait which had a staggering number of COVID-19 cases (35,950) compared to the total population of the country, according to the World Health Organization data. The cases detected in Azerbaijan is currently 9,957 and increasing every day. Although, there is not a confirmed COVID-19 case in Turkmenistan yet, specialists speculate that there are unconfirmed cases in the country. Furthermore, the country imposed very strict travel bans to its citizens. Iran was one of the countries which was affected the first from the pandemic, and it was affected hard. With the current cases of 187,427 and number of deaths of 8,837, Iran remains among the countries which suffered the most from the pandemic. To sum up, countries of origins of the international students in Turkey are among the ones which was affected by the global pandemic the most (Worldometers, 2020).

As the mentioned countries suffered greatly when it comes to the human costs of the pandemic, they are also the ones which suffered from the economic stagnation followed by the pandemic. Due to the fall in the oil prices, countries which are rich in natural resources are facing economic contraction. This situation effected the regular citizens' incomes very rapidly. As the borders are still closed in many countries, import and export came to a halt as well. This situation resulted the students to change their study plans or suspend them because of financial difficulties. The survey results of the "studyportals" which is an international education portal which is based in the Netherland,

shows us that 40% of the international students had to change their higher education plans due to the global pandemic. 17% of those students decided to postpone their plans to the next year while 15% of those students decided to join online education. 4% of those students unfortunately decided to give up higher education all together because of the global pandemic (Gutterer, 2020).

In the light of the information above, it is highly expected that the number of international students who will choose Turkey as a study destination of higher education will decrease due to the global pandemic as it is also expected in many countries in the world.

### **Conclusion**

For a long time, we did not face a global crisis which affected every aspect of our lives. As it was the case in all the aspects of our lives, thanks to the global COVID-19 pandemic, we could observe that higher education was sitting on a very fragile basis and function properly only under the normal circumstances. In this sense, it will bring many risks that are mentioned along with it, this pandemic gave us the opportunity to build a more sustainable higher education system by eliminating many vulnerabilities, inadequacies and twisted applications which could not be noticed under the normal circumstances. The pandemic provided a vision of sustainable education and research to the higher education institutions in the world and made them gain the experience that is needed to pave their way to the said vision.

Of course, we should not overlook the risks that was brought by this valuable experience. Although we were able to continue higher education without a long pause, as we have moved the education to the online platforms rather swiftly, inexperience of the lecturers in distance learning, educational materials were designed for the use of formal education, turning the assessment and evaluation systems into a matter of discussion and insufficient technical infrastructure for the online learning resulted an unpleasant experience for the students in general. However, with quick, flexible and rational steps, it is still possible to turn the hardships into convenience and increase the motivation of the students towards distance learning.

Additionally, it is evident that the internationalization of higher education is faced with an important risk in this pandemic. The internationalization policies which were designed only for globalized world where all the borders are open, lost all its effectiveness in the global pandemic and all the international Education and study activities are either stopped or taken a totally different form. In this sense, extra efforts are needed to build sustainable internationalization policies and international partnerships. Furthermore, the weak financial structure of many universities will not allow them to resist the economic constriction which is followed by the global pandemic.

If we manage to eliminate those risks, it is possible for us to finally integrate the distance learning to the formal learning in higher education. If we make the necessary adjustments in the light of this valuable experience, it is safe to say that the higher education institutions which will blend distance and formal learning together and make the formal learning to be sustainable even in crisis situations will also shape the future of the Higher Education in the world.

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