Taking stock: The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on University–Community engagement

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Abstract
This article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university–community engagement (UCE) as an academic mission. The aim of the work is to outline the ways in which UCE has been functioning since the turbulent onset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. The study undertakes a systematic review of the UCE literature to identify major trends, raising important questions regarding ongoing scholarly discussions and managerial/policy debates on the subject. The results show seven distinct types of engagement responses by higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe. In addition, the review identified that HEIs faced difficulties in either adapting existing engagement practices or while establishing new ones, especially regarding the efficient use of digital technologies. In terms of implications, the findings suggest that the pandemic has resulted in new debates about the societal role of HEIs, with medium- and long-term implications for policy and management.

Keywords
COVID-19, university–community engagement, higher education, societal impact

The emergence of COVID-19 at the end of 2019 and the subsequent worldwide outbreak in early 2020 significantly changed the dynamics of society, economics and education, among other spheres of life. In the field of higher education (HE), in many countries around the world, disruptive and immediate changes were observed as higher education institutions (HEIs) struggled to adapt their activities to the context of social distancing and lockdown measures (UNESCO, 2021a). The pandemic has impacted teaching and learning mainly through the adoption of remote education, but also regarding HE systems overall, ranging from funding to supply and demand to the organisation and management of HEIs, reinforcing a set of external and internal pressures and trends, including digitalisation (CEPAL-UNESCO, 2020; IESALC-UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO, 2021b).

According to Marinoni et al. (2020), by May 2020 HEIs were closed in 177 countries with restrictions on face-to-face activities, impacting the three missions of teaching/learning, research and (community) engagement. In the case of university–community engagement (UCE), defined as the extent to which academic communities actively collaborate with societal actors across the public and private and civic sectors (cf. Benneworth, 2013; Pinheiro et al., 2015), the report showed that a third of the HEIs (424 in 109 countries) had observed a decrease in activities, with 45% reporting that COVID-19 had led to growth in this (third) mission. About a fifth of the HEIs indicated that they did not know how COVID-19 had impacted community engagement. These findings revealed an interesting paradox – namely, while the restrictions may have negatively affected ongoing UCE tasks and the capacity to carry them out, the sets of new problems and pressures caused by the pandemic may have stimulated HEIs to engage more (yet perhaps differently) with their community partners across the board. Indeed, despite the numerous studies on COVID-19 and HE, the novel, turbulent and uncertain nature of the...
phemonenon (Ansell et al., 2020) still raises challenges when attempting to understand its short-, medium- and long-term impacts on HE systems and HEIs alike. In the case of UCE, this turbulent scenario may have amplified the tensions historically observed around this academic mission (cf. Pinheiro et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2011), especially in terms of the level of institutionalisation and linkages with the primary missions of teaching/learning and research.

In view of these developments, the purpose of the article is to reflect on – to take stock of – the possible paths of UCE as an academic mission in the face of the pandemic based on a literature review of the topic. That is, based on the existing literature about UCE and COVID-19, the article aims to identify the impacts of COVID-19 and the trends accelerated or created by the pandemic in UCE.

The paper is organised as follows. First, we provide descriptions of UCE, including its main characteristics as an academic mission, and a discussion of its institutionalisation within HEIs, as well as the tensions involved. Next, we present the methodology of the study to proceed with the literature review on UCE and COVID-19, discussing the impacts of the pandemic. In the conclusion, we reflect on the possible paths that UCE and HEIs could take in an eventual post-pandemic scenario (medium and long term).

**University–Community engagement**

Broadly speaking, UCE is connected to universities’ participation in public life and their surrounding communities, building awareness of and intervening in current social or public issues (Goddard et al., 2016; Hazelkorn, 2017; Koekkoek et al., 2021; Teixeira and Shin, 2020). The idea of UCE includes myriad related terms, such as social or public engagement (Cuthill, 2011). In addition, the term ‘third mission’ has been used in discussions about the relationships between universities and society, a topic that has gained in prominence in the last decade or so in Europe and abroad (Laredo, 2007; Pinheiro et al., 2015). This paper conceives of UCE as ‘the range of ways in which university staff, students and management interact with external communities in mutually beneficial ways, either as part of teaching and research or as part of other projects and joint initiatives’ (Farnell, 2020: p. 6). The notion of UCE implies three interconnected elements: (1) a set of processes or practices of interaction and mutual exchange of knowledge within (2) a wide range of non-academic communities/organisations that are (3) anchored in societal needs (societal factors that influence the society’s quality of life). Such a definition encompasses a wide range of interaction possibilities, institutional arrangements, values, knowledge exchanges and connections within teaching and research missions (Benneworth et al., 2018). As pointed out below, the possibilities of engagement include service learning, partnership research, community access to university services and facilities, knowledge exchange, technological development, among others. Values and institutional arrangements will depend on differences in the three dimensions mentioned above; however, it is possible to state that the interactions between university and community are largely shaped by normative and strategic views regarding the role and social responsibility of the university and the social impact of knowledge production and transmission processes.

Considering this debate, UCE practices can be assessed in terms of the following thematic dimensions (Farnell, 2020): (a) teaching and learning activities aimed at a non-academic public (such as service learning initiatives); (b) research oriented to the societal needs of the external community or participatory research in partnerships, including methodologies such as action research and participatory research; (c) service, knowledge exchange, and public service; (d) student initiatives within the community; (e) university-level engagement, taken as formal partnerships, and the opening of services and facilities to the external community.

This variety highlights the context-specific and bottom-up nature of UCE (Benneworth et al., 2018). Also, in addition to government and business, Benneworth et al. (2018) refer to the existence of a wide variety of actors within the idea of ‘community’, including excluded and marginalised groups. In this sense, Benneworth (2018, p. 4) describes excluded communities as “a group whose problems are societally urgent and who traditionally rarely interact with universities”; in other words, it can be stated that engagement goes beyond the interaction with business and government, and can encompass the community (in its cultural, social, environmental, political and other dimensions), as well as socially vulnerable groups. Goddard et al. (2016) shed light on the interaction between universities and cities in the larger context of ‘civic engagement’, defined as attempts to promote the public good through ‘active, reciprocal engagement with a wide range of groups and organisations at different geographical scales’ (p. 5). This is associated with the idea that universities (as relatively autonomous institutions centred on knowledge transmission and production) can establish more integrated relations with the urban spaces of which they are part – not only through participating actively in socio-economic development, but also through being more relevant in other dimensions of citizens’ daily life (e.g. cultural, political, overall well-being, inclusion, governance). Despite such links to the local/city surroundings, it is possible to infer that UCE also considers agendas on a broader scale, connecting the local and regional with both national and global spheres (Puukka, 2017).

In a normative sense, this debate is related to ongoing discussions about the role of universities in promoting the public good, citizenship and democracy, among other areas (Bryer et al., 2020). Such discussions have become increasingly important in the context of grand challenges like...
rising socio-economic inequalities within and across countries, democratic backsliding, crisis management, etc. (cf. Gilbertson et al., 2019). This has led to renewed external calls for more active and responsible engagement by academic communities in general (Pinheiro et al., 2015). Discussions surrounding university engagement are deeply embedded in the societal context in which HEIs, especially in the last 30 years, have been pressured to exert greater economic and social impact within the conceptions of the ‘knowledge society’ and the ‘knowledge economy’ (Hazelkorn, 2017; Laredo, 2007) – for example, to promote the United Nations (UN)’s Sustainable Development Goals (El-Jardali et al., 2018).

Based on the works by Farnell (2020), Benneworth et al. (2018) and Pinheiro et al. (2015), institutionalising UCE pertains to the formal and informal factors embedded in this specific mission. These encompass supportive policies and measures, resource mobilisation, strategic plans, formal and informal/cultural recognition, the integration of community engagement in the core knowledge activities and services of HEIs, administrative support and academic staff. In the case of flagship and research-intensive universities, UCE can be considered a peripheral mission in relation to the core tasks of teaching and research, although in more regionally embedded and vocational universities, engagement is often cultivated due to its links within the localities (Benneworth, 2018; Benneworth, 2013; Cristofoletti and Serafin, 2020; Goddard et al., 2016; Pinheiro et al., 2015). Another related discussion concerns the methods for assessing engagement, shedding light on the need for the development of novel and more sophisticated frameworks to measure the societal impact of HEIs and their collaborations with external stakeholders (Benneworth et al., 2018; Farnell, 2020; Wise et al., 2021). In other words, UCE is still considered a rather peripheral activity in relation to teaching and research, and the relationship between these three missions or functions constitutes an important source of tension in HE and science policies and within HEIs (Pinheiro and Abualrub, 2021; Pinheiro et al., 2015).

Another potential source of tension is to be found in the ‘modernisation’ reforms in HE systems – with differences at the national level – that have taken place over the last three decades. In Europe, for example, the reforms were inspired by New Public Management (NPM), arguing for universities to be strategically managed, encompassing stronger steering and a focus on efficiency, market competition and excellence, among other things (Benneworth et al., 2015; Canhilal et al., 2016). Such reforms also consider universities as instruments to promote governmental objectives (Olsen and Maassen, 2007). Benneworth et al. (2016) argue that the policies and reforms have tended to consider simplistic university ‘ideal types’ based on ‘one size fits all’ models. Neither universities nor academics are passive actors, which causes tensions in the adoption of top-down engagement agendas in the context of governmental reforms and external stakeholders’ strategic interests. Moreover, universities are complex organisations that historically have co-evolved with other societal subsystems, like the economy and politico-administrative regimes (Young and Pinheiro, 2022; Pinheiro et al., 2022).

Considering these points, the enactment of engagement processes and practices is likely to generate tensions along three interconnected dimensions (Benneworth et al., 2015, 2016; Goddard et al., 2016; Koekkoek et al., 2021; Pinheiro et al., 2015): (a) between engagement and the core missions of teaching and research, especially considering the orientation towards academic excellence, output-based funding and global research rankings; (b) within the possibility of conflicts and discussions that certain practices and external stakeholders could generate related to the legitimacy of the practices within and outside HEIs; and (c) from the interactions between the academic community and external actors in terms of conflicting interests, values and objectives, among other things.

In that sense, while there are pressures to perform engagement and ‘deliver’ social impact, there is a series of tensions that push UCE towards or keep it as a peripheral mission (Goddard et al., 2016), seen by many as an ‘add-on’ activity or a ‘nice to have’ (Koekkoek et al., 2021). In this sense, although the pandemic may have negatively impacted previous engagement initiatives, it would be interesting to assess whether COVID-19 has created any positive stimuli towards strengthening UCE and its institutionalisation or, instead, has reinforced existing tensions and/or led to the emergence of new ones.

Method

This paper is based on a systematic literature review (Trieweiler et al., 2021; Xiao and Watson, 2019) on the effects of COVID-19 on HE, focusing on: a) studies that directly address UCE and b) studies and reflections that seek to discuss the societal role of HEIs in the face of the ongoing pandemic. In both cases, we considered the mentioned literature on UCE, guiding the review with the following four questions:

1. How are universities engaging with external stakeholders in the face of societal problems caused/intensified by COVID-19?
2. To what extent are there similarities and commonalities (cross-cutting issues) in the literature consulted?
3. What kinds of stimuli and tensions have the pandemic caused/intensified in the institutionalisation of UCE?
4. How is the societal role of HEIs being debated in view of a pandemic and ‘post-pandemic’ context?
The selected articles reflect the context-specific and bottom-up characteristics of UCE since they present a variety of engagement initiatives shaped by disciplinary and institutional contexts, as well as by the broader social contexts in which HEIs are embedded.

More specifically, the literature search was conducted on 5 November 2021. The Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, the World Health Organization and UNESCO databases were used. The search considered the following keywords (by topic and relevance): COVID-19 OR Pandemic AND ‘university-community engagement’ OR ‘Outreach’ OR ‘Third Mission’ OR ‘University Extension’ OR ‘Public Engagement’ OR ‘University partnership’. Materials that were close to the theme/questions of the study were manually selected by first examining the abstracts in the databases – adapting the literature screen procedure mentioned by Xiao and Watson (2019). The search and first selection procedure resulted in 56 materials (articles, books and reports), which were used for the qualitative study. In total, the review considered 51 materials: 45 papers, mostly focused on reports of engagement practices and experiences from several areas of knowledge, including one Special Issue (representing nine papers of the sample); five reports of HEI associations, supranational organizations and HEIs themselves; one book with a compilation of chapters with reflections on COVID-19, the future of higher education and engagement.

From this selection, we considered producing a narrative description of the collected materials (Xiao and Watson, 2019). This narrative was organized based on the identification of three elements: UCE practices in the face of COVID-19, cross-cutting issues and discussions about the societal role of the university vis-à-vis COVID-19 along with impacts on UCE as an academic mission. In order to identify these elements, we read the selected materials to identify similarities in UCE practices and recurrent topics – to do so, Farnell’s (2020) classification of the UCE dimensions was used as support. Next, we selected and read the materials that developed broader reflections (either from engagement experiences or theoretical debates) on the impacts of COVID-19 on UCE as an academic mission. In other words, from the material analysis, the studies identified three lines of information and argumentation: (a) accounts of experiences of engagement in the context of the pandemic; (b) themes that appear in various studies together with these experiences of engagement (cross-cutting issues); and (c) discussions of the negative impact and opportunities generated by the pandemic on UCE as an academic mission and broader reflections on the societal role of HEIs. As a methodological note, it should be stressed that the materials confirm the diverse and bottom-up nature of UCE, which makes it difficult to pick up in a more comprehensive analysis. In addition, considering the exploratory nature of the study, we opted to approach the literature from the classification of the initiatives and the mentioned debates (no comment is made, for example, on the institutions and countries, among other details).

Figure 1 summarizes the steps of the literature review.

Before the narrative description of the results according to the identified topics (Step 3), we present in Table 1, in outline, the sample of selected materials.

As can be seen, the sample shows three type of sources (materials). With regard to the reports, it is noted that they are varied in terms of publishing institution, country of origin and features. In terms of origin, the reports and the book under consideration are predominantly from European countries; however, some cover studies and data of other regions of the world, such as the International Association of Universities’ survey, UNESCO and the book published by the Council of Europe. The reports usually present findings from wider research conducted at institutional (one or more HEIs), regional or global level, as well as reflections and debates on the impact of COVID-19 on UCE. As for the papers, most, in general terms, are from the areas of health and education – with a great variety of sub-areas and cross-cutting themes. As for the ‘others’, it is also worth noting the variety of areas, such as sociology, administration, science and technology, engineering, among others. There is a predominance of papers from the USA, followed by Brazil. Finally, for the Special Issue, its nine articles focus on case studies about action research and university–community engagement (with a variety of themes) in the context of COVID-19.

For exposition purposes, the narrative is divided into two items. The first describes the findings in terms of UCE practices and experiences around COVID-19 and also gives an overview of related cross-cutting issues. The second concerns the debate on the impact of COVID-19 on UCE together with discussions about the societal role of HEIs.

**COVID-19 and societal engagement**

From a general analysis of the abstract and keywords, we categorised these initiatives into seven categories (noted below as (i)–(vii)), established for descriptive and analytical purposes, and the categories intersect.

Overall, some of the literature reports the (i) development or adaptation of engagement activities in the field of health and well-being, mainly through community medical care and services, the provision of facilities and structures (e.g. university hospitals) and the development of protocols and new technologies and tools to assist the community, among other initiatives, to provide care and support to health systems (Maglia and Braid, 2020; McElfish et al., 2021; Michener et al., 2020; Perry et al., 2021; Rosa et al., 2021; Tozini et al., 2022; Vinson et al., 2021; Welter et al., 2021). Such initiatives are especially connected to government partnerships (vi) and were developed at the institutional
level or led by groups of academics (staff, students) within their departments or disciplines. In that sense, the literature points out that the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, as an essentially epidemiological and public health problem, has led HEIs to adapt their structures and seek to act more proactively in combating and mitigating the virus in their respective communities.

Another set of engagement initiatives refers to (ii) science communication for a broad public/vulnerable communities and advisory actions (Carvalho et al., 2020; Dumbia et al., 2020; Nicolò et al., 2021; Perrotta, 2021; Tozini et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2021). In the case of communications, the mobilisation or creation of portals and communication platforms to disseminate information about the pandemic is highlighted. These efforts also include the civic and public actions of HEIs and the scientific community in the fight against the so-called ‘fake news’ (Deca et al., 2021; Harkavy et al., 2020). When it comes to policy advice, experts were called on by government authorities and the media to build awareness about the disease and the mechanisms of prevention or to contribute with advice to decisions and public policies related to the pandemic (Arrais et al., 2021; Maglia and Braida, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). It can be said that the pandemic has been generating stimuli to the connections between engagement and science communication; the role of digital media and technologies can also be highlighted in this context.

A third set of initiatives refers to the creation or adaptation of (iii) courses and service learning for a non-academic audience (Benitz and Yang, 2020; Bintliff et al., 2020; Seru, 2021). In this category, a diversity of course types and themes was observed, and the role of student participation can be highlighted. In addition, it was observed that this type of engagement mostly used digital technologies as mediators, either in the adaptation of existing courses or in the creation of new courses in the pandemic scenario.

Fourth, some experiences of (iv) university–school engagement have been identified (Dresden et al., 2021; Galindo et al., 2021). HEIs have been helping local schools adapt to the impositions of the pandemic (remote teaching and vulnerable students, among others), strengthening and creating links between educational institutions at all levels. Going forward, (v) volunteer and humanitarian actions by students and academic staff were identified, looking at vulnerable population groups (Aluisio et al., 2020; Arrais et al., 2021). It was noted that the pandemic intensified the level of vulnerability of several population groups. The academic community has often mobilised through humanitarian actions (carried out by student and staff groups, institutional campaigns and other types of assistance initiatives).

Furthermore, the review identified (vi) university–government partnerships, mainly formed to conduct research in collaboration with other entities or on demand (in all areas of knowledge). These partnerships included those between universities, governments and communities, as well as joint initiatives aimed at the formulation of public policies, protocols and campaigns, among others (Arrais et al., 2021; Joseph et al., 2021; Luppi et al., 2021; Maglia and Braida, 2020; Mauressse, 2021; Nawangwe, 2021; Perrotta, 2021; Rosa et al., 2021; Souza et al., 2022; Vinson et al., 2021). Public–public partnerships have important intersections with other dimensions, especially with (i), (ii) and (vii).
Table 1. Sample.

| Papers                      | Country                               | Description                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNESCO                      | —                                     | UNESCO’s note with discussion about the importance of UCE before COVID-19    |
| Montevideo group association of universities | Argentina                            | Discussion about UCE from a survey on the subject with 38 public universities in South America |
| International association of universities | France (UNESCO House) | Data exposure report on international survey about the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, with data for UCE mission |
| National Co-ordinating centre for public engagement | UK                                   | Research report with UK public engagement professionals on how UCE was impacted by COVID-19 |
| Melbourne centre for the study of higher education | Australia                            | Research report on the impact of Covid-19 on the engagement mission at the university of Melbourne |
| Book (publisher)            | Council of Europe higher education series | France                                                                     |
|                             |                                       | Series of chapters (edited book, several authors) with reflections on COVID-19 and higher education; discussions on public, civic and community engagement. It focuses on the European context, but also presents authors and cases from other parts of the world |

Papers

Health studies and related fields

- Global health action
- Health equity
- Health Expectations
- Health Promotion practice
- Health research policy and systems
- International Journal of environmental research and public health
- Journal of Clinical and Translational science
- Medical science Educator
- Medicine, conflict and Survival
- NASN school Nurse
- Population health management
- Preventing Chronic disease
- Revista Brasileira de Educação Médica
- The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry

Education and related fields

- Advances in engineering education
- American literature
- Field Educator
- Global higher education during COVID-19 (edited book)
- Digital Library perspectives
- Higher learning research communications
- Journal of service-learning in higher education
- Knowledge studies in higher education
- Revista Ibero Americana de Educación
- School–University partnerships
- Studies in higher education
- University museums and Collections Journal

(continued)
Here, the importance of the participation of HEIs and the academic community in the processes of the formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policies is highlighted; moreover, it causes one to reflect on the interaction models that have at their centre articulations between universities, governments and civil societies/communities/vulnerable groups. In summary, the literature highlights that, given the nature of the crisis (its uncertainty, complexity, etc.), many governments at the municipal, regional and national levels have sought to partner with HEIs to conduct research (e.g. about the virus, impacts and predictions, vaccine and treatment development, etc.) and to engage in joint actions.

Finally, the literature review identified a diverse range of (vii) university–community engagement projects and action research related to the pandemic. These encompassed the development of cultural initiatives aimed at the academic and non-academic public (Luppi et al., 2021); engagement initiatives to help small and medium-sized businesses facing the economic consequences of the pandemic (Brauner et al., 2020); participatory social design projects within the community to design solutions for social problems, using participatory research methodologies (De Bernardi et al., 2021); the development of participative maps (using digital technologies) with the objective of connecting vulnerable territories/social groups with possible donations or governmental/community aid (Polli et al., 2020); online university–community participatory research projects (Manikam et al., 2021); the use of interactive web-based distance-learning platforms in medical education (Saini et al., 2021); and adaptation experiences of museums and libraries related to the pandemic (Cioppi et al., 2020; Neatrou et al., 2020).

The review also revealed several cross-cutting issues worth noting. The first was the need to adapt previous engagement practices in the face of the sudden appearance of the pandemic. That is, it was possible to observe in the reports of engagement initiatives the conducting of adaptive actions to maintain the execution of projects negatively impacted by the pandemic. The second issue concerned the establishment of new engagement practices, given new or intensified societal problems brought about by COVID-19. The literature highlighted that the pandemic brought challenges and opportunities, especially given the restrictions on face-to-face contact. In both cases, many studies have reported the adoption of digital technologies to mediate the engagement process and the building of undeveloped organisational capacities/skills for engagement. Moreover, we observed that the connections between engagement, scientific communication and more flexible and adapted forms (e.g. through digital technologies) featured as an important aspect.

### Institutional impact and the societal role of HEIs

Part of the identified literature focuses on discussing the performance and societal role of HEIs in the short (during the pandemic), medium and long terms from general reflections on trends in HE and science, as well as from initial attempts to gather more general information on the impact of COVID-19 on university–community engagement as an academic mission, mostly through surveys or case studies encompassing HEIs (Bergan et al., 2021; Davenport and Holland, 2021; Law et al., 2021; Maglia and Braida, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020; NCCPE, 2021; Perrotta, 2021; Reimers, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). In general, the need to think of HE as a public good was emphasised, as well as the ideas of civic character and social commitment and the need to develop HEI models that are more closely connected to their communities – i.e. the various external stakeholders.
The most pertinent materials for such discussions were found in the institutional reports and in the book (Bergan, 2021). For this part of the analysis, six main materials (cited throughout the narrative) were used: a UNESCO report on UCE and COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2021); a report by the International Association of Universities (IAU), which presents broader data on the issue (Marinoni et al., 2020); a report by the Montevideo Group Association of Universities covering major universities in South America (Maglia and Braida, 2020); two research reports by HEIs on the impact of COVID-19 on their UCE mission (NCCPE, 2021; Law et al., 2021); and an edited book by the Council of Europe (Bergan et al., 2021) with reflections and empirical cases of universities’ contributions to engagement in the face of the pandemic alongside the future impacts insofar as university–society relations are concerned.

Supra-level organisations highlight UCE as an important avenue for HEIs to assist communities in addressing problems related to COVID-19. UNESCO (2021a) argues that the connection between teaching, research and engagement enhances HEIs’ community actions, especially in devising innovative solutions to tackle both the internal problems and the societal problems caused by the pandemic:

‘HEIs have been instrumental in helping communities respond to the pandemic. Actions taken include providing free online learning provision for a wider public, conducting research on COVID-19 and its impact, communicating and raising awareness by sharing accurate and scientific knowledge about the virus, as well as students volunteering to support vulnerable groups.’ (UNESCO, 2021b, p. 2)

UNESCO’s report also argues that the pandemic has generated a renewed stimulus for the development of more flexible and creative forms of engagement. Overall, the assessment by the UNESCO experts, unsurprisingly, places the challenges brought by the pandemic within the scope of the global challenges of the UN Sustainable Development Goals agenda, stressing themes such as healthcare and climate change. In this sense, the pandemic has added further strains on previous engagement agendas, reinforcing discussions about the societal impact of HE and science.

Providing a general idea of the impact of the pandemic on UCE, the IAU reported, based on a survey (spring 2020) of 424 universities and other HEIs in 109 countries, that 31% had observed a decrease in UCE activities; 45% claimed that COVID-19 had led to growth in this mission; 19% indicated that they did not know how COVID-19 had impacted UCE; and 6% replied that the situation had remained the same. The survey pointed to differences between world regions: 56% of the Americas reported an increase in UCE, 46% in Europe, and 37% in Africa – in these cases more positive than negative or uncertain responses were received. The only region that indicated more negative responses was Asia-Pacific, with a 48% decline.

The survey also presented data regarding some engagement initiatives (Marinoni et al., 2020): 22% declared ‘Our university hospital provides care for affected people’; 28% ‘Our students and staff provide mobile care for affected people’; 40% ‘We provide medical advice and support’; 49% ‘We develop science communication initiatives’; 52% ‘We increase our community actions’; and 27% selected ‘Other (please specify)’. The report concluded that there was diversity in UCE practices related to COVID-19. The data allowed us to note – considering the broad categories previously delimited by the survey – a slight predominance of engagement in the healthcare and science communication fields. Of course, the nature of the pandemic relates to such outcomes; in addition, we note that a greater connection between the debates on UCE and science communication seems to be an emerging trend.

Bergan (2021) put into perspective reflections and studies on the impact of COVID-19 on HE, highlighting the turbulent and tense context in which the academic community has found itself and, at the same time, the major structural inequalities (e.g. access, inclusion and democratisation) in which HE systems and HEIs are enmeshed: “[T]his has served as a “wake-up call” warning that these inequities can no longer be addressed partly, or fitfully, but that a longer-term, strategic approach is needed” (Bergan et al., 2021, p. 8). Again, the reflections attempted to define the role of HE in combating field-level inequalities (e.g. on access and funding) and, at the same time, to address the societal problems observed (inequalities, human rights, sustainable development, etc.). Another aspect highlighted by the authors was the participation of HEIs in building more resilient societies, also indicating the need to think about the development of adequate institutional capacities. Furthermore, Harkavy et al. (2020) emphasised the need to reflect on the social role of HEIs and to stimulate connections and cooperation between HEIs at various scales.

Hazelkorn (2021) highlights interesting elements regarding the future of HE through the construction of new institutional models that are more integrated with or embedded in communities. The author warns of the possibility that the pandemic will have accelerated competitive tendencies in the sector, taking into account its composition, governance, business dynamics and the trajectory of reforms over the last 30 years (in Europe). We chose to highlight this chapter because it raises an important issue: most studies and reflections, going towards a normative point of analysis, highlight the need to rethink the role of HEIs in the short, medium and long terms. In general, such reflection defends models capable of solving the inequalities of the sector and, at the same time, acting more proactively within the community. However, some of the trends and tensions prior to the pandemic (e.g. rankings, the view that
engagement stifles the excellence of research, distribution of funds, competition dynamics, etc.) may have also gained momentum, undermining the possibility of the development of HEIs in the directions discussed so far.

Moving to a more regional focus, Maglia and Braida (2020) have shown that many Latin American public universities actively participated in their communities during the pandemic. The authors present data about UCE collected from 38 Latin American associated public universities: 68% provided advice to national authorities in relation to the pandemic; 78% advised local and regional policies; 71% produced health protocols for the local, regional and national communities; 82% developed communication initiatives and the dissemination of scientific knowledge; 92% implemented COVID-19 prevention mechanisms in their communities; 81% had been offering health services directly to citizens; and all the universities reported developing research related to COVID-19 and on the pandemic’s societal consequences. What is more, Maglia and Braida (2020) contend that the pandemic has institutionally strengthened debates about the social commitment of public universities in Latin America:

‘It is perceived by the State Public Universities that the population notices the role they are fulfilling, thus making their social function visible and strengthening the recognition of the role of science, research and the societal role of these universities, increasing their legitimacy.’ (Maglia and Braida, 2020: p. 19)

The above report further stated that the pandemic had demanded more university–public sector interactions and partnerships, and that the universities’ responses also related to the need for social and political legitimisation. Nevertheless, Reimers (2021) has argued that public universities throughout the region, considering Latin America’s engagement trajectory since the Cordoba Reform of 1918, have had the opportunity to develop innovative engagement initiatives and organisational learning through connections between research, teaching and engagement.

Turning to the UK, it is worth mentioning a study that stressed the impact of the pandemic on the institutional dimension of UCE. The 2021 report, entitled The Experience of Public Engagement Professionals During COVID-19, draws on research conducted by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) with public engagement professionals in the UK (including procedures such as surveys, interviews and focus groups, encompassing about 150 public engagement professionals).

As well as the other studies mentioned, this report sets the research in a context in which the pandemic has reinforced broader societal problems (inequalities, racism, poverty, democracy, etc.), and HEIs are called on to act in this situation, increasing the pressures for engagement. The report states that the pandemic ‘has created opportunities to re-think and re-imagine many aspects of social life, including the role played by universities in their communities’ (NCCPE, 2021, p. 4).

Summarising the findings, NCCPE (2021) classified three types of COVID-19 impacts on UCE: (i) challenges, (ii) opportunities and (iii) future. The identified challenges included the following: the uncertainty of the professionals involved, the continuity of the engagement and the problems generated by a lack of face-to-face contact, the lack of knowledge and skills when faced with a new situation, problems related to the planning and financing of activities, and the digitalisation of engagement activities. On the other hand, opportunities came to the fore with regard to the development of new skills (e.g. digital skills), opportunities for new audiences and forms of engagement, networking among engagement professionals and increased public interest in research. In the future category, it was noted that the pandemic might have generated impacts on governance, funding and learning regarding UCE, as well as greater inclusion in terms of under-represented social groups like the poor, women and ethnic minorities.

The pandemic has brought uncertainty, pressures and difficulties regarding the capacity to engage, but it has also stimulated new forms of interaction in communities and the development of new engagement capacities (digital skills in particular). The scenario generated short-, medium- and long-term uncertainties about UCE-related funding and planning, as well as sparking a renewed interest in discussing the social commitment of HEIs – including rethinking the work of the professionals. Notably, the survey also indicated that the pandemic had strengthened UCE in HEIs that had already successfully institutionalised this mission prior to the turbulence of COVID-19, stimulating the development of new engagement skills and capabilities. In contrast, at HEIs where this mission was seen as a ‘nice to have’ (peripheral), UCE was not prioritised at all, with the pandemic ultimately reinforcing previous difficulties with engagement. Such findings are important, as they reveal that the trajectory of HEIs’ engagement and its institutionalisation and valuation both within the university and in the surrounding communities are important factors in understanding the impact of COVID-19 on UCE and the university as an organisation and institution more generally.

Finally, a study that examined the impact of COVID-19 on engagement at the University of Melbourne (Australia) sought to identify the key barriers and challenges facing university staff and external stakeholders in sustaining engagement, alongside ways to improve UCE (Law et al., 2021). A total of 25 interviews were conducted with university staff during 2020. In general, the report concluded that COVID-19 raised a strategic opportunity to reflect on what engagement meant and on the best ways to improve this academic mission, including institutional
improvements to systems, structures, governance, career development and funding to support engagement. This report posits the importance of thinking of engagement in terms of the co-construction of knowledge (cf. Brandsen et al., 2018) beyond the classic idea of knowledge transfer, which could be considered dominant in the thinking of policymakers in the country. Figure 2 summarises the main aspects identified in the literature review.

‘Initiatives’ refer to the numbered items (above) relating to UCE practices vis-à-vis COVID-19. ‘Transversal topics’ refer to issues that cut across the discussion of many of the reported UCE practices. Furthermore, ‘Background discussions’ highlight the institutional impacts of COVID-19 on UCE, including the reality that the pandemic has highlighted some broad debates on HE with the potential for intensification in the medium and long terms.

Concluding reflections

The literature review on COVID-19 and UCE revealed a heterogeneous and bottom-up range of practices and initiatives, reinforcing these previous characteristics of this academic mission. Among the initiatives, one can highlight the engagement between university and government, university and community and university, government and community, as well as greater concern with communication initiatives and public awareness. In this regard, the experiences in the health field stand out, although several other societal problems are addressed. To what extent such initiatives represent a novel character that will remain in a (possibly) ‘post-pandemic’ future, with the ability to move UCE as an academic mission towards greater institutionalization and a closer relationship with other missions in HEIs, remains open for future study. The literature review identified that, in the face of the abrupt and turbulent COVID-19 scenario, UCE initiatives had to adapt through the development of new capacities and skills and the use of digital technologies. Such adaptation occurred both for the continuation of established UCE practices and for the development of new ones. It is possible to conclude that the pandemic may have accelerated the trend towards the digitalisation of UCE, alongside the trend of digitalisation observed in higher education in general.

It should be noted that this study aims to make a first approximation – of a general nature – about the impact of COVID-19 on UCE. In this sense, there is a limitation in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the reported experiences and examining these in the light of deeper contextual aspects related to spatial and temporal dimensions, as well as actors’ motivations, strategic intentions and resource constraints. Nevertheless, based on the literature review, both the strengthening of certain partnerships and the development of new engagement structures and capabilities are critical factors that policymakers and university managers alike should take into serious consideration. More specifically, the devising of policy and strategic mechanisms that can support the nurturing of an enabling institutional environment (locally and at the level of the academic profession as a whole) which both acknowledges

![Figure 2. COVID-19 and UCE overview. Source: Authors’ own.](image-url)
and rewards engaged academics and activities that deliver mutual value to the partners involved. What is more, the salience of digital technologies as mediators of social relations suggests that the barriers for active engagement beyond the immediate vicinity of the university have been somewhat eroded. That said, it is important to highlight the importance of face-to-face encounters as well as lived (on and off-campus) experiences in the context of sense-giving and sense-making, alongside the building of mutual trust. Interesting topics to be further explored by future research, thus, include qualitative and longitudinal accounts aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of actors’ motivations, experiences and practices alongside the identification of structural and cultural barriers impeding such initiatives. A fruitful path to better grasping the impact of COVID-19 on UCE as an academic mission also includes paying close attention to the complex and dynamic interplay amongst key, co-evolving and nested elements at the macro (policy and society), meso (organisational strategy) and micro (sub-units and academic communities) levels. Two areas of significant scholarly and policy interest pertain to the extent to which, as a mission, UCE (a) fosters the capacity of universities to adapt to environmental circumstances, including crises like COVID-19, in the context of resilience over time (cf. Pekkola et al., 2022), and (b) contributes to hybrid arrangements within universities, changing structures, activities and mindsets across the academic profession (cf. Pekkola et al., 2022).

Finally, the review also points out that the pandemic has provoked discussions about the societal role of HEIs. In this sense, the UCE debate comes alongside a backdrop of discussions on how to rethink and reshape higher education in the medium and long terms. The literature has stressed the need to strengthen the character of higher education as a public good and as a space for inclusion and democracy, as well as to rethink models of HEIs so that they have the capacity to act more strongly within communities and to participate more actively in the resolution of societal problems at local, regional, national and global levels. Furthermore, we posit that HEIs have an important role in co-constructing a post-pandemic society and also that they need to legitimise themselves socially and politically in the face of new and future scenarios. In this context, such discussions, at least in the literature consulted, indicate a positive vector for the greater institutionalisation of UCE and for making this academic mission less peripheral. Despite this positive signalling, this series of tensions involving UCE continues (and perhaps many of them have intensified by the pandemic, in terms of stimulating competition and disputes about resources). Thus, a cloud of uncertainty remains over the place of UCE in the medium and long terms.

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