Abstract. The COVID-19 outbreak has become a worldwide concern for everyone, and specifically for Higher Education Institutions, their students, teachers and those responsible for university public policies. Social distancing is now the primary consideration for any student when deciding where and how to study, reducing their willingness to educate themselves in physical settings with others who may carry the virus. In this context, this article analyzes how the Covid-19 pandemic affects Ecuadorian universities in the form of a communication and marketing trial, and its influence on university actors. The Covid-19 crisis has put the processes of social structures to the test. Communication and marketing are examples of these processes that face an unprecedented and unforeseen situation. In this sense, it is intended to reflect on how the pandemic affects and will condition the practice of university communication, both internal communication and its link with society. Finally, emphasis is placed on the importance of the universities assuming that reputation is a risk, and that this risk must be managed with the techniques and tools of communication, since the pandemic demonstrated higher education institutions the importance of managing relationships of trust with their teachers and students.

Keywords: Communication · Education · Academy

1 New Realities of University

Four months ago, no one would think of a global standstill on such a scale. The Covid-19 pandemic presumably begins in China, spreading through networks of global human mobility (Sirkeci and Yucesahin 2020), sending shock waves around the world, halting life in almost every countries of the world.

Not only the anxiety and fear of the spread of a deadly virus, but also the measures taken against it, changed the lives of consumers, academics and researchers. Here a new approach for universities emerges, a new standard in development, which includes academic marketing (López and Antropólogo 2020). Airlines, tourism, out-of-home entertainment and the hotel industries, among others, have collapsed under quarantine
and isolation measures (Gössling et al. 2020). It is important to recognize the probability that long periods of confinement will lead to behavioral changes (Brouder 2020).

Marketing theory offers some insights into the potential impact on universities of the Covid-19 disruption, such as institutional loyalty, behavior change, sustainability concerns of teachers and students (Gössling et al. 2020). At the same time, universities have had to suddenly switch to digital, becoming a process that tested their resistance. Some of these universities may disappear, while others, more agile and ingenious, succeed in the process.

In this scenario, university actors will develop different interests and habits, although at present the evidence is not yet conclusive (Tucker and Yu 2020). Their return to the use of traditional services is not guaranteed, with social distancing, keeping many people at home, there are important changes in behavioral trends (Balis 2020). So the effect of the pandemic will only be felt in the coming months, being important the creation of new university models, which must emerge from this crisis, regardless of our reactions as teachers or students (Xifra 2020).

The Ecuadorian university must adapt to this new reality, along with the need to take advantage of the pulse of the consumer, their reactions and ideas, to prepare for the future, since their sense of trust and loyalty will be affected by the environment of rapidly changing marketing (López and Anthropologist 2020).

In this sense, the Ecuadorian university communication channels have changed, from an education called face-to-face, to being completely online, through the Internet, with the use of applications such as Zoom, Teams, in addition to social networks and other computer programs (Villón 2019).

This is how we find ourselves, with an academic community that has been working remotely from their homes, since the beginning of March 2020. This is part of the new Ecuadorian university reality. Which leads us to many and varied questions about the ways in which universities should be talking to their students: Where to invest in academic marketing? How to organize work between teams? What are the keys to ensure the permanence of the academic institution? What should be the university position on the sustainability of the planet, teachers, students, companies, communities and families? One thing is certain, that much research will be needed to assess the new reality and develop appropriate strategies to meet the objectives of the universities.

2 Some Ecuadorian University Initiatives

The outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has become a global concern for universities, faculty, students, and public policy makers worldwide. As of June 15, 2020, more than 7.9 million cases of coronaviruses had been reported globally, corresponding to 46,751 cases reported to the Republic of Ecuador, reaching to this date a number of deaths of 433,472 worldwide, of which 3,896 they were Ecuadorian, according to Johns Hopkins University. To delay the spread of the virus and protect people’s health, the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have advised people to practice social distancing by staying home, avoiding social gatherings in crowded places and keeping at least 2 m apart.
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests limiting face-to-face contact with others is the best way to reduce the spread of coronavirus disease. Social distancing has become a major factor guiding people’s decisions about where and how to educate or eat. In response to growing health concerns, many of Ecuador’s universities have issued a series of measures that reduce the risk of studying. For example, some have posted signs on their entrances and on their floors to remind their users to keep a safe distance from each other. They have also added online studies and other options to serve students who are concerned about going to physical classrooms (Li and Li 2020).

Ecuadorian universities such as Espíritu Santo, in collaboration with the Faculty of Medical Sciences and the School of Psychology, made a medical helpline available to the community, as an alternative to decongest health centers (Hakovirta and Denuwara 2020). The Ecuadorian government enabled telephone line 171, but this service was insufficient given the number of calls and constant complaints from users who were not receiving attention.

In this scenario, the Espíritu Santo Specialties University requested authorization to carry out tests in its laboratories. If a person suspects or experiences any symptoms of COVID-19, they can contact their call center, where more than eighty doctors take calls from citizens from Friday, March 27, 2020. The service is available from 09:00 until 18:00.

The dean of its Faculty of Medical Sciences, commented that the professionals approved a course of the Pan American Health Organization. That is, they can guide patients who feel discomfort from COVID-19 such as dry cough and fever. They attend them by telephone, tell them how to act in the face of the emergency and reinforce the sanitary measures that they must follow (Hakovirta and Denuwara 2020). The institution considers that the quarantine decreed to stop the spread of the coronavirus can cause feelings of stress, frustration or anger. For this reason, this university also provides psychological assistance services for people who require it. The objective is to provide emotional support to those who feel that they are going through episodes of anxiety, depression, burnout syndrome, product of the current situation, etc.

This service has the participation of teachers from the School of Psychology of this university and students from the last year of the degree. It can be accessed by dialing the same number of the institution. The service is from Monday to Sunday between 08:00 and 23:00.

The Salesian Polytechnic University is another of the universities that aims to help Ecuadorian citizens who live in fear and stress during quarantine. The professors of the Psychology degree from the Salesian Polytechnic University on the Guayaquil campus have developed the accompaniment project called “Share what you feel confidential”, to provide the university community and the general public with psychological advice during the health crisis that crosses the country, due to COVID-19 (Xifra 2020).

The project seeks to mitigate in the population symptoms such as stress, anguish, fear and uncertainty caused by feeling at risk of permanent and latent death as a consequence of the current scenario that the city and the country are experiencing.

The support received by those interested is completely free and is carried out through the Zoom platform, via WhatsApp, whose link allows you to find the name of the professional, their telephone number and hours of operation.
Most of the professionals who lead the project are clinical psychologists with experience in the field, who can make obvious pathological diagnoses, said the director of the Psychology degree at this study center.

In addition to this field, the Psychology degree also has services such as psychoeducation that involves the rules of mental hygiene, facilitating strategies for the individual to cope with the current situation, he stressed (Cortez-Clavijo 2018).

Another service is coaching, which empowers you to set goals to achieve what you want. In addition, there is spiritual advice from the University Pastoral of the headquarters. During the emergency, this university has also collaborated in the development of masks.

The Computer Science Engineering, Multimedia specialization of the Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral in Guayaquil, has created the web application #QuédateEnCasa, in the context of the current health emergency experienced by Ecuador by COVID-19. It is an application that helps Ecuadorian families find medicines, food, health centers and all kinds of services that are useful at the moment (Hakovirta and Denuwara 2020). With this application, people can find services near their homes. In addition, most of the elements that appear on this platform make home deliveries. This application is very useful in these times when many want to stock up on medicine without leaving home.

Noting that many people shared useful information (mainly service directories or the like) in WhatsApp groups, it seemed to the University a good idea to collect all this information for later management, geolocation and validation. In addition to making it available to the entire community (Linzan 2020).

#QuédateEnCasa also has benefits for business owners, since it allows registered users to add, at no cost, service points on the map. It also has an option to search for initiatives and projects that help combat the problems caused by COVID-19.

The working model in which this application is framed is called ‘crowdsourcing’, and it consists of a massive and open collaboration.

For now there are only localities in Guayaquil, but the application allows you to add services in any city; being able to feed it from any part of Ecuador or the world for their own country. This tool has also been presented to different municipalities and prefectures of the country. The application can be found at: stayteencasa.app and on Twitter: @makubexs.

In addition, a group of volunteers from Espol University are also working on the manufacture of face protection masks, which will be delivered to health professionals who are in charge of patients with coronavirus. These instruments are manufactured through 3D printing and laser cutting. This work is part of the citizen initiative #HackingCOVID19ec that seeks to combat the virus and reduce the risk of contagion in medical personnel. Another group of polytechnic graduates, together with professionals from Latin America and Europe, are creating a low-cost solution that allows patients with severe cases of COVID-19 to access an artificial respirator, whose value is between $350 and $400. In the market this can cost from 3,500 to $100,000.
3 For the Ecuadorian Government Higher Education is not a Priority

Higher education was hit with a new budget cut in May 2020. The Constitutional Court of Ecuador asks to stop it but the government insists on the decrease for public universities and polytechnic schools.

The budget cut to 26 public universities, three postgraduate universities and eight co-financed individuals, rather than a financial exercise, is a declaration of principles: the government is not taking into account the fundamental role that higher education plays in facing the pandemic. Without adequate financing, education cannot have the quality it needs. Without quality, the country is risking its future to, supposedly, overcome the situation (Clery 2020).

In Colombia, Mexico and Chile, public universities are doing research to help fight the spread of the coronavirus. But in Ecuador, the contribution of the academy was taken into account very late in the coronavirus crisis, which was used, rather, as a new pretext to underfund them.

And although the budget cut to public universities was provisionally stopped by order of the Ecuadorian Constitutional Court and a court of the city of Ambato, if it were to be reinstated, it would hit the higher education institutions and the country hard.

There are effects on the well-being of society, the main one is to deepen the ignorance of the role that the academy plays in progress. The cut deepens the deterioration in the quality of higher education, increasing the factory of graduates in the small Ecuadorian labor space (Santa-María 2019), widening the gap between private and public universities, the relevance of provincial universities will almost disappear again (what that destroys the relationship between the university and the environment), with overload of class hours for teachers and almost not without conducting scientific research (Molina 2016).

The 98 million raised by reducing the government to the budget of public universities had already been approved and allocated at the end of 2019. That money, according to the Ecuadorian Higher Education Agency, comes from the collection of the value added tax and the Tax on the rent. With the collection falling due to the economic paralysis caused by the health emergency due to Covid-19, the agency argues, there are no funds and the economic cut was necessary.

The funds withdrawn correspond to the item of expenses destined to the salary payment for teachers, administrative and service personnel. Many institutions said the decline put even more pressure on their operation. When it became known about the suspension of the cut, the Central University of Ecuador reported that it will reopen the registration process on May 18, 2020, which had been canceled on May 5, 2020, as a result of the reduction in funds.

But several experts disagree commenting that the cut is unconstitutional, because according to the Constitution, during a state of emergency, it is prohibited to use the money destined for education and health.

It is not only a matter of constitutional mandate. There are also various technical considerations. A second agency, the Higher Education Quality Assurance agency, had
to issue a prior technical report. But neither in the official gazette nor on social networks has the document been published. So the Ministry of Economy and Finance made the decision in a disoriented way (Rey-Martin 2019).

The budget cut will affect the development of scientific knowledge in universities. Doing research is expensive and time consuming. But with the budget cut, the investigation would stagnate.

To the director of the first Agency it does not seem serious. In a television interview, he said that with the new normality due to the covid-19 pandemic, there are investigations that cannot be carried out, because people cannot travel or cannot go out into the field, they are not affected, certain priorities are prioritized. investigations (López and Anthropologist 2020). What we do not share from this research, since without research projects, universities cannot deliver knowledge or well-prepared professionals to society.

Reducing the financing of public universities will have medium and long-term effects and, in addition, it puts us at a disadvantage for the new normality. Ecuador should bet on the academy as one of its post-Covid-19 axes of progress, through innovation and technology. For this, the country needs research centers, the production of scientific articles to achieve intellectual freedom and evidence-based policies (Li and Li 2020).

To avoid budget cuts to universities, student associations submitted proposals to the government, asking to declare a moratorium on foreign debt, or collecting back taxes from 500 companies that appear as debtors to the treasury. The problem is that many of these obligations date back to 2005 and 2006, and are from companies that no longer operate in Ecuador or have no assets or patrimony, to respond to those charges that would represent lengthy and tortuous processes, before the Treasury Service and the judicial system.

The organization also proposes to implement a 2% estate tax on the 265 wealthiest families in the country and another 5% tribute to companies that earned more than a million dollars in 2019. It is difficult to know whether after the economic effects of the pandemic, these companies will have the liquidity for such a tax, if it would not reduce their productive capacity or, in the worst case, would not cause them to close permanently. Some experts have suggested that cuts, if necessary, be redirected and applied to military spending. What is clear is that an effort for public education is indispensable.

4 Public Higher Education in Ecuador at Risk

After the decision of the Constitutional Court to suspend the pre-budgetary cut destined to the payment of payroll of the public universities, the panorama in the Academy remains somewhat uncertain. The worst evil was avoided, however, some of the 33 public universities in the country already faced another cut at the beginning of the year, to which is added a debt of $131 million that the Ministry of Economy and Finance maintains with the Universities and Polytechnic Schools.

Part of the budget that the Government allocates to universities is obtained based on a projection of collection made by the Ministry of Finance and the Tax Agency, made
up of 10% of the net collection of the Purchase Tax and 11% of the net collection of the Income Tax. At the end of the fiscal year, if what is actually collected is higher than projected, that balance must be reliquidated to the universities, according to the Law of the Permanent Fund for University and Polytechnic Development.

A technical study prepared by the director of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences; and the rector of the Technical University of the North, ensures that there is a loss to the Universities of $131 million for the pending re-liquidations corresponding to the years 2017, 2018 and 2019.

This damage would amount to more, if we consider the cut of about $138 million suffered by certain universities in January 2020. In the case of the Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral, this adjustment meant $4,770,065.23 of its budget, and for the National Polytechnic School was over $5 million.

This means that there was already accumulated damage, prior to COVID, and that rather the issue of the pandemic is aggravating the matter, a kind of attack on the Ecuadorian University with continued lack of budget reductions.

| Year | Real collection - income tax | Real collection tax on purchases | Fund allocated | Fund according to actual collection | Difference |
|------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|------------|
| 2015 | 4.732                       | 6.274                           | 993.075       | 1.043                             | 50.428     |
| 2016 | 3.547                       | 5.739                           | 965.033       | 868.547                           | (96.486)   |
| 2017 | 3.625                       | 6.319                           | 871.234       | 925.411                           | 54.171     |
| 2018 | 4.5                         | 6.304                           | 968.652       | 1.02                              | 51.78      |
| 2019 | 4.31                        | 6.241                           | 968.652       | 994.273                           | 25.621     |

Source: Ministry of Finance

In 2016, when there was a drop in tax collection due to the earthquake, the universities were going to be reduced in the budget, but in order not to affect the Academy, the values owed for 2012, 2013 and 2015 were re-settled. The same could It should have been done this year, but it was not (Vall 2017).

Thanks to a constitutional action led by various groups and university students, it was possible to suspend a cut called “criminal” of $98 million, which seriously endangered faculty and administrative staff. But the reality of public universities remains precarious. The percentage of spending on education according to the Gross Domestic Product of Ecuador, is lower than that of other 14 countries in Latin America, below Costa Rica, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Peru, among others. In addition, since 2015 the resources allocated to universities have not increased.

We are the only country that cuts education in a crisis in which what is most needed is support so that universities and schools continue to function.

The cuts and the lack of investment in the Academy also threaten the growth of scientific research taking place in the country. For example, if we add up the annual publications of all Ecuadorian public universities, we cannot even exceed the scientific production of the University of Chile.
Dozens of investigations are jeopardized by government cuts. Currently, for example, the Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral is investigating how to counter the banana fungus called ‘Fusarium Raza 4’, a pest that appeared in Colombia and that could soon reach Ecuador, where it would destroy the plantations. They are also developing mechanisms to improve the standards of fine aroma cocoa, the export of which is at risk by failing to meet European standards. In this university, there are countless other research projects in areas of human, animal and plant health; climate change; renewable energy; technological development; big data; artificial intelligence (Gössling et al. 2020). From the beginning of the pandemic, the Biomedicine laboratory was ready to carry out diagnostic tests for COVID-19 and now they are offering them to the public.

From the National Polytechnic School, it is feared that because of the cuts it will end up affecting human talent. They also receive criticism about the number of administrative personnel that the universities have (in the case of Ecuadorian public universities the average is one teacher for each administrative). From the universities it is ensured that although they are called “administrative”, many of these workers are laboratory technicians, doctors and specialists, who perform substantial functions in the institution.

In the Ecuadorian public sphere, they are classified as administrative, because there are no other classifications, for example, laboratory technicians, who work in analysis, who work, for example, in the Geophysical Institute doing field research, technicians from Nuclear Sciences departments, from Continuing Education Centers, which provide services and help to work in self-management, staff of student welfare, etc.

Art is not left out of this equation. The financial crisis that the country is experiencing due to the coronavirus pandemic has also generated uncertainty in the authorities of the University of the Arts and its students. The announcement of the cut in April was followed by the departure of the members of the Management Commission, ordered by the Government’s Education authorities, among other teachers and administrators.

Their sudden departures, without any notification, mean that within hours of starting the new semester there is an absence of teachers. It is feared that the current crisis will trigger more cuts that will force the closure of this institution created in 2013.

5 University Autonomy in Danger?

The adverse reality of the coronavirus has overwhelmed health systems and devastated the economies of dozens of countries, including Ecuador, which also faces a historic decline in the oil market. The situation is critical for all sectors of the country, however, there are various proposals to avoid affecting the pillars of society: health and education.

Among several alternative measures, the rector of the University of Guayaquil insists that the reduction of the size of the public sector is essential, as well as the adjustment and ordering of remuneration. But it also talks about targeting the subsidy on fuels and guaranteeing foreign and national investment, creating incentives and
benefits for new investors who decide to bring fresh resources to invest in the country, with a period of tax grace and establishing new forms of labor contracting.

One of the great challenges of the Ecuadorian Government has been the optimization of public spending, which in the previous administration reached up to 44% of the Gross Domestic Product. Currently the average size of the State measured through total public spending is around 36%, something that for some experts is still oversized. There has been no significant effort in the size of public sector spending, the State is still absolutely oversized and obese, there have been some reductions, but unfortunately they are still very small, spending on what is payroll is still 9,000 million dollars.

One of the assembly members of the Education Commission of the National Assembly, stated that there has been a mismanagement of finances during the health emergency, allocating funds to unnecessary or non-essential items in the current scenario. The legislator revealed a series of contracts in public institutions that could well have been done after the emergency, or whose funds could have been prioritized for health and education.

On March 30, the Ministry of Finance awarded $188,237 in contracting travel services for the issuance of air tickets on national and international routes, that is, in the month that quarantine was decreed in Ecuador.

With this scenario, on April 30, 2020, the Ecuadorian Government authorities unilaterally resolved to cut the amount of 51 public universities, which directly affects the teaching and administrative staff. Just a month earlier, the Secretary of Higher Education had agreed to work the cuts together with each university, to optimize and rationalize spending. But this never happened. The news caught the rectors by surprise the next day.

This decision, taken inconsistently, violates the autonomy of the universities, that essential principle that does not defend a political question, but the academic freedom to teach and research (Li and Li 2020).

The dialogue between the Government and the Academy for decision-making that affects the universities is essential. University autonomy has been reduced because it has been made impossible for the university to decide which items can work with the Minister of Finance herself or with the Higher Education Agency, depriving universities of decision-making capacity (Cevallos 2017).

It was a violation of university autonomy that an entity such as the Ministry of Finance tells a university where it has to cut its economic income, that is, deciding university policy.

This autonomy, which embodies the democratic values of free countries, gives public universities independence in the performance of their functions, guarantees them the right to organize their academic structure and the free administration, disposition and control of their resources.
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