COVID-19 and crises of higher education: Responses and intensifying inequalities in the Global South

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Abstract
This special issue contributes to the vibrant debates concerning the ‘responses and intensifying inequalities in the Global South’ underway with regard to COVID-19 and the subsequent crises of higher education. With neoliberal globalization in a deeper crisis by the pandemic, transforming higher education and teaching configurations in ways that appease the rich and powerful players, while simultaneously seeking to neutralize forms of equity in education. Rather than pointing fingers at the broken structures and wider external economic framework, we argue that re-centring the humanistic, holistic and bottom-up approach that frames the post-pandemic higher education offers a more useful framework for understanding educational transformation in the contemporary period.

Keywords
COVID-19, higher education, neoliberal globalization, inequalities, Global South

Even before the global pandemic kicked in, it was commonly acknowledged that university systems around the world were being deeply affected by processes of neoliberalization (Berg et al., 2016; Berg, 2019; Cupples, 2019). The impacts have been widespread and significant, but mostly they involve transforming the university into a space that is understood through ‘a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of [academic] existence in economic terms’ (Brown, 2015: 17). On top of that, the pandemic has taken the education sector by storm; in particular, its initial impact on higher education planning and policies has been a disaster, to put it mildly, and these short-term outcomes alter the way higher education exists (Tesar, 2020). ‘In some ways Covid-19 was a mere accelerator of the processes that were put into motion some time ago, rather than a radical

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changemaker. That is, that something that was inevitable to occur, has suddenly, without consultation, formed a clear, easiest and most logical path forward in a time of crises’ (Tesar, 2020).

In the context of the Global South, in particular, in South Asia, systemic inequalities were reified by the imposition of Western-educated, Macaulay-oriented knowledge production conjoined with new modes of governmentality, in which a particular form of identity construction in the Indian subcontinent emerges from this nexus of colonial discourse and state practice that privileges the so-called upper class. Overall, they complement the pandemic-infused broader debate in regard to inequality in higher education.

In this timely and pressing special issue of Policy Futures in Education, authors from a range of countries representing the issues involving the Global South – Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, Cape Verde, India, Mexico–USA border, Nigeria, Portugal, Brazil and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – explore some relevant, contemporary concerns in higher education caused by the pandemic. This special issue builds on the intellectual labour of these authors.

In the first article, Daniel Malet Calvo, David Cairns, Thais França and Leonardo Francisco de Azevedo explore the conditions of students during the lockdown in terms of their economic, emotional and administrative difficulties and anguishes. The authors problematize the structural situation of the Global South that makes students susceptible to be more affected by disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The core of the article is devoted to analyse step by step the different complaints and situations of inequality and suffering found during the interviews: (i) the lack of support by host and home institutions during the COVID-19 outbreak, even with critical cases of students unable to sustain themselves and buy basic food supply; (ii) the impossibility to find a job during the confinement, on which many Global South students depend for their daily expenses and to pay the rent; (iii) the emotional stress caused by isolation, lockdown and loneliness far from their families, and the news of the virus spreading to their home and host countries; (iv) the adaptation of students to the new situation, engaging with various forms of conviviality online and in person and when possible, including jogging in groups, online yoga and virtual callings to their home countries; and finally, (v) the plans and expectations expressed by the international students regarding the immediate and the far future of their own mobility careers. The authors conclude that higher education institutions (HEIs) must take some responsibility towards their international students during their stays in order to avoid the problems and inequalities they suffer. The authors further suggest that working together with active and resolute student associations would be a good starting point.

In the second article, Saifullah Mahfuz, Md Nazmus Sakib and M. M. Husain problematize the status of the visually impaired students in Bangladesh under the COVID-19 global pandemic. They enquire two inter-related questions: (i) what level and quality of technological access does a visually impaired student have in their HEI (e.g. a university or government-affiliated college operating under a university)? Furthermore, (ii) how are these students academically coping under the pandemic? The authors employ mixed methods for data collection, encompassing a quantitative survey questionnaire followed by qualitative phone interviews. The illustrated findings are instrumental to initiate a collaborative discussion among academics and practitioners in the government, non-government and private sectors in the country and around the Global South.

In the third article, Olga Fellus and Kristin Kew push forth what, too often, remain in the blind spots of scholarly work. These scholars turn the limelight onto the borderland community of Palomas and Demming – two twin towns located across the US–Mexico border. In regular times, almost a thousand children cross the checkpoint every day from Palomas in Mexico to Deming in the United States to attend school. During the COVID-19 school closure, however, accessibility to education was almost completely denied. By employing community action approach and forging alliances with community stakeholders, the scholars collected data through interviews with
educational leaders to identify the challenges in providing equal education during school closure. Findings suggest that the borderland community of Palomas and Deming is united by shared vision, mission and values about schooling and education. The researchers felt further research is needed to supplant the crude tools available and to refine community action research to scale up educational change in borderland communities.

In the fourth article, Vanessa Woicolesco, Marilia Morosini and Jocéliaand Marcelino examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of Brazilian higher education, with emphasis on the consequences for internationalization. The authors obtain research data from a bibliographic review carried out in the institutional repositories of international organizations and Brazilian official bodies. Data analysis reveals that the pandemic intensified social problems. For example, the GDP in Latin America and the Caribbean fell, respectively, by 7.7% and 4.1%. In particular, in Brazil, the state decreased resources for education that negatively affected international mobility. In order to minimize the impacts, universities adopted online collaboration employing digital information technologies. The authors argue that it will be necessary in the future to consolidate strategies that include digital information and communication technologies in the internationalization of higher education and to promote the strengthening of more symmetrical cooperation networks in the South–South and South–North.

In the fifth article, Oyetoro Oyebode Stephen investigates the closure in Nigerian public HEIs caused by recurrent issues relating to the revitalization of the university system, in particular, concerns for workers’ welfare brought about by differing ideologies among academic staff. The author concludes that emerging diversity in the support for or against elements of neoliberalism should be well managed by stakeholders in the university system in order to maximize the opportunities and minimize threats in the post-pandemic era.

In the sixth article, Sarah Hopkyns presents empirical data from a qualitative phenomenological case study in the UAE investigating female Emirati university students’ \( n = 69 \) perspectives on the use of video cameras and microphones during the COVID-19 pandemic period of emergency remote teaching and learning. Students’ reflective writing and researcher observations in Autumn 2020 revealed discomfort using video cameras and microphones due to Islamic beliefs relating to modesty, home as a gendered space, noise and privacy considerations, and linguistic struggles in their English-medium university. The author analyses thematically drawn data on intersectionality and Goffman’s theories of everyday interaction, stigma and relative deprivation, with the aim of exploring complexities in learner identities. She recommends ways to adapt online learning to better suit the cultural and sociolinguistic realities of periphery and Global South contexts. She concludes that greater efforts need to be made toward inclusion of marginalized learners during the COVID-19 period.

In the seventh article, Mansi Babbar and Tushita Gupta highlight various online modes of education and government initiatives that were undertaken in India and beyond to ease the radical shift to digital pedagogy, online examinations and virtual assessments. The authors adopt a documentary research review approach where published research literature across the globe and data from international institutions suggest a plethora of hardships experienced by educators and learners in the transition. Apart from the basic infrastructural and internet connectivity issues, lack of training of students and teachers also emerged as a major challenge. Considering the flip side, the authors highlight numerous advantages of digital education and opportunities that pushed stakeholders to explore beyond physical classrooms. Although the authors appreciate different educational initiatives undertaken by countries, institutional inflexibility and lack of preparedness emerged as major concerns, and therefore, recommendations are made to help institutions sustain such unforeseen crisis situations.
In the eighth article, Fatima Bailey, Amir Kaviani, Jason Johnson, Jenny Jenny Eppard and Hasan Johnson examine the experiences of five faculty teacher-educators in the UAE during the sudden but necessary shift from traditional face-to-face classes to fully online courses during the first year of the COVID-19 global pandemic. These five faculty became co-researchers and participants who explored necessary changes to their pedagogical practices, mindsets and habits of mind. Their explorations are shared through collaborative autoethnographic reflections, narratives and vignettes. Although the study is limited to a very specific, short timeframe and a small number of participants, it is believed that examining these processes allowed teacher-educators to change a possible negative narrative to a more informed narrative. It is expected that other faculty reexamine their own responses and processes to substantial and/or other future changes in higher education.

In the ninth article, Sabrina Ahmed explores how the faculties perceive the effect of higher education policy response on students of Bangladesh. Her study employs a qualitative approach and conducted in-depth interviews of the faculties from both private and public universities. Being a qualitative study, the findings of this study are not generalizable, but it provides a bird-eye view of the current situation. The article analyses how neoliberal features of the response are failing to address student’s learning gap while generating new challenges to strengthen the root of social inequality. Critical inquiry and debate are crucial aspects of higher education in developing a country. This study aims to help the policy makers and practitioners understand how neoliberalism is crippling it, which may prompt them to take appropriate measures to mitigate the damage.

In the tenth and final article, Hari Hara Sudhan Ramaswamy and Sanjay Kumar problematize how international higher education in many developed countries, in particular, the United States (U.S.) and Australia has become a great source of revenue from students of the developing and underdeveloped (least development countries – LDCs) countries. These scholars argue that the systemic issues embedded in the revenue stream continue to create social inequality. What is equally worse is the internationalization policies and agendas that remain unsustainable. The authors highlight that such a situation of inequality is exacerbated by a viciously interdependent circle formed by the erosion of monetary, human and linguistic capital. Calamities beyond human control including COVID-19 amplify social inequality. This article compares the international higher education scenes in the U.S. and Australia which have strong educational collaborations with a developing country like India. The article employs extant literature in partnership with the technique of discourse analysis to provide a critical analysis of the politics of the existing internationalization policies in international higher education and provides suggestions to deliver better internationalization policies.

These authors emphasize towards a better synergy between state and universities in regard to developing an efficient hybrid teaching delivery system.

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