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## Higher education institutions' engagement with the community

### Introduction

The global COVID-19 crisis has affected education systems around the world, including higher education institutions (HEIs), as most of them have been forced to close their premises and temporarily discontinue on-campus learning. This has had multiple effects, both on the student population but also on the *modus operandi* of HEIs. For example, it has affected the learning experience of higher education students pursuing their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees; the sudden and unplanned shift to digital modalities has meant the reconfiguration of whole courses; the pandemic has also affected 'lifelong learning' activities of HEIs, prompting more flexible learning formats, such as short-cycle courses, open lectures and public talks, offered to local communities and learners of all ages.

Yet, particularly in the time of such a severe crisis, with consequences for every aspect of life, HEIs' engagement and support for local communities is vital. With their vast research-based expertise, their experience in knowledge production and dissemination, and their know-how concerning effective and innovative teaching and learning practices, HEIs have a crucial role to play in ensuring that the right to quality education and learning opportunities for all is not compromised by the COVID-19 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.

By reaching out to local communities, HEIs are widening access to their resources and services, which may have longer-term effects on the regular functioning of HEIs. With traditional operations disrupted, HEIs may start to see the appeal of providing more flexible formats, such as short-term courses and modular learning, and reaching out to new target groups, for example by catering to intergenerational groups of learners (*Times Higher Education*, 2020).

In this context, there is substantial evidence of HEIs overhauling, renewing and deepening their community engagement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Defining the topic and related key issues

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### **Roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions**

Higher education plays an important role in advancing the quality of learning and supporting lifelong learning goals. Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) [target 4.3](#) calls on countries to 'ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university' by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Furthermore, higher education institutions contribute to the achievement of many other goals – from reducing poverty, supporting economic growth and increasing access to decent work, to advancing knowledge and innovation around health care and climate change.

While the core mission of HEIs is commonly understood as involving research and teaching, they also have a responsibility towards wider society. This means that HEIs not only serve undergraduate and postgraduate students on campus, but also support the communities in which they are embedded, even more so in times of crisis. According to their societal mission, HEIs have engaged in research on COVID-19 and related social, economic and cultural issues to develop solutions for the benefit of society. Many HEIs have been offering additional online lectures and courses, or extending access to existing courses and online learning platforms, to provide the wider public with learning opportunities during confinement.

### **Students' social engagement and volunteering**

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of higher education students significantly, with regard to learning provision, examination, student mobility and internships, among other factors. Despite the many difficulties, students have proven that they are not simply passive recipients of the pandemic's disruptive effects, but rather active agents in dealing with this crisis. Many student populations around the world have supported or even established initiatives for voluntary social engagement and community aid. Often, these bottom-up initiatives have received direct support and encouragement from HEIs' leadership, and they commonly target more vulnerable groups in the local community. This is evident in the student-led delivery services for elderly and vulnerable people shielding from the virus

(e.g. food shopping, delivery of medication, dog walking, giving out meals to homeless persons) and in the offers of childcare for key workers in the health, food-supply and public-service sectors (Universities UK, 2020).

### **Health and mental health support**

In a [recent webinar on cities' responses to COVID-19](#) held by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, the World Health Organization (WHO) noted the significant impact COVID-19 is having on public mental health, the main psychological impacts being elevated rates of stress and anxiety, and increased levels of loneliness, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, self-harm and suicidal behaviour. According to the WHO, frontline workers, who are often under extreme pressure, and vulnerable groups are likely to experience the highest levels of stress (UIL, 2020). There is also the risk that the COVID-19 pandemic will have exacerbated existing inequalities for those involved in higher education: women in academia already experienced salary inequity and greater workloads and now, with more demanding home environments during the pandemic, women will have been subject to added pressures (Malisch et al., 2020). Higher education institutions – specifically, their departments of health and medicine – have provided mental-health support to communities during the pandemic. For example, the faculty of psychology at Shanghai University of Sport worked with local partners representing women's interests to develop an online course named 'The 15 Mirrors for Women' to provide psychological care and support to women. Other specific measures aim to prevent domestic violence (University of North Dakota, 2020) and help people cope with grief (University of Plymouth, 2020) in times of social isolation. They are offered in the form of printed material, online counseling services and telephone helplines. In addition to mental-health services, medical and nursing students have supported health and social care services directly. Several universities in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (e.g. University of Sheffield and Hull York Medical School) have offered fast-tracked graduation for final-year medical students to support the national health system (Universities UK, 2020).

### **Research, knowledge production and dissemination**

With the emergence and rapid escalation of COVID-19, reliable research and knowledge have taken on a new significance. Scientists in different disciplines have largely contributed to the distribution of reliable, research-based and accurate knowledge about COVID-19 and its social, economic and political effects. This includes sharing and interpreting facts and findings about the virus itself, such as health risks, protection measures and up-to-date information about the local and global spread of the virus. Medical departments and university laboratories have produced coronavirus test kits, donated ventilators and personal protective equipment and shared information with the public via numerous media channels (Sursock, 2020). Universities are also at the forefront of COVID-19 vaccine research and are making some of the most promising forays into this area of scientific advancement (University of Oxford, 2020). Research and knowledge dissemination by universities extends beyond the medical field and addresses changes in the labour market and the impact of the pandemic on social relations. Research has also produced well-grounded scenarios for future development related to employment, the protection of human and civil rights, social change, the situation of vulnerable groups and international relations. Higher education institutions are disseminating this research and knowledge either among local communities through public information campaigns or to governments directly to inform national response plans. This has served to counteract the spread of misinformation, rumors and panic.

### **Online and distance learning**

Campus closures have compelled higher education institutions to bolster their online and distance learning provision. Through new partnerships with enterprises specializing in online learning and technology, HEIs have begun to seek more versatility in their provision of online learning by exploring



new tools for teacher training and student engagement (Kandri, 2020). Efforts to strengthen online and distance learning have been accompanied by measures to widen access. In order to avoid exclusion, many universities have made laptops and 4G internet devices available to economically disadvantaged students (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, HEIs have made a wealth of online resources available free-of-charge temporarily (Yale University, 2020; Max Planck Institute of Colloids and Interfaces, 2020). Whether born of altruistic community spirit or of a determination to reach new demographic groups during a period of uncertainty, HEIs' expansion of digital resources has widened access to online learning, as has the implementation of free general-interest courses targeted at adults. It is important to note that the examples here mainly apply to those parts of the world with good internet connectivity; in areas with low connectivity, the implementation of open and distance learning during the pandemic has been challenging. Nevertheless, in these ways, many HEIs have engaged more directly with the community during the COVID-19 pandemic and removed some barriers to higher education in the process.

## Lessons from past practices and the current crisis

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### Providing online learning opportunities to the wider community

As mentioned, many institutions have not only upscaled online learning provision since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, but have also widened its scope. For example, the University of Glasgow in the UK has made numerous short adult education courses available online through a partnership between its Centre for Open Studies and the Hunterian Museum. The courses cover topics such as history, archaeology, languages and art. Additionally, the university has delivered civic engagement lectures on significant events in modern American history. These general interest courses target adults and reach beyond the university's traditional student population.

Similarly, the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile has implemented open online courses, webinars and videos aimed at demographically diverse audiences. Some course materials cover virus-related topics such as how to use personal protective equipment and provide basic respiratory care. The university's Coursera online platform delivers a further 20 online courses. An example supporting the local economy comes from Aberdeen's Robert Gordon University with its initiative to offer 400 fully-funded places in short online courses focused on strengthening businesses and providing individuals with skill development opportunities (Universities UK, 2020). Other HEIs are using the [Coursera platform](#) to make online courses available to wider audiences, particularly on the topic of COVID-19. An example is the series of free public health courses provided by universities around the world, including 'Science Matters: Let's Talk About COVID-19' by Imperial College London and 'Global Health: An Interdisciplinary Overview' by the University of Geneva. To further engage adults in online learning, some higher education institutions are seeing the value in offering virtual tours catered to adult learners (Murchison, 2020).

### Utilizing expertise in health and mental health

Some of the most prominent practices of community engagement at HEIs in response to COVID-19 have emerged from faculties and departments of medicine and health. Bahir Dar University in Ethiopia has developed and distributed information leaflets about COVID-19 to students and local people. Medical experts at the university have also trained regional health professionals. To support the public in terms of mental health, the American University in Cairo (AUC) has shared resources and expertise through its Coronavirus 'Keep Calm and Stay Strong' Toolkit' (American University in Cairo, 2020). This publicly available resource, co-developed by the university's Department of Psychology and Centre for Student Well-being, covers such pertinent topics as emotional health, stress prevention, meditation, managing anxiety and coping with social distancing and quarantine.

HEIs have complemented their direct engagement with communities by pursuing medical advancement and formulating scientific responses to the virus. For example, the biomedical department in the School of Life Sciences at East China Normal University produced a test kit to diagnose COVID-19 in just 10 minutes (ECNU, 2020). The University of Swansea in the UK capitalized on an existing partnership with Wuhan Union Hospital in China by facilitating peer learning between local clinicians in Swansea, who were facing the onset of the pandemic, and medical professions in Wuhan, who were able to offer advice after months of fighting COVID-19 (Swansea University, 2020). Engineers at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, United States of America, have worked on developing a device designed to 'split' a ventilator, so that each machine can support multiple patients (Denny, 2020). In Macao, a 'Specialized Subsidy Scheme for Macao Higher Education Institutions in the Area of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences' has been launched as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Higher Education Bureau of Macao, 2020).

### **Facilitating student mobilization**

Many of the community engagement practices at HEIs have been driven by student volunteers, who have mobilized to support local communities with encouragement from institutional leadership. Their efforts have been aided by pre-established partnerships. In St. Louis, USA, more than 100 students at the Washington University School of Medicine volunteered to work on the city's contact-tracing system. Washington University is a community partner of the city of St. Louis, and so the infrastructure was already in place for students to support the local and state health departments (Sauerwein, 2020).

In Japan, students at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies also volunteered their time and effort to launch a [website](#) available in 13 languages with information about the latest COVID-19 developments for non-Japanese speakers living in Japan. Around 70 students regularly translate Japanese news and information provided by the national and municipal governments (*Kyodo News*, 2020). In Upper Assam, India, students initiated a campaign called 'Mask is Must' to raise awareness of personal protection in remote villages. Coordinated by Digboi College through the National Service Scheme (NSS) of India, student volunteers have shared information, distributed masks and conducted door-to-door campaigns (Ojha, 2020).

## **Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions**

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### **Diversify learning content and provision**

The nature of learning provision had to change drastically as lockdowns were imposed around the world. Even as restrictions loosen, there is an enduring need to rethink and diversify learning provision at higher education institutions. Open and distance learning (ODL) strategies for the wider community can be an effective starting point. Rethinking learning provision means revising curricula to allow for more flexibility and accessibility. It also involves integrating issues related to social responsibility into curricula to raise awareness and change attitudes. To address the severe economic impact of the crisis, HEIs should encourage an entrepreneurial spirit among students, researchers and external stakeholders through targeted course offerings and investments. This issue note has showcased some of the many ways in which HEIs have responded to COVID-19 by increasing community engagement; now, it is vital that learning programmes offered by HEIs reflect society's needs (PRIA International Academy & Association of Indian Universities, 2020). In this respect, universities should consider integrating the concept of social responsibility into their curricula and linking it with the 17 SDGs of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and particularly SDG 4 on education.

### **Recognize the value of partnerships**

Community engagement initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed how small student groups and individual HEIs can effect meaningful change by demonstrating creativity and proactivity.

Measures taken by institutions and their learners have had a profound impact on people's lives in recent months, though it is important to note that some of the most effective actions taken are the result of new or existing partnerships. Examples include partnerships between HEIs and hospitals, municipal governments, national governments, online course providers and museums. This is only a snapshot of the collaborative partnerships led by HEIs. They can widen access to learning, create networks for knowledge exchange on teaching and learning, adapt curricula in response to new challenges and the needs of society, design support systems for vulnerable students and increase investment in higher education (Universities South Africa, 2020). While initiatives for community engagement are often devised by individual institutions and student bodies, they are enhanced greatly by partnerships. In addition to local stakeholder relations, HEIs can further strengthen and widen the scope of their social responsibility missions by collaborating with partners in other countries. Effective communication and information exchange among all partners is a key criteria for successful partnerships at any level, particularly in times of disruption.

### **Increase stakeholder involvement in research**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of immediate research by higher education institutions. Scientific studies on the virus and the social, economic, political and educational impacts of restrictions put in place to curb its spread have received media attention and are influencing governments' response plans and policies directly. The pandemic has demonstrated the relevance of research, not only to provide facts and guidance but also to develop new models for sustainable living. The demand for research is growing and generating new expectations, pressures and opportunities for HEIs. As a result, some are now receiving additional funding and subsidy schemes to strengthen research capacities, both in response to the current pandemic and in preparation for future emergencies. With the societal importance of research reasserted, HEIs must ensure that it remains relevant to communities by involving diverse groups of stakeholders in research projects whenever possible. For example, young people are one of many groups severely impacted by the pandemic, with futures thrown into doubt and the subsequent uncertainty impacting physical and mental health; this has prompted calls for youth-led research on the impact of COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2020a). There is a need to ensure youth involvement, as well as that of other stakeholder groups, in research undertaken by HEIs during and beyond the pandemic.

To ensure a long-term impact and to use the transformational potential of this crisis, the key messages highlighted above must be addressed in both higher education policy and institutional strategies. Specifically, social responsibility and community engagement should be defined as a mandate of the higher education sector, funding for such initiatives provided, and such services to the community acknowledged as a criterion for academic merit, for both the institutions and the individual research and teaching staff involved.

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## About UNESCO Education Sector's Issue Notes

UNESCO Education Sector's issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; Teaching and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development.

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by: **UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning with support from the Section for Higher Education.**

## Stay in touch

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