

## HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE POST COVID-19 WORLD – LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES

**Susan TOWNSEND**

*North Arizona University  
Flagstaff, Arizona, US  
[smc6940burt@gmail.com](mailto:smc6940burt@gmail.com)*

**Elena NICOLAE**

*Bucharest University of Economic Studies  
6 Piata Romana, District 1, Bucharest, RO  
[elena.nicolae@rei.ase.ro](mailto:elena.nicolae@rei.ase.ro)*

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the impact the sanitary crisis has had on education in general and on higher education in particular all over the world. There is already a large amount of literature documenting the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on education and it is all freely accessible. This in itself is a result of this pandemic and part of a growing trend towards open and free access to the results of research. This paper focuses on higher education issues by attempting to integrate the literature and data available and making sense of the many issues surfacing. The Boston College Center for International Higher Education, for example, puts forward figures from the beginning of April 2020 showing that higher education institutions closed in 170 countries and communities and that COVID-19 disrupted over 220 million tertiary education students representing 13 % of the total number of students affected globally. The figures may differ depending on the period, moment, and measurement methods, but most experts and researchers view the implications for higher education as mostly negative. The same source considers that the effects of the health crisis on the higher education sector will amplify the already existing gaps and inequalities between learners, institutions, and countries. Experts from around the world seem to agree that although there will be significant variations of any possible such scenarios at a global level, there is a clear likelihood that universities in developing countries will be more affected than those in developed economies. Also, the effects on the internationalization of higher education are important both in terms of universities' incomes and market shares and, mainly, in terms of students' satisfaction and quality of learning. The majority of universities everywhere responded to the crisis with a quick movement of their programs online. This proved to be a challenge for all the parties involved: university leadership and management, teaching staff, students, and the rest of the stakeholders of higher education in the respective communities. The research methodology is mainly qualitative, analyzing, and integrating sources of literature, academic, professional, and investigative, as well as the authors' own experiences in two diverse organizational higher education contexts. The data used in our research is from available, public sources. The paper aims not only to raise relevant questions but also to offer some possible suggestions or at least highlight some issues that might help decision-makers to prepare for the post COVID world.

### **Keywords**

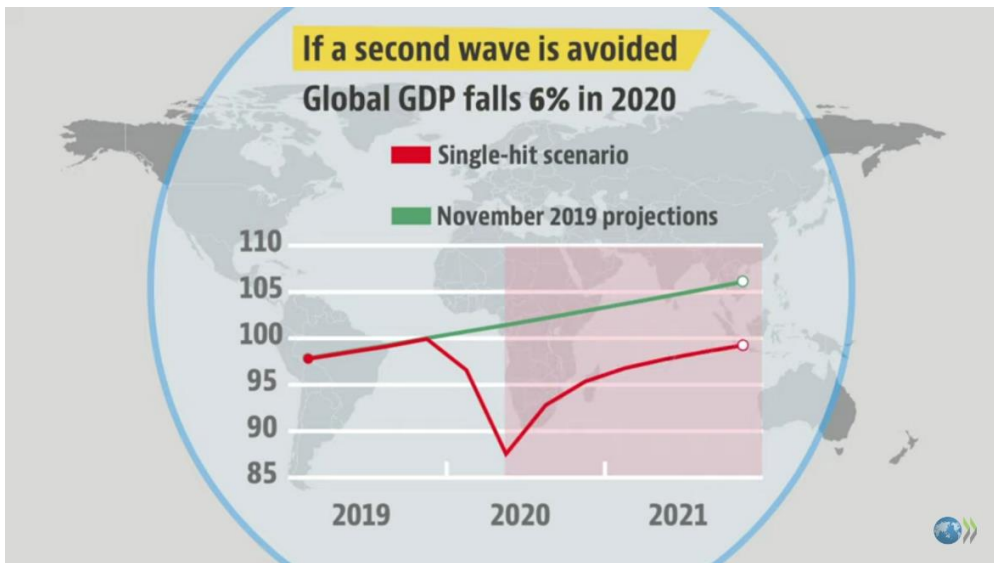
Higher education, COVID-19, higher education internationalization, online education, leadership challenges, impact on learning.

## Introduction

The sanitary crisis that started with the spread and acknowledgment of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) between December 2019 and early 2020 has clearly changed the world. The rapid spread of the disease required formerly unimagined strict quarantine measures not only in China but in many other parts of the world, though not everywhere. Those measures influenced and, in some cases, seriously affected the lives of the people kept in isolation.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been serious and extended beyond people's physical health and lives to provoke a variety of psychological problems, such as panic disorder, anxiety, and depression (Mazza et al., 2020; Nadolu, 2020). No matter how tragic and dramatic those effects continue to be, some not even identified and others not entirely evaluated, the large concerns are those triggered by the economic, social and, possibly, political effects of the pandemic which have added to the already existing and increasing turbulence of a world characterized by the World Economic Forum's *The Global Risks Report 2020* as an "unsettled world" (p. 8) even before the pandemic was acknowledged for what it was. How does an "unsettled world" look like? In the words of the President of the World Economic Forum, Borge Brende, such a world is characterized by a polarized political landscape, by dramatic changes in the natural world and the climate, and by a profound need of the world leadership to repair and strengthen the world's systems of cooperation if humanity wants to survive as a species. This might sound rather dramatic, but there are more credible voices who join those who believe so (Harari, 2020; Slaughter & Hines, 2020; Human futures, 2019).

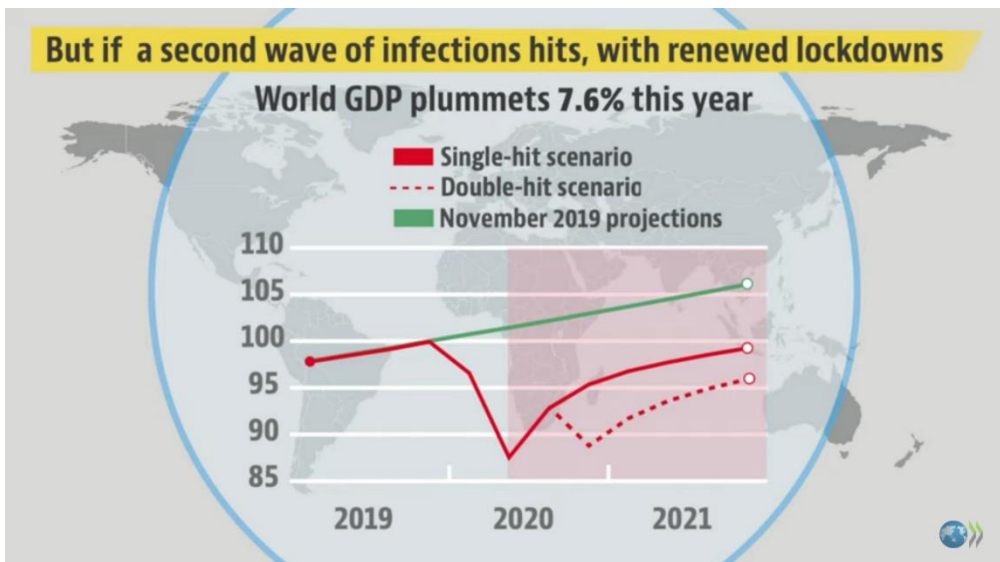
The pandemic created a new list of people considered usually most successful both in terms of public visibility and of incomes. This list shifted from football/baseball players and other athletes, pop and entertainment artists, not to mention politicians, doctors, nurses, social workers, and mainly medical researchers who suddenly became essential to understand and overcome the mechanisms of the virus transmission and treatment. Suddenly human society is forced to understand which jobs are really important and which are on the market only to help others make more money and generate more income which continues to be unequally distributed (Hanauer & Beinhocker, 2015; Mair, 2020). There is an abundance of information on all aspects and possible impacts the COVID-19 might have on the large diversity of human activities from the economy to the environment. However, the authenticity and objectivity of the sources which provide information are very often difficult to discern. Therefore, the authors decided to present the data the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) put together to fight disinformation and help navigate ambiguity during the crisis. The OECD's specialized researchers for economic forecasting have put together two possible scenarios which are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below. Figure 1 is built around the situation in which the virus continues to drawback and can be controlled.



**Figure 1. OECD's first scenario is based on the containment and control of the virus.**

Source: <https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/june-2020/>

Figure 2 presents a possible scenario in which a second wave of rapid contagion breaks out in the second part of 2020. The conclusions of the OECD researchers are in both cases pessimistic showing a severe contraction of the global economy, with unfortunate effects on the social and political life.



**Figure 2. OECD's second scenario is based on a new outbreak and rapid contagion of the virus.**

Source: <https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/june-2020/>

Mair (2020) considers that such a grim economic perspective allows four possible future scenarios: “a descent into barbarism, robust state capitalism, radical state socialism, and a transformation into a big society built on mutual aid.” Analyzing all four possibilities, Mair, a research fellow at the University of Surrey, considers that all of those futures are possible, but he mostly fears, the “descent from state capitalism into barbarism”. Mair’s ideal future would be a blend of state socialism and mutual aid, by which he means a strong and democratic state capable of building stronger and healthier public systems, of protecting the vulnerable and responding to and enabling its citizens to form mutual aid groups rather than working meaningless jobs.

At the same time, McKinsey & Company (2020 a) based on a survey of more than 2,000 global executives show the same cautious and grim views on the economy and its recovery after COVID-19. If this is true in North America and the developing markets, business leaders in China and India are growing more optimistic. There are many different evaluations of the COVID-19 crisis and relatively as many possible solutions – some optimistic, some scary. The most serious ones highlight the critical flaws of our present systems. Most effective responses to this crisis consider radical social change as vital and the premises for that change is investing in people through education and health.

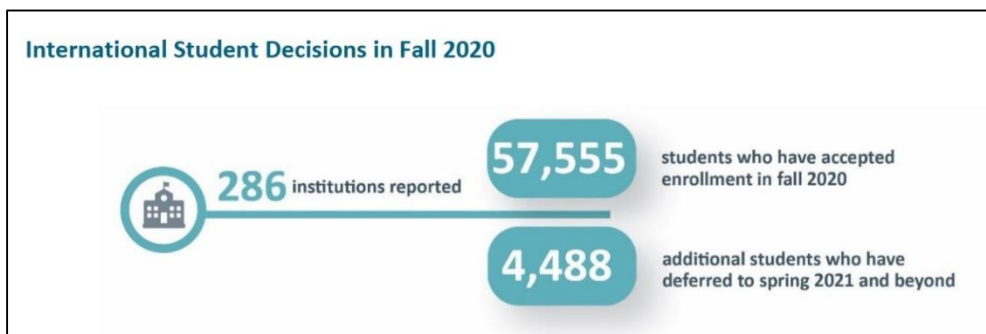
### ***Challenges for education***

This paper intends to explore higher education issues by attempting to integrate the literature and data available and making sense of the many issues surfacing when we look at the system of education worldwide, with apparently so many differences, but in essence so similar. The Boston College Center for International Higher Education, for example, puts forward figures from the beginning of April 2020 showing that higher education institutions closed in 170 countries and communities and that COVID-19 disrupted over 220 million tertiary education students representing 13 % of the total number of students affected globally. Based on the UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, continuously updated, their website gives the latest numbers (UNESCO, 2020a) of affected learners along the spectrum of all levels of education as 1,184,126,508 affected learners, 67.6% of total enrolled learners which represent schools totally closed down in 143 countries. Those numbers had been bigger at the peak of the crisis showing that almost 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries, in other words, 94% of the world’s student population, had been affected (UNESCO, 2020 b).

The above figures made the UN Secretary-General António Guterres consider that COVID-19 has created the most severe disruption in the world’s education systems in history and is threatening a loss of learning that may stretch beyond one generation of students. Guterres underlined that the educational crisis, mainly a learning crisis, which in itself is an important discussion however impossible here, had been evident before as well. And he strongly emphasized that unless national authorities and the international community collaborate to define education as a priority on the recovery agendas and to invest in education the world could find itself facing “a generational catastrophe” that could trigger loss of human potential, undermine decades of progress, and exacerbate entrenched inequalities. This is even worse in countries like Romania where education has been a priority only rhetorically in the last three decades (Nicolae 2015, pp.31-33).

What is also relevant in the UNESCO article for the present discussion is that tertiary education is likely to register the highest dropout rate and, a rather terrifying thought for universities all over the world, with the grim consequence of a projected 3.5% decline in enrolments which means 7.9 million fewer students. Of course, each higher education system has its specific worries and concerns, but all over the world tertiary education is mainly apprehensive about the economics of enrolments.

In the US, Canada, the UK, or Australia, to mention only some of the countries in which international students bring important revenues to the domestic higher education markets and even to the economy as a whole, this is very evident. As Times Higher Education (2020) underlines, in the US alone, Chinese students represent 33.7 % of the international student population, and Indian students make up 18.4 %, in other words, 52.1% of all international students in the US are Asian. In a report of the UK Institute of International Education (IIE), the author, Mirka Martel, points out the number of international students expected to enroll in the autumn of 2020 for the next academic year. We present in Figure 3 some of the data presented by Martel (2020, p.11) based on a survey of 286 US institutions.



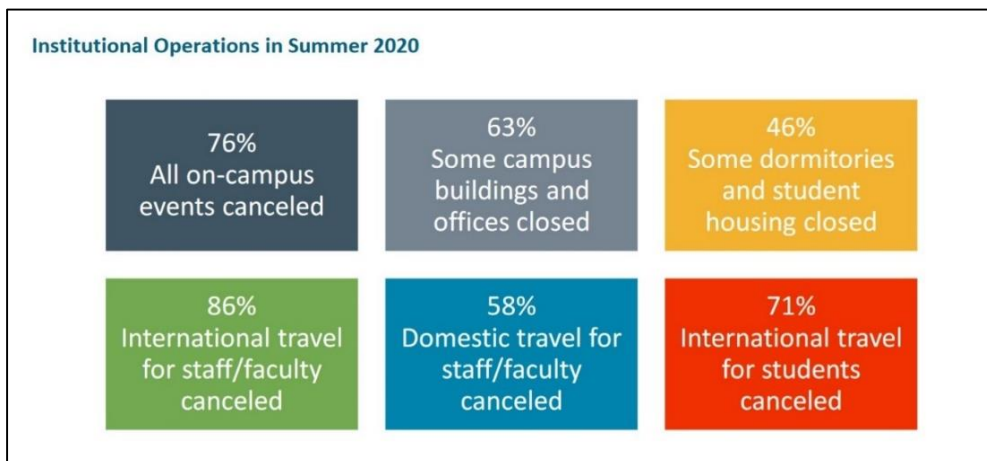
**Figure 3. US colleges and universities offered flexible options for admitted international students to encourage their enrolment.**

*Source: Martel, 2020, p.11*

The institutional flexibility we mention in the title of Figure 3 is particularly significant if we note that from the above numbers of international students 52.1 % are coming from Asia and their travel and visa arrangements are uncertain due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the unpredictable future economic and social realities. This flexibility means various options for enrolment for admitted international students, either as shown in Figure 3 with some students planning to begin studies in the fall of 2020 while others expressed their intention to postpone their studies to a future semester in 2021 or even later. Another option for international students is online registration in classes, however not without its risks and difficulties for universities. Therefore, higher education institutions are proactive in approaching students personally and providing several enrolment alternatives to prevent withdrawals. Martel's report (2020, p.11) underlines that most surveyed institutions "are frank in reporting the challenges of virtual enrolment, including concerns about decreases in enrolment, less student engagement with faculty and peers, and access and ability to attend online classes".

As Blankenberger & Williams (2020) observe the COVID-19 disruption of higher education, which they actually call a catastrophe, may have wide and challenging

impacts on areas such as budget, enrolment and recruiting, research, course delivery, and accountability and assessment. If we look again at the way the summer operations of US higher education institutions have been affected, see Figure 4, then we have a clearer picture of the massive impact of the COVID-19 crisis as surfacing from Martel (2020, p. 4) and on possible future effects.



**Figure 4. Responses by surveyed US colleges and universities to COVID-19 in summer 2020.**

*Source: Martel, 2020, p.4*

Blankenberger and Williams (2020, p.2) emphasize that all those areas they mentioned and their major effects, some of which are presented in Figure 4, are areas for which the management and leadership of higher education institutions need to prepare as well as the relevant policymakers at a macro level in each educational context. Blankenberger and Williams (2020, p.2) consider that teaching is an important area of reflection and needs innovation in the shifting to online formats if we want learning to be effective. They put forward the proposition that the role of higher education for the advancement of social equity is crucial and, therefore, institutional integrity and accountability will be essential for institutions in the COVID and post-COVID era for survival and recovery. However, the way higher education chooses to respond to the challenges underlined is mainly a political decision and such decisions are the competence of the leaders of institutions of higher education. The conclusions of Blankenberger and Williams (2020, p.14) emphasize the interconnectedness of the higher education ecological system through its “elements—people, place, physical technology, social technology, wishes and ideas, catastrophe, and personality”. In a trust market, as the market of higher education is, Blankenberger and Williams firmly state that institutions and people cannot function without integrity and accountability.

Altbach and De Wit, (2020) rightly consider that being aware of the dangers of generalizations, particularly in the middle of an unprecedented crisis, we may assume that the consequences of the pandemic for higher education will be major and mostly negative. The post-COVID-19 world will be one with increased gaps and inequalities between learners, institutions, and countries. Altbach and De Wit reckon that although there will be significant variations across the international higher education scene, the

most probable scenarios is that universities in the less developed parts of the world will be affected more severely.

### ***Online education***

Online education is not something new or a mode of delivery that higher education has not been aware of the present pandemic. We can say that most universities in the developed and even less developed world have an online platform for blended learning. The technical specifications of those platforms and what staff and students do with them is another story, the truth being that a large proportion of academics have complained of being “forced/pushed” online when the COVID-19 crisis was acknowledged for a pandemic. At the same time, learners/students came to realize that learning in a complete, forced virtual environment is harder and more demanding than accessing online courses by choice. And also, that there is a need for special competence development.

Murphy (2020) argues that there is a clear difference between online education by choice and “emergency elearning”. When Goldie Blumenstyk (2020) of the “Chronicle of Higher Education” interviewed the owners of Noodle (a company offering support to schools and universities to transition to eLearning) about the eLearning transition they suggested that “these events could prompt colleges to stop distinguishing between online and classroom programs.” In other words, the administrative choice for online education, while preserving the existing levels of tuition by using massive online courses that learners would access by free choice, would change the situation.

Murphy (2020, pp.493-495) using the Copenhagen school securitization theory explains how a certain topic can be changed into a critical “security issue” through discourse. In the present discussion, this applies to face-to-face education which was securitized during the pandemic. By underlining that social distancing is an appropriate response during the pandemic, Murphy also draws the attention to the dangers of “removing face-to-face education from the realm of normal discourse” and of talking about “mandatory eLearning programs as a means of public austerity” that are trying to “normalize emergency eLearning protocols. Murphy underlines that discussing and reflecting on the risks of normalizing emergency eLearning is different from denouncing online learning in general. And he brings to the discussion some positive contributions of online education such as addressing the digital divide, the possibly increased access to education in rural communities through the research into the portability of eLearning, the advantages of asynchronous eLearning for wider access.

Particularly relevant to the present discussion is Murphy’s observation that hybrid or blended forms of delivering content in traditional higher education institutions could contribute to the improvement of the quality of face-to-face teaching by moving lectures online and preserving interaction and mainly questions from learners to instructors to clarify issues for in-person sessions which traditionally are known as seminars.

### ***Higher education leadership during a pandemic***

We already mentioned before the role of leadership in the section about the implications of the COVID-19 crisis over higher education. Most areas of impact require decisions at a macro (social) and mezzo (institutional) levels. Those are clearly areas of intervention

for decision-makers at organizational and governmental levels. However, from the literature studied and from the personal experience of the authors of the present paper, we claim that a lot of effort was required from the individual academics to move online with enormous pressure both on the university staff and the students in an unprecedented context.

QS, Quacquarelli Symonds, who define themselves as the world's leading provider of services, analytics, and insights to the global higher education sector, has published a survey of prospective international students to which approximately 11,000 respondents contributed and another survey of about 400 higher education professionals in universities across the globe. The results have been published in the QS White Paper, *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Global Higher Education*, (2020). The education professionals have been asked to contribute their thoughts on how their higher education institutions answered the crisis and the coronavirus problems. Most answers underlined the following issues: "Online learning; International coordination and collaboration; Proactive, preventative measures; Strong university leadership; Flexibility for assessment deadlines and exams; Stricter sanitation initiatives; and Clear communication from university leadership and administrators" (p.14).

The role of leadership is important and so is the communication among all the stakeholders in the process of higher education. The QS White Paper quotes one US professor who says that it is important that universities do not minimize the difficulties and the risks of the crisis. We find this very important as usually management and leadership tend to use optimistic discourses to offer a safe and ... picture even if most decision-makers admitted not knowing what was going on: "Higher education should lead the way in showing a calm and measured approach to crisis management while remaining decisive and effective without minimizing or dismissing credible risks."

Harvard Business School, HBS, (2020) adapted its executive programs immediately to a world under a pandemic and produced for their alumni, in open access format, a series of virtual events to help them navigate through the crisis. The HBS faculty rightly point out that Covid-19 is a medical phenomenon, but the COVID-19 CRISIS goes beyond that reaching to the deep structures of our entire world. To approach it successfully leaders have to manage the Covid-19 event as a whole, not look at the various disparate effects. In the view of the HBS team the elements that leaders have to consider when dealing with the crisis are: 1) Medical; 2) Financial; 3) Supply Chain; 4) Economic; 5) Psychological and 6) ... unforeseeable elements. Obviously, this is a business approach. However, since higher education has been pushed for some time now to operate as close as a business (see Nicolae, 2015, pp.37-39) as possible, particularly in the US and also in Romania as a wishful project rather than a reality, we can easily replace the "supply chain" component of the above with the student recruitment and enrolment activity of universities and get a framework that works for higher education as well. The HBS asks the simple and honest question that relatively few leaders dare to ask: "What do we do ... when no one knows what to do?" pointing out that this is what is generally referred to as crisis leadership. Admitting they have no "pre-cooked answers", the HBS team offer instead of the "best process" which everyone can apply to their situation. The best process is simple and clear to understand, but difficult to follow and to apply under pressure and in conditions of total uncertainty. The best process means that 1. we need to avoid the temptation of immediate answers as most of them will be proven wrong; 2. constantly remember and remind others as well that we don't understand the big



picture because of its continuous change so we need patience for the process of learning; and 3. Put in action the best process possible with the best people available.

However, to put into practice, the best process available to us and to use our best people, it is obvious that we, as a society and as individual institutions, need to have constantly invested in organizational leadership development on the one hand and personal growth of our staff on the other. If these requirements have been a constant concern of our academic environment, then the advice given by Thomas Horan (2020) may be well understood and applied in our individual contexts. Horan does not specifically mention the COVID-19 crisis, but his proposal clearly addresses the turbulence through which leaders in higher education need to go to survive institutionally for the benefit of their various stakeholders, and mainly students and staff. In Figure 6 we present the leadership model proposed by Horan under the title “purposeful leadership” (Horan, 2020, p.48).



**Figure 6. The Arc of Purposeful Leadership by Thomas Horan (2020)**

*Source: Horan, 2020, p. 48*

The model is based on Peter Drucker's seminal conceptions on leadership and management and Horan's own long and varied experience of diverse international higher education environments, starting from the individual, going through teams and organizations until the higher purpose of socially responsible management is reached. The author warns us that although the model shows a progression from the "self/individual" through "teams" to "organizations" and finally to "society," we need to think of it in dynamic terms, as the many forces at play in society at large also can and do affect organizations. As in the time of the COVID-19 crisis with yet unforeseeable consequences. And also, it is important before looking at the large picture, to make sure that each component is fully developed and mastered. Only then, can we talk about the synergy or, in Horan's own words, the alignment across all the four levels. Various organizations have various strengths – some organizations may have wonderfully resourceful human resources, but not a clear sense of organizational vision or mission. Others, on the contrary, may follow a great vision for a good cause, through a strong organizational strategy but are constantly plagued by an unhealthy work and team culture.

It is probably appropriate at this point to ask ourselves if our higher education institutions are aware of their “purpose” in today’s world. This is not a simple rhetorical question and it has been asked around public conversations quite a lot lately (Nicolae, 2015, pp.94-100; UNESCO, 2020c). This is an important discussion that we only briefly mention here because its complexity exceeds the scope of our paper. And yet it is an important one as its answer provides support for the main obligation of a higher education institution: should it be towards its students, its research projects, towards society in general or business in particular? It is not easy to answer (Nicolae, 2020, pp.21- 28). If one looks at the university rankings we can see the complexity of the fields they take into account, if we listen to the educational management of universities they want to be as advanced in the rankings with the minimum investments and if we ask the teaching staff we have various answers. Some are interested in teaching and therefore students’ concerns are incredibly important to this category, others are interested mainly in research and consultancy and students’ needs are not relevant for them. And even if there has been an incredible devaluation of teaching and learning everywhere in the world (Polyanina, 2020; Popenici, 2013) suddenly during the COVID-19 crisis the public discourse centered around students, their safety, their needs.

## Conclusions

In this study, we have explored the impact the sanitary crisis has had on education in general and on higher education in particular all over the world. The literature documenting the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on education is already large and growing and it is, in general, freely accessible. This in itself is a positive result of the pandemic as part of a growing trend towards research collaboration through open and free access to the results of research to everyone.

Most of the literature consulted considers that the effects of the health crisis on the higher education sector will continue to deepen the already existing gaps and inequalities between learners, institutions, and countries. Experts from around the world seem to agree that although there will be significant variations of any possible such scenarios at a global level, there is a clear likelihood that universities and people in developing countries will be more affected than those in developed economies. The effects on the internationalization of higher education are also important not so much in terms of universities’ incomes and market shares, though they will be diminished, but mainly, in terms of students’ satisfaction and quality of learning.

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