

A Time of Disruption in Higher Education

Written for OEB20 by Friedrich W. Hesse, Scientific Co-Chair of the GLC, published via <https://oeb.global/oeb-insights/a-time-of-disruption-in-higher-education/> on November 20, 2020

Looking back at the last few months and speaking to university leaders around the world, one certainly gets the impression that a crisis is both a challenge and an opportunity. From one day to the next, universities were forced to rethink and adapt their teaching concepts. Some would say – myself included – this was the time when institutions and education systems were finally catching up on a previously oft-neglected aspect in higher education: the teaching experience. So far so good. But I also believe we have now reached the tipping point.

Even if I do not want to defend this to the last detail, coming from a country with a primarily public university system, I propose to look at the system of tertiary education for a moment as a market – both nationally and internationally.

This market has been experiencing an unprecedented crisis for a few months now. A crisis where its primary business model – namely that of teaching – has been massively challenged. After a first virtual semester, one wonders whether the product will continue to have the same quality as before. And from what we are seeing right now, the results are mixed at best, with student satisfaction already greatly suffering (e.g., Means & Neisler, 2020).

To be sure, most institutions have managed the ad-hoc changeover to emergency remote teaching comparatively well and students and teaching staff have in many cases found creative individual solutions. However, often enough this emergency response meant a trivial translation from classroom teaching to virtual teaching without a coherent institutional strategy in place. Here, and we can see this from the accompanying research on the traditional MOOCs model, quality suffered (e.g., Reich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019). Many institutions have further reacted with simplified examination procedures, which would bring us into a downward spiral that should not be continued for another semester.

In addition, many universities in the world finance themselves largely through tuition fees. A significant proportion of these come from foreign students. With a complete halt to global student mobility and difficulty in adequately catering to students abroad, a massive source of income for these institutions has begun to falter.

The answer to both problems can only be a strategic switch to well organized and quality-assured digital teaching coupled with better collaboration between instructors and institutions worldwide. Especially since from the market perspective, a crisis is always a moment of disruption. Some players were undoubtedly better prepared for the current challenge than others, and new

private providers are entering the market. What do higher education leaders need to look out for now?

First, teaching must be understood as what it is. At a time when learning must take place in the digital realm, it wins the strategic upper hand. The value of higher education centers around student satisfaction and good learning outcomes. And as it turns out, learning science has plenty of answers for us. Appropriate digital pedagogy, investment in faculty training and infrastructure, and a focus on social learning experiences and networked learning are crucial for effective digital teaching. These efforts and experimentations need to be scientifically accompanied and evaluated, to ensure that lasting quality standards can be implemented.

Second, universities must collaborate strategically. While international travel is at an all-time low, virtual exchange is more important than ever. If higher education institutions are serious about providing more equitable access and better opportunities for all, learning resources must be made more widely available and best-practices must be shared. We need a collaborative global education system wherein profit is made not by selling exclusivity and prestige, but by creating better learning opportunities for more students worldwide.

Not all universities exist in a fully competitive market environment. But all would do well from looking at the value of their product and using the momentum of the moment to innovate and experiment. They must base their decisions on good science and good practice. And they must act socially responsibly and collaboratively on a global scale to move beyond the moment of crisis.

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