# HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHALLENGES AND MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CRISIS TIMES

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GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Cross-National Perspectives on the Challenges and Management of Higher Education in Crisis Times

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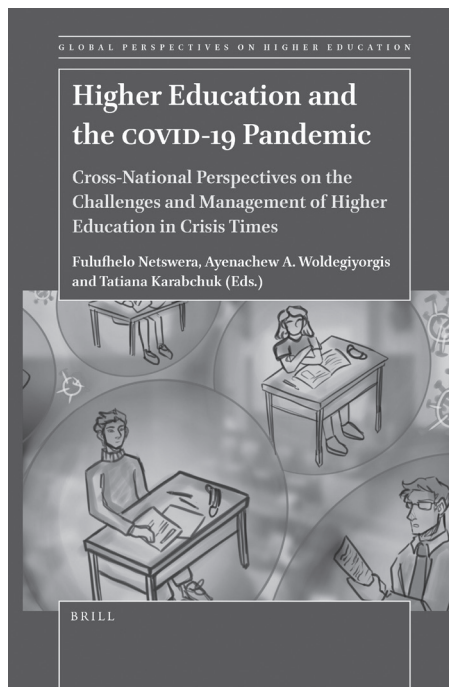
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Among many other books focused on the impact of Covid-19 on higher education, the reviewed one with four parts and 22 chapters has a special focus on Africa which makes it really unique. The editors are Fulufhelo Netswera, Executive dean of the Durban University of Technology; Ayenachew A. Woldegiyorgis, Doctoral student of higher education at the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, and Tatiana Karabchuk, Associate professor at United Arab Emirates University; PhD in economic sociology. Professor Netswera's research interest includes the topics of good governance and academic leadership in Africa. Woldegiyorgis has written several studies about the internationalization of higher education in developing countries. In the center of his works are the issues and challenges of Ethiopian higher education. Tatiana Karabchuk has made lots of research in connection with the educational development in the Middle East.

The Covid-19 infection has been officially marked by the WHO as a global pandemic since the 11th, March 2020. The pandemic forced almost every country all around the globe, to take serious and fast steps, to reduce the spreading of the virus. By declining the personal contacts between the citizens, it rapidly became impossible to rely on "normal" methods mainly in the educational sphere. As we can read in the introductory part of the book, the closure of schools impacted more than 1.6 billion students worldwide in approximately 200 countries. The pandemic attacked the higher educational (HE) systems and almost every aspect of human existence suddenly and unexpectedly: it was very hard (most of all for the cities, where the IT infrastructure was not so developed or simply non-existent) to guarantee the plain changeover from in-person/face to face teaching to an unusual, online form. E-learning quickly became the only possible alternative for traditional education, although its effectiveness and quality were in most of the cases questionable. The book is built on collection of essays and they offer an overview about the most relevant aspects and challenges of the last two years; including the topics of transition to e-education, the actual quality of online-learning and the financial/logistical aspects of the brand-new way of life.

In this book we can read about the challenges of the paradigm shift caused by the pandemic in the normal educational life of many states all around the globe, including among others Oman, Ethiopia, Ukraine, Japan, Australia, the Maldives, Germany and the United States of America. To get sufficient information, some of the authors made several phone interviews with college deans and other persons concerned. Others analysed official documents or used narrative policy, made public opinion surveys among the students and/or the teaching stuff. In the Maldives for example, data were collected with the use of both quantitative (stakeholder survey questionnaires) and qualitative (stakeholder interviews) methods.

Following the first shocks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the stakeholders, researchers, and teachers were forced to test different educational forms, so they could continue the teaching. The aim was to create a win-win situation among the teaching staff and the students with quality teaching even in the online-sphere. Firstly, the decision makers had to develop such a system, which makes it possible to visit classes online. But this journey was difficult with a lot of problems to solve. The main question of the authors was: *"How did Higher Education Institutions (HEIS) respond the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic?"* For example, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation (MOHERI) in Oman made some discounts to help HEIS: they were allowed to suspend teaching in the summer of 2020. And from the fall on, they could continue teaching in an unusual online form. In this "distant period" students were discharged from paying for university housing. There were institutions that found it risky and inconvenient to change their education plans in such a rapid way, so they decided to do nothing: teaching was suspended. In the second case the institution recognized the emergency and continued to educate with the IT tools it had. And perhaps there were HEIS that made "long term adaptation plans" because it is often not clear, what would happen in the (near) future. In Ethiopia, alongside with the lack of technology and infrastructures, the government had to deal with political tension and ethnic conflicts at the HEIS at the same time. It is important to notice, that many challenges were present long before the outbreak of the pandemic: ethnic tension was a permanent factor in the educational and political sector too. Then, after the first Covid-19 infection, the HEIS had to face the "new normal" with a strong dependence on traditional teaching methods and lack of relevant IT-tools. The HEIS have set up task forces to manage the transition to online-learning. At the same time, the government established four national response coordination structures.

The countries analysed reacted differently to the challenges of the pandemic, but a closer look reveals the common steps, that were identical in most of the countries. As a summary, we can say that a three-stage adaptation process was observed worldwide. It is structured as follows:

1. *The countries firstly evaluated the impact of Covid-19:* In many states, borders were closed in order to reduce the spreading of the virus. The Australian government's first provision was a travel ban on China, from where the pandemic started. The main goal was to maintain discipline among the population.

2. *Then began the planning for continuity of education:* It is clear that in many HEIS the necessary infrastructure for online education was not available. This pointed out the need of modernization of the sector and obligated the states to take serious steps in order to support the changeover with funds or with other forms of assistance.

3. *The HEIS continue to teach and live through remote education:* This topic is discussed in more detail in the next paragraph.

Online education has brought many advantages. First of all, it helped to stop the spreading of the virus. At the same time, in the case of Australia, the introduction of quarantine had serious financial consequences. Important to notice, that higher education is a main export element of Australia. Australia is a very popular destination for international students: the international student population of the country represented 8.4% of the total global number of the same indicator in 2019. Unfortunately, the pandemic has hit the sector hard, causing a serious wave of unemployment, with 35,000 job losses only in the case of the staff of the public universities by May 2021. Another negative factor was that teachers — and in many cases students — did not have adequate IT skills. There was also a lack of tools of sufficient quality. At the Maldives, only 12.2% of the students had access to a good internet connection. Lastly: because of the mental distress caused by the physical isolation people needed proper psychological support. But the mental help was missing in many cases. For poorer, developing countries, the shocks were much more severe.

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Even for richer and more developed countries, the provision of expensive technology was a problem, and for lower income countries the situation was even more difficult. A further problem was the impossibility of delivering practical training (e.g., courses with laboratory visits) in the online space.

It is worth paying particular attention to the chapter on the ordeals in South Africa. The main question was: *How to minimalize the dropout-rates in the HE-sector?* To get a credible picture of the difficulties in the sector, we need to overview the history of the continent. Especially in the past, there has been a certain hesitancy to educate the black youth. The aim of the so-called "Bantu education" model of the apartheid-state was to reduce the educational opportunities of black people. They wanted to train them only for labourer. This distinct treatment between the races caused enormous differences even after the years of democratization. The effects can be seen mainly in the financial situation and general qualifications of black people: Deficiency of high-level skills made education even before the pandemic much more difficult. Many students never worked on a computer before.

The South African HE-sector depends heavily on the state: within the framework of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in the academic year 2018/2019 25% of the students country-wide had state funded education. There were dissatisfactions about the fees for a long time. An example to highlight was a sector-wide wave of protests (#FeesMustFall) against the government, so they had to make concessions. But there were still difficulties during the pandemic. Continuing the culture of teaching was a quiet hard task. The Covid-19-Solidarity Fund was established as a rapid answer, which receives donations from all sectors of society. There is also a strong link between HE and economic growth in South Africa, so the state has tried by all means to continue education as effective as possible.

Clearly, Covid-19 has caused drastic damage in all aspects of human existence. However, the coronavirus epidemic has created a need for institutional and structural changes that could not have been effectively implemented before. An entire chapter is devoted to the golden rule: "Don't let a good crisis go to waste". In this case, the guideline suggests that it is possible to introduce reforms during a crisis that would have been difficult to get public acceptance in "peacetime". In the US, the epidemic has been used as a scapegoat to end a number of programs that were not profitable, and of course a number of jobs have been cut at the same time.

There were preliminary predictions about the possible outcomes and impacts of the pandemic on higher education, but the results – more than a year and a half later – are more serious than expected. Lastly it is necessary to notice: this is still and will be in the upcoming years an on-going process; the pandemic's complete effect on higher education cannot be measured precisely nowadays. Along with this fact, during the reading from cover to cover, we can get an in-depth and, in many ways, African insight about the above-mentioned topics. Well-stocked libraries with books on Covid-19 and Africa must have this book. ☀