Higher Education's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Building a More a Sustainable and Democratic Future
Webinar as part of the IAU Webinar Series on the Future of Higher Education
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Session co-organized by the International Association of Universities (IAU), the Council of Europe, and the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy

The COVID-19 pandemic is a watershed. Higher education had to react rapidly and make daunting decisions on how to reorganise teaching, learning, and research, as well as other activities. Institutions needed to take account of the health and safety of students and staff as well as of the approach established by public authorities for addressing the sudden health crisis. Beyond this immediate response, higher education must play a major role in helping to shape a better, more equitable and just post-COVID world.

To better understand "Higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic", the Council of Europe has published a book, co-edited by representatives from the Council, the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy, and the IAU, describing the various ways in which higher education is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is designed to help universities, specifically their staff, students, and partners, contribute to a more sustainable and democratic future.

Some of the authors who contributed to the book are the webinar panelists.

▸ **Panelists:**

- ▪ Ligia Deca, Presidential Adviser to the President of Romania, Department of Education and Research.
- ▪ Paul Pribbenow, President, Augsburg University, USA.
- ▪ Barnabas Nawangwe, Vice Chancellor, Makerere University, Uganda.
- ▪ Naoto Yoshikawa, Vice Chancellor for Global Initiatives, Tokai University.

▸ **Moderator:** Sjur Bergan, Head of the Education Department, Council of Europe.

▸ **Q&A:** Hilligje van't Land, Secretary-General, International Association of Universities (IAU).

▸ **Closing Remarks:** Ira Harkavy, Associate Vice President and Founding Director, Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania; Chair, International Consortium.

Ira Harkavy
Closing remarks

Thank you Hilligje van't Land, very much. First, I want to thank you for convening us, and for IAU's role, and I want to thank you for the wonderful questions that you posed for the panelists; and Sjur Bergan, I want to thank you for moderating this session so expertly—and certainly to thank my colleagues who did just an extraordinary job in providing a rich overview of the differences and similarities in their work.

What I would like to do is highlight what Naoto Yoshikawa, Barnabas Nawangwe, Paul Pribbenow and Ligia Deca contributed as examples of larger themes. One thing that comes across, very clearly, is how influential higher education is as an institution. This is no epiphenomenon; they are not second-tier institutions. It isn't just government or the economy that makes a powerful difference. The comments point to the power of higher education, and indeed, the entire educational sector. When we look at the areas of influence that you all have described, the four of you, they're really significant.

With that in mind, let's turn to some other major points. For Barnabas this crisis created a "dangerous situation." He also said that dangerous situations bring things together--that there were issues before that required people to act, but it took the pandemic for that to happen. And if we think of the areas that the panelists all identified as so central, we can start with health and the role that higher education played, particularly the health professions and medical schools. They also identified other health responses, including providing various supports and medical equipment.

The panelists, in addition, discussed reaching out to communities in need. Naoto said this would not have been possible unless we first dealt with the health problem. The panelists then turned to what higher education had to do concerning its own operation. This discussion focused on the mobilization of higher education as a learning institution adapting to deal with students in appropriate ways -- particularly trying to produce the best online and outreach education possible in these very, very difficult circumstances.

But that wasn't all that was discussed. The speakers raised the dilemmas of inequality and of inequity. These were issues that all identified as occurring in many different areas. And then, of course, the issue that was raised very clearly was that of democracy itself. Ligia indicated the importance of fact-checking and the need to check on issues related to truth and honesty in science, which are powerful examples of why the status of democracy has to be in the forefront. Paul touched on this for the United States -- that democracy could well have become a casualty of the pandemic. He raised the issue of higher education's role, emphasizing that while steps were taken, more needed to be done.

As for the issue of inequality, something that came up very strongly was the issue of the digital divide, and the question of what is the best way of mobilizing online education for it to be effective and of quality.

These areas are very varied and significant, and the discussion indicates that higher education plays a key role in dealing with the pandemic and the many problems that derive from it. What I think my colleagues were brilliantly able to do was to highlight themes that we need to consider now and into the future. I will discuss some of these and then turn to steps forward.

I believe that the phrases that were used very early in the conversation were powerful. Naoto referred to the need for "global citizenship." The idea is that we need to educate our students for more than just careers and technical success. He linked this to the importance of the role of dialogue, the role of conversation, the role of working in a learning environment in which we learn the skills of citizenship and how to work together. That raises the question: How, in this pandemic and post-pandemic world, can this be best done? What kind of priority does global citizenship need to be given in this current period and going forward?

Related to that point was Paul's emphasis on democracy as a social ethic. The idea here is that we're not speaking about democracy in higher education in terms of just educating students to be voters, although that's crucially important, but the idea that democracy needs to infuse the entire society. Paul's emphasis, and the emphasis of all the panelists to some extent, that indeed democracy needs to occur not just in the political realm but in all other aspects of society could not be more important. This issue of "democracy as a way of life" pertains to how higher education teaches as well as how it mixes online and face-to-face education.

The role that higher education has in all the various areas that the speakers identified: health, education, democracy itself, inequities in society is very important. All these areas are components of how one builds what the Council of Europe would term a "democratic culture." That raises the issue of how we 'judge' higher education. Ligia poses a central question, "How do we assure quality?" How do we define quality and what it means concretely, in the new context? It cannot be defined by the same old rankings as before. What are you ranking for when you use the old ranking mechanisms? You're ranking according to the old-world framework, pre-COVID-19. I don't think it worked then, and it will certainly not work now. Paul referred to the idea of "democratic excellence." In the post-COVID world, we certainly cannot assess the quality of higher education without referring to this key idea.

Related to the issue of what we should measure is Paul's claim that we needed to look at the larger role of higher education, with democracy as being crucial. As noted, he called for "democratic excellence," in which a range of aspects and components of human life need to be measured in terms of a learning environment. That idea of "democratic excellence" pushes us to think about things differently.

Barnabas made this excellent point that Naoto and others picked up on -- the idea that the crisis pointed out where problems already existed, and that higher education needed to deal with them. I referred to this point earlier, but it so important that I want to highlight it again. I think Barnabas went so far as to call it a "blessing" to now deal with those problems. Whether a blessing or not, the previous 'normal' was not appropriate for what we need for our societies and the world. That seems to me to be a powerful finding in all the panelists' presentations.

This then raises the issue of what our priorities should be going forward. I will touch on a few of those priorities, and then turn to where we might go from here. One priority clearly, was "cooperation globally." One of the speakers stated emphatically "We are all in this together!" We need each other and we need global community in to solve the problems we face. I just listened to the four speakers today, and I realize how much I learned from the different situations described. I reread the book before today's webinar, but hearing from these four authors made it even more powerful. We need to find better ways to learn from each other.

A key issue, of course, is how do we figure out what is the appropriate mix in different countries of face-to-face and online learning. If you take Naoto's focus on the need for personal face-to-face dialogue [in Japan] and Barnabas's imperative, "We've got to move from that 8% [access to higher education in Africa], we have to, and online is the only way forward," you see different contexts and approaches in different societies that face different issues. Regardless of the specifics, the speakers are all asking how to do we do what needs to be done and do it better than we've done it before.

Now just to conclude with a few general points. In my judgment, we need to lead with what Sjur started with: values. The question that emerges now is the need to reach the highest values of higher education in our individual and collective societies around the world. The values of a democratic purpose, of that broader purpose, not just education for jobs and the market, but education for life, and education for a good society for all, with maximum contribution and engagement, has to be front and center.

The emphasis on access -- the idea that we cannot be exclusive institutions but need to open our doors for learning to everyone, either by opening doors or opening online education -- or both.

If we're talking about access for inclusivity, the focus is not just on one population group but on all populations; higher education needs to reflect the actual composition of our societies. I think this further raises issues of where we go from here to do what needs to be done.

If we want to realize the values Sjur and I have mentioned, then we have to do it globally. As global citizens. But we also have to do it, as Paul emphasized, locally -- locally not just with our students, but with our neighbors. We need to build democratic local communities that connect our learning to the people in our environments, through - as indicated by Ligia - working with the community to develop local knowledge through cooperation and face-to-face interactions

I would like to conclude on the crucial issue of funding, which Ligia raised. I believe that it makes good sense to focus on the democratic purpose of higher education, as well as highlighting higher education's enormously influential role, and the need for access, diversity, and inclusion. That seems to me to be the best platform to secure and even increase funding now and into the future. We need to illustrate in practice higher education's democratic public purpose -- its purpose of helping to achieve a fair, decent, and just society for all citizens, and a decent quality of life in all societies around the world. In short, we need to make the case that higher education is essential for a democratic future.

Thank you to the four speakers for this extraordinary conversation. It has been a pleasure to try to summarize all the wonderful things they have said. Thank you very much.

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