Part 6
Research Education & Research Practice

Ewelina K Niemczyk

Higher Education as a Sustainable Service Provider in a Rapidly Changing World

Abstract

Bearing in mind United Nations' 2030 agenda and achievement of global goals, the conference theme brings attention to exploration of how education adjusted to the unexpected challenges of the global crisis and how lessons learnt can be used to create better education systems. On that note, this perspective piece brings attention to sustainable development and especially sustainable development goal 4 specific to education as well as the VUCA times representative of the fast-page changing world. Description of the above-mentioned notions is connected to the vision of higher education sector as a sustainable service provider. Higher education institutions play an essential role in sustainability since they are not only knowledge producers but most importantly agents nurturing educators, researchers and leaders with potential to contribute to the successful achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. The paper culminates with reflections and considerations about the direction higher education sector should consider to build back better.

Keywords: pandemic, global crisis, sustainable development, SDG4, VUCA times, higher education, South Africa

Introduction

The year 2020 marked by COVID-19 pandemic will remain seen as the time of global crisis impacting life of millions of people at many levels, including their health, loss of employment, and associated financial pressures (OECD, 2020). As a result of implemented restrictions and regulations during the crisis, the education sector was highly affected forcing all educational stakeholders to adopt new practices and activities. Thus, adding an enormous amount of workload for educators who were already struggling to balance all academic activities (Rapanta et al., 2020). The closure of universities and cancelation of face-to-face instruction affected the entire academic community, particularly the teaching practice. Scholars, students, and related support

services had to quickly adapt to virtual platforms. Scholarly literature informs that shifting to online instruction raised several concerns, including the digital divide and a lack of training in effective delivery of online modules. Despite institutional and individual commitment to maintain quality education and student satisfaction via remote teaching, some aspects of online education were difficult to manage due to shortcomings in infrastructure and technological competency. This was a challenging reality especially in less developed parts of the world.

This work is based on literature review and researcher's personal experiences in the past 3 years. Witnessing challenges as well as activities applied to solve them, led to meaningful evaluation of experiences along with lessons learnt in the process. In alignment with the conference theme, this perspective piece will bring attention to sustainable development (SD) and especially sustainable development goal 4 (SDG4) specific to education as well as the VUCA times representative of the fast-page changing world. Description of the above-mentioned notions connect to vision of higher education (HE) sector as a sustainable service provider. Ultimately, reflections are made on the direction HE should consider taking to move from crisis management to building back better.

Sustainability in education

The concept of SD and sustainability received closer attention since the Brundtland Commission report (UN, 1987) that defined sustainable development as: "Development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs and aspirations". This particular description implies the vitality of a long-term vision as opposed to making decisions or taking actions that lead to short term benefits. Although the exploration of SD started with the focus on the environment, currently it includes three main pillars: economic, environmental, and social.

Taking into consideration the challenges that may jeopardise the very existence of humanity and in recognition of the urgency for action, in 2015 the United Nations (UN) with all the UN member states adopted Agenda 2030 for SD and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDG 4 refers specifically to education and finds its realization through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD):

... which aims to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (UNESCO, 2020, p. 57)

Explicating ESD further, UNESCO (2014, p. 12) states:

ESD empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity. It is about lifelong learning, and is an integral part of quality education. ESD is holistic and transformational education which addresses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment. It achieves its purpose by transforming society.

Higher education as sustainable service provider

The HE sector is critically important in the delivery of ESD. In fact, scholarly literature often defines HEIs as sustainable service providers. All HEIs can be guided by sustainability values meant to a) safeguard fair and just society and economy for present and future generations, b) ensure the protection of human, animal, and environmental rights, and c) improve the quality of life for all on our planet. These core sustainability values not only form the basis for the sustainability mindset, but also help to inspire the current and future generation of HE leaders to achieve the SDGs.

During the 2022 UNESCO World Higher Education Conference held in Barcelona, Spain, an urgent message called universities to play a stronger role in the societal transformation needed to achieve the SDGs. The common message coming from the presenters urged HEIs to embrace the 2030 Agenda by making sustainability and SDG literacy a core requisite for all faculty members and students and to connect students with real world problems. Another emerging message implied that transformation for sustainability needs to be approached holistically by universities, more specifically to be addressed in each academic activity.

To a large extent, human beliefs and mindsets drive human behaviours. Thus, the future of humanity, and the planet ultimately depends on humanity's ability to adopt a sustainability mindset in order to solve pressing issues of our time. Within this context, HE as a catalyst for economic and social progress, needs to lead the world to achieve a sustainable future. Current culture/norms at HEIs include trends towards marketisation of HE and the increasing focus on rankings, which drive up competition between universities.

To that end, some leaders question whether transformation of universities can be achieved without first transforming the context in which HEIs operate. We can all recognise that the current environment of HE is not fully conducive to SD. It is rather difficult to pursue it because of HEIs' commitment to competitiveness: pursuit of excellence is very often (mis) understood as pursuit of individual excellence only, which is further supported by funding structures and rankings that only increase the commodification of science and education. This kind of institutional culture may limit HEIs' ability or even potential to practice sustainability.

Therefore, we need to consider sustainable practices to implement but also unsustainable practices to unlearn. This requires simultaneous process of learning and unlearning as a way to revitalize ESD globally. We need to a) carefully craft a less competitive understanding of excellence, b) encourage collaborative practices based on reciprocity, and c) dedicate time and effort to establish academic processes and practices that keep SD as their guiding principle. Overall, the global society needs to become more responsible with environmental, social, and economic capital. Furthermore, there is a need to recognize that this can only be accomplished through partnerships, new ideas and innovations, and comparative work.

VUCA times

Without any doubt we are living in a fast-changing world and VUCA times. The acronym VUCA stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. The VUCA descriptor was first used by the US Army War College as a response to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Basically, strategizing of what would the new world order look like after the end of a cold war and considering new ways of

seeing and reacting. From that point, VUCA became a way of thinking and approaching solutions to the new world order. A brief description of each term as provided by Glaeser (2022):

Volatility – We live in a constantly changing world, becoming more unstable and unpredictable, getting more and more dramatic and happening faster and faster. As events unfold in unexpected ways, it is difficult to determine cause and effect.

Uncertainty – It is becoming more difficult to anticipate events or predict how they will unfold; historical forecasts and past experiences are losing their relevance and are rarely applicable as a basis for predicting the things to come.

Complexity – Our modern world is more complex than ever. Problems and their repercussions are multi-layered and harder to understand. The different layers overlap, making it impossible to get an overview of how things are related.

Ambiguity – "One size fits all" and "best practice" notions have been relegated to yesterday – in today's world it is rare for things to be clear or precisely determinable. The demands on modern institutions and management are more contradictory and paradoxical than ever, challenging our personal value systems to the core.

As stated by Waltraud Glaeser, a VUCA expert: "VUCA is more than a buzzword! It is a way of thinking and approaching solutions to the problems of our digital and dynamic world." The increase in volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity means that we need to seek a new orientation. We need to become fully aware under which conditions we are operating when we consider elements of SD and ESD because this will define our approach to making decisions and taking actions. Simply put, we cannot solve the 21st century challenges and implement sustainable practices and processes with the 20th century mindset when things were more certain and predictable. Decision making under VUCA times must be different that is why we need to consider the current uncertain environment and reflect on lessons learnt during the past 3 years. We need to improve our forecasting and build mindset of a VUCA world, thinking not about going back to the accepted norms but rather anticipate more changes and more complexities coming our way.

Researcher's reflections

Before the pandemic, my institution can be considered a traditional, campus-based institution – with 3 campuses, where students came to attend classes and lectures, to access various physical learning spaces – lecture halls, libraries, laboratories, multimedia centres. Beyond the official curriculum, campus-based life offered a place of belonging and where any number of extracurricular activities take place, where students have a social life. The on-campus social life was disrupted by the pandemic since one of the key measures to fight the spread of the virus was social distancing. So, while distance education pre-pandemic was limited to a few programs and modules, it suddenly became the sole option for maintaining university's operation. Academics and students adapted to the online shift for all activities with various levels of success. Encountering challenges in terms of access to technology and internet; finding time/space to study/work at home; overwhelming unexpected workload for lecturers; research being stopped or restricted.

The restrictions and changes implemented in response to the pandemic at my institution align with reported changes introduced at other institutions that turned solely to online teaching, assessing students' performance, sharing feedback, and graduate supervision, research collaborations, managerial meetings. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS, 2020) reported findings based on a large survey to share insights and lessons from universities around the world with the intention to inform and support other HEIs. The QS report included the following beneficial approaches to pandemic-related crisis management: online learning, international coordination and collaboration, proactive and 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 IAU in turn disseminated its 2020 Global Survey Report (Marinoni et al., 2020) based on responses from 109 countries about the pandemic's effect on HE around the world. The IAU findings showed that almost all HEIs acknowledged the significant impact of the pandemic on their pedagogical practices. In most cases, classroom teaching was successfully replaced by distance teaching, and in some cases institutions still look for solutions to continue teaching online. Many institutions, however, were not prepared to move online and had to close their campuses (mainly in Africa).

Technical infrastructure and online access were identified as main prerequisites for shifting to distance teaching and learning. Yet, low-income nations struggle with investing in digital tools or online licenses, a situation that is aggravated by students from low-income families often having no internet access at home, which not only delays their studies but also affects the completion of their academic year. As Paterson (2021, para. 5) indicates, poorer students "may be less able to afford the cellphone, laptop, data and airtime costs of the shift to online tuition" and, moreover, "may also be forced to return to homes where everyday hardships inhibit their ability to learn".

The IAU report also noted that faculty members found it difficult to transition to online teaching because of the different pedagogical approaches that are required for distance teaching; they were not prepared and often lacked technological skills (Marinoni et al., 2020). The quality of learning and the effectiveness of teaching online depends also on the field of study; in some areas (such as the performing/visual arts or veterinary studies), actual practice cannot be easily replaced by distance teaching (Marinoni et al., 2020, p. 25).

Overall, the IAU Global Survey Report indicated that the quality of provision of online teaching differs across nations as it depends on financial situation, technical infrastructure, teaching staff's ability to adapt to remote instruction, and the actual field of study (Marinoni et al., 2020). Students without access to internet and online communication tools (smartphones, tablets, laptops) are the most disadvantaged, which unfortunately maximizes existing inequalities in education.

The forced shift to move all academic activities online along with the use of new or revised teaching and research methods was challenging. Yet, it also showed effectiveness of new and customized ways of doing and thinking. It can be said that as of 2023, a visible transition was made from crisis management to focus on prospects.

Building back better

Although it is still difficult to predict the end of the current pandemic, we need to make changes for the post-pandemic era and adapt for the future that most likely will

present us with new challenges. VUCA times force us to rethink pre-pandemic research activities and teaching practices and to envision creative and effective ways to move forward in a sustainable manner. To a great extent, it is up to us to shape the future of HE and there is an undeniable urgent need to evaluate what works, what lessons learnt we need to harness, what practices are of the past thus we need to unlearn them, and how to convert challenges into opportunities. We must foster a sustainable ecosystem of HEIs and treat sustainability as innovation's new frontier. As noted in the IAU's Global Survey Report, international insights can provide timely solutions to current challenges and showcase the path forward from the crisis to a better future of teaching and research in HEIs:

> *The overall understanding that our combined efforts generate about the current challenges that institutions and national systems face helps inform future perspectives of and on higher education. International and global perspectives are more important than ever in light of the pandemic and its effect.* (Marinoni et al., 2020, p. 6)

It is evident in the scholarly literature that HEIs are transitioning to a position of identifying sustainable prospects for the future. During the crisis, HEIs were able to overcome many challenges; universities identified potential solutions, and the focus in many cases shifted to opportunities that came with change. Having said that, the ongoing struggles of low-income nations and pressures experienced by under-sourced universities is still evident and must be acknowledged. At the same time, it is important to recognise that having learnt valuable lessons during the pandemic, which showed vulnerabilities in terms of access, equality, and relevance of technological skills, HEIs are engaged in strategic planning for the future.

Making informed decisions based on the lessons learnt aligns with the OECD's (2020) message that the global society needs to "build back better". Although the OECD report refers mainly to economic and healthcare recovery, its message also applies to the education sector because ultimately all elements of society are interconnected. The past shows that education can thrive on change and educational stakeholders have the capacity to develop new skills, enhance existing abilities, and provide quality education. In conclusion, HEIs have a responsibility and remarkable role to play in sharing awareness about SDGs as well as engaging in academic activities in sustainable ways to achieve these goals.

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Prof. Dr. Ewelina K Niemczyk, North-West University, South Africa