

COVID-19 and higher education: Implications for equity, and a return to the common good

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The coronavirus crisis has disrupted almost all domains of human activity. The United Nations (UN) recognises that the crisis exposed [“deep weaknesses in the delivery of public services and structural inequalities that impede access to them”](#). [Concerns are growing that the virus will exacerbate existing social stratification](#), posing a new and unprecedented challenge to social equity. In this context of crisis, it is imperative that we draw on the potential contributions of a wide range of social actors to fight the virus, and place a renewed emphasis on safeguarding social equity.

History tells us that higher education can drive social equity, even within the context of such crises. Universities have offered vital support for their local communities in the wake of [major military conflicts](#) and [natural disasters](#), and provided an important [means for generations of young people](#) to survive periods of economic recession. Having said this, the COVID-19 pandemic differs from previous crises in one key characteristic: the need for physical distancing and a reduction in travel. This compounds the effects of previous economic recessions by undermining tried and tested models of higher education provision. For students, equity in higher education access, experience, and outcomes is under threat. As we envision the post-pandemic university, it is critical that we consciously mitigate the pandemic’s worst effects on social equity, and ensure that recent progress in widening participation is not reversed.

COVID-19’s challenges to higher education and social equity

COVID-19 may have critical consequences for equity in higher education access, experience, and outcomes. In light of ongoing lockdowns and travel restrictions, [the likelihood of further waves of infection](#), and the fears that the migration of tertiary students for the Autumn term make further significant outbreaks [“highly likely”](#), students’ ability to travel is likely to be restricted for the foreseeable future. Such restrictions are particularly impactful on international education. The inability to travel for university inevitably restricts access to higher education, particularly for those [living in rural or isolated areas](#) with no local university, or those without the means to relocate from the familial home long-term. The move to online teaching and learning may mitigate these concerns, but has also exposed the [“digital divide”](#), with vulnerable students more likely to suffer disruption in their experience of higher education. Access to online learning infrastructure is [far from universal](#), and many students must balance learning with care responsibilities. An increase in student drop-out rates is a likely consequence, [the bulk of which may be students from disadvantaged backgrounds](#).

These challenges necessarily raise concerns for the outcomes of higher education, manifested in students' acquisition of knowledge and skills, the strengthening of their agency, and the recognition of higher education qualifications obtained during the pandemic. Moving to online teaching and learning inevitably curtails the campus experience, limiting students' socialisation to new communities of knowledge and development relevant soft skills, which are critical in differentiating higher education graduates in the eyes of employers. Assessment practices are also affected, with many universities organising open-book examinations and [introducing new qualifications](#) for those unable to attend final-year assessments. It remains unclear to what extent new forms of learning and assessment influence students' learning outcomes, and how these will impact employers' recognition of qualifications obtained during the pandemic. The effects on graduate employment are expected to be unequally distributed. [With significantly fewer jobs available in the ongoing economic crisis](#), graduates with developed social networks and embodied capitals will likely be more successful in securing a job. Graduate unemployment will also impact the lives of disadvantaged graduates more severely, as they are more vulnerable to immediate financial hardship.

Revisiting the concept of the common good

Without a concerted sector-wide effort to safeguard higher education's contributions to social equity, recent progress in widening participation may unravel. However, we must guard against wholesale reliance on logics of the [market](#) and [private returns](#) to higher education, that have so dominated since the late 20th century, and threaten to become ever more embedded as the sector seeks to shore up its own interests in response to the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19. Rather, we argue that the search for solutions to the aforementioned challenges may benefit from revisiting the concept of the common good.

We illustrate this with specific reference to two elements of the common good that are particularly relevant to present challenges. The first element is the humanistic vision carried by the common good. The common good envisages a world dedicated to just, equitable, and sustainable development, promoting both individual and shared welfare. UNESCO was first to advance the humanistic idea of common good in contrast to the economic rationales underpinning education globally. UNESCO explains that [“from a ‘common good’ perspective, it is not only the ‘good life’ of individuals that matters, but also the goodness of the life that humans hold in common”](#). Values grounded in our common humanity—equity, solidarity, mutual respect, and social justice—are fundamental to this humanistic approach. The second element is the common good's collective nature, and the idea that it is both collectively produced and shared. According to Deneulin and Townsend, the common good is [“constituted by goods that humans share intrinsically in common.”](#)

These two elements of the common good have important implications for what universities could do to address the challenges of COVID-19. It is urgent for higher education to turn to a humanistic vision. In part, actions need to be and can be taken by higher education to support vulnerable students, whose welfare is intrinsic to the “good life” of the commons. Furthermore, global citizenship education, following a humanistic approach, will need to be emphasized to deal with international tensions and the [rise of nationalism](#). However, against the backdrop of marketisation in higher education, global citizenship education is often seen as an [“add-on” rather than “core business”](#) of universities. A humanistic vision of the common good also involves a communitarian reflection on the [“gulf between campus and community”](#) to ensure that universities engage with their local, national, and global communities in a manner that promotes humanistic values including solidarity, equity,

justice, respect, and harmony. Further, the collective nature of the common good also sheds lights on potential solutions to the financial crisis of higher education, which often impedes higher education's commitment to mitigating inequities. The marketization process of higher education in the past decades, [reflective of the public/private zero-sum assumption](#), needs alteration. The establishment of a more sustainable financial model of higher education would benefit from common participation, including that from the state, in funding higher education and supporting its production of common goods.

The recovery from COVID-19 will be a global effort, and a global humanistic perspective has never been more important. Recognition of our collective nature and joint efforts made across society, including the international community, are necessary. Hence, we suggest a return to the concept of the common good, the central pillar around which a more equitable and sustainable post-pandemic model of education may be built, and a guiding principle by which we may reform our higher education practice.