

Challenges and possibilities for the University during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic

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Professor Kumar, Professor Sudarshan, distinguished colleagues.

It is an honour to keynote today. I am deeply grateful. This is an important conference. I congratulate O.P. Jindal Global University on the initiative. It provides us all with the opportunity to commune with each other in the midst of our common challenge.

Because all of us, Global North and South, Global East and West, every nation, every university, every family, all are caught up in the pandemic. We all share the threat to the people we love, the massive disruption of the economy and democracy, and the existential threat to higher education and research. We know that this threat is with us until a vaccine is widely available. So we need to talk with each other, to find solidarity, to learn from each other and to work together better than before. Although governments are handling this pandemic on a nationally-bordered basis, with some are doing better than others, the pandemic does not respect borders. It flows everywhere. It calls up in all universities the need to cooperate – to cooperate in the research that will overcome the virus, in passing on to our societies the lessons learned elsewhere, and in strategies to sustain higher education itself. University people work together well across boundaries. Because universities are adaptive, flexible, open, multiple, scalable and creative institutions, all universities have a crucial contribution to make, during the pandemic and in the recovery phase. Providing, of course, that universities themselves survive.

In this keynote I want to discuss three challenges we face. These challenges are local, global, and governmental. We are already meeting the *local* challenge,

which is to sustain university education at this time. The *global* challenge is to learn from how different countries are handling the pandemic. The *governmental* challenge is the challenge of politics, policy and university funding and sustainability as we move through the pandemic period.

The local challenge

First, the immediate local challenge. We do not have comprehensive country by country data, but my overall impression is that the pandemic has been handled well by universities, sometimes very well. Many universities moved quickly to move curricula, teaching and communication into online modes. Strong new online delivery prototypes emerged, or were augmented, in the first weeks. Web-related skills are now widely dispersed. Today at this conference you have heard of great examples and you will hear of more.

A crucial element has been the tremendous commitment of administrative staff, and those staff, whether academic or administrative, responsible for student welfare, including stranded international students. While for some academics the retreat into home working may have lightened the load, this has not been the case for academic leaders, or for administrators who deal with students and online delivery. Many people have worked extraordinary hours to keep systems going while retooling them at the same time.

In those initial efforts many people were under the mistaken assumption that the worst of the pandemic would blow over in two or three months. But we now know that we face a longer haul. It could be several years. In some countries, online student contact will be the norm for some time to come. In many countries, there is the ongoing possibility of sudden switches between open and closed delivery. And in certain countries, wishful thinking persists. Universities feel impelled to open as much as they can, while relying on over optimistic projections of the course of the pandemic. Such cases raise the question of the balance between student safety, sustainable higher education,

and the policy imperatives driving the imagined return to business as usual. This goes to fundamental questions about social values.

The global challenge

This takes me to the global challenge. Because the international examples can help us to think about questions of values. We can learn from the best Covid-19 practices elsewhere, and from the worst. On the whole universities are better at learning from other countries than are societies and governments.

Consider the striking differences between countries and cultures, in the experience of Covid-19. There is a great gap between the good and bad outcomes, a gap of hundreds of thousands of lives, between countries that have responded effectively to the pandemic, and those that have not.

The United States and the UK have not done well. In these countries many people push back against the constraint of individual freedom during the pandemic. In both countries, governments have responded on the basis of rule one of populist politics. Rule one is not enlightened. Nor does it help with the pandemic. Rule one is: 'do whatever it takes to get elected next time'. So the US and UK governments have been too slow to close down and too eager to reopen. Until recently, neither encouraged the wearing of masks. They do not consistently test and trace. They talk tough about the pandemic only when politically necessary. From the national centre, they have partly deconstructed lockdowns while the pandemic is still raging, while watching the death toll rise.

By yesterday, 5 August 2020, there had been 157 thousand registered Covid-19 related deaths in the US, and 46 thousand in the UK. A carnage on the scale of the twentieth-century world wars. It has further to run. Italy was also too slow to recognise the danger and has lost 35 thousand people. But the outcome in Germany, Denmark and Finland has been much better. Those countries exhibit impressive social discipline. Their people have understood that it is not about

their private freedoms, it is about their social responsibilities. We have no true individual freedom unless all are free and none of us endanger another. Masks are not the loss of liberty. They are a device for protecting others.

Around the world outcomes are again mixed. Latin America is the current global hotspot. There have been 96 thousand deaths in Brazil, where the President belittled the danger and opposed masks and shutdowns until he became sick himself. In Mexico, where the president was another pandemic sceptic, 49 thousand have died. It is different in East and Southeast Asia. In the post-Confucian cultures of East Asia, presidents don't beat their hairy chests to show they are invincible, and strict regulation and self-regulation prevail. By yesterday, only 7 people in Taiwan had died, 27 in Singapore, 302 in South Korea and 1022 in Japan. In China less than 5 thousand had died, nearly all in Hubei. In Malaysia, not a Chinese culture but nearby, 125 have died, in Thailand 58. East and Southeast Asia includes Vietnam, with 96 million people and per capita income of \$2715 in 2019, just above India. Vietnam has a strong community health network and a history of banding together for national survival. Vietnam has had 8 Covid-19 deaths. There are 40 thousand in India.

The countries that have minimised Covid-19 deaths have understood how to avoid a trade-off between public health and the economy. The solution is to put health first. Spend money on test, trace and hospitals now, to reduce the cost later. That is the quickest way to return the economy to normalcy.

Why is handling of the pandemic better in some countries than others? In the first instance the differences are cultural and go to the foundational relation between individual and society. In the Chinese civilisational zone, the individual is nested in the larger spheres of family and state. There is a normative bias in favour of the collective. In the core Confucian outlook individuals are free to think what they will, but not to act as they will without taking into account the effects on others. Classic Confucianism underplays individual freedom but it has the virtue of foregrounding sociability. This

smooths the role of government in general, and the regulation of the pandemic in particular. Whether the East Asian country is a democracy or a one-party regime the outcome is similar. But it is not necessary to be a Confucian heritage country to survive the pandemic. Some European countries have operated collectively so as to minimise the damage, while others have not. Social responsibility can be acquired. Good government, local leaders and strong institutions like universities can instil the values essential for survival.

How have the differences between countries played out in universities? One way to compare the higher education experience under pandemic conditions is to apply to each country a common ideal template, based on what happens in higher education when the 'common good' is uppermost. The UNESCO notion of education as a 'global common good' interprets higher education in terms of its contribution to solidaristic social relations. This combines the social and individual dimensions. The norm of higher education for the common good joins shared welfare, social inclusion, tolerance, and mutual respect to ideas of universal individual rights, protections and freedoms on the basis of equality. This is a good set of values with which to tackle the pandemic.

In a common good university system, under the pandemic, six things happen:

1. Government announces that because the health and the lives of students and staff take priority, all education must remain solely online until it is fully safe to reopen all institutions for everyone. Reopening is determined by public health policy, not individual universities.
2. Government commits itself to underpin the financial sustainability of universities for as long as necessary, in the manner that it underpins other necessary sectors such as the health system, food or banking.
3. Institutions provide the best possible quality of online educational provision and administration, consistent with economic delivery.
4. Because online higher education can effectively provide only part of the full product –it provides cognitive learning, some interaction, and

credentialing, but not full sociability with other students and with teachers, physical facilities, extra-curricular activities and nested work experience – in countries that charge fees to students, the tuition cost should be discounted. Good online education is not cheap, but it is not plausible to claim that it is the same cost as full onsite education.

5. Governments and universities provide additional support for students from poor families, including those lacking access to online facilities.
6. When reopening in a particular country or locality, institutions establish strong public health protocols, and they shut down instantly and move to wholly online mode if the pandemic flares up again.

Which countries and universities have fulfilled this ideal? Again, we look to East Asia and parts of Europe. In China, where the pandemic crested early, universities were wholly online until the data made it unambiguously clear the time came to safely re-open them in full. Finland in Europe has followed the same policy. In South Korea, 40 per cent of universities are providing partial tuition refunds to students because of cancelled face to face classes and other activities. The discount has been extended to international students. The Korean Ministry of Education is providing financial support for institutions with low reserves that discount tuition fees.

In contrast, the UK government has ruled that schools and universities will reopen next term, though the pandemic is still raging. Every British university is deeply worried about the possibility of a surge in Covid-19 cases on its campus. But universities have to say that they are operating face to face, or mask to mask, in October. If they do not, their enrolment and income may collapse. So universities must do their best to lock in students by claiming a return to face to face education, though no one knows how much face to face education will be possible in the coming year. This is because government has refused to guarantee university finances. The normal market forces continue to rule UK higher education though this is not a normal time.

Why are crucial matters of public health being passed downwards to universities to manage, while positioning those same universities in a conflict between their duty of care and their economic interest? Why do countries blunder on like this? Why can't they learn from good practice elsewhere?

In the face of their dilemma, some UK universities are developing an unstable model of hybrid higher education. They will combine online delivery of much of the programme, and administration, with restricted and nerve-wracking face to face activity, policed by complex regulation to protect health. This they hope will enable them to say they are not wholly online, both retaining their market position and meeting the desire for a return to face to face education. That desire is totally understandable. But we cannot wish away the pandemic. I suspect that the hybrid approaches will be less effective in either protecting student health or providing adequate education on the basis of realistic expectations. It would seem better to be fully online until it is safe to reopen.

The global lessons of the pandemic are clear. It is a mirror of sorts, a means of common reflexivity. We can take from it the need not only to wash our hands and to improve the quality of education online, but the need to take collective responsibility for shared outcomes, and the need to learn from other societies, both similar to our own and different. And we can think about the values we teach our students. Will we help them to draw the right lessons from the handling of the pandemic in different parts of the world? When they are graduate, will they together implement the public values essential to managing the next pandemic, and urgent collective problems like climate change?

The governmental challenge

That brings me to the final challenge, which is the governmental challenge. At a time when politics is unstable and leadership is of varied quality, universities have two essential tasks in relation to national and provincial policy, regulation and funding. The first task is to persuade government to support the

universities in their three-pronged mission of teaching, research and social reconstruction during and after the pandemic and the pandemic-induced recession. The second task is to persuade government, and non government organisations also, to continue to sustain universities themselves.

Prior to the pandemic universities had become central social institutions. In 2018 there were 224 million tertiary students across the world, four fifths in degree courses. Since the late 1990s participation in university and other forms of tertiary education has grown rapidly, reaching 38 per cent at world level and 28 per cent in India which had 34 million students in 2018. India's new policy foreshadows a rise to 50 per cent. But the growth trajectory is now vulnerable. Neither student support, family support nor governmental support can be taken for granted in societies which have been upended by the pandemic.

We face a dangerous conjunction. Online education is less attractive to some students. Families have less economic capacity to support student children. Graduate unemployment is rising sharply, and though there is less work for those who don't go to university, graduate unemployment makes university less attractive. Governments have accumulated larger powers, including fiscal powers, as they grapple with the pandemic, and have an unprecedented opportunity to either upgrade or downgrade university education as they wish.

Universities, with their expertise, their authority, their teaching capacity and their broad social links, are an invaluable resource in a time of crisis and recovery. They instil skills and capabilities, generate and share essential knowledge, help to build communities, and foster hope. But autonomous universities, which are the only kind worth having, can trouble governments. Coming out the pandemic, the battered public will have to be persuaded of the value of universities all over again. It is a great challenge for all of us.

I wish O.P. Jindal Global University, and everyone tuned into this conference, all the best in the coming months and years. Stay safe, and support each other!