

LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF COVID-19

Daniel Samoilovich¹

*“Sweet are the uses of adversity, which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head”
William Shakespeare, As you like it*

In this global crisis, we are all witnessing the boost of the experts role. Science determine public policy decisions. At the same time, leaders across the board navigate the storm, at all levels. Consulting firm McKinsey has just released a document to help company directors reflect on their role in these circumstances.² University leaders also face simultaneous challenges and imperatives. Why not also reflect on these?

According to John Kotter, change begins with the need to create a sense of urgency. Unfortunately, this time this is assured. Problems crop up: ensure continuity to classes, make educational resources available in digital format, obtain resources for university hospitals, mobilize research groups with potentially relevant contributions, give interviews to the press, not forgetting discussions with governments on the regulations governing distance education or with teachers unions not always favorable to the digital transition due to the impact on working conditions. Such accumulation of difficulties makes the Rectors feel - in the words of one of them - that "reality runs over us".

This will be a period of experimentation in every sense. It will be important to move from a crisis state of mind to a opportunit state of mind.³ Beyond emergencies, rectors and their teams can adopt a "test and learn" attitude. They need to be ready to recognize what isn't working and change it quickly.

These urgent notes are devoid of any academic claim. Furthermore, in such dramatic contexts, they may seem remote from reality, and in fact, in some way, they are. But, when the urgent displaces the important, they can help to think holistically. Their sole intention is to assist navigation in unknown waters.

¹ Daniel Samoilovich is Executive Director Columbus Association, columbusnet@hotmail.com. This essay has benefited by comments received from rectors Juan Carlos del Bello (Universidad Nacional de Rio Negro, Argentina), Hugo Juri (Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina), Marcelo Knobel (Unicamp, Brazil), Dolly Montoya (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) and Alberto Roa (Universidad Tecnologica de Bolívar, Colombia), to whom I am grateful, as well as to Giovanni Malnati (Politécnico di Torino, Italy) and my colleagues at Columbus, Jesús Ariza, Kelly Henao and Cecilia Valdés, for their valuable observations.

² These page is widely inspired by A blueprint for remote working: Lessons from China, Raphael Bick, Michael Chang, Kevin Wei Wang, and Tianwen Yu, McKinsey, March 2020, available at <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/a-blueprint-for-remote-working-lessons-from-china?cid=other-eml-alt-mjp-mck&hlkid=71a1ebea808e42f9a82e0716ac7ffae8&hctky=2631990&hdpid=8a7d725d-49e2-4b4e-91f7-ff6a4dad4b5>

³ This is the perspective presented by Fernando Reimers - Harvard Graduate School of Education, in Adaptation of Universities to COVID-19, I-lunch organized by LASPAU, available at <https://colab.laspau.org/es/articulos/laspau-ialmuerzo-aprendiendo-sobre-la-marcha-adaptacion-de-las-universidades-a-covid19/>.

1. What impact will the crisis have on higher education?

In the emergency, the universities are migrating their courses to a virtual modality. The massive training of teachers is imposed, as evidenced by the enormous reception of the course "Adapting my class to a virtual environment without succumbing in the attempt", organized by Columbus in collaboration with member universities.⁴ Basically, we perceive two attitudes, that of a reactive or proactive passage to virtuality.⁵ Tasks multiply: adjust academic calendars, acquire the necessary equipment and software, ensure the continuity of services to students and communication with all of them. strengthen or create support structures, develop new academic guidelines for courses and exams. The most advanced institutions are capable of monitoring the implementation of the new modalities, solving difficulties in the provision of courses, addressing the assessment of learning outcomes. In less prepared institutions, drop out may increase, worsening an already existing problem.

«Higher education – globally and within countries – is characterised by inequalities of all kinds. The COVID-19 crisis is likely to exacerbate these inequalities, (...) amplifying gaps and inequalities between learners, institutions and countries». «There may be an increase in demand for community colleges in the United States and less expensive professional schools elsewhere.(...) In times of unemployment, education is an alternative choice, but it has to be affordable».⁶

In the immediate future, especially in Latin America, equality of opportunities is a very important aspect of the transition. Remote modalities pose difficulties for those with connectivity restrictions.⁷ Its increase is also the responsibility of public policy.

"With virtualization being the main educational tool to sustain the functioning of education, the enormous digital⁸ divide must be considered. Its existence must be recognized, not to prevent virtualization, but to design strategies and support mechanisms that help combat it even more intensely». Some institutions, such as UNICAMP, are accompanying the transition with proactive policies, activating the donation of computers and coordinating a loan system for non-face-to-face activities during quarantine.⁹

⁴ In the course participate more than 800 Latin American professors: <https://columbus-web.org/es/eventos-y-noticias/item/316-webinar-adaptando-mi-clase-a-un-entorno-virtual-y-no-sucumbir-en-el-intento-ejemplos-aplicados-a-la-plataforma-moodle.html>

⁵ This differentiation is taking place in several countries in the region, for example in Argentina. This distinction is presented in "Present and Future of the virtualization of the SE of the Dominican Republic".

⁶ Post pandemic outlook for HE is bleakest for the poorest, Philip G Altbach and Hans de Wit, University World News, 04 April 2020, available at : <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200402152914362>

⁷ According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), mobile broadband penetration in the region is 30%, very far from the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) where it is 72%. Regarding fixed broadband, penetration reaches 10% of the region's population when in OECD countries it is 28%. Regarding fourth generation mobile broadband (4G) networks, 27% of the population in Latin America is covered, compared to 77% of the population in OECD countries. For Colombia this penetration is barely 20% and in other countries very different levels of development can be found. For example, in the Caribbean there is practically no 4G, while coverage in the Southern Cone is 36%. <https://tecnologiaeconomia.com/articulos/cual-es-el-estado-de-conexion-internet-de-america-latina>

⁸ COVID-19 y educación superior: De los efectos inmediatos al día después . Análisis de impactos, respuestas políticas y recomendaciones, UNESCO-IESALC, 6 de abril de 2020, pag. 42, available at: <http://www.iesalc.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.unicamp.br/unicamp/noticias/2020/04/06/unicamp-inicia-emprestimo-de-equipamentos-para-atividades-nao-presenciais>

Ensuring the continuity of academic activities implies mobilizing resources and willingness. Preparing for virtuality, says Hugo Juri, Rector of the National University of Córdoba, a 400-year-old university, meant "an effort by many teachers and many non-teachers to achieve as much normality as possible. We will surely have many difficulties and we will make mistakes, but it would have been worse to sit idly by".

"There is initial commitment and enthusiasm in the majority", says another Rector, but a "countercyclical" pedagogy is needed. Staying motivated is going to be key ». In the medium term, how much of the current transition and rupture will impact the teaching-learning models when the crisis has passed? The value of face-to-face contact will surely be revalued. But, undeniably, the virtual takes on a new dignity. «From now on, teaching staff may become less reluctant regarding opportunities offered by hybrid teaching models».¹⁰

«The temporary cessation of the face-to-face activities of HEIs has operated as a huge disruptor to their functioning. The impact of this disruption is highly variable and depends, firstly, on their ability to stay active in their academic activities and, secondly, on their financial sustainability».¹¹

The current situation will probably have a more structural impact on Higher Education. We can see an analogy in the effect that the development of ambulatory techniques had on the fewest number of hospital beds, which makes us today contemplate these mid-20th century mega hospital structures with a feeling of anachronism. We do not yet know how much of the organization of academic activities will change, but surely there will be profound changes.

Certainly, the transformations in the world of training and in the world of work will feed back. Various academic articles already stated that remote work can be, to a certain extent, more effective.¹² Companies are now building their expertise and may, in some sectors more than others, feel that it will not be necessary to invest in office space for employees. Such organization of work will require strengthening certain professionals skills and degree of autonom. In this way, for universities, the current adversity will have its benefits; Training to work remotely will also be an important element of the academic offer. In turn, the reflection on new learning objectives, on new criteria and forms of evaluation, will be accompanied by a reflection on investment in classroom space, in computer equipment that becomes obsolete in three years, etc.

It will be useful to reflect on these transformations in the future. In the immediate term, the recent IESALC document recommends, among other measures,

- Documenting the pedagogical changes introduced and their impacts;
- Learning from mistakes in order to scale digitization, hybridization, and ubiquitous learning;
- Promoting internal reflection on the renewal of the teaching and learning model.

«The critical question is whether the acquired experience can be capitalized for a redesign of these processes, maximizing the advantages of face-to-face classes while making the most of technologies, and, secondly, how far each institution wants or can go».¹³

¹⁰ Post pandemic outlook for HE is bleakest for the poorest, op.cit.

¹¹ COVID-19 y educación superior, op.cit.

¹² See, for example. To Raise Productivity, Let More Employees Work from Home , Nicholas Bloom, HBR, January–February 2014; The Three Main Challenges of Remote Working, Mark Mortensen, INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour | March 27, 2020, disponible en <https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/the-three-main-challenges-of-remote-working-13651>

¹³ COVID-19 y educación superior, op.cit. pp 41 to 43.

"Thanks to technology, it is possible not to break the communication thread (...). But the question, as you well know, is a more fundamental one (...). We have a conscience divided into watertight compartments, incapable of offering unitary perspectives and inadequate to concretely face the problems of the present. Our students do not learn to measure themselves with the great existential challenges, nor with the complexity and uncertainty of a constantly changing reality. It seems important to me to prepare to understand interconnections: how a health crisis can provoke an economic crisis that, in turn, produces a social and, ultimately, existential crisis (...). Maintaining direct, human contact between teachers and students is essential. Only a teacher who teaches with passion can truly influence the lives of his students. The role of teaching is above all to problematize, through a method based on questions and answers capable of stimulating the critical and self-critical spirit of the students».¹⁴

2. Research and innovation : an open state of mind

University social responsibility is embodied through a rich combination of teaching, research and third mission. According to Dolly Montoya, President of Universidad Nacional de Colombia, «The current situation has mobilized a large number of research groups to articulate in unexpected ways to comprehensively address the current global crisis and thus, with their results and suggestions, accompany local and national governments in making urgent decisions at all levels. I think it is important to show the active participation of universities in accompanying and guiding governments to take the appropriate measures at the appropriate times. The Universidad Nacional has organized its think tanks in all areas of knowledge so that they can start working on the evaluation and learning of this crisis to contribute elements of public policy when all this has been overcome. We know that the world will not be the same" (verbal communication).

The foreseeable economic crisis will have an impact on the financing of research and development activities, which will have to compete for scarce resources with other public goods, with a consequent greater demand on their economic and social impact, o al menos una reasignación de los recursos disponibles. It will be necessary to consider new national policies and institutional mechanisms for the future orientation of such activities. In order to overcome the false dilemma between basic and applied research, it is desirable to identify in each case areas of strategic research, of "pasteurization", that draw on both at the same time. The concept of « pasteurization » of science, as opposed to pure basic research and pure applied one, is due to Donald E. Stokes in his book, Pasteur's Quadrant, to refer to use-inspired basic research.¹⁵

The new context will surely catalyze more robust collaborative strategies on three fronts: the interdisciplinary one, that of cooperation with external actors, and that of shared and open data.

The interdisciplinary. Again, by analogy, with the pandemic the hospital organization by medical specialty is mutating to one organization by level of complexity and intensity of care, already existing in some hospital systems. The world has problems, universities have faculties and departments. Covid-19 has only displaced the consequences of climate change from public attention for a couple of months. Focusing on these global and urgent problems will erode the silos that separate the disciplines. Is the circular economy a matter for biologists, chemists, production

¹⁴ Interview to Edgar Moran, in El Pais, 11-4-2020, available at: <https://elpais.com/cultura/2020-04-11/edgar-morin-vivimos-en-un-mercado-planetario-que-no-ha-sabido-suscitar-fraternidad-entre-los-pueblos.html>

¹⁵ Examples of present and past strategic research issues at Wageningen University in the Netherlands can be found at <https://www.wur.nl/en/About-Wageningen/Strategic-Plan.htm>

engineers or economists? Of all of them. To educate interdisciplinary thinking and competences become a necessity.¹⁶

That of cooperation with external actors. Traditionally, the university was perceived as a reservoir of knowledge ready to be "transferred" to companies. However, in countries where the knowledge economy is more than just a declaimed objective, an important part of research and development is carried out in industries and services, or even more so in close collaboration with universities in iterative processes of co-creation, in which the partners complement each other. A good example is given these days by the University of Antioquia and the Antioquia School of Engineering with the development, in collaboration with external actors and in record time, of prototypes of low-cost mechanical fans.¹⁷

The one with shared and open data. This is one of the pillars of the Open Science movement. Internet have allowed, as never before, the collection and accumulation of data. Data sharing enables national and international collaboration with other institutions in thematic networks. The evidence on the benefits covers a wide spectrum of disciplines, issues, purposes, actors and regions of the planet, from agricultural data to climate monitoring, from ionosphere scrutinizing to fighting Covid-19.

The pandemic is changing the way of doing science. The massive exchange of data and publications helps to verify results, which is a key part of the scientific process, in this case what works, what does not work. Access to preprints allows data mining to be applied. Sharing information is reducing redundancy. Many scientists welcome the way the crisis is transforming the way scientists communicate. Institutions must know how to recognize and stimulate this new way of doing research through mandates, training of researchers in data management, support services and technical infrastructure. Policy must go hand in hand with its implementation, and the role of university leaders in this is also central.¹⁸

3. Establishing structures for consensual and effective decision making

The rector of a well-known university in Brazil, 48 hours after issuing a message to the entire academic community, received an open letter from the teachers union expressing his objections about the call for continuity of actions proposed by the rector in the name of respect for working conditions. This debate led a group of academics and experts, gathered in the Cartagena Group, to write a manifesto on "Higher Education in the face of the Coronavirus crisis", included https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rA92lc-_izXLGrTs7o8za9lZBjiJ6my3/view?usp=sharing

The crisis invites a strengthening of the auctoritas. But, greater rigor requires greater transparency. Difficult decision-making invites reflection on decision-making in turbulent periods such as those we are all living.

Universities have their usual statutory bodies: governing bodies, administrative boards, academic councils, etc. Without ignoring them, the creation of small and multifunctional teams with clear objectives and a common purpose can contribute to building trust and making decisions in line with

¹⁶ The Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Ecosystems, Sybille Reichert, EUA, March 2019, available at: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/819:the-role-of-universities-in-regional-innovation-ecosystems.html>

¹⁷ See "We Need to Solve This": Colombia's Amazing Race to Build a \$ 1,000 Ventilator, Vanity Fair, available at : <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/04/colombias-amazing-race-to-build-a-1000-ventilator>.

¹⁸ Scooping Review for a UNESCO Roadmap and recommendations on Open Science – Open research Data, Daniel Samoilovich and Paola Andrea Ramírez, February 2020, Unpublished

institutional priorities. This may be the opportunity to test forms of organization that integrate managers, academic leaders and administrative personnel responsible for taking into account various points of view when defining courses of action, may be with the participation of new professional roles -such as instructional designers and data stewards.¹⁹ Small committees to prepare big decisions. In other words, «creating unity from diversity» (Aristotle.) In the context of a University, good governance means ensuring that governance at all levels of the institution works well, that all interconnected parts come together smoothly and that all processes co-help to achieve an organizational culture that is robust, flexible and inclined to make decisions in confidence when the situation demands it.²⁰

Without underestimating the statutory bodies, it is about creating instances that take advantage of the differences of interests and points of view between the main actors. Starting from a common understanding of the challenges facing the institution and creating a shared sense of urgency, it is a matter of reaching, not consensus, but the best possible solution. Regular interactions help build trust between all parties ("strong, well-traveled bridges"). Motivation and mutual commitment is favored by jointly developed initiatives. A seed of this type of instance may be, for example, the Crisis Committee for Digital Transformation, for Research, for Well-being, for Communications and for Academic affairs to capitalize on teaching and learning innovation, created at the National University of Colombia.

4. Leading from afar and creating a sense of community

To ensure the physical and mental well-being of students and teachers, it is necessary to create a sense of community, maintain a sense of common purpose. In the community, the human being is "at home". The community protects, preserves, and respects people. It takes into account your needs including emotional ones. The foundations of a caring culture are to have a common purpose and unified goals. Which can be addressed at the academic community level? How to assign meaningful tasks to stimulate motivation? How to make the students take part in the solution to the problems that appear? Sharing success stories is vital to creating a human connection.

According to Michel Fiol, managers have a double role: offering results and creating meaningful situations. Management by sense differs from management by orders (typical of a military organization) and management by strategy (commonly practiced in companies). It consists of creating situations that make sense for the members of an organization: it defines a common project, it is a source of collective entity and it develops shared feelings.²¹ The university is the kingdom of meaning par excellence (although this often leads to excessive fragmentation).

Leaders need to energize the entire university by setting a clear direction and communicating it effectively. Offering a clear vision and a realistic perspective can have a powerful effect on motivation throughout the organization. It is essential to foster a culture that empowers and holds teams accountable for doing things, while fostering open, honest, and effective communication.

¹⁹ Data stewards are disciplinary experts with knowledge of data management who are employed at faculties in order to advise researchers and faculty members on the various aspects of research data management. See : Data Stewardship: Addressing Disciplinary Data Management Needs Marta Teperek, Maria J. Cruz, Ellen Verbakel, Jasmin Böhmer, and Alastair Dunning Research , available at : <http://www.ijdc.net/article/view/604>

²⁰ Managing good governance in higher education, Michael Shattock, Jul 2006. In another text I have called these forms of shared governance "Small committees of great decisions".

²¹ L'Intelligence Situationelle, Michel Fiol, Catherine Tanneau, Paul Delahaie, Annabel-Mauve Bonnefus, 2019 ; Managing good governance in higher education, Michael Shattock, Jul 2006. In another text I have called these forms of shared governance "Small committees of great decisions".

By offering insight into difficult times, managers can get closer to what's going on, solve problems, and help their employees solve problems as they arise. For leaders, it is important to inspire and lead their team in the daily course of work, while physically apart. One way to do this is to increase levels of interaction. But, determining how to communicate is as important as what is said.

In this emergency, it may be helpful to assemble a small crisis management team (3 or 4 trusted people) to reassure a Rector in his isolation, prevent him from forgetting one or more essential elements, and multiply his decisions and his communication.

5. Adopting new routines

One of the undeniable effects of the crisis is to demonstrate the value of the internet in all areas, one of them being remote work powered by a set of technological tools that allow teams to co-create, communicate, share documents and manage processes in a effective way.

People management is one of the most difficult elements of remote work, since everyone will respond differently to cultural change and the challenges of the home work environment. Going to remote work runs the risk of interrupting flows and rhythms based on face-to-face work. The challenges of the new working pattern and of not being together in a room can be overcome by setting clear working rules, workflows with a digitally facilitated cadence of meetings. It is useful to differentiate planning meetings, review sessions, and brief meetings to resolve specific issues

Using technology can be vital, but choosing the right channel is important. Video conferencing is great for discussing tricky topics in real time and for creating a sense of community, but it requires coordination and focus across the team. Channel-based collaboration software (chat) is ideal for quick synchronization or easy-to-answer questions, while email can be used to record results and communicate more formally. The effectiveness of video conferencing depends on following some simple rules. A clear agenda and moderator are needed to keep the debate going. For joint problem solving, it is particularly useful to use virtual whiteboards to co-edit documents. Focusing on one thing at a time can sometimes be the best way to get the job done.

It is helpful to take time with the rectory team to discuss how to work together. Agree, for example, on a daily and weekly pace that takes into account individual limitations, and agree on the specific rules, anticipating what could go wrong and how it will be mitigated.²²

As the University returns to normality, these new routines can be incorporated into a "new normal", taking advantage of the structures, culture, processes and technology developed during the emergency period, combining face-to-face and remote forms of work.

In Conclusion

We all know, it is not easy to see the jewel in the toad's head. More over, considering that « higher education is everywhere segmented and differentiated, with public and private institutions serving

²² There is evidence that some Columbus member universities are better prepared for remote work, and have tools that integrate everything into a platform for collaborative, multi-channel work. The aforementioned McKinsey article contains two useful tables on the most appropriate communication channels for remote work and on the effective use of technologies. See "A blueprint for remote working" op. cit.

different needs and with vastly differing resources (...), generalising about individual countries or about the world as a whole is not very useful. »²³ Rankings and accreditation mechanisms tend to blur such differentiation which underlines any approach to strategic thinking.

Faced with immediate problems, university leaders need, **at the same time**, to provide emergency responses to keep students learning, and prepare for the aftermath by reflecting on which trends may affect their universities: What impact will the crisis have on student enrollment, what teaching and learning model promote, how will the relevance of research and innovation activities increase, what is the University value added model? and other fundamental questions. To prepare their institutions, they may need to improve the decision making processes, enhance the sense of community and adopt new routines. Doing so, they will reinforce the significance of leadership – rectoral teams, but also middle management –, and enhance the opportunities to shape the outcome, rather than merely reacting to challenges to come in these difficult times.

²³ Post pandemic outlook for HE is bleakest for the poorest, op.cit.