China's Higher Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Some Preliminary Observations

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Abstract

COVID-19 has exerted its great impact on higher education worldwide. China has been particularly associated with the pandemic. Chinese universities are proactive in curbing coronavirus. Their swift and effective response deserves to be recognized by the international community so that everyone can learn from the experience.

COVID-19 has left no aspect of higher education untouched. In the astonishing number of analyses and forecasts on its possible impact on higher education discussions focus mostly on the effectiveness of e-learning and global student mobility, and to a much less extent on issues of governance, business model, equity and sustainability. With the scope and outcomes of the pandemic largely unclear, it is too early to accurately predict its broader implications for higher education. China has been particularly associated with COVID-19, as both the likely origin of the virus, and for its decisive coping strategies. More fundamentally, Chinese students studying overseas have been the single most influential factor shaping the direction of international education since the beginning of this century while China itself is fast becoming a popular study abroad destination. The following reflections focus specifically on China.

Extraordinary Measures with Rapid Effect

China has been proactive in battling COVID-19. The reporting of its swift and effective response by the international media have been influenced heavily by Western socio-political discourse and by the tensions between the United States and China. Its sharp contrast to other societies especially in the West in curbing coronavirus deserves to be recognized by the international community so that everyone can learn from the experience. Many extraordinary measures taken quickly and effectively by Chinese public universities are possible due to China's mode of governance in higher education and to the fact that the sector has been comparatively less affected by the so-called 'audit culture' that would give universities limited breathing space in the times of COVID-19. It is also because the degree of trust and coordination between government and universities is still high in comparison with many systems internationally (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2012; Kim, 2016).

Shortly after the COVID-19 outbreak, an emergency policy initiative called "Suspending Classes without Stopping Learning" was launched by the Chinese government to continue teaching activities as schools across the country were closed to contain the virus. Universities shut their campuses and shifted teaching online. A variety of difficulties were experienced including the weakness of the online teaching infrastructure, the inexperience of teachers

(including unequal learning outcomes caused by teachers' varied experience), the information gap, and the complex environment at home. The government made great efforts to implement the policy by integrating national resources and planning at the top-level to guarantee the provision of network service resources, providing online teaching training for teachers of all levels, enabling local authorities and schools to carry out online teaching in line with local conditions, formulating guidelines to prepare for smooth transition back to normal offline education after the epidemic, and working out a plan for school reopening after the epidemic.

The use of online education in Chinese universities has been significantly expanded, fast becoming the main mode of instruction implemented on a massive scale. Even those universities, which did not have much previous e-learning experience have started teaching online. Some foreign lecturers who could not return to China after their vacation back home overcame time differences and delivered their teaching online from their home countries. Most theoretical courses are now taught online. From their homes all over the country, students access their online classes and interact synchronously with lecturers and classmates. Data show that the average student participation rate in the first week of online teaching exceeded 85%. A positive outcome of the pandemic is that online interaction between lecturers and students is much more frequent than before, with the help of advanced technologies.

Major universities are better resourced to shift to e-learning than smaller universities. For example, across Zhejiang University's seven sites in east China, with its smart campus, professional development in online delivery and digital learning platforms, more than 5,000 courses were made available within just two weeks into the transition, in line with its original term calendar. Open to learners worldwide, the course hub "Learning at ZJU" attracted 570,000 visits, and "DingTalk ZJU", a live streaming app co-developed by Alibaba, recorded a total audience of 300,000. Around 2,500 graduate students have defended their theses to graduate as planned. As part of the quality assurance, a series of training sessions were organized in mid-February for 3,670 faculty members. An instructor of one of the most popular MOOC courses was invited to demonstrate how he adapted pedagogy to online tuition and forged a strong sense of community (Wu, 2020).

The pandemic has thus become the impetus for Chinese universities to evaluate their technical preparedness for new changes, prompting them to reflect on how they can tap into disruptive technologies such as mixed reality, data science and artificial intelligence to better serve the needs of education and address latent disruptors like COVID-19. Seeking to bridge the digital divide, universities negotiate deals with network providers to subsidize the data plans of their lecturers and students. Students are expressing pride about the way their universities have responded with agility to the pandemic (Peters et al., 2020). The initially short-term switch to online learning may lead to a more permanent change in pedagogy with increasing online programs thriving in the post-pandemic climate.

University funding has understandably been a major concern caused by the pandemic. It is expected that future public allocations to higher education will shrink because massive expenditures aim at stabilizing economies during the crisis. Universities across China announced they would slash research funding and other expenses during 2020 due to the economic impact of COVID-19, as government departments set the tone in preparation for thrifty lifestyles amid the pandemic. According to ScienceNet, many Chinese universities have been asked to "tighten up the belt" for 2020, using 75% as the baseline for their budget for the rest of the year; some projects have been put under "freeze". The order demands a

clear budget-cutting performance outcome by June 30th. This impacts not only top universities such as Zhejiang University, Tongji University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, but second and third tier universities as well.

However, there are some hopeful signs. While the financial impact of the pandemic on higher education is obvious, it might not be as substantial as previously thought. According to the budget released by the Ministry of Education on July 3, among the 76 higher education institutions under the Ministry's direct jurisdiction, 55 universities still have received an increase in funding (although the increase rate and scale were consistently and considerably better during many previous years). The top recipients of funding are Tsinghua University (31.07 billion), Zhejiang University (21.62 billion) and Peking University (19.1 billion). In light of this support, the financial conditions of China's public universities may be the envy of many peers overseas.

The experience of foreign students during the epidemic is another focus of attention. The outbreak suddenly halted studying, travelling and socializing for all students in China. Universities decided to postpone the enrolment of foreign students until further notice, as a proactive measure taken in response to the growing number of virus cases. Most international students went back home during the semester break. For foreign students already in China, universities have linked them with mentors and group coordinators who provide reassurance via WeChat, while lecturers conduct online classes (Shrestha, 2020). Many foreign students see their experience in China as an opportunity to learn how China deals with difficult situations like this novel coronavirus epidemic. As an international student of public health reflected: "Now, as I see the efforts of the government in real time, I feel like it's an internship" (Stevenson, 2020).

Future Directions

The future is at least partly shaped by the present. The ultimate effect of the pandemic COVID-19 presents far more than a medical challenge. It is also a unique social problem, urging all members of human society to look for clear reference points to help anchor us. Currently, responses to the pandemic seem to be characterized by chaos and mess. While we are confronting a virus of a global nature, we are witnessing a rise in non-cooperative, combative national strategies aimed at shifting one's own troubles onto others.

COVID-19 forces us to rethink our social interactions and that will include the way we educate. As Altbach and de Wit (2020) have argued, although predicting a post-pandemic future for universities is fraught with difficulty, demand for higher education is certain to continue, and probably to grow, to serve the global knowledge economy. The basic configuration of internationalization is likely to remain. Global higher education will remain fundamentally stable, while significant short-, medium-, and perhaps long-term consequences and disruptions are inevitable. Global knowledge asymmetries will stay and the COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate inequalities in higher education. It appears unfortunately that the current malign trends toward nationalism and populism will continue.

As part of its response to the crisis, China's Ministry of Education stipulated new regulations on government scholarships for foreign students to study in China in March and issued "Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening of Education in the New Era" in June. The Ministry declares China's firm determination to adhere to further opening

education to the outside world including mobility of knowledge and people across national borders at various levels in all directions. Although this is more policy rhetoric than education reality at this stage, China has been one of the first to make such official statement about its attitude toward global engagement in higher education in the post-COVID-19 era. In this sense, it is more assuring than disturbing. Although the endgame remains unknown, in term of the directions for future development that are much related China's higher education, some scenarios are almost certain. For example, blended learning models will definitely become more common with a reduced reliance on face-to-face seminars and tutorials, and China's online education will be given a boost.

It is uncertain whether Chinese students will continue to travel abroad to study in large numbers, or how attractive China will remain to international students. However, the basic factors that have driven Chinese students to study abroad will remain, and many middle-class Chinese parents will continue to send their children abroad for education. Yet, they will take both monetary expenditures and behavioral choices into more serious consideration. Emotions such as the fear induced by the global outbreak of COVID-19 and growing anti-Chinese sentiment abroad will be important when they weigh advantages against disadvantages. All things considered, the decision to send their children to study overseas will continue to be somewhat dependent on family financial and educational background, but various other factors, including the possibility of unpleasant experiences, an economic pessimistic outlook, and fear of vulnerability and loss of control will also be taken into account.

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