

Reflecting on the future: universities post-COVID

LEARNING TRANS- FORMING

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, what challenges do universities face? How should the role of higher education evolve? What difficulties will our new scenario bring? How will we overcome them? How does adapting to digital transformation fit in? What should our research model be?

Universities must change, and spokespeople, faculty members and researchers from the UOC have been sharing their reflections on where a roadmap for the coming years should take us.

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«The capacity to generate and disseminate knowledge is no longer the exclusive preserve of universities, although they still hold a privileged position for connecting and catalysing knowledge in its diverse forms»

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Whenever the new priorities of twenty-first century higher education are discussed, the old and familiar dichotomy between the social and intellectual functions of universities emerges. As the debate on the educational challenge rages, and while globalization, environmental sustainability and the development of artificial intelligence are changing the playing field for economic and social relations, seemingly irreconcilable goals are still being compared. Issues such as the need to bolster citizens' critical awareness or educate students in the humanities seem to be incompatible with the goal of training professionals in the skills required to meet the needs of a mutating society and labour market. As if uni-

versities cannot aspire to educating workers who think or thinkers who work. As if aspiring to both means developing a dynamic that instrumentalizes and downgrades higher education.

Consensus regarding the role of universities in promoting social progress through employment was clearly set out in the Bologna Declaration, which established the foundations for the European Higher Education Area over 20 years ago, on the threshold of a new millennium. At that point it was considered necessary to adapt the role of universities to the needs and demands of society and scientific knowledge, where promoting employment held – and continues to hold – pride

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of place. In 2002 the Copenhagen Declaration further reinforced the need for greater European cooperation in professional training and teaching to ensure social cohesion. Nevertheless, the global commitment that definitively associated higher education with employment, decent work and entrepreneurship was established in the 2030 Agenda, through Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates for quality education that is inclusive and equitable and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The categorical public and global consensus is that ongoing economic and social development requires the training of competent professionals who can also pursue their personal and professional development freely and with their own sense of responsibility and civic conscience. This cannot happen without a number of transformations that turn this goal for higher education into a clear orientation towards employability. Unlike industrial society's more instrumental vision, a new conception grounded in the knowledge society sees employment as a lifelong process that is continuous and fluid – a process whose success will depend on its speed, alignment with education, stability, and the quality of conditions.

In the current context, where the challenges go beyond unemployment figures (for instance, automation, digital training, the gig economy, retaining talent, or the updating and specialization of professional skills), society's expectations of universities to help graduates adapt to this continually evolving labour market have intensified. Faced with this reality, universities cannot limit themselves to just generating and disseminating knowledge; they must also promote broader support for personal and professional development so that learning can bear fruit in workforce entry, too. This requires integrating a truly democ-

ratizing and transformative conception of education geared towards employability. This new employability, 20 years after the Bologna Declaration, is more complex, shifting and indefinite, and the strategy to elevate it requires the identification, recognition and integration of new perspectives, key examples being those focusing on systems, time frames and competencies.

With regard to systems, universities must reposition their role in the ecosystem of knowledge generation and dissemination, an ecosystem in which the dynamics are increasingly complex and where knowledge exchange occurs through neta-architectural (networked), multi-actor structures. This transition towards an ecosystemic vision – where the capacity to generate and disseminate knowledge is no longer the exclusive preserve of universities, although they still hold a privileged position for connecting and catalysing its different expressions – can and must be used to generate employability. In short, employment is still a formula for connecting diverse skills and learning across the widespread nodes of the knowledge ecosystem, where threats and opportunities will also be present.

With regard to time frames, the capacity to maintain a fulfilling career is a continuous, evolving and lifelong process. In this new scenario, it no longer makes sense to see education as having an end goal, so the challenge universities face is to promote personal empowerment and adaptability to permanent changes. Recent technological, economic and social changes in our environment call into question the design of rigid training programmes and marked-out careers, and diminish the traditional idea of a fixed educational profile and a lifelong job in a single organization. In contrast, the new context entails a series of stages in education and employment, with a variety of different formulas

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and environments. This panorama requires individuals to think about how to design their lifelong learning and career, while universities have the challenge of providing sufficient support to help them make the right decisions at the right time.

In terms of competencies, if we accept education's transformational capacity to turn the employability (of people) effectively into competitiveness (for organizations) and progress (in society), it is essential for universities' learning processes to combine the acquisition of technical and professional competencies with the development of a critical and self-critical civic conscience. This would mean conscious citizens who empathize with their environment, master the impact of technology, respect diversity, foster intellectual curiosity, seek out scientific evidence, adopt a global perspective and promote interdisciplinary cooperation to approach complex problems.

This new approach to fostering high-quality employability in all its dimensions requires universities to redefine strategies, dynamics, capacities and structures. Among other aspects, orientation towards new employability requires a more permeable university system, in constant dialogue with other inhabitants of the ecosystem, a university system that opens its classrooms to professionals with teaching skills or takes learning outside the classroom. A more transdisciplinary system which fosters the merging of knowledge areas, recognizes and promotes unique academic courses, and designs novel learning pathways that create new pockets of employment at the intersections between disciplines. A more digital system which grasps the opportunities provided by technology to facilitate access, improve digital training, enrich learning and cater for diversity. A more integrating

system, open to vocational training, which diversifies its courses and services, eliminates the bureaucratic complexities in updating curricula, and seeks to empower students in their professional futures. In short, an entrepreneurial university system that interacts with its environment and catalyses knowledge to favour greater economic and social progress.

Much as people reach university without ever distinguishing between interests and vocations, hopes and fears, desires and abilities, we must avoid partial visions that can fragment the goal of higher education. Neither two functions, nor three missions, just a single goal: to ensure society prospers by promoting employability.

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