

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.

Towards new and improved university management models



Antoni Cahner
UOC general manager and FUOC
CEO

 Published in
[eEconomista.es](https://www.economista.es)
on 05/11/2020

In this age of knowledge and uncertainty, we must ensure universities' sustainability by upgrading their management models.

There are many compelling reasons for this upgrade, reasons which have come to the fore in the new millennium:

- Universities no longer have a monopoly on knowledge. In fact, companies and non-university institutions have, to a large extent, overtaken universities' traditional role as knowledge generators and disseminators.
- In today's globalized world, education has become key in ensuring society's development, competitiveness and well-being, and this has led to growth in the demand for degrees and likewise increases in the number of programmes offered.
- The fast-paced and complex nature of modern changes calls for a flexible and multidisciplinary approach to teaching and research, and for continual updating of our knowledge.
- Technology now provides ways to manage the demand for education in a more efficient and personalized manner.
- Globalization and the pandemic-driven health crisis have called into question the traditional models

of teaching and research, and moves towards hybrid (or blended) learning and open science are gathering momentum.

To begin it should be noted that the demand for education, and specifically higher education, has seen steady growth in recent decades. As a result, higher education has become an attractive sector for private investment funds, leading to an increase in the number of for-profit private universities directly competing for student enrolment. This, coupled with the fact that many of these universities offer online education, has caused an effect that public administration failed to predict. In terms of demand, the once closed system is now open. For prospective students, the university that is closest to home is no longer the automatic first preference because they now have the alternative of studying online. Projections regarding the demand for higher education (which in Spain are managed by each autonomous community individually) are clearly skewed by this effect, with universities feeling a direct impact on their enrolment-based revenue. Therefore, one of the fundamental pillars of university funding (revenue from the enrolment of local students) is beginning to falter. This should force governments and universities to rethink how to ensure sustainability.

Towards new and improved university management models

We find ourselves at a critical moment also with regard to supply. The demand for continuing education is at odds with the currently over-regulated system, both with respect to the degrees on offer and the hiring of faculty. Furthermore, universities' organizational structures – their faculties – are arranged by disciplines, thus hindering interdisciplinary ventures. These three factors (regulation, hiring and organization) make it harder for supply to meet demand, and are increasing the gap between what society (employers and citizens) needs and what universities can provide. The problem is further exacerbated by the difficulty of recruiting talent, which is attributable both to the barely permeable and excessively endogamous model in place and to the current remuneration system, which is not competitive in global terms.

In this context, we must ask ourselves what we can do to reshape and upgrade universities' management models, while at the same time upholding their mission and ensuring their sustainability.

To address the matter in an orderly manner, let us focus on the three processes that – from a management perspective – are key to sustainability: demand management (in our case the demand for education), operations management (to satisfy the demand) and resources management.

Demand management

This process ranges from identifying the needs of stakeholders (citizens, companies, governments) to solidifying those needs into real products and services.

Tackling our challenges will necessarily require a much more flexible and open approach; this applies to

designing for learning needs (programme length, personalization, methodology, contents, interdisciplinarity), to assessment systems and to the regulation of teaching programmes. It is the only way to supply education that can fulfil society's demands, needs and possibilities for training and lifelong learning.

Moreover, the diversification of demand will compel universities to rationalize and focus their portfolios, and to forge increasing numbers of alliances with other institutions. This will enable them to excel and stand out competitively against an increasingly globalized offer.

Operations management

Offering personalized and multidisciplinary education requires flexible management models.

In terms of methodology, the need to hybridize online and on-site models will grow. The same can be said for the need to combine permanent faculty and affiliated teaching staff, the latter ideally having ties to the professional world or other institutions (other universities, research centres or organizations), and this requires appropriate hiring mechanisms.

In order to offer personalization, flexible operations management must make intensive use of technology and rigorously manage data. Likewise, it must proactively support areas such as admissions, keeping track of teaching activities, and students' entry into the workforce after finishing their studies. In addition, information systems must support and complement both teachers' and researchers' activities.

Quality management models will also be key in ensuring that operations comply with external quality

Towards new and improved university management models

assurance regulations and meet the needs of stakeholders. These models (based on the definition of policies and objectives, with systematic monitoring through indicators and data) must provide clear identification of operational processes so as to manage their continual improvement.

Resources management

In terms of financial resources, universities will have to draw up plans that allow for this open demand management model, figuring out how to strike a balance between public resources (subsidies), enrolment-based revenue and private resources (from services or donations). Public policies will be the key factor; firstly, more funds could be earmarked for subsidizing universities, and the corresponding accountability criteria may be updated; secondly, additional funding could subsidize the demand (through grants and scholarships) to strengthen equal opportunities and equitable access to higher education.

In terms of infrastructure, there is a strong likelihood that universities will become less dependent on their physical premises. Online models will allow them to use buildings much less for classroom teaching but more for technology and research infrastructure (laboratories).

The most important change must come through the recruitment and retention of talent. Knowledge is generated by people, and universities will have to find ways to recruit talent and make careers in universities an attractive prospect, with globally competitive remuneration models. Universities will have to find flexible recruitment methods that enable them to act as knowledge hubs, part of a network in which they can involve other professionals and institutions in their activities.

In short, these challenges must be faced if we hope to succeed with objectives such as United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (the first of its kind to include university teaching): to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

25.uoc.edu