

Imagining the university in the post-COVID world

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One of the disquieting questions the pandemic has forced us to consider is, What will universities, now partially if not totally deserted, look like in the post-COVID world? The massive use of online virtual instruments means that the old model, in which universities physically concentrate all their activities in one single location, as the Western university was built after, may no longer completely hold true. In fact, the tendency towards an online environment was already on the rise with the advent of e-learning, MOOCs, open universities, etc., and their increasing grip on the higher education 'market'.

I recently revisited an article that appeared in June 2020, at the height of the first wave of the pandemic, by Rohan D'Souza. The author characterised the struggles between three university paradigms or 'ideal types', and what they mean for the future of 'the university': the original 'Humboldtian' model, built around the idea of turning students into autonomous 'citizens' by developing their own reasoning powers in an environment of academic freedom; the neoliberal model, based on the understanding that education is above all the preparation of 'student-clients' to hit the labour market; and the irrepressible rise, both as continuity and rupture of the latter, of 'EdTech' university platforms, where credit-based online education-certification leads to the abandonment of the experience of in-person learning. For D'Souza, it is the struggle between these until now overlapping value-imbued paradigms that will determine the future of higher learning. In his powerful account, the author warns of the possibility of an irreversible trend towards the disappearance of most physical universities.¹

With a few months' hindsight, we can see that D'Souza's description was possibly excessive. The presence of university campuses and their communities of students will not disappear from our urban landscapes so easily. However, D'Souza's description of the transformation nonetheless points to some tectonic changes that will likely present themselves due to COVID-19. What remains powerful in his argumentation is that it forces us to grapple with some of the inherent contradictions within these university paradigms, in a way that the path toward a dystopian future remains real.

I see at least two such contradictions. The 'Humboldtian' university, a model inseparable from the nation-state project imagined in the early nineteenth century for an 'enlightened' category of society. Its massification after WW2, with considerable investments on the part of states, succeeded in bringing a ratio of above 40% of tertiary education gross enrolment (a figure reached in the US in the end of the 1960s, in Europe in the 1980s). However positive the trend was, at a time of economic growth and full employment, it led to a phenomenon of invisible separation within society, between those who 'made it' (to college) and those who did not.² The American Vietnam War was an illustrative moment when the education gap gained political visibility: whilst less educated youth were drafted to fight in Southeast Asia, those at university, exempt from fighting, were demonstrating on campuses against the war. When they returned home, the former found themselves basically ignored, if not rejected,

by the latter. This rift was accentuated by the economic crisis and the introduction of neoliberal policies from the 1980s onward. It has since encysted into a 'them-and-us' socio-political culture, and has led to the perception amongst many that universities are primarily instruments of social segregation. Meanwhile, the university model has remained a luxury for most countries in the South, where the ratio student/national population has remained much lower.³ In most decolonising nations, a number of emblematic new establishments served as national development pillars. In Nehruvian India for instance, state interventionism in the 1950s and 1960s led to the creation of a network of public universities and the now renowned Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) system. Yet, those who benefit from this public system, even if it has continued to expand, remain a tiny minority of the population, which is a situation that has invited the development of a large private higher education sector, not always synonymous with high quality.

The second contradiction lies in the neoliberal 'corporate university' model and its economic and human unsustainability. The progressive introduction of this paradigm in the wake of the 'Washington Consensus' in the 1990s, led to a further expansion of higher education services. Predicated on economic 'usefulness', the corporate model de-emphasised the 'gratuitous', speculative and deliberative pursuits best represented by the humanities and the social sciences – which were deemed less 'useful' – whilst it imposed an arsenal of managerial methods aimed at evaluating, and quantifying, every aspect of academic work in the name of 'marketability'. Built on the sacrosanct belief in competition – between individuals (tagged as 'human resources'), institutions and countries – the new model justified a vertical 'selection', which was ultimately not very different from the old elitist European tradition. 'Ivy League' US and UK universities showed the way by transforming themselves from national to global educational and elite markers, a trend reinforced by attributes of academic distinction such as prestigious University Presses, peer-reviewed journals, endowed centres and Professor Chairs.

Yet, as D'Souza pointed out, the continuation of the neoliberal university is founded on students' willingness, and capacity, to take on increasingly higher debts to pay for their studies. This model is built on a deleterious system at a time when an inflation of diplomas faces a reduction of (good) job opportunities. The system is also built on a faculty and staff population in an increasingly precarious situation, most hired on a temporary basis.

Universities as EdTech platforms

D'Souza foresees this economically unbalanced model experiencing a dramatic turn when the classroom-campus 'humanistic' experience finally implodes, and is replaced by the new business model represented by EdTech. This new paradigm, EdTech, is based on the same competitive utilitarian ideology as the corporate university models, yet it corresponds to a new level in that model: through the commoditisation of higher education by using computing platforms (the 'Big Tech') in order to virtually aggregate transactions between clients (the students)

and providers (universities), thereby bypassing the traditional (public) role of the latter as part of the so-called new 'platform economy'. A direct consequence for higher education therefore may be a trend towards its effective dematerialisation, and the gradual depletion of the university as a brick-and-mortar campus, and with it, the communities of faculty and students forged through inter-personal encounters and interactions.

When EdTech reaches maturity, D'Souza predicts it will no longer operate on the basis of a cycle of semesters spent by the students at a physical campus, but mostly through online connections from anywhere in the world, driven to accrue *à la carte* courses provided by a few platforms. These platforms will attract much larger numbers of online 'students' without the hard costs of maintaining buildings, libraries or a vast number of employees, faculty included. Quite naturally, as already the case for other service businesses, we may see algorithm-operated platforms like Amazon or Google forge working alliances with a handful of prestigious university names – turned into certification 'brands' – to lead the train to comprehensive digital education.

During the first wave of COVID, we witnessed the surprising readiness of some flagship institutions – Cambridge, Harvard, MIT, Science Po, LSE – to shut down their physical activities and move everything online for at least one or two years. Even if these policies were later amended to allow students to partially return to classrooms, these renowned establishments could obviously not resist entering the new business fray. What they may lose in tuition fees, particularly from overseas students, they will eventually earn many times more in online course-based subscriptions.

The consequence of such a trend is not just the demise of an organisational, economic model. It is the ultimate atomisation of individuals, faculty and students alike, and the unravelling of the civic educational experience that the university, as we know it, offers. What the COVID crisis reveals indeed, is the extent to which universities should be appreciated for their primary role, as vectors of social development and cohesion. Unless strong decisions are taken, this existential role may be threatened, as was recently commented on in a South African academic periodical: "The pandemic is an inflection point. It behoves universities to re-imagine new teaching and learning possibilities. It calls for universities to re-examine the way they do research and pursue collaborations. It calls for the sector to re-examine how it works. Higher education must re-define the rigid bureaucracies that characterize the system. Universities must also pursue bold responses to enhance their sustainability, relevance and contribution to the country's socio-economic advancement."⁴

Rethinking the university, on the basis of collaboration and situatedness

We must ask ourselves, Is there an alternative to the EdTech predicament? As we saw, even in its benevolent expression, the old university model may have suffered from an original hubris, a hubris reinforced by the post-cold war victory of the West, in which it was thought that *total knowledge* could be encapsulated in universities as repositories of all what (Western or Northern)

societies saw as valuable knowledge, as a mark of their ultimate superiority, exclusive of the immediate communities from which they emanated, and of the world in all its ecological and human diversity.

But as the pandemic has shown (or reminded) us, we live in an interconnected, complex world, in which human-nature relations and the different forms of knowledge drawn from them are all entangled. We now understand that the virus is a consequence of our relentless encroachments on the environment and its biodiversity. By getting rid of our anthropo-ethno-cultural provincialism, along with our neoliberal obsessions, we can imagine a more sober, anchored, multi-centred, horizontal and inclusive experience of Academia. One that combines collective activities embedded in our local environment (human and natural), in dialogue with colleagues from other 'ecosystems' in the world, for a mutually beneficial collaborative educational and research process. This *modus operandi* can make use of online devices, but without falling prey to the Tech platforms and their deadly logic.

Facilitating structures like IIAS can play an important role in this reinvention process. Because it operates on the basis of collaboration, as a versatile multi-function platform (I here want to reclaim the word!), the institute and its world counterparts can help universities rediscover their civic role. With its capacity to forge connections of different kinds while promoting locally-situated/globally-connected knowledge production streams, IIAS can help bring forward the kind of approach that no EdTech will ever achieve.

This is the effort IIAS has unleashed through a number of coalitions of willing partners such as ICAS, SEANNET and HaB. Like IIAS, our Asian, African, American and European partners recognise that only through collaboration, without assumed hierarchies, and through their adherence to a set of essential principles, including the recognition that different forms of knowledges are equally worthy of engagement, that a new universal 'multi-lingual' framework can be forged. With its Humanities across Borders (HaB) program in particular, IIAS offers organisational and methodological perspectives for a truly co-developed pedagogy; one in which universities reclaim their role as unique meeting-grounds, as was foregrounded in the program's Manifesto preamble (written by representatives of the 18-institution members of the HaB consortium, just before COVID-19 got us in its clutches):

"We envision a university that reclaims its rightful civic role and responsibility as a confluence of multiple nodes of knowledge exchange. Our goal, as educators and institutions, is to identify and explore the expansive variety of modes and contexts of acting in, and on, the world. We propose to create border-crossing spaces within and outside universities where academics, students, and communities learn from, and act and work with, each other, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and recognition."

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Notes

- 1 D'Souza, R. 2020 (June 8). 'Zooming Toward a University Platform', *RAIOT Magazine*, India.
- 2 The sociologist Emmanuel Todd calls it 'educative stratification', in *L'illusion Économique* (Gallimard, Paris, 1997). Todd also draws from Michael Young's seminal *Rise of Meritocracy* (Penguin, London, 1958), who first predicted that the rise of higher education would lead to that of a sentiment of inequality within society, and for the members of the highly educated strata, an inclination toward separation from the less educated groups.
- 3 It was 4% in 1980's China; it is now over 30%.
- 4 Kupe, T. & Wangenge-Ouma, G. 2020 (15 Nov) 'Post-Covid 19: Opportunity for Universities to have a rethink', *The Conversation*, South-Africa.