

What COVID-19 does to our Universities

*No mechanical means, however expeditious,
no materialism, however triumphant,
can eradicate the day break we experience
when we have understood a Master.¹*

Across the globe, COVID-19 is affecting multiple dimensions of our lives, ranging from the most existential aspects to the more mundane ones. In this brief article, I wish to reflect upon the impact the pandemic has on our Universities. Let me stress from the outset that I do not intend to downplay the terrible losses people all over the world have suffered. Nor do I wish to discuss the proportionality of the protective measures imposed by the governments, including those taken regarding research and teaching activities on University campuses. What I do want to address, however, is that COVID-19 currently functions as a fire accelerant, stimulating highly detrimental processes that flagrantly run counter to the idea of a University per se. It is vital to prevent COVID-19 from altering the University experience permanently. To accentuate my point, I will first lay down what I mean by the “idea of a University per se”. Second, I will present a few thoughts on why COVID-19 has negative effects on our Universities.

The idea of a “University per se” goes back, *inter alia*, to the classical 19th-century theories of Alexander von Humboldt and John Henry Newman. According to these theories, Universities distinguish themselves from other kinds of professional instruction and training, by providing a liberal education. Understood in this way, education is a public good that pursues intellectual, cultural, and scientific aims. Education prepares and enables students to develop genuine autonomy, by introducing them to the open-ended search for deeper understanding and by stimulating them to form their minds and attitudes in a protected space. Universities also enable advanced scholarship. University scholars research fundamental questions, which do not exclusively answer to the immediate needs of current practical problems.

¹ George Steiner, *Lessons of the Masters*

By answering those more fundamental questions, University research is often the motor for grander and sustainable transformations in society. Further, both education and research are pursued not just in one single discipline or in otherwise narrow limits, but in an open-ended and unlimited discourse, which spans across multiple disciplines and approaches. Universities provide unique spaces for societal self-reflection, as well as an unparalleled room for the growth of individuals as persons. To achieve all this, Universities require as much autonomy as possible, so that they can live by their own intellectual rationale. External influence, stemming from political aims, social purposes, or economic pressure, is not only alien but also ruinous to it. The currency of Universities is truth, not money. Numerous other functions of a University have been added to this original idea of a University per se ever since. Not only were Universities transformed into degree-emitting factories for the greater part of any generation. Nowadays, they also engage in a wide range of activities, such as lifelong learning programmes, marketing, third party funding and collaborating with local and regional businesses and social institutions. In result, considering the pluralism of functions and this wide variety of activities, we work in a “multiversity”. Yet, all these additional functions and activities are of a secondary character only. They are indirect consequences and contingent byproducts of their primary purpose. In view of the increasing pressure on scholars to engage in a preposterous race for external funding, it needs to be stressed that money is a precondition of good research – and not its aim.

This primary function, however, has been in decline for several decades now. Vast areas in our contemporary Universities are characterized by a highly “distracted, numbers-swamped, audit-crazed, grant-chasing” (Stefan Collini) atmosphere. Political influence and measures of the so-called “new public management” have turned many, if not most Universities, into organizations that are so far removed from the idea of a University that one wonders whether the use of the label “University” is still justified. Academic endeavours are commercialized and counted, and university leaders act as if they were leading economic enterprises. Research output is expected to be directly useful, allowing for an immediate implementation. In this way, Universities are pulled into the vortex of purposive research. Various external pressure groups, boards of governors, and artificially instituted competition are now influencing, if not imposing upon, strategic decisions in our Universities. Accountability measures have destroyed the institutional autonomy our Universities once enjoyed. Constant audit activities and chase for grants distract and hinder the scholars from living by their primary rationale.

These destructive processes are now augmented with COVID-19 and the way how University leaders, rectors, presidents and department chairs have reacted to the pandemic. Before I elaborate on these detriments, let me at least briefly acknowledge the paradox that, as far as research is concerned, at least in the humanities and social sciences, the pandemic turned out to have some positive impact. A significant number of talks, workshops, and conferences had to be cancelled during the lockdown. When not substituted by an online format, these cancellations gave scholars the most precious gift the world has for them: Time. Time to read. Time to write. As a reviewer, I already notice the higher quantity of research output following the lockdown period. One could doubt, of course, whether a higher amount of publication is good in itself. But still: more time for research is something we scholars regard highly, but experience rarely. This positive aspect apart, we are confronted with a deplorable picture: vacant campuses, closed libraries, empty seminar rooms. Exchange programmes have come to a halt, international student mobility has almost entirely subsided. Students and scholars report the terrible experience of the COVID-19 term. They miss the everyday realities of campus life: no-tech classes face-to-face, social and cultural diversions, extracurricular activities, in-person office hours, social interactions. The pandemic has triggered one of the most enormous disruptions in the history of University education. The muting of so many aspects of University life, closes down vital communication rooms and opportunities for actual face-to-face encounters, not just of knowledge and ideas, but of persons. Now, one may say that thanks to the various technologies we nowadays have at our disposal, we have alternative communicative spaces: online rooms. Many commentators praise digitalization as the ultimate benefaction, both of our lives in general, and of higher education in particular. The euphoria of digitalization is, however, fundamentally mistaken. The benefits of digitalization are overrated, while its downsides are grossly underestimated. This is a fact that both students and professors report alike after their first lockdown term. In a similar vein, I recently learnt that in my city, around 80 per cent of 3- to 6-year-olds are using tablets or mobile phones. I cannot bring myself to see this as an advantageous development. On the contrary, I wish these kids would browse storybooks instead. Many would want to convince us that a fully digitized University is the pinnacle of a movement toward an ever more inclusive and modernized research and learning environment. I find this idea utterly ridiculous. Reducing students to small images on video conference checkerboards does not support real education, but it hinders it. Surveys demonstrate that during the last COVID-term, students got ever more frustrated with their learning experience, the longer the online-teaching lasted. They miss the interactive, socializing life on campus.

Students report a significantly higher workload during the digitalized term, as well as problems to focus and to motivate themselves at home. They reproach the missing orientation when assessing their learning materials. Guidance must be given by professors in real presence. While it may be that some aspects of professional training can as well be achieved in an online format, University education is different. Education requires, what George Steiner named “real presence”. “Real” means real, and not some zooming-skyping-webexing fake-type of real. A technophile fetishization of digital teaching should not deceive us here. One can certainly acquire a lot of knowledge, alone, in front of electronic devices. But when it comes to how this knowledge shapes the learner and affects society as a whole, it is impossible to replace the direct personal encounters of real education. Remote learning is nothing but a poor substitute.

It may be true that we cannot avoid the fake-type of real education for the time being, due to the pandemic. What I firmly believe, however, is the following: We must maintain our awareness of the differences between real and fake-real. University education is not a serial information programme that can be switched on and off as one pleases. And here is what alerted me so much in this respect: the phrasing Universities used to announce lockdown measures, was highly revealing. Many University leaders seemed to cherish that the pandemic now forces the “old dog” type of professors to learn the new tricks of digitized teaching. They conveyed the distorted image of online teaching as a special gift to the students. Allegedly supported by this image, it seemed as if they had finally found a justification for interfering with the professor’s freedom of education.

What an absurd idea! Instead, Universities should have apologized to their students. They should have labelled digitized teaching as a poor copy and cheap imitation of real education. They should have mentioned humbly, that for the time being, they could, sadly, “only” provide online teaching. They should have promised to return to real education as soon as the situation would allow it. But instead, what we saw were some high-gloss marketing announcements, signalling that “all is fine” and “everything is under control”. Some Universities even seemed to be tempted to prolong their lockdowns a bit longer, to make the digitalization more permanent. In short, the pandemic was abused to hinder the type of education students have a right to experience, and professors have a right to provide, if we take the idea of a liberal education seriously. A German minister even praised the digitalization of teaching as the ultimate solution to the tense situation of the housing market in many University cities: after all, online-students no longer need to live near their Universities. This statement reveals a profound misunderstanding of the function of Universities: an education presupposes the whole spectrum of horizon-broadening experiences that come with

living in a University city. And the statement also displays a cynical vision of how we should develop and improve the social structure in our cities. The educational losses of the pandemic now threaten to extend beyond the current generation, erasing decades of progress, as far as the opportunities for the most vulnerable young adults from marginalized groups are concerned. Persons living in rural or impoverished areas, refugees or persons with disabilities rarely have access to a fully equipped home-office with a high-speed internet connection. And even if they had, distance learning is second class learning from the start. I do not deny the necessity to build resilient educational systems and the need to be adaptive and innovative in improving our means to provide high-quality education and research. Instead, I want to remind all of us that it is at least as important, if not more, to rediscover the original idea of a University. Universities must proactively improve their institutional abilities to change. But they must most vigorously avoid doing so at the expense of their academic core mission. While the members of Universities nearly perish by drowning in the flash floods of endless calls for adaptation, agility, and attitude reframing, I urge all of us to vividly remember our origins. The invocation for education and research is alarmingly silent in the ever-growing, excessive hullabaloo of innovation and change. In this respect, the pandemic, with all its detriments, may at least give us a forceful reminder of what Universities are for, and what conditions they need to flourish. The highly detrimental influence of ministers of higher education, boards of governors, and external funding providers needs to be stopped. The pandemic could help us revitalize our understanding of the nature and importance of Universities. This understanding is so much in danger of being lost sight of. While the immediate effects of COVID-19 have been dramatic and detrimental, mid-term, it also brings with it the opportunity to refocus on higher education and advanced research as a public goods, and to rediscover our Universities' true mission.

In a major weekly German newspaper, one could read a miniature recently written by a University professor. She reported that she was photocopying on a late Friday afternoon, just before the term started. When the job was done, and the machine fell silent, she first felt isolated and alone in the vast and utterly empty building. Yet suddenly, she heard distant music. Going about to find out, she discovered a violinist playing in a seminar room. In her concluding memento, she praises the place of a University campus: "People not only work here – they live here". If only we could revive this spirit again soon. Until then, let us at least remember it with all our forces.

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