

Conflicting logics of the postpandemic university

Gerald Reisinger and Martina Gaisch

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to present a conceptual frame for scholars who draws on the conflicting logics of the postpandemic university.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This feature paper is based on a systematic review of research and studies conducted in the field of higher education. It illustrates broader trends with respect to how the various elements of contemporary and conflicting challenges present themselves within higher education institutions (HEIs).*

Findings – *A combination of literature review and fieldwork across a broad range of scientific fields presents a potentially powerful means of reducing the gap between research and practice. For this reason, this paper sets out to provide conceptual perspectives as to contemporary and conflicting challenges in higher education.*

Research limitations/implications – *This paper presents many descriptive results from HEIs in the western world which do not allow for making global inferences toward the entire higher education sector.*

Practical implications – *The results have a number of implications for the postpandemic university. Among them are that HEIs should not only be more open toward contemporary changes but also embrace previously excluded student populations with their purpose-driven and sustainable orientation toward life.*

Originality/value – *This paper presents a conceptual contribution to contemporary challenges in higher education as a way of refraining from one-size-fits-all approaches. It demonstrates how institutional positioning and profiling depend on conflicting logics. Consequently, each institution of higher learning needs to address these challenges in line with their strategic, economic and political settings.*

Keywords *Higher education research, SDGs, Postpandemic university*

Paper type *Conceptual paper*

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Major challenges determine the environment in which we are currently living. They have significant implications for all areas of life, be they cultural, social, economic, political or ecological. Although it is typical of these challenges that they appear in different waves, depending on the specific societal and political context, they still have a tendency to emerge with a similar structure. This is mainly because social developments go through similar cycles, and there are increasingly global challenges and no longer just regionally limited issues.

To illustrate this in more detail, it is useful here to point at the sustainable development goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations, as they address both the so-called desperate moral problems and grand challenges. To tackle them effectively, it requires interdisciplinary and international efforts where universities must take over proactive roles and become agents of change (Gaisch *et al.*, 2019) that drive these economic, political and societal transformations. For a successful implementation of the 17 SDGs, higher education institutions (HEIs) will need to put even more emphasis on the creation and stimulation of stakeholder dialogues, and on their brokering and bridging roles to generate knowledge together with their national and international networks for the benefit of all citizens around

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the world. Hence, one critical task of the education systems worldwide is to prepare young persons to meet these ever-increasing global challenges while at the same time sensitizing them to the pervasive immorality at hand. A major responsibility for HEIs lies therefore in the provided tool kit and set of values that encourage future graduates to transfer this knowledge to society through their actions. In other words, knowledge is not only made available to society in theory, but above all, in practical terms by solving societal and business issues through concrete action (transfer competence). This approach clearly outlines the so-called third mission of HEIs that next to teaching and research they also need to ensure the “dissemination or outreach activities” for increased innovation and social change (Guldbrandsen and Slipersæter, 2007, p. 113).

Therefore, it is not surprising that in today’s complex world, HEIs are required to take on conflicting roles as civic, regional, national and global entities with differing orientations, priorities and outlines (Preymann *et al.*, 2016). In this context, they frequently need to switch between various identities – ranging from providers of a humanistic education, scientific and scholarly research, and practice-oriented education while responding to increasingly diverse stakeholder demands.

In the following essay, contemporary challenges are sketched, and the role of the educational system is discussed in more detail. Drawing on both a broad literature review and empirical findings of previous research (Gaisch, 2021; Preymann *et al.*, 2016; Gaisch *et al.*, 2019; Durazzi, 2019; Austin and Jones, 2018; Gaisch and Aichinger, 2016), the authors seek to condense conflicting challenges within higher education and provide some practical implications that may help the postpandemic university to successfully navigate today’s “VUCA” world marked by high volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

Placing sustainability at the heart of higher education’s “raison d’être”

Nearly 10 years ago, Sterling (2013) claimed an epistemic and paradigmatic reorientation of universities toward sustainability. That was one year after the SDGs were born at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro. The objective was to produce a set of universal goals that meet the urgent environmental, political and economic challenges facing our world. At the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are the 17 SDGs, which are an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership.

This call for action is all the more relevant in view of the reliance on fossil fuels that have enabled us to make considerable progress and enjoy substantial prosperity over the last century. At the same time, it must be recognized that humanity and its never-ending urge for continuous growth is endangering the future of our planet and the future of generations. Nevertheless, it is legitimate that emerging countries and cultures also claim their right to raise their level of prosperity to the same level as that of the Western world. Arguably, then, energy consumption will continue to grow, as less or no energy is not an option. At the end of the day, whether it concerns issues of materials technology, propulsion technology or energy storage technology, to name a few examples, energy consumption will ultimately be necessary to shape the legacy we leave behind and by doing so, adopt a sustainable perspective. On the one hand, this is a technological challenge that requires new approaches and innovations; on the other hand, it is also a question of awareness where educational systems have a key responsibility when it comes to shaping public opinion and contribute to a transformation of entrenched attitudes and habits.

Not surprisingly, societal issues are also mirrored in the theme of urbanization, which is reinforced by various sociological components. As understandable as the attraction that metropolitan areas exert in terms of a social cultural framework as well as labor market-specific options, equally serious are the effects with regard to mobility, energy requirements, CO₂ footprint and rural exodus. Here, too, HEIs need to function as

transformative institutions ([Bornemann et al., 2020](#); [Gaisch and Aichinger, 2018](#)) capable of covering crucial areas from a variety of perspectives. This is all the more significant in view of the dynamic VUCA world where volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous situations dominate our digitalized and globalized knowledge society ([Gaisch et al., 2021](#)). In this vein, it needs to be stated that the competitiveness and level of innovation of a nation is strongly dependent on the educational level of its citizens.

For this reason, it goes without saying that HEIs not only need to cope with an increasingly heterogeneous student body but also with dynamic societal and technological transformations that have long-lasting implications for their structure and governance.

Aging population and its societal implications

Despite the positive effects of an increasingly aging society, it cannot be denied that this trend also entails some social challenges ([Goldman et al., 2018](#)). From a technological perspective, the spectrum ranges from personalized medicine and operation and examination technology to assistance systems as well as broad questions of the organization and implementation of nursing and care. The question of nutrition with the simultaneous preservation of biological diversity can also be assigned to this wide area of topical issues and problems that HEIs need to find appropriate questions to.

Technological advances and digital literacy

Digitization in all areas of life will be the key driver for society and the economy or as [Kagermann \(2015\)](#) puts it, it is “value creation in the age of industry 4.0.” And although digitization is a substantial innovator in terms of solving problems, the essential challenge lies not only in technological excellence in research and development, but in the need to establish basic digital literacy across the board. Using digital tools and operating in a social environment characterized by human-machine interfaces must be developed into a basic skill analogous to arithmetic, writing and reading. A society that succeeds in taking people along on the path to ever greater digital penetration of all areas of life will also be able to successfully safeguard the prosperity it has acquired in the future and create appropriate conditions for living together. Here, too, the respective education system needs to take the lead and make an invaluable contribution.

Newly emerging student populations and their purpose-driven orientation

In Europe, the generations under the formative influence of the world wars and the reconstruction period after Second World War put their emphasis on construction, further development, technology and prosperity. Increasingly, however, it is becoming apparent that these goals are no longer the focus of young people to any great extent. It is values beyond these that guide today's youth and shape the way they see their own future. Students want to co-construct the world in terms of sustainability and social justice and purpose and are interested in cultural interaction and a meaningful way of life.

What is more, to achieve the ambitious goal that the student body should as far as possible, reflect the sociodemographic profile of the entire population, higher education access for previously underrepresented groups of students must become more fully integrated. Consequently, the ongoing transformation process of the European HEIs requires more flexible learning paths and more innovative didactic designs for an increasingly diverse student body that has different expectations and learning goals than their previous generations ([Gaisch and Aichinger, 2016](#)). Undoubtedly, the skillset that these graduates need to possess goes far beyond disciplinary knowledge alone. They also need to draw on the 21st-century skills, namely, creativity, communication and collaboration skills and critical thinking ([Sieglová and Kocurová-Giurgiu, 2018](#)).

Taking all these factors into account, it seems logical that traditional HEIs appear to become more and more outdated, and that new teaching and learning concepts, scenarios and governance models need to be conceived and implemented. In the following, the postpandemic university is sketched in more detail. It is argued that the narrow focus of educating students and conducting research can no longer be the only purpose for institutions of higher learning. Rankings, profits, graduate income and employability will certainly not disappear from their agendas. At the same time, the need for a real societal impact has never been more pressing. What [Haski-Leventhal \(2020\)](#) calls the purpose-driven university is an educational system that transforms lives and creates impact through academic societal responsibility, not least driven by a student body that claims such profound transformations. It goes beyond the traditional role of custodians of knowledge and embraces the notion of “student success.”

Framing the postpandemic university

In view of both contemporary and future global challenges, it appears indispensable for all stakeholders, whether at the political, economic or societal level, to tackle the issues at stake with a high degree of innovation, technological progress and a sharp eye on task-orientation. What appears to be critical in this context, however, is that this innovative power needs to be clearly embedded in a qualified set of values. To draw on the appropriate value system will more than ever lie in the responsibility of institutions of higher learning that must reconcile two, sometimes diametrically opposed, positions to sufficiently prepare future graduates to navigate the stormy waters of our times. In this regard, [Ivancheva et al. \(2020\)](#) talk about the conflict logics of higher education and refer to the logic of capital and the logic of social relevance.

Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly apparent that society and as such potential students as well as industry and economy have started to place demands on the education system that lie beyond mere purpose fulfillment and goal orientation. From this perspective, the two conflicting strands of the humanistic tradition of Humboldt, on the one hand, in its exaggerated and abstracted form and the representatives of an exclusively purpose-oriented education, on the other hand, have become increasingly blurred. What is referred to as “academic drift” ([Burgess and Pratt, 1970](#); [Krücken, 2014](#); [Tight, 2015](#)) is the convergence tendency between institutions of vocational focus (e.g. technical colleges) and traditional universities which is one reason for both diversification and harmonization processes in higher education ([Musselin, 2011](#); [Fumasoli and Huisman, 2013](#)).

Although traditional tensions have played out between theory and practice orientation, research and teaching, the degree of academic freedom and social responsibility, stakeholder claims, employability and mass versus elite education, the newly added dichotomies will have to be shifted from an “either/or” to an integrated “and” dimension ([Gaisch, 2021](#)). These new challenges embrace topics such as full-/part-time studies, face-to-face/distance teaching; disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity and regionality/internationality. Undoubtedly, the students of the future can no longer be squeezed in a “one-size-fits-all” model, neither will they accept clear-cut boundaries between different institutions and sectors. Against the background of an increasingly diverse student population that draws on different educational biographies and family and work commitments, HEIs will have to balance these alleged conflicting logics and become more flexible in their governance structures and in their teaching and learning regimes.

What will be decisive for the success of the postpandemic university is the ability to address this heterogeneous student body in terms of emotional bonding. To understand what is required in the given context and circumstances and to cater to students’ “needs” effectively will be a crucial ingredient for the tertiary education of the future.

HEIs will need to accompany students along their personal life path through suitable and flexible educational offers and models. For teachers, this means to no longer be the “sage-on-the-stage” (King, 1993) but the “guide-on-the-side” or the “meddler-in-the-middle” (Gaisch, 2014; McWilliam, 2008). They are no longer solely responsible for the transfer of knowledge but need to guide and encourage commitment, self-awareness and critical reflective thinking. Teachers will have to be like the old masters who show their students the way and give them the necessary strength for self-development. Together with their students, they need to develop a repertoire of activities that allows for critical and creative thinking processes and problem-solving strategies.

Consequently, such a path cannot and must not be a rigid and well-trodden one. Rather, it must leave room for individual needs and ideas and encourage HEIs to offer tailor-made solutions, also with regard to knowledge acquired through informal learning and qualifications. By doing so, students will gain the necessary disciplinary skills and the future skills needed to navigate the dynamic world of work. This means, however, that it is high time to leave outdated didactic concepts behind. The postpandemic university will have to reinvent itself in line with the demanding challenges of our times.

The complexity of future requirements also increasingly bids farewell to the one-dimensionally trained graduates who possess in-depth I-shaped knowledge only. It is legitimate to outline that in today’s world, it requires much more than specialist knowledge alone. The problems and grand challenges that need to be resolved in the framework of the 17 SDGs can no longer be solved by one discipline alone (Tyndale *et al.*, 2021; Gaisch, 2020). Rather, they require a common effort of an interdisciplinary, international and intercultural teamwork of T-shaped experts, namely, persons who are capable of navigating and translating between narrow disciplinary boundaries (Adkins, 2009; Gaisch *et al.*, 2020). Our world today needs transversal troubleshooters who can look beyond and build bridges between different cognitive and disciplinary socializations. Understanding other disciplines; the willingness to accept and use the competences, knowledge and values structures of others; and to get the big picture is considered a central requirement.

How many team-building processes and continuing education activities could we spare worldwide if universities could manage to keep alive this interest and curiosity about different disciplines and their interplay. Arguably and understandably, the purpose-driven young people of today expect universities to equip them with transversal skills that go beyond pure content education. And how easy it would be – with an open mind and an agile approach to grant this heterogeneous group of students the free spaces or, if necessary, to create free spaces for reflective and critical thinking in which interculturality and diversity would develop almost on their own.

In proving such reflective loops, an essential demand of the global knowledge economy would be fulfilled – namely, global citizenship – and this without having to use standardized tools and to measure every millimeter of progress in all possible rankings. Perhaps it would be enough to take a closer look at our children from time to time and reflect on their achievements just by drawing on curiosity and positive motivation.

If we manage to understand our actions as a service to our customers – the students – who entrust us with a part of their lives, or as a service to society and no longer as a purpose to increase our own glory, then the universities of this world would also make their contribution in terms of the third mission. For this, it will also be necessary to take the economy and industry on board. If economic interests stand in the way, we will have a hard time to solve the social challenges described at the beginning.

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