

Redesigning Higher Education

Expanding Access during a Pandemic and Beyond

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Abstract

It is undisputed that higher education, both regionally and internationally, has faced severe disruption in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. This disruption affected aspects of university life such as admissions and enrolment, the operations of teaching and research laboratories, university accommodation, sporting activities, and students' overall well-being – all resulting in financial implications for these institutions. While higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Caribbean have weathered the COVID-19 storm's initial phase, unfortunately this transition to online learning is not enough for the continued survival of higher education institutions. This conceptual paper cautions higher education leaders against investing an inordinate amount of time responding to the immediate challenges of COVID-19 at the expense of planning for the long term. While the effects of the disruption are uncontested, the current crisis also creates opportunities for these institutions to redesign themselves (agility) and reconsider their business strategies as they contemplate the question of access. More critically, these institutions must now consider how they can provide for the new customer market segments, the changing nature of work, and resultant workforce development requirements in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (alignment). University leaders should use what they are learning in crisis to position their institutions for the most significant impact in the decades to come. A systematic review of the literature informs this writing as it examines the re-imagination of higher education in a post-COVID-19 dispensation.

Keywords: COVID-19, Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), higher education

Introduction

AS THE WORLD BECOMES INCREASINGLY INTERCONNECTED, SO ARE the risks that we face. The word ‘pandemic’ underscores the global reach of COVID-19. It spanned international borders, affected people regardless of nationality, level of education, income or gender (United Nations 2020a). COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable in society (United Nations 2020b). In education, this trend is no different. Like their global counterparts, Caribbean higher education administrators did not shape regional higher education institutions (HEIs) to deal with extended shutdowns like those which emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (International Association of Universities 2020). The pandemic resulted in a transition to working and learning in remote environments. With COVID-19 as a catalyst, lecturers, administrators, and staff have rapidly engaged in a paradigm shift that they would have otherwise carried out over the next decade. It also spirited an internal shift in institutional structures and has opened dialogue regarding the implications *for* and the future *of* higher education (HE) (Hillman 2020).

In this current dispensation, the stakes are higher as universities are now being called upon to re-engineer, redesign, and transform their business processes. Higher education administrators must situate this re-engineering process within the context of the changing student expectations and the increasing need for widening access. Our inability to reference crises of similar global magnitude makes it difficult to predict what may happen in the immediate future. Though this conceptual paper may be considered future-gazing, its intention is to direct higher education administrators to the opportunities this current dispensation presents for equity and access prospects. This conceptual paper is multi-disciplinary, focusing on sociology, business, education, information technology, and marketing. The discourse builds upon various insights that researchers and proponents have undertaken in their respective fields to link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden our thinking scope. The discussion that follows adopts a problem-focused approach and addresses the “What is new?” question thoroughly. This approach identifies opportunities over challenges, value-added propositions, and highlights new pathways for future universities.

This paper first discusses the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. It then identifies how these new challenges converge with existing challenges. Third, it discusses HEIs’ immediate response to the COVID -19 pandemic. Next, through

detailed examples, I discuss how opportunities for widening access through new market segments can be achieved and reinforces why it is imperative. Finally, the paper concludes by emphasising the critical role of regional HEIs in the current context of the Coronavirus pandemic's socio-economic challenges, responding to changing students' needs, the changing world of work, and the corresponding regional workforce development needs.

Conceptual Framework

HEIs in the Caribbean have weathered this storm's initial phase by transitioning courses and programmes to remote delivery and providing the appropriate student support and resources during this era. However, these institutions must now contemplate their future in a post-COVID-19 dispensation. Unfortunately, the transition to online learning is not enough for the continued survival of HEIs. This conceptual paper cautions HE leaders against investing an inordinate amount of time responding to the immediate challenges of COVID-19 at the expense of planning for the long term. While the effects of the disruption are uncontested, the current crisis also creates opportunities for these institutions to redesign themselves (**agility**) and reconsider their business strategies as they contemplate the question of **access**. More critically, these institutions must consider how they can provide for the new customer market segments or the changing market demographics that have emerged in response to this pandemic and its corollaries. Specifically, institutions need to address the economic disruption, the changing nature of work, and the resultant workforce development requirements in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (**alignment**) – that term from the global crisis. *Agility*, *Access*, and *Alignment* are critical pillars of the *Strategic Plan 2017–2022* of one of the stalwarts in HE in the Caribbean, The University of the West Indies (The UWI).

For this discourse, higher education, also known as tertiary education in some countries, refers to “all post-secondary education, including public and private universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational schools” (The World Bank 2017). Tewarie (2010) extends this definition to include technical and vocational education. In the Anglophone Caribbean, The UWI leads the higher education sector. Compared to national universities, The UWI exercises more flexibility as, “it has a broader governance structure that prevents it from being subjected to a particular jurisdictional power” and it “is positioned to benefit from

economies of scale and scope while ensuring subsidiarity and complementarity” (The University of the West Indies 2012, 16). At the time of his writing, Tewarie (2010) noted that of the 150 HEIs in the region, 60 per cent are public, 30 per cent private, and the remaining 10 per cent exist with some government support. Tertiary education in the Caribbean remains mainly the remit of governments (Howe 2003). On the other hand, private institutions operate as demand-driven, for-profit institutions that service specific niches in their respective territories (Tewarie 2010).

Impact of COVID-19 on HE

The COVID-19 virus upended HE’s world and presented a massive economic hit to HE in the region. In March of 2020, students (locally, regionally, and internationally), were sent home. Classrooms and lecture theatres stood empty; dormitories became unoccupied. Traditional college and university events such as student guild and hall activities, conferences, graduations, and sporting activities were all cancelled. Administrators scrambled to prepare for the unexpected. Teaching and learning immediately transitioned to an online mode in response to governments’ physical distancing measures.

In some cases, this move occurred within hours. For many institutions, this was a formidable challenge with considerations for shortcomings, such as the loss of experiential and hands-on-learning, quality issues associated with teaching, technical difficulties as both teaching staff and students transitioned to the online teaching platforms, and bandwidth capacity issues (International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean 2020; Li and Lalani, 2020; Loukkola 2020; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2015; Times Higher Education 2020; University World News 2020). The realities of domestic life for staff and students further strained the move to online. The financial health of these institutions was also an obvious concern. The anticipated fall in student enrolment is likely to be painful, forcing many institutions to engage in the process of deeper inflexion. While most of the HEIs in the region are supported by their governments and/or are regionally funded, much of the financial concerns focused on the potential loss of their primary customer base along with losses in revenue generated from accommodation, catering, consulting, and conferencing.

Aside from the disruption to their social life, students have experienced the most immediate impact from the temporary cessation of face-to-face teaching

at HEIs, particularly undergraduates and those about to finish upper secondary school and aspiring to enter higher education. Students have no clear indication of how long this disruption will last vis-à-vis the immediate impact on daily life, the costs incurred, the financial burdens, the learning continuity, and regional and international mobility. For many students, the reality is resigning themselves to limited education, wasted finances, and ongoing health risks, at least for the next two years in the first instance (Bruner 2020). Distance learning requires a high level of organisation from students to achieve acceptable standards and prevent dropout (Gorbunovs, Kapenieks, and Cakula 2016). Challenges include access to technology, internet access, establishing a study routine, managing distractions, and the absence of a specific place to study (Gorbunovs, Kapenieks, and Cakula 2016; Indiana University 2018).

A review of the literature indicates that students have become increasingly worried about the Coronavirus's impact on their finances (Bolton and Hubble 2020; Top Universities 2020). These concerns extend to an overall reduction in income, making rent payments, increased worries about employability after graduation, and concerns about the utility of the continued payment of full tuition fees. Students are revisiting the return on investment (ROI) of higher education with some urgency in a period of increased unemployment and uncertainty. Students have now been spending more time (not less) at home due to closures of dorms, online classes, and stay-at-home orders (Boyd 2020). Socialising during the pandemic has been limited to virtual encounters or small groups and constant vigilance surrounding social distancing. Absent are the opportunities for impromptu gatherings in dorms and cafeterias or participating in social events on campus that serve as stress relievers for many students. Social distancing practices will restrict how students socialise and seek informal support.

For Caribbean HEIs, this disruption occurred against the backdrop of broader economic and social upheaval – an impact that is second to none. Although physical distancing and quarantine measures remain critical to reducing the virus' spread, the economic uncertainty associated with those measures provided a significant economic counterweight, particularly for economies in the Caribbean whose business transactions relied primarily on face-to-face interactions. In the case of tourism, for instance, the Caribbean is the most severely hit by the paralysis of travel. Governments are recording job losses at unprecedented rates in tourism and its downstream sectors. Classified as small island developing states (SIDS), the region's territories are highly vulnerable to external and inter-

nal economic shocks. These economic challenges exist against the backdrop of balance-of-payments constraints, recurrent exchange-rate and debt crises, low growth, poverty, and heightened vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters (United Nations 2020).

Both commodity and tourism-dependent countries showed considerable prevalence of job losses in households earning below the minimum wage in January 2020. A similar pattern, although less pronounced, is observed for the incidence of business closures. The diaspora is also affected and unable to provide remittances (Caribbean Association of Banks 2020). A review of the social implications reveals that the pandemic has impacted particular population segments, such as those living in, or vulnerable to poverty. Other groups impacted include people working in more exposed activities, women, children, adolescents, the elderly, those with disabilities, migrants, and the homeless (Bogdan 2013). The youth, specifically Gen Z, will also be severely impacted as the temporary, part-time, or unprotected jobs in informal conditions, which young people tend to have, are the most affected by the deterioration of the economy (International Labour Organization 2020a). The implication for this group to access higher education will be revisited later in this discussion.

Challenges Presented by COVID-19 on Higher Education

The challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic also compound the existing challenges faced by HEIs in the region, with economic security being the primary concern. Decades of socioeconomic struggles by regional governments have fuelled ongoing conversations and criticisms about higher education's role beyond its teaching and research remit and its contribution to developing knowledge economies and democratic societies (The World Bank 2002). The trends influencing higher education financing outlined by Marcucci and Johnstone (2007) remain relevant in the Caribbean. These trends include the rising unit costs of instruction, increasing enrolments, and declining governmental funding.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is an extension of its predecessor, the digital revolution, and focuses on smart technology, artificial intelligence, and robotics; all of which now impact our everyday lives. The implication of this revolution for business, industry, and the workforce in general, are extensive. The most obvious relates to how the nature of work and the job market are changing. The Inter-American Development Bank (2019) projected that occupations related

to the digital economy (such as computer science specialists) or services (such as food service professionals) are among the fastest-growing occupations in Latin America and the Caribbean. There is also an increasing demand for advanced digital skills – web and software development, knowledge of data storage technologies, or mobile application development.

In the age of innovation and knowledge-driven growth, universities as the generators of knowledge and hosts to knowledge repositories are central to this growth paradigm. A society's ability to produce, select, adapt, commercialise, and use knowledge is critical for sustained economic growth and improved living standards (The World Bank 2002, 7). It is against this context that universities deemed as developmental universities are even more critical and instrumental in leading the way or partnering in the search for new and innovative economic sectors and/or facilitating the transformation of old sectors (Beckles 2020).

In terms of building the human capital stock, the Caribbean has recorded the lowest enrolment in HE in the hemisphere within the relevant age cohort, 18–30 years (Beckles 2020). Its enrolment rates currently hover at less than 25 per cent against a North American average of near 60 per cent and Latin America approaching 45 per cent (Beckles 2020). There is no doubt that the pandemic has resulted in enrolment figures that are much more discouraging. These challenges undoubtedly paint a dismal view of the future of HE in the region. The pandemic has now forced higher education administrators to confront an uncomfortable truth: the current campus model is neither sustainable nor scalable (Kurshan 2020). HEIs are cautioned against fixating on these challenges; they are advised to consider the opportunities for working through these difficulties. Considering these opportunities repositions the future university by exploring opportunities for broader access via new market segments, creating online services that are more efficient and less costly, and the provision of more scalable and skill and career-oriented programmes designed for the online learner.

Immediate COVID-19 Responses by Regional HEIs

As the world contends with the Coronavirus's onslaught, university leaders worldwide engaged in extensive contingency planning efforts to ensure business and educational continuity. To maintain student retention and access, many universities quickly pivoted to offer fully online courses. While some universities may already have had robust online systems, smaller universities and colleges struggled

under the weight of the demand. Similarly, higher education administrators in the region also acted decisively. Following government guidelines, higher education administrators suspended face-to-face teaching, and non-essential facilities on campuses were closed. Regional and international students were shuttled safely to their homes. These initiatives were vital to protect staff and students' safety, health, and well-being (Nurse 2020).

Higher education administrators rapidly transitioned courses and programmes to online delivery. For some, transitioning all programmes online proved to be much more challenging. Traditional exams were abandoned and moved at pace to transform the assessment processes to include digital testing and in some instances, digital proctoring (Nurse 2020; United Nations Children's Fund 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2020). Several institutions have begun planning and using virtual webinars and tours to support future student recruitment, admissions, and enrolment process. Higher education administrators disseminated COVID-19 updates and communications to the campus communities. HEIs also instituted student support resources such as virtual library services, online academic advising, telephone and online counselling, and flexible tuition payment plans.

Opportunities for Widening Access

Multiple publications have likened the transition to virtual or remote learning to a tectonic shift. The global experimentation in remote teaching and learning has recorded relative successes for many HEIs in the region (Nurse 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2020). This move has changed the concept of education overnight, and digital learning has emerged as a necessary resource for education. Technology has afforded institutions the ability to distribute, create more compact content, and ultimately change access for everyone. As institutions emerge beyond their initial COVID-19 emergency response, they face questions about higher education institutions' fundamental roles in a post-pandemic dispensation.

This paper stands resolute in its position that the successes of remote teaching and learning garnered in this pandemic offer tremendous opportunities for the future of regional HEIs. These opportunities must be identified, planned for, and leveraged, if regional HEIs plan to maintain their global outlook and positioning, address the workforce and skills development gap for the region, and

more importantly, maintain business continuity. However, this paper cautions institutions that this move also requires revision of their business models and, more importantly, addressing the question, “How well do universities understand their future ‘customers’ whom they exist to serve?” Responding to this question requires a radical approach to business process re-engineering which integrates customer focus, emphasises designing and improving key organisational processes; and in the identification of critical success metrics (Davenport 1994; Grint and Willcocks 1995; Tang and Zairi 1998). For Caribbean HEIs, this may include

- the development of a customer service blueprint centred on digital service delivery;
- improved organisational processes such as
 - o a more effortless transfer of documents across departments and campuses via electronic workflows;
 - o more contemporary communications technologies that allow users to edit, view and receive messages regarding activities and tasks, retrieve reports, forms and notifications;
 - o the ability to populate a series of form fields by extracting information from a database instead of requiring users to input that data;
- leveraging digital opportunities to improve brand differentiation;
- identifying new key performance metrics. These can include financial, student success, admission and enrolment, faculty and staff, and facilities and resources.

The global HE market is now more competitive than ever before. The widespread access to the internet and rapid technological advancements have facilitated an unprecedented degree of global connectedness. Increased connectivity allows for a faster exchange of knowledge, networks, collaborations, and opportunities for internationalisation. For regional HEIs however, it also means that in order to survive, these institutions must become agile in their operations. Academic reputation alone is no longer a good value proposition to attract students. As institutions consider expanded access and reach, they must consider a more agile approach to student recruitment, focused on different segments with personalised content. Traditional indicators such as age, sex, and geography are no longer sufficient for identifying client segments. Administrators must contemplate that

additional factors such as return on investment, career aspiration, career status, financial status, graduating status, and social needs are also critical factors in students' decision-making process. As such, regional institutions can create new and varied segments and customer bases that they must pivot to and respond to as they seek to fulfil their learners' varied aspirations and needs. An appreciation of these segments will, in turn, inform strategic planning and recruitment.

Identifying new customer segments allows regional HEIs to respond to widening access and increases these institutions' ability to recruit larger numbers of students. Even more critical in a COVID-19 dispensation for regional HEIs, is how access will be created and sustained for the non-traditional student. Today, the composition of HE's student population indicates an expanding non-traditional base (CLASP 2015; Hittepole 2019; Hutchins 2020; National Center for Education Statistics 2012). According to a National Center for Education Statistics report, within the next six years, the number of people 35 and older who enrol in college will grow 20 per cent, compared to 13 per cent for the traditional 18- to 24-year-old set (Hussar and Bailey 2017).

The term 'college' or 'university' student is no longer exclusive to the traditional 18- to 24-year-old matriculating directly from high school (Hittepole 2019). The definition of a non-traditional student has been a source of much discussion in the literature. While definitions vary, researchers generally consider non-traditional students to have one or more of the following characteristics: independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying post-secondary enrolment, attending school part-time, and being employed full-time (United States Department of Education 2015). This section will demonstrate, through the use of four examples, how HEIs can achieve broader access through targeted market segmentation by highlighting those segments that face the most vulnerabilities in the current higher education environment. The customer segments discussed below focus on two categories of non-traditional students: the lifelong learner and the displaced worker. This is then followed by the traditional student, as seen through the lens of the new pandemic, and persons with disabilities.

Lifelong learners

When planning for widening access and catering to expanding student demographics, HEIs must plan from the non-traditional student's perspective. Holdsworth

(2011) asserts that “academics must do more to challenge assumptions about who their students are, and be able to cater to those that do not fit the mould”. The Commission of the European Communities (2000) defines lifelong learning as an “essential policy for the development of citizenship, social cohesion and employment”. It describes a supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetime. Key competencies of lifelong learning include knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by all for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion, and active citizenship (European Commission 2018). Before the pandemic, HEIs viewed lifelong learning as an opportunity for participants to increase their work competency, upgrade skills, widen and update knowledge and improve social networking. In essence, it equips people with skills and knowledge that will advance their careers (Mustafa 2017). The discussion below directs the reader to the categories of lifelong learners that must be incorporated into an HEIs expanding access model.

In this current dispensation, lifelong learning can no longer be an opportunity for some. The looming upheaval to the global economic system and sustainable employment as we know it created a renewed role for higher education as it positions itself to align with the societal needs to support sustainable employment through continuous learning. Skills development, retraining, and education are central to economic growth, decent work and wages, equity, inclusion, and social justice (Fore et al. 2020). With the acceleration of the digital transformation of jobs and temporary job losses becoming a permanent feature of our global economic landscape, there is a need for accelerated action around re-skilling, upskilling, and retraining (World Economic Forum 2020). Any movement towards expanding access must incorporate educational reformation in content and delivery for the future workforce. Expanding access involves examining the labour pool based on skills and degrees. In this context, softer skills such as liberal arts, creativity, innovation, customer servicing, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, and empathy, have risen to the top (Fore et al. 2020). As part of its mandate to regional development, higher education must cater for an increasingly dynamic labour market where specific fields experience labour shortages, widening skills gap, and professions are fluid (Zeeman and Cremonini 2020). Central to this is the alignment of regional higher education and the world of work, which undoubtedly filters down to regional work.

It is now essential for these institutions to become both responsive and

scalable. Responsiveness implies that regional HEIs must react to socioeconomic and market demands through the knowledge, skills, and competencies an institution develops in learners. Simultaneously, scalability denotes an institution's capacity to absorb more students (providing equal quality of education) as flexibility increases (Zeeman and Cremonini 2020); all very much in keeping with a global university outlook. In such a context, the pace of change is unpredictable and domain dependent, and continuous re-skilling and alliance with the world of work is necessary. Focused planning from the university must include:

- ensuring access for all;
- developing the right mix of formal and non-formal learning;
- developing flexible degree paths, for example, enabling adults to attain a degree through dual trajectories, modular or stackable learning;
- developing certified, short-term learning opportunities to develop new skills;
- creating synergies and alignment between industry sectors and sub-sectors;
- the development of closing the skills gap accelerator programmes;
- the development of a Caribbean Skills Consortium and Common Taxonomy. (Mustafa 2017; Stanistreet 2020; Zeeman and Cremonini 2020):

The displaced worker pursuing upskilling or reskilling

In tandem with the COVID-19 recession, automation creates a 'double-disruption' scenario for workers (Tsusaka 2020). The displaced worker represents a new category of student/client for which regional HEIs must now react. The impact of COVID-19 on the displacement of workers in the world labour market is unprecedented. Preliminary data suggests that the quarantine and physical distancing measures have resulted in job losses to the sum of 1.6 million more unemployed persons in 2020 than 2019 (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2020). Similarly, the International Labour Organization (ILO) expects that the workforce will lose 9.9 per cent of working hours during the second fiscal quarter because of the impact of COVID-19 (International Labour Organization 2020b). This magnitude is equivalent to a loss of 1.5 million full-time jobs. These displaced workers are now pursuing retooling and reskilling opportunities. In this unique scenario, we are now witnessing a situation of millions unemployed on the one hand, and a rapidly evolving and increasing skills need on the other.

This pandemic-related disruption, however, must be contextualised within a

more extended history of economic cycles. Before 12 March 2020, the 4IR was already impacting current jobs (World Economic Forum 2016, 2018, 2020). While the job market is well into the 21st century, it is clear that our higher education system cannot fully support this transition. At the turn of the 20th century, the world underwent a significant reconfiguration in the world of work – from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy (West 2019). At that time, it took decades for governments to deal with the effects of this change and foster alignment between workforce skills and the world of work requirements.

Today, we are on the cusp of another transition – from an industrial economy to a digital one (World Economic Forum 2016; West 2019). Central to this new business model is automation and artificial intelligence (AI). The World Economic Forum (2016, 1) noted that “these drivers of transformation currently affecting global industries are expected to significantly impact jobs, ranging from significant job creation to job displacement, and from heightened labour productivity to widening skills gaps”. As such, some of the most reliable jobs for people who were unable to benefit from tertiary level education exist in restaurants, factories, retail, and transportation, and these jobs are now being affected by automation. Claudia Coenjaerts, Director of the ILO Decent Work Team and Office for the Caribbean, suggests, “this is also an opportunity to use ‘downtime’ for building skills for employability” (International Labour Organization 2020).

Regional HEIs must develop a strategy for creating access for the displaced worker, ensuring that they are aware of their option of returning to school. Robert LaLonde of the University of Chicago and Daniel Sullivan of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago suggest that retraining through our nations’ community colleges is one mechanism of reducing the skills gaps and potentially increase their students’ re-employment earnings (The Hamilton Project 2019, 201). An internet search would indicate that many of our best universities, some through collaboration with government and private institutions, have already begun capitalising on these opportunities to create training programmes for displaced workers and pivoting as they learn more about the programme and those undertaking it. Case Studies include The Pittsburg State University, Texas A&M University-Commerce, Central Queensland University, and the University of Wollongong (Pittsburg State University 2020; Rosanes 2020; Texas A&M University-Commerce 2020). In some instances, several universities such as Charles Darwin University (Rosanes 2020) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) such as Coursera (Boorstin 2020) are rolling out short online courses. Workers who have been furloughed

or lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic can benefit from the heavily subsidised (or free) courses.

As such, this is an opportunity for regional HEIs to offer industry-recognised education, training, and credentials to facilitate dislocated workers' return to work. That said, the experiences of HEIs to date indicate that regional HEIs must first determine how to address dislocated workers' unique needs to encourage their enrolment. Regional HEIs would also need to provide sufficient guidance around appropriate career options and provide support to help them gain the basic skills necessary to succeed (Amour 2020; Noy, Heidkamp, and Manz 2013). These include

- providing flexibility (fast, affordable, and accessible) access to education and training that students require;
- developing a user-centred design approach and developing programmes that deliver education targeted to student needs. Programmes should provide displaced workers with fast, flexible programmes that can get them the skills they require, and the ability to continually return and learn as skills needs change;
- providing more options, like credentials that can be completed more quickly (Amour 2020);
- providing comprehensive information that is readily accessible: information is critical, and as such, displaced workers require more information on the changing skills in their industries, as well as additional information about how to prepare for multiple career paths;
- developing programmes that are of high-quality, lead to employment, and can be stacked with longer-term programmes;
- providing learner support services to assist mature students in using career exploration and assessment tools, offering them information about the local labour market, and identifying courses or programmes that will help them prepare for their careers.

The traditional student: A new lens

This paper asserts that as universities seek to restructure their business models to provide for widened access, they must now consider the changing economic and social realities of their once most secure customer segment. That customer

segment, the traditional student (18–24 years), has been impacted by the effects of the broader global impact of COVID-19 at a crucial time when they are reaching critical milestones in their lives. Millennials, age 26–40 years old, include young and established career professionals who may also be new parents or homeowners. Gen Zs, age 11 to 25 years old, are now beginning to come of age, completing their education, and moving into the workforce (Schmidt 2020). Historical data indicates that youth unemployment rates rise faster during economic recessions than the overall unemployment rate (Schmidt 2020). According to a recent United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) report, an estimated 230,000 persons in the Eastern Caribbean are between 18 and 24 (Wood, Nartea, and Bishop 2020). Younger age groups will feel similar economic and employment effects (Wood et al. 2020).

Young persons have focused on essentials like food, housing, and healthcare, while they have relegated activities such as education, transportation, leisure, and recreation as optional. Additional factors such as the digital divide, and budget cuts and disruptions to service delivery, further exacerbate the immediate financial impact of COVID-19 on youths. These challenges are now hampering HEIs from meeting young people’s needs (The Commonwealth 2020). Additionally, these challenges further compound this group’s already negative perception of higher education’s utility and its return on investment (Barber 2020). Regional HEIs will continue to see an increasing number of students become unemployed, contract the illness themselves, or care for family members, along with a series of disappointments around graduations, connections to the community, and uncertain futures (Mull 2020). As regional HEIs seek to cater and appeal to this segment, there are several factors that they must take into consideration (Seemiller and Grace 2016; Selingo 2018):

1. The purpose of higher education for Gen Z is to help launch a career. They will look primarily for academic and co-curricular programmes to develop their skills and prospects.
2. While they expect a high-tech educational and campus experience, they toggle between the real and virtual worlds.
3. They favour a mix of learning environments and activities led by a professor, and additional options to create their blend of independent and group work and experiential opportunities.

Persons with disabilities

The challenges of access for persons with disabilities is one of the most apparent indicators of higher education disparity. Within the context of access to HE, persons with disabilities are often unable to benefit from available options, personalised information, coordination between services, departments, ancillary staff, funding, trained aides, and technical aides (Australian Human Rights Commission 2004). These barriers to participation and success originate from institutions, systems, and processes. In this regard, educational providers play a central role as equalisers in this equation by creating avenues for more inclusivity. The impact of COVID-19 on differently-abled persons and specifically, differently-abled students, is particularly harsh (Enders, Haggstrom, and Lalive 2020; James 2020; Office for Students 2020; Westander 2020).

Differently-abled students face every issue that non-differently-abled students face during this challenging time – job loss, isolation, financial concerns. They also face heightened stressors unique to them, such as ADD/ADHD, eating disorders, learning issues, anxiety, PTSD and more. In the case of a virtual or remote learning higher education experience, HEIs must leverage the advantages and opportunities to reduce the difference between outcomes gaps for differently-abled students and non-differently-abled students just entering the university, continuing with their studies, and performing in their degrees.

For differently-abled students who are also considered vulnerable to the Coronavirus, remote learning is seen as incredibly crucial, reducing the interaction they have with others (James 2020). This accelerated shift to online learning provides opportunities for regional HEIs to address access issues and biases in concentration by providing students with disabilities with more meaningful choices. Critical to this is the expansion of university services to include a more assisted learning approach, an issue that traditional teaching, such as group lectures or seminars, can sometimes struggle to achieve. These include specific support such as online stenotyping services, recorded lectures, and inclusive assessments related to online teaching for students with all kind of vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

In the wake of extreme economic uncertainty, and with many colleges and universities transitioning to virtual learning, the rippling effects of the Coronavirus

pandemic have sent unprecedented shocks through the higher education system. In addition to the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have also seen the rapid acceleration of three significant global forces: deglobalisation, digitisation, and corporate consolidation all converged to influence global finance's rapid shift, the world of work, and changing consumer behaviour. This competitive environment has forced many HEIs to choose strategies to enhance organisational effectiveness and efficiency. Regional HEIs are mandated to retool, reposition, and accelerate their responses to both the upending of industries in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, and the acceleration of the 4IR and its impact on the work of world.

This re-engineering process becomes even more critical for regional HEIs and their nuanced developmental role within the region. While universities will not solve the profound socioeconomic impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on their own, through collaboration, they can work with governments and businesses to help address the crisis through evidence-informed policy and practice, retraining and retooling people towards economic recovery.

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