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STEERing into the Swerve: Adjusting to the Challenges and Opportunities Forced by COVID-19

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Abstract

"Drivers" of tertiary education found themselves swerving dangerously and, seemingly, uncontrollably during the pandemic. The action required to regain control over a vehicle when sliding is to steer into the swerve. For higher education leaders around the world, STEERing into the COVID-19 swerve means acknowledging that the crisis pushed tertiary education off its path, resulting in a need for innovative, open-minded thinking to reposition tertiary systems and institutions onto a new one.

The 2008 financial crisis presented formidable challenges that needed to be addressed both in the short- and long-term, including diminished resources, personal and academic challenges for institutions and students, staffing problems, downward pressures on comprehensive tertiary systems, and much more. Recollecting (former World Bank chief economist) Paul Romer's famous 2004 quote that "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste" and applying what was learned from the financial crisis over a decade ago, the World Bank reassessed its policy advisory framework in order to craft a tool that would allow policy makers and advisors to use future crises as opportunities for reflection and potential reform. As when operating cars on icy roads, "drivers" of tertiary education found themselves swerving dangerously and, seemingly, uncontrollably during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With its 2021 policy advisory framework, "STEERing Tertiary Education: Toward Resilient Systems that Deliver for All," the World Bank has developed a tool to help countries steer their tertiary education sectors into the COVID swerve. Policymakers and academic leaders should be purposeful in steering their tertiary sectors toward national and institutional strategic goals, particularly recognizing how those goals may have been affected by the impacts of the pandemic on their operations (including, but not limited to, financing, quality, staffing, and student access and retention issues) and may even need to withstand future disruptions. The STEERing framework is built around five key dimensions that are instrumental for creating agile, effective, and sustainable tertiary education, particularly in the post-COVID environment.

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- **Strategically Diversified Systems:** supporting all postsecondary institutions, ensuring agile, articulated pathways and diversity of forms, functions, and missions. Countries at all levels of economic development can benefit from ensuring that tertiary education offers options for studies that suit the interests of students in terms of both their studies and outcomes. Diversified systems can promote lifelong learning opportunities for (re)skilling, with flexible pathways, second-chance options, and greater adaptability to meet the needs and opportunities of employers, civil society, and governments. This means permeability across pathways and providers, modularization of learning offers, and student-centered credit systems to allow for flexible pathways as well as bridging and mentoring programs to boost tertiary remedial education, to give everyone a good start and adequate support.
- **Technology:** designed and applied in a purposeful and equitable manner. While technology has been a mixed experience in countries around the world in terms of the benefits achieved through massive (often very expensive) investments, there is no doubt that applying effective education technology is now a mainstay of tertiary education everywhere in the world. Harnessing the power of technology to improve teaching and research capacity while simultaneously acknowledging and countering the impact of expanding digital divides has to be in every nation's tertiary education strategy, to make the most of what was experienced and learned during the COVID pandemic.
- **Equity:** a universal approach to the benefits and opportunities of postsecondary learning. As noted in the STEERing report, equity (as equality of opportunity in tertiary education) promotes sustainable and impactful economic and social development. Inclusion promotes policies and cultures that enable all members to benefit from, and contribute to, their learning environment and institutions. As knowledge drives economic development and the rewards of advanced education become ever greater, attention to equity and access must be a central consideration for all stakeholders in tertiary education. Access to, and persistence through, tertiary education is a global concern and one that requires sustained commitment to resolve.
- **Efficiency:** a goal-oriented, effective use of resources requires improving information systems so that sectors, subsectors, and institutions can be managed and enhanced utilizing evidence and sound information. To ensure both operational and fiscal efficiencies, leaders benefit from establishing robust and data-driven governance, financing, and quality assurance instruments that are designed to weather the current and potential future crises. For financing, systems and institutions may benefit from diversifying their funding base and reducing dependency on a single income source like government budgets. For quality assurance, adapting accreditation and institutional operations requires agility in ensuring that innovations in delivery can be assessed and adapted quickly. And, for governance, it is vital to ensure that external governance (legislative and ministerial oversight) and institutional governance (boards and oversight bodies) are developed and operated in such a manner that promotes effective connections with external actors and the world of work and allow for rapid innovations to be tested and embraced.
- **Resilience:** the ability to persist, flourish, and deliver agreed goals despite adversity, and while maintaining a commitment to mission and purpose. In order not to waste the lessons learned via this crisis, countries and institutions will benefit from acknowledging the need for resilience planning, by taking stock of the successes and failures of the COVID-19 response at the systems and institutional levels, and analyzing options that would have mitigated the failures.The adoption of this new indicator optimistically aims for a return of a local focus among faculty, who are expected to work closely with communities, industry, and government organizations as an alternative to seeking to compete globally by publishing in international journals. This initiative also marks a shift from an outward-looking strategy to a relatively inward-looking approach. Importantly, this reorientation exemplifies the tension between the global and local agendas in higher education policy.

In Conclusion

Utilizing adaptive governance frameworks to embed strategic resilience interventions to address significant short- and long-term challenges enables leaders to establish operating norms and opportunities that reinforce the institution's capacity to survive and thrive during times of disruption. Major issues to be acknowledged and addressed include diminished resources for institutions, personal and academic challenges for institutions and students, demand for improved infrastructure to support continued distance and blended learning models, reduced mobility placing pressures to improve regional and local tertiary institutions, questions of sustainability of funding models, continuity of research in terms of funding and day-to-day activities, and more.

STEERing into the swerve means acknowledging that the crisis has pushed tertiary education institutions and systems off of the path on which they were in 2019, and committing to repositioning them on a new one. And, while the immediate pain of COVID-19 disruptions recedes, new disruptions emerge, such as the brutal invasion of Ukraine and the resultant diplomatic and geopolitical isolation of Russia. Higher education has weathered disruptions from war and pandemics in the past. New tools and innovative thinking can bridge from today into the future, utilizing purposeful and directional "steering" to ensure that higher education is able to promote the values and serve the needs of its societies and constituents. ◢

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