



REFLECTIONS ON US HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW CROWN EPIDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Amidst global advancements and technological progression, a nation's higher education standard mirrors its cultural influence. The U.S., despite its dominance in higher education, faces challenges, particularly highlighted by the recent pandemic. This paper examines key issues such as financial constraints, rising educational inequalities, and diminishing social responsibility of educational institutions. By focusing on a people-centered approach, fostering educational equity, ensuring quality, and balancing government oversight with market-driven dynamics, the research aims to guide higher education in the post-pandemic world.

KEYWORDS: *Pandemic; U.S. higher education; Challenges; Cultural diplomacy.*

INTRODUCTION

As one of the world's developed countries, the United States has distinctive characteristics of higher education that have brought it advantages in many areas, which in turn have played a vital role in the development of the country's social, economic, scientific and technological, and cultural diplomacy. These characteristics include the diversity of higher education in the US, the openness and autonomy of the school system, and the practicality of the higher education approach, and so on. These characteristics of American higher education have greatly activated the vitality of higher education, enhanced the social service function of higher education, promoted universities to highlight their characteristics by all means, and strengthened the internal construction of universities. These characteristics and advantages of higher education in the United States are worthy of reference for the construction of higher education in other countries around the world. On the flip side, the outbreak of the Newcastle pneumonia epidemic has brought a huge impact on American higher education, and has exposed many shortcomings of American higher education. Despite the fact that the Biden administration has implemented a new policy for American higher education that differs from the anti-intellectualism of the Trump administration, it has still not been able to fundamentally reverse the situation in which American higher education is in deep shock. The review of US higher education in the light of the new epidemic will be of great value in thinking about the future of higher education in other countries around the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an unprecedented upheaval in higher education, compelling institutions to adapt rapidly to an unforeseen set of challenges.

Pomerantz and Brooks (2020) provide a foundational understanding of the complexities institutions confronted as they transitioned to remote learning. Their exploration encompasses the experiences of both students and faculty, painting a holistic picture of the emotional, logistical, and pedagogical challenges.

As higher education navigated the murky waters of the pandemic, financial implications took center stage. A report by McKinsey & Company (2020) suggests that institutions, particularly those with pre-existing financial vulnerabilities, grappled with substantial enrollment declines and corresponding revenue losses.

The pandemic didn't just pose logistical challenges; it also spotlighted longstanding inequalities. Grawe (2020) underscores that the brunt of the pandemic's academic disruptions were borne by marginalized students. Barriers ranging from technological access to conducive home learning environments intensified, hampering equitable educational access.

The psychological toll of the pandemic on students emerged as a profound concern. Cao et al. (2020) elucidate this impact, emphasizing the heightened anxiety, depression, and stress levels students faced. Their study highlights the pressing need for institutions to bolster support mechanisms during crises.



The abrupt shift to online instruction stands out as one of the most defining aspects of higher education's pandemic response. Crawford et al. (2020) provide an extensive review of how institutions across 20 countries, including the US, adapted their pedagogical approaches. Their findings reflect a shared global struggle and an exposed digital divide among students, urging institutions to invest in more resilient and flexible educational infrastructures.

As the dust begins to settle, contemplations on the future landscape of higher education are surfacing. Daniel (2020) offers insights into potential lasting shifts. His predictions encompass the broader adoption of hybrid educational models, a heightened focus on lifelong learning, and initiatives to ensure more equitable access to education.

US higher education's journey through the pandemic, as reflected in scholarly discourse, underscores a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities. While immediate disruptions have been undeniably profound, there is also an emergent sentiment that this crisis might be the catalyst for introspective reforms in higher education.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

1. The plight of US higher education in the light of the new crown epidemic

With the great impact of the new crown epidemic, the US higher education system has been thrown into disarray and will face severe tests for a longer period of time. This dilemma is mainly manifested in the crisis facing the finances of higher education institutions, the accentuation of inequity in higher education, and the weakening sense of social responsibility of higher education institutions.

First of all, many higher education institutions have serious funding gaps, and are facing a financial crisis

Funding for higher education in the United States generally comes from three areas: students, donors, and the legislature. Nevertheless, with the new crown epidemic, the sources of funding for higher education have been severely impacted.

The spread of the New Crown epidemic in the United States has undoubtedly had a devastating impact on the country's economic development. The impact has had a domino effect on various sectors. And higher education has inevitably been involved.

The coming of the new crown epidemic has severely affected government public revenues, financial markets, and the labour market at a macro level. At the level of government public revenue, the impact of the epidemic has led to a reduction in economic growth and tax revenue, which in turn has led to a reduction in public revenue. In this case, the government will inevitably cut back on some public services and tighten its spending on higher education funding. In 2020, according to NPR, "The school's financial resources from the government have been reduced by almost half."^① At the student loan level, a downturn in the economy can trigger a credit crunch in the financial markets and an increase in loan rates. This makes it more difficult for students to take out loans, which in turn affects their payment of tuition fees and enrolment. At the level of university employment, the economic recession has triggered a lack of consumer investment, and a shrinking demand for labour, with university employment suffering as a result, and this cascading reaction has contributed to a vicious circle in the development of higher education.

At the micro level, the spread of the new crown epidemic will affect household incomes, corporate profits, investment in universities, and then exacerbate the financial crisis of higher education institutions. As unemployment rises, many families' income levels fall, affecting their children's access to education; increased unemployment will also lead to lower levels of consumer purchasing power, lower sales of goods, lower production margins for businesses, loss of profits, financial constraints or even bankruptcy of businesses. As a result, the willingness and ability of donors to give is subsequently diminished. The epidemic continues to spread, and the stock market continues to fall. Many universities have seen their investments shrink. This combination of factors has exacerbated the financial difficulties of higher education institutions. In addition, the epidemic and national policies have led to a serious loss of international students. As a result, higher education institutions have also lost a significant amount of revenue. According to an April 2020 survey, U.S. higher education could lose nearly \$1 billion due to the shortening or elimination of study abroad programs alone.^{[1]p100}

In summary, many higher education institutions in the United States are in great financial crisis as a result of the epidemic, and some have already closed down. According to incomplete statistics, 107 public schools have closed down and 33 colleges and universities have announced their permanent closure in the US, and the number is on the rise.^②

① 《U.S. education community faces "darkest hour" as epidemic hits》, <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20200816A0HAQZ00>, August 16, 2020.

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**Secondly, inequality in higher education has become more pronounced.**

While inequity in higher education has long been a problem in the United States, it has been accentuated by the ongoing impact of the new crown epidemic. This is particularly true for African-American, Asian and other minority students.

On the one hand, the epidemic has increased the poverty of many families. Industrial stagnation, unemployment, a sharp drop in income, and being infected by the virus have come and gone, bringing misery to one family after another. According to the US Census Bureau, after five consecutive years of decline, and reaching its lowest level since 1959 in 2019, the US poverty rate rose by 1 percentage point to 11.4 percent in 2020.^① At this rate, 37.2 million Americans will be in poverty in 2020, an increase of 3.3 million from 2019. The U.S. Census Bureau also said that in 2020, median household income will fall by 3.2 percent in the Midwest and by 2.3 percent in the South and West. The Northeast (seventy-five thousand two hundred and eleven dollars) and the West (seventy-four thousand nine hundred and fifty-one dollars) have the highest median incomes, followed by the Midwest (sixty-six thousand nine hundred and sixty-eight dollars) and the South (sixty-one thousand two hundred and forty-three dollars). The largest declines in income were seen in households with low levels of education.^② Some drop out of school or are unable to attend at all, because their families are too poor to pay for tuition, the internet services and devices, which are required for online courses. Reduced enrolment is a direct impact of the new crown epidemic on low-income, and minority populations in the US. Students with family incomes under \$75,000 are almost twice as likely to cancel classes this fall compared to students with family incomes over \$100,000, according to a U.S. Census 2020 data from the end of August.^③

On the other hand, the Biden administration attaches great importance to higher education opportunities for low-income groups and minorities, advocating for the reduction of college tuition fees, advocating for loan forgiveness for college students, simplifying the loan and repayment process, advocating for increased funding for institutions in financial crisis, and raising taxes on high-income groups, etc. Through this series of methods to alleviate the inequity of higher education in the United States. However, there is greater doubt as to whether the Biden administration's initiatives will be passed and implemented. Accordingly, it is difficult to solve the problem of inequity in American higher education in a short period of time. The continuation of this phenomenon will cause serious social problems and disturb the stability of society.

Thirdly, the weakened sense of social responsibility of higher education institutions.

The marketisation of higher education in the US has seen a gradual weakening of its public service values. Driven by utilitarianism, some Higher Education Institutions would make the school's self-interest as their highest pursuit, and their sense of social responsibility subsequently diminished. Under the impact of the epidemic, commodified Higher Education Institutions have reduced their operating costs by stopping the recruitment of new staff, firing staff members, cutting tenure-track positions, and recruiting graduate assistants in order to alleviate their financial crisis, which has to some extent led to a loss of quality assurance in higher education. At the same time, these ways diminished the sense of student learning experience. These universities gain their own private benefits at the expense of the public good. There are also schools that admit only the best students or students from wealthy families in order to produce outstanding students as a way of enhancing the school's reputation and bringing in more lucrative benefits, creating social class and racial disparities in access, and resource allocation. This marketisation of higher education has exacerbated the inequities in higher education. And especially during the epidemic, High School not only has it failed to take up its social responsibility, but has thereby exacerbated a series of social conflicts.

In a deeper analysis, the weakening of social responsibility in American higher education institutions is not an accidental phenomenon, but has some historical roots. Historically, there has been a long-standing "contractual" relationship between American higher education and society. The government has taken a variety of measures to fund public universities and colleges and thereby meet the needs of society. However, with the marketisation of higher education in the US, such a traditional "contract" is gradually being undermined. Not only are private universities in fierce competition with each other, but public universities are also facing serious challenges. Various forms of universities or colleges compete for students, corporate sponsorship, public grants, etc. in order to better survive. The result of this dramatic shift in the value proposition of these universities, which focus primarily on self-interest rather than the public good, is that higher education institutions are unmotivated to take on the obligation to serve society. If the highest norm and ethical standard pursued by a university organisation is profit, then it is difficult for the organisation to bring the positive benefits to society that it deserves. For driven by the overriding aim of utilitarianism, excessive materialistic pursuits are

①② 《The biggest income slump since the financial crisis! U.S. Families Face Poverty Nightmare Again》, International Financial Times, https://www.sohu.com/a/490095960_632979, September 15, 2021.

③ Poor students in the United States are giving up their college dream and trying to be erased by the epidemic in 20 years <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20200917A01FYB00>, September 15, 2020.



bound to be carried out, leading some universities to lose their sense of social responsibility without regard for the plight of the people. Under the impact of the epidemic, one of the outstanding disadvantages of the marketisation of higher education in the United States is that universities have suffered a serious loss of both their own and social benefits, and there is an imbalance in the interaction between universities and society. These phenomena are manifested in various aspects of teaching, research and social services. Higher education is supposed to be responsible for promoting the moral development of students, improving the moral quality of society as a whole and nurturing moral and talented people for social development. However, higher education in the United States is currently not as good as it could be. The culture of schooling, influenced by its value proposition, has developed a strong culture of business and output targets. Such a culture permeates the entire education system in various forms, and has an ongoing negative impact on society.

Insights into the plight of US higher education in the light of the new crown epidemic

The United States is a powerhouse in higher education. The development of higher education in the United States is not only an important subject of concern to the US government, but also a hot topic of interest to other countries around the world in order to prosper their higher education endeavours. In the 21st century, American higher education is still in the leading position, such as Harvard University, Yale University, Stanford University and other top universities in the world have great influence in the international arena. Therefore, we need to study and explore the characteristics and advantages of American higher education, so as to provide effective reference for the reform and development of higher education in China. However, we need to look at the issue from two perspectives. While the US higher education has absolute advantages that are worthy of learning from, it also has its own disadvantages, especially in the light of the new epidemic. This is a wake-up call for countries to learn from the US higher education reform and development.

First of all, adhere to the "people-centered thinking" to guide the development of higher education

Education is one of the fundamental activities of human existence and development, and an important aspect of governance. Clarifying the question of "for whom" education should be run is a prerequisite for educational activities, and determines the ways, means and methods of educational reform and development. There is a common saying that there is a common way to govern a country, but the people are the mainstay. As an important basic project for people's livelihood, education involves thousands of families and benefits all generations, and is therefore of wide concern to people. The people are the creators of history, and it is by developing higher education for the people that the cause of higher education will be sustainable, which in turn will inject vitality and vigour into social development. Especially in the face of the challenges of the epidemic, there is a need to strengthen the value of the "common good" and to make it clear that education is for the general public, not just for the rich. To this end, it is important to actively seek a concept of the "common good", which encompasses the humanism of higher education while transcending the narrowness of private interests and reconciling the public good with private interests and profit with non-profit. Under this concept, the responsibility and mission of higher education institutions should be enhanced, and the value of higher education should be fully demonstrated.

Especially in the 21st century, knowledge is an important force driving economic development. However, knowledge is only created through well-educated people. In the era of knowledge-based economy, higher education is an important place for the country to train talents and has a profound impact on various fields such as economy, politics, society, culture, and national security. If education thrives, then the country thrives. If education is strong, the country is strong. Education is an important form of social production. If education does not flourish, social production will struggle, economic development will be difficult, and a chain reaction of systems will result. The country will enter a vicious circle. So, the proliferation of old and new problems will inevitably leave the government overwhelmed and in a permanent quandary. The development of people-centred higher education is therefore of strategic importance. It is for this reason that, firstly, the importance of developing people-centred higher education should be given high priority, and the concept of people-centred higher education should be implemented in depth in practice, in an effort to form a synergy that will provide a constant stream of high-quality intellectual support for social development. Secondly, to increase awareness of the crisis. Through a keen sense of crisis proactively recognise the problems within the higher education system, identify gaps and weaknesses. On this basis, actively promote the reform and development of higher education. Thirdly, in promoting higher education, there is a need to enhance the government's education governance capacity. Government is the mainstay of national governance and the key to optimising education governance. On the one hand, the government's clear responsibility for coordinating the distribution of the various administrative bodies of education can avoid the problem of "absence" in educational affairs, and ensure the orderly operation of the education system under the impact of an unexpected crisis and the quality of education for the people. On the other hand, it is necessary to build a sustainable education system, enhance the resilience of higher education, and improve its ability to withstand risks and challenges.

Second, promoting equity in education and building high quality higher education

Education is a fundamental right of the citizens of society. Dewey argued that education is not a luxury, but a necessity. If the privatisation of education is overly reinforced, education will inevitably lose its equity. Once education loses its equity, education



will become a luxury for the poor, and quality education will only become quality education for the few, which obviously runs counter to the essential requirements of education. Good education is not only reflected in the improvement of the quality of education, but also in the promotion of equity in education. Otherwise, quality education can only be a feast for the exclusive enjoyment of a few, and such educational inequity will contribute to social inequity; or low-quality educational equity can only be averaged and shared at a low level, which is also not the proper meaning of promoting educational equity. Therefore, we should strive to promote educational equity and build high-quality higher education, so that quality education becomes available to the majority, which is the real pursuit of education and the inevitable choice for social development. Through high quality education, the people's own quality will generally be improved, and the state of ignorance and barbarism of people themselves will be improved, and man's own production will become more and more optimised, with a richer social and material production and a rising civilisation of human society.

The issue of equity is particularly salient when considering the plight of American higher education in the context of the epidemic. In terms of the stratification of US higher education institutions, they are broadly divided into top doctoral-granting universities and liberal arts colleges, general doctoral-granting and other highly selective liberal arts colleges, master's-granting institutions, bachelor's-granting institutions, career-training-oriented associate degree-granting institutions, and community colleges.^{[2]p99}The first two types of institutions of higher education are attended mainly by upper-middle class white students, while the latter three are attended mainly by lower-middle class black, Hispanic, Indian and other minority students. Despite the US government's efforts to alleviate the inequities and increase access to a large number of colleges and universities, the situation has not been fundamentally reversed. Old wounds have not yet healed and new ones have been added. The outbreak and continued spread of the new epidemic has affected the US economy, raising the unemployment rate and increasing the number of working people who have lost their jobs and become homeless, further highlighting the plight of the poor. Families suffering from both economic poverty and the epidemic are struggling to survive, leaving little time for education. Therefore, in the post-epidemic era, the reform and development of higher education should place great emphasis on "equity in education" and "quality in education".

Lastly, mastering the scale of marketisation of higher education.

There has been a trend towards a market-based model of university operation in the United States. As the commercialisation of universities accelerates, market values are gradually replacing the values of university education, and universities are drifting away from the public goals of society. Driven by utilitarian objectives, the social responsibility of some universities has been weakened. In the long run, this pattern will not only damage the university's own effectiveness, but will also have a serious impact on the social effect, which in turn will unbalance the interaction between the university and society. In the case of endowments, there is no denying that they are a source of funding for American institutions of higher education. But endowments can lead to the problem that universities can rely on the interests of donors to shape or change educational policy in order to secure as much funding as possible. From an educational standpoint, it would be appropriate to try to secure funding by first developing our educational policies. In fact, however, some universities have had their educational policies shaped by financial happenstance, which can lead to chaos in university education. This is illustrated by the financial crisis, closures, layoffs, and lack of social responsibility at US institutions of higher education during the New Crown epidemic. Therefore, although marketisation of higher education has its merits, it is important to avoid blind and simple transplantation and to deal with the relationship between government regulation and market allocation according to the needs of the country's stage of development.

Although marketisation of higher education has its merits, such as stimulating the vitality of higher education, diversification of models, and flexibility in management, it also brings a series of negative effects, such as the utilitarianisation of education, the interest-based relationship between teachers and students, imbalance in the education market and inequity in education. Therefore, even the United States, as a powerhouse of higher education, cannot resist many of the problems brought about by marketisation. Therefore, when studying and learning from the US higher education reform and development, we should avoid blind and simple transplantation. The relationship between government regulation and market allocation should be well managed according to the needs of the country's stage of development.

CONCLUSION

The United States is already a powerhouse in higher education, and its experience is worthy of study and learning from other countries. However, American higher education also has its own drawbacks, especially the spread of the epidemic, which has accentuated its shortcomings. This inspires us to maintain a two-pronged approach when absorbing the experiences of other countries. In the process of reforming and developing higher education in other countries around the world, we should not only learn from and absorb the advanced experience of foreign higher education, but also base on our own national conditions and explore the potential of our own higher education, so as to avoid the mistakes of fetishism, dogmatism and bookishness. Each country has different national conditions. Systems, institutions and mechanisms can and do vary greatly from country to country. Therefore,



each country should closely link with its social, economic, cultural and educational history, and current situation, follow the laws of education, actively respond to the trend of the times, and strive to explore the path of higher education development that suits its own reality, strengthen the policy support needed for the development of higher education, develop a concept of higher education with national characteristics, nurture the intrinsic motivation of higher education development. In this way, all favourable conditions are actively used to promote the high quality of higher education.

Contemporary higher education shoulders the multiple tasks of national political, economic, cultural, scientific and technological development, and is a solid backing for the prosperity and strength of a country. While we fully recognise the importance of developing higher education, we need to face up to the problems that exist in the reform and development of higher education. The problems highlighted by higher education in the United States under the epidemic exist to varying degrees in many countries and also deserve attention. Internationally, every country is faced with this important issue of developing higher education. In order to accelerate the pace of higher education development, we need to take the initiative to learn from foreign countries to carry out advanced educational experiences, and make up for the shortcomings. Domestically, each country has its own traditions and strengths, as well as its own weaknesses. This requires the development of higher education in the country from the actual situation in the country. Optimizing the top-level design of higher education is conducive to better promoting the sustainable development of education. To do this, the relationship between government, market, schools and people has to be managed. A range of issues will be involved in the process. Such as the purpose of higher education development, the way higher education is financed, the structure and form of higher education, the speed and scale of higher education development, the universalisation, informatisation, marketisation and internationalisation of higher education. These issues can constrain the development of society, the progress of science and technology, and the well-being of the people. With the change of domestic and international conditions, new issues and situations will continue to present themselves. Therefore, academics and government officials need to pay great attention to and think deeply about the development of higher education, make concerted efforts to promote its high-quality development, build a solid foundation for enhancing the country's cultural soft power, and better play its important function in cultural diplomacy.

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