



## **From the Covid-19 Shock to a Risk Management and Preparedness Culture in Higher Education Institutions**

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Higher education institutions (HEIs) all over the globe have witnessed overwhelming operational disruption and financial turbulence arising from the rapid spread of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. This crisis has triggered a reconceptualization of education provision at all levels and HEIs are subject to rapidly changing dynamics. It has become clear that risk management should not solely be associated with accountability to the governing body (and to senior management and stakeholders), but that HEIs should seek to strengthen their development of comprehensive risk management systems that can help in the identification, assessment, treatment, monitoring and minimization of risk at all levels.

It must be acknowledged that many universities, including some leading institutions, were unprepared for the most obvious impact of Covid-19 on their operation: the loss of a large portion of their international student population, who either returned to their countries or were unable to start the new semester due to travel bans and restrictions. It is also evident that Covid-19 exacerbated inequality among HEIs, not all of them had the resources required to effectively implement online teaching and learning. It is probable that these learning inequalities will widen, marginalization will increase, and the most disadvantaged students will find themselves unable to pursue their studies. The path to recovery will require long-term measures that are fair, transparent, and supporting all types of students regardless of their backgrounds.

Despite the daunting scale of the crisis, many HEIs have managed to adjust their programs to meet the challenges of online teaching and learning, and of student and staff wellbeing in such a context, through a rapid and well-resourced transition to the widespread use of learning technologies and/or forms of ‘blended’ learning. These processes, inevitably, were introduced more smoothly in those countries with resource-rich institutions and advanced communication infrastructures.

The major question from a quality assurance (QA) perspective is to what extent the HEIs’ risk management policies and procedures were sufficient, adequate and sufficiently robust to meet unprecedented and largely unanticipated challenges?.

An important lesson that must be drawn from this experience is that HEIs, traditionally relatively conservative organisations with a reverence for established procedures, must be ready to adapt very rapidly to crises and completely new environments. Now that the “new normal” has become established (i.e. it is no longer extraordinary), the broad communities within HEIs must already be thinking about potential challenges beyond Covid-19. What would happen if another, more serious, pandemic or natural disaster struck Oman and the internet services were interrupted and academics and students became isolated, or some key academics were hospitalised (or worse)?

Given recent events and the associated implications, HEIs must analyze several variables. First, they should consider the extent to which they have responded by implementing long-desired curricular, staffing, and infrastructural reforms (e.g. the development of online teaching environments and the training required to use them). Second, their academics and policy-makers must investigate how students have reacted to online teaching and remote learning, for instance, the impact on their motivation and whether they have learned less or more effectively than when they were being taught on campus. Given that global comparisons in relation to rates of learning are difficult (for example, due to the different levels of preparation and resilience in different countries and regions), local data must be generated, analyzed, and shared. Third, although the processes of teaching and being taught online are very different from onsite “in class” learning, substantially more research into the appropriate design, implementation, and evaluation of online and blended assessment tools should now be a priority. Studies need to

consider the particularities of each faculty, a field of study and the students' domestic and social environments and habitats.

HEI governing bodies must recognise that they are ultimately responsible and accountable for the operation of the organization in all circumstances. Consequently, they will generally have already initiated a reflection process. The necessary policies and procedures (including for online teaching and digital assessments), and the expert officers (e.g. online curriculum designers and analysts) will inform such developments, as well monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of the associated systems. Risk management should by now have been fully integrated into the management cultures of HEIs as preparedness must be a constant concern in HEIs' performance management systems.

The management of risk should be shared among all the staff as well as and, occasionally, other stakeholders including students, police, security and emergency services, and health and welfare agencies. However, this requires that the HEI staff be trained so they can implement the risk management policies and procedures according to the law, and other standards and procedures as well as effectively engage with each other, students and external parties in relation to "risk issues".

Whilst the tasks of identifying and managing risks within HEIs need to be widely distributed between all involved within the organisation, the final instance responsibility rests with the senior leadership who must provide a practical framework for line managers to assess all types of risk inherent in the decision-making and quality assurance processes, not only those posed by viral outbreaks, terrorism or political unrest, or natural catastrophes.

Levels and Types of risk tolerance change over time as new information and management techniques become available, as expectations evolve, and as a result of stakeholder engagement. Good risk management includes the need to marry top-down and bottom-up assessments to produce a comprehensive picture of risks to the institution (including the sudden resignation, departure on sick/maternity leave, or death of academics as well as of professional and other support staff). A risk register should include risk type, risk description, consequence or further narrative about the nature of the risk, its rating (by impact and likelihood), controls and actions for improvement for both gross and net risks, and the scales for assessing risk using rigorous risk indicators, as well the options for tracking mechanisms that can be used in risk

reduction and treatment. Mechanisms for consultation and reporting risk should be fully transported to all stakeholders.

In short, HEIs across the globe have responded with commendable creativity, innovation and speed to adapt their teaching and learning systems and cultures, as well as their management and administrative procedures. The efforts made by institutions and the individuals within them have been enormous and are to be applauded. Nonetheless, there have been many instances where (for complex reasons) the justifiably high expectations held by students have not been met, and where staff have felt unprecedented pressures as they attempt to adapt to new demands. By now it will be generally taken for granted that HEIs will have developed systems for evaluating and identifying both the short and longer-term impact of risks. HEIs need to have stand-alone risk management processes to disseminate risk management practices and procedures at all levels not only to minimize and manage risks but also to create an embedded culture of preparedness. Risk management should be an integral part of performance appraisals and incentive rewards, and all risk management policies should be aligned with the broader objectives of the HEIs. Although most HEIs have substantially developed their risk management strategies, policies and systems in response to Covid-19, in the context of a rapidly changing and increasingly globalized market for higher education, none can be satisfying.