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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: STREAMLINING OR CAPSIZING THE GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION REVOLUTION

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to interpret the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic within the frame of the global higher education revolution. One of the striking elements of the contemporary world since 1990 is a global higher education revolution. While the most prominent feature of this revolution is massification, it is a multifaceted revolution, involving all aspects of higher education, including the curriculum, methods of teaching and learning, the academic profession, funding, relations between higher education and government and management. This article first outlines the societal drivers of this revolution, being demographic shifts, increasing affluence, the rise of knowledge economies, the neo-liberal economic revolution, the information and communication technology (ICT) revolution, the rise of multicultural societies, democratisation, individualisation and the rise of the creed of human rights and next key features of the revolution will be surveyed. The revolution is then critically evaluated by interrogating and using as yardstick the unique, indispensable mission of higher education in society. The changes that the pandemic are forcing in the higher education sector is then assessed against the potential of the disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to redress or strengthen the discontents of this global higher education revolution.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; global higher education revolution; higher education; higher education scholarship; managerialism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, a global higher education revolution has been sweeping through the world (Altbach *et al.*, 2009). While the key feature of this revolution has been massification, it is a multifaceted revolution, involving all aspects of higher education, including the curriculum, methods of teaching and learning, the academic profession, funding, relations between higher education and government and management (see Altbach *et al.*, 2009). These facets will be unpacked in a section later in this article. On top of this, in 2020, COVID-19 has impacted higher education externally and internally, forcing major changes in the way universities are operating. While the most obvious change is to give momentum to the trend towards online learning,



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this impact is also of a multifaceted nature, to be unpacked in a later section of the article. The aim of this article is to investigate whether this pandemic can or will effect a correction or a calamity, to the global higher education revolution.

2. THE GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION REVOLUTION

One of the often not fully appreciated signature features of the present era in world history, is the world-wide higher education revolution. It is a basic theorem in the scholarly field of Comparative and International Education that education systems are shaped by societal forces (typically analysed under the rubrics of geography, demography, level of scientific and technological development, social system, economy, political system, religion and life and world philosophy), and that education systems can only be comprehended from these societal forces (see Wolhuter, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2018). This applies to the higher education sector as much as to other levels of education. The global higher education revolution has likewise been driven by numerous societal drivers and in order to fully comprehend this revolution, this section will commence with an examination of these societal drivers of the global higher education revolution. This will be followed with a discussion of the main dimensions defining this revolution, after which the revolution will be assessed.

2.1. The societal drivers of the global higher education revolution

At least nine interrelated societal forces are driving the global higher education revolution. These are demographic shifts, increasing affluence, the rise of knowledge economies, the neo-liberal economic revolution, the information and communication technology (ICT) revolution, the rise of multicultural societies, democratisation, individualisation and the rise of the creed of human rights.

Numerous demographic trends are visible in the world. The first is that the world is experiencing a population explosion and every year 81 million people are added to the global population total. This means every year, more people are clamouring for admittance to institutions of higher education. Secondly, most of the increase in population takes place in the countries of the Global South. The present annual population growth rates for the various parts of the world are: 2.49 per cent for Africa (2.63 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa), Oceania: 1.31 per cent, Asia: 0.86 per cent, South America: 0.83 per cent, North America: 0.62 per cent and Europe: 0.06 per cent (World Population Review, 2020). Furthermore, the Global South has a youthful population age profile, meaning every year the demand for higher education is increasing. The median age per continent at present is 18 years in the case of Africa, 31 years in the case of Asia, 31 years in the case of South America, 33 years in the case of Oceania, 35 years in the case of North America and 42 years in the case of Europe (Desjardins, 2019). A third demographic trend is that the global population is an increasingly mobile population. The number of international migrants in the world (i.e. those residing in a country other than the country of their birth), stands at 258 million, or 3.4 per cent of the global population (Institute National d'Etudes Demographiques, 2020). This number of international migrants in the world rises at a rate of 2.4 per cent per year (ibid). It is not only international migration that has been picking up momentum. While in 1800 people in the United States of America travelled on average 50 metres per day, by the beginning of the twenty-first century they have travelled 50 kilometres per day (Urry, 2007). This mobility has obvious implications for higher education in, for example, facilitating faculty and student mobility, intra-nationally as well as internationally. Thus, serving one of the drives of the university, namely internationalisation.

At least three economic trends currently salient, are driving the global higher education revolution. Since 1990, the world has entered one of the most forceful phases of economic upswing in history, which may be related to the downscaling of the welfare state and the beginning of the neo-liberal economic revolution, technological advances especially in information and communication technology and the era of relative peace which followed the conclusion of the Cold War. In the ten-year period 2005–2015, the global annual economic output has more than doubled, from US\$29.6 trillion to US\$78.3 trillion (World Bank, 2016). This rise has continued to reach US\$ 84.4 trillion in 2018 (World Bank, 2020). This upswing has brought higher education within financial reach of a growing number of people. While at the time of writing (March 2021) the long-term economic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is all but clear (particularly the growth or decline in economic output in the various countries of the world), it should be stated that from the above cited figures, the 2008 economic crisis made no dent on the long term economic growth trajectory. Similarly, the major economic crises of the twentieth century (the 1993 depression, the 1973 oil crisis and other), as well as other economic slumps, could not, in the long term, deflect the upward economic curve (see Mortimer, 2014).

The second economic trend is the transformation towards a knowledge economy. A knowledge economy is an economy where the production and consumption of new knowledge has become the driving axis of the economy (Corporate Finance Institute, n.d.). Historians of the economic evolution of societies distinguish between a number of successive phases in the economic evolution of economies, based on the economic mainstay of the phase. These are the phase of hunting and gathering, agricultural economies (which commenced in the Middle East and North Africa 8000 to 10000 years ago; from where it spread to the rest of the world), industrial economies (the industrial revolution started in England around 1750), and service economies (which came strongly to the fore during the twentieth century). Now, economists identify a growing knowledge economy breaking through in the most advanced economies of the world. In such an economy an even higher value is attached to higher education. Occurring concomitantly with the economic upswing since 1990, another economic trend has been the neo-liberal economic revolution, coinciding with the economic upswing. This revolution entailed the scaling down of the role of the state not only in the economy, but also in other sectors of society, for example as transport, health services, and – important for its effect on higher education – education, and the commodification of education, giving the forces of the free market free rein (see Ball, 2015; Jacobs & Teise, 2019; Davies & Bansel, 2007).

Another societal driver in the higher education revolution is the ICT revolution that has put in place an instant 24-hour planetary information network, comprising free access to and widespread use of the personal computer, the Internet, the fax machine and the mobile telephone. In the higher education sector, this revolution has made higher education accessible to larger numbers of people, notably through the expansion of distance education programmes. The revolution has also enabled the more mobile global population. Maintaining contact with home base makes it easier to leave that base for extended periods of time. Societies have become diverse and multicultural; replacing the more homogenous societies of past times.

At the same time as the economic upswing, the neo-liberal economic revolution and the knowledge explosion, a process of democratisation has taken off in large parts of the world since 1990. The proviso should be added, however, that in many parts of the world, Africa included, much of the progress made on the scale of democratisation, have again been

reversed since about 2005 (See Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Mills *et al.*, 2019). The process of democratisation, combined with the emergence of the creed of human rights (to be discussed later), and the empowerment that the ICT revolution brought to individuals, all have given impetus to another trend in modern society, namely individualisation. Finally, in the diverse multicultural, including multireligious societies in the contemporary world, the creed of human rights has come to constitute the basis of the new (global) moral order (Prozesky, 2018).

2.2. Dimensions of the global higher education revolution

The above outlined societal drivers have, in combination, resulted in a global higher education revolution that displays the following features: massification, competition and differentiation, changing funding patterns, changing relations with government, changing relations with industry, a call for relevance, the rise of new modes of knowledge generation and packaging, an extraordinary growth in distance education, internationalisation, managerialism (procedures and techniques employed to regulate and command conduct (Jacobs & Teise, 2019), a new student profile and a changed academic profession. These features will now be clarified and unpacked.

Altbach *et al.* (2009) describes the single defining feature of this global higher education revolution as massification. Globally higher education enrolments surged from 88.6 million in 1990 to 223.7 million in 2018 (UNESCO, 2020). Even after discounting global population growth, the enrolment explosion of higher education remains impressive. On a global aggregate level, gross higher education enrolment ratios grew from 14 per cent in 1990, to reach 38.04 per cent in 2018 (UNESCO, 2020). The increasing affluence, economic transformation, democratisation (promoting the belief that higher education is a right everyone has) and the ICT revolution have ensured that higher education is no longer limited to a privileged few, but that mass participation has become the norm in many parts of the world. While enrolment ratios are the highest in the Global North (the gross enrolment ratio of higher education has now reached 143 per cent in Greece, the highest in the world), in terms of absolute numbers (enrolments) most growth has taken place in the countries in the Global South. In sub-Saharan Africa for example, higher education enrolments have surged from 1.3 million in 1990 to 8.2 million in 2018 (UNESCO, 2020).

The rapid expansion in the context of the contemporary world contains two imperatives. Firstly, in a globally competitive world, virtually every institution aspires to become a world class university (see Wolhuter, 2012), creating an ectropic-isomorphic imperative in higher education systems all over the world. Evidence of this is the university ranking industry, something non-existent a generation ago. On the other hand, the proliferation of universities has forced differentiation, different kinds of institutions, each seeking a particular niche (see Altbach *et al.*, 2017).

The runaway expansion of higher education, more so in times of a neo-liberal economic revolution, meant that government funding for the entire higher education expansion project became unsustainable. Funding patterns changed, as the burden of funding shifted from government to the direction of the clientele, i.e. industry and students. The extreme end of this was privatisation – a host of private universities mushroomed in many parts of the world (while both Americas historically had a strong private higher education sector, in the post-1990 era this sector surged in many countries in Asia and in virtually all parts of Africa, save South Africa), and by 2009 already an estimated one third of all universities in the world were private institutions (Altbach *et al.*, 2009), opening up many spaces for enrolments, thus it helped to

make possible the massification of higher education. By 2018, for instance India had 345 state funded universities, compared to 233 private universities, with an array of other classifications added to make a total of 864 (Tiwari & Singhal, 2018). However, in most countries in the world, governments remain the largest single funder of higher education institutions. In times of neo-liberal economics, governments claim more say in universities, representing a revolutionary change from the autonomy and freedom from government interference that characterised the university (at least the Western university) a generation ago.

It is not only university-government relations that have changed. Industry too, in return for their financial commitment to universities, claim a say in universities, representing another front in the onslaught of the autonomy of universities. Curricula and programmes are clearly packaged to be more relevant to the needs of industry. The imperative for relevance is also very visible in the rise of Mode II knowledge. Mode II, an expression coined by Gibbons *et al.* (1994) to name the trend whereby knowledge is no longer generated, ordered and taught in a discipline-defined format (Mode I knowledge), but in a trans- and interdisciplinary open system, and where knowledge is ordered and evaluated not so much in terms of scientific criteria as in terms of practical and utilitarian considerations (Mode II knowledge).

The principles of the neo-liberal economic revolution, such as performance measurement, efficiency and accountability, are also carried into the management style of universities, thereby creating a culture of managerialism: an entirely new professional environment for the academic profession.

Furthermore, the ICT revolution gave particular impetus to the expansion of distance higher education. Tellingly, the mega-universities in the world today, are typically distance education universities, including the largest university in the world, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) (established 1985), with its more than 4 million students. Mass Online Open Courses (MOOCs) have mushroomed from nowhere the past decades, bringing university education to an even larger clientele. The phenomenon of offshore campuses of universities represent a new way of universities transcending national boundaries.

The economic affluence, and the ICT revolution, as well as the global isomorphism created by democratisation, the creed of human rights and the neo-liberal economic revolution all facilitated increased internationalisation of students, of faculty, and of curricula. While an international dimension has always been, since the inception of the university almost a millennium ago, a distinguishing feature of the university (see Welch *et al.*, 2004), in the past thirty years, internationalisation of higher education has reached new levels.

Carrying into the university the principles of the neo-liberal economic revolution, such as the profit-motive, performativity, performance appraisal, efficiency, quality control and like, subjected the university to a strong trend of managerialism, unknown in the university even a single generation ago. The student profile too changed: from the ideal type of the student coming to university to sit at the knees of the master, receiving knowledge and education, to a client, much more challenging and demanding than the student a generation ago. No longer an autonomous and prestigious profession, the academic profession now finds itself sandwiched between the exigencies of managerialism and the demands of students (see Locke *et al.*, 2011).

2.3. Assessment: Achievements of and challenges and discontents brought by the global higher education revolution

The global higher education revolution will now be assessed, using a yardstick, the very nature of a university and its unique role in society.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2020) defines a university as “an advanced autonomous educational institution for the promotion (teaching and research) of various branches of science”. From this definition and based on an analysis of the history of the university and its place in society, the following six roles or functions of the university can be delineated (Wolhuter & Langa, 2021). In the first instance, the university is an institution of teaching and learning. From the definition cited above, it flows that, various branches of learning should be taught and studied, at their most advanced level. Virtually everywhere in the world, the university represents the pinnacle of the education system. A second function of a university is to conduct research. The idea is that of a teaching-learning-research nexus: the results of research should be percolated back to enrich teaching-learning programmes; on the other hand, teaching-learning should be the training ground of researchers.

The service delivery function represents a third role of the university. This service role is the vaguest and most difficult to define of all roles of the university. Sometimes scholars attach the meaning of “engagement” to this function, at other times they identify it as “out-reach”. One elaborate description of this function of the university, is that of Ward (2003), in which he enumerates a comprehensive gamut of activities which could be regarded as the service activities of the university. Ward (2003) distinguishes between internal and external service activities. Internal service could, in turn, be sub-divided into on-campus and off-campus discipline/scholarly field-oriented service activities and external service activities. On-campus service includes institutional governance and institutional support, student advising or counselling (on matters outside the narrow scope of the curriculum) and academic oversight. Off-campus service activities, which faculty occupy themselves, include service activities to disciplines or scholarly fields by means of membership and commitments to various associations, e.g., professional/scientific societies or publication-related activities (such as serving on editorial boards or acting as reviewers of papers). External service refers to the way higher education institutions put their expertise to the benefit of different external stakeholders and can include consulting, service learning, community action-based research, community upliftment projects, participation in cultural activities and civic service. Such service activities may be paid or unpaid; however, the common factor among all service activities is that it is based on the expertise of faculty members.

A fourth role of the university is to act as the conscience of society, meaning to critique on society (*cf.* Habermas, 1968: 3–4). This role assumes particular importance at this point in time in history when societies and governments are pledging allegiance to the creed of human rights, and where humankind is facing challenges and critical issues such as the threat of ecological destruction and the possibilities created by the fourth industrial revolution. The university can fulfil this role only on the precondition that it is an autonomous institution, out of reach of any decree or sanction from government or any constituency (interest group) in society.

The university also has a role with respect to the maintenance, the preservation and the development of culture. A final function of the university is to be a location of innovation. This means innovation produced by human resources with high levels of expert knowledge

of a scholarly type and in a knowledge economy. This role of the university is evident in the number of patents emanating from universities, i.e. where the expertise of academics brings forth innovations.

The global higher education revolution represents a remarkable achievement of humanity the past generation, in addition to participation in higher education opening new possibilities to students and education representing an ameliorative force in society. The value of higher education is also set to rise even more in the face of a nascent knowledge economy and the immanent fourth industrial revolution; however, a number of cautionary notes should also be made.

To commence with, there are rising levels of graduate unemployment in virtually all parts of the world. The problem is that of a wastage of public resources as well as that of the financial sacrifice that the student and his/her family have made. Problematic consequences of graduate unemployment also include feelings of failure on a personal level and on societal level, there is the danger of a pool of unemployed graduates being very susceptible for socio-political mobilisation (especially for populist causes creating even more unrealistic expectations). Then there is a tendency, in places where all graduates cannot be absorbed into the labour force, of especially the well-connected and elite getting employed, thus inequality in society gets exacerbated.

An unresolved (if in any way resolvable) issue is who should bear the costs of the global higher education project. Arguments for expecting students to pay include that they are the beneficiaries of higher education, and that the fiscus is limited and more worthy causes for the needy (including primary and secondary education, especially for the needy) should be prioritised. Arguments against students paying for higher education (and expecting government to pay) include that a system of students financing their own higher education mean only the elite, the already privileged will then enjoy higher education, thus higher education will serve to deepen inequalities in society. There is also the argument that society as a whole or as a collective benefit from the expertise and education supplied by higher education, and therefore public money should be invested in higher education.

What we want to highlight surrounding problematic aspects or results of the higher education revolution, however, hinges on the sacrificing or at least diluting of the two principles of excellence and autonomy. The definition and unique functions of the university, as delineated at the outset of this article, is contingent on two principles, namely the pursuit of excellence and the safeguarding of autonomy. Both these are seriously threatened by the global higher education revolution, at the least the form it is taking on in the world of today, and particularly the way it is being shaped (or contorted) in the South African societal contextual ecology. The double layer of managerialism emanating from national governance and institutional governance from the top, and from the bottom, student empowerment and entitlement, mean that the academic profession finds itself sandwiched between these two powerful blocs, no longer in the comfortable space where they can pursue their quest for truth and academic excellence. In the South African context in particular, these factors are present in the superlative. That the South African university finds itself in a pincer movement between these two forces, to the extent that it can eventually mean the end of the university, has been remarked by alarm by scholars and education commentators straddling the entire political spectrum: from conservative scholar and former principal of the University of Pretoria, Flip

Smit (Smit, 2020), to liberal academic and journalist, R.W. Johnson (2012), to progressive scholar and former rector of the University of the Free State, Jonathan Jansen (2017).

Another red flag is the denigration or marginalisation or outright excising of basic research, as part of the force exerted by the parameters of relevance and (immediate) demonstrable profit of the global higher education revolution. This trend of the demise of basic research has been criticised — rightfully and commendably — by no less than former World Bank President, Josef Stiglitz (2019). Even from the sole criterion of utility, it should be borne in mind that the basis of much technology and practical use of scientific knowledge today have their roots in labours of basic research, where the researcher had nothing of the modern applications of that research in mind. When Oersted explored the relation between magnetism and electricity at the end of the eighteenth century, he did not remotely have in mind electric bulbs, the diode, the automobile, and the like. Neither had the pioneers of nuclear physics in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, from Dalton to Nils Bohr, Rutherford and Cavendish, any visions of nuclear power generators or interventions curing people from life threatening diseases. A graphic illustration of the (unforeseen and unpredictable) beneficial results of basic research, is the history of the Bayes Theorem (see Bryson, 2010: 7–8). Today this theorem, expressing and offering a way to calculate probability distribution, is used routinely in an uncountable variety of applications, including forecasting of weather, predicting climate change, equity market analysis, astrophysics and social policy analysis. Yet when Thomas Bayes penned it down somewhere in the second half of the eighteenth century, it had no obvious utility. In fact, Bayes thought so little of it, an exercise he did out of mere interest and amusement, that he did not even try to publish it. After his death a friend found it in his notes, sent it to the Royal Society which published it, and in that way, it originally became part of the stock of common scientific knowledge.

Finally, the pressures of the neo-liberal economic revolution and the parameters these laid down for the global higher education revolution, as outlined in the preceding paragraph, brought about a neglect of the function of the university with regard to the preservation, transmittance and development of the cultural wealth of humanity. Not only will that impoverish the richness and quality of human life, but it has wider adverse consequences too. To name one example, the lack of attention and resources to the development of dictionaries will negatively affect scholarly development, as science and scholarly writing depend on precise word choice and careful language use.

It is this higher education revolution, with its massive momentum, and its possibilities, promising assets as well as discontents that encountered the worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first months of 2020.

3. THE GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION REVOLUTION MET BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Thus, the global higher education revolution, which had been steaming ahead, with ever increasing momentum for thirty years, unexpectedly encountered the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic during the first months of 2020, coming like the strongest of crosswinds. This pandemic forced the captains of higher education to urgently make contingency plans, as the pandemic made it impossible to carry on as usual. The thesis of this article is that the pandemic, necessitating changes, has brought on an opportunity which, used wisely, can rectify much that is objectionable and concern-raising about the global higher education

revolution, while capitalising on and furthering the commendable aspects of the revolution. On the other hand, handled unwisely the pandemic can aggravate matters in higher education; undo what good the global higher education revolution has yielded and amplify its discontents. This thesis will now be illustrated by focusing on ten aspects of higher education vis-à-vis the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1. Massification

The most common immediate reaction to the pandemic by universities worldwide was to close contact-mode teaching and to shift towards distance education or online learning. Mindful of what has been stated earlier regarding the possibilities the ICT revolution has opened for expanding access to higher education, the movement towards increasing online education certainly has much to be commended. The context of the COVID-19 pandemic has, for example, as mentioned earlier, spawned an exponential growth of MOOCs (see Impey, 2020), to which ever an growing number of adult students enrol (by July 2020 110 million students globally), whether to further their careers or for personal growth.

3.2. Inequality

At the same time, going online can easily exacerbate existing inequalities, working against higher education constituting a force of equalisation in society. For example, the digital divide here comes to mind. After going into online mode, South African universities are aiming to end the current (2020) academic year in a staggered pattern. It is striking that the historically most advantaged institutions with the highest concentration of students from the upper socio-economic echelons have managed to work for the end of the academic year in November/December 2020, the usual time, those institutions less well-endowed will end January 2021, while the universities least well-endowed and with the largest concentration of students from poverty stricken families and communities, will only end the academic year in February 2021 (Du Plessis, 2020).

3.3. Internationalisation

The internationalisation of universities (internationalisation of higher education here understood as defined by Jane Knight (2003: 1) as “integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education”), particularly in terms of faculty and student mobility, has also been rendered difficult by the COVID-19 pandemic (as travelling is no longer possible). However strong the arguments in favour of the principle of internationalisation of universities, progressive scholars had always raised the questions “what internationalisation, whose internationalisation, and what for?”, and interpreted the existing pattern of internationalisation as favouring the Global North and serving to strengthen Northern Hegemony. With the epicentre of the pandemic in the Global North and especially the borders of the United States of America (USA) now closing and in the process stifling the flow of international students and faculty to the USA, the pandemic may prove to be conducive for strengthening South-South collaboration between universities and also lead to new ways of internationalisation, including redesigning internationalisation at home (e.g., *cf.* Kigotho, 2020).

3.4. Assessment

Assessment practices at universities, and South African universities in particular, have been criticised for the heavy emphasis on summative assessment. This kind of assessment being

skewed towards lower level learning objectives (in Bloom's taxonomy) such as memorisation and regurgitation of facts, is out of step with the contemporary context and education, and in the case of South Africa, with international developments. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the movement towards online education in particular, has forced universities to resort to and to devise new assessment methods, moving towards formative assessment; an experiment that universities may well capitalise on to effect a salutary permanent development in higher education (Winstone & Boud, 2020).

3.5. Education quality or excellence

One of the risks of a rapid expansion of enrolments is always that quality of education will be sacrificed (the quantity versus quality dilemma). Quality in education is a term difficult to define but is used here as referring to the components of input quality, process quality, output quality and product quality (see Wolhuter, 2014b). This caveat is all the more present when funding is curtailed, as is the case with the dwindling financial commitment of the public fiscus being one part of the global higher education revolution. Online higher education has its own cost structure and embracing ICT technology in pursuing higher education can open new possibilities for raising and ensuring quality.

3.6. Character formation

One mandate of higher education neglected in recent decades, at least in the scholarly and even in the public discourse, is that of character formation of students (see Rogers, 1991). While it can be argued that a residential university with contact teaching-learning lends itself better for character formation (see Gouws, 2020), at the same time online teaching and learning opens possibilities of individualised interaction between student and lecturer (no matter how demanding and time-consuming for the lecturer), which do not always happen in mass lecture halls.

3.7. The academic profession

As was explained above, the matrix of the global higher education revolution saw to it that the academic profession was squashed between two sets of vicious forces. While the ICT revolution makes managerialism, micro-management and control possible like never before (see Zuboff, 2019), on the other hand, the new arrangements of higher education necessitated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic can also be used to loosen the grip of stifling, dispiriting control structures and to let the academic profession reclaim its professional autonomy.

3.8. The university as social conscience of society

The solidarity that was induced in society by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic presents to the university the opportunity to rise to the occasion, to reassert its social critique function, which was forced out of the centre of higher education by the specific matrix of the higher education revolution the past thirty years (as was explained above, *cf.* section 2.1).

3.9. Realigning the world of (higher) education with the world of work

The COVID-19 pandemic has also ravaged the world of work, leaving in its aftermath many people in the economy at large with either a loss of work or a reduced income. With the twenty-first century and the looming fourth industrial revolution in any case creating a new world of work, which historically developed education is not geared to supply what is needed,

the pandemic also has the potential and the opportunity to rethink radically the preparation for work aspect of higher education.

3.10. The research agenda of Higher Education scholarship

Finally, the disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused in higher education worldwide creates the opportunity to take stock of the higher education research agenda (similar to the exercise done a decade ago by Wolhuter, 2014a), and to adjust this agenda to make higher education an even more relevant and valuable field of scholarship, guiding higher education planners and practitioners through these times.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the higher education sector like a tsunami, at the time when higher education globally has been in the throes of a revolution. This revolution has at the same time much to be commended, and much that is concern-raising and objectionable. At this stage it is uncertain how higher education will finally be affected long term. However, the pandemic creates the opportunity for the academic profession and for the higher education research community to reaffirm their control of the sector, to capitalise on what is valuable in the global higher education revolution and to rid it of its discontents.

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