

Hi, everyone!

Thank you for having me in UNEC Economy Forum. My name is Erol Özvar, and I am going to share with you my views about education and particularly the higher education sector during and after the coronavirus pandemic.

For almost two years, the global pandemic COVID-19 has been threatening humanity and confronting all societies with huge challenges and crises. We are tested for our capacity to accommodate ourselves to new adverse living conditions. In addition to Covid-19, climate change and global financial crises all together call for the necessity to reconsider flexibility, interdependency, and resilience to overcome the next disasters and catastrophes.

In this short presentation, my questions are as follows: How has the higher education sector been affected by recent pandemic conditions? How can universities adapt themselves to play a more influential role in alleviating local and global shocks? After the covid-19 pandemic, will the higher education systems continue to function as they did before? I believe that these questions are not specific to this or that country but shared by all of us.

Dear Colleagues,

COVID-19 disrupted every aspect of our life. In addition to social distancing, the restriction and even banning of local and global travels forced us to change behavior. The global crisis of logistics, which started during the Pandemic and will probably continue for an unforeseeable period, threaten our way of life.

It is undeniable that the higher education sector all over the world, like most other sectors, was caught unprepared for this crisis. Before the pandemic, university learning was mostly based on face-to-face meetings. After the outbreak of COVID-19, the first thing all universities did was to close the doors and to continue education via online teaching and distance learning. I think that academics and other staff of universities deserve praise for a rapid reaction against the crises by digitalizing all curricula for e-learning in a short time—if, for a moment, we put aside the concerns regarding quality assurance.

We understand that before the start of the Pandemic, the higher education sector in both developing and developed countries had acquired e-learning infrastructures to maintain teaching activities—albeit at different degrees. It has to be admitted that the universities made good use of these existing infrastructures to launch hybrid or blended learning models to adapt to the changes and to make more space for the distance learning processes. However, the

existing structures did not meet all newly-arising demands. This led many countries to make huge investments in remote video conferencing software. Even several schools now have their software products to bridge faculty members and students in digital conference cabinets.

Despite all these advances, it is still questionable whether or not higher education is accessible to all at the same level within and across countries. Digitalization in its current form does not mean reducing the inequality of opportunity in higher education. There is a lot of work to be done on this issue.

Dear guests,

We faced the challenge of the Pandemic in higher education and responded to it by adopting and developing distance learning methods. Now, the question is “what will happen when the Pandemic ends?” Will academics and students prefer to continue to use e-learning services or will they want to go back to completely face-to-face education? The results of the surveys are interesting.

Several surveys in several countries revealed that students would not be against using remote education methods after the Pandemic ends. Based on Turkish national data regarding student and faculty satisfaction about distance learning during the Pandemic, I can confidently say that students and faculty members in Turkey successfully adapted to the new conditions. They somehow continued the process of teaching and learning by adapting themselves to digital platforms such as Zoom, GoogleMeet, and Microsoft Teams. Now, they are willing to make good use of newly-acquired skills and habits after the Pandemic conditions end.

Online learning has some clear benefits. It enables students to overcome the difficulties of physical distance. It allows others to be mobile while learning. It cuts some of the expenses of traditional learning and makes it possible to carry learning to a wider segment of the population. It is almost impossible for us--students, academics, and administrators of higher education-- to turn a blind eye to these benefits.

In addition, if we look beyond the world of higher education, with the development of information and communication technologies, digital information society and a digital knowledge economy have become a goal for all countries. In line with this purpose, it is obvious that the demand for a qualified workforce, familiar with digital technologies, will increase at the global level.

Thus, considering all of these, I believe that the injection of online learning into the traditional methods of university education and following hybrid models of teaching and learning is inevitable. A change in the higher education paradigms awaits all of us.

Having said this, I have to underline that e-learning or online learning brings challenges, next to benefits. We have to rethink the conventional issues of our higher education sector such as learning space, classrooms, course curriculum, schedules, education programs, and assessment systems.

In addition, digitalization makes a remarkable change in the employment market. Many jobs face a huge risk because of the advent of automation in manufacturing. It is predicted that 85 million jobs will disappear due to digital transformation, and at the same time, 97 million new jobs that are more compatible with the new working life will emerge by 2025. Therefore, the need for human resources with advanced talents in the labor market will gradually increase. The graduates of higher education programs will tend to enroll in formal or non-formal programs to improve their competencies. All these have to be undertaken to respond to the changes that have been taking place in working life in recent years, partly concerning the COVID Pandemic.

Having all these prospective developments, we should reflect on the rising trends in the employment market and new vocational education models. We should also think about the ways of creating flexible occupational profiles, and providing students with the necessary skills in this direction. Moreover, the study periods in schools and the recognition of prior learning should be planned in detail and meticulously.

With the expected transformation, the profile of human resources in higher education will also be updated. Plans should be made in advance. The training and employment of individuals with the skills that will be needed in the future should be given priority. We have to keep in mind that employment in the field of information and communication technology will increase gradually.

It would not be surprising that if we do not relate higher educational institutions to labor markets more closely, the relevance of universities will become more questionable. That's why program and curriculum designers must prepare learning content in such a way to equip the students with employable skills and talents. Moreover, university administrations must keep collaborations with the business world on the agenda.

During the pandemic, internationalization in terms of more international enrollments continued to be one of the main financial sources for private universities. It is also a criterion for the level of global integration of universities and supports the participation of competent graduates in a competitive environment. Despite the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the international mobility of students and academic staff has continued. Though limited, mobility enables the rapid transfer of knowledge and experiences from one region to another. In addition to mobility programs, after the coronavirus pandemic, increasing the number of international students and academic staff and developing collaborations with international institutions and organizations will remain the main goals that higher education systems want to attain.

Regarding R&D and innovation activities, after covid 19, universities should allocate more resources to the software industry while focusing on capacity building in the field of digital economy and green deal. If we are to realize the digital revolution, we will have to improve infrastructure and introduce digital literacy to society. In addition, we have to develop proper legal codes for the software industry which is the driving force of this revolution. Nevertheless, these are not enough to progress relevant activities. Incentives must be simplified for the researchers to increase the effectiveness of scientific projects. In addition, the outcomes of projects should be commercialized and branded through support mechanisms.

Gathering all higher educational institutions in Turkey under its roof, as of today, YÖK (the Council of Higher Education) coordinates the functioning of 207 universities with over 8 million students and over 180 thousand academic staff.

Turkish Higher Education has largely completed its quantitative development. Now, it focuses on quality-oriented structural transformations. In this context, YÖK has been carrying out many projects such as Mission Differentiation and Specialization in Higher Education, YÖK Ph.D. Scholarship Project, Target-Oriented Internationalization, Digital Transformation Project in Higher Education, Open Science and Open Access Project, Future Professions Project, YÖK-Future Project, YÖK-Anatolia Project, and YÖK Virtual Laboratory Project.

In the new period, our new vision in higher education underscores **big data** in higher education, evidence-based decision support services, and R&D policy that primarily focuses on Turkey's economic and social priorities, innovation and employment-oriented universities, academic productivity, strong academic performance, new models for university-business world cooperation, new vocational training models, recognition of prior learning, international interactions of universities and widespread use of knowledge diplomacy.

To conclude, going back to the ‘same old’ ways of higher education is **not an option**.

No one can deny that the COVID Pandemic released forces that cannot be returned and removed. Society, economy, health services underwent significant transformations. Along the same lines, the sector of education and particularly higher education faced challenges and responded to these in a way that affected the main structure. Perhaps, it is not an exaggeration to say that the COVID Pandemic-related changes, particularly diverse modes of online teaching, brought about a paradigm shift in education. Now, we all have to think about the most effective ways of using the benefits and containing the challenges of the new paradigm in our efforts to construct our new education model that would prepare new generations for the challenges of the increasingly globalized post-pandemic world.

Higher education must help shape **the post-COVID world**. Universities have to engage more proactively with their communities. We can only then better contribute to knowledge creation, educate students for active citizenship, and help create a democratic and inclusive society. So, first, we have to get over **the please-get-back-to-normal syndrome**. And then, we can actively turn these ideas into practice.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.