The Disruptive Futures of Education—Post-COVID-19 Pandemic



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1 Introduction

The year 2020 is mostly known to many as an inflection point. A metaphorical vision to look far ahead, with clarity, taking on the various "disruptions" that have been much touted, namely, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Since its pronouncement, four years ago, during the 2016 World Economic Forum in Davos, the world of higher education has been inundated with demands to introduce the so-called 'Education 4.0'. It claimed that this is an attempt to maximise the impact of the latest "revolution" which allegedly, like the previous industrial (techno-centric, man-made) revolutions took the world by storm. Shaping new paradigms, while dismantling the old. We are familiar with their benefits, but not so when it comes to the reverse. Yet, the latter took greater toll in ecological and human terms since the first Industrial Revolution in the late 1700 s. Many of the relationships between people and nature have suffered the worst over the last 300 years and still suffers today.

Now, we are standing on a new threshold called the Anthropocene era with the Sixth Mass Extinction already on the way according to some sources. It is as though people-nature relationships have been totally redefined whereby "anthropocentrism" got the upper hand. So much so, during the 2019 World Economic Forum, Sir David Attenborough declared that the "Garden of Eden is no more." The choice of metaphor is indeed apt, in terms of education, with reference to humans and the natural surroundings. Not surprisingly, the narrative of (higher) education followed very closely the same storyline where anthropocentrism rules. It is consequent to the emergence of a factory-like model to mass produce "workers" in the name of the "revolution," so to speak. It spewed out the language of the industrial age framed by the four Ms—Manpower, Mind and Machine, driven predominantly by the all-mighty Money! This continues into the current "revolution" where the terminologies are

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rewritten but not the framing. Thus, instead of Manpower, it morphs to Human Capital; Mind becomes Invention; and the Machine turns into Technology. The human capital-invention-technology nexus is still very much the driver of education, where ecological and human dimensions remain on the backburner. In other words, the lingo is still economically biased which in turn, brought about an imbalance between the three aspects of Profit, Planet and People, otherwise dubbed as three Ps, distorting the true purpose of education as implied by Attenborough. This is increasingly well illustrated by the crises-susceptible world which has been the source of concern over at least three decades; even more so given the frequency and severity of the crises of late.

2 Current Status of "Education"

Simply put, the current status of "education" is fast becoming irrelevant for the future. Especially, with respect to the younger generation led by the likes of Greta Thunberg and millions of supporters globally. Their influence and articulation have reached far and wide onto global platforms that used to be dominated by mostly adult males as heads of states. This is now being challenged when Thunberg dared them to ensure that her generation has a sustainable future. Her statements are often direct and profound, centred on the question as to why should her generation even attend school when their future continues to be uncertain, if not bleak. This, no doubt, is a clear indictment as to the current state of education, mirrored socio-ecologically, in as far as the future generation is concerned. Such changing demand is presumably not much different from 70 years ago when UNESCO encouraged the foundation of IAU.

Fast forward. What is urgently at stake is a lasting solution within the framework of "Education for Sustainable Development" (ESD), aimed at bringing back the muchneeded balance between the three Ps - Profit, Planet and People—as mentioned above. Or as more recently understood, Education 2030 in the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from 2016 until 2030. It encompasses 17 goals with overarching targets of five Ps, where the Partnership and Peace make up the additional two Ps. The platform for SDGs was launched in New York in September 2015, slightly earlier than that of 4IR in Davos. Not only SDGs act as a common global platform as endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly, but it is also a crucial bridge forward from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the period 2000-2015. During the period, it encapsulates the United Nations Decade on ESD from 2005 to 2014. Throughout the decade, IAU took an active role in partnering with many agencies, notably the United Nations University (UNU) in Tokyo. At one point during the decade, the Rector of UNU was also the President of IAU, indicating the seamless working relationships between the two committed entities in realising the three Ps, later five Ps, of SD through education (ESD). As far as IAU is concerned, MDGs, ESD and the later SDGs, featured strongly on its agenda during the 14th

presidency (2012–2016) helmed by the author of this piece. Then, IAU adopted four vital inter-linking strategic areas to effectively become the global voice of higher education.

3 IAU's Strategic Intent

IAU, being mindful that the future well-being of humanity and the planet depends on successful resolution of the interconnected challenges of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability, has been advocating for higher education to actively participate in mainstreaming ESD since 1993. To date, it equivocally supports the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in providing a "new" framework for universities to develop inter-institutional collaborations in pursuit of ESD. The overarching goal is to assist higher education leaders to embed SD concepts and principles in strategic planning, academic and organisational work. The main objectives include: to encourage peer-to-peer learning and share expertise on the SDGs, foster whole-institution approaches at the leadership level to integrate SD priorities, and provide capacity building and networking services. Towards this end, IAU has a developed a dedicated portal on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HERSD) at www.iau-hesd.net.

As it is well embedded in the use of technology, IAU regards this as an important dimension of higher education worldwide, bringing new opportunities to various parties involved. In reality, however, the impact to improve higher education is unevenly distributed and delivered. Thus, while it is important to pursue the potential of technology, bridging the divides in terms of access and success to knowledge and information is no less vital. IAU, therefore, acknowledges the high risk of exacerbating present or even future inequalities, rather than narrowing the existing gaps. As such, it is imperative that IAU aims to fully harness the potential use of technology as an affordable means to uplift the quality of higher education and to enhance access and success to relevant knowledge and education for all.

Overall, as an international organisation that acts as "The Global Voice of Higher Education," IAU put in place a deliberate strategy to improve the quality and relevance of higher education. It focuses on the academic rationales and the equitable and collaborative nature of the process. It aims to minimise the adverse effects of international interactions due to highly unequal and diverse contexts among higher education institutions (HEIs) with different resources, needs and interests.

In handling all these, leadership, at the core of quality higher education, is vital to respond to complex challenges and rapid socio-cultural change. Higher education leadership, in particular, must be supported by values and responsibility. It is essential that HEIs fully contribute to the development of sustainable and democratic societies. IAU targets strengthening the capacities of leaders and enhancing cooperation as well as collaboration among them as well as maximising their impact through engagement with communities.

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These interlinking aspects are in tandem with the 2015 World Education Forum held in Incheon, Republic of Korea, where IAU played an active role in support of the Incheon Declaration. It expresses agreement on "essential elements" of the Education 2030 Framework for Action, building on the UN-led Education for All framework and goals. The final version of the 2030 Framework was adopted and launched at a high-level meeting in November 2015 that took place alongside the 38th session of the UNESCO General Conference pointing to the SDGs. More specifically, SDG 4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. It desires a more human-centric and humane dimension to fashion education of the future to balance out what the 4IR trajectory stands for in creating largely techno-centric (read, robotic) scenarios with its own (un)intended divides and complexities that IAU wants to minimise, if not eliminate.

4 The Humanising, "Whole Person" Approach

With this in mind, it could be argued that there is a need for a "novel" disruption to fundamentally reconstruct the four Ms model into a four Hs—together with their overarching drivers, in order to better embrace the challenges of the 21st century. Essentially, this means a shift in emphasis from Manpower to Humanity; Mind to Heart; and Machine (Hi-Tech) to Hi-Touch. Whilst, the overarching driver morphs from Monetary (value) to a Humanising (values) framework. In doing so, the 4Hs model, which is more values-based, is set to replace the 4Ms mechanistic structure to a humanistic one. In this context, it is interesting to quote the current UNESCO Director-General, Audrey Azoulay, when speaking of UNESCO's leadership role in education, saying: "Our deeply humanist DNA cannot let us reduce education to a technical or technological issue, nor even to an economic one." Simply put, the Futures of Education is increasingly values-based in humanising education for the new century and beyond. It addresses the "whole person" as did one of the four pillars of education for the 21st as advocated by UNESCO in 1996 through the Delors Commission. Namely, Learning to Be which accommodates "the allround development of the whole person, to fulfil his/her highest potential, and be able to think, decide and act independently—the source of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. It involves activities that foster personal development (body, mind and spirit) and contribute to creativity, personal discovery and appreciation of the inherent value provided by these pursuits," involving the hand, head and heart. "The 21st century will need a varied range of talents and personalities even more than exceptionally gifted individuals, who are equally essential in any society. In other words, children should be offered every opportunity for aesthetic, artistic, scientific, cultural and social discovery and experimentation."

Education, therefore, should cease to merely serve a utilitarian purpose (as it is currently) at the expense of cultural significance. Educating in developing imagination and creativity should also restore cultural values and knowledge drawn from indigenous wisdom and experiences in translating *Learning to Be* sustainably.

The Delors Commission reasserted a fundamental principle in *Learning to Be* where the aim is the complete fulfilment of the person in all the richness of his/her personality. The Commission reportedly embraces one of the complexities of this form of expression and the various commitments—as an individual, member of a family and of a community, citizen, producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer. This holistic human development, which begins at birth and continues through a person's life, is a dialectic process which is based both on self-knowledge and on relationships with other people, as well as the natural surroundings.

5 Learning to Become

That said, more recently, UNESCO added yet another pillar of education to the existing four, that is, *Learning to Become* as part of the Futures of Education matrix closing the ESD loop, as it were. More specifically, *Learning to Become Sustainable!* And at once put a specific thrust to the three other pillars of *Learning to Know, Learning to Do* and *Learning to Live Together* so that they are better aligned to ESD. UNESCO, as the lead agency, is engaging "a global conversation as well as a report on the future of education, drawing on the diverse and fruitful ways of learning practised around the world, resolutely forward-looking, yet grounded in human rights at the service of the dignity of all." The latest (fifth) pillar can be construed as a "disruption" to the old model which would otherwise remain unsustainable and irrelevant to the future, if not altogether obsolete to ESD. This resonates closely with the 4Hs model discussed above.

Notwithstanding, the said disruption is starkly different from the more commonly understood techno-centric (man-made) types of disruptions as applied to education across the board. To fully appreciate the difference is to realise the (organic) impact of the disruption as manifested by the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. In a matter of months, a myriad of massive, rapid states of "biodisruption" overwhelmed the whole world, creating uncertain and unsustainable ecosystems worldwide. To begin with, being less predictable and left many unprepared, impacting on education at large, including suspending formal learning globally, and which affected millions for a lengthy period, causing varying (mental) anxieties. First and foremost is the question how to handle the biodisruption, that generally "disrupts" those very human emotions and relationships based on values, involving ethics, authenticity and integrity, all subsumed by *Learning to Be* and *Learning to Become*.

6 Concluding Thought: The "Renewed" Normal

Under the circumstances, this is how education needs to be transformed by learning from COVID-19, acting as the ultimate "equaliser"—a descriptor that once upon a time "education" was best known for. But not anymore, in fact the contrary is

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true. In many instances, "education" can be the source of social inequity, especially in the Global South due to the ever-widening gap. The unfolding protests symbolised by #Black Lives Matter in many cities in the Global North markedly add to this unjust reality. Taking this tragedy into consideration, and looking through this lens, the takeaway lesson from the coronavirus outbreak is what I summarily called "COVID learning." It is framed within collaborative, open-accessed and openresourced dimensions, which are values-oriented, inclusive, yet diverse in content and delivery, all for the purpose of humanising education as represented by the 4Hs model. Indeed, it is about flattening the education curve aligned to what IAU is set to do, namely creating an equitable, accessible and quality of education post-COVID-19. Evidently, it is not so much about fashioning a so-called "new" (ab)normal, as often suggested, but more about a "renewed" normal, one that rights the wrongs which were (un)intentionally carried out and in consequence "bio-disrupting" the humans. This, ultimately, demonstrates the failure in translating *Learning to Become* to narrowing, not just the existing gaps, but historical ones as well. Not just the extrinsic aspects but the intrinsic ones too. Summarily, Learning to Become could be an uphill battle to accomplish, should the "renewed" normal fail to become a reality for the futures of education.

To conclude, let us resort to the words of the Director-General of UNESCO during her investiture speech: "We are facing a moment of truth in which we become collectively liable at a time when the need for UNESCO is greater than ever. Together, we must take the right decisions to take it (sic) into the 21st century and shape it [...], and we owe it to the young to maintain that ambition, with them and for them." Similarly, the same applies to IAU as well in regard to handling the bio-disruptions during and post-COVID pandemic towards humanising education for the 21st century and beyond.

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