administrative personnel in a process of assessing the viewpoints of all engaged stakeholders when defining courses of action.

**Creating a Sense of Community and Leading from a Distance**
To ensure the physical and mental wellbeing of students and faculty, it is necessary to maintain a sense of community and common purpose. In the community, the individual is "at home." The community protects, preserves, and respects individuals. It takes into account people's needs, including emotional ones. The foundations of a caring culture are a common purpose and unified goals. While goals vary at the academic community level, addressing common problems that arise during this crisis and sharing common experiences may contribute to building community in a time of social distancing.

Leaders need to energize the entire university community by setting a clear direction and communicating it effectively. Presenting a clear vision and offering a realistic perspective can have a powerful effect on motivation throughout the organization. It is important for leaders to inspire and lead their administrative departments in their daily work, while physically apart. One way to do so is to increase levels of interaction. In this emergency, it is advisable to assemble a crisis management team to support the rector in reactive and proactive decision-making.

As the university returns to normal, new routines will have to be incorporated into a "new normal," taking advantage of the structures, culture, processes, and technology developed during the emergency period, combining face-to-face and remote forms of work. ◀

*Daniel Samoilovich is executive director of the Columbus Association. E-mail: columbusnet@hotmail.com. An extended version of this article is available at https://www.columbus-web.org/en/*

# The Argentine University against COVID-19: Old and New Discussions in an Unforeseen Reality

**Monica Marquina**

**Abstract**
During the COVID-19 quarantine, old and new discussions emerged regarding virtual higher education. Under the current state of emergency, the University of Buenos Aires has postponed the start of the academic year from April to June out of concern for quality and social responsibility. Meanwhile, the vast majority of higher education institutions keeps supporting the right to education through distance teaching.

Since the beginning of the year, Argentina, like other countries in the Americas, has been witnessing the relentless spread of the COVID-19 virus throughout Asia and Europe. The first confirmed case of coronavirus in the country occurred on March 3, and the first death, ten days later. On March 20, the government issued a decree ordering "preventive and compulsory social isolation" for the entire population, suspending all nonessential activities as well as all domestic and international travel and transportation, and closing the country's borders.

Universities have become leading players in the fight against COVID-19, acting within the framework of their social mission in multiple ways. For instance, they recruit volunteers to assist passengers arriving from international flights who must comply with a mandatory quarantine in hotels. These volunteers also help pack food that students usually consume in university dining halls for free or at low prices, and they give support to elderly living alone. Many institutions are contributing to the production of items in short supply, such as alcohol-based hand sanitizer and masks, and, in some cases, they participate in the production of respirators and hospital conditioning. University hospitals also carry out tests to diagnose the disease.

Most universities are working against the clock to ensure that their virtual platforms are set up for the courses scheduled for the first semester of the year, supporting teachers and evaluating options so that no student is left out because of limited means or technological capabilities. Several already have online classes under way or have even organized online dissertation defenses.

### Argentina's Advantage in Distance Education

Argentina has a background that sets it apart from other countries in the region with regard to distance university education. This form of education began to expand at a fast pace at the turn of the century, with several universities at the vanguard of developments. In 2017, the university sector reached sufficient maturity to agree on a legal framework for distance education, based on quality standards, and establishing distance education on equal terms with face-to-face education. The Council of Universities, which represents all university institutions in the country, worked together with the Office of University Policies (SPU) on a regulatory framework specifying quality requirements for distance education. Since then, each institution offering full or partial distance education programs has had to set up its own Institutional Distance Education System, which in turn must be validated by the SPU based on a favorable evaluation by the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation. In addition, each of these programs must be evaluated individually. The process implies that universities offering distance education programs must document how they organize themselves in terms of functional structure, technological infrastructure, specialized human resources, teacher training strategies, and research activity on this type of education.

These regulations are specific to online programs, which at most universities represent only a small portion of the total academic offering. Although it would be a mistake to expect that all courses programmed for the first semester of 2020 may transit to a virtual format overnight, the university system—unlike elementary or high school systems—is well prepared, on a structural level, to face these kinds of contingencies. There is a wealth of experience in distance learning that is currently being used to full advantage.

Yet, individual teachers face a heavy challenge when preparing virtual classes in record time and with different levels of institutional support. For many, the amount of work required is considerable, because of scheduling and lack of pedagogical experience. They have to "learn on the go." For some, this is a good thing, whereas others struggle. In many cases, experienced educators work alongside young teachers, combining different types of knowledge.

### Emerging Arguments against Virtual Education

Following a decision to extend the quarantine, old and new discussions began to emerge, with brand new arguments arising against virtual education, in addition to the traditional ones advocating that face-to-face teaching is irreplaceable. Working conditions for educators at home or lack of experience are arguments used by some unions to claim that it would be best to wait for the situation to normalize rather than offer low-quality teaching. The inequity of technology-mediated education is also a common issue, since many students do not have the means to access it.

Recently, the University of Buenos Aires, one of the main universities in the country in terms of history, number of students, and international recognition, established a new academic calendar postponing the start of the semester from April to June. While acknowledging that each faculty (school) can establish virtual modalities in line with the characteristics of its programs, the university passed a regulation whereby attendance to face-to-face classes is the only authorized option, citing social responsibility and quality concerns. Meanwhile, the vast majority of public and private universities approved virtual classes as a means to sustain academic activity throughout the quarantine period.

It is important to highlight what each university can do, according to its means and possibilities, to ensure the right to education, in a situation where nothing is as it was and where it is crucial to maintain a pedagogical offer. In an unexpected moment of isolation, universities cannot afford to be absent. Moving forward, it is likely that, when activities go back to normal, a seed of change will have been sown. A change that will grow

*Universities have become leading players in the fight against COVID-19, acting within the framework of their social mission in multiple ways.*

**35**

*Monica Marquina is professor and researcher in higher education at CONICET/UNTREF, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina. E-mail: mmarquina@untref.edu.ar.*

from the experience of each of those key actors during this unexpected and exceptional period: students, teachers, and institutions.

**36**

**Abstract**
With international students comprising over a quarter of its student population, Australia is vulnerable to global shocks. The initial impact of COVID-19 was to prevent thousands of Chinese students from traveling to Australia for the new academic year. The unfolding lockdown, a shift to online teaching, and collapse of part-time work are affecting international students deeply. However, universities have transitioned to online operations quite seamlessly, which might bring lasting cultural change to their operations.

# The Impact of COVID-19 on Australian Higher Education

## Betty Leask and Chris Ziguras

Higher education has been one of Australia's top three exports for over a decade. In 2019, Chinese students contributed A$12 billion to the Australian economy. The presence of international students generally, and of Chinese students in particular, has literally and metaphorically enriched campuses, classrooms, and research laboratories. International student visas allow students to work up to 40 hours a fortnight, and graduates are able to stay on in the country for between two and four years with full work rights. As a result, local communities have benefited from access to an enthusiastic, flexible, and diverse casual workforce. COVID-19 has put all of this at risk.

The movement of students from China to Australia prior to COVID-19 represented one of the largest education flows that the world has ever seen. In 2019, Chinese students comprised 28 percent of Australia's total international student population. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in China came at the worst possible time for students from that country, as the academic year in Australia commences in March. At the time when Australia imposed restrictions on travel from China, there were more than 100,000 students there who had been accepted to study in Australia in 2020, but who were no longer permitted to enter the country. As the crisis unfolded in January and February, it quickly became clear that only a very small percentage of those students would be able to start the semester as planned. People were just starting to understand the personal cost for students, and the economic cost for institutions, of COVID-19. For students unable to leave China, the impact of the crisis on their lives was magnified beyond the immediate impact on their families, friends, and lifestyle. It was likely to be much longer-term, affecting their future plans for a professional career. For institutions, the economic cost was estimated to be in excess of A$3 billion.

### Early Days—Chinese Students Stranded
Some Chinese students did manage to enter Australia by spending two weeks in transit in a third country. By the time the semester started, though, many remained in China, some studying online, others having deferred, hoping for a mid-year commencement.

Australian universities worked hard to meet the needs of all three groups of students, including providing discounted fee tuition for those taking online classes in China; reorganizing on-campus teaching so that students who arrived later in the semester would receive the support they needed; delaying the start date of the semester; providing fee refunds and deferred payment; supporting students to resolve visa issues; resolving accommodation and employment arrangements; and offering dedicated support services for Chinese students. The latter included extended academic and welfare support, counselling, special helplines, and coronavirus-specific information guidelines.

Nevertheless, the crisis had an immediate devastating effect on both Chinese students and institutions. It caused major disruption to students' study, accommodation, part-time employment, and life plans, as well as mental wellbeing. Students and institutions