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# Universities and Covid-19 in Argentina: from community engagement to regulation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper assesses how Argentine public universities responded to the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic in three dimensions: teaching and learning, scientific research and community engagement, and internationalization activities. For each of the dimensions, the actions developed, and the challenges encountered are presented. I argue that the response was quick and consistent: it is related to an academic culture that is framed in the right to university, both individual right (access, permanence, and graduation to all citizens) and collective right (benefit socio-community development). The article concludes with a preliminary analysis of the agenda items to advance regulations and policies. On several occasions a self-reflective exercise is carried out, as part of a community that is going through this situation of extraordinary urgency.

## KEYWORDS

University; higher education; Covid-19; governance; Argentina

## Introduction

This paper was written completely under preventive and compulsory social isolation (aka ASPO, according to the original in Spanish). I have been working at home since mid-March, which also means conducting pedagogical assistance to students through distance education tools, conducting research in terms of the new context and taking care of a toddler who learnt to walk a week after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in this paper I provide in-depth description of the different policies and initiatives to address this complex situation, together with personal insights that reflect my own point of view as well as fruitful discussions I shared with colleagues. I stress the last point: during this pandemic, more spaces and channels were opened for the reflection of academic and pedagogical practices; as well as renewed critiques of the different policy instruments that regulate university work. The last point includes not only transforming our activities to virtual environments, but also making visible and coping with longstanding inequalities that relate to access to technology, connectivity, distance-learning tools, etc. to gender gaps and the care economy.<sup>2</sup>

I argue that public universities had a rapid and reliable response to the consequences and impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic through the adaptation of teaching activities and community engagement in the search for vaccines, palliatives and solutions to psychosocial and economic problems. At the same time, the situation of exceptionality and urgency made visible problematic situations (such as inequalities, exclusion and educational injustices) and areas that require regulation. The time is propitious because – as part of the new administration – the discussion to reform the Higher Education Law was opened by the President on March 1. Therefore, in this work, in addition to analyzing the different responses and tools deployed by the universities, critical issues are

presented for further examination. The article proposes an agenda of topics to regulate and proposals to consider.

The first section of this paper describes important aspects of the governance of higher education in Argentina. The second section presents the main policies of the national government during the Pandemic and a summary of the main data concerning Covid-19 cases. In the third section, the work presents three axes of analysis: responses to the continuity of teaching, community-based and research activities, and internationalization activities. This allows some final remarks. The article concludes with an epilogue of my experience of doing this work while being confined.

## Higher education in Argentina: main features

Higher education in Argentina is mostly public and there is a long-standing tradition of its participation in the social and cultural life of the country, which gives it its own dynamics and specificity. Because of historical trends and regulatory framework, the main characteristics of Argentinean HE are: first, the consideration of HE as a human right and a public (social) good. Secondly, publicly funded universities<sup>3</sup> have no fees (gratuity), unrestricted access (without entrance exams or other conditions), are massive and open (no quotas, available for each person living in the country). Third, public universities have political autonomy and financial autarchy (the government covers functioning expenses and does not interfere in their activities).<sup>4</sup> They are self-governing institutions: there is a co-government with the participation of teachers, students, graduates, and administrative staff. Finally, public universities execute teaching, scientific and technological research, and community outreach activities, have a strong social commitment and are democratizing institutions. There is no one single model of the Argentinean University as there are heterogeneous institutional designs (Chiroleu 2018; Suasnabar and Rovelli 2012). Its academic culture (Naidorf 2009; Rinesi 2015) is composed by those features.

According to the last statistical yearbook, there are 132 university institutions (see Table 1) whereas half of them are publicly funded, the enrollment is concentrated in the public sector, almost 80% (see Table 2). There are more than two million students of which 58,1% are women. As for other overall figures of 2018 enrollments (population ages 18–24 years old): the net university rate is 20,3%; the gross university rate is 40,3% and the gross HE rate is 59,1% (Ministry of Education 2020).

Higher education is delivered on a regular basis (typical classroom face-to-face activities). As shown in Table 3, distance education is scarce: of all the offers available at the undergraduate and graduate level, a 94% (6.627 degree offers) is concentrated on regular education. As for the distribution of students in distance education programs (Table 4): 36% of them are in the public sector, compare to 64% in the private sector. Likewise, as for the graduates of distance education programs: 24% correspond to public sector and 76% to the private sector. Thus, the trend in the student population distribution in distance education programs is opposite to that observed in the face-to-face mode. It is not possible to state exhaustively that the private sector was more prepared for distance education, since the public sector has some exemplary institutions that provide education in this modality.

The National Interuniversity Council (CIN) is formed by national universities, university institutes and provincial universities. It is the body for coordinating, consulting and proposing policies and strategies for university development and the promotion of activities of interest to the public

**Table 1.** University institutions according to management type. Year 2019.

Type of management	Total	University	University institutes
National (public)	132	113	19
Provincial (public)	61	57	4
Private	6	5	1
Foreign/International	63	50	13
	2	1	1

Source: Statistical yearbook of the Ministry of Education (2018–2019).

**Table 2.** Students, new enrollees, and graduates. Year 2018.

		Students	New enrollees	Graduates
Undergraduate and graduate students	Total	2.071.270 (100%)	547.661 (100%)	132.744 (100%)
	Public	1.640.405 (79%)	424.959 (78%)	86.958 (65%)
	Private	430.865 (21%)	122.702 (22%)	45.786 (35%)
Postgraduate students	Total	156.476 (100%)	42.088 (100%)	17.710 (100%)
	Public	117.002 (75%)	27.363 (65%)	10.281 (58%)
	Private	39.474 (25%)	14.725 (35%)	7.429 (42%)

Source: Statistical yearbook of the Ministry of Education (2018–2019).

**Table 3.** Number of degrees programs (offers) according to study modality (distance/regular) by management (public/private). Year 2019.

Management sector	Undergraduate and graduate		Postgraduate	
	Distance education	Regular education	Distance education	Regular education
Total	392 (6%)	6.627 (94%)	96 (3%)	2.881 (97%)
Public	200	4.256	62	2.130
Private	192	2.371	34	751

Source: statistical yearbook of the Ministry of Education (2018–2019).

**Table 4.** Students and graduates according to study modality (distance / regular) by management (public / private). Year 2019.

Management sector	Students Undergraduate and graduate		Graduates	
	Distance education	Regular education	Distance education	Regular education
Total	161.281 (100%)	1.909.989 (100%)	10.773 (100%)	121.971 (100%)
Public	36%	82,8%	24%	69,2%
Private	64%	17,2%	76%	30,8%

Source: statistical yearbook of the Ministry of Education (2018–2019).

higher education system. Together with the Council of Rectors of Private Universities (CRUP) and representatives of the Councils for Regional Planning of Higher Education (CPRES), it is part of the Council of Universities, which is chaired by the National Minister of Education.

Universities are part of the innovation ecosystem of our country. Some of its components are presented in the section of the work dedicated to scientific research.

### Covid-19 response: the national government

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Argentina dates from 3rd of March and involved a person who entered the country from a virus circulation zone (Italy). By then, schools had just started classes and many universities were still developing summer courses. Since that moment, the government acted swiftly as the lessons from Europe were devastating: the rapid spread of the virus combined with the collapse of intensive care units (ICU) triggered a high mortality rate (especially on the elderly population and people with existing diseases). To decide who gets the mechanical ventilator or even a bed and care in a hospital proved to be the most unhuman face of the Coronavirus crisis and, for developing countries, that situation was even worse as the initial conditions were more critical (in terms of lack of enough ICU, physicians, ventilators, and medical supplies). Additionally, Argentina had already structural conditions that complicated the situation: unsustainable debt and high levels of poverty, inequality and hunger.<sup>5</sup> To sum up: the scenarios for the crisis management were serious and the main policy-driver of the government was to choose life above all. Health over the economy. Three principles explain the overall policy measures: care, solidarity and responsibility. Even if it is not the goal of this paper to assess the government's policy performance, we present the tools for the containment of the circulation of the virus, the guarantee of the right to

health and the support to formal labor and the incomes of the informal workers. These policies framed the actions carried out by universities and its governance system.

Thus, the government, among other policies, created a council of experts to have updated evidence that guided decision making and foresee at least five phases to manage isolation: strict isolation, administrative isolation, geographical segmentation, progressive reopening and the 'new normal'; that regulated authorizations and prohibitions both at the national and the subnational (provincial) level according to a set of epidemiological indicators (such as positive cases duplication time and level of UTI occupancy). Strict isolation was regulated by a National Emergency Decree: The President on March 12 signed the Decree of Necessity and Urgency (DNU) that expanded the Health Emergency and provided for new measures to contain the spread of the virus. The decree empowered the Ministry of Health to acquire equipment, goods and services, and to enforce the necessary public health measures. In turn, it protects critical supplies such as sanitizing gel or masks, suspends flights from areas affected by the virus and determinates the mandatory isolation in specified cases. Consequently, ASPO was settled: strict isolation (included the closure of establishments). Subnational authorities could request exceptions from personnel affected by certain activities and services, or from people who live in specific and delimited geographic areas based on compliance with a series of requirements as well as the strict application of the corresponding health protocols. ASPO started on March 21 and since then it has been consecutively extended to date. The last DNU established ASPO until November 8 and a new phase of isolation in some provinces called DISPO (Social, Preventive and Obligatory Distancing). Additionally, border closures were established, including the prohibition of air carriers until September 1. Only a few commercial flights were authorized to guarantee the provision of supplies (especially purchases of equipment and medical supplies) and to repatriate Argentines abroad.

Among the set of policies to protect the health, the incomes, the economy and priority rights, I highlight:

- (1) The Emergency Family Income (IFE) for informal workers, between 18 and 65 years old, with a high degree of vulnerability. It is a fixed sum of USD 125 that was given three times between April and October.
- (2) The Emergency Work and Production Assistance Program (aka ATP): postponement or reduction of up to 95% of the payment of employer contributions to the Argentine Integrated Pension System; the payment of a complementary Salary: it is an allowance paid by the national government for formal workers in the private sector; a zero rate credit for self-employed workers without any financial cost; a subsidized rate credit for companies; and comprehensive unemployment benefit system.
- (3) The creation of a special fund of USD 22 million to acquire equipment and supplies from laboratories and hospitals. Budgetary modifications to strengthen the health sector: USD 1,6 million to prioritize attention to strategic areas of health and science to promote large-scale production of rapid tests, as well as the strengthening of the health system.
- (4) Construction of 12 modular emergency hospitals.
- (5) Increase in Family Allowances by 7.5%.
- (6) Incorporation of telephony, internet and pay television as competing public services and suspension of rate increases until December 31.
- (7) Programs to guarantee the right of access to basic goods and services of information and communication technologies for the entire population.
- (8) Licensing and remote work system for public and private sector workers. Prohibition of dismissals and suspensions.
- (9) Creation of sectorial support programs: cultural industries, family farming; tourism; social club; to support popular neighborhoods.
- (10) Repatriation program for Argentines abroad.

Thus, the country was in isolation for 8 months (so far), combining strict confinement (ASPO) with social distancing (DISPO). As in other countries, as the confinement spread, social unrest and pressures for openness increased and this was exploited by the opposition.

To date<sup>6</sup>, there are 1,304,846 positive cases in the country, of which 1,119,366 are recovered patients and 150,173 are active confirmed cases. The number of deceased people is 35,307. Since the beginning of the outbreak, 3,434,801 diagnostic tests have been carried out, which is equivalent to 75,695 samples per million inhabitants. According to the Coronavirus Resource Center of the John Hopkins University the incidence rate is 2,887.10 per 100,000 people; the case-fatality ratio is 2,71%. Argentina is number 8 in the global ranking of cumulative cases (second in the region).<sup>7</sup>

Briefly, the area of the country that required special consideration is the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, called *AMBA* (which includes the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and the suburbs of the Province of Buenos Aires) due to its population density (37% of total population of Argentina), that led to circulation and contagion. At different stages, other cities in the rest of the country had critical situations (in terms of number of infections, deaths and available UTIs). The contagion curve was flat as a result of ASPO and DISPO measurements; the peak was between the months of August and October. Afterwards, cases began to decline in November (*AMBA* stabilized and there are heterogeneous situations in the rest of the provinces).

### The university response to COVID-19 pandemic<sup>8</sup>

Public universities were key actor in contributing to creating the needed conditions for strengthening sanitary infrastructure prior to the peak of cases by incorporating ICUs and campaign hospitals for isolation and treatment of infected persons and manufacturing medical supplies (such as sanitizing gel, masks, ventilators, special cloths, tests). Specially, research institutions related to the public STI system are active collaborators in an international research networks that are working in finding vaccines. Thus, Argentinean HE institutions and actors have been in the front line of fighting the effects of this unprecedented pandemic. In this section, I assess the different initiatives engaged by the sector regarding teaching, social outreach (scientific research and community engagement) and internationalization activities. In some cases, some personal insights are incorporated as footnotes.

The normative framework stated above (DNU of the President) is broadened with the resolutions from the Ministry of Education (ME):

- (1) DNU No. 260/2020 extended the public emergency in health matters for the term of one (1) year.
- (2) DNU No. 297/20 established a measure of 'social, preventive and compulsory isolation' throughout the country, which was extended until June 7, 2020.
- (3) Multiple DNUs differentiated the different geographical areas of the country, in those who went to a stage of 'social, preventive and mandatory distancing,' those who remained in 'social, preventive and mandatory isolation' at all times and those who had to return to this latest health modality, until November 8, 2020.
- (4) Resolution ME No. 82/2020 recommended early the adoption of a series of preventive measures, including cases of return travel from areas with circulation and transmission of coronavirus.
- (5) Resolution ME No. 104/2020 recommends to universities, university institutes and higher education of all jurisdictions the adaptation of face-to-face academic activity in the framework of the emergency, in accordance with the recommendations of the Ministry of Health, including rescheduling participation in activities of internationalization that would imply the attendance of personnel, scholarship holders or students from the university to zones or areas of

transmission and circulation of COVID-19, as well as the reception of personnel, scholarship holders or students from said zones.

- (6) Resolution ME No. 106/2020 Creates the 'Seguimos Educando' Program within the Ministry of Education with the objectives of: collaborate with the creation of conditions for the continuity of teaching activities in the national educational system; ensure the distribution of resources; prepare materials and/or resources for educational purposes and/or cultural resources for family and/or community use.
- (7) Resolution ME No. 108/2020 ordered, the suspension of face-to-face classes at all levels and modalities, including higher education.
- (8) Resolution of the Secretariat of University Policies of the ME No. 12/2020 recommended to the National and Private Universities and University Institutes the readjustment of their 2020 academic calendar, taking into account the specificity of university education, guaranteeing those taken in the modalities periodicals that are normally developed in an academic year and maintaining the quality of the university system.
- (9) Resolution ME No. 423/2020 created the Advisory Council for the Planning of the Face-to-Face Return to Classrooms, of a multidisciplinary and consultative nature, in order to program the physical return to the establishments of the National Educational System as soon as possible according to the prevailing epidemiological situation in the different geographical areas of our country
- (10) Resolution ME No. 1084/2020 approved the Framework Protocol and General Guidelines for the return to face-to-face academic activities at universities and university institutes, which will be decided by the provincial authorities and the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (they could suspend activities and restart them according to the epidemiological situation).

As stated above, the Ministry of Education regulated the closure of institutions, provided tools for the continuity of learning, and customize protocols for the management of the situation and re-opening. Thus, the decision to suspend face-to-face educational activities (March 15) was preceded by a set of recommendations regarding protocols for persons traveling from abroad (self-quarantine) and for special situation with confirmed or suspected Covid-19 cases in educational institutions (total or partial school closures). After confinement (March 21) even if institutions were closed, there provision of sustenance and food benefits for children continued. As mentioned, Argentina had many vulnerable populations suffering from hunger and stopping food provision would have worsen the situation. Another feature that I highlight is the need to get continuous, updated, and reliable information of the situation of each educational institution: the incorporation of a twice a day report was included in many provisions. As the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded and some areas of the country had diminished the figures of infected, deaths, recoveries, and testing, social pressure increased demanding the return to face-to-face education.

### **Teaching activities**

As public universities are autonomous institutions, they established their own regulations: for instance, after Resolution ME N° 82/2020, the Rectorate of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) determine mandatory quarantine for persons that have arrived from countries with high circulation of the virus which led, almost immediately, to stopping international mobilities (both inbound and outbound).<sup>9</sup> After the global declaration of the Pandemic and Resolution ME N° 104/2020 (but prior to total confinement) universities started to modify their academic calendars to the new reality.<sup>10</sup> When ASPO was decreed, institutions were closed and all academic activities were virtualized, including management procedures. The last feature is a substantial part of academic life as our national universities rely on 'paper' (grades, exam minutes, certificates, processes to ensure correlative activities among programs, applications, among others). To digitalize these procedures was (and still is) a huge effort. In the case of exams, the Ministries of Education and Interior Affairs signed an agreement with



the National inter-university Council (CIN) to use a software that guarantees the identity of students when they are evaluated remotely.

The virtualization of classrooms in a system that was structurally unprepared for such a feat was a major challenge. As mentioned previously, regarding distance education, some institutions had experience with platforms and regulations. However, most public universities used these tools only as a pedagogical support for face-to-face teaching. Despite these difficulties, an effective response was achieved by the institutions, both those that had platforms for virtual teaching and those that did not. The University Information System (SIU) and the Association of University Interconnection Networks (ARIU) – within CIN – had a key role to provide knowledge and infrastructure to balance the inequalities in virtual education. CIN-SIU created an online collaborative catalog of resources for the implementation of virtual classes. The site (eVirtual<sup>11</sup>) offered educational resources for the development of distance learning, tutorials, tools, and resources of interest related to good practices. Additionally, ready-to-use platforms for teaching were offered: Moodle, Meet and support for conducting classes via streaming on YouTube. Additionally, CIN-SIU, the National Communications Entity (ENACOM) and ARIU agreed to achieve greater availability of equipment and connectivity to satisfy the growing demand for access to all digital content generated by the university system, including access through mobile phone networks.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, it was agreed to advance the Project to Strengthen the University Connectivity infrastructure to support universities as a post-pandemic goal.

Furthermore, different support mechanisms were generated. The National Institute for Teacher Training (INFOD) provided tools for developing teaching skills for virtual education. University unions also delivered training tools and shared information. It is also important to mention that the workload and stress of university teachers increased as they: (1) developed strategies of pedagogical continuity using the available software for the first time; (2) received (sometimes) mixed or confusing messages from authorities; (3) had extra workload with regard to care activities (specially women); (4) experienced difficulties due to improper access to internet connectivity and outdated equipment at home (or households with only one computer that was also used by other adults to work or by children to carry out their own distance learning activities). Because of dialogues between unions, universities and national authorities, some protocols for the regulation of home office were passed, including the creation of a credit program to buy new equipment (computers). This situation was a subject of much deliberation during the annual joint negotiations for salary increases.

From the students' point of view, online learning also incremented the technological and digital gap among them. This inequality gap added to existing conditions of vulnerability that would increase due to the social and economic impact of the Pandemic. The digital gap was mitigated by a set of tools: an agreement between the Ministry of Education and ENACOM to guarantee that no fees were charged when navigating 'edu.ar' web pages; together with the need to extend some benefits regarding equipment. The social consequences are being tackled via existing scholarship programs (monetary assistance, such as PROGRESAR+) and the programs listed in the preceding section (as many of university students may have applied to IFE or are workers whose companies have been helped by ATP).

Finally, because of the Pandemic impact on teaching activities, a question that has long been neglected in polity discussions gained visibility: regulating distance education. Distance education, except in the public system (although not exempt), has been mostly guided by market logic in its growth over the last two decades, and its enrollment has been steadily (especially in the private sector). Thus, if virtual education has been an unspoken subject over the last years, currently, it is worth recognizing that the public system faces the challenge of regulating it. The reason is clear: virtual education has an important democratizing potential guided by the principles of higher education as a public good and a human right. Consequently, current use of distance education tools highlighted a set of enquiries that deserve thoughtful consideration and debate: first, the intensification of asymmetries and inequalities based on technological gaps, that add to other inequalities.



Thus, a priori, we cannot expect that distance education has arrived to modernize our stagnant structures and ways of teaching and learning at university, because there is a high risk of creating new forms of exclusions over the pre-existing ones. Secondly, transnational private capitals are the major providers of distance education tools. Although the emergence of Covid-19 implies that all available tools are used, these are mostly from for-profit business groups with extensive experience and impact on the global market of educational services. The public system is challenged to settle strategies to address this situation based on the generation of public platforms oriented to the exercise of the right to education. Third, discussions on university quality and evaluation policies and processes are strained by the distance mode of provision and the increasing technological gap and other forms of socio-economic inequalities (which impact on the teaching-learning process). Quality assessment is not technical (the instrumentalization of qualification-oriented procedures), rather is a political and contested process. Thus, the ways of responding to the pedagogical engagement of students, places in the foreground the idea of evaluation as a reflective and accompanying tool, which must not be punitive but must take into consideration exceptionality.

Finally, a comprehensive approach to gender issues, which affect alumni, faculty, researchers and administrative staff alike should be incorporated. Situations of social isolation have a greater impact on women who carry out care work, generating greater pressure on them and reproducing gender gaps in the field of professional performance. Situations of male domestic violence are also exacerbated during confinement.

### ***Social outreach: research and community engagement***

Public universities in Argentina have an important territorial anchorage in all regions of the country. Thus, they expanded their capacities for social and community intervention to fulfill their social function and research activities by generating varied forms of knowledge transfer resulting from scientific, technological and artistic activities. In this way, together with teaching activities, an important part of the faculty has redoubled its efforts in research, on the one hand, and community engagement, on the other.

Universities offered their infrastructure for the implementation of field hospitals to increase the number of beds per inhabitant, with areas for the isolation of low-risk patients, contributed to the delivery of food to the most vulnerable populations and produced supplies (sanitizing gel, masks, cloths) in their laboratories. Also, advanced medical students were incorporated to the national health system to fight Covid-19.

At the same time, the research infrastructures in science, technology and innovation (STI) were allocated to develop basic and applied knowledge on Covid-19. This involves the generation of different research projects, as part of national, regional and international collaboration networks. A *Coronavirus Covid-19 Unit* was created and two special projects grant calls from the Agency allocated resources.

On the one hand, the Coronavirus Unit gathers researchers of all fields to: (a) plan and execute a national diagnosis strategy; (b) develop diagnostic kits for the detection of SARS-CoV-2, based on various technological platforms, and articulated efforts between laboratories of the scientific-technological system and national technology-based companies; (c) concentrate a group of experts from the scientific and technological system to advise the President on epidemiological concerns; (d) centralize and evaluate feasibility of proposals for the development of supplies, equipment, and artificial respirators; (e) collaborate with the Ministry of Health and the Chief of Cabinet of Ministers in the development and validation of an application for smartphones. The Unit also launched a national campaign for the solidarity production of personal protection elements for health centers, security forces and other institutions that require it.

On the other hand, the (first) extraordinary call for 'project-ideas Covid-19' promoted by the Agency selected 64 initiatives that received a maximum sum in pesos equivalent to USD 100,000. The Call was designed to strengthen our country's response in terms of diagnosis, control,

prevention, treatment, and monitoring of Covid-19. The (second) 'PISAC COVID-19 Call: Society in the post-pandemic' targeted researchers from Social and Human Sciences to finance 17 projects (USD 1,2 million). The call included innovative aspects such as the promotion of associative research networks organized in federal nodes, the equitable participation of gender in the projects, the inclusion of young researchers and the contemplation of extra budget for the construction of open databases.

Additionally, as part of the MERCOSUR regional collaboration networks, USD 16 million was allocated to the Plurinational project 'Research, Education and Biotechnologies applied to Health,' which will be allocated entirely to the coordinated fight against Covid-19. These resources are financed through the MERCOSUR Structural Convergence Fund (FOCEM), are non-reimbursable and free of financial interest to face the pandemic in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Last, Argentinean scientific research teams based at public universities, together with mixed capital laboratories, are participating in the different initiatives for finding the vaccine (Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Russia, China, etc.) and develop palliative medicines. This includes that our country is taking part in the testing of the possible vaccines and has signed agreements to be one of the main producers in Latin America.

Alongside the research activities, many other areas received attention. One of these is precisely education to generate safety habits and a healthy culture (communicating material for preventive measures): universities developed campaigns to promote prevention measures in communities close to their campuses in collaboration with state agencies.<sup>13</sup> For the social sciences and humanities, efforts have been concentrated to generate reports for the national government on the social emergency and mechanisms to deal with it. This type of information contributed to evidence-based public policies, identifying emerging situations of isolation that required direct and focused State intervention: from psychosocial issues, to situations of vulnerability, gender violence, working conditions and children's rights, among others. In addition, universities together with the media and the Ministry of Health, launched campaigns to address fake news circulating around Covid-19. Besides, universities generated artistic and cultural content to support the population during isolation, thus contributing to the improvement of psychosocial conditions and the different forms of discomfort generated by confinement. Different cultural and artistic products were left in open, non-commercial access. It is also worthy to mention that national universities are protagonists in the generation of educational content that nurture 'Seguimos Educando'.<sup>14</sup>

The pandemic made noticeable some weaknesses regarding geographical asymmetries (within the country), gender gaps and the need to improve the available resources for a STI system that had suffered cutbacks during the previous administration. Even if researchers and faculty in general showed resiliency to adapt to the new context, some demands regarding wages and labor conditions are pressing the national government. In terms of the gender gap, women and persons in charge of caring and reproductive activities had been unable to cope with productivity demands. Publishing papers (in top quality research journals) is still the unit to assess academic work and the pandemic stopped not only projects that required field research (because of confinement) but also the amount of time needed to write papers, improve them, send them to a publisher, receive feedbacks and correct them. Evaluation procedures did not modify because of the Pandemic, affecting especially younger researchers that need to take care of children and/or the elderly. Besides the burden includes the stress of changing teaching practices to a virtual environment and the anxiety wave of 'webinars 24/7' as the new normal. Thus, the need to cope with productivism metrics have made more visible that current trends of knowledge production are unsustainable.

Overall, this engagement re-legitimizes the role of public universities (and the public STI system) and its role as a strategic public and social good. In fact, universities are one of the most trusted institutions within the country (above the media and the judiciary system). The engagement of universities on solving unrelenting problems as well as to create narratives and images of desirable futures of wellbeing is a distinguished feature during this crisis. Regarding international research collaborations, Argentina leading role within Latin America and its inclusion in the most advanced projects to

obtain a vaccine questions traditional North–South or Center–Periphery divides. Argentinean researchers have enough agency capacities to incorporate autonomously knowledge networks and thus mitigate effects of scientific dependence.

Finally, an ethical question regarding the distribution of the vaccine is an issue that shall not be underestimated. Commercialization of knowledge challenges the right to health and so far, the government assured that negotiations with laboratories are guided by the principle to protect life above all.

### **Internationalization**

University internationalization was highly affected by the global pandemic as global flows and exchanges stopped. The rapid circulation of the virus around the globe and the confinement measures adopted by countries (closure of borders, closures of institutions and shifting to distance learning tools) challenged States and universities to develop quick strategies to locate and assist their staff, alumni, and faculty. International events were postponed, and mobility activities were prohibited. The last, together with the closure of borders, required a handcraft work of locating, contacting and assisting both nationals abroad and foreigners in the country so that everyone could return ‘safe and sound’ to his or her home. In many cases, virtual mobility strategies replaced the global movement of persons.

The Ministry of Education concentrated and coordinated communication with universities and research centers and provided permanent monitoring of the ongoing situation. A registry of international academic staff was conducted by the Secretary of University Policies (SPU) as there was no unified and unflawed record of mobility activities. The rest of the actors depended on voluntary decisions of individuals to report mobility, as they had no integrated records of mobile academic/staff.<sup>15</sup> Thus, an emergency tool to recollect data was launched and, in a week’s time, it included more than 1000 registries and between March 16 and May 19 there were 1898 cases (PIESCI/SPU 2020). Situations varied from type and duration of the activity, to critical issues such as decreasing or stopping funding because of long periods of confinement and the impossibility to return home. To repatriate nationals, there were articulated efforts with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which implemented a comprehensive plan for repatriation) and *Aerolíneas Argentinas* (Argentina’s flagship commercial airline). Additionally, the Ministry of Education has two ‘Casas’ (residencies) for educational, artistic and research purposes in Europe (one in Madrid and the other in Paris) that were left for housing use (under strict health protocols) for the citizens in most needed conditions until they could book a repatriation flight.

Foreigners in Argentina were incorporated in the monitoring initiatives, as they could not return to their home country, unless competent authorities granted special permissions and bookings on the few repatriation flights available. Among this group, there were differences based on if they belonged to institutionalized programs (such as the Fulbright Commission, British Council, *Campus France*, *Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst*, *Fundación Carolina*) or they were in Argentina under personal arrangements. The information of the registry was shared with Embassies and partners. This group of international scholars suffered from many discrimination acts, including violence (as they were treated as potential carriers of the virus. Thus, the core values that are usually emphasized when justifying internationalization (mutual learning, solidarity, empathy, understanding, etc.) were challenged and proved to be greatly needed in a risky world).

As mentioned, the Pandemic unraveled some issues that need a governance response but were not entirely addressed before Covid-19:

- To support virtual internationalization initiatives and fully apprehend internationalization as a transversal and integral tool for improving training, research and community outreach. For instance, in Argentina internationalization of the curriculum is a fruitful area yet to be developed.

- To develop protocols and tools for psychosocial and emotional support for international scholars (especially students). This has been a topic neglected in the agenda of the government and HEI institutional policies. Among other tools, I advocate for the inclusion of protocols to prevent violence and harassment against women and LGBTIQ+; as well as provisions to eliminate gender barriers in internationalization (such as grants that covers traveling with children). Because of the Pandemic, it is expected that health protocols would be included (tests, special travel insurance, quarantines).
- To create a comprehensive registry of all (long and short) inbound and outbound mobility in the country that would contribute to future crisis management scenarios as well as to improve internationalization policies. Reliable and complete data, inter-operative with different systems, and easy to use. The national government, articulating the participation of the actors of the governance system and providing incentives to change current academic cultures, should coordinate this effort.
- To engage in the discussion on the recognition of qualifications, which has long been a 'taboo' issue because it involves confronting corporate interests over who recognizes what and where, as well as discussing in depth the global market for the provision of higher education services. The emergency situation enables a more mature regulatory discourse conducted by the State together with public universities structured on the principle of the right to protect life and health.
- To strengthen cooperation mechanisms based on pre-existing academic networks in order to face the multiple social, economic, health, cultural, educational challenges, etc., which articulate important questions about the future that must be grounded on a regional perspective.
- To develop a national and regional policy for the generation of public repositories in open access to disseminate the knowledge produced by the STI and artistic sector.

## Final remarks

This paper assessed how public universities in Argentina coped with the Pandemic: adaptability, community engagement and solidarity are the key words to understand how efforts unfolded. Institutions and actors were able to adapt practices to the 'new reality' as part of a deeply rooted academic culture that stands for the right to higher education as both an individual and collective (social) right. That means to say, efforts were made to continue with teaching and training activities as no student should be left without education and that research was orientated to tackling Coronavirus and its impact over social practices. This could be understood as resilience triggered by the emergency or as the capability (and need) of adaptation of an institution that was considered to be conservative and reluctant to changes, especially by those that shook longstanding bureaucratic procedures (we may leave this for another paper).

Overall, the general scenario is that we as an academic community were unprepared but able to deliver. Nevertheless, inequalities became more visible and 'issues' started to emerge in the governance debate: We need:

First, to address the different and intersected inequalities that persist in our institutions and, and especially those related to gender. If the university is to be inclusive, this includes leaving patriarchy behind.

Secondly, to regulate those policy areas that relates to possible situations of commodification of education and privatization of knowledge: distance education is a democratizing tool and we foresee that mixed or blended learning systems would be more regular, so shutting the conversation about regulation is not an alternative. The same goes to initiatives such as virtual mobility and quality assurance of internationalization initiatives. State regulation that embraces the right to (higher) education should be discussed broadly and including participatory mechanisms.

Third, to reformulate internationalization moving from discourse to practice. We shall take account of all internationalization initiatives and have a thorough registry of inbound and outbound mobility (of all types). The world would not be less risky in the short term, so provisions to manage future

closures and confinements are needed. Above all, we should question what we understand of internationalization of higher education: as the most common policy is to increase the flow of mobility, we underestimate the transformative power of the curriculum and, especially, the possibility to integrate our already intercultural classrooms to embrace 'the international' and the many activities of community outreach HEI developed. Also, we should move on from the segmented image of the world (North – South, Center – Periphery) to a genuine understanding of the goals that drives internationalization activities and embrace diversity (without indulgence) in our collaborations and cooperation activities. There are no good or bad destinations, preferable or undesirable partners; there are tools that meet (or not) institutional missions and politics and contributes to gain autonomy.

Fourth, to understand current geopolitics of knowledge production to improve agency in international collaborations and gain autonomy. Our public university and STI system proved to be highly competent in the world's quest for a vaccine and science diplomacy initiatives (with several providers) has been used to guarantee the right to health of our citizens as well as to increase scientific sovereignty and also lead to the production to export to other Latin-American countries. Thus, the role of the country in fostering regional (Latin and/or South American) knowledge networks is to be highlighted: the strengthening of a 'care diplomacy' of our own, opposite to sanitary nationalism and 'the masks diplomacy'. In this regards, universities are key global actors to contribute to the solution of global development problems (such as climate change, hunger, poverty) through the alignment of their international cooperation to a multilateral tool: the Agenda 2030 and the sustainable development goals (SDGs). States have committed to this Agenda and the Pandemic proved that is time to accelerate it. As Sanahuja (2020) points out: current crisis is not only a health crisis, neither an economic crisis; it is a development crisis. Thus, efforts should mobilize resources and ideas for a new development pact, where actors committed to make the world less risky and safer. Universities are institutions whose mission is to foresee prospective scenarios and imagine desirable futures. In doing so, they have the power to change reality (Derrida 2002). Consequently, a vigorous involvement in this agenda is needed.

## Epilogue

During the realization of this article I experienced many of the pressures mentioned here: the need to continue with academic processes during isolation while carrying out care and related tasks; connectivity problems (poor internet service) and several times I had no electricity for more than 10 consecutive hours; the self-imposed pressures to achieve the pedagogical continuity of students (and my teaching partner with Covid-19); the general anxiety of meeting all productivity demands and requests for research grants, as well as participation in evaluation committees. Of course, this has also been accompanied by numerous spaces for joint reflection with colleagues, solidarity and support to facilitate tasks.

## Notes

1. Since February 1 I am working for the national government in the Ministry of Education, as National Director for International Cooperation. All opinions are personal and unofficial.
2. As UNWOMEN notes 'The vast amount of unpaid and poorly paid care and domestic work that women have always done is the backbone of the response to COVID[-19]', available at: <https://data.unwomen.org/features/covid-19-sends-care-economy-deeper-crisis-mode> [last visited: 10/04/20].
3. The system includes both universities and non-university tertiary education institutions. For this paper, I focus only on the public universities: the landscape is composed mostly by 'national universities', but there are also 'provincial universities' under the jurisdiction of the provincial government.
4. Each year the university budget is approved as part of the general budget of the federal government.
5. For further information: <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/02/19/pr2057-argentina-imf-staff-statement-on-argentina> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/opinion/argentina-debt-negotiation-coronavirus.html>.

6. Last updated on November 14. Source: [https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/14-11-20\\_reporte\\_vesperino\\_covid\\_19.pdf](https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/14-11-20_reporte_vesperino_covid_19.pdf) A daily report with analysis is available on the personal website of Jorge Aliaga: [http://www.jorgealiaga.com.ar/?page\\_id=2185#](http://www.jorgealiaga.com.ar/?page_id=2185#).
7. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> [accessed on November 15].
8. A previous insight of some issues raised here were developed in: Del Valle and Perrotta (2020).
9. For instance, this resolution of UBA affected me particularly as on March 8th I was starting a joint postgraduate 'Summer School' (UBA, Complutense University of Madrid): the two week course was suspended until further notice and Spanish professors and alumni that had entered the country on the 6th of March were isolated for 14 days and sent back home afterwards. Back then, this policy was seen by academic staff as too dramatic and even hasty, but time proved it was a pertinent and timely measure. After UBA, many other 'big and traditional' universities took the same provisions: National University of La Plata (UNLP), National University of Córdoba (UNC) and National University of Rosario (UNR), for instance.
10. The case of UBA (my university) was quite atypical because the Rectorate stated that the academic calendar would start (face-to-face) on the 1st June but provided freedom to Schools to arrange their own calendars. The resolution does not affect the development of non-contact activities of courses or careers approved to be taught remotely. Therefore, the different academic units, the common basic cycle and the secondary schools dependent on the UBA may organize 'support activities for students through virtual campuses or other institutional distance learning tools or platforms, in accordance with the characteristics of their careers and subjects, which may be recognized after the restart of the academic calendar'. In practice, this resulted in the heterogeneity of the response to pedagogical continuity and communication problems with students (since the Rectorate's message diverged from the Schools' communications). As an example of my teaching practice, in my School of Social Sciences each *chair* ('*cátedra*' in Spanish, which is the teaching exercise unit) defined autonomously when it would start and how (with what tools it would do it). This implied that some teachers spent more weeks in front of a course and that students had fully virtual subjects since March or no contact with teachers until June. A common denominator was the problems in adapting virtual teaching to those teaching teams that were not familiar with the Campus tool and/or they faced teaching first-year courses (classes of more than 100 students). In comparison, the development of the second semester was better because of the lessons learnt in the first one.
11. <http://evirtual.cin.edu.ar/>.
12. Mobile phone companies have enabled various domains regarding free navigation for university students to access educational platforms and virtual classrooms used by institutions.
13. For instance, the Program 'DetectAR' (Strategic Testing Device for Coronavirus in Argentine Territory). <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/coronavirus/detectar>.
14. A framework agreement between CIN and the Ministry of Education was signed on 16 March.
15. Noticeably, many students, faculty and researchers mobilize by their own means, so no records are available.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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