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# Trends in Higher Education

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## Message from the Publisher

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Developments in the political arena both regionally and globally are of serious concerns to education administrators, students, and faculty everywhere. This issue of 'Trends in Higher Education' provides an update on critical developments such as the Russia/Ukraine war, election outcomes in the Caribbean region and globally, legislation that are stifling academic freedom, reckoning with slavery and its injustices, among other political interference in the academic space. These developments have to be monitored very closely since they will have implications for how universities teach, research and write in the future, as well as their advocacy role. In addition, universities' globalization agenda will be affected by developments in the global political environment, as it relates to recruitment of both international students and scholars. Ultimately, this would be reflected in institutions' global rankings as well.

Please enjoy reading this very interesting issue of 'Trends in Higher Education'.

## Trends in Higher Education - Political Issues and Considerations

### Introduction

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the steady but uneven vaccination progress globally continue to affect economic recovery and simultaneously, deepen existing social and geopolitical tensions, among countries. According to the World Economic Forum (2022), geoeconomic confrontations and geopolitical fractures are among some of the most critical threats, in the medium to long-term and among the most potentially severe risks over the next decade.

As the world adjusts to new post-pandemic realities, several political issues are likely to be of concern for the impacts they may have on trade, continued tension and conflict, and diplomatic relations. These include:

- (i) Changing balance of power in the Western Pacific
- (ii) Intensifying of competition in newer dimensions and geographies
- (iii) Increase in the exercise of "soft power"
- (iv) Increase in protectionist policies
- (v) Rising migration pressures

The Russia-Ukraine war continues to rivet international attention as fighting intensifies in the east and south of Ukraine, as Russia seeks to assert its hegemonic powers over Ukraine. This has grave consequences for Europe's security structure, which has been in existence since the 1990s and the extension of Western-style democracy in Eastern Europe. Russia's hostile and aggressive attempt to conquer Ukraine, demonstrates renewed geopolitical rivalry between these two European countries.

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Election outcomes give insights into the preference of populations for ideologically sound political parties and leaders who are expected to positively influence the contents and priorities of public policy and foreign relations. For example, Emmanuel Macron's win in France will benefit the European Union, as he is a strong advocate for an independent Europe, in terms of food production, energy, and defense (Adler 2022). Looking ahead, there is the US House of Representatives election carded for the latter part of 2022, which is presently controlled by the Democrats. Election pundits are forecasting Republicans as favorites to win the House of Representatives, based on the political environment and factors such as geography and demographics. If that happens, it has implications for the continuity of President Biden's policy agenda, post-elections. Similarly, in Canada, provincial elections in Québec and Ontario, are likely to cause increased federal-provincial conflict on a variety of policies like climate change, immigration, and health care.

Within the region, limited policy changes are expected from Barbados, which held Parliamentary elections recently with the incumbent Mia Mottley winning all the seats. In The Bahamas and St Lucia, the public voted for the opposition parties to take the lead in forming their respective governments and therefore one can expect some policy changes in those islands. Elections are constitutionally due in 2023, in Antigua and Barbuda and Grenada. Further, while Barbados became a republic late 2021, Jamaica and Antigua and Barbuda have signaled their interest in republican status and thus, breaking their ties to the colonial past.

#### *Implications of recent election results on the education sector*

The education sector is likely to be impacted by these political cycles and changes. For instance, the OECD (2022) identifies scenarios, which may affect the future of schooling, which has implications for education systems in the

international market. Extension of schooling, education outsourcing, and learning-as-you-go may have implications for organisations and governance by way of international public-private partnerships, changes to accountability systems, and de-institutionalising of public education.

#### *Effects of the Russian/Ukraine conflict on the academy*

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, universities across the United States and Europe condemned Russia's attack (Burakovsky 2022). Of interest, Ukrainian academics have strongly urged that academic ties between Western academics and those in Russian institutes be curtailed (Havargal 2022). Questions have also been raised about how to treat Russian universities in university rankings, with Times Higher Education noting that they are taking "steps to ensure that Russian universities are given less prominence" in its World University Rankings tables (Baker (1) 2022).

Several countries in Europe and North America suspended academic partnerships with Russian institutions. Countries such as Australia, Germany and The Netherlands have halted ties with Russian universities after the invasion began. Some institutions are reviewing their collaborations. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology ended its involvement with an institute of science and technology in Russia. There have also been calls to block Russian professors from publishing in international journals or participating in multinational research projects and some critics have suggested that Russian students should be kicked out of American and other western universities (Fischer (1) 2022).

In the face of Russia's political and economic isolation, there is concern that this will have a damaging effect on its future research engagements. Baker (2)2022) posits that Russia may seek to strengthen scientific ties with China thus, creating a Russian-Chinese research bloc. Moreover, based on the sanctions imposed by

Western countries the STEM disciplines are most likely to be affected which may depend on the import of technologies and equipment for research.<sup>1</sup> Early this month, Russia began strengthening research collaborations with India with a memorandum of understanding between Chandigarh University (a private institution in Punjab province) and Saint Petersburg State University (Lem (1) 2022).

In early March, Russia's parliament criminalised free speech on the Ukraine war - those who express opinions contradicting the government's position face up to 15 years in prison (Lem (4) 2022). Students who oppose the conflict in Ukraine are affected with Lem (3) 2022) noting that hundreds of students are estimated to have been expelled. Moreover, Russian universities monitor social media accounts to identify anti-war students and pressure them to remove so-called anti-patriotic posts.

Russian academics who have openly opposed the war have either lost their jobs or fled the country since the invasion hinting at a new brain drain. Nevertheless, there are grassroots efforts (e.g., small community of cognitive scientists working or studying in Europe/US) that help at-risk Russian or Belarus researchers offering advice on job applications and assisting them in contacting relevant labs. Additionally, virtual universities (e.g., Free University of Berlin and University of New Europe) are offering help and a community to some academics affected by the conflict (Upton 2022).

Nevertheless, Baker (1)2022) in the article cautions that boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) between universities can have a negative effective on international research collaboration, academic freedom, and the flow

of knowledge. It can also help Russia's propaganda of aggression and isolation. This has led the Scholars at Risk (an international network whose collective mission is to protect scholars and promote academic freedom), to identify clear parameters for BDS namely: with the "clearest" one being where it seeks to cut off "complicity" with the violations taking place and the other where, for a limited period, halting ties aids the education of colleagues (Baker (2) 2022).

### Political Interference in HEIs

In the United States, HEIs have been pulled into the fray of political hostilities. Universities and colleges have been subject to outside interference and highlighted recent high-profile controversies over such issues as vaccine and mask mandates, critical race theory, racial and gender equity, and tenure (Fischer (2) 2022). Lawmakers proposed college curriculum restrictions in at least 25 states and already having won approval in three (Basken (2) 2022).<sup>2</sup> For example, curriculum restrictions have been observed at:

- Boise State University cancelled diversity-themed ethics courses because a single white student complained.
- Iowa State University told its faculty to be cautious about what they presented to their students after the state enacted a law forbidding the teaching of "divisive concepts" related to racism and sexism.
- While the faculty council at the University of Texas at Austin passed a resolution affirming the right of instructors to teach students about racial justice, the state's lieutenant governor promised to use his role as president of the state Senate to end tenure for all new hires at Texas public colleges and universities, and to revoke it

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<sup>1</sup> Baker (2) 2022) notes that even prior to the conflict, Russia and China were pursuing closer research ties. Data on research collaboration also appear to bear out a shift in recent years towards closer scientific cooperation between the two powers, with their overall co-authored publications more than quadrupling between 2011 and 2020 – a much higher growth rate than any other major nation working with Russia (Baker (2) 2022).

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Basken. "[How can US universities combat threat of teaching restrictions?](#)" *Times Higher Education*, February 23, 2022.

for those who do teach about the nation's long-standing structural racial inequities.

The negative political climate poses risks for seasoned and young academics who are worried about what they can teach, research, and write. Fischer (2)2022) drew attention to the following departures because of political challenges:

- A University of Georgia professor quit when the state university system refused to require her students to wear masks.
- In North Carolina, prominent professors, and administrators of colour on the Chapel Hill campus left to take jobs elsewhere, citing the university's racial and political climate. A chemistry professor at the University of Maryland at Baltimore, withdrew from consideration for a faculty position at Chapel Hill in protest.
- University of Wisconsin at Madison faculty quit their positions after there was the weakening of tenure protections.

At present the Republicans control more than 60% of all legislative chambers across the country and in 23 states have "trifectas," controlling both houses of the state legislature as well as the governor's office (Fischer (2) 2022). As such, they are well positioned to not only influence the agenda of public HEIs, but it also provides them with a voice in the composition of public-college governing boards, many of which are appointed through a political process. Board members may thus view their jobs as advancing the agenda of a party or a politician. Historically Republicans supported higher education as means for economic advancement and national security. However, graduates are more likely to vote Democratic and this has led to more partisan views of higher education.

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<sup>3</sup> The Georgetown University acknowledged selling as slaves in 1838 to help keep the institution financially viable (the number has since been expanded to at least 313 from 272). The Georgetown Memory Project has so far identified more than 8,600 descendants of those slaves.

<sup>4</sup> The university has agreed to continue engagement with descendants and support genealogical research, give favourable

### Redressing the injustices of slavery

Several HEIs have publicly acknowledged their historical ties to slavery and pledged to make amends for it. University responses to the subject of racial reparations have raised controversy as much as it has addressed underlying needs. In the United States, there has been the establishment of a Universities Studying Slavery group created by the University of Virginia in 2013 (Mann 2019).

Reconciliation projects such as that by the Georgetown University<sup>3</sup> is contending with the meaning of racial justice (Mann 2019).<sup>4</sup> Retrospective projects like the one at John Hopkins University, which recently joined the group, Universities Studying Slavery, have started investigating the past of its founder.<sup>5</sup> Harvard University recently affirmed their historical ties of the institution and that of its benefactors to slavery and white supremacy in a report that examined the university's direct, financial, and intellectual ties to slavery over several centuries.<sup>6</sup>

However, some scholars posit that it will be more beneficial if Harvard and similar institutions form the necessary political coalition to lobby and petition Congress for a comprehensive national programme of reparations (Basken (1) 2022). Across the US, responses to suggestions of reparations generally fall short of any meaningful change. In states such as Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina and Virginia, legislatures have issued statements of regret for the nation's slaveholding past (Mann 2019). Moreover, she notes that such phrasing often avoids legal culpability and when reparation monies are allocated, they are often tightly prescribed.

admissions preferences to any of the descendants who apply to attend the institution and a commitment to diversity in research.

<sup>5</sup> The university recently learnt that its founder owned slaves and that there is no evidence to substantiate him as an abolitionist (Basken (3) 2020).

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see [Report of the Presidential Committee on Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery](#).

### Stifling academic freedom

At the Australia India Institute (AII) established at the University of Melbourne, academic fellows argue that the institute's activities are influenced by the Indian government and its dominant culture of nationalism. They drew attention to the change in the institute's plans to host a public lecture on Hindu nationalist violence, which was changed to an invitation-only event following interventions by Indian diplomats. Additionally, they highlighted that the new strategic plan rallied the institute's work around three "impact themes": "bilateral economy," "cultural diplomacy" and "security and geopolitics." Since then, thirteen academic fellows have resigned. This situation highlights the challenges universities face in hosting diplomatically oriented think tanks in a conflicted world focused only on areas of mutual government priority (Ross (2022)).

The University of Florida has denied academics the ability to testify in litigation against the state. Three political science professors who were hired as expert witnesses for groups opposing a restrictive voting law and one professor in paediatric palliative care who was to testify and serve as a declarant in litigation that forbade mask mandates in schools were told they could not participate in the lawsuit against the state. This raises questions of academic freedom and First Amendment rights and demonstrates that politicization is seeping into public university governance (Ellis and Petitt 2021).

The consequence for the institution was high. Over eighty political science faculty across the United States signed a letter criticising the decision. Additionally, Florida's accreditor, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, indicated it would investigate whether the university had violated accreditation standards (Ellis and Petitt 2021).

It is worth noting that in March 2020, Florida lawmakers passed a higher-education law that carried harsh penalties for employees who failed to report outside activities and interests. Shortly

thereafter, the university released guidelines on what types of activities might present scrutiny. The university's response suggests the professors' requests violated the campus' conflict-of-interest procedures (Ellis and Petitt 2021).

Britain's controversial legislation on free speech in English campuses has stalled in Parliament due to dwindling political support. Nevertheless, there is still support for the bill. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, which had its first reading in the House of Commons in early 2021, is still scheduled to be introduced in the House of Lords. Morgan (2022) notes that universities are worried about the potential impact of some of the bill's provisions, which include the appointment of a free speech and academic freedom champion to the Office for Students board and enabling individuals to sue institutions for compensation over breaches of strengthened free speech duties.

A proposal that would give the University of Hong Kong the power to start disciplinary proceedings against any student accused of bringing the institution into "disrepute" has been condemned by several scholars. If enacted the university will have the power to determine the type of punishments ranging from "reprimands and fines to suspension or even expulsion for an offence" (Lem (2) 2022). Academics fear that the university's proposal will not only give it the means to punish students who criticise its policies, but it will also make it difficult to do social survey research. The rule, if enacted, would mirror Hong Kong's national security legislation, which has been criticised by scholars for targeting those with dissenting political views.

### Conclusion

The current developments in the political environment and their implications for higher education should be of deep concern to educational planners and policymakers alike. The repressive legislative issues and the increasing politicisation of the higher education

sector as well as constraints to free speech and academic freedom might be continuing for a while and will affect policies and operations particularly, in diversity and inclusion.

HEIs including The University of the West Indies should continue to monitor the effects of changes to public policies and legislation by governments and their agencies, which can affect the opportunities available to them and the conditions under which they must operate in the global marketplace.

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