

## Introduction to the JCIHE Special Issue

***The Pandemic of Covid-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean Higher Education: An Invitation to Remember and Reflect into the Future****Guest Editors*Pilar Mendoza<sup>a\*</sup> and Santiago Castiello-Gutiérrez<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, University of Missouri-Columbia<sup>b</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Human Development, Culture, and Media, Seton Hall University\*Corresponding author: Pilar Mendoza: Email: [mendozamp@missouri.edu](mailto:mendozamp@missouri.edu)  
Address: 303 Townsend Hall, University of Missouri. Columbia, Missouri, USA**Introducción**

Dear Readers,

On January 11, 2020, China reported the first death from a novel coronavirus virus, and by January 23, Wuhan was placed under lockdown to contain the outbreak (CDC, 2023). In the following month, more than 1,000 deaths were reported by the new and fast-spreading disease caused by the virus, named COVID-19. Not even science fiction could get close to what the world went through in the coming months, including a worldwide lockdown and almost seven million deaths to this day (WHO, 2024). Four years have passed, but the COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on societies worldwide, necessitating innovative responses from all sectors, particularly education.

However, amidst the turmoil, COVID-19 was also a time when humanity unprecedentedly rose to the occasion and showed its genuine resilience, altruism and potential for working together for a common cause. It is this resilience and the lessons learned from the shared experience that deserve our reflection as we confront both new and enduring challenges. In times of crisis, humanity exhibited a remarkable ability to unite for the greater good, transcending borders and cultural differences. Some examples of this unity emerged in China, where a 1,000-bed hospital was built in 10 days. In terms of global collaboration, mankind has never seen such a rapid, effective, and monumental scientific advancement and deployment in creating and distributing vaccines against COVID-19. Even while politicians were pointing fingers at other countries blaming them for their (mis)handling of the pandemic, scholars proved that science does not know geographical borders and transnational cooperation among China and the United States increased (Lee and Haupt, 2020).

Education, too, underwent a radical transformation during this period. Educators, at all levels, around the world shifted to fully online instructions within days. Within weeks, the world managed to operate virtually and with minimal contact. However, as we now return to life post-Covid, we are still figuring out the impact of those pandemic years. Despite some positive distinguishable outcomes such as new medical breakthroughs, telework flexibility, and better technology integration in our lives and education, reality is that COVID-19 also contributed to widen the gap among

countries and among individuals. Not everyone was able to swiftly transition to remote learning; technology, despite its democratic spirit, is still not reachable to all. As we have seen many times, when challenges hit, the most vulnerable individuals get hit hardest (UNESCO, 2022).

In terms of World Regions, Latin America and the Caribbean is among those vulnerable regions that got hit hard by COVID-19. A recent report by UNESCO-IESALC (2022) highlights some of the particular challenges faced by this region: 1) The shift to online teaching and learning was rapid but impacted instructional quality. 2) While opportunities for innovation arose, challenges in adapting to virtual environments were more pronounced in regions with a significant digital divide. 3) In terms of research, COVID-19 brought about changes in research capacity, funding, and collaboration, with increased focus on pandemic-related research. However, resource reallocation raised concerns about underfunding in other crucial fields, disrupting fieldwork and disproportionately affecting female academics, early career researchers, and PhD students.

Heads of State and Government, senior UN officials, and representatives of civil society who gathered in September 2015, as part of the 70<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could not predict a Pandemic with such a far-reaching impact. The SDGs goals were created as a set of universal goals to meet the urgent environmental, social, and economic challenges facing our world, which begs the question, to what degree did we depart from these goals due to COVID-19? What did we gain from this experience getting us closer to achieving the SDGs? It will take us years to answer these questions, but we should start by reflecting on what happened and how we responded as a reminder of what we are capable of doing in times of crises, especially as we embraced the global climate crisis upon us. In this spirit, this special issue contributes to the growing literature on lessons learned during the global crisis of Covid-19 (e.g. Castiello-Gutierrez et al., 2022; Liu & Shirley, 2021; Oleksiyenko et al., 2023; Ordorika, 2020; Reimers, 2021).

In the summer of 2022, JCIHE released a two-part special issue edited by Ghosh and DeMartino (2022a) and Gosh (2022b) examining the impact of COVID-19 on institutions of education around the world. Of these multiple articles, only one study included data from Latin America as part of a comparative study including data from other six countries in the Global North (Schiffecker et al., 2022). This special issue takes a deeper dive into the effects of Covid-19 in this region with two essays and three empirical studies documenting different aspects related to higher education at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic experienced in Cuba, Haiti, Panama, and Mexico with reflections into the future. To break with the hegemony of English as the imperial tongue in academia (Altbach, 2007; Mendoza, et al., in press), we are pleased to offer three of these articles in Spanish, the second most spoken language in the world after Chinese. In particular, the article by Blum, de Armas Victores and Batista Salvado provides a detailed account of the various responses initiated by the Cuban government during the pandemic of Covid-19 with a focus on the critical role that universities played at that time. This article represents a unique opportunity for readers to learn about Cuba's government efforts to address UNESCO's sustainable development goals amidst the crisis brought by Covid-19. One of the highlights of these efforts is the critical role of Cuban higher education in responding to the crisis, including the active role of college students in brigades of faculty, medical personnel, and staff attending to the specific needs of the population during the crisis and participating in the development of vaccines. The second essay by Severson, León and Psychoyos documents how the crisis allowed for an unusual but highly productive collaboration between the Ministry of Education and higher education in Panamá as a testimony of *si se puede*.

Two empirical articles of this special issue investigated different aspects of internationalization in Mexico as a result of Covid-19. Cortes-Velasco and Maldonado-Maldonado in their study interrogate the notion of "virtual mobility" in internationalization, which is a question still relevant post-pandemic time as we embrace the potential of technology in instruction. Izquierdo, Ramírez and Cárdenas present an empirical study about the challenges faced by international students from Latin America and the Caribbean while obtaining their graduate degrees in Mexican universities during Covid-19. This article presents a unique contribution to the scarce literature on South-to-South mobility of international student as well as the strategies these students used still relevant for international students in the post-pandemic world. Drawing from a large study, Marcelin, et al., present an analysis of the impact of Covid-19 in Haiti, a country devastated by political, economic, and natural disasters turmoil. They emphasize the neglect of Haitian higher education in national debates to address the multitude of crises that continue to affect Haiti as a call for officials in this country to utilize higher education the way other countries did it such as the case of Cuba documented in this special issue.

Although we focused on one region of the world, the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic was universal and all on the planet can relate to these articles in one way or another. In an effort for all of us to rescue the good lessons and heal the global trauma we all endured, we offer these articles as a way for us to remember and honor those difficult times as well as rescue lessons for the challenges ahead of us.

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