

Post-Pandemic Scenarios Higher Education First in a Series

Covid-19 has altered the landscape in which all organizations function. In particular, institutions of higher education have been severely impacted. Our analysis of post-pandemic scenarios indicates:

- *Virtual learning is here to stay*
 - *Course offerings will respond to workforce changes*
 - *Institutions that succeed will be those that innovate aggressively and use technology to their benefit*
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Idea in Brief

We think that higher education is ripe for disruption and COVID-19 has accelerated this disruption. The advancement of digital technologies for online instruction and work from home being the new normal, colleges and universities need to come up with innovative ways to enhance the experience of students.

The coronavirus pandemic will profoundly change our view of the world and how we operate. However, the nature of those changes is highly uncertain. To reduce this uncertainty, our team has conducted a structured, iterative group forecasting exercise. Our forecasting methodology is outlined at the end of this paper.

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Post Pandemic Scenarios – Higher Education

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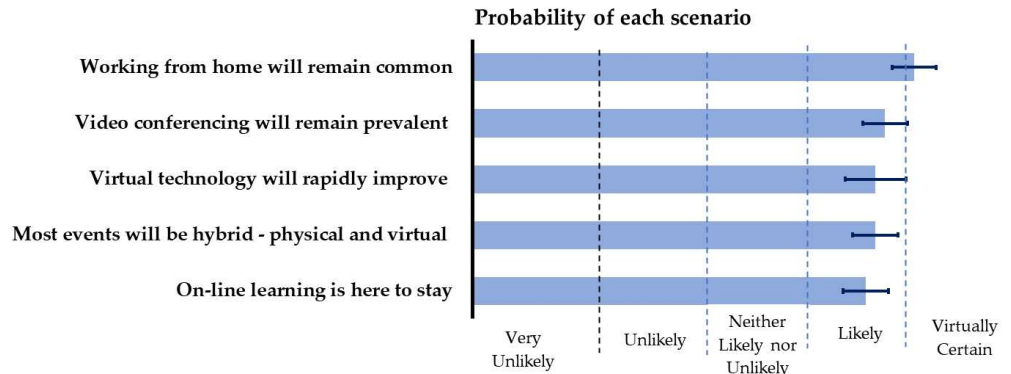
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I. Virtual learning is here to stay

Our panel concluded with a high level of alignment that on-line instruction will continue as a major form of course delivery. This mirrors broader changes in society and the workplace, where virtual interaction will remain prevalent and where virtual technology is expected to improve rapidly.¹ As physical classes again become common, many will continue to be offered on-line, and “hybrid” classes will effectively combine physical and on-line elements.

On-line learning is here to stay...

...and winning institutions will turn that to their advantage.



Implications:

Virtual instruction allows colleges and universities to easily scale and reach broader audiences. Consequently, students are not limited to one institution, and a handful of institutions, such as Ivy Leagues, may reap an outsized share of the benefits as they can leverage their powerful brands over larger geographies and student segments.

This means that institutions of higher learning must innovate to stay relevant. For example, instead of using technology as a substitute for in-class teaching, they can use it to enhance the student experience, such as through the use of hybrid instruction – for example, asynchronous chemistry lectures combined with in-person labs. Furthermore, they can use technology to personalize education such as through the use of small class sizes. Institutions must also re-think how best to enhance or effectively leverage their core strengths – their unique selling proposition – that will allow them to stay relevant and cater to a set of people most likely to benefit. Fortunately, COVID-19 has substantially lowered our psychological barriers – we have already shown that we can adapt in a matter of a week or less.

We believe it is a critical time for university leadership and boards of trustees to carefully craft their strategy – short-, medium-, and long-term. It is equally critical

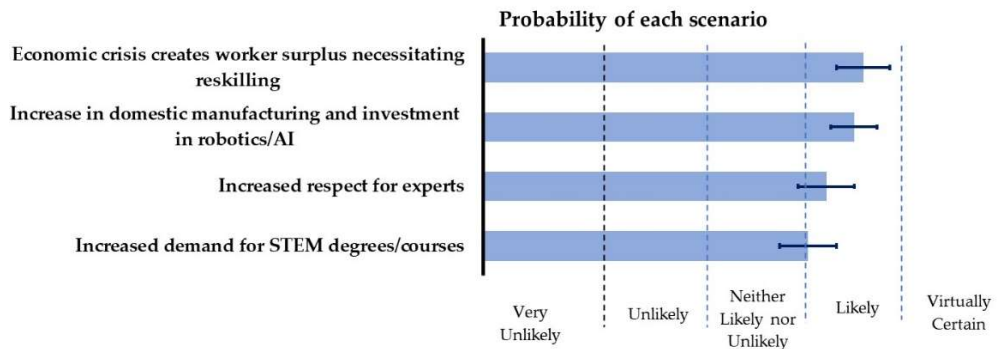
¹ As of this writing, Zoom Video Communications is worth over 63 Million USD, worth more than 7 largest airlines combined.

to collect data for every action they take in this fast-changing environment and, more importantly, be willing to modify their course of action based on this data. Such institutions are likely to survive and thrive in the long run.

II. Course offerings will respond to workforce changes

The pandemic will create lasting change in the workforce, affecting how universities prepare students for successful careers. We conclude it is likely that ongoing economic pressure will continue to displace many workers, creating demand for workplace-relevant courses and extensive (and frequent) reskilling. At the same time, an increase in domestic manufacturing will increase the demand for employees skilled in robotics, AI, manufacturing, supply chain and related STEM fields.

Workforce changes will drive course design



Implications:

Institutions must innovate and (re)design curriculum given that many courses will be commoditized (such as introductory math). Regional colleges and universities can take advantage of this opportunity to more directly cater to local populations. For example, a college near silicon valley may offer courses in Machine Learning, AI, etc. while a college near the Midwest manufacturing belt may offer specialized courses in supply chain, instrumentation, and machine tooling or a college near a biomedical hub such as research triangle may offer courses in bioengineering and advanced process chemistry.

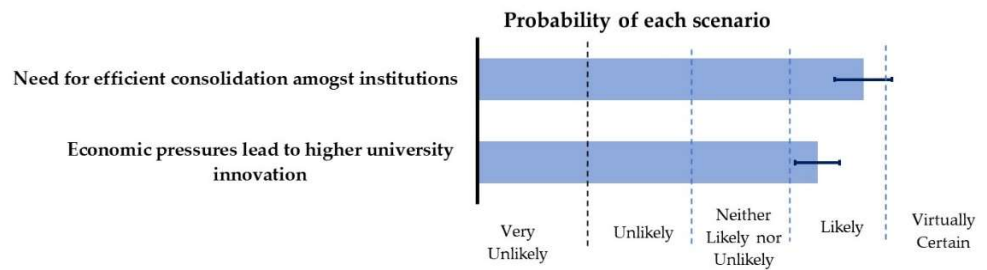
Given that the pandemic has accelerated the move towards STEM education, institutions will continue to offer STEM courses but may need to re-think how they package courses to offer students a unique program that is tailored to the local economy and is likely to result in the students not only graduating (and on time) but also placing them in a job that best matches their skill-set.

We think curriculum (re)design requires innovation. With appropriate and smart use of data, universities and colleges can leverage not only the advancing technology and their core strengths but also their local or regional economies to maximize their effectiveness and long-term success.

Winning institutions will be those that innovate aggressively

III. *Winning institutions will innovate aggressively*

We expect that many weaker institutions across all sectors will fail – including companies, non-profits, and institutions of higher education. This will create a need for effective consolidation and efficiently transferring affected students to other institutions. The combination of economic pressure and the transformation of course offerings means that the universities that succeed in the future will be those that innovate rapidly and effectively.



Implications:

A congruence of multiple factors – changes in course offerings and how they are delivered, a drop in international students, potential deferral of admissions, increased need for financial aid – has created a potentially volatile situation that may result in a large financial void for many institutions of higher learning from which they may never be able to recover.

However, this is also a good opportunity for institutions to innovate. For example, institutions could refine their focus. Research or teaching? They could also develop expertise in subjects that matter to their local economies (e.g. in supply chain manufacturing) that are likely to result in good job placements for their students. Universities could “unbundle” by building partnerships – for example, they can outsource basic courses (such as those in the freshman year) to community colleges and focus on admitting sophomores or juniors, where they can offer specialized courses.

Finally, this is also an opportunity for universities and colleges to think on a global scale. They could develop cross-border alliances with similar partner institutions in other parts of the world – a university in Nigeria or Vietnam or Chile -- that allows students from the two universities to collaborate, visit each other virtually and physically (e.g. a semester abroad) and take advantage of learnings from each other. Using words from a book by New York Times Columnist, Thomas Friedman: This will help flatten the world.

Methodology

To develop perspectives on the post-pandemic environment, our research and consulting divisions conducted an extensive scenario planning effort based on the Delphi method. In total, a panel of 27 senior leaders independently assessed and rated over 130 discrete future scenarios and assigned probabilities to each.

Our panel was constructed to represent a diverse cross-section of organizations, including senior leaders in business, education, the non-profit sector, health care, finance and government. The result is a rich database, consisting of over 7,000 data points, providing insights into the future we will all face together after the Covid pandemic is resolved.

About the Authors

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About Opus Faveo

Opus Faveo Innovation Development is an innovation strategy and venture development firm. Through its Institutional and Corporate Innovation strategy practice, the firm provides actionable solutions to leadership in academia, government and the private sector, increasing innovation impact through stakeholder engagement, rigorous analysis, and effective communication and outreach programs.

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