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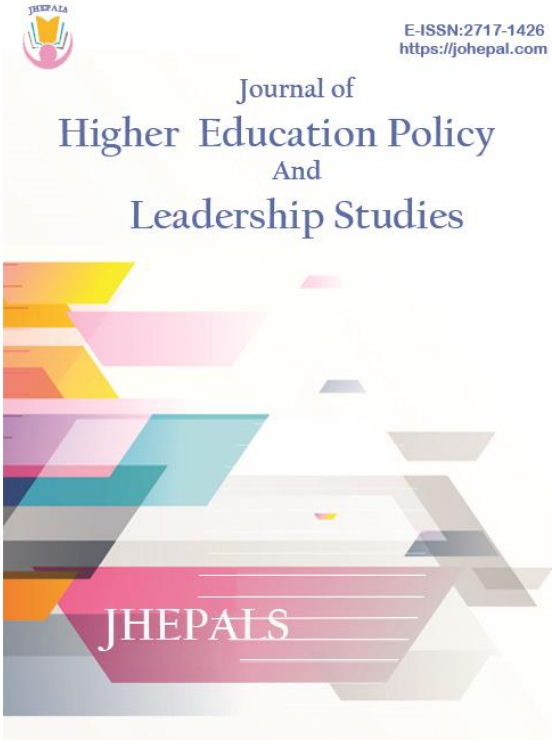

Rethinking Post-Covid Higher Education Policy Through a Lens of Equity: An Interview with Dr. Maureen Manning

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Interview

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Dr. Maureen Manning is an international consultant, presenter, and keynote speaker on the topics of global education, intercultural competence, and language acquisition. She is the VP of Strategy and Insight for The PIE. Dr. Manning has worked as a doctoral chair, professor, teacher trainer, and professional development facilitator across the United States, Asia, Australia, and Europe, promoting best practices in strengthening intercultural competencies to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Dr. Manning has been a featured speaker at Harvard University as well as Loyola Marymount University's International Colloquium in Soria, Spain, University of Lisbon, the Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication in China, the Global Conference for Academia in Pakistan, and The Shape the Future Conference in Nigeria. She is a frequent presenter at numerous conferences each year, including NAFSA, The Forum for Education Abroad, AASA, ASCD, and WIDA. As well, as the VP North America, Dr. Manning facilitates student, faculty-led, and adult international tours and exchange programs with Lingo Tours.

Dr. Manning's most recent scholarly articles are published in the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership, the American Sociology Association's Teaching and Learning Matters Journal, the European International Education Association Journal, and the University of Southern California's Follow the Leader Journal, with other publications currently in press. She is a doctoral chair at Carolina University, and serves as a peer reviewer for academic papers, articles, and conference applications, and as a national professional development grant reviewer for the US Department of Education. Manning received her doctorate from Northeastern University in Boston and works as a consultant to organizations across the globe. Using a systems-thinking and marketing lens, she advises on strategy and co-creates evidence-based, data-driven plans to help launch organizations to heightened levels of success.

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Manning, M.

It is an honor and privilege for us to host Dr. Maureen Manning as a globally renowned scholar and higher education leader whose research, books, talks, interviews, and notes are extensively cited and acknowledged throughout the world with a research/ professional focus on *global education, intercultural competence, and language acquisition*.

We are sure that Dr. Manning's insightful, illuminating and critical responses to the following questions will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

In the context of the globalization of higher education, which is commonly the Americanization of higher education, how can the gap between the quality of higher education in the North and the South be detached? Do organizations like UNESCO have plans in this regard? How?

Answer:

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already significant gap in the quality and accessibility of higher education between the global North and South. A benefit that resulted, however, was that it illuminated those disparities and helped foster a greater sense of urgency around addressing the vast inequities.

UNESCO is, indeed, actively advocating for a more equitable globalization of higher education post-Covid. Though Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, UNESCO (2015) aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." The SDGs have generally been embraced by higher education institutions (HEI)s with an acknowledgement that increasing educational equity means improving access to quality education across the PreK-12 and post-secondary continuum (United Nations, 2015). Yet, despite advances in educational equity and access, substantial gaps, particularly in historically underserved populations, remain. Thus, as we approach 2030 and consider SDG targets, it is necessary to re-examine the historical systemic nature of educational inequity and to implement innovative and flexible approaches to eradicate them.

During the pandemic, UNESCO commissioned a Futures of Education Report (FOE) in which obstacles and opportunities were highlighted in an effort to chart a path forward in turbulent times. Before the pandemic, one-sixth of school-age students in elementary and secondary school were not attending school. This number tripled as a result of the pandemic; a fraction that represents 750 million children (UNESCO, 2020). Yet as we emerge post-pandemic, the number of students who remain out of school is disheartening. A large percentage of the out of school statistics is attributed to children living in refugee camps, as they are five times more likely to experience gaps in education than their peers (UNESCO,

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2016). In fact, of all school-age children not in school, about half are displaced and/or living in a conflict-affected area of the world. Compounding this is that fact that increased migration has led to disparities for language minority students, with over 200 million students attending schools in which their primary language is not recognized (UNESCO, 2010).

Last month's Taliban policy removing the right to education for women and girls in Afghanistan has served to increase these numbers. A 2020 agreement with UNICEF to ensure education in Afghanistan through community-based classes remained nebulous for the past two years. This vagueness permitted the Taliban to circumvent demands from the international community. Yet, the latest policy, resulting in a complete ban on the education of girls and women is one of the most devastating setbacks to women's rights since the Taliban's seizure of control. In addition, they have banned all female staff, including teachers, from working in schools, one of the few remaining careers once available to women under Taliban rule. However, as Afghanistan relies heavily on international aid, it remains to be seen how the regime may respond to future aid that is connected to donor conditions.

Conversely, elsewhere, the globalization of higher education has led to substantial advances in how and what we learn. It has dramatically influenced developments in science, information technology, transportation, and trade (Wagner et al., 2020). As well, enhanced globalization has led to increased intercultural competence (Deardorff & Elsbeth, 2012). In Deardorff's (2006) landmark study, she identified several key attitudes associated with intercultural competence; one being curiosity. Deardorff asserted "curiosity sets a foundation for more creative ways to turn differences into opportunities" (as cited in Deardorff & Elsbeth, 2012, p. 6).

Likewise, Wagner et al. (2020), in examining the status of the SDGs during the pandemic, sought to turn differences into opportunities in calling for a global approach that better addresses gaps in equity due to the increase in diversity, migration, refugees, and language minorities in schools. Undoubtedly, it will take immense, coordinated global cooperation to increase educational access, which can then aid in irradicating poverty, improving health outcomes, and boosting economic growth.

Question #2

How do you see the future of the unbalanced monopoly of knowledge production and distribution? How can we overcome this unbalanced and uneven monopoly? What is UNESCO's plan in this regard?

Answer:

We have only just begun to experience the resultant effects of the pandemic regarding education, and its relationship to the already imbalanced monopoly of knowledge production and distribution. While the average pandemic-related learning loss of school-age

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children is estimated to be about 5 months, this gap is exacerbated in historically marginalized populations worldwide. In a recent McKinley report, Dorn et al. (2021) indicated high school aged students of color currently in Years 9-11 are more likely to drop out of school, and seniors are less likely to pursue tertiary education. And those numbers increase even more dramatically for high school seniors of color from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Moreover, researchers argue the outcomes of the learning loss experienced by millions of students may last a generation. With lower levels of education attainment, come lower earning potential and decreased innovation (Dorn et al., 2021). These factors are associated with diminished economic productivity. By the time the pandemic cohort of students enters the global the workforce, researchers predict a likely annual GDP loss of $128 billion to $188 billion as a direct result of learning loss (Dorn et al., 2021).

As schools began to reopen, billions of dollars flowed from governmental organizations in the global North into educational institutions, aimed at rectifying the pandemic's impact (DeWitt & Smett, 2021; Dorn et al., 2021). Yet money alone will not be enough to assuage the deep impact of learning loss. Thought leaders from the Coalition to Advance Future Student Success (2021) argued for intervention initiatives to be successful, educators must re-engage students by creating effective learning environments. They created a 10-step framework to support students in their unfinished learning and with mental health and wellness (The Coalition to Advance Future Student Success [CAFSS], 2021). And their plan was endorsed by nearly 50 leading educational advocacy groups in the US, such as the National Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators.

The work of the Coalition has implications for HEIs across the globe and, if implemented with fidelity, may help eradicate the monopoly around knowledge and learning. There are three areas within the 10 tenets of the framework in which leaders at HEIs can directly support through collaborative efforts with K12 institutions. The first is helping to create and maintain pathways to postsecondary and career readiness. Support for K12 professionals in postsecondary pathways, planning, advising, and transitions, along with increasing dual enrollment and internships can help alleviate detrimental effects of pandemic-related learning loss and increase student enrollment and retention at HEIs.

Another strategy is recruiting a talented educator workforce through quality pre-service programs. As well, there must be a more concentrated effort on programs and policies that help diversify the educator workforce (CAFSS, 2021). And finally, we must reimagine the entire educational system, including its delivery models.

Wagner et al. (2020), in the UNESCO FOE Report, offered suggestions to disrupt the educational systems that have existed for centuries by rethinking the future through a more equitable lens. The argument is grounded in UNESCO's assertation that the future requires a radical shift.

> [The] debate on the future of education centers on the radical disruption and redesign of learning systems. In contrast, in too many other settings quality

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> universal basic education needs remain unrealized. Looking to the future requires that we navigate plural realities across communities in both the North and South. (UNESCO-FOE, 2020, p. 2)

As such, Wagner et al. suggested embracing information communications technology (ICT). In developing countries, the implementation of ICT can enhance equity, quality, and efficiency in educational delivery (Lim et al., 2022). As well, ICT has improved the access of school-age girls in Asia to resources, knowledge, and skills (Liang et al., 2022).

Question #3

What are the effects of higher education ranking systems such as Times, QS, ARWU, etc. on higher education?

Answer:

In any discussion of equity in the higher education arena, one must also consider the role of ranking systems. Downing et al. (2021) argued a substantial improvement in ranking can be challenging for HEIs with scant resources to appeal to international academic talent. As a result, the authors asserted HEIs in developing nations, as well as less affluent ones in the global North, must often decide whether chasing rank is worth the cost of diverting resources from other priorities such as financial aid, educator effectiveness, and community engagement.

Higher education ranking systems (HERS) have long yielded great power and influence and have been the subject of debate and scholarly research since their inception (Dolan, 1976; Grewal et al., 2008; Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). The results of college rankings, particularly "The Big Three," Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education (THE), and Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (QS), have a considerable impact on multiple stakeholder groups at HEIs. Research indicates a decline in rankings for even 1 year often results in a less robust round of applications the following year, which then affects the next year's ranking. (Dolan, 1976). This has financial implications as well, of course, as many universities must then recalculate their financial awarding systems as a result in order to compensate for a weaker applicant pool.

In advocating for the importance of the systems, proponents of HERS cite transparency, accountability, and consumer rights. In addition to its consumer benefits, rankings can also help drive institutional effectiveness that is aligned with their mission and vision (Downing et al., 2021). Detractors, however, claim the systems can be easily rigged and are targeted toward the elite. As well, critics question the integrity of submitted data and the methods used to verify said data.

Some college presidents and policymakers have denounced ranking systems and called out ways in which institutions can play "the rankings game" by manipulating data. Moreover, recent scandals have illuminated deceptive rankings practices by universities and their staff, and their corresponding lawsuits and jail time. This fall, Yale Law announced it would no

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longer submit data for the US News and World Report ranking system. Shortly after, the law schools at Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, and all but two other law schools in the top 14, followed suit.

The ongoing drama has caused many in the academic community to wonder if we have seen the end of college rankings. Yet it is highly likely that HERS, in some form, are here to stay. That said, the focus of opponents should then shift to advocating for changes in the criteria for measuring HEI performance to accurately reflect effectiveness. Consequently, initiatives designed to rethink current standards or create new ones have emerged. However, this may well require a paradigm shift (HESI, 2021).

In a comprehensive comparative analysis, Downing et al. (in press) discussed both post-pandemic obstacles and opportunities of HERS as well as their impact on universities and students across four continents. This latest edition of their work is set to launch later this month and is on my winter reading list.

Question #4

According to your lived experiences, discuss current policies of higher education in today's world.

Answer:

Some of the biggest hot button higher education policies of 2022 will carry over into 2023 and will likely bring more contentious debate. Those that come to my mind immediately are pressing concerns here in the US, many with pending litigation, in particular debt forgiveness, DEI offices on campus, and the future of for-profit colleges. More globally, some policy issues we'll likely still be discussing in the new year (and beyond) are academic freedom, free speech, racial justice, gender and sexuality, and tenure.

As my field is international education (IE), I'm deeply invested in keeping my finger on the pulse of trends and updates in IE policies. This fall I moderated a policy discussion at The PIE Live North America: Leaders in International Education Conference in Toronto, Canada. Fellow panelists included thought leaders in IE from NAFSA, NYU, and the President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. These experts referenced the national IE policy implemented in Canada and asserted the US may benefit from a similar national strategy in order to maintain its billing as the world's top destination for study.

Some of the 2022 US higher education IE policies included the Early Career STEM Research Initiative and the Opportunity for Academic Training Extensions for J-1 College and University Students in STEM Fields. This past year, 22 new fields of study were added in the STEM Optional Practical Training (OPT) categories and the Department of State (DOS) updated its policy manual regarding what can be classified as "extraordinary ability" for non-immigrant status. As well, policy updates were made by the Department of Homeland Security on how U.S. Citizenship and Immigration decides national interest waivers for

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immigrants with extraordinary ability in their field. These new and updated policies follow one of the first acts in an ambitious agenda of the Biden-Harris administration, the *Executive Order on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans*, the first in an effort to reverse some of the anti-immigrant policies of the previous administration.

Later in the PIE Live conference, I had the honor of closing out the event by interviewing DOS Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) Ethan Rosenzweig about where higher education in the US stands one year after the issuance of the *Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education* and what we can expect in the coming year. Rosenzweig said the ECA is committed to increasing international student mobility and ensuring that all students, regardless of background, country, or economic background, have an opportunity for an international experience. He argued this is the only way we will have the capacity to combat the world's most pressing issues, such as climate change, food insecurity, and defending democracy and its ideals.

Question #5

What are your reflections about policies for intelligently facing the future of higher education?

Answer:

Harkening DAS Rosenzweig's words, we are, indeed, facing global problems of epic proportions. Therefore, successfully addressing these issues will require a concentrated, cooperative global strategy. As well, each of these problems will manifest itself in some way in knowledge, learning, and higher education. Some scholars believe that HEI change will occur incrementally, while others predict a full-scale revolution in education. Either way, there are numerous trends that many agree will help fuel these changes.

First is continued flexibility in mode of instructional delivery. The pandemic forced the temporary closures of countless HEIs and a reliance on online learning and teaching (OLT). While there was a sharp learning curve experienced by some during the transition to OLT, many stakeholders touted its benefits. Rapanta, et al. (2021) described OLT as:

> a subset of distance education using electronic media that, if done well, takes place in dynamic and carefully designed learning environments providing a well-considered learning ecosystem aimed at increased flexibility and better access to learning opportunities, through the careful design of unique courses that appropriately combine synchronous, asynchronous and independent study activities. (p. 717)

Secondly, in the coming year(s), expect to hear more debate questioning the value of a degree versus experience. The way HEIs prepare students for the workforce is receiving more attention post-pandemic. As such, questions about the meaning and value of HEI credentials have become more urgent (Gallagher, 2016). Hence, micro credentials have

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joined the conversation as a response to these questions and an answer to skills shortages. Desmarchelier and Cary (2022) suggested micro-credentials be designed to facilitate authentic problem-solving with real-world application. Benefits of micro credentials include skills development, flexibility, targeted learning, and financial implications. However, a key to a establishing the value of micro credentials is being able to define and quantify its value to the learner and the university (Desmarchelier & Cary, 2022).

Thirdly is the emphasis on teaching the 21st century skills that students need to be prepared for the global workforce. Advocates claim this is not a new concept, yet it has a newfound sense of importance post-pandemic (Valtonen et al., 2021). While there is not an exhaustive list of 21st century skills, common categories include: intercultural communication and competence, critical thinking, self-regulation, technological knowledge, creativity and innovation, self-efficacy, negotiation, cooperative mindset, and team leadership.

The learning and practice of 21st century skills in higher education may be best applied through experiential learning, such as during study abroad programs, lab work, student teaching, and internships. These types of experiential learning opportunities can increase levels of "self-confidence, autonomy, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility and adaptability, and interpersonal skills" (Mikulec, 2019). And the desirability of these characteristics as related to employability has been supported by myriad surveys of global employers over the past decade (Hart Research Associates, 2016).

Hollander (2021) noted the pandemic took higher education "back to school." Now, as we emerge post-pandemic, we have a unique opportunity to examine lessons learned and consider how to apply them to navigate a new way forward in higher education. Although predictions for the future of higher education differ, there is a growing understanding that returning to pre-pandemic "normalcy" is not only impossible, but also not in the best interest of the current and future generation of students. Therefore, higher education scholars and practitioners must remain ever nimble, not just to brace themselves for a future crisis, but rather to practice the flexibility, agility, and adaptability necessary to engage in the new frontier of higher education.

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