Futures for higher education as we look forward to 2050

Marcela Mollis (IUCoop)

This short 4-page essay begins and ends with the same question: What is the focus of our reflections? Futures in plural, compared higher education, or the futures of higher education?

If we look into the first option, **Futures in Plural**, Keri Facer (2011) in *Learning Futures*, offers us an interesting metaphor to better imagine them. She proposes a chess match, in which both players, rather than anticipating the entire match from the beginning, they carefully concentrate on the three next moves. Similarly, the author warns us about the impossibility of "totalizing" scenarios or imposing a series of predictive-like colonizing arguments, which enclose or limit the future measured with clocks (clock time) instead of imagining futures in terms of "human encounter time". From her perspective, a philosophy of time is required. Another significant contribution regarding the new ways of learning futures is the use of "occasional and plural thoughts" in the presence of radically unknown, unpredictable, and uncertain scenarios, although, at the same time, they lead us towards an "educated optimism" that arises from knowledge building and the agencies that enable knowing to act and act knowing.

We have also consulted a relevant work of the concomitant UNESCO for the particular purposes of this essay, edited by Riel Miller (2018), who uses the concept of "Futures Literacy" so as to understand the systems and anticipatory processes, recognized in the innovative Anticipation Discipline. The book explores:

• New themes (Futures Literacy and the Anticipation Discipline),

• the outcomes of researches collected from over 30 futures literacy laboratories and 14 case studies, and

• analyzes the historical opportunity provided today to discover significant novelties that contribute to the decision-making process of mankind.

In this direction, we believe it is necessary to explain the meaning of some of the concepts to be used as assessment tools. Miller defines *Futures Literacy* (FL) as an acquired skill or ability. Therefore, it is assumed that a futures literate has acquired the skills required to decide why and how to use their imagination to recreate the inexistent future in the present time. These anticipation activities play an important role in the perception and actions of individuals: "Developing this prospective-usage ability requires an analytical framework that allows clarifying the nature of the different anticipatory systems and provides guidance in the research on futures literacies, their acquisition, and skills" (Miller, 2018:6). The most relevant contribution of this book with

regard to the use of the "prospective" [ability] is the provision of two theoretical-methodological elements about the future of higher education. On the one hand, the Anticipation Discipline, which is incorporated into the new study plans with a view to the development of new abilities focused on "the imagination". On the other hand, the experience of the 14 cases, in which the visualizations of the future prepared by scholars and educational communities, may influence over the transformation possibilities of institutions in the present.

Arjun Appadurai (2016) in *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*, adopts the term "politics of hope" and lays the foundations for a revitalized and urgent anthropology of the future. The configuration of such anthropology,

> "requires a broad debate on the best ways to design humanity in what could be its last chapter in the mysterious history of nature as a whole. In this sense, the anthropology of the future and the future of anthropology might well provide one another with the best critical energy."

With respect to focusing our reflection on **compared higher education,** we hold the thesis that in order to reach its comprehension and futurible anticipation (diverse and heterogeneous futures) it is essential to start from the academic tradition that gave rise to it – whether European / North American / Latin American - (Mollis, 1994, 2019a). Although the binary system dominates the global scenario as to the differentiation and diversification of higher education systems (i.e., the university segment intended for the academic/professional/scientific formation on the one hand, and on the other hand, the tertiary segment, which deals with the formation for the productive work, for the services sector, or teaching), the futures for both circuits can evolve into non-differentiated articulation and integration formats, or simply further such differences.

The recent world trends towards the expansion of the student population of higher educational levels (Marginson, 2018, 2016b, Mollis, 2019b, Brunner, 2015) bring together currently debated topics in light of the apparent emerging contradictions between the greater student demand – and the job market – for study certifications (dominant credentialism) and the decrease of students in high complexity programs or academic quality together with dropping out or early desertions from educational programs (WISE 2016). The uncertain futures of employment anticipate a selectivity based on credentials. However, the pandemic and post-pandemic scenarios pose a challenge to credentialism and open up opportunities for the development of a scarce, recycled or highly technologized workforce – with an expert command of information technologies – from the action or practice of work. For example, in early XXth century Argentina, the aspiration of the immigrant middle class referred to "my son, the Doctor" as the representation of the expectations of upward social mobility derived from a university diploma of any liberal profession (Lawyer, Physician, Engineer, Accountant), and is currently displaced by "my son, the Programmer" (Computer Sciences). In XXth century Latin America, credentials (mostly from universities) opened the path towards social mobility. What is the future of tertiary credentials and university diplomas in light

of the accelerated productive changes and technological domination within more unequal social contexts worldwide?

This question gives way to the enumeration of some antagonisms of the present day that challenge the future: democratization and desertion / massiveness and elitism / massive tertiary education – MOOCS – and elite universities / formation for employment at educational institutions with out-of-date contents, and training on the job: high employability contents / higher education institutions as agents of political/social/economic transformation and higher education institutions as generally devaluated spaces.

As for the third option, **futures for higher education**, we are inspired by the results of the research group that has been working collaboratively since the year 2012 on a great project sponsored by the Arts & Humanities of Research Council Leadership Fellow (2012-2015) in the United Kingdom, titled *Connected Communities Programme*, and coordinated by Keri Facer (Bristol University, UK) & Bryony Enright (University of East Anglia, UK). Among the proposed objectives is to unveil the impact of the collaborative research methodology, which allows creating new spaces of freedom in order for scholars, civil society organizations, and others to reflect on and transform their surroundings. The scholars involved are working in over 50 projects and are in charge of studying the relationships between precariousness/poverty and the production of knowledge. Keri Facer (2011, 2016a, 2016b) in particular, analyzes the cultural politics of the collaborative methodology and the implications for the future of universities. The pedagogical experiences in laboratories give an account of new ways of relationships between universities and the community (minority groups, particular groups, singular groups, e.g., geriatric groups) characterized by:

> ➢ Reciprocal reflexivity
> ➢ experiences/experimentation
> ➢ problem management and administration
> ➢ interdisciplinarity

From a political and pedagogical perspective, the narrative of the future is naturalized in the university mission to improve/perfect/complete the individual who educates himself/herself beyond the formation process. Facer explains that *"a certain futurity* is integrated in the core of the educational process, and at the same time our desires and fears for that future remain latent in the increasingly urgent pursuit of pedagogical alternatives."

This brief anticipatory exercise presents us an intellectual challenge and derives from our academic responsibility. It in turn requires the commitment to recognizing the present time, the global post-pandemic, and its impact on world capitalism as a sense-making context:

> "The first lesson from the coronavirus is also the most overwhelming: it is completely possible, in a matter of weeks, to suspend, across the entire world and at the same time, an economic system that, until now, we were told it was

impossible to slow down or redirect. Facing all of the arguments of ecologists with regard to the need to change our ways of life, they were always opposed by the argument of the irreversible force of the *progress train*, which by no means could ever derail because of – as was said – *globalization*. Now, it is precisely *its global nature* what makes it so fragile, susceptible to slowing down and stopping abruptly." (Lautor, 2020)

We have undertaken to think about the coming futures of higher education, without falling for the fallacies that diagnose the failures of modern higher education systems from the unfulfilled promises of national states, with their linear beliefs in development and progress, underestimating the cultural heterogeneities and social inequalities inherited from local and global preexistent domination forms.

For what we have said up to here, we have recovered below a set of concepts, which emerge from the literature and our reflections about the futures and higher education:

futures in plural, educational communities that build knowledge collaboratively with experts and scholars, social cultures and cultural societies, emotion management for the action and emotional actions as a source of knowledge and reflection, social education, global pandemic crisis and capitalist crisis, politics of hope, history/ present continuous and futures, universities as anticipation institutions, technological utopias/ virtuality and presence, imaginative reconfigurations, alternative paradigms, anticipatory games, pedagogies of encounter

References

Appadurai, Arjun (2016) *El Futuro como hecho cultural. Ensayos sobre la condición global*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires

Brunner, José Joaquín, (2015) "La idea de universidad en tiempos de masificación", en: *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación Superior* (RIES), México, UNAM-IISUE/Universia, Vol. III, núm. 7, 2012, pp. 130-143. Disponible en: http://ries.universia.net/index. php/ries/article/view/228.

Carnoy, Martin & Margison, Simon & others (editors) (2018) *Higher Education in Federal Countries. A Comparative Study*, SAGE Studies in Higher Education, Boston

Facer, Keri (2016a) "Using the Future in education: creating spaces for openness, hope and novelty", en: Lees & Noddings (Editors) *Palgrave International Handbook of Alternative Education,* Palgrave Macmillan, London

Facer, Keri and Enright, B (2016b) *Creating Living Knowledge: The Connected Communities Programme, Community-University Partnerships and the Participatory Turn in the Production of Knowledge,* University of Bristol/AHRC Connected Communities Programme, Bristol

Facer, K (2011*) Learning Futures: Education, Technology and Social Change*, Routledge, London

Latour, Bruno (2020) "Imaginer les gestes-barrières contre le retour à la production d'avant crise": https://aoc.media/ opinion/2020/03/29/imaginer-les-gestes-barrieres-contre-le-retour-a-la-production-davant-crise/ Este artículo fue originalmente publicado en francés por AOC el 29 de marzo del 2020

Marginson, Simon (2016a) *The Dream is Over: the Crisis of Clark Kerr's Californian Idea of Higher Education,* University of California Press, Los Angeles

Marginson, Simon (2016b) "High Participation Systems of Higher Education", en: *The Journal of Higher Education*, 87(2), 243-271. doi:10.1353/jhe.2016.0007.

Miller, Riel (editor) (2018) *Transforming the future. Anticipation in the 21st century*, Routledge & UNESCO Publishing, New York

Mollis, Marcela (1994) "La Transferencia internacional de la Universidad Humboldtiana del siglo XIX: ¿imitación o adaptación japonesa?", *Estudios de Asia y Africa*, Ciudad de México, México: El Colegio de México, 29(2), pp. 223-251.

Mollis, Marcela (2019a) "En busca de una genealogía de las misiones universitarias reformistas" en: *Revista del IICE*, n 44, Julio-Diciembre, pp.51-65

Mollis, Marcela (2019b) "Tendencias universitarias argentinas 2003-2015", en: *Educar em Revista*, Curitiba, Brasil, v. 35, n. 75, p. 31-59, mai./jun. pp. 31-59