The Lessons of COVID-19

— Reflections on University Education

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There is no doubt that COVID-19 poses a significant challenge to universities. However, this can serve as a unique opportunity to reflect on the function and mission of university education. The pandemic means that universities must conduct various experiments in online and blended learning, although it may transpire that such experiments are not successful. If universities do not capitalize on the opportunity to identify a new path to the education of the future, they are likely to fall behind other universities in Korea and elsewhere. This is another way of saying that the universities that push such an agenda forward will gain competitive edge in the global higher education market. No one is sure of the right way forward because we are living in an unprecedented time, but we do know for certain that changes are unavoidable. What is required now is imagination and a proactive commitment to make these changes.

Keywords Online Learning(オンライン学習), Korea University(高麗大学校), Pandemic(パンデミック), Face-to-Face Learning(対面学習), Change(変化)

I vividly recall the hectic moments last February just about two weeks before the spring semester began. Korea University had made the urgent decision to offer all courses online due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Korea. As director of the university's Center for Teaching and Learning with responsibility for online courses, I had to ensure that all courses could be successfully conducted online. It was a daunting task because it was literally unprecedented. Until 2019, Korea University's online courses (e.g., flipped classroom, MOOCs) comprised only 0.1 percent of all courses. However, in light of the pandemic, 100% of the university's approximately 8,000 courses are now being conducted online, with the exception of courses with few students. While the process of transforming face-to-face courses into online ones was a huge challenge for professors and the university alike, and required massive adaptation on the part of students, the result has become a 'new normal'.

1 Reflection on University Education

Universities have suffered from the pandemic because government-enforced social

distancing makes it difficult for professors, alumni and students to plan, carry out and take part in a wide range of curricular and extra-curricular programs. To make the situation worse, many college students in Korea have called for tuition refunds. The main rationale for their demand is that they are not fully utilizing the facilities of their university, and that they are dissatisfied with the quality of online courses.

What has COVID-19 taught the university community? Despite its horrendous effects, the virus has given us an opportunity to reflect on the function and mission of the university. COVID-19 has revealed the uncomfortable truth that universities have undervalued teaching, which should be a key part of their mission. At least in the case of my employer Korea University, I have to admit that a greater emphasis has been placed on the impressive buildings and facilities of the campus than on the quality of education. It has long boasted superb facilities, excellent faculty research accomplishments, and various kinds of extracurricular program such as student exchange programs and internship opportunities. Due to Korea University's identity as a research university, professors' performance is assessed almost entirely on the basis of their research output rather than their pedagogical excellence. Poor course evaluations received from students rarely affect professors' promotion prospects or tenure.

In an online learning environment students have higher expectations. Before COVID-19, their studies constituted perhaps only 50% of what they do in college. Even if they were not happy with their courses, they were able to find gratification in other activities at school (e.g., club activities, interaction with peers). But now that the only university-related activity available to them is online learning, students have become more selective about courses they take, as they expect a higher quality of education that compensates for the absence of other activities. They readily criticize professors who reuse materials they used in previous semesters, who do not provide opportunities for students to interact creatively with each other, who never offer feedback on their assignments, and who are not fully competent in nor at ease with the use of online technology. It is apparent that students now position themselves as 'consumers' of education more than as members of the university community. In this context, universities must pay attention to the ways in which the overall quality of the courses they provide to students can be improved.

2 The Current Imperative for Universities

Many repeatedly utter the phrase "when COVID-19 is over" as if the pandemic will

be gone one day and won't affect humanity any more. Unfortunately, medical experts are unanimous that we must 'live with pandemics', and that we thus cannot return to the pre-COVID-19 era. If pandemics are unavoidable, we must further develop our pedagogy to accommodate the new dispensation.

Online teaching is not simply the wired delivery of course content. In order to enable students to achieve their learning goals when face-to-face interaction is constrained, the traditional techniques and conventions of teaching need to be restructured to make them suitable for online education. We can't simply reproduce what we do in the physical classroom in an online environment. We must devise creative and effective ways to optimally deliver course content to students online.

In this context there are multiple urgent tasks that must be undertaken by universities. They must produce detailed new guidelines for the various types of learning (e.g., flipped learning, project-based learning, and blended learning) that can be applied to the full range of university courses. It is likely that all of these types of learning must also be tailored to the online environment. This process requires rigorous research. The Center for Teaching and Learning at Korea University has conducted surveys to gather the opinions and identify the needs of professors and students, as well as their perceived strengths

and weaknesses in the online learning setting. I believe the collective intelligence of the university community is pivotal in designing optimal types of course that can be widely adopted by KU's faculty. The form courses take should vary depending on the nature of the topics and fields dealt with. Thus, research-based guidelines and policy implementation are critical in making online courses more effective and productive.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has posed a daunting challenge to universities, but this challenge can serve as a unique opportunity for us to reflect on the function and mission of university education. Universities must conduct various experiments in online and blended learning, even if it transpires they are not successful. If given universities do not capitalize on the opportunity to identify a new path to the education of the future, they are likely to fall behind other universities in Korea and elsewhere. This is another way of saying that the universities that push such an agenda forward will gain a competitive edge in the global higher education market. The right path forward is very difficult to discern because we are living in an unprecedented time, but we do know for certain that changes are unavoidable. What is required now is imagination and a proactive commitment to change.