

## Vision for the Post-Pandemic Education in BRICS

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### Abstract

This article briefly explores the pandemic's impact on higher Education in BRICS member states. Attention is brought to the measures BRICS nations adopted to continue providing quality education despite the imposed restrictions and challenges. As explained in the text, transformations imposed by the pandemic affected the functioning of the entire education system and adapted responses depended on the available resources and overall capacity to adapt to the crisis by individual institutions and contexts. Furthermore, the transformations pointed out the existing inequalities and many unknowns for which various educational stakeholders were not always prepared. As evident from the account, strategic planning must better prepare education systems for emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also paramount that the narrative of the strategic planning and the vision for the future focuses on thriving instead of surviving.

**Keywords:** BRICS Cooperation; COVID-19 and Education; Higher Education; Research Capacity Building; Contemporary Educational Issues; Post-Pandemic Education; Comparative Education

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## Introduction

At the outset, BRICS cooperation was grounded in economic and political collaboration; however, with time, it evolved to embrace also cultural exchanges, Education and scientific initiatives, as well as technological advancements (Sun & Yang, 2021). Zooming in on higher Education, teaching and research collaboration among BRICS countries has been active since 2013. In this endeavour, in November 2013, the first BRICS Education Ministers Meeting was held at the 37<sup>th</sup> UNESCO General Conference, hosted in Paris. The meeting initiated the process of multidimensional educational cooperation among the BRICS countries, paying special attention to higher Education. As Sun and Yang (2021) noted, research and capacity building in higher Education is currently promoted by two major multidimensional cooperation platforms, namely, BRICS Network University and the BRICS University League. The establishment and evolution of BRICS is a unique, large-scale collaboration between countries, driven by improved Education towards social, environmental and economic sustainability of society.

## Impact of the Pandemic on BRICS Higher Education Institutions

COVID-19 impacted all aspects of life in countries across the world. In terms of Education, the impact was especially evident in teaching and research practices, which required emergency planning for teaching and researching under the imposed restrictions, provision of funding to support the required changes and often update of existing policies (Niemczyk et al., 2021). The World Health Organisation published a document titled Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools, which provided the basic principles to manage the influence of COVID-19 in Education effectively (Niemczyk et al., 2021). Educational institutions were advised to update their strategic plans, cancel all mass meetings, and implement a variety of safety measures for students and staff. Following the public health

guidelines and protocols to contain COVID-19 (Negi & Azeez, 2022) as well as keeping in mind the objective to complete the academic year, distance education was identified as a way forward (Niemczyk et al., 2021; Petrova, 2021).

Brazil adopted various measures to slow down the spread of the virus; however, the country was recovering from the 2015/2016 recession, therefore, their response to the pandemic was limited due to the frail state of the economy even prior to the pandemic. This vulnerable state of the country was reflected in Brazil's higher Education, where the pandemic exacerbated many already-existing challenges. This included a lack of financial resources and severe inequalities among education provisioning based on geographic location, social status and access to Education (Niemczyk et al., 2021). Similarly to Brazil and the rest of the world, educational system of Russia was forced to transition to a remote form of Education. As Petrova (2021) reported, the country's higher education institutions (HEIs) found themselves in an unfamiliar situation, which involved using and applying distance learning technologies. Russian higher education system counts 966 universities, excluding branch campuses and 4.7 million students (Minaeva & Taradina, 2022). By April 2020, more than 90% of Russian universities had the capacity to offer distance learning (Minaeva & Taradina, 2022). The transformations due to the pandemic affected the entire education system at all levels, creating uncertain times, which education systems were not prepared for (Petrova, 2021). In fact, the impact of the pandemic created inequalities visible in the uneven responses by different types of institutions based on their resources and overall capacity to adapt to the crisis.

The Indian higher education system is the third largest in the world after China and the USA. Bordoloi et al. (2021) reported that in 2019, there were 993 universities, 39,931 colleges and 10,725 standalone institutions across India. After considerable debates about the right response towards the pandemic, it was decided that teaching and learning will entirely shift to

distance education to ensure the successful completion of the academic year (Bordoloi et al., 2021). Before the pandemic, distance education made up 11% of the total enrolment in the segment of higher Education. Therefore, the transition to distance education was familiar to some students and educators (Bordoloi et al., 2021). However, the unanticipated crisis posed unique challenges to educators and students, who were expected to adapt to digital transformation overnight. Moving to the next BRICS member state, the People's Republic of China was the first country to close schools selectively in February 2020 (Niemczyk et al., 2021). As in other contexts, the pandemic has disrupted the traditional face-to-face learning and research methods at Chinese universities (Li & Che, 2022; Negi & Azeez, 2022). The sudden shift to remote teaching and research practices influenced the academic performance and the physical and psychological well-being of Chinese students and staff (Li & Che, 2022). Furthermore, research practices required innovative approaches due to the closure of laboratories, universities as well as travel restrictions (Abbas et al., 2022). As reported by Negi and Azeez (2022), the shift to distance learning resulted in the expansion of existing inequalities posing threats to the academic progress of many Chinese students.

The impact of COVID-19 on South Africa's higher education system has to be considered against very particular circumstances since violent protests had disrupted teaching and learning at several of the nation's twenty-six public universities before the outbreak of the pandemic (du Plessis, 2022; Landa et al., 2021; Motala & Menon, 2020). Students resorted to protests to express their dissatisfaction with university management, accommodations, and tuition debts, which led to the temporary suspension of classes (du Plessis, 2022; Landa et al., 2021). Therefore, the strikes already affected teaching, learning and research at some South African universities. In terms of the pandemic, HEIs were only permitted to commence reopening for the purpose of teaching and learning on 1 June 2020, following the announcement that the country would move

from Alert level 5 (high restrictions) to Alert Level 3. Schalkwyk (2021) reported that under Alert Level 3, HEIs were permitted to allow 33% of students who required clinical training in all years of study to return on campus. In addition, postgraduate students who needed access to laboratories and technical equipment to undertake their research studies were also allowed to return.

### **Moving Forward**

The scholarly literature revealed that the pandemic posed many challenges to higher Education in BRICS countries. As an active response, all member states transitioned to online Education, updated their policies, provided funds to address emerging challenges, developed digital programmes and transformed their teaching and research strategies according to their capacities (Niemczyk et al., 2021). As evident in the previous section, Russia and China had well-established digital infrastructure and trained educators prior to the pandemic, which they employed to continue the academic year (Petrova, 2021). Meanwhile, Brazil, India and South Africa were experiencing challenges such as a lack of training and digital infrastructure, budget cuts (Rosa et al., 2021) and protests before the emergence of the pandemic (Bordoloi et al., 2021). Therefore, although the e-provision of Education allowed institutions to move forward, it was not accessible to all students (Rosa et al., 2021). In fact, all of the BRICS countries informed that transitioning to online Education created a digital divide and exacerbated inequality in Education (Bordoloi et al., 2021; Dawood & Van Wyk, 2021; Jiang et al., 2021; Minaeva & Taradina, 2022; Naidoo, 2022; Niemczyk et al., 2021). Furthermore, all BRICS countries reported that the pandemic had impacted their students' and staff's mental health and well-being (Hedding et al., 2020; Li & Che, 2022;). Against this backdrop of lessons learnt from BRICS, recommendations towards a way forward, in post-pandemic higher Education can be made.

For instance, it seems evident that the vision forward must foresee education systems to be better prepared for emergency educational

situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The strategic plans in cases of emergency education should include transitioning to online Education, supervising and supporting students and addressing educational inequalities (Niemczyk et al., 2021). Furthermore, significant consideration must be devoted to training educators to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively engage in quality online teaching and research (Niemczyk et al., 2021). Proficiency with digital technologies and maximised access to the internet are instrumental in solving the challenges posed by the pandemic and any potential future emergencies. It is clear that staff and students will be required to upgrade their teaching and learning approaches since digital competence will remain a critical skill expected from graduates. Based on recent scholarly reports, online Education constitutes the best way forward during emergency education and thus should be viewed as a COVID-keeper. However, the evident inequalities in terms of access to online Education must be acknowledged and adequately addressed. In addition, the vision forward for post-pandemic era should consider synchronising online Education with contact teaching. The need to provide for all students, irrespective of economic status, gender or location, with quality education should continue to be taken into consideration by governments and HEIs (Niemczyk et al., 2021). It is likely that higher Education in BRICS countries with the capacity and resources to exploit the benefits of online teaching and learning will do so, while the remainder will resort to traditional teaching methods (Schalkwyk, 2021).

COVID-19 definitely served as a gateway, opening up multiple channels for teaching and learning in the form of online and distance methods (Schalkwyk, 2021). Looking forward, governments as well as private funding agencies should continue to assist educators and researchers to advance their efforts in undertaking their online teaching and research activities. Making informed decisions and actions is highly dependent on bringing diverse perspectives that expand the potential of effective solutions. In addition, research about

creative education strategies to approach future states of emergency should be promoted. The pandemic will not last forever; however, we must learn from it to be prepared for future emergencies (Niemczyk et al., 2021).

Furthermore, for better preparation in periods of emergency education, governments and HEIs in BRICS countries should set aside special funds to ensure the completion of the academic year regardless of the circumstances (Adom et al., 2020). Finally, higher Education needs to seek global cooperation and partnerships, which are prerequisites to reimagining higher Education and research in the post-pandemic era. (du Plessis, 2022).

### **The Special Edition**

This special issue titled *New day starts in the dark: Vision for the post-pandemic BRICS education* provided a scholarly space to address contemporary educational issues and stimulate much-needed conversation about a vision for post-pandemic BRICS Education. The edition also offered space for dialogue and intellectual exchange on this imperative and timely topic. 2020 marked a global crisis impacting all social sectors, including higher education research, teaching practice, management, and most institutional operations. The pandemic exposed HEIs to many challenges pointing out vulnerabilities, highlighting social inequalities and a growing gap between the economically privileged and those who struggle to access and benefit from quality education. Beyond a doubt, Covid-related circumstances questioned the very nature of higher Education and its role within the global society. It is worth recognising that the stormy time of the pandemic also presented several opportunities to re-evaluate past practices, revisit strategic education plans, and re-envision a more inclusive future for HEIs. On the one hand, HEIs showed their capacity to change and rapidly adapt to remote teaching and research. On the other hand, many HEIs were not prepared to respond to the restrictions posed by the pandemic and struggled significantly for a long time. Although many strategies were put in place, inequalities in access to digital technologies and online learning

were and are immense, which further influences social disparities in BRICS and beyond.

This special edition is dedicated to critically exploring the path from the crisis to clarity and a better future of research and teaching in HEIs. It is paramount that we frame the narrative for the future with a focus on thriving instead of surviving. Embracing a positive approach, we can be reminded of Friedrich Nietzsche's statement that *chaos gives birth to dancing stars*. To that end, we do not wait for the crisis to fully pass and passively follow steps prescribed by others to go back to so called 'normal.' Instead, the dancing stars are found through proactivity and courage to rebuild the plane while flying and implement upgrades. Although the response of HEIs to the crisis is commendable, the need for transformations is visible, and it will only accelerate. The time is ripe to make sense of the current landscape and ongoing shifts with the intention to zoom our attention on the next steps to build back better.

As evident from the collection of articles, this issue provided space for scholars from different disciplines to share how they envision the move forward based on the lessons learned and reflections made about new directions for research, teaching, and general academic practice. The authors covered several important aspects, including new models and strategies in research and teaching; comparative and international Education as a guiding discipline; accessibility, quality and equality in Education; research ethics; classroom management skills; teacher education; diversity and inclusion; virtual connectedness and collaborations; and digital literacy. As we know, social problems are territorially blind, meaning that no country has sufficient knowledge and capacity to solve challenges independently. The articles from various disciplines and contexts allow opportunities for a unified effort and collective thinking to explore the proposed theme and propose post-pandemic plans to prosper.

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#### About the Guest Editor

Professor Ewelina K Niemczyk is a scholar in Comparative and International Education at North-West University, South Africa. Her research interests focus on higher education with specific attention to research capacity building, education for sustainable development and BRICS education. As a comparativist, Professor Ewelina has experiences in a variety of teaching and research positions in Canadian, South African and Polish contexts. Her scholarly interests are reinforced through the modules she teaches, the supervision of postgraduate students as well as her publications. As per her contribution to the wider scholarly community, she actively serves as a reviewer, editor, conference chair, and keynote speaker.