

GLOBAL



# IAUP: Leading universities into a post-pandemic world

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Fernando León García, president of CETYS University (Centro de Enseñanza Técnica y Superior) with three campuses in Mexico, takes over the three-year presidency of the International Association of University Presidents or IAUP – often described as the global voice of higher education – at its **2021 Triennial Conference**, to be held virtually from 29 to 31 July.

The conference theme is “Innovation and Inclusion: Key priorities for higher education in a post-pandemic world”.

In this interview, León García outlines the areas of focus for his presidency for university leaders around the world coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and looking ahead to a post-pandemic world.

**UWN:** *What do you see as the main challenges for university leaders in the next three years as you take on the presidency of IAUP?*

**León García:** Society and higher education tend to go in cycles but there are some recurrent themes. What the pandemic has done is intensified some and provided further challenges on others that we were not acting on.

Focusing on innovation and inclusion, the themes of the conference, the pandemic forces us to review everything we were doing and to try to recover in whatever way we can, but to be careful enough not to go back to everything as it was.

The pandemic has pulled the rug from under us, and it does require us to profoundly reflect on what needs to be improved, what needs to be changed, what needs to be transformed.

First, we need to be more inclusive in whatever we do – everything: students, faculty outreach, with society, partners and partnerships. Second, we need to do things better. And in some cases, differently, which, in a broad sense, is innovation.

The four key words are recovery and transformation, innovation and inclusion. They capture the lion’s share of what we will have to face as institutions in higher education. And, of course, recovery does involve economic recovery, because we have all been impacted.

**UWN:** *IAUP is a global organisation but not all regions or countries are out of the pandemic;*

*some are very much in the throes of it. So how easy is it for university leaders to look ahead at this point?*

**León García:** There's no single yardstick or measure through which we can gauge progress and lead progress. Just like the pandemic manifested itself throughout the world, first in one place, then another, all of a sudden, so we will see different speeds and stages of recovery and development.

Some are at stage one, the emergency stage. Then there are countries still scrambling around because of lack of vaccination, because of an unclear policy or strategy about how to approach the pandemic and a sense of denial in some countries.

There are others who have managed it to a reasonable degree, not necessarily of control, but at least some kind of orderly way of trying to recover and move forward – that would be the transition stage where most of the world, the developed and developing world, happened to be, but there are many still in the emergency stage.

And then there are some who are already seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. And that would be the transformation stage.

Eventually, we will all need to be in the transformational stage.

The recommendation, of course, is: Don't wait until the environment is better. It's time to begin to reflect and try to transform, whether you happen to be in the emergency stage or transition.

University leaders should reflect on what things were working fine despite the pandemic, what is because of the pandemic, and which things were we not doing at all. The pandemic is forcing us to say: now it's on the table, it's part of the challenge of higher education.

**UWN:** *You're in Mexico, in the Latin American region. How has the region fared from your perspective?*

**León García:** In Latin America in general, if you look at the number of cases, the number of deaths, the number of vaccinations, it's a mixture. But overall, we're behind the curve, catching up.

In most Latin American countries, it has been a centralised approach to what's needed to be done. There are some that have been more proactive. That has affected the form and speed which, in particular, higher education institutions have been able to pivot, and in some cases recover.

In the United States, the United Kingdom and other developed countries, you have residential education and that portion of what universities offered was not available during the pandemic. The financial impact was probably much greater than in developing countries and in Latin America, where the norm is that students come and go.

While it would appear, overall, that we're struggling financially and that there are problems, I believe here in Latin America, they are not as acute.

**UWN:** *The conference theme talks about innovation. How is that possible in a pandemic?*

**León García:** There were certain things that Latin America as a whole was facing before, that the pandemic has intensified. Before the pandemic, it was clear we needed to innovate. In Latin America, in general, and Mexico in particular, we needed to look at new models for the delivery of education. We needed to incorporate technology, we needed to intensify our research efforts, we needed to internationalise also.

What the pandemic has done is to intensify and force us to do it quickly, even if we were not prepared, even if we did not believe in it. One thing you could observe before the pandemic was openness to the use of technology, but lack of legitimacy in the sense that it was not the same, and therefore there was a preference for any innovative approach or model that included some face to face.

With COVID we had no option. We had to rely on alternative modes of delivery using technology. And while there are some who will revert to what was before the pandemic, I believe that the trend will be for higher education institutions, including in Latin America, to review what they were doing.

An IAUP survey was carried out during the second half of 2020 that had over 700 responses, covering at least 80 countries. When we asked ‘what’s going to happen in the next two to three years’, the overwhelming majority said there’s going to be more online, there’s going to be more hybrid learning.

But for Latin America, rather than talk about something that involves technology, the response was ‘alternative delivery models’, which didn’t necessarily mean you’re going to use technology – I’m interpreting the results here. So, there is still a doubtful type of attitude towards it.

But many more will say the mix of activities should include shorter-term e-mobility, internationalisation and borderless professor concepts, etc, that were there but not really tested. Now, because of the pandemic, they do have a place. It doesn’t mean they’ll replace everything that was being done as we tried to instil the development of a globally competitive internationalisation as part of the undergraduate experience.

**UWN:** *So that suggests internationalisation activities can continue in a pandemic or online situation, without involving travel?*

**León García:** If you ask universities in the developed world, internationalisation overwhelmingly equates to ‘Am I getting students coming to my country?’ That’s not a bad thing, but it has an impact not only on the notion of internationalisation but also on finances, because that’s how internationalisation is understood.

From that perspective, the developed world was impacted more heavily than the developing world. From a financial and operational perspective, it’s inextricably linked to the operation and survival of your institution.

You have to find different ways of promoting internationalisation as a learning objective. Developing a global and diverse perspective is really what it's all about. Part of that experience can and has been face to face, but when you can't do that, then you have to find other ways. So, around the world there were all sorts of pilots and experiments. And in some cases, they were already doing it – moving to connecting virtually.

At CETYS last summer, and now this summer again, we decided not to cancel the summer session. We said, let's hold it virtually. The end result was we had more international participation than we anticipated. And this year, more than half of those coming were international because of the virtual setting, which was not the case before.

So I think e-mobility models of collaboration that involve virtual are on the rise. There were also more institutions trying to see how they could enrich the experience of their students who couldn't go abroad. There were many who couldn't go abroad before anyway, but they were doing nothing about it.

I tend to describe it as I@H – internationalisation at home. This meant institutions could rearrange content, they could connect some of their courses to a foreign professor, they could connect to foreign students, or all of the above. So even if a student cannot leave, they are nevertheless interacting and picking up some of the nuances. You can't replicate everything, but certainly you can achieve something.

A certain number of institutions took advantage of having someone who is not from this country to continue to teach. Lo and behold, you have a virtual platform! So, you have the makings of what I and others are calling the 'borderless visiting professor', which is not going to go away. On the contrary, I think more institutions are going to be using this in the future.

Internationalisation suffered in terms of physical mobility but gained in terms of the creativity and entrepreneurship that we've seen on the part of academics, institutions and students in trying to achieve the development of a global and diverse perspective. I suspect there's going to be a mix. It's one of the benefits – gains for those who are open and innovative in what they do.

*UWN: Inclusion is another conference theme. Black Lives Matter and Asian-American discrimination are big and important issues, that started in the US. But others are taking note and thinking about it. What is the way forward for university leaders on this?*

**León García:** As an outsider, we can respect and support what is happening and the intensive effort at all levels in the US. However, inclusion or diversity carries across in different ways, depending on the region. It's not about saying it's totally irrelevant, or it has to be the same way as in the US. Regardless of where you are, there is some issue concerning diversity and inclusion and equity.

In a country with a male-dominant society, it starts with gender. At the very minimum, societies and universities have to address that. Gender is an issue that carries across almost all countries. Another is the socio-economic perspective. It's an issue of diversity, an issue of equity, and of

inclusion.

With ethnic groups, there is rarely one country where there isn't a dominant group and a minority group. There are all sorts of disparities. Societies and universities have to acknowledge that and do something about it. It carries differently in Canada as it does in Australia. In the former you refer to the First Nations and in the latter to aborigines. But it's the same issue.

Inclusion, as I understand it, is addressing those disparities and discrimination against certain groups in your own context and doing something about that. It starts with the obvious, and you expand as your society or country is more prepared or open to begin to embrace a broader notion.

But acknowledging that you do have an issue – it's in that context that IAUP would try to raise the level of awareness among university presidents and vice-chancellors around the world, and how they can, as leaders, through policy, through examples and through practice, move the needle a little bit forward, so that universities are not only bastions of knowledge, but bastions of inclusiveness. And by doing that, they are helping improve their respective societies.

I don't want to credit the pandemic too much. But it has made us further aware of some disparities that existed but that we didn't acknowledge beyond the surface.

So even when you accept that the pandemic impacted all of us, in terms of access to education – because we had to go to remote education and in an overwhelming majority this entailed technology – it raised the level of awareness that we didn't have a level playing field.

For example, public institutions' and private institutions' access to equipment and bandwidth. It was not an issue generally for students from private institutions but it was for public institutions in Mexico. Even in the US, there were issues of equipment and bandwidth.

The same thing occurred even among our professors. There were some professors who had no issues whatsoever. But a lot of part-timers didn't have access to equipment. Simple things such as 'Can I work from home?' made us aware of discrepancies and disparities.

Mental health and other aspects of the pandemic did not carry across uniformly either. It has made us more aware that this is an acute issue that we need to deal with.

**UWN:** *Is the region facing a lost generation because of the pandemic?*

**León García:** These were issues that we have tried as a whole to address so that time was not lost completely. There are some institutions that believe in the development of the whole person – a kind of a liberal arts twist, where you're not only preparing professionals, you're preparing citizens, you're preparing lifelong learners, you're preparing well-rounded individuals.

We engaged in virtual activities that were an approximation to expressions of art, recreation, culture, etc. There was a whole host of things we were doing face to face. Then all of a sudden, we didn't have an opportunity to do it. You either remain there with your arms crossed, and say, 'I can't do it'. Or you say, 'Students deserve this, Let's give it a try'. This has been done so that you can

minimise the impacts of a lost generation.

Alumni offices, career planning and placement centres are more active, trying to make sure they provide support for job opportunities, and you know, for practical work that will make students more employable.

Despite the pandemic, we were still able to have employment rates of 94% to 95%. Typically, placement is between 96% to 98% for CETYS, so it went down but only slightly so we're proud of that. But it required an intensive effort to try to support students. At the same time, we found business and industry were eager, as they were recovering, to provide job opportunities to students.

*Q&As are edited for length and clarity.*