Why Your Institution Should Still be Prioritizing its Sustainability Efforts During the Pandemic

Description

In the rush to manage the disruption caused by the coronavirus, are universitiesÂ still prioritizing and investing inÂ their sustainability efforts?Â

The coronavirusÂ crisisÂ has significantly disrupted higher education, forcing institutions to focus almostÂ all theirÂ efforts into managing theÂ repercussionsÂ of the crisis.Â Â

Obstacles facing higher education institutions as a result of the pandemicÂ include;Â protecting staff and students from the virus, supporting international students, shifting to online learning,Â and arrangingÂ virtual events, to name a few.Â Â

According to experts atÂ McKinsey & Company:Â "Coping with COVID-19 is particularly complicated for universities, because they serve such a wide variety of functions.â?Â

Universities are not only educational institutions butÂ theyÂ also â??function as small cities, complete with police forces, energy plants, sports facilities, and other civic institutions.â?Â They are major local employers, with some even operating as hospitals.Â Â

Having suchÂ aÂ multitude of functions, itâ??s no wonder that a crisis such as a global pandemic can have such a catastrophic impact on the lives of all those involved inÂ higher education.Â Â

Additionally, with so much at stake,Â itâ??sÂ understandable thatÂ universities have put almost all their Â energyÂ and resourcesÂ intoÂ managingÂ and mitigatingÂ the negative consequences of the pandemic.Â Â

While doing so is essential to securing the future success of institutions, itÂ hasÂ alsoÂ resulted inÂ attentionÂ beingÂ redirected away fromÂ the otherÂ criticalÂ issueÂ facing the global population: climate change.Â Â

Before the pandemic, many universities were making commitments to help fight climate changeÂ andÂ reduceÂ their impact on the environment.Â Â

TheÂ University ofÂ TechnologyÂ in SydneyÂ andÂ Bristol UniversityÂ in the UKÂ are just twoÂ of the manyÂ institutions whoÂ recently announcedÂ their commitment to becoming a carbon neutralÂ institution.Â

Itâ??s also clear fromÂ QSâ??s latest report on sustainabilityÂ that students areÂ demandingÂ more sustainabilityÂ efforts fromÂ theirÂ chosenÂ institution,Â asÂ 94%Â of respondents want to see universities do more to help fight climate change.Â Â

With no definitive end in sight for the coronavirus crisis, itâ??s crucial that institutions ensure they continue to focus their attention on the critical issue of climate change.

In a statement released on International Mother Earth Day, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres describes the impact of the coronavirus as being both â??immediate and dreadful, â?•yet highlights climate change as being another â??deep emergency.â?

According to Guterres, â??the current crisis is an unprecedented wake-up call. We need to turn the recovery into a real opportunity to do things right for the future.â?

As the world ground to a halt as a result of the coronavirus, many countries saw their impact on the environment reduce.

IQAir, a Swiss-based air quality technology company, reported a â??drastic dropâ? in air pollution â??for almost every city under lockdown when compared with the same period a year earlier.â?

A study by *Science of the Total Environment* also reported that air travel dropped by 96% due to COVID-19, the lowest in 75 years, further evidence that the coronavirus may have slowed environmental damage.

The coronavirus pandemic acts as a reminder that reducing our impact on the environment is within our reach and presents a rare insight into a more sustainable way of living.

In an article on the link between COVID-19 and nature, the World Economic Forum *s*aid: â??Many people are wondering when life will get back to normal after the COVID-19 crisis. We should be asking: can we use this opportunity to learn from our mistakes and build something better?â?•

With this in mind, how can your institution get its sustainability efforts back on track? And h as the coronavirus exposed any new avenues to becoming a greener institution?

One possible step would be to maintain some level of online learning after the pandemic has settled. According to the National Wildlife Federation, online learning is more environmentally friendly than traditional teaching as it results in a reduction in travel for both domestic and international students, as well as a reduction in paper waste.

The federation explained that â??online learning provided impressive carbon dioxide savings over conventional classroom educationâ?• by â??reducing campus site CO2 emissions from 81kg (178.5lbs) for a full time to student to about 2kg (4.4lbs) for a blended online and print-based course.â?

With lockdowns and remote working forcing us to spend more time indoors, a research survey of consumers in the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland, and Sweden revealed that there was a â??greater public appetite for outdoor activities after COVID-19.â?

This shift in attitude could act as an impetus to improve outdoor campus space in the future, planting more trees and reducing traffic flow.

According to The Guardian, planting trees has â??mind-blowing potentialâ?• to tackle the climate crisis , as well as having a positive effect on our mental health.

While the coronavirus has required immediate and drastic action from the higher education sector, this doesnâ??t mean that action to fight climate change should be neglected.

Universities have a responsibility to return to their sustainability efforts and to use this period as a time to reflect on possible areas of improvement.

For more information on the role of higher education in the fight against climate change, please see our report: Sustainability in Higher Education: What More Can Universities Do?