**Reflections from Patricia Parera, U.S. UCN Secretariat**

Why does the UCN matter in the internationalization of higher education.

Network – Knowledge – Collaboration.

With a New Year underway, we celebrate new beginnings and feel hopeful for what is to come.

This past year has challenged and changed us. COVID-19 continues to affect nearly every person on the planet—causing more than 2 million deaths worldwide. As of April 6, 2020, universities and other tertiary education institutions were closed in 170 countries and communities, and more than 220 million post-secondary students—13 percent of the total number of students affected globally—have already had their studies ended or significantly disrupted due to COVID-19.

But difficult times often inspire innovation and progress, and we saw that this year as the world collectively mounted the largest public health effort in history. Nearly three decades ago, the iconic Maya Angelou welcomed a new day—invited us to “say simply…with hope, good morning.” So, we are saying good morning and reinventing our future together.

We were hard at work during the last two months of 2020. The U.S. UCN Secretariat at Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute (VT-LCI) designed and implemented four different webinars with the support of the US. Embassy in Amman, Jordan and the generous participation of our U.S.-Jordanian UCN members.

**The main takeaways** from the webinars were the need for more communication, for more cross fertilization of ideas and the possibility of reaching a wider audience and hear from other’s experiences with internationalization, exchanges, COVID measures at our campuses and the health system in general. We discussed “Challenges and opportunities of the COVID-19 crisis for tertiary education”, and the need to develop strategies that adapt higher education curricula to the labor markets marked by the emergence of the ever stronger artificial intelligence (AI) revolution that affects the way most of us live, work, and play. What and how specifically can AI deliver results for a more prosperous and resilient future?

**We also found new opportunities**. The crisis shook the system and created an environment more open to innovation, including the curriculum and how to approach internationalization. COVID-19 has forced us to think strategically and outside the box, to advance the use of technology in support of learning. Students who were planning to travel abroad have been offered an opportunity to register online and to travel to campus once the situation is restored, faculty and other professionals can take short-term certificate programs offered worldwide; recruitment fairs are organized online for a fraction of the cost of in-person fairs. *This would also be a way for universities to do a better selection of students, because when students travel to a new country they have to manage a number of issues, so now that they have this buffer, it gives them kind of a smoother transition, so it will be a way for universities to test the students’ motivation and commitment.*

|  |
| --- |
| Main messages from the webinars |
| * Many universities and colleges have moved their operations online by taking major actions due to previous investments in digital connectivity.
* Internationalization is a commitment to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research, and service missions of higher education.
* Tertiary education means a strong commitment to equitable growth, social cohesion and societies with strong democratic foundations as well as to the success and advancement of individual students.
* Utilize the opportunities provided by the private sector
* Promote STEAM fields, grounded in a solid general education, to optimize individual and economic outcomes.
* Think beyond mobility, beyond the international office but still playing a key leadership role.
* Need for Leadership to (i) internationalize the on-campus curriculum and learning; promote research and scholarship; encourage and implement global institutional partnerships within a framework of inclusion, diversity and equity.
* Universities’ senior management need to take actions to manage universities’ closures; they need to find solutions to the absence of face-to-face classes; how to sustain research in remote context, adapt and manage to uncertainties and continue with their organizational operations, IT, security, financial services, etc.
* Remote learning. We need to be conscious of the structural challenges that perpetuate inequalities and a rise in “learning poverty”. Not all universities have platforms. We cannot speak about e-learning, it is more remote learning, using platforms like Zoom, Googlemeet, Canvas. Courses are delivered through web conferences, we send emails and participate in chat groups, but, there are no interactive platforms.
* We need to acknowledge a decrease in mobility and the need to restructure mobility patterns. Universities can’t continue their dependency on income from international students. We need to seek financial alternatives.
* Technical and Vocational, Education and Training (TVET). We need to recognize the importance of TVET as a complement or alternative to tertiary education. There are almost 1.2 billion young people in the world today, and approximately 90 percent of these youth live in developing countries, including both stable and fragile or conflict-affected contexts. Many young people do not have access to higher education. TVET programs show promise for addressing these and other youth employment and entrepreneurship challenges.
* Five main TVET initiatives:
	+ Teaching employability skills
	+ Leveraging partnerships
	+ Developing technical skills to meet industry needs
	+ Preparing entrepreneurs
	+ Training teachers, employers, and other partners
	+ Educated, healthy, employed, and civically engaged youth drive economic growth, resilience, peace and stability, democracy, improved health outcomes, and prosperity.
* A System-Wide Approach for Effective Skills Development need to:
	+ Fully reflect modern industry practices
	+ Focus on competency-based training and certification methods
	+ Provide youth with robust practical experience
	+ Lay a foundation for addressing systemic challenges in skills development ecosystem.
 |

What is next for the UCN. We are at a crossroads. The Secretariats at the University of Jordan and at Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute have been working almost “pro bono” for more than two years. We have achieved some milestones, especially our [gatherings](https://lci.vt.edu/content/dam/lci_vt_edu/UCN-Conference-Report-June-2019.pdf) in Amman, Blacksburg and Arlington Virginia to discuss relevant topics and participate in professional development activities. We established two UCN websites at the University of Jordan (https://www.ucnnetwork.com/ ) and at Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute ( lci.vt.edu/ucn) respectively. VT-LCI produced five newsletters, including this one. North Carolina State University (NCSU) established a “Scholarship on Developing Cultural Competency” for UCN Jordanian universities to enroll in one of ‘s non-credit certificate courses. We collaborated as a Network in several proposal submissions for funding.

|  |
| --- |
| Two years of UCN activities (2019-2020) |
| 1. [Virginia Tech Conference on Innovative & Transformational Ideas to Improve the Development and Policy Response to Forced Displacement,](https://lci.vt.edu/content/dam/lci_vt_edu/UCN-Conference-Report-June-2019.pdf) June 2019, Virginia, USA.
2. University of Jordan and North Carolina State University “International conference & workshop on Building Capacity for International University Cooperation and Research Collaboration”, June 2019, Amman, Jordan.
3. Virginia Tech/UW-Madison/Cambridge Education: Pre-Service Teacher Education in Jordan (PRESTIJ).
4. UW-Madison CALS Global/ JUST & YU proposal to NSF/ IRES Program for a 2-year summer school on the food-energy-water nexus & effect of climate change.
5. Purdue and Yarmouk University (YU):
	* Faculty exchange.
	* Visits from Purdue faculty to YU
	* Fellowship program.
	* YU scholarship in industrial engineering and/or mechanical engineering to attend Purdue or any other UCN member in the U.S.
	* YU online GRE platform with the support from the U.S. Embassy, Amman.
6. Wisconsin-Madison/YU faculty exchange funded by Fulbright Commission.
7. Hashemite University submission to the Stevens Initiative with the support of several US UCN members.
 |

**The importance of a network of universities is invaluable** in bringing joint collaboration, research, exchanges and innovation. We are open to hear suggestions from our members and from our previous sponsor, the Public Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Amman, Jordan. At this point in time, however, we are not sure whether we will be able to continue with these initiatives since funding for the UCN is non-existent from other partners or funding sources.

We would like to propose a zoom discussion with the UCN members at a later date in February to discuss our path forward. Once we have a clear path, we could discuss our proposal and we can bring our strategic plan to potential sponsors.

* Our vision for the future is to continue creating positive change and innovation through collaboration and the cross fertilization of ideas and collective action.
* Our goal is to stop thinking and acting in silos and instead share experiences, information, knowledge, and lessons learned for all.
* Our intention is to have a platform where our work produces the greatest and broadest access for our main target population: graduate students, faculty, researchers and administrators.
* Communication is King. Often visibility is more important than financing.

Let’s **exercise our individual and collective agency and social imagination** to reimagine, create and support a community of knowledge and practice. The United States has a great ally in Jordan as the beacon of peace in the region. Let’s be clear about our **strategic intentions as a Network** so that we can put our shared intentions into practice.

* Participating in the UCN helps universities **enhance knowledge** to develop sustainable, long-term **institutional partnerships.**
* The UCN helps build robust relations to develop **internationalization** processes.
* The UCN provides an excellent channel to know more about possible **funding opportunities** and facilitate the process of finding more **US partners**.
* We need to engage Government officials, private sector and corporate partners.
* Approach and engage Embassies from both sides of the Atlantic.

Invite more universities from the U.S. and private universities in jordan to join UCN.

In the words of our colleague and friend, Dr. Hassan 'Hijazi, University of Arizona, “We have come a long way, but we can go much further. Together we stand, divided we fall (by Pink Floyd)”.