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The role of academia in an era of political turmoil



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The COVID-19 pandemic raging around the world is shining a bright light on the capacity of nations and the international community to respond to a global threat. Despite knowing for many years that “a serious international epidemic could be caused by a pathogen currently unknown to cause human disease”,¹ this virus is showing that most countries failed to prepare for such an emergency. The previous outbreaks of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), and Ebola virus disease demonstrated that strong public institutions that can collaborate, communicate, and cooperate are essential to countering such a threat.² We know that they are the backbone of a nation’s security and a guardian of people’s health. Yet, after these outbreaks we became complacent and failed to invest in them. Now we are paying a terrible price for this indolence.

The importance of strong public institutions reaches far beyond public health. Effective, transparent, and accountable finance, justice, public works, environment, election oversight, education, health, and other government departments form the integrated foundation of a stable nation. It is the only sector that can protect human rights and individual safety and create a stable environment for commerce.³ It ensures that the elected are accountable to the public.

Authoritarian, nationalist leaders around the world know this and have waged a determined assault on these institutions. This has enabled them to capture the levers of state, engage in massive theft from the public coffers, and scapegoat minority and vulnerable populations to secure their political base.⁴ Weakening state institutions accountable to the public, weaponising social media platforms, and attacking press freedom threatens the global stability painstakingly cobbled together since the end of World War 2. Despite being a formidable obstacle to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, this threat has been neglected by the global health community.

A nation’s citizens are deeply affected by the strength or weakness of their public sector, more so than any medical intervention. Grasping this should compel us to rethink international development and presents an important opportunity for academia.

Universities can leverage their educational, research, and service mandate and engage government ministries

to strengthening their systems. They could be funded to provide in-house and online training for public servants in management, finance, communications, IT, leadership, and more. They could also be tasked to undertake research aligned with real-time problems governments may not have the capacity to address.

Institutions in high-income countries and those in low-income nations can partner in this effort. The former could provide free access to their educational products, libraries, trainers, and grant writing capabilities. The latter would lead the effort, seeking collaboration where required and providing trainers, and the cultural and political intelligence critical in this work.

This pivot towards connecting academia to the public sector can be incentivised. The criteria for tenure should be reformed to include such activities as capacity building, public engagement, creating new partnerships, addressing inequities in development outcomes, community engagement, advocacy, and media engagement.⁵ Which academic institutions will answer the call?

The Consortium of Universities for Global Health (CUGH) at its annual meeting in 2020,⁶ was attempting to do this but, like many others, the meeting was cancelled to limit the spread of COVID-19. The conference programme was to include a wide array of sessions that addressed the interface between political turmoil and sustainable development and other global health issues including emerging infectious diseases; how academic centres can address local social determinants of health;⁷ the commercial determinants of health; non-communicable diseases; the drivers of migration; gun violence; trauma; mental health; planetary health, one health, and environmental health; the role of law to protect human rights;⁸ the plight of the Rohingya and the underserved in Gaza, Lebanon, Turkey and other areas; the importance of global health diplomacy as a strategic development tool; and commemorating the Year of the Nurse and Midwife. The abstracts selected for oral presentation at CUGH 2020 are included in this special issue of *The Lancet Global Health*. Additionally, some of the presentations slated for the conference will be compiled in an open access eBook in the next few months.

In these unstable times, academia has an opportunity to evolve, to create more extensive partnerships across

sectors, and use its substantial capabilities to directly impact the contemporary challenges we face. More researchers need to become public scientists and be a source for evidence-based information. More need to engage in policy making and capacity building. Reforming academia will strengthen its historic mandate while making it a more effective agent to create a sustainable future for all.

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**Keith Martin, Zoë Mullan*
kmartin@cugh.org

Consortium of Universities for Global Health, Washington, DC 20036, USA (KM);
The Lancet Global Health, London, UK (ZM)

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