

## Article

# Catholic Higher Education Globally: Enrollment Trends, Current Pressures, Student Choice, and the Potential of Service Learning

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**Abstract:** Globally, Catholic universities operate in an increasingly competitive market. They tend to have a strong academic reputation in many countries and their graduates tend to do well professionally. One explanation for this success could be that many universities are selective: they may attract motivated students. In addition, it is sometimes suggested that the values emphasized in Catholic education may also play a role, including for the choice of students to attend a particular university. Whether values and the Catholic faith matter for students, or rather how much they matter, is important for the future of Catholic universities in a context of rising competition as well as pluralism, including in terms of the views held by students. After a review of broad trends in enrollment in Catholic higher education globally and regionally over the last four decades, and a discussion of some of the increasing competitive pressures Catholic (and other) universities are confronted with, this article explores some of the factors that may lead students to enroll in Catholic higher education institutions. Values and faith matter, but (not surprisingly) other factors matter more. The paper also discusses the possibility for Catholic universities to invest in service learning as an opportunity to strengthen their Catholic identity in a way that respects pluralism in the student body.

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, the Catholic Church estimates that in 2020, 6.6 million students were enrolled in Catholic institutions of higher education<sup>1</sup>. This is in addition to 61.4 million students enrolled in K12 (pre-primary to secondary) Catholic schools<sup>2</sup>. Whether for pre-primary to secondary education or for higher education, the Catholic Church is by far the largest non-governmental provider of education in the world. A majority of students in Catholic institutions of higher learning are enrolled in colleges<sup>3</sup> and universities, but the Church also runs other institutions at the post-secondary level, especially in the developing world<sup>4</sup>. According to the classification used in the statistical yearbook of the Church published annually by the Secretariat of State, enrollment in Catholic higher education includes 2.4 million students in non-university higher institutes, 0.4 million students in ecclesiastical studies at the university level, and 3.8 million students in other types of university studies (Secretariat of State [of the Vatican] 2022)<sup>5</sup>.

Many Catholic universities have a strong reputation and an illustrious history in their country. In Belgium for example, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) and the Université Catholique de Louvain (UC Louvain) both trace their origin to a university founded in 1325. The two universities have been ranked in the Top 100 globally in some rankings. In the United States, ten Catholic universities are ranked in the Top 100 according to a widely used national ranking<sup>6</sup>. Several of these universities were founded by the Jesuits. While Jesuit institutions of higher education account for less than half a percent of all colleges and universities in the United States, in 2021 more than ten percent of all

Senators and Representatives were Jesuit-educated alumni (55 of 535 members of the 117th Congress, including 13 Senators and 42 Representatives; see [AJCU 2021](#)).

One explanation for this success could be that many Jesuit and other Catholic colleges and universities are selective. Therefore, they may attract motivated students who do well professionally. Another explanation could be location: Georgetown University accounts for half of all Senators and Representatives who are alumni of Jesuit higher education. Because of its location in Washington, DC, the university tends to attract students with an interest in politics and public service. In addition, it is sometimes suggested that the values emphasized in Catholic education may also play a role. It is also often suggested that those values matter for students when they choose to attend a particular university.

Whether this is indeed the case, or rather how much Catholic values and faith matter for the choice of a university, can make a difference for universities in the context of rising competitive pressures ([Altbach et al. 2009](#); [Salmi 2009](#); [International Federation of Catholic Universities Foresight Unit 2021](#))<sup>7</sup> and additional financial strain brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (on the response of higher education systems to the pandemic, see [UNESCO 2021](#))<sup>8</sup>. As is the case for other institutions, Catholic institutions of higher learning face major challenges. In a relatively recent report assessing World Bank support for the sector, the World Bank's [Independent Evaluation Group \(2017\)](#) identified three core challenges. The analysis was conducted for developing countries, but it also applies for the most part in high income countries (see also [Arnhold and Bassett 2021](#), for a more recent analysis at the World Bank).

The first challenge is that access to universities and other institutions of higher learning remains highly unequitable, with the poor often excluded. This is especially problematic for Catholic institutions given their aim to contribute to the preferential option for the poor ([Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, 2017](#)). Realistically, despite their efforts to welcome disadvantaged students, Catholic institutions of higher learning will continue to face equity challenges in the foreseeable future.

The second challenge is the low quality education being provided by many institutions of higher learning, which contributes to delays in graduation and higher costs for both students and states. The problem of low quality is also prevalent in K12 education in many countries as noted by the World Development Report on the learning crisis ([World Bank 2018](#)). Better preparation for students at the secondary level should help, but efforts to improve quality in institutions of higher learning are also key. While Catholic institutions may be comparatively doing better, quality may remain a concern for some.

The third challenge is that of employability with, again in many countries, high rates of unemployment and underemployment among university graduates. This comes in part from the issue of low quality, but it also relates to insufficient interactions between universities and the private sector. What students learn is not necessarily what is needed in the labor market (see [Filmer and Fox 2014](#), on sub-Saharan Africa, and [World Bank 2019](#), on the future of work and its implications for education globally).

While these challenges may be more severe in the developing world, they also apply to high-income countries. In the United States, low-income students face serious and rising challenges to acquiring post-secondary education ([Goldrick-Rab 2018](#)). Quality is also perceived as an issue, with substantial heterogeneity between institutions in the value added being provided and associated concerns about the cost of college (after years of price increases above inflation) in comparison to potential benefits ([Taylor et al. 2011](#)). This relates to concerns about the availability of well-paying jobs after graduation and the vulnerability inherent to the 'gig economy' and the changing nature of work<sup>9</sup>.

A university education should not cater only to the demand from the labor market, but it should lead to adequate employment opportunities given the financial sacrifices made by students, parents, and taxpayers for acquiring tertiary education. For example, in low-income countries where the formal sector is small, this could mean putting a stronger emphasis on entrepreneurial skills, as well as a shift towards fields of study where labor demand is stronger. As to faith and values, which are both essential for the identity of

Catholic colleges and universities, it is important to note that in most countries including those with a strong Catholic tradition, many students attending Catholic institutions are not Catholic themselves. In the United States for example, just over half of first year students at four-year Catholic colleges and universities self-identify as Catholic (Eagan et al. 2017).

Given this context, this article provides a broad overview of trends in enrollment in Catholic higher education globally, a discussion of some of the competitive pressures Catholic (and other) universities are confronted with today, and a basic analysis of the characteristics and motivations of the students who choose to enroll in Catholic colleges and universities<sup>10</sup>. The analysis is descriptive but given the relative lack of global analysis of these issues, it is hoped that the article will nevertheless be valuable to readers.

How has enrollment in Catholic institutions of higher education evolved over time? Does enrollment remain concentrated in few high-income countries, or is it increasing in the global south? In which region is enrollment the largest and where is it growing fastest? How is enrollment split between universities and other institutions of higher education, and by types of studies within universities (ecclesiastical and other studies)? What are the competitive pressures Catholic (and many other) universities are confronted with? What are the motivations of students to enroll in Catholic higher education, and more generally to pursue post-secondary education opportunities? Finally, in a context of a pluralism of views with regards to religion among their student body, what could Catholic colleges and universities do to strengthen their Catholic identity?

To provide tentative answers these questions, the next section documents trends in enrollment in Catholic institutions of higher education from 1980 to 2020. Thereafter, a discussion of some of the competitive pressures faced by Catholic universities is provided. Subsequently, some of the motivations for students to enroll in Catholic schools are explored based on insights from several different datasets. The article then discusses the possibility for Catholic colleges and universities to invest in service learning as one of the potential avenues to strengthen their Catholic identity in a way that respects the de facto pluralism of views on faith in their student body. A brief conclusion follows.

## 2. Global and Regional Trends in Enrollment in Catholic Higher Education

This section provides an overview of trends in enrollment in Catholic higher education globally and regionally from 1980 to 2020<sup>11</sup>. Growth or even stability in enrollment is probably not a primary objective of Catholic institutions of higher education, but it does matter. A healthy enrollment level is necessary for financial sustainability in an increasingly competitive higher education market. It also contributes to the evangelization mission of the Church. Beyond the Church, Catholic higher education provides benefits to society at large, including budget savings for states. Catholic institutions of higher learning also provide choice for students and thereby contribute to pluralism in democratic societies.

Data on the number of students in Catholic higher education are available in the Church's annual statistical yearbooks (Secretariat of State [of the Vatican] 2022). The data are self-reported by chancery offices of ecclesiastical jurisdictions through an annual questionnaire. Less than five percent of the jurisdictions do not fill the questionnaire, and those tend to be small, thus not affecting results substantially.

Table 1 provides estimates of enrollment in Catholic institutions of higher education for the three categories of students mentioned earlier and for the total number of students enrolled globally and for five regions: Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. These are the regional aggregates used in the statistical yearbooks of the Church. In 2020, 6.6 million students were enrolled in Catholic Higher Education. Of those, 2.4 million were in higher institutes, 0.4 million were enrolled in ecclesiastical studies in universities, and 3.8 million were studying other topics at Catholic universities. Data are provided by decade to illustrate long-term trends, but in addition data are also provided for 2018 and 2020 to assess recent changes. The data do not account (or at least do not fully account) for the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on enrollment since the pandemic started in 2020.

**Table 1.** Trends in the number of students enrolled in Catholic higher education (thousands).

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018	2020
Higher Institutes						
Africa	6.5	6.8	24.8	88.4	137.2	174.6
Americas	383.0	427.9	517.5	795.1	591.9	685.8
Asia	445.9	539.6	795.7	1135.7	1205.6	1253.4
Europe	116.3	157.2	221.8	270.5	308.5	280.7
Oceania	3.1	2.7	8.8	14.5	8.6	9.3
World	954.7	1134.2	1568.6	2304.2	2251.6	2403.8
Universities—Ecclesiastical Studies						
Africa	1.0	1.4	5.8	15.6	49.6	43.9
Americas	28.5	31.9	53.9	158.4	233.1	181.4
Asia	7.0	8.7	71.5	184.3	129.3	108.5
Europe	29.0	52.7	65.8	116.0	89.2	84.7
Oceania	1.3	1.7	3.8	12.4	6.7	6.7
World	66.8	96.5	200.9	486.7	507.9	425.2
Universities—Other Studies						
Africa	0.9	2.1	41.1	106.2	177.5	211.6
Americas	870.3	1070.2	2088.5	2183.6	2187.0	2262.4
Asia	169.4	376.1	467.3	490.7	518.2	460.8
Europe	98.2	149.9	332.7	541.7	788.0	795.7
Oceania	0.2	2.6	5.1	16.2	36.9	41.6
World	1138.9	1600.9	2934.7	3338.5	3707.6	3771.9
Total						
Africa	8.3	10.3	71.7	210.1	364.3	430.1
Americas	1281.8	1530.0	2660.0	3137.2	3012.0	3129.5
Asia	622.2	924.4	1334.6	1810.8	1853.0	1822.7
Europe	243.5	359.9	620.3	928.2	1185.6	1161.1
Oceania	4.6	7.0	17.7	43.1	52.2	57.6
World	2160.4	2831.7	4704.2	6129.3	6467.1	6600.9

Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

A few findings are worth emphasizing. First, there has been substantial growth in enrollment over time. Enrollment grew three-fold globally between 1980 and 2020, from 2.2 million students to 6.6 million. As discussed in [Wodon \(2021\)](#), Catholic higher education grew even faster than K12 education. However, while for K12 education most of the growth was in Africa, for tertiary education most of the growth took place in the Americas (gain of 1.8 million students), Asia (gain of 1.2 million students), and Europe (gain of 0.9 million students). In terms of annual growth rates, as will be discussed below, Africa is growing at the fastest rate, but it is starting from a low base, so that absolute gains remain smaller. In terms of the three categories of students, the largest gains were observed in absolute terms for university students not engaged in ecclesiastical studies and students in higher institutes, but large gains were also observed for students in ecclesiastical studies, although in that case the gains were observed in the earlier decades of the period under review, with losses in the last decade. There is a marked decline between 2018 and 2020 for students in ecclesiastical studies which could be related to data issues, but is nevertheless significant. Even though many students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies may not have considered joining the priesthood or a religious order, it could be that the crisis in the number of vocations in many parts of the world has contributed to the decline in students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies in the last decade.

Second, as shown in [Table 2](#), there are differences between regions in the share of students enrolled by type of higher education. In 2020, students in universities (non-ecclesiastical studies) accounted for 57.1% of total enrollment, versus 36.4% for students in higher institutes. Asia, where India plays a major role (given that there are virtually

no Catholic institutions in China), is the only one of the five regions where most students are enrolled in higher institutes. This is related in part to the explosion of private non-university institutions of higher education in India as a response to a demand from the rising middle class for higher education. Globally, within university students, there are almost nine students in non-ecclesiastical studies for each student in ecclesiastical studies, but again with regional differences.

**Table 2.** Proportion of students enrolled in Catholic institutions of higher education by type (%).

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018	2020
Higher Institutes						
Africa	77.5	66.3	34.6	42.1	37.7	40.6
Americas	29.9	28.0	19.5	25.3	19.7	21.9
Asia	71.7	58.4	59.6	62.7	65.1	68.8
Europe	47.8	43.7	35.8	29.1	26.0	24.2
Oceania	67.4	38.0	49.6	33.7	16.4	16.1
World	44.2	40.1	33.3	37.6	34.8	36.4
Universities—Ecclesiastical Studies						
Africa	11.6	13.6	8.1	7.4	13.6	10.2
Americas	2.2	2.1	2.0	5.0	7.7	5.8
Asia	1.1	0.9	5.4	10.2	7.0	6.0
Europe	11.9	14.7	10.6	12.5	7.5	7.3
Oceania	29.4	24.6	21.7	28.8	12.9	11.6
World	3.1	3.4	4.3	7.9	7.9	6.4
Universities—Other Studies						
Africa	10.8	20.2	57.3	50.5	48.7	49.2
Americas	67.9	69.9	78.5	69.6	72.6	72.3
Asia	27.2	40.7	35.0	27.1	28.0	25.3
Europe	40.3	41.7	53.6	58.4	66.5	68.5
Oceania	3.3	37.5	28.7	37.6	70.7	72.2
World	52.7	56.5	62.4	54.5	57.3	57.1

Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

The shares of students enrolled in higher institutes declined in the first two decades after 1980, but increased thereafter. Among universities, there was a steady rise in the share of students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies in the first 30 years of data provided in Table 2, but a decline thereafter<sup>12</sup>. In 1980, these students represented 3.1% of total enrollment. By 2010, this had risen to 7.9% especially thanks to gains in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. By contrast, in Europe and Oceania, there was a decline in the share of students in ecclesiastical studies, albeit from higher baseline levels. The drop in students in ecclesiastical studies in the last few years led to their share of all students in higher education retreating to 6.4% by 2020. Note that at the regional level, there are a few jumps in the shares reported in Table 2 for ecclesiastical studies. This is due in part to the fact that estimates of enrollment for these students are smaller in absolute terms, especially in Oceania, so that even comparatively small changes can lead to jumps in shares.

Third, in proportionate terms, as a percentage change from the base, the highest growth rates in overall enrollment are observed in Africa, even though in absolute terms larger gains are reported in other regions. The annual growth rates from 1980 to 2020 (taking into account compounding) are provided in Table 3. In Africa, total enrollment grew over the last four decades at a rate of more than 10 percent per year. If the growth in enrollment continues to be higher than in the rest of the world, the region will account for a progressively larger share in total enrollment, but this will take some time. For reference, growth rates from 2018 to 2020 (thus over two years) are also provided in Table 3. There are some changes, especially for students in ecclesiastical studies as mentioned earlier. Overall, there appears to be a decline in growth rates, as the growth in the number of students



enrolled in universities declined even if there was a rebound in the number of students enrolled in other higher education institutions. It is too early to say whether new patterns of growth are at work, and the data do not reflect (or at least do not fully reflect) the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic may have had. As discussed in the next section, what is clear, however, is that Catholic institutions of higher education operate in an increasingly competitive environment, especially in countries such as the United States where students must pay tuition.

**Table 3.** Annual growth rate for enrollment in Catholic institutions of higher education (%).

	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	1980–2020	2018–2020
Higher Institutes						
Africa	0.5%	13.8%	13.6%	5.6%	8.6%	12.8%
Americas	1.1%	1.9%	4.4%	−3.6%	1.5%	7.6%
Asia	1.9%	4.0%	3.6%	0.7%	2.6%	2.0%
Europe	3.1%	3.5%	2.0%	1.7%	2.2%	−4.6%
Oceania	−1.4%	12.5%	5.1%	−6.3%	2.8%	4.0%
World	1.7%	3.3%	3.9%	−0.3%	2.3%	3.3%
Universities—Ecclesiastical Studies						
Africa	3.4%	15.3%	10.4%	15.6%	9.9%	−5.9%
Americas	1.1%	5.4%	11.4%	4.9%	4.7%	−11.8%
Asia	2.2%	23.4%	9.9%	−4.3%	7.1%	−8.4%
Europe	6.2%	2.2%	5.8%	−3.2%	2.7%	−2.6%
Oceania	2.7%	8.4%	12.6%	−7.4%	4.2%	0.0%
World	3.7%	7.6%	9.3%	0.5%	4.7%	−8.5%
Universities—Other Studies						
Africa	8.8%	34.6%	10.0%	6.6%	14.6%	9.2%
Americas	2.1%	6.9%	0.4%	0.0%	2.4%	1.7%
Asia	8.3%	2.2%	0.5%	0.7%	2.5%	−5.7%
Europe	4.3%	8.3%	5.0%	4.8%	5.4%	0.5%
Oceania	29.2%	7.0%	12.3%	10.8%	14.3%	6.2%
World	3.5%	6.2%	1.3%	1.3%	3.0%	0.9%
Total						
Africa	2.2%	21.4%	11.4%	7.1%	10.4%	8.7%
Americas	1.8%	5.7%	1.7%	−0.5%	2.3%	1.9%
Asia	4.0%	3.7%	3.1%	0.3%	2.7%	−0.8%
Europe	4.0%	5.6%	4.1%	3.1%	4.0%	−1.0%
Oceania	4.3%	9.7%	9.3%	2.4%	6.5%	5.0%
World	2.7%	5.2%	2.7%	0.7%	2.8%	1.0%

Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

Fourth, as is the case in K12 education, there are substantial differences between countries in the size of their Catholic higher education networks. One could argue that in some countries, the differences between different Catholic institutions of higher learning may be larger than those observed between countries, but we will come back to this issue later. In the meantime, Table 4 provides data on the top 15 countries in terms of total enrollment in 2020. Together, these countries account for about four fifths of global enrollment. By comparison, the top 15 countries at those levels of education account for about two thirds of global enrollment in Catholic K12 schools. As expected, given the correlation between enrollment in higher education and economic development, there is a higher concentration of enrollment in a few countries for higher education than for K12 education. The country with the largest enrollment is the United States, with close to 1.2 million students in higher education. Three large developing countries follow: India, the Philippines, and Brazil. Italy is next, possibly in part because of a concentration of students in ecclesiastical and other studies in Rome.

**Table 4.** Top 15 countries by enrollment in Catholic higher education, 2020.

	Higher Institutes	Universities— Eccl.	Universities— Others	Total
United States	354,505	22,789	830,335	1,207,629
India	801,883	19,392	62,553	883,828
Philippines	348,455	36,900	162,707	548,062
Brazil	21,223	53,230	451,273	525,726
Italy	5913	23,107	302,673	331,693
Mexico	56,246	23,953	163,530	243,729
Colombia	9075	6961	227,276	243,312
Chile	87,808	73	117,158	205,039
Great Britain (*)	21,907	-	181,610	203,517
Belgium	126,366	2676	50,823	179,865
Argentina	54,763	651	101,549	156,963
Spain	15,291	3083	115,519	133,893
Indonesia	34,930	7850	78,000	120,780
Peru	31,896	576	65,764	98,236
France	61,298	17,566	13,425	92,289

Source: Annual statistical yearbook of the Church. Note: (\*) the estimate of enrollment in non-ecclesiastic university studies for Great Britain seems too high and may not be correct given the small footprint of Catholic higher education in the country. In the 2016 and 2017 yearbooks, the estimates were much lower, at 39,494 and 37,484 students, respectively. For this article, potential data errors at the level of individual countries are not too consequential because analysis is done at the aggregate level. However, when conducting country-level work, it is important to check for consistency over time, and cross-check the data available from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church with other sources of country-level data.

The smallest country in the mix by population size in Table 4 is Belgium, as is the case for K12 education. This is in part because under the Constitution, Catholic schools and higher education institutions benefit from public funding as do public universities. None of the countries in the top 15 are classified as low income by the World Bank. By contrast, for K12 education, three of the top five countries in terms of total enrollment are low income (the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, and Uganda). Note also more generally that this section relies on data from the annual statistical yearbooks to measure trends over time in enrollment in Catholic higher education. In most cases, the data appear to be consistent over time and reasonably accurate. However, in a few instances, this may not be the case<sup>13</sup>.

For K12 education, as discussed in Wodon (2021), enrollment in Catholic schools has been growing especially rapidly in Africa and to a lower extent in South Asia. As a result, globally, seven in ten students in Catholic primary schools live in low- and lower-middle income countries. By contrast, for higher education, Catholic universities and other institutions of post-secondary education remain concentrated in upper-middle and high-income countries, as is the case for other universities, both public and private. Globally, seven in ten students in Catholic higher education live in upper-middle or high-income countries. Karram (2011) notes that much of the growth in private higher education in Africa is from religious institutions, but again this is from a low base. Therefore, Africa will not account for a large share of students enrolled in religious institutions of higher learning for some time.

### 3. Pressures Faced by Catholic and Other Universities

The previous section suggests substantial growth in enrollment in Catholic higher education over the last 40 years or so, even if the pattern of the last few years suggests that growth may have been reduced. As mentioned earlier, the data do not yet account for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on enrollment, but it seems clear from the literature that today, many Catholic universities are feeling pressures on enrollment and revenues, especially in high-income countries where enrollment remains concentrated and where demographic trends do not provide an ever-growing pool of potential students as is the case in many developing countries. The higher education market is becoming increasingly competitive, and Catholic as well as other universities are affected.

A recent report for the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) in the context of structural changes accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic notes five types of pressures affecting universities today: (1) financial constraints; (2) reductions in international student mobility; (3) the impact of technology; (4) the rise of micro-credentials as potential alternatives to traditional degrees; all of which may lead to (5) broader debates about the future of higher education (Mellul 2022)<sup>14</sup>. In addition, in several high-income countries where Catholic universities have a strong footprint (the United States being a case in point), two other factors may lead to pressure on enrollment: (1) a demographic transition due to lower fertility rates, and (2) a movement towards secularization, or at least a pluralism of views regarding faith which creates challenges for Catholic colleges and universities to attract students with different views about faith while maintaining their Catholic identity. In what follows, these trends are briefly discussed.

First, the pandemic led to financial stress for many universities. In some countries, universities were relatively protected thanks to public funding reducing out-of-pocket costs for students. However, even when universities are mostly publicly funded, crises can lead to a reduction in revenues from the state, and broader trends in funding are not necessarily favorable (e.g., European University Association's Public Funding Observatory (Bennetot Pruvot et al. 2021)). In the United States, pressures brought about by the pandemic exacerbated long-standing criticisms about the rising cost of higher education. Combined with predicted losses in enrollment due to lower fertility rates, this is threatening the financial sustainability of smaller liberal arts colleges. Marymount California University is one of the latest Catholic universities that closed due to losses in enrollment and broader financial pressures.

Second, the pandemic led to a sharp drop in international student mobility. In countries where Catholic and other universities relied in part on international students for tuition revenue (this includes the United States, as well as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, among others), the reduction in international students generated additional financial stress. It is unclear whether international student flows will fully recover, but if they do, there could be shifts in terms of the countries of destination.

Third, the pandemic accelerated the transformation of higher education by technology. There was a massive rapid shift towards remote teaching and learning because of the pandemic, but interest in online learning had been rising for some time before. One example was that of massive online open courses (MOOCs), but there was a broader acknowledgment of the benefits of blended learning combining the best of face-to-face and online learning. There is evidence that students learn more in traditional versus online settings (Altindag et al. 2021), but the demand by students for flexible learning options is here to stay, adding financial stress given the need for universities to invest in technology.

Fourth, the rise of a focus on skills and micro-credentials for employability may affect the competitiveness of universities focusing only on traditional degrees. While some may decry this focus on employability, ensuring that their graduates find appropriate employment is simply a necessity for all universities. This requires ensuring that students acquire up-to-date skills requested by employers, thereby competing with an increasing number of organizations, including technology firms, providing micro-credentials through more flexible, shorter, and less expensive courses (Pelletier et al. 2021). One option for universities to weather this change is to partner with firms providing such credentials.

Fifth, these multiple pressures put in question the value of traditional forms of higher education. Mellul (2022) concludes her review of challenges in higher education by citing various scenarios for the future. Of particular interest is the *Economist Intelligence Unit's* (2020) suggestion of five innovative models of higher education: the online, cluster, experiential, partnership, and liberal arts model. The online model aims to provide "anytime, anywhere, to anyone" learning. To be successful, this requires investments in personalized materials and, for some students, hybrid learning options. Under the cluster model, several institutions combine their efforts to reach economies of scale and offer more options for students, which requires establishing common priorities and sharing the burden of offerings



equitably. The experiential model goes beyond the classroom to provide internships and hands-on projects that help in the acquisition of skills for the labor market, with potential challenges in finding adequate faculty. The partnership model enables universities to work with corporations to upskill and reskill. Finally, the liberal arts model prioritizes intellectual development over skills. This model is closest to the traditional idea of the Catholic university, but given low teacher–student ratios and thereby high costs, it may not be financially sustainable for many universities in an increasingly competitive environment.

In addition to the five challenges mentioned in the report for IFCU by Mellul (2022), two additional challenges should be noted. First, there is a risk due to demographic shifts that enrollment may decline in some of the high-income countries where Catholic higher education has a strong footprint, with the United States again being a case in point. As the last wave of children from baby boomers (individuals born from 1946 to 1964) complete their undergraduate studies, future enrollment may be lower given both lower fertility rates and a lower share of the population of childbearing age. In high-income countries, the COVID-19 pandemic may have led to a further decrease in fertility rates. This demographic shift together with more restrictive immigration policies is likely to lead to a reduction in the pool of available youth in the traditional age bracket targeted by higher education. Colleges and universities could adapt their programs to attract more students who are older and interested in lifelong learning, but this would require focused efforts within the competitive constraints mentioned earlier.

Second, again in high-income countries where Catholic higher education has a strong footprint, the share of the adult population that identifies as Catholic, or more broadly as Christian, has been declining. In the United States for example, only 63 percent of the adult population identified as Christian in 2021 versus 78 percent in 2007 (Smith 2021). Most of the decline in affiliation was concentrated among Protestants, but this may still affect Catholic colleges and universities. Furthermore, in proportion to base values in 2007, the share of adults praying daily and the share considering religion as very important in their life dropped even more. Apart from secularization, the sex abuse scandal that has marred the Catholic Church may also contribute to disaffection from the Church and lower enrollment in Catholic colleges and universities. This generates challenges for Catholic colleges and universities to serve students with a plurality of views regarding faith while also maintaining, or even strengthening, their Catholic identity.

Before concluding this section on some of the challenges faced by Catholic (and other) colleges and universities, it should be emphasized again that there is substantial heterogeneity in Catholic higher education within a country as well as between countries. One aspect of this heterogeneity was already apparent in the discussion of the previous section and the three reporting categories used in the statistical yearbooks of the Church to track enrollment. There are distinctions between universities and other institutions of higher learning, and within universities between students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies (many of whom may not consider ordination but are interested in religious studies) and those enrolled in other types of studies. Yet beyond those aggregate distinctions and the fact that a student's experience in, say, sub-Saharan Africa may be very different from that of a student in North America, there is also often substantial variability in circumstances between universities within a country.

The United States, with more than 240 colleges and universities, is one case. Some American colleges and universities are large institutions that are among the best in the country, while others are small liberal arts colleges that in some cases struggle to attract enough students to be sustainable. The changes in the landscape of higher education have forced some small institutions to close or merge with larger ones, showing how the sources of pressure highlighted in this section may have different impacts on colleges and universities depending on the strength of their position in the higher education market<sup>15</sup>.

#### 4. Student Enrollment: Characteristics and Priorities

The upshot of the previous two sections is that enrollment in Catholic universities has grown substantially for several decades, but less so in the most recent years, with at least some institutions encountering headwinds. The challenges that lie ahead given increasing competition may be daunting for some institutions, with the COVID-19 pandemic not helping. In particular, the pressure to focus on skills and employability keeps increasing, which may be at odds with the traditional emphasis of Catholic universities on academic excellence, values, and the transmission of the faith. How Catholic colleges and universities could strengthen their identity in the context of pluralism in religious views among their student body will be discussed in the next section. In this section, the focus is first on what can be learned from student perceptions of, and rationale for enrolling in, Catholic universities.

One would expect that, at least for some students, faith plays a role in selecting a Catholic college or university. However, how much faith matters for college selection, and how college selection in turn affects faith while students are enrolled are empirical questions. At the international level, a few studies have explored the values held by students in Catholic universities ([Aparicio Gómez and Cubillo 2014](#); [Mabille and Bartroli 2021](#)). Reviews of the literature suggest that college students may be more engaged with religion than commonly believed, but typically more broadly than deeply, to use a characterization by [Mayrl and Oeur \(2009\)](#). Several authors have suggested that in American colleges and universities, there may be a return of religion ([Sommerville 2006](#); [Hill 2009](#); [Jacobsen and Jacobsen 2012](#)). However, this does not imply that faith is today for students a primary motivation in college choice. In this section, two sources of data, one international and the other for the United States, are used to explore some of the characteristics and motivations of students enrolled in Catholic universities.

##### 4.1. Profile of the Student Body from Multi-Country Surveys

What are the characteristics of students enrolled in Catholic higher education? Tentative answers are available from data collected in 2012 and 2017 by the IFCU among its member universities. In both years, data were collected through online questionnaires. Sample sizes are relatively large. For example, 17,735 students from 42 universities in 21 countries responded to the 2017 survey. The surveys may not be fully representative. Still, a few findings are interesting and a number of student characteristics emerge from the data ([Mabille and Bartroli 2021](#); on the 2012 survey, see [Aparicio Gómez and Cubillo 2014](#)).

The socio-demographic profile of students is broadly similar in both surveys. In 2017, the mode for students' age is 20–22 years (44% of all students), with younger students in Asia and older students in Africa. Almost two third of respondents are women (65%), possibly because Catholic universities may be seen as more protective and as providing a more personalized education. More than nine in ten students are single, as expected. The share of students whose parents have university degrees is at about half, and a majority of students come from upper or upper-middle class families, although this is less the case in Africa. A majority of students went to private secondary schools, most of which were Catholic schools. Three in four students continue to live with their parents during their studies. While students are aware of the Catholic identity of their university, the majority avoid engaging in it.

Employment considerations play a large role in the decision to enroll in Catholic universities and the choice of a field of study, as is the case for other types of universities. Finding a good job is the main reason to enroll. By contrast, contributing to the good of society or to its disadvantaged members is rarely mentioned. [Mabille and Bartroli \(2021\)](#) suggest that between 2012 and 2017 students seem to place even more importance on the economic benefits associated with their higher education, possibly at the expense of how well their particular field of study may fit for their own profile. They also argue that students value the opportunity to develop their professional savoir faire more than (critical) knowledge.

Another important finding is that in terms of extracurricular activities, students in Catholic universities may not be very different from those in non-denominational universities. In particular, less than one in five students (18%) participate in religious activities organized by the universities, and only about half of the students consider themselves Catholic. Engagement in cultural activities is limited as well (41%), as is engagement in various societies or other non-profit organizations (33%). The findings from the two surveys tend to be similar, and this is also the case for the student's views. For example, most students tend to have middle of the road views related to the functioning of markets. Most students do not see capitalism as sacred, but also do not call for radical alternatives, even if they are critical of politicians.

#### 4.2. Reasons for Choosing Catholic Schools in the United States

In the United States, more detailed data are available regarding the reasons that lead students to enroll in higher education and in particular in Catholic colleges and universities. According to data from the CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) Freshman Survey<sup>16</sup>, about a quarter of all college freshmen at four-year colleges in the United States identify as Catholic, while the proportion is just above two fifths for freshmen at institutions identifying as Roman Catholic. In other words, as already pointed out, many students at Catholic colleges and universities are not themselves Catholic.

Data from the CIRP Freshman Survey can be used to assess whether there have been changes over time in students' priorities when choosing a particular college. As shown in Table 5 for the latest available CIRP survey (data for 2019), eight reasons are cited by almost half or more students attending Catholic colleges as very important reasons in deciding to go to the particular college in which they enrolled: (1) This college has a very good academic reputation (71.8%); (2) This college's graduates get good jobs (67.3%); (3) I was offered financial assistance (65.5%); (4) The academic reputation of my intended major (59.0%); (5) A visit to this campus (54.7%); (6) This college has a good reputation for its social and extracurricular activities (52.4%); (7) I wanted to go to a school about the size of this college (49.7%); and (8) The cost of attending this college (48.7%). The other reasons in Table 5 are cited by less than 40 percent of students.

**Table 5.** Share of college freshmen declaring various reasons as “very important” in deciding to go to that particular college (data for Catholic institutions), CIRP Freshman Survey 2000, 2010, 2019 (%).

Reasons for Deciding to Go to Their Particular College	2019	2010	2000
This college has a very good academic reputation	71.8	70.8	60.4
This college's graduates get good jobs	67.3	62.4	56.4
I was offered financial assistance	65.5	67.7	51.6
The academic reputation of my intended major	59.0	-	-
A visit to this campus	54.7	50.5	-
This college has a good reputation for its social and extracurricular activities	52.4	40.5	29.3
I wanted to go to a school about the size of this college	49.7	55.7	52.8
The cost of attending this college	48.7	39.5	-
This college's graduates make a difference in the world	39.6	-	-
This college's graduates gain admission to top graduate/professional schools	39.0	38.7	32.7
Communication with a professor	30.3	-	-
I wanted to live near home	28.0	23.2	21.9
I was admitted through an Early Action or Early Decision program	22.2	14.9	7.2
My parents/relatives wanted me to come here	19.2	16.4	8.2
I was attracted by the religious affiliation/orientation of this college	18.1	19.7	15.1
Rankings in national magazines	17.7	16.2	7.9
Could not afford first choice	15.5	12.5	-
Not offered aid by first choice	13.5	11.0	7.2
High school counselor advised me	12.0	12.1	7.4
My teacher advised me	7.9	7.2	3.9
Private college counselor advised me	7.1	5.5	3.5

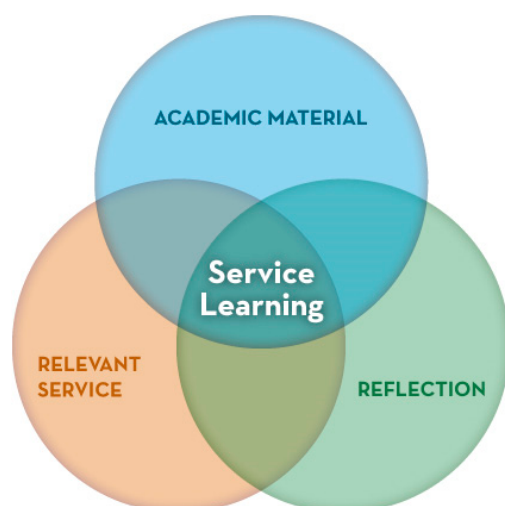
Source: Adapted from [Stolzenberg et al. \(2020\)](#); [Pryor et al. \(2010\)](#); [Sax et al. \(2000\)](#).

The data for previous years suggest similar conclusions, even if there is no strict comparability because some of the modalities for responses in the 2019 survey were not available in previous years and vice versa. Still, if there is any trend over the last two decades, it is towards a stronger emphasis on employability (as well as extracurricular activities), as already noted in the previous section when discussing data collected from Catholic universities globally.

### 5. Opportunities: The Case of Service Learning

Much of the discussion in the previous sections highlights challenges facing higher education writ large, as well as the motivation for students to select Catholic or other colleges and universities, with employment-related concerns being prominent. The challenges faced by Catholic and other higher education institutions include a lack of equitable access, cost, concerns about the skills of graduates, enrollment pressures, the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, a reduced flow of international students in some countries, the challenges posed by technology, and so on. Assessing how each of these challenges may affect Catholic colleges and universities (positively or negatively) in particular is beyond the scope of this article. However, there is one particular opportunity, that of service learning, that Catholic higher education institutions could pursue to respond to the aspirations of their students while also strengthening their institutions' Catholic identity and respecting the pluralism of views about faith of their student body. Investing in service learning opportunities for students would not solve all of the challenges faced by Catholic colleges and universities, but it seems to be an option to tackle some of them while being faithful to the institutions' mission and responding to the desire of many students attending Catholic higher education to engage in community and service work while enrolled<sup>17</sup>.

What is service learning? There is no universally agreed definition, but the idea is to integrate service and community engagement into the learning experience of students and provide credit-bearing courses in the curriculum to do so<sup>18</sup>. Through service learning, students and faculty may deepen their understanding of concepts discussed in the classroom and assess their relevance for the real world, typically within a social justice lens. Service learning is a particular form of community engagement that combines academic material, service relevant to communities, and reflection (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Components of service learning. Source: Loyola University New Orleans (<http://www.loyno.edu/engage/service-learning>). Accessed on 10 August 2022.

The concept of service learning did not emerge from Catholic educational institutions, but it is aligned with Catholic social thought and it has been emphasized by Pope Francis<sup>19</sup> and the Congregation for Catholic Education<sup>20</sup>, including in their guidance towards a Global Compact on Education to renew our passion for a more open and inclusive education.

The commitments called for by Pope Francis under the idea of the Global Compact are aligned with the concept of service learning as one potential avenue to promote social justice<sup>21</sup>. Importantly, because promoting service learning does not presuppose or require adherence by students to the Catholic faith, it may help to strengthen the Catholic identity of colleges and universities while being respectful of the pluralism of religious views in the student body.

Table 6 highlights some of the perceived differences between community service, service learning, and traditional internships. Community service may lead to transformative learning, but the potential of service learning to do so is enhanced by the fact that it is on purpose embedded in the curriculum in order to emphasize critical reflection. As to the comparison of service learning with traditional internships, a benefit expected from service learning is that apart from helping students acquire skills that could enhance their employability upon graduation, service learning also tends to have a strong civic engagement component as well as (ideally) full engagement from the faculty.

**Table 6.** Differences between community service, service learning, and internships.

	Community Service	Service Learning	Internship
Primary beneficiary	Recipient(s)	Recipient(s) and provider	Provider
Primary focus	Providing meaningful service	Providing meaningful service and enhancing classroom learning	Learning by doing
Educational purpose	Moral, personal, and social growth and development	Academic learning, enhancing intellectual and civic engagement	Career development and professional preparation
Curricular integration	None	Fully integrated into the curriculum	Co-curricular or supplemental
Nature of activity	Based on student interest/motivation	Based on course topic or discipline	Based on industry or career

Source: Adapted slightly from Loyola University New Orleans (<http://www.loyno.edu/engage/service-learning-vs-community-service>). Accessed on 10 August 2022.

Have Catholic colleges and universities adopted programs promoting service learning? Data collected by ZIGLA (2019) for the Uniservitate collaborative<sup>22</sup> suggest differences between universities and regions of the world in the adoption of the practice. The data are based on a survey sent to 448 Catholic universities, of which 132 responded. Most respondents indicated that their university had service learning activities, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, and Asia, and to a lower extent in Europe (especially Eastern Europe), the Middle East and North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Typical issues considered in service learning activities include social justice, education, community participation, and health, with environmental issues less commonly considered, although this may change in the future. Colleges and universities tend to partner with community organizations and NGOs, local churches, and occasionally governments to implement their service learning activities.

In terms of how well service learning activities are integrated within the universities, substantial differences were observed between universities. While nine in ten respondents declared that their university had service learning activities, these activities were assessed based on responses to the survey questions to be highly integrated into the universities in just over one fourth of the universities. Typically, universities in Latin America, the United States, and Canada had service learning activities that were better integrated, for example in terms of their role in the curriculum or the involvement of faculty. The motivation for developing service learning activities were of three main types: institutional (e.g., engaging with the community and appealing to the interests of students and faculty), religious (e.g., Pope Francis' emphasis on service and more broadly Catholic social teaching), and



civic (e.g., concern for social justice and corporate social responsibility/citizenship). As to the barriers to expanding and integrating service learning activities in the offering of universities, respondents mentioned a lack of human resources and leadership as well as resistance from faculty and managers, risks of politicization and conflicts with pastoral actions, a lack of alignment with traditional incentives for faculty that emphasize research, and lack of economic and logistical resources, including time constraints.

While expanding service learning seems to be a good fit for Catholic colleges and universities, caution is nevertheless warranted in terms of expected outcomes. Service- and community-based learning has been identified as one of eleven high-impact practices by the Association of American Colleges and Universities<sup>23</sup>. The other practices are capstone courses and projects, collaborative assignments and projects, common intellectual experiences, diversity/global learning, eportfolios, first-year seminars and experiences, internships, learning communities, undergraduate research, and writing-intensive courses. Yet robust evidence on the impact of service learning remains limited.

In a review of service-learning programs for business school students, [Marco-Gardoqui et al. \(2020\)](#) suggest that students may benefit from service learning in a variety of ways, including greater social engagement, improved self-esteem, and the acquisition of skills (e.g., teamwork, leadership, and communication). Many of the studies included in the review were however implemented at a small scale and without randomization. Using more stringent criteria, a literature review for service learning programs in K12 education by [Filges et al. \(2022\)](#) suggests that few randomized controlled trials have been conducted on the effectiveness of service learning on students' academic success, personal and social skills, and risk behaviors. The available robust studies, all implemented in the United States, do not yet provide conclusive evidence that the programs that were evaluated improved student outcomes in a systematic way. This does not imply that service learning may not generate benefits, but while guidance exists on how to institutionalize service learning activities in universities<sup>24</sup>, more research is needed to prove its effectiveness and to identify the conditions under which these activities are most likely to generate substantial benefits for students.

## 6. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to provide stylized facts on Catholic higher education globally. The section on enrollment trends provided a simple descriptive analysis of the data, considering both long- and short-term trends. Several findings emerge from the data. First, enrollment in Catholic higher education grew three-fold from 1980 to 2020 globally. One could expect growth to continue given higher demand from higher completion rates for secondary education as well as population growth especially in the developing world, but in high-income countries, growth may have slowed in recent years, and there is concern about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (which is not yet reflected in the latest available data). Second, in most regions, Catholic institutions enroll more students in universities than in higher institutes, but in Asia, the reverse is observed, in large part because of India. Third, in proportionate terms, as a percentage change from the base, the highest growth rates in enrollment are observed in Africa. In absolute terms by contrast, larger gains are reported in other regions, with most of the students in Catholic higher education still residing in high- and middle-income countries. Fourth, there are substantial differences between countries in the size of their Catholic higher education networks. The United States still has the largest enrollment, but India is moving up in terms of enrollment.

The next section was devoted to a brief analysis of some of the current pressures faced by Catholic and other universities in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Following a report by IFCU staff, five pressures were highlighted: (1) financial constraints; (2) reductions in international student mobility; (3) the impact of technology; (4) the rise of micro-credentials as potential alternatives to traditional degrees; all of which may lead to (5) broader debates about the future of higher education. Various scenarios have been suggested on how to adapt to these pressures. For example, a typology by the Economist

Intelligence Unit suggests five innovative models of higher education: the online, cluster, experiential, partnership, and liberal arts model. The last model is closest to the traditional idea of the Catholic university, but least likely to be sustainable. In addition, two more sources of pressures on enrollment were mentioned for high-income countries: the decline in the pool of students of traditional college-going age as the children of baby boomers complete their studies, and the trend towards secularization combined with the sexual abuse scandal which may both lead to a growing disaffection from the Church.

The following section of the article explored some of the characteristics and motivations of students enrolling in Catholic universities. It is often argued that Catholic education provides special benefits to students and the broader society. First, there is a perception that the education provided in Catholic institutions of higher education is of good quality, and possibly better on average than in other institutions. Second, while welcoming students from all religious backgrounds, Catholic institutions pride themselves in providing an education that is grounded in the Catholic faith and that emphasizes moral values. The question of Catholic identity or “What makes us different?” is often the focus of debates in scholarly work on Catholic education.

At the same time, Catholic institutions are not immune to broader challenges faced by all institutions of higher learning, whether Catholic or not. There could even be a risk of focusing too much on issues related to Catholic identity, or at least the Catholic faith, at the expense of confronting other challenges. Without providing direct answers to those questions, what the data suggest is that for some students, values and faith clearly matter when choosing a university, but for most students, other factors related to employment prospects matter even more.

In the last section of the article, the opportunity for Catholic colleges and universities to invest in providing service learning opportunities was discussed. It was mentioned that while the concept of service learning did not emerge from Catholic educational institutions, it is aligned with the Catholic identity of these institutions and has been encouraged by Pope Francis. Although one should be careful not to overstate the benefits of service learning for students given the paucity of rigorous impact evaluations, it has been identified a high-impact practice by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Data collected as part of a global assessment of the level of institutionalization of service learning activities in Catholic colleges and universities suggest that while most universities have some way to go, there is a strong base to build upon, especially in the Americas, which is encouraging.

As mentioned early on, the aim of this article was to provide a few stylized facts on enrollment trends in Catholic higher education, the competitive pressures felt by many colleges and universities, some of the factors leading students to choose specific institutions for their studies, and as one illustration of potential opportunities, a discussion of how investing in service learning makes sense for Catholic institutions, with many of these institutions already doing so. One of the constraints of providing stylized facts at a global level is that particular issues faced in any given country cannot be discussed in any detail. This is, however, carried out in a separate article in this special issue of *Religions* focusing on the United States<sup>25</sup>. Hopefully, the broad panorama provided in this article will be useful to those considering these issues and how to ensure that Catholic colleges and universities continue to play their role in higher education<sup>26</sup>.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To provide broad context, the first section provides updates with more recent data of an analysis provided in [Wodon \(2018, 2020a\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> The term ‘K12’ in the United States refers to kindergarten to 12th grade, i.e., to preschool to the completion of secondary school.
- <sup>3</sup> The term ‘college’ is used with reference to the terminology in the United States where colleges are post-secondary institutions, albeit typically slightly smaller than national or regional universities and with an emphasis on undergraduate as opposed to graduate education.
- <sup>4</sup> In India, for example, using different categories of higher education institutions than those used in the Statistical Yearbook of the Church, the available data suggest that apart from a dozen medical colleges and universities, the Church operates approximately 25 management institutions, 300 professional colleges and engineering institutes, 450 degree colleges, and 5500 junior colleges, all of which are post-secondary institutions ([Manipadam 2018](#)).
- <sup>5</sup> The enrollment estimates provided in this article are the latest available at the time of writing. For analysis of slightly older data, see [Wodon \(2018, 2020a, 2021\)](#). Two types of Catholic universities and faculties can be distinguished. Ecclesiastical or Pontifical universities and faculties often provide education in a wide range of disciplines, but they are also authorized by the Holy See to grant ecclesiastical degrees in theology, philosophy, and Canon Law. They are governed by Pope Francis’ Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*. Most Catholic universities are however governed by Pope John Paul’s Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. As for training in religious sciences, guidance for so-called Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences is provided by the [Congregation for Catholic Education \(2008\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> In the US News and World Report ranking, the 10 universities ranked in the Top 100 at the time of writing are the University of Notre Dame, Georgetown University, Boston College, Villanova University, Santa Clara University, Loyola Marymount University, Fordham University, Gonzaga University, University of San Diego, and Marquette University.
- <sup>7</sup> As noted by [International Federation of Catholic Universities Foresight Unit \(2021\)](#), the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated trends that were already observed and that were threatening for many colleges and universities, including Catholic institutions. The Foresight Unit of IFCU ([International Federation of Catholic Universities Foresight Unit 2021](#)) highlights five such trends: (1) the rise of hybrid teaching and learning; (2) the risk of losses in revenues from foreign students due to a reduction in the speed of internationalization; (3) the rising premium for practical skills as opposed to general knowledge; (4) the resulting perceived loss of value of a college degree in the United States; and (5) the acceleration of faculty casualization and its implications among others for research.
- <sup>8</sup> The survey was conducted by UNESCO among member states and associate members. Among key findings, the survey found (1) an increase in the reliance on online education and hybrid modes of teaching; (2) a higher ability of universities to cope with the crisis in high-income countries; (3) a drop in international mobility for students; (4) relatively mild effects on staffing; (5) disruptions in research; (6) widening inequalities in various areas; (7) sharp reduction in maintenance activities and some services on campuses; (8) more difficult transition to the job markets for students; and (9) more emphasis placed on digital strategies in a range of areas.
- <sup>9</sup> See [World Bank \(2019\)](#). Limited funding from governments whose budgets are often stretched may be of the factors contributing to low quality in education and as a result lack of employability for graduates. Affordability is especially an issue in the developing world, but it also matters in developed countries. In the United States, declining support from states for tuition at public colleges and universities has contributed to higher student debt.
- <sup>10</sup> A companion piece looks at students’ decision to enroll in Catholic universities in the United States ([Wodon 2022](#)).
- <sup>11</sup> The article provides updates with previous data and analysis published in [Wodon \(2021\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> Africa and Asia are the two regions where the number of diocesan priests has been increasing the most in recent years, but the broader trend may also reflect the rising number of permanent deacons in comparison to priests in the Church. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be useful in subsequent work to look in more detail at the factors explaining the increase in the number of students in ecclesiastical studies.
- <sup>13</sup> For example, as noted in Table 4, the data for Great Britain appear to be off. More generally, patterns in the country-level data in the statistical yearbooks suggest that enrollment estimates may be sometimes rounded up/down since a larger number of estimates than what would be expected end up being multiples of 10. It is likely that at least in some countries with limited capacity to monitor enrollment closely, some of the estimates may be tentative.
- <sup>14</sup> On some of the impact of the pandemic on Catholic education, see [Wodon \(2020b, 2020c, 2020d\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> In a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, [Belkin \(2022\)](#) notes that while flagship universities and brand-name colleges are doing well, less prestigious schools are struggling. Two statistics from the consulting firm EY Parthenon illustrate this heterogeneity: (1) Over the last decade, some 200 colleges closed, four times as many as in the previous decade; and (2) there were 95 college mergers in the past four years, versus 78 in the prior 18 years.
- <sup>16</sup> The survey has been implemented annually by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California for more 50 years. It is administered to first-year students before they start classes at their institution and includes questions among others on behaviors in high school, academic preparedness, admissions decisions, expectations of college, interactions with peers and faculty, student values and goals, student demographic characteristics, and concerns about financing college.

- 17 In the United States, data from the CIRP Freshman Survey suggest that engaging in service is more of an aspiration for students choosing Catholic colleges and universities than other institutions. When asked whether there is a very good chance that they will participate in volunteer or community service work, 43.9 percent of freshmen students enrolled in Catholic institutions respond in the affirmative, versus 39.4 percent for student in other religiously affiliated private institutions, 37.4 percent in non-sectarian private institutions, and 28.7 percent in public institutions (see the statistical tables in [Stolzenberg et al. 2020](#)).
- 18 In the paragraphs that follow, I rely on the approach to service learning outlined on the website of Loyola University New Orleans.
- 19 As mentioned by Pope Francis (2019) in launching the idea of a Global Compact on Education, service is a pillar of the culture of encounter. This is also a key theme in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis 2020).
- 20 The concept of service learning is mentioned in the *Vademecum* from the Congregation for Catholic Education (2021) for the Global Compact on Education. Specifically, the term is used in the *Instrumentum Laboris*.
- 21 The seven commitments are: (1) to make human persons the center; (2) to listen to the voices of children and young people; (3) to advance the women; (4) to empower the family; (5) to welcome; (6) to find new ways of understanding (the) economy and politics; and (7) to safeguard our common home.
- 22 See the website of Uniservitate at <https://www.uniservitate.org/>.
- 23 See the website of the American Association of Colleges and Universities at <https://www.aacu.org/trending-topics/high-impact>.
- 24 See the report by Ribeiro et al. (2021) for the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education. See also the volumes of essays in the Uniservitate collection (e.g., Caballero 2020; Peregalli and Isola 2021).
- 25 See the companion article on the United States in this journal Wodon (2022).
- 26 As noted by a reviewer, an important questions is whether John Paul II's (Paul 1990) *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* still serves as an essential normative doctrinal statement on Catholic higher education, or whether in light of secular pressures faced by many Catholic colleges and universities, it may not be used in practice as a reference by the leadership of (some) of these universities. Another important question is whether and how Pope Francis' views, as expressed among others in his idea of a Global Compact for Education, could affect the future direction of Catholic colleges and universities. While it was mentioned that the idea of service learning touches on some of those questions, a discussion of these questions is best left to further work.

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