

Pandemic, Disruption and Adjustment in Higher Education

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Pandemic, Disruption and Adjustment in Higher Education

Edited by

Susana Gonçalves and Suzanne Majhanovich



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Foreword

Allan Pitman

In trying to make sense of the ways in which the 2020 SARS-CoV2 (COVID-19) pandemic and the political responses to it had impact on university faculty members, a group of scholars contributing to this collection have taken multiple approaches to study the problem, both from a range of geographic locations and at different levels of institutional analysis, while maintaining a focus on the changed professional lives of academics involved in teaching. Thus, the volume consists of some work that looks at systemic issues while other writers concentrate on the local and institutional and personal levels. We then have the central question: How has the sudden disruption of the existing routines of university life played out in the professional lives of university faculty members? This concern has then been broken into two parts: one related to teaching methods and the transition of much teaching to an on-line modality, the second on the loss of presence on campus as campuses were closed to in-person contacts between faculty, their students and each other with the consequences for their wellbeing.

A crisis has effects at multiple levels throughout societies and their institutions, at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels. Such crises may be triggered by any number of causes: economic disruption, social upheaval, international political tensions and a myriad of other forms. The advent of the SARS-CoV2 (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020 and later provides an excellent context for considering the strengths and fragilities of institutions as they adapt and are transformed by major disruptions to their modes of operation and organizational and financial structures when crisis occurs.

Universities have been hit heavily by the emergence of the virus and by the political and health policy responses to it. The pandemic has triggered a set of crises across every aspect of society, internationally as well as within nations.

Organizations can be viewed from two interconnected positions. First, there is the organizational, administrative dimension; second, the work conducted within the organization has its own distinct features, strengths and vulnerabilities.

The crisis has had varied effects on universities in different national settings. Throughout the Western world, the prevalence of neoliberal economic and political policies has tied universities more tightly than ever into the local and international trade and employment policies of governments, with the

concomitant dependence of these institutions on revenue generation other than that obtained through government funding. Increasingly, the shift of post-secondary knowledge and training into the economic and trade sector has seen universities in these countries dependent for much of their operating costs on the on-campus presence of international students (see, for example, Pitman, 2022). On the other hand, in other parts of the world this has not been the major problem: rather, a lack of resources (at the institutional and personal levels) is more of a driving problem in dealing with the loss of on-campus interactions.

The arrival of the impacts of the 2020 pandemic brought all of these into focus, but not for the first time. The “Asian Flu” economic crisis of 1997, for example, which originated in Thailand and spread through the Pacific region (International Monetary Fund, 2012), had major effects on the Australian university system, dependent as many of its universities and specific departments were on the sale of degree programs and courses to students from southeast Asia. Particularly affected then were Business Schools around the world due to a sharp drop in demand. Massive declines were seen in foreign enrolments in Engineering and Technology, particularly in Information Technology departments, which had ballooned in the previous years as sources of student fee income. The outcome was the near-bankruptcy of some universities and the closure of a number of Departments with the termination of tenured faculty members.

Now as then, at the institutional level, budgets were hard hit, with many universities and colleges dependent for up to a third of their student body being full-fee paying foreign undergraduate and graduate students. This has precipitated reassessments of the short- and long-term viability of individual Departments and programs, and in many cases has led to significant cuts in faculty and support staffing.

The point to be emphasized here is the complex play between uniqueness and the to-be-expected nature of the current situation created by responses to the COVID pandemic in universities. While organizationally universities are vulnerable to disruption to their working models, the COVID situation is unique in its closure of in-person on-campus activities for an extended period and the necessity to shift teaching to remote learning models.

Historically, the role of universities has been in the education of those entering a range of the professions and for the study of the disciplines of knowledge. Over time and in interaction with the technologies of the day, the work associated with fulfilling this mandate has evolved, while maintaining certain characteristic features. These features are of both a knowledge transmission and social interaction form: lectures, seminars and other on-campus

and near-campus activities such as student clubs, fraternities etc. are significant among these. In a sense, the university has been expected to provide to students a development beyond the learning within the lecture hall and texts, to include a rather more general growth of the whole individual – closer to the northern European notions of *Bildung* than a straightforward degree qualification. The effect of the growing reliance on international students has varied greatly between universities, ranging from the intensification of on-line and other remote learning models and of making very little adjustment away from traditional lecture – seminar models.

The context in which faculty now work has become one in which the future is less certain and workload stresses have increased. The focus of this book is on the teaching role rather than that of research activity. Here, the increase in workload involves new or enhanced skill development associated with teaching at a distance, in development of on-line materials and in real-time on-line presentations and interactions with students.

For many academics, the pandemic has led to a severing of the day-to-day in-person interactions with fellow faculty and with students. This has constituted both a loss of one significant form of intellectual discourse and also to a weakening of internal institutional interpersonal relationships.

With respect to the shift to on-line provision of coursework, the pandemic can be seen as having accelerated a process which was occurring already as the online technologies were being integrated into complementary roles with in-person contacts in the years prior to 2020. In this regard, some institutions were better prepared than others to be able to assist faculty as they were forced to translate their courses from structures based on in-person or mixed mode delivery to wholly on-line.

It is still too soon to draw conclusions about the significance and permanence of the changes that have taken place, or to the long-term effects on the stress levels and conflicts in how faculty members understand their roles in academia. Central to this concern is how they see their relationships with their students and with each other.

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