



COVID-19 and the Institutional Fabric of Higher Education

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This edited book comprises a number of chapters analysing the impact of COVID-19 in countries in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia-Pacific. The theme of the book relates to an analysis of the interplay between ‘macro’, ‘meso’ and ‘micro’ elements or factors underpinning higher education (HE) systems and their respective institutions (HEIs), and how

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they, either on their own or in cooperation with each other, addressed the challenges posed by COVID-19 beginning in March 2020.

In the introductory chapter of this volume, a claim was made that, despite their demonstrable ability to adapt to emerging circumstances over the years, as an unprecedented external shock, COVID-19 posed considerable challenges to HE systems and HEIs alike. At the same time, we argued that the shock waves emanating from the crisis also provided scholars with a unique opportunity to assess the resilient nature of HE systems and HEIs around the world. A major assumption or starting point pertained to the claim that system-level responses (macro) were likely to differ considerably from those responses (meso and micro) at the level of the individual HEIs, thus providing new insights on the complexity associated with contemporary HE systems and their domestic providers, not least as regards their institutional fabric. By ‘institutional fabric’, we referred in the introduction to the sets of formal and informal rules and standard operating procedures that regulate the behaviour of social actors both as individuals and/or collectives or groups. Mention was made of the importance associated with regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions underpinning logics, practices and identities throughout the HE system as a whole.

Following an open-systems view, we highlighted the critical role undertaken by a variety of stakeholder groups, each with their own claims and demands on the purposes and functions of modern HEIs. The coexistence of multiple, often contradictory, stakeholder demands, we argued earlier, results in conflicting dynamics and paradoxes characterising the complex and pluralistic environments in which HEIs operate, pushing system actors in multiple directions. Our primary aim with the volume was thus to inquire about the extent to which COVID-19 modified existing change trajectories by focusing on the effects of the responses to the pandemic at different levels in the institutional features of HE systems and HEIs.

The rich empirical chapters demonstrate vividly how HEIs and, in many cases, policymakers responded to the various threats as well as opportunities posed by the pandemic. Four key features or mechanisms stand out unambiguously in the manner in which countries and their respective HE systems responded to the crisis, namely, *rationality*, *cooperation*, *resilience* and *innovation*.

Marie Clarke (Chap. 2), in her case study of Ireland, described how the crisis led to ‘situations and policy proposals that would have been impossible under pre-COVID-19 conditions’. The crisis demanded closer

cooperation between government departments and challenged historical and existing relationships. Clarke showed how policymakers had to adjust to new ways of operating and making decisions. For the first time, all the stakeholders in Irish education were working together to deal with the crisis. The result was a greater interdependency between government and HEIs in the ‘unpredictable situation’ caused by the pandemic. At the same time, COVID-19 exposed systemic deficiencies (e.g., a historic inability or unwillingness to reach students most in need), enabled a move away from traditional approaches to dealing with system-wide challenges and resulted in the creation of a dedicated department to deal with issues pertaining to the HE sector, taking into account its inherent complexity.

Shenderova et al. (Chap. 3), in their case study of the Polish and Russian HE systems, show that the shift in the 1990s from a single HE actor (namely, the state) to a network of actors brought about a dramatic change in the internationalisation of HE in both countries, resulting in greater decentralisation, less bureaucracy, the internationalisation of HE and an increasing emphasis on research. Moreover, the pandemic introduced new policy actors such as public health and national security, as well as some negative consequences related to the latter such as dominance over HE actors and an emergent policy agenda frequently at odds with the concerns of internal actors across the HE system as a whole.

Dakowska (Chap. 4), in her analysis of the French HE system, described how the pandemic revealed both its vulnerability and resilience. The negative effects included the fast-changing regulatory framework, the lack of equipment and insufficient administrative personnel to deal with the new crisis. The positive factors included the fact that HE budgets were kept intact, and there was closer cooperation between university leaders and the ministry. However, existing inequalities were reinforced especially around remote learning, and the distribution of resources between research and so-called teaching-centred universities, thus reinforcing the vulnerability of some HEIs.

Moving to the African continent, Bisaso and Achange (Chap. 5), in their analysis of the Ugandan HE system, demonstrate how the country moved relatively rapidly to develop and implement an Open/Online Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) system for HE in response to the pandemic. Their analysis examines the positive interaction between the macro (the regulatory body, the National Commission for Higher Education—NCHE) and the meso (HEIs) elements of the system. In implementing the new system, public, private-for-profit and private religious institutions

all responded to ensure continuity (a key resilience feature) in teaching and learning during the pandemic.

In their case study of Brazil, Barbosa and colleagues (Chap. 6) strike an optimistic note on the future of HE in that country, for example, vaccine research highlighted the critical social role of HE and the value of skilled workers particularly in health and education. Innovation was a key cross-cutting strand, reflected in the development of new teaching methods, the incorporation of learning technologies, the importance of the third mission and the advancement of research and science. However, the authors do raise the recurring theme of inequality whilst critically asking; ‘in the Brazilian context what do these advancements mean for women, Afro-Brazilians, and poor students?’

In the Eastern Asian context, Yonezawa et al. (Chap. 7), in their Japanese case studies of two universities, illustrate how resilience combined with exceptional innovation can make international undergraduate education possible both within Japan and across the world. Their study shows how, despite mobility challenges resulting from mandated lockdowns, the expansion of online learning opportunities to overseas audiences was made possible through the seamless combination of accumulated experience and improved technology.

Rabossi et al.’s Argentinian case study (Chap. 8) shows how universities’ International Relations Offices strategically reacted to the pandemic by shifting their activities in response to the imposed restrictions on global mobility. Using the lens of ‘Resilience Theory’, the authors describe the efforts made to ensure ‘continuity of function’, which included dealing with the challenges caused by closed borders, cancelled flights and support to families and students. Paradoxically, the pandemic ‘forced’ domestic universities to increase their international activities. In some cases, remote teaching and learning became an opportunity to broaden horizons. It also led to ‘community resilience, greater collaboration and cooperation between a HEI and its surrounding community and stakeholders’, for example, with collection of data on Argentinian students and staff stranded abroad.

Back in Europe, Charles’ focus on university-civic engagement at the time of the pandemic (Chap. 9) highlights how civic partnerships embraced health, and economic and social development. Focusing on two case universities in the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in England, and their collaboration with local partners, the study demonstrates the importance of collaborative partnerships (based on mutual trust and benefits) in

addressing immediate health needs as well as the long-term economic revival of the locality.

Asante et al. (Chap. 10), in their analysis of Nordic HE, show yet more evidence of HEIs' extraordinary abilities to adapt to novel situations. Their study sheds light on a set of critical features, namely, innovations, including blended learning; sophisticated technological platforms for managing teaching and learning, and reskilling of academic staff; resilience, including knowledge-based and socially based resources and capabilities, combined with effective leadership (multiple levels), all playing a critical role in fostering accountability.

Almeida and Terra (Chap. 11), following similar themes of resilience and innovation, show how the transfer of technology and research from Brazilian universities to society, through spin-off firms, enables the private business sector, government and universities to reinforce the university's 'third mission', especially around developing products and services, to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Back to Asia, Liu and Horta (Chap. 12), in their study of mainland China and Hong Kong, focus specifically on academics (micro level) and their coping strategies in the face of COVID-19. They spell out the many challenges including new working and living arrangements, day parenting, adjusting to new modes of teaching and the resulting emotional instability. Two views are highlighted, an initial negativity, and a more pronounced, second positive one which showed the opportunities the pandemic brought with respect to the development of academics as professionals.

Similarly, Nokkala et al. (Chap. 13) describe how academics in Finland viewed the relationship between work and their universities during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reactions of academics, on the one hand, were marked by disillusionment, frustration and conflict, and on the other, by feelings of contentment and satisfaction, being cared for and caring for people.

In their case study of Norway, Solberg and Tømte (Chap. 14) demonstrate how COVID-19 hastened the adoption of digital forms of teaching and learning during the first phase of the pandemic. Their survey findings show a clear preference for on-campus teaching, alongside widespread support for expanding digital technologies as they apply to teaching and learning, in the context of digital skills and literacy.

Pekkola et al. (Chap. 15) examine the impact of COVID-19 on academic leadership in Finland. Based on interviews with deans and rectors at

public universities, the authors find that domestic universities did rather well in coping with the crisis. The study found that the pandemic provided HEIs, most notably formal leaders, with a ‘window of opportunity’ to reconsider their social mission and to observe what is critical for the continuity of academic work as well as on the essential role of academic managers in managing the crisis.

Finally, Schreiber et al. (Chap. 16) consider the impact of COVID-19 on the institutional fabric of HE in four distinct national systems. Their study explores how student affairs and services (SAS) in different parts of the world have responded to the changes in student and institutional needs as a result of the pandemic. Surveying 781 SAS professionals across the globe, the authors empirically show how SAS changed its role in response to the pandemic both within and beyond the HEIs. These changes were found to impact student success including students’ personal situations, the sociocultural context and family situation, the institutional and academic domain, and the broader macro-public domain. The major finding of the study is that SAS and the universities in which they are embedded strongly support students in their learning process. However, the study also highlights that important factors in the public domain are mitigated by SAS to promote a learning context globally.

All in all, the rich empirical contributions composing the bulk of this edited volume demonstrate how different HE systems and levels within each system responded initially, almost everywhere in a *rational* manner, even though this was a situation that they had never encountered before. This insight suggests that, as alluded to in earlier studies, autonomy or self-organisation combined with pluralistic forms (internal diversity) of addressing novelty helps overcome the inherent challenges posed by ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon, 1991) whilst facing novel and adverse situations (Frigotto et al., 2022; Trondal et al., 2022).

Second, there was an early recognition that *cooperation* would be an essential ingredient for addressing the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic. This process manifested itself at different levels, within and between HEIs, between HEIs and government (and its different agencies), between HEIs and industry and together with broader civil society. These findings are aligned with studies showing empirical evidence from various national and policy contexts with respect to the centrality of trusty collaborations (horizontal and vertical, intra- and inter-organisational) in the context of crisis management as well as resilience (Comfort et al., 2010; Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2022).

Third, as the pandemic unfolded over time, there was a clear sense of *resilience* developing across countries and HEIs, as amply demonstrated in most of the case chapters and exemplified in the development and implementation of HE policies, even though there were no signs of the pandemic declining in its intensity across countries. What is more, in many of the countries and HE systems being investigated in this volume, the continuity of the crisis implied moving from a modus operandi of crisis management centred on ‘bouncing back’ (to the old ways) towards a strategic opportunity for ‘moving forward’ in the form of adaptative and transformative forms of resilience (Frigotto et al., 2022).

Finally, deriving from this resilience, there was an observed tendency in the development and implementation of *innovative* policies, practices and mindsets that were remarkable both for the speed with which new learning methodologies were developed and the varying nature of the innovation across countries and continents as researchers and policymakers alike attempted to meet their own unique circumstances relating to the pandemic. This attests to the ability of actors at different levels of the HE system to learn and improvise when faced with novel situations (Frigotto, 2017; March, 2008), reinforcing the old maxim that crises provide unprecedented opportunities for change and renewal.

Coming back to the question posed at the onset, as regards the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the institutional fabric of HE, the empirical evidence provided in the volume points to both patterns of *continuity* and *discontinuity*. With the former, the most salient mechanisms pertain to rational processes of decision making (Simon, 1997) and the importance associated with the ‘maintenance of function’ (Holling, 1973) in the context of historical contingencies or path dependencies (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). Seminal studies have long demonstrated that, once institutionalised, formal and informal rules shaping social behaviour (structures, practices, norms, values and identities) are rather difficult to displace (North 1990, Oliver, 1992). This is increasingly the case when local actors, like academics, rely heavily on those rules to perform their daily tasks (of teaching, research and engagement) and have been the subject of intense socialisation over considerable periods of time (cf. Clark, 1987). This process was aided by two important factors. Firstly, the fact that, as autonomous professionals, academics across multiple disciplinary settings and types of HEIs were, nonetheless, able to continue undertaking their core tasks, albeit remotely, off-campus. Secondly, HEIs’ investments in technological infrastructures and digital literacy prior to the pandemic

(Pinheiro et al., 2023a; Pinheiro et al., 2023b) meant that the degree of novelty faced by many academics when dealing with the COVID-19 lockdowns was moderate.

With regard to institutional discontinuities, there is compelling evidence across the volume of the emergence of new forms of academic and administrative work, aspects associated with two of the four mechanisms identified earlier, namely, *cooperation* and *innovation*. When faced with a novel situation, actors within HEIs intensified their collaborative arrangements as a means of, first, making sense of the new contexts in which they found themselves in (e.g., the blending of private and workspaces/lives and restrictions on physical mobility) and, second, enacting new mechanisms, both intra- and inter-organisational, of collaboration and coordination. In many instances, these processes have resulted in profound changes or innovations that are likely to persist following the pandemic. These include but are not limited to flexible, working-from-home arrangements, the ubiquity associated with digital technologies in teaching and research, reductions in overseas travelling and new (virtual) forms of student and staff mobility and collaboration.

The extent to which the aforementioned features are likely to prevail and become part and parcel of newly institutionalised and taken-for-granted working methods, practices and cultural mindsets is, at the time of writing, rather difficult to ascertain. What we do know is that, for the most part, HEIs and the national HE systems in which they are embedded demonstrated remarkable ability to adapt to emerging circumstances. That being said, it is important to note that the pandemic not only reinforced the need to address existing system inequalities at different levels, but has also negatively contributed to widening the divide between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, amongst other aspects, by fostering a regulatory environment laden with financial stringency and the need to do more with less resources.

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