New realities, new challenges: future proofing?

Introduction

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Editors

Abstract: The papers in this edition of the Journal bridge the gap between initiatives that occurred before the pandemic and those developed in response to the pandemic. They illustrate how an institution's ability to implement rapid change is to some extent predicated on the institutional culture and adaptability before crises arise.

Keywords: change management; student satisfaction; regional strategies; COVID-19; language development.

In this edition of the Journal, we are delighted to have the first papers in the COVID-19 Section edited by Professor Anca Greere. The COVID section follows the main papers with its own unique section editorial. First, however, we offer an overview of the general papers comprising this edition.

We commence with two papers, both of Spanish origin, that report educational innovations within single institutions. The first concerns an eight-year longitudinal institution-wide case study- *"The e-portfolio in higher education: The case of a line of teaching innovation and complex change management"* by Berbegal Vázquez, Merino Orozco, Arraiz Pérez and Sabirón Sierra. This paper can appear deceptive in that while the case study is of e-portfolio development, the analytical frame of the paper is the complexity of innovation and the learning points gleaned through in-depth case study evaluation using mixed methods and informed by theories of change. Although action research cycles were not mentioned within the methodology, there were similarities in that the project comprised three different teacher training courses and six projects whose learning points fed chronologically into subsequent phases. At the heart of the initiatives were practical projects underpinned by relevant theories and research. The three key components centred on (1) the development of learning-centred and

skill-based assessment; 2) definition, optimisation, and transfer of the Mahara e-portfolio solution; and 3) design of a policy for expansion and dissemination of the MaharaZar digital personal learning environment. Three critical dimensions were relevant to the implementation of the projects: technical, political, and cultural aspects. The authors concluded that four criteria were necessary for an appropriate use of the e-portfolio in higher education namely (1) Adapted sustainability; (2) Oriented digitalisation; (3) Transversal nature and ongoing continuity and (4) Strategic institutional change. Furthermore, they concluded that the e-portfolio is an 'analyser of disruptive, pedagogical, technological and institutional changes'. The paper offers insights into the merits of planned and linear development projects that are critically evaluated and can enable change within the institution.

The second manuscript analyses an initiative in teacher education where Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is employed through fieldwork trips aimed to develop disciplinary, social and linguistic competences in the trainee teachers [Martínez-Hernández and Albaladejo-Albaladejo, *"Geohistorical, didactic and linguistic competencies learning through a bilingual (Spanish/English) fieldtrip project with teachers in training"*]. Martínez-Hernández and Albaladejo-Albaladejo's paper focuses uniquely on the potential of urban fieldtrips to improve the disciplinary competences (namely: geography and history 'geohistorical') and linguistic competences of trainee teachers. This well-designed study comprised twenty-seven trainees who volunteered to engage in three complementary workshop field trips with didactive components in the second language (English). The paper analyses the CLIL model and debates the respective merits of bilingual fieldtrips on the cognitive and linguistic development of students. Their study confirmed that the pedagogy using CLIL promoted learning on several competence domains and using bilingualism did not hinder development. Indeed, there was no statistical difference between students who were bilingual and those who were not at the outset of the study. As the authors noted, the use of the fieldtrip in a subject area to enhance linguistic and disciplinary competencies is under researched. What is interesting here is the use of natural communication activities that enable the dialogues to be meaningful rather than learning by rote. In this case, the geography and history trainee teachers engaged in a guided tour in the second language in which key points of geographical and historical interest were the 'stopping' points on the tour. The urban fieldwork was akin to being a tourist. This paper challenges other disciplines to consider natural communicative events that could enhance both the disciplinary competences (in this case teaching and the subject area) and language skills. The authors

also produced an insightful section on 'limitations' which was both refreshing and realistic.

Our third, fourth, and fifth papers reflect upon historical and future trends within the university sector that impact upon the countries concerned (Africa, the Czech Republic and Khuzestan Province Iran, respectively).

Adamu offers a critical reflection on the *"Harmonisation of higher education in Africa: 20 years after the Bologna Process*" and argues for the crucial necessity of Africa needing genuine and strong "conainsation" which the author describes as 'the process of continentalisation, nationalisation and institutionalisation of theories, ideas, notions, policies, strategies, approaches, initiatives, practices, etc. by putting the intended context at the center of the process'. Adamu's paper is a timely reminder of the issues that arise when policies and practises from one continent are translocated to another without critical reflection. Adamu summarises and debates the impact of the European 'Bologna Process' upon the African continent. The drive to harmonise African Higher Education (HE) was/is situated in a continent with resource challenges, limited experience of intra continent harmonisation, historical differences, less political commitment, and a wider diversity of Higher Education systems at the beginning of harmonisation. The paper provides students of African Higher Education with historical points of reference and their legacy. A classic example is the 1981 Aruba Convention that recruited only 20 signatories and even less to its revised version thirty years later (Addis Addaba Convention 2014). This Convention currently has approximately 12 states that have ratified the Convention. Similarly, Adamu outlines the role of the African Union and other stakeholders in the 'harmonisation' journey. In analysing the impact of the Bologna Process upon Africa, Adamu points out the financial and technical support provided by the EU and the 'soft 'power exerted through grants and other awards that require Bologna inspired activities. This analysis challenges the model of European Union engagement and questions the extent to which this might lead to 'self-imposed colonisation.'

From Africa to the Czech Republic and a study that investigates student satisfaction with the university sector, a key topic given the decline in student enrolments in the sector since 2010 [Chládková, Skýpalová, and Blašková, "*Strengthening the university competitiveness in the Czech Republic*"]. This paper introduces the reader into the socio-historical context of Higher Education in the Czech Republic and shows how several factors have led to the 'persistent seclusion of Czech higher education and an unwillingness to cooperate among various entities (public - private universities)'. The paper provides a detailed background and extensive literature review concerning

rankings, quality, and esteem of universities and how universities in the Czech Republic fare within the different measures of HEIs. The research study at the heart of the project sought to elicit students' perspectives on the factors they consider important and the strengths and weaknesses within their respective Faculties. Conducted in 2019, 595 bachelor's students, aged 21-23 from a Business Faculty in two universities (one public and one private) responded to the survey (no foreign students were included). Interestingly, although perhaps not surprising, were the factors that were similar to both universities and those that differed. Differences between the private and public sector focused on environmental factors like student care, interesting lectures, study materials and opportunities. In contrast, the public university student saw the strengths as image, international links, and modern technologies. Both groups rated atmosphere, facilities, and teachers. Weaknesses were quite different. At the public university students found the study difficult, the image of the university was seen to have declined and there was a lack of practical training. In contrast, for the private university the weaknesses were more structural, for example lengthy processing through the study department, too many seminar papers and insufficient school capacity.

Finally to Khuzestan, Iran, where Farazm, Afghah, and Andayesh *"University in an oil-dependent state economy: The future of Khuzestan higher education"* share their findings from an expert and stakeholder led study that sought to (a) create alternative scenarios and propose the preferred one for higher education in Khuzestan province; and (b) discover how higher education within Khuzestan province could contribute to the socio-economic development of the region. This fascinating study also presents a relevant and interesting socio and historical context to the Higher Education (HEI) Sector in Iran through the comparisons with other global regions and international trends. Drawing on theories of Human Capital and Scenario Modelling, Farazm, Afghah, and Andayesh noted before their fieldwork, that the HE sector had not paid sufficient attention to the local and regional labour market needs and those of a globalising economy. Crucially, Iran is driven by an oil dependent economy which meant the HEI sector was funded by government with the populations having expectations aligned to this method of funding. Farazm, Afghah, and Andayesh used a snowball technique to reach relevant participants whose knowledge, expertise, and familiarity with the regional context, would enable them to critique the current situation and offer potential scenarios for the future. Ten in depth interviews were conducted until theoretical data saturation was achieved. Four alternative scenarios for higher education in Khuzestan province were designed and the

participants then validated these scenarios which were linked economically to the extent to which Iran remained an oil dependent economy. The four typologies were Universities who were Conservative, Adaptive, Enablers or Developers. Concluding that the Developer scenario was the preferred option, the implications were significant, knowing that there is a wide gap between the traditional and industrial sectors of employment in the province and that funding mechanisms remain unchanged.

What these papers have in common is the endeavour to move with the times, to be responsive and anticipate trends, thereby preparing their department, faculty, university, or region for the future. Albeit a future with predictable, unexpected, and in some cases possibly overwhelming challenges. What is particularly interesting is that these innovations, strategic plans, or responsive evaluations were initiated before the pandemic. So, in Berbegal Vázquez, Merino Orozco, Arraiz Pérez and Sabirón Sierra's introduction of the e-portfolio, one would presume the universities concerned were not only well equipped to exploit further technologies during the pandemic, but also from a leadership perspective, better prepared to manage change. The learning points from Martínez-Hernández and Albaladejo-Albaladejo's study are that 'natural communicative' activities can be best used for developing linguistic competences in the discipline and that more simple uncomplicated activities at low cost can be very effective.

From a strategic and policy perspective, Adamu reminds us to consider local context when applying an education system model to another untrialled setting, particularly those with significant differences in the technical, cultural, political, and infrastructural domains. As an ethnographer, I am sensitive to such nuances and the potential for negative consequences when they are neglected. Adamu revealed another example of potential colonialism. The use of 'soft power' to create change through replication rather than adaption or evolution and the acceptance of such power to acquire funding. This of course is not new in the world of international grants and favours. In this case, one region's 'current reality' becomes another region's 'new reality'. The future proofing lies in mechanisms of grant giving that respect culture, facilitate adaption, evolution, or invention.

For Chládková, Skýpalová, and Blašková, the Czech Republic 'new reality' was a decline in student numbers in the university sector, largely due to a demographic profile and the growing importance of being competitive in both a national and international context. The challenge was to ascertain factors influencing student choice and experience between public and private universities. What the study revealed is key similarities that apply to all students, but specific features associated with the respective university and

the students they attract. This paper illustrates the journeys that universities and their country policy makers must travel if they are to be 'future proofed' when the realities change.

Similarly, identifying and facing the 'new realities' was the goal of Farazm, Afghah, and Andayesh. Their paper argues for a particular model of university organisation, ethos, and mission. The challenge is the current reliance on an oil driven and state economy. To prepare for the future a significant change at state level is argued to be a necessity, with strategies to address a new economic/governance model. Mindful of the climate implications of fossil fuels, countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia face specific challenges to meet the 'new reality' of climate control and the link to their current and future economic success and societal expectations.

As we move to the COVID-19 section, the 'new reality' was the impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education and the extent to which the institutions concerned were 'ready', 'challenged' and 'future proofed' as the pandemic emerged and developed.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has created multiple challenges across the higher education sector. Every stakeholder group was affected equally but differently. Students found themselves engaged in distance learning, a mode of delivery some had not opted for; teaching staff had to rapidly rethink delivery and train on new technologies; researchers had to methodologically reinvent projects and collaborations; professional staff had to pivot emphasis on areas in more demand, such as mental health or legal advice; senior management were acting with less autonomy, as governmental restrictions dictated possible actions. Undoubtedly, the pandemic situation has also created opportunities from increasing digitalisation, more flexible ways of working, expediting networking and collaborations, etc. Into the future, every stakeholder group will continue to aim to cope as best as possible with the emerging 'new normal' and any support from various contexts across the world will be helpful in this regard. The two papers on COVID-19-related realities, although documenting very different areas of higher education, contribute relevant insights and offer clear guidance for action and, where necessary, for change.

The first paper in the COVID-19 special section by Matthew Kitching "*A mixed methods contribution analysis of UK students' unions' internal communications response to addressing staff motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic*" is set against the backdrop of COVID-19 developments in the United Kingdom. The findings, however, demonstrate transferability across international settings and can prove relevant at a time when institutions/organisations are deciding what they may retain from the pandemic experiences.

In a description that will resonate as familiar with many of us in higher education, Kitching recognises that the shift to online delivery achieved mixed success and lockdown-induced working from home arrangements exacerbated existing challenges in many contexts. Student Unions were strongly exposed as the demand for advice and representation grew, while extra-curricular and community-based activities came to a complete halt. This meant that student union employees were under mounting pressure to deliver on their responsibilities. The study looks at the communication received by employees (from all-staff, departmental, and individual emails to social media communications and online and face-to-face meetings) and establishes a link between those communications and staff motivation. Using Mayne's Contribution Analysis and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the author places these communication strategies in perspective and develops recommended actions for viable change. 151 responses from across 35 student unions meant conclusions could be relevantly formulated, emphasising considerations of job security, capability, socialisation, recognition, and development to underpin communication constructs. Not surprisingly, misalignment between manager's intentions and employee expectations resulted in dissatisfaction or frustration which evidently led to demotivation. What the author does not explore, but could be extremely interesting for future research, is how these variations in motivation may have impacted perceptions of student union performance as experienced by the student body.

The second of our COVID-19-focussed papers shifts attention to research and researchers, as White, Alders, Patocs and Raina explore how the pandemic has impacted the potential to conduct interdisciplinary research, through collaborative approaches. The paper *"COVID-19 and interdisciplinary research: What are the needs of researchers on aging?"* rightly acknowledges the need to intensify research on aging, especially given the pandemic consequences on older people. The authors describe a case study of managing change under pandemic restrictions to ensure much needed continuity for research activities. An initial survey tested the needs of researchers under newly imposed circumstances, followed by two Co-design Idea Exchange sessions which aimed at alleviating concerns and finding solutions for the future. Remote researching protocols, virtual collaboration spaces and innovative stakeholder engagement for funding and data collection, all feature as areas in need of detailed consideration. Findings focus on capacity and adaptability of researchers to move to virtual platforms, their eagerness to consider opportunities for instituting new methods to connect disparate interdisciplinary parts for more comprehensive analyses, as well as continuity of day-to-day activities and overcoming safety anxieties. The authors offer

clear direction how the McMaster Institute for Research on Aging engaged researchers to support them to successfully pivot and optimise activities under the restrictions. This paper offers timely insights derived from a methodology which is most certainly adaptable to other institutional contexts where researchers have been confronted with major challenges.

As the Journal captures both the non-COVID and COVID-19 related dimensions of Higher Education, and their inter-relatedness, we can appreciate how the capacity, readiness to change, and competence of all the Higher Education Community actors at the start of the pandemic influenced their subsequent experience of the pandemic. As editors, we will continue to review the next batch of papers to elicit the themes and trends that emerge through the on-going iterations with the stake-holding community, the pandemic, historical good practises and the 'new normal'.

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