

## Special Section Editorial

# Shaping proactive higher education: Pandemic research and its value for future-proofing

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**Abstract:** This editorial to the Special Section on COVID-19 emphasises the importance of researching pandemic realities and the value that the findings can bring to the way we shape decisions in the future, for the ‘new normal’. The pandemic, with its rapidly changing timeline, required swift action in untrials circumstances and its consequences have been experienced differently by diverse institutions and across national contexts. Depending on the roles and responsibilities we may have taken on during this time, our capabilities to document our experiences and emerging trends have varied.

**Key words:** COVID-19 research; higher education; pandemic experiences; ‘new normal’; strategic decision-making.

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The pandemic, with its rapidly changing timeline, required swift action in untrials circumstances and its consequences have been experienced differently by diverse institutions and across national contexts. Depending on the roles and responsibilities we may have taken on during this time, our capabilities to document our experiences and emerging trends have varied. As a community it is important that we continue to share and compare our experiences for a deeper understanding of the rationale underpinning similarities or differences.

When the Tuning Journal for Higher Education (TJHE) extended an invitation to contributors to focus on pandemic experiences, the impact these were having on higher education, and their implications for the future, we had just past the one year anniversary of the first COVID-19 lockdowns across the world. At the time it was difficult to predict how long the world would still be confronted with this crisis (it still is, of course, difficult to predict!). The words ‘uncertainty’ or ‘unprecedented’ had become a constant

feature of any form of communication, formal and informal alike, international mobility was still very limited, and governments were changing protocols with little, if any, notice. However, vaccines were already being rolled out, indeed more modestly in some contexts than others, wearing masks no longer seemed such an imposition, and frequent testing coupled with quarantine or self-isolation measures were being followed responsibly by the great majority of people.

The pandemic had created challenges, across all continents, at all levels of society, and without exception. For many months, the world had grasped at any form of normality it could still preserve as the ‘new normal’ rapidly took shape. The TJHE call for papers recognised that, in spite of (or truly because of) these challenges, higher education was exposed to valuable lessons and could take them forward, strategically, into the future. The proposal was clearly geared at encouraging a platform for academic debate and scientific research to support the higher education community in disseminating innovative responses, focussed approaches, impactful analyses and significant findings derived from the COVID-19 pandemic experiences.

During the timeline of the pandemic, higher education has been strongly impacted, initially with an imposed shift to online modes of delivery and, subsequently, with a prolonged transition which is continuing to question the temporary nature of this shift. The emergency remote response benefitted from the effort, time, and goodwill of both staff and students, as new roles and responsibilities had to be accommodated in situations that strongly resembled crisis management. A level of leniency and tolerance was exhibited by all stakeholders as higher education institutions were finding ways to come to terms with stringent restrictions while aiming to safeguard the educational experience, overall, and teaching, learning and assessment standards, more specifically. However, the start of the second academic year affected by the pandemic (i.e. 2020-2021) dispelled many of the hopes that there could be a full return to academic life as we had witnessed it before the pandemic. It was becoming increasingly evident that pandemic experiences were already reshaping our outlook on what would be a sustainable academic environment, effective student-staff interactions and innovative enhancements for the future. The pandemic was expediting items on the global agenda for higher education, like widening participation in support of inclusivity and diversity, increasing digitalisation in support of pedagogical advances and infrastructural efficiencies, or intensifying international collaborations in support of unique research engagements and expanded academic exchanges. The higher education sector was grappling for solutions, taking higher risks (but not where safety was concerned), increasing the pace of decision-making,

and rolling out actions to deal with the crisis. With some challenges arguably universal and others highly context specific, the options available to institutions and their modes of implementation have demonstrated considerable variety.

It is against this backdrop that we proposed a wide ranging list of topics to be covered in the Special Section on COVID-19 of the TJHE to allow us to take stock of such experiences, derive lessons learned, identify impacts, and model post-pandemic expectations. Interestingly, we have received submissions from across all continents, some with a strong statistical focus offering an authoritative view derived from national-level studies with thousands of respondents and others prioritising qualitative findings from small-scale investigations into niche areas and challenges; some concentrating their attention on documenting pandemic realities and others taking a forecasting approach and striving to anticipate viable directions; some preoccupied with day-to-day grassroots experiences and others translating operational solutions into strategic, mission-critical strides. Irrespective of approach, we have welcomed the large number of submissions and celebrated their variety. Reviewers have been working tirelessly to provide constructive feedback and authors have been extremely understanding of, and responsive to, the publication process. Two contributions are ready for publication in this issue, and many more are being attended to in the background as we prepare the May and November 2022 issues.

Most certainly, the topics proposed retain their relevance into 2022. Considerations of temporary versus permanent solutions and their anticipated implications for future directions are even more topical now and span many areas of higher education, including: strategic decision-making and leadership; changing institutional/organisational roles and responsibilities; repurposing internationalisation and mobility aims; broadening of quality standards and quality assurance approaches; adjustments to programme design and curriculum delivery; staff and student performance within the virtual environment; definitions of academic integrity and ethical behaviour in online or hybrid interactions; upgrading infrastructure; recalibrating support services; reaffirming research and development priorities; and, not least, rethinking engagement with industry and society. For a comprehensive, overarching view of the pandemic print on higher education, we continue to draw on focussed analyses of these topics, whether they are qualitative or quantitative, exploratory or descriptive, supplemented by recommendations for future action and/or applicability between contexts.

The Special Section on Covid-19 will continue to foster international academic reflection, detailed analysis, and on-going dialogue by bringing

together diverse opinions, multiple voices, and varied perspectives. We invite higher education institutions (senior management, staff, and students), quality assurance agencies, ministerial bodies, industry representatives, and other stakeholders to continue to engage with the TJHE and propose contributions in the form of research articles, case studies, or policy papers on topics related to the pandemic and higher education.

The TJHE commitment to offer a platform for the exchange of experiences within higher education is as strong as ever. Given the positive reactions and the manifold submissions we have received, we are encouraged that our initiative to support solutions for the ‘new normal’ is already demonstrating impact. Notwithstanding that pandemic realities have been most challenging, we have to recognise that options which would have rarely been considered viable in pre-pandemic higher education are becoming increasingly appealing to a variety of stakeholders. The world of higher education is now even more preoccupied with the major questions of what each institution, each national sector, and each regional structure will take forward as they craft their post-pandemic profiles.

Nevertheless, any attempt to look into the future and try to make sense of what may come to be, involves a recognisable gamble and hence the risk of misjudgement. However, a realistic assessment of past lessons corroborated with a comprehensive understanding of future potential may mitigate this somewhat. It would, thus, seem obvious that the more detail we gain and the more insights we share, the better we will be placed, as a sector, to identify opportunities for innovation and growth.

One of the most recurrent questions concerns the future modes of delivery and the options that have become available to the higher education sector as a result of pandemic lockdowns and the forced move to online. With the experience of the past 18 months, it seems inconceivable that these modes, namely online, blended, hybrid, and in-person, would not all play a role in the future. Additionally, it seems reasonable that we would envisage online options as becoming more prevalent than in pre-pandemic times. Indeed, in professional conversation, many colleagues in institutions where there was no prior online/distance-learning experience, describe a sense of achievement in relation to the use of online modes and newly gained confidence in relation to digitalisation and technology-infused pedagogies. While previously they would have been reluctant and would never have embraced a move to online if given the option, they may now find themselves enthusiastically promoting it and some are quite distraught at the thought that there could be a full revert-back to traditional delivery. Colleagues recognise the steep learning curve involved, both individual and institutional, but see this as something

that has allowed the higher education sector to demonstrate great levels of adaptability, resilience, and innovation, and has highlighted the potential to drive a paradigm shift. Some colleagues express the desire not to lose the momentum and build on the lessons learned, embed the skills developed, and grasp these new opportunities for growth. Importantly, however, this is accompanied by the understanding that any decision to retain online delivery, in whatever combination, needs to benefit from proper strategic and operational planning so as to meet quality expectations by all stakeholders, including students, teaching staff, professional staff, senior management, employers, the general public, quality assurance bodies, and governmental structures.

Clearly, each institution, each national sector, and each regional structure will need to assess context specific elements and culturally relevant features to validate changes made in response to a post-pandemic future. Some of these changes may seem more like minor adjustments with the potential to better streamline operational areas, while others may be underpinned by strategic redesign and offer institutions and sectors opportunities to reposition themselves regionally or globally.

In support of planning, the following questions may contribute to eliciting the appropriate nature and relevant degree of future change and help to determine how valuable changes may prove to be for any given institution, organisation or government.

(1) What is permanently desirable? What will the institution/organisation/government wish to retain? What will the institution/organisation/government struggle to retain? And, crucially, why? What purpose is the change serving? What are the implications of its implementation?

(2) What is temporarily desirable? What will the institution/organisation/government seek to discard? What will the institution/organisation/government struggle to discard? And, crucially, why? What purpose is the change serving? What are the implications of its implementation?

As the world of higher education is still navigating towards an uncertain future, it is important that we continue to take a reflective approach, and one that allows multiple factors to be brought into the discussion. Coming out of the pandemic, whenever that might be, will also pose a variety of challenges and the higher education sector needs to demonstrate awareness and take appropriate action. Close scrutiny of the recent past will continue to yield insights into potential options for the future, as the predicted 'new normal' is yet to fully materialise.

It seems common sense to affirm that, at the current moment, anyone invested in higher education who is still postponing to make strategic

decisions in anticipation of post-pandemic times is choosing to ignore the obvious signs of opportunity and the predictive prompts for change.

Personally, I share in the belief that the momentum for development and growth should not be lost. It is my view that while 2020 and much of 2021 was, unavoidably, spent in a reactive mode, as we enter 2022, a shift towards more proactive tactics will be an advantage. Unquestionably, firm decision-making, and its explicit communication, will be of benefit in the ‘new normal’ that arises as we emerge from the crisis.

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