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COVID-19 SPECIAL SECTION

COVID-19 Special Section: Introduction

Targeted reflection, mutual understanding, and collaborative working. Building blocks for post-pandemic models in higher education

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Targeted reflection, mutual understanding, and collaborative working. Building blocks for post-pandemic models in higher education

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Abstract: This introduction to the COVID-19 Special Section highlights the importance for targeted reflection on pandemic experiences, mutual understanding of perspectives and best practice sharing by and across stakeholder groups. Higher education, similar to other global sectors, has been profoundly shaken by the realities brought about since March 2020, and different stakeholders have felt the impact and consequences of the pandemic on a daily basis. Reports of challenges go a long way towards enabling understanding; however, unless these are combined with demonstrations of responses in context and analyses of their effectiveness, they remain at the level of awareness and cannot move towards action. Sharing the lessons learned, alerting to specificities and gaining perspectives have never been more timely, as higher education shapes future models for enhanced stakeholder experiences within increased quality parameters.

Notwithstanding the disruptive effect on societies, COVID-19 must also be recognised as an accelerator for higher education, impacting digitalisation, accessibility and creating opportunities for new approaches to educational delivery and collaboration. The papers in this Special Section cover a variety of contexts, moving swiftly from Spain to Poland to the United States of America, India and Iran to return to Europe, i.e. Slovenia. Authors tackle specific challenges experienced by stakeholders, be they students, teaching and administrative staff, researchers or policy makers, and discuss lessons learned, highlight perceived benefits and recommend how these may be translated into policy and practice.

Keywords: higher education stakeholders; COVID-19 experiences in higher education; future prospects for higher education; COVID-19 responses in higher education; good practice in crisis management.

On 14 September 2022, the head of the World Health Organisation indicated,[1] in what appeared a judiciously articulated statement, that the end of the pandemic was in sight and we should seize the opportunity to "finish the race". Governments are, thus, urged to take the evidence and experience of the last 32 months, and retain, for the future, what was found to work best to save lives, protect health systems, and avoid social and economic disruption.

Although the reality on the ground may feel very different to individuals, communities and national contexts still confronting new waves and more variants, the cautiously optimistic news raises the bar for more strategic future thinking where robust contingency and increased agility could allow for the experiences of COVID-19 to not be repeated or, at least, not with the same degree of impact. This places responsibility on all actors, within all areas of existence, to reflect intensely on the lessons learned and design unassailable plans for the future.

Higher education, too, needs to rise to the challenge

In many contexts across the world, the academic year 2022/2023 gave opportunity to invite students back in the classrooms, back in the libraries, back in the residence halls, back on campus. Strangely enough it seemed to take some higher education institutions by surprise as they scrambled to update infrastructure, find sufficient physical space for larger numbers of students admitted during the pandemic or take a clear approach on how or if online components were to play a role in the "new normal". If the end of lockdowns could have been a clear sign to accelerate preparations for crafting viable arrangements, it seems that only some took this cue, while others made some adjustments, and others, still, aimed for a full return to pre-pandemic times. The degree of strategic clarity and operational preparedness (or lack thereof) was felt equally across a variety of groups of higher education stakeholders, with staff and students experiencing the highest exposure.

What is the "New Normal", then?

With many higher education institutions across the world exhibiting, pre-COVID, traditional education models, the rapid move to online education has created a steep learning curve, which saw staff and students

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[1] "The end of the COVID-19 pandemic is in sight: WHO," United Nations, UN News, accessed November 9, 2022, https:// news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1126621.

gain resilience and become more proactive. Research,[2] as also evidenced in papers of the TJHE COVID-19 special sections,[3] shows that in the emergency response phase many actors on the ground felt challenged and displayed negative emotions which took a toll on performance. However, as higher education moved into the transition phase, confidence increased, digitalisation became routine and more positive feelings of achievement came to the fore.

Many stakeholders have articulated the need to seize the benefits and ensure that they feature in future strategic planning to safeguard that valuable lessons will not be lost[4] and that higher education is given opportunity to consolidate the paradigm shift which sees online, hybrid, blended models permeate mainstream education. If approached effectively, the "New Normal" can aid ambitions of widening access, generating flexibility, embedding ethical considerations, reinforcing sustainable actions through increased digitalisation, balanced resourcing and advanced infrastructures.

With the notion of traditional degree-type education already being under strong challenge for some years now, the onus is on institutional management structures and national policy initiatives to accommodate changing expectations of and motivations for higher education. With more diverse profiles of learners seeking to connect agilely to education to serve purposes of upskilling and reskilling, concepts like stackability and portability have never been more relevant.[5] In this changing world, where higher education is

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[2] Anca Greere and Fiona Crozier, "Quality assurance expectations for online higher education: stepping stones to support post-pandemic decisions in Georgia," *Quality in Higher Education* (Taylor and Francis 2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2022.2123266.

[3] Seena Joseph, Robyn Thompson, Subashnie Soobramoney, and Jeanette Wendy Wing, "Emergency remote teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic: Efficacy of a four-stage model," *Tuning Journal for Higher Education* 9, no. 2 (2022): 245-278, https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe.2134.

Emilia Mazurek, "Higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic in the opinions of students in Poland," *Tuning Journal for Higher Education* 10, no. 1 (2022): 263-284, https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe.2172.

Esmaeil Ghaderi, Ali Khoshnood, and Neda Fekri, "Achievement emotions of university students in on-campus and online education during the COVID-19 pandemic," *Tuning Journal for Higher Education* 10, no. 1 (2022): 319-336, https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe.2346.

[4] Anca Greere and Fiona Crozier, "Quality assurance expectations for online higher education: stepping stones to support post-pandemic decisions in Georgia," *Quality in Higher Education* (Taylor and Francis 2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2022.2123266.

[5] "Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability," *Council of the European Union*, accessed November 9, 2022, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/ document/ST-9237-2022-INIT/en/pdf.

often pushed to play a survival game, it seems legitimate to seize the opportunities presented by COVID-19 and allow them to guide education in response to societal dynamics, especially where the quality of the educational experience can be enhanced.

However, this is only possible if the higher education sector assumes the responsibility of transforming an experience littered with negativity, uncertainty and disruption into one which recognises the positives and seeks to give them strategic value. To achieve such transformational stance will be highly dependent on the interactions higher education promotes so as to understand the views of stakeholders, to account for their different perspectives, to support cross-stakeholder sharing and to stimulate the co-creating of desirable models. Higher education needs to bring with it all stakeholders towards a collectively endorsed blueprint for the future as students, teachers, administrators, researchers, employers etc. come aligned with policy makers to allow for constructive change.

All papers in this section highlight the importance for targeted reflection on pandemic experiences, mutual understanding of perspectives and best practice sharing by and across stakeholder groups. Higher education, similar to other global sectors, has been profoundly shaken by the realities brought about since March 2020, and different stakeholders have felt the impact and consequences of the pandemic on a daily basis. Reports of challenges go a long way towards enabling understanding; however, unless these are combined with demonstrations of responses in context and analyses of their effectiveness, they remain at the level of awareness and cannot move towards action. Sharing the lessons learned, alerting to specificities and gaining perspectives have never been more timely, as higher education shapes future models for enhanced stakeholder experiences within increased quality parameters.

Notwithstanding the disruptive effect on societies, COVID-19 must also be recognised as an accelerator for higher education, impacting digitalisation, accessibility and creating opportunities for new approaches to educational delivery and collaboration. The papers in this COVID-19 Special Section cover a variety of contexts, moving swiftly from Spain to Poland to the United States of America, India and Iran to return to Europe, i.e. Slovenia. Authors tackle specific challenges experienced by stakeholders, be they students, teaching and administrative staff, researchers or policy makers, and discuss lessons learned, highlight perceived benefits and recommend how these may be translated into policy and practice.

The first paper, authored by Anna Sala-Bubaré, Mariona Corcelles, Núria Suñé-Soler, and Montserrat Castelló Badia, puts the spotlight on

researchers and explores their perceptions of the unfolding pandemic and its impact on Responsible Research and Innovation practices. Entitled *"Researchers' perceptions of COVID-19 impact on Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)-based practices and society's view of science in the first months of the pandemic",* the paper thoroughly investigates changes in research practices across different disciplines, while aiming to highlight societal shifts in perception in regards science and the potential for responsible and innovative scientific advancement. The study is based in Spain, more precisely its three Catalan-speaking regions, where a survey was administered online in the first months of the pandemic. Responses from 1499 researchers were analysed and conclusions drawn on the individual positioning of researchers in respect their own research environment, further extrapolated to society's views. Whereas predominantly the collective view is positive in regards items which explored how society views research and the role of the researcher, concerns are also expressed about fake news infiltrating global communication channels and taking a toll on societal perceptions. The analysis also reflects some interesting differences across disciplines, with Health Sciences and Social Sciences researchers perceiving higher impact than in other disciplines, and Humanities being more sceptical towards a positive outlook of society in respect research prospects. There is, however, firm consensus when it comes to a plea for working conditions and funding to improve so as to allow the research community to deploy all its capabilities in support of regional challenges and global crises, like the pandemic.

Responsible Research and Innovation, as a key action of the European Union's Science with and for Society programme,[6] promotes interdisciplinary research practices geared at societal needs and responsive to its expectations. As such, the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders must be secured to relevantly consider all perspectives which can support the design and implementation of well targeted research initiatives. Such engagement is advocated across all the phases of a research project and would see citizens, policymakers, professionals, and civil organisations come together alongside researchers to shape, in a co-creative environment, the outcomes which are deemed valuable for society. Setting the COVID-19 pandemic in context and acknowledging the added challenges which it has brought forward for research, the authors outline the gaps experienced and pinpoint lessons learned, grouped under four main headings: the relevance of science for

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[6] "Science with and for society", European Commission, Open Research Europe, accessed November 7, 2022, https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/gateways/sciencewithandforsociety/about-this-gateway.

citizens and society, *fake news* and the role of media, the importance of improving the relationship between science and politics, and the need to improve research investment. Importantly, researchers perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to open science to society, highlighting how science has been more available and easily accessible, promoting a better and more rigorous understanding of experiences and realities.

With our second paper *"Higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic in the opinions of students in Poland"*, we stay in the context of Europe but shift focus to a different group of stakeholders, namely students, whose opinions of the pandemic experience are analysed and put into perspective so that higher education may consider the valuable lessons learned and take them as guidance into the future. The study proposed by author Emilia Mazurek focussed on eliciting the views of 290 students from a variety of universities in Poland about the implementation of distance education arrangements, mindful also of the social implications and the adjustments necessary to cope with social life limitations as imposed during the pandemic. Organised as a two stage process, the research investigates perceptions during emergency remote teaching and learning, i.e. in the initial stages of the pandemic when distance education was forcefully imposed, with little if any preparation and, subsequently, moves to explore changing attitudes across the transitional stages of the pandemic, once students and teachers became more accustomed to distance delivery and more confident in the use of online educational technologies.

Consistent with other findings reported in previous COVID-19 special section papers of the Tuning Journal for Higher Education, the study found that in the initial stages of the pandemic students were trying to cope with challenges arising from an absence of personal interaction with teachers and other students, difficulty in organising online classes to stimulate practice-based interaction, lack of standardisation of platforms used for online education at the university, an increase in out-of-class independent learning workload and health risks related to prolonged exposure to the computer screen, few opportunities for exercise and fresh air, and feelings of isolation and social withdrawal. In the second semester of distance education, however, there was an increase in student satisfaction with online delivery as reports indicate an increase in synchronous classes. This satisfaction is seen by the author as consolidating the option for online education for the future, as an integral part of higher education in Poland, to sit effectively alongside more traditional type delivery. With most universities in Poland having exhibited more conventional modes of education before the pandemic it is clear that such direct and rapid exposure to the online environment has generated a steep learning curve, with

students rising to the challenge. This anticipates online and blended modes to become part of mainstream educational offers, thus generating what the author describes as the "educational revolution in Poland".

The third paper draws our attention to a different, less explored but equally relevant, area of challenge as it proposes ways of dealing with teaching staff turnover at moments in the academic year when this is likely to create the greatest impact. Coupled with the uncertainties generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, mid-semester changes in teaching staff opened up highly problematic management issues, which intensified the apprehension experienced by students and had to be resolved in a timely and effective manner. "*Preparing for the unexpected in a COVID-19 world: The teaching dilemmas of a mid-semester faculty change*", authored by Deborah M. Gray, Jeremy T. Bond, Jessica M. Wicks, and Nancy Hicks, demonstrates the dynamics of the COVID-19 fallout in the United States of America and shifts our attention, yet again, to a different group of stakeholders, those involved in management decisions and administrative interactions. Conscious of the shortage of research geared towards identifying best practices for handling the dilemmas associated with mid-semester teaching staff changes, the paper focusses on: (1) the impact on students of such changes and the most appropriate actions which can alleviate the tensions generated and (2) the support in place for incoming replacement teaching staff for a smooth transition and one which allows for minimum disruption to the educational process. A mixed methodology research combining student surveys and administrator interviews led to interesting conclusions about practical approaches which have the potential to make a positive difference in the opinion of students and administrative staff. It is demonstrated that expectations play a key role in the success of teaching staff transitioning, with students keen to observe levels of flexibility during the course take-over, i.e. expecting that the new teacher will first ascertain the level of knowledge gained before moving into the lessons as planned and, subsequently, be willing to fill any gaps that students may still be exhibiting from their previous teaching. Transitions that are student-focussed are recognised to require more support than would standard personnel turnover procedures, with mid-semester teaching staff changes requiring robust contingency planning based on functional and rapidly implementable solutions, if students are to be duly protected from such disruption.

Importantly, this paper raises awareness of an area least explored but with worrying consequences especially in COVID-19 times, when mental health issues have been on the rise within higher education with both students and staff requiring effective support to allow them to develop relevant coping

mechanism. The three reasons why teaching staff might be replaced mid-semester are noted as being related to voluntary departures, extenuating motivations and punitive catalysts for departure, with COVID-19 likely having accentuated all such areas, creating a stronger cocktail for disruption. Changes derived from COVID-19 restrictions will have seen working conditions become more stressful, family and health issues on the rise; this will have had a knock on effect on performance and commitment which in turn will have created the desire to voluntarily leave to avoid further mental health pressures. The authors conclude that it is incumbent on higher education institutions to recognise such chain of causality and have mechanisms in place for swift action. With teaching staff members playing a pinnacle role in student learning and their teaching practice having significant impact on student persistence and retention, mid-semester changes, if not administered effectively, may take a dramatic toll on students. This is because students who feel a sense of community in the classroom have a higher rate of attendance, participation, and persistence and COVID-19 is demonstrated to have profoundly disrupted this sense of community. Moreover, where COVID-19 was doubled by staff replacements, higher education institutions will have had a more difficult task on their hands.

Esmaeil Ghaderi, Ali Khoshnood, and Neda Fekri offer us the fourth paper in our COVID-19 Special Section entitled "*Achievement emotions of university students in on-campus and online education during the COVID-19 pandemic*", which also brings in focus the emotional impact generated by the COVID-19 pandemic on students through a comparison between face-to-face educational experiences and online delivery. The authors, too, emphasise the link established between feelings and emotions and the motivation and academic performance of students as they aim to better understand how students reacted, emotionally, in the physical classroom as opposed to the virtual classroom. 92 Iranian higher education students, studying Humanities and Social Sciences, were asked to evaluate their emotions by completing the Achievement Emotions Questionnaire developed by Bieleke et al. (2021) twice, once for the emotions related to on-campus experiences and a second time for those experienced in pandemic online delivery. At the time of the questionnaire, students had had a minimum of two semesters delivered traditionally, on campus, and two semesters delivered online as part of the university emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Pekrun's (2006) control-value three-dimensional taxonomy of achievement emotions and applying it to educational settings, the authors distinguish emotions felt by students in various achievement situations, such as learning, doing homework, participating in class, or taking exams, and investigate the

consequences on a learner's ability to self-regulate, on their use of flexible strategies and on their academic performance.

Overarching findings indicate that classroom-based teaching and learning was associated with positive emotions such as enjoyment, hope and pride, while online classes triggered anger. Interestingly, anxiety, hopelessness, boredom and shame displayed no significant variations between the two educational formats. Still, one third of students indicated that continuing in online mode could be preferred and would allow optimum use of resources. The authors, thus, urge educational policymakers, curriculum planners, and teachers to consider how students feel comparatively about the two modes of higher education delivery in deciding the formats of the future and anticipate blended models and online collaborative learning, which have shown demonstrable benefits, to become integrated in educational portfolios of a wide range of higher education institutions.

The fifth paper "*Teaching-learning process through virtual mode during the pandemic time: Systematic literature review and gap analysis*" by Ajay Kumar Singh and Mukesh Kumar Meena, looks specifically at the benefits of the virtual classroom as used during the pandemic lockdown in India. 305 teachers and 588 students in higher education institutions were surveyed and expected versus actual benefits were concluded on. A significant difference is reported between expected benefits and actual benefits and this is attributed predominantly to technical barriers with students being unable to connect to virtual classroom due to availability, connectivity and accessibility issues. However, poor digital skills of both teachers and students were also reported and their consequences noted as frequently translating into disengagement, feelings of isolation, and reactive attitudes with effect on academic performance. Actual benefits were more difficult to articulate as the challenges seemed to overshadow the identification of actual benefits. This led the authors to formulate a number of concrete recommendations that would see educational authorities and higher education institutions working together to resolve problems of a technical or pedagogical nature. A plea for improved infrastructural investments and extended technical support is made to ensure that the Indian higher education context may also relate more strongly to actual benefits.

Our sixth and final paper in the COVID-19 Special Section investigates an area much discussed, namely the difficulties encountered in achieving learning outcomes related to components of practical training in a variety of programmes. Specifically, Irena Hergan and Mojca Pečar focus on "*Teaching practicum for primary teacher education students during the COVID-19 pandemic*" as they present the results of a research conducted with Faculty of

Education pre-service student teachers to assess the usefulness of their distance teaching practicum during COVID-19 for their professional development. This study brings us back to Europe, namely Slovenia, where the authors administered an online survey in spring 2020, with 238 student responses received. Whereas it was found that perceptions of usefulness were varied across the two groups surveyed, third year students versus fourth year students, it demonstrated that teaching practice can be delivered online, meaning that learning outcomes are not majorly affected, if there is a good balance between preparing materials, supporting pupils and delivering lessons via videoconferencing.

Reflective practices are highlighted as generating important layers of professional development, with students needing to acquire reflection skills which they can deploy habitually in a deliberate, purposeful and planned manner. The pre-pandemic set-up described by the authors sees third year students working in groups at primary schools with teaching and teaching observations conducted equally, whereas fourth year students spend their whole practicum teaching individually the same group of pupils – all under the supervision of a primary school teacher mentor. COVID-19 moved the practicum from an authentic school environment online and logistical adaptations were inevitable; however, the reflective features of the practicum work were still maintained, with students encouraged to keep records of the content and scope of their work and evaluate their pedagogical experience afterwards. Overall, the authors believe that students had less diverse experiences during the distance practicum because the teacher mentors were instructed to integrate students in the areas where they would be most helpful; thus, many students were asked to prepare various teaching materials, rather than engage in interactive delivery with pupils. As such, exposure to the various pedagogical realities of primary school teaching was more limited, although students reported being able to develop, to a satisfactory extent, their time management skills, plan and teach in different subjects, take into account pupil diversity, include diverse teaching materials, and reflect on their work and the work of pupils together with teacher mentors – which meant learning outcomes were not put at risk, allowing for the programme to demonstrate continuity and comparability.

Conclusively, all papers identify multiple challenges which have been experienced under the pandemic, but, importantly, move into reflection mode and analyse how or if the responses to challenges can be transformed into lessons for the future. The transferability of best practices is evident and the opportunity for future options is unquestionable. Continuing to share and

learn from our experiences will generate the building blocks to shape higher education.

With this edition of the Tuning Journal for Higher Education, we will have had three successful COVID-19 sections, all generously sharing experiences from across the globe for a better understanding, increased applicability and improved transferability of lessons learned which can pave the way for the future. This being the last iteration of the special section, I close my role as COVID-19 Special Section editor and offer my thanks to all authors, all contributors, all colleagues who have engaged with this section and made it a valuable resource. I urge you all to continue to nurture, collectively and individually, your commitment, your perseverance and your passion for higher education, and offer the guarantee that the Tuning Journal for Higher Education will be here to support you.

Good luck and stay safe!