



Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education: Critical Reflections

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Abstract

This Special Issue has chosen the major focus to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected higher education development and governance. The collection of articles in this Special Issue is organized with three key sub-themes, namely, student mobility, teaching and student learning, and university governance. Papers selected in this Issue were presented at different international conferences examining how the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 has affected higher education development from international and comparative perspectives. During the international research events, authors contributing their papers to this Special Issue indeed benefitted from the exchanges and dialogues from international peers. Drawing insights from the papers collected in this Special Issue, this introductory article concludes by drawing the implications for future development of international education.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · Quality education · Higher education · Student learning · Geo-politics · Student mobility · Reflections from Asia

Teaching and Student Learning

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed higher education systems across different parts of the globe to adopt online platforms for conducting teaching and learning activities. *Angela Hou and colleagues*, in her article, ask a very important and reflective question: How would COVID-19 drive digitalization, innovations, and crisis management of higher education? More importantly, they also raise the issue of quality assurance when most higher education teaching and learning had been operating through online platforms. Based upon a case study of the INQAHE Virtual Review, they critically examine issues related to quality assurance when higher education teaching and learning of had been digitalized. Their article does

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not only offer a case study of Taiwan, showing how one of the East Asian economies responded to the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis through digitalizing higher education. This case studies also shows relevance to other parts of the world, especially when those countries/regions encounter difficulties in realizing the digitalization of teaching and student learning. International research reports educational inequality and disparity being intensified after the widespread the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020, 2021). International and comparative research report higher education systems from relatively low-income countries/regions have suffered tremendously simply because of the lack of resources/infrastructural support for online teaching/learning, let alone diverse differences in educational cultures/management and practices across different parts of the globe (Vegas, 2020; Mok, et al., 2021).

The second article contributed by *Mok, Xiong, and Ke* critically examines how Chinese students evaluate overseas studies during and in the post-COVID-19 crisis, showing the growing interest of Chinese students in making Asia their future destination for studying abroad, especially when becoming more concerned about public health conditions in traditional destinations based in Europe, the UK and the USA (QS, 2020). The motivations and desires of Chinese students choosing overseas learning would have been affected by the new geopolitics and different kinds of “cultural shocks”, particularly when Asian students were reportedly being discriminated/stigmatized after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic when studying abroad (Mbous, et al2022; Mok and Zhang, 2021).

Institutional Response and University Governance

Moving beyond management of teaching and student learning, Susan Robertson, critically reflecting upon the future of higher education governance set against the COVID-19 context, presented a paper at the Conference for Higher Education Research (CHER) 2020. Based upon recent works on temporality and higher education, Robertson considers such works have made important contributions to work on time, though time-future continues to be under-developed. In her presentation, she attempted to explore anticipatory governance in the contemporary university. Exploring a range of anticipatory practices and their logic in the contemporary academy, from goals to planning, predictions, forecasts, indicators, specialised knowledge, and agreements, Robertson believed we should think beyond our own box of how the future presents potential opportunities for academic development. Adopting the time-future lens in conceiving future university governance, Robertson’s paper shows the anticipatory practices mobilise different kinds of socio-temporal and political sensibilities and expectations, practices, and institutional arrangements, that constitute timescapes in the contemporary academy (Robertson, 2020).

Whereas Robertson discusses temporality in general, *Tilak* critically examines the impact of the pandemic on Indian higher education. In his article, he presents the major challenges confronting higher education development in India against the COVID-19 crisis, discussing major strategies/policy measures adopted by the Indian government in managing challenges for higher education. As India is committed to further increasing its higher education enrolments in order to produce sufficient

young talents for the changing economic needs of the country, the current COVID-19 crisis would considerably disrupt its plans for higher education development. To which extent the Indian government and university leaders make use of innovative measures through the technology-enabled platforms to achieve its development goals depends not only on resources but also on careful policy coordination.

Moving away from Asia, the article contributed by *O'Shea, Mou, Xu, and Aikins* critically examine how higher education institutions (HEIs) in three countries, namely, Canada, China, and the USA, responded to the challenges of COVID-19 over a six-month period at the outbreak of the global pandemic. Employing document analysis, they analyze 732 publicly available communications from 27 HEIs in Canada, China, and the United States. Through the theoretical framework of Situational Critical Communications Theory (SCCT), *O'Shea et al.*, explore how HEIs respond to the crisis and communicate their response to the crisis to campus stakeholders. While there are important country-level distinctions among HEIs in how they communicate and respond to crisis, this research finds there are common themes across the three countries, including (1) emphasizing social responsibilities of serving the community, (2) referencing public health guidelines, and (3) offering different kinds of financial support to students. The findings shed light on strengths and weaknesses of the SCCT model in analyzing HEI responses to COVID-19 and may be helpful for HEIs to prepare for the next crisis.

Future of International Education

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, international students are considered to be more adversely affected by COVID-19 restrictions than other student and population groups (e.g., local students) in the world (Dodd, et al., 2021). According to research conducted by Amoah and Mok in 2020, international students find themselves living in foreign countries/regions with limited social and economic support and in a context of rising discrimination (Amoah and Mok, 2020). With special attention to international student well-being, the article contributed by *Amoah and Esther Mok* examines the effects that COVID-19 restrictions have had and are having on the lives of international students. Such effects include direct consequences of the disease itself and its disruptive effect on this group of students and the effectiveness of the support offered by universities for the well-being of international students. The study analyzed data from a global survey conducted among international students in April 2020. They found that the well-being of international students is negatively associated with being worried about COVID-19 itself ($B = -0.218, p = .027$); with perceived COVID-19 disruption of academic activities ($B = -0.162, p = .016$); and with feelings of loneliness ($B = -0.317, p = .000$). Notably, COVID-19 information support provided by universities was positively associated with the students' well-being ($B = 0.224, p = 0.003$). These findings are discussed in the context of education policy and practical changes introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion also considers the influence of the changing geopolitical and social environment (e.g., racism) on higher education internationalisation, critically

reflecting upon management and governance issues faced by universities worldwide when promoting the well-being of international students (Mok, 2022).

A critical reflection of how the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the Australian university system, *Anthony Welch* shows the impact of COVID as a stark reminder that international students are so much more than cash cows for universities. Not merely do they add immeasurably to the vibrant cultural diversity of universities, they “are vital parts of communities. Indeed, many international students are future Australian citizens. It is estimated that between 20,000 and 30,000 international students move from student visas to permanent residency visas every year” a figure that is likely to be an underestimate, since students often gain another form of temporary visa, before attaining permanent residence. During the COVID-19 crisis, we have witnessed how academic cooperation and research collaboration have become highly politicized, especially when the new geopolitics has emerged as an influential force shaping international education and research.

In view of the worsening diplomatic relationship between China and Australia, Welch highlights the potential for COVID to curtail staff and student mobility, restricting research collaboration between colleagues in Australia and China. The growing anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments commonly found not only in Australia but also in other major university systems in Europe and North America would create disincentives for inter-university and cross-border collaboration, which would be detrimental to future development of international education and research. According to Welch, what is urgently needed is a dialogue of civilizations, rather than a clash of civilizations, with the associated rancorous and rivalrous international relations that threaten international academic mobility and collaboration.

Conclusion

This Special Issue brings together thought-provocative pieces, critically reflecting upon the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education development. The challenges confronting contemporary universities are partly caused by the pandemic, disrupting the “normal operation” of universities. Nonetheless, the present global health crisis has also opened new opportunities for university teachers and leaders for exploring innovative modes of teaching and student learning, moving beyond the conventional models in developing new forms of inter-university collaborations. However, part of the problems facing universities globally is the unfavorable influences of new geopolitics creating mistrust across countries/regions. Perhaps world leaders as well as university leaders should be humbled to learn from the global health crisis resulting from the outbreak of COVID-19, seeking appropriate ways for closer and deeper collaboration for the betterment of the humanity.

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