

***Introduction
for Special ISSUES
COVID-19 and the Resilience of Higher Education
Institutions***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a process of reshaping the activities of higher education institutions (HEIs) took place, more abruptly in what concerns the first pillar of the universities (teaching), and more gradually in what concerns their second one (research) and the third stream activities. Regardless of the mission, in the first months of the pandemic the emphasis was on emergency and crisis management and, later on, the attention shifted to quality management and improvement (Cirlan and Loukkola, 2021).

The issue of quality in any academic domain was quickly becoming an imperative, right after ensuring safety in academic activities and administrative organization of activities. Scholars, for example, operate a conceptual difference between the emergency remote education from spring 2020 and online learning, urging to see the first as “a quick and temporary response to a crisis, whereas the latter is planned and grounded in theoretical and practical knowledge specific to the field” (Bozkurt et al., 2020, p. 2). If specialists can see, retroactively, essential differences between the two – at the conceptual level, in higher education institutions, as everywhere, probably, in educational institutions, the transition from the first form to the second has been almost unnoticed to some, under pressure from pandemic restrictions.

Finally, due to the raised rates of contagion in many countries, some universities shifted gradually from emergency remote education towards online learning (Cirlan and Loukkola, 2021). Changes in policies in a large spectrum of sectors were in order. Obviously, the decision makers addressed the most stringent ones, related to the assurance of the legal action framework, the regulatory frameworks for exams, the policies related to student progression, academic integrity, international mobility, internships or regulations. Gradually, guidelines for work, life and teaching requiring physical presence on campus, codes of conduct for remote teaching regarding data protection and privacy regulations and agreements were also developed (Cirlan and Loukkola, 2021). At the other end of the continuum, the actual subjective experience, as faced and overcome by the social actors of change, reported transformations experienced as quite significant. Obviously, they were addressed less - and not primarily - by decision-makers in higher education institutions. Some of those challenges were thoroughly investigated and shared in this section. We consider that the most difficult to investigate are the subjective experiences for which the academic communities - both at individual level and at that of the groups facing the same challenges (students, teachers, ancillary staff, etc.) still find, with difficulty, the ways of expression. The uniqueness of life experience in a global pandemic has had - still has, when we close our journal issue - consequences on the ability of those involved to express, to organize into categories - and, in this way, to configure the meaning / meanings of what we all live through. Thus, the research devoted to this "burning subject" is still hesitant, especially in the study of data that was most often enthusiastically collected, on various levels, from various groups, etc. Our issue has welcomed preliminary research and opinions regarding the broad systemic and individual impact of the pandemic on higher education institutions up to the empirical data on the impact at the individual level of actors involved.

The COVID-19 pandemic restructured important aspects of our academic lives, including how universities deliver and students access tertiary education, how research is undertaken and the third mission of universities is fulfilled. Reports speak about the pandemic's impact on academics' ability to come up in a short time with new and exciting designs and contents for their online courses, in time with increased domestic responsibilities associated with closures of schools and child-care facilities, universities' capabilities to provide a high-quality and safe educational experience for students and a safe and technologically equipped environment to their staff. The challenges academic staff had to face, from balancing home-teaching with family roles in the same household to balancing teaching and research duties with academic administrative roles were salient and abrupt. Not to mention the challenges that the academic body has received in managing its relationship with students - that complex, fragile and at the same time essential axis, which defines the educational process, as it defines the roles of its participants. The virtual environment in which - most often - the relationship has moved has proved, globally we would say, insufficiently known / investigated / built as one adapted to the educational process, we repeat - in all its complexity. From here, innumerable problems have arisen, some - transformed into challenges for higher education institutions, others - marginalized under the presence of the daily rhythm in which the "pandemic abnormality" had to be managed. And the latter, we believe, must be recovered from their marginal hypostasis and must be given due attention.

As revealed by the contributors on this special volume: these challenges intensified complications related to workload and in particular for female academics. As Obianuju Okeke-Uzodike and Vangeli Wiseman Gamede's study on the workload and its impact on the life-work balance revealed, the time allocation to academic activities between teaching, research, third stream activities contributions and academic administrative and coordination duties remains a challenge for universities main task-force and "Covid-19 imposed remote working

arrangements resulting in increased workloads, leading to reduced research productivity and inability to achieve work-life balance for the female academics” (Okeke-Uzodike and Gamede, 2021). The panel of experts from a wide range of universities organised by EUA in February 2021 in order to assess the main issues in Quality Assurance revealed a strong consensus regarding the fact that the first year of pandemic led to an increased workload for staff. The experts also provided examples of typical solutions to this issue like offering psychological support (increased demand) and informal peer support; peer learning was also a lever of releasing the pressure on individual staff members.

In what concerns research within universities, the changes Covid-19 imposed were not without challenges. The restricted access to research equipment, decreased access to laboratory space and field mobility put considerable pressure on the researchers’ ability to produce high-impact research output, facing challenges in procuring equipment and adapting the design to new realities, difficulties in recruiting study participants and collecting data, etc. Soon, high impact journals publication policies made very clear the fact that research output has to become smarter than the type of research carried out before 2020 and mitigate less mobility and access to data and research equipment. Kock et al. (2020) stressed the need for research transcending the description of what is already known regarding the pandemic’s impact and going beyond measuring and predicting impacts (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020; Sigala, 2020). This imperative was made clear very soon after the response phase by the research literature, namely the limitations imposed on mobility and direct contact, which resulted in a limited range of available methodology and collaborative designs used in empirical research (Mălăescu, Drăgan and Mureşan, 2021 in press). The focus of current research is on paradigmatic changes, new approaches, models and methodologies rather than continuing with the previous practices (Mair, 2020; Gössling, Scott, and Hall, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Mălăescu, Drăgan and Mureşan, 2021 in press). A natural consequence of limited access in field research seemed to be

the fact that most of the studies have focused on regional impact analysis (Uğur and Akbıyık, 2020).

According to the recent EUA's report on quality assurance in HEIs, in the first phase, the decision-making process was speeding-up and embraced the crisis management algorithms, due to the transition to online delivery of teaching and university services, with changes in decision-making structures and policies. The scholars wondered about the dynamics of future research funding in the view of these changed priorities, about how the scientific world would adapt to uncertainty and how future grant applications conditions would be met. In addition, an imperative would be the recovering of the shattered research and educational programs after scarce funding and losing expertise as higher education institution restructure and adapt to the new reality.

On the other hand, the outbreak of Covid-19, with the ensuing online learning, made education more accessible for some students, while disadvantaging others; researchers were more prone to lose their international perspective and encountered difficulties in working and collaborating in their research networks, while other scholars have stressed the opportunity for the development of more environmentally sustainable and inclusive research practices. However, according to the EUA Report on *Internal quality assurance in times of Covid-19* (2021) the data on the impact of the changes made to the provision of student learning was reported as inconclusive. In what regards other aspects of their academic life, the challenges reside in access to the internet, the lack of digital equipment or of an adequate place to study, financial difficulties, health, family, social and psychological issues (Napier, 2021). Our contributors' study cases brought insight on how the extended social and political context of study during Covid-19 can influence the decision-making process to study abroad. Swanson, Wang and Hughes (2021) brought empirical evidence on the significant decreasing tendency in the willingness to study in the US of the Chinese students compared to the previous year. The authors concluded that safety from Covid-19 is the students' primary concern, followed by

mental preoccupation regarding racial discrimination or sudden changes in the political spectrum of the US-China relationship that could jeopardize their ability to finish their degree are the main issues that could potentially diminish the motivation for pursuing tertiary education in the US.

This journal issue includes contributions about the potential long-term impact in bilateral student-exchange and the related economic sectors, to the effects on particular groups, to implications for how we should be better prepared for possible future pandemics, and to the geopolitical ramifications of international relations which may be altered by far reaching changes likely to be associated with various outcomes from the pandemic. Our contributors see the impact of the halving of Chinese international students in US universities connected to the fact that numerous US universities are dependent on Chinese international students paying out-of-state tuition rates, to meet their financial needs, as a potential devastating effect on the US educational system if this tendency is diagnostic for the Chinese students decision-making process, and that there will be the prognostic decline in demand (Swanson, Wang and Hughes, 2021). Some of the elements responsible for the decline in students' motivation are beyond HEIs control, being attributable to large scale political issues but, in the authors' opinion, "US universities could make small efforts to mitigate some of the damage and improve the perception of their university to prospective Chinese applicants" (Swanson, Wang and Hughes, 2021). Other measures like a robust Covid-19 precaution plan and salient policies insuring Chinese students that political dynamics will not interfere with their framework for finishing their degree and tracking the political bilateral evolution were also among the suggestions our contributors formulated for the American HEIs in order to potentially diminish some of the perceived disincentives for pursuing education in the US.

The present collection also stressed "the need for institutional review and policy development on the academic workload management system to ensure work-life balance for the female academics and output

maximization for the university, especially in a pandemic” (Okeke-Uzodike and Gamede, 2021).

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