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## *Higher education research as preparation for emergencies*

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While for many, the introduction of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) foretold the end of traditional approaches to higher education, various settlements regarding the ‘idea of a university’ would not be seriously imperilled on global scale until the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) surfaced in early 2020, everywhere. Like other organisations, universities now interacted preponderantly online amidst growing economic, political and social disruption. Almost everything changed, seemingly overnight. To what extent could universities draw on the body of higher education research to pivot in the face of this shape-shifting emergency, and reconcile a COVID-normal?

Preliminary academic analysis emerged quickly; international comparative education and meta-analysis grew busy with key themes and noise (Crawford et al., 2020; Daniel, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020). It was almost immediately apparent that government health-directives restricting physical access to campuses would involve huge disruptions to practices around the student life cycle. Our tracking of media commentary, government reports and early scholarly literature since early 2020 revealed immediately obvious disruptions related to pathways into higher education from school (i.e., leaving/entrance examinations, university admissions), teaching and learning practices (i.e., online learning, participation, professional development, technology solutions) and urgent demand for health science graduates (i.e., doctors, nurses, aged/disability care staff). It also became apparent that the shift to online learning would raise issues associated with the recognition of qualifications, particularly for international students from China and India. As the health crisis spread, there was renewed government and community optimism about global science, in particular, medical science, as universities and R&D

companies investigated COVID-19 genetic sequencing, modelling, diagnostics, treatments, and vaccines, cognisant of potentially serious variants and their ramifications.

The student experience and student support would be an early touchpoint (i.e., repatriation, quarantine care packages) given that teaching and learning necessarily captures the essence of a university. In their efforts to continue operations, universities thanked teaching and research faculty, so many on casual, short-term and piecemeal contracts, as they pivoted programs online and radically altered research practices. At the same time, universities prevaricated about employment conditions and COVID-safe campus reopening plans (Davidson College, 2020), while increasingly alarmed by COVID-19 cases and deaths (The New York Times, 2020) and declining international student numbers. By mid-2020, universities had shifted their priorities (and values) and were introducing unprecedented faculty and staff cutbacks (Bauman, 2021; Bodin, 2020; Universities Australia, 2021).

Working remotely, isolated and uncertain, we explored some of the institution-level disruptions through the COVID-19 Institutional Policy Virtual Network, an initiative sponsored by the Australasian Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM). Through a regular series of video-conferenced meetings in the early stages of the pandemic (April – July 2020), we led a group of practitioners, scholars and consultants from Australia, New Zealand, India and Malaysia through discussions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on higher education practices and policies. Faculty, practitioners and consultants working in Chile, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United States also participated.

Clearly, COVID-19 had induced radical changes to academic practices (i.e., technology-enabled assessment, academic integrity, work integrated learning, research training), student administration (i.e., scholarships, admissions, progression, exclusion, orientation, graduation), and governance (i.e., delegations of authority, decision-making, privacy). Across diverse contexts and countries, the COVID-19 Institutional Policy Virtual Network identified unexpected developments around the use of emergency management plans and powers to enable rapid, transformational shifts in governance, leadership and operations. It became apparent that, faced with a public-health emergency and restricted campus access, the idea of the university could be fundamentally reframed, quickly. It seemed possible that a post-COVID world could emerge that embraced positive change.

Many of these shifts could usefully draw on higher education scholar's expertise, and education research literature. For example, pre-COVID, a robust body of literature had emerged regarding distance-education, broadly defined as learning for geographically dispersed persons interacting using telecommunications systems (Simonson et al., 2019). More recently, this literature analysed the evolution of technology-enabled learning including MOOCs and education technology (edtech) (Liyanagunawardena et al, 2013; Escueta et al., 2017). In 2020,

much emerging COVID-related literature emphasised the pivot to remote teaching, and analysed online learning pedagogy, curriculum, partnerships (i.e., online program management, third parties), technologies (i.e., learning management systems, platforms, devices, automation), and academic development requirements (Chan, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Michael et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2020).

Despite this wealth of knowledge, particularly in English-speaking countries, Continental Europe and East Asia where higher education scholarship is concentrated, along with the growth of futures forecasting, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a radical departure from most, if not all, existing and imagined practices. Clearly, not only was the impact on working and teaching important. Suddenly, universities needed urgent guidance on ‘COVID-safeing’ campus infrastructure and environs (including residential accommodation and retail outlets), and handbooks, protocols and specialised equipment emerged. University planners furiously modelled domestic and international student demand, while executives deferred capital works and laid off faculty to resolve looming financial crises. University research and research training was impacted, to greater and lesser extents, depending on the discipline, stage, funding arrangements and infrastructure/mobility-dependency. Novel approaches to international research collaboration emerged; however, some new collaborative studies flagged.

While not necessarily changing national policy, regulations and funding settings to support universities, we observed that governments emphasised the promise of medical science along with the economic function of universities (i.e., atomising learning/micro-credentials; steering course focus), while prioritising instrumental teaching (i.e., upskilling essential workers, and educating bored people in lockdown). As with many other sectors, it quickly transpired that COVID-19 exacerbated existing inequalities in universities. Higher education scholars observed that the pandemic entrenched the digital divide (Kelley & Sisneros, 2020) along with structural inequalities in the university workforce and conditions of employment (Gabster et al., 2021). It also became evident that COVID-19 disproportionately impacted students already facing multiple emergencies (e.g., culturally and linguistically diverse migrants and refugees; drought/fires/floods/storms/cyclones) (Mupenzi, 2020; Nicholas & Evershed, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the very idea of the university by closing campuses and upending academic, governance and administrative practices. Our research in 2020 suggests that the challenges facing higher education systems and institutions around the world will persist at least for several years. Research addressing the various aspects of higher education systems and institutions (i.e., pathways in/out, teaching and learning, governance and leadership, infrastructure, research and research training, policy, human resources and financing) can play a vital role in analysing responses to COVID-19, and increase university’s

preparedness for future emergencies.

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