Editorial: The cross-cultural effects of COVID-19 on higher education learning and teaching practice

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) that began in the late part of 2019 in Wuhan, China has created significant challenges for higher education. Since the inception of COVID-19 research and practice in the higher education discipline, there has continued to be a focus on exploring its effects in localised contexts. The place-based context, while useful in enhancing individual practice, limits the potential to examine the pandemic from a broader lens. There are for many of us, shared examples of good practice that can serve to collectively improve the higher education sector during and beyond the pandemic. This Special Issue came about as an effort to reinvigorate collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries in a discipline environment characterised by exponential growth in local case studies. This Editorial explores the role that we can play in supporting collaboration among researchers as both a process and end-product to support innovation in the university learning and teaching domain. We believe this Special Issue provides a curated cornerstone for the future of COVID-19 in higher education research. This work, contributed from each corner of the globe seeks to understand not just what is occurring now, but what might occur in the future. We find inspiration in the manuscripts within this Special Issue as they provide innovative responses to the pandemic and opportunities for us to collectively grow to better support academics, students, employers, and communities. We hope you find benefit in progressing through this knowledge dissemination project.

Practitioner Notes

1. COVID-19 has created a challenge for international research collaborations in higher education.
2. The pandemic has created an opportunity to rethink learning and teaching practice to support collaboration.
3. Early career academics have had more difficulty in developing research relationships across jurisdictional boundaries.
4. Journal Editors can have a role to play in creating support systems for early career academics to network.
5. We should take the opportunity, despite the challenges, of the pandemic to reimagine what the future state of higher education state may look like.

Keywords

Coronavirus, tertiary education, teaching and learning, emergency remote teaching, pandemic

Introduction

The novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) that began in the late part of 2019 in Wuhan, China has created significant challenges for higher education. Since the inception of COVID-19 research and practice in the higher education discipline, there has continued to be a focus on exploring its effects in localised contexts. The place-based context, while useful in enhancing individual practice, limits the potential to examine the pandemic from a broader lens. There are for many of us, shared examples of good practice that can serve to collectively improve the higher education sector during and beyond the pandemic.

Indeed, the ongoing and often unpredictable outbreaks and lockdowns have affected us all, without discrimination. While some parts of the world have not experienced the same degree of turbulence, the economic and social challenges remain. There are unique facets of nation and university responses, like variation on how delivery is conducted. In Australia, a move to online learning was only an extension of existing practice. In India, this was quite different. With only a small percentage of tertiary education available through online means, the leap to offering emergency remote teaching (ERT) was significant. Yet, in many contexts there are commonalities. Many of these, we began and led conversations on since early 2020. In April 2020, we built a descriptive foundation for immediate responses across 20 countries (Crawford et al., 2020). We continued this by building the COVID-19 in Higher Education Literature Database (CHELD) for the first six months (n = 138 manuscripts: Butler-Henderson et al., 2020), and for the first year (n = 738 manuscripts: Butler-Henderson et al., 2021). These curated works have sat as a cornerstone in our thinking surrounding how the pandemic literature may progress.

Beyond changes to teaching practices, COVID-19 transformed the landscape for early career researchers. We identified this early, and sought to define and remedy the potential for long-term effects for promising emerging researchers. For early career researchers, there are often supportive mechanisms to enable scholars to network and collaborate with people across the sector. This is often through doctoral colloquiums, conference dinners, and informal meet-and-greets among the discipline. All of these came to a standstill when lockdowns prevented most face-to-face interaction. While there were still online conferences, and Friday discipline wine nights, these likely did not create the same kinds of conditions that supported meaningful connections between junior academics and their potential collaborators. Conferences still supported learning, yet their ability to create high-impact networking events online was constrained. This, balanced with generally higher workloads (Watermeyer et al., 2020), has created an equity gap for newly minted postdoctoral fellows and similar.

To create a positive response to the early career gap, we engaged in a new process in this Journal: the *Collaborative Expression of Interest.* In this, we advertised to academics that we would support a general expression to be partnered with another academic by us with some questions on data, preferred method, and research area of interest. Using this database, we grouped academics, with no previous connection, and typically from different countries, to collaborate on research

together. The output was an active and committed group of researchers with an interest in learning about experiences across the globe and creating new knowledge of practice together. While some of these did not receive final acceptance into this Special Issue, there are many teams that have their research published as part of this expression of interest. We have provided feedback to the Senior Editors of the Journal to explore whether this practice should form a core part of the Journal's value proposition to emerging researchers seeking to build national and international collaborative networks.

For us, the works we have accepted for publication in this Special Issue are important. They offer a new foundation to support the continued collaborations across cultural and geographic boundaries to reimagine global higher education. This Special Issue is a result of extensive exploration of how we may learn from unique university experiences when critically contrasted to others. There are examples of comparisons of moves to online learning, as well as examples of face-to-face education during lockdowns. We believe the articles contained here create a unique composition and documentation of how we are collectively progressing through the pandemic. This Special Issue sits as a foundation to the next phase of COVID-19 in higher education literature, built on a practice of inventing a new rather than repeated examinations of similar concepts (e.g., an ERT case study) without seeking to redefine as an output.

In this Editorial, we attempt to organise our collective wisdom in redirecting the COVID-19 literature to be enabling, exploratory, and explanatory rather than descriptive. We share the theoretical framework that guided our actions as we progressed through the Special Issue processes. This Issue is hinged on the notion of collaboration, and we next share the forms of collaboration that emerged during the past year. Finally, we set the scene for future actions with COVID-19 remaining a key feature of higher education strategy into the foreseeable future.

Theoretical framework

We establish our theoretical framework as collaborative, yet beyond that on diversity in collaboration. Enacting research as an act of researcher identity or professional development during the COVID-19 moment has taught us there is no silver bullet, no best methodology, no single lens, for either researching or transborder enquiry in supercomplex times. Diversity strengthens any ecosystem, and this is true for the range of lenses within this special edition of research in the COVID-19 era. Research needs to be powered by multiple forms, appropriate to different circumstances, environments and contexts, and there are many more ways to 'arrive' at research in an era where emergent methodologies are more intuitively appropriate (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008) than ones set in concrete. Never more have we been aware of the organic, emergent, and iterative nature of research as a process rather than a planned and concretised sequence creating a product, an outcome. This is clear in postgraduate education and in ongoing research projects where acts of nimble pivoting have become an essential aspect of the experience of research and of ongoing pedagogy and heutagogy. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008) had argued:

> Emergent research methods have sprung forth as a result of where we have been, where we are, and where we envision ourselves going in the future… Therefore, as the social world and our understanding of it have progressed, so too has our repertoire of social research methods (p. 1).

This comment clicks with us, who have experienced the early 2020s, and sets the groundwork for the episodes of resilience, pivoting, and emergence that have come to characterise academic research.

It may turn out that in applying many qualitative methods, online data collection may be as effective as face-to-face methods (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). The lost social and human dimensions of research may be the major casualty of research in the COVID-19 age, but a community of enquiry and practice can help mitigate the loss (Garrison, 2016). Researchers are under the gun to produce papers, but those which fail to incorporate 'pivots', embed resilience or recognise the fundamental impacts of COVID-19 in the methods appear instantly outdated; ephemeral outputs to satisfy the increasingly unsustainable audit culture of a bygone industrial era. No-one, as yet, gets additional points for resilient initiative or the invention of innovative and sustainable approaches to enquiry or pedagogy.

Diversity is apparent as a principle in pedagogical methods, too, as narratives of innovative or inventive adaptation to online learning and flipped classrooms dominate the teaching and learning space (Schindler et al., 2017; Dianati et al., 2020). Researchers around the world are leveraging this moment to come together in studies using such methodologies as collaborative autoethnography, collaborative enquiry and multi-site case study to create experience-based studies that are more resonantly international than ever. It is increasingly an era of mutual data sharing as opposed to annexed data ownership. This Special Issue is testament to this process.

Working in a distance learning era of geographical as well as pedagogical challenge, educators increasingly follow such principles as ensuring feedback is immediate and applied; creating opportunities for community engagement; applying process-based learning to foster productive and problem-solving skills, agency and resilience, and creating interactive spaces beyond the screen, creating links to 'the real world', whatever that will look like further into the pandemic era. These principles can be achieved simply by such pedagogical techniques as exploiting discussion boards and forums; harnessing the affordances of appropriately secure social media; building communities of practice via every e-medium; curating repositories of 'shared repertoire', both key curricular texts and bodies of student work, and setting up rigorous task-based or project-based learning for receptive as well as productive skills. These are core strategies to build new ways of thinking, doing, and being and to impact the belonging and becoming necessary for learner engagement (Garrison, 2016; Tice et al., 2021).

Marshall and Kosta (2020) demonstrated that these principles and pedagogical methods pre-dated COVID-19. The pandemic merely made them essential rather than merely possible. When COVID-19 came along, then, we already had the seeds of resilience. Stories of adaptation and resilience dominate this special issue, as they do the research world in general (e.g., Ferdig et al.,

2020). It is no coincidence that these strategies accord with the vision of the Education 4.0 movement whose manifesto predates COVID-19 and can be seen today as hugely prophetic (Diwan, 2017). The educator has become a curator of the outside world, and the digital world increasingly its curriculum.

Types of collaboration

The literature on COVID-19 and higher education published during 2020 is growing exponentially (Butler-Henderson et al., 2021). Due to the perceived novelty of the phenomenon, it is understandable that the bulk of the literature thus far has focused on single-institution and single-country studies. Thick descriptions are valuable and Geertz's (1973) observation that description in general is a notoriously underestimated approach in the social sciences appears still valid. Consequently, the numerous institutional case studies and national case studies all usefully add to our knowledge on the pandemic. However, the downside of such piecemeal approaches is their fragmenting focus on local contexts. This could easily lead to a myopic perspective that misses the big picture, for instance how the pandemic has transformed student perspectives of online learning or exacerbated neoliberal trends in the global higher education sector. A narrow descriptive approach could also further amplify our permanent preoccupation with the present (Fleming, 2017).

Comparisons are important as we bring disparate approaches to cohesive narratives, *together*. To the chagrin of ethno-nationalists and populists, the coronavirus does not stop at the borders of nation-states in our irreversibly globalised society, barring the impossibility of a permanent closure of all borders. Comparing reminds us that the pandemic is not only our problem. We learn from each other. We adopt best practices, and learn to improve them. We network for fruitful cross-fertilisation. While in 2020, there were relatively few articles that compared three or more countries (e.g., Esteban, 2020; Jonuscheit et al., 2020; Khodabandelou et al., 2020; Lassoued et al., 2020; Tejedor et al., 2020), there has since, refreshingly, been an increasing number of comparative articles, and this Special Issue was, from the beginning, conceived to contribute to this welcome trend.

In the physically and socially distanced world of most countries, water cooler conversations have gone missing, and there are consequent long-term implications of such a lack of informal connection forming; particularly among those beginning their careers. The pandemic has magnified market individualism and the concomitant erosion of community bonds, isolating us from one another and making us primarily responsible for our fate (Fleming, 2021). A downward spiral of increased workloads and mounting stress levels exacerbating the "loneliness epidemic" (Fleming, 2017, p. 10) is a clear and present danger.

While the Guest Editors of this issue feel fortunate to have been spared some of the worst consequences of the pandemic (such as death, illness, or unemployment), this Special Issue goes well beyond the geographies of our country locations (Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United States of America). There are countries that exist on the periphery of higher education discussions, and even more so during the pandemic. These countries are given a voice here, for

instance Cambodia, Oman, and Turkey. Collaboration across countries, including extreme comparisons of vastly different environments (Shelley, 2019, Kefalaki et al., 2021), help combat the aforementioned fragmentation and isolationism as well as the 'alternative facts' of denialists that require robust academic responses (Rudolph et al., 2021).

Differences in collaboration during COVID-19 will also likely be evident across gender. The increased demands of primary care responsibilities were heightened during lockdowns, particularly due to home schooling or the restriction on paid care being able to enter homes in isolation, reduced the opportunity to participate in collaborative research. As the largest proportion of primary caregivers, women were greatly impacted (Allen et al., 2021). This impact was also reflected in our Special Issue, with less than half of the first authors identifying as female. With a greater proportion of women as early career researchers, initiatives such as the mentorship collaboration used in our expression of interest process, and our upcoming Special Issue in March 2022 titled *Women and Leadership in Higher Education Learning and Teaching*, in part begin to close the gap in research success across genders.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to have profound implications on all sectors globally, including the higher education sector (Kara, 2021). The pandemic has influenced the sector to incorporate emergency remote teaching as a short-term response, as well as changes in assessments, learning, and teaching approaches and strategies. During this unprecedented and evolving phase of rapid digitalisation, greater usage of educational technology has been an essential tool to enable remote, distance, online, and digital forms of delivery.

This period has also fostered greater cross-cultural and cross-border collaborations to occur among academics and researchers. By providing a platform for academics, this Special Issue has also fostered a sense of camaraderie among the collaborators, many of whom had not met previously. This Special Issue is a product of the Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice Senior Editors and Guest Editors identifying a genuine gap in the literature and research that required response. The decision to promote international collaboration to support early career researchers and academics, was made to enable proposals that focused on cross-cultural and international collaborations.

Cross-cultural collaborations in higher education should not halt when the pandemic runs its course, and the timing of the post-pandemic environment will be different in regions and countries around the world. Our hope is that moving forward in the post-COVID-19 environment, the academic and research community would continue to enhance the facet of cross-cultural collaborations, which will provide a platform for early career academics and researchers to build international networks and relationships. And to help resolve emerging gaps in our knowledge base and student supports (e.g., Baker et al., 2021). This enhancement can occur in the form of special issues such as this one, and also through ongoing academic exchanges and invited guest speaking arrangements, so that the technological platforms can be used as an avenue for early-career academics to engage with their

audiences. These systems serve as positive synchronous communication opportunities, but do not offer a complete replacement for face-to-face communication. Likewise, application of on-campus pedagogy to online environments (i.e., digitalisation) is often not appropriate, and different than a signature digital pedagogy to support online student success. For example, Tice and colleagues (2021), highlight the opportunity to replace the on-campus water cooler conversation with informal Zoom time prior to online workshops without an academic present. Enhancements of these types of creative opportunities will strengthen and fortify future higher education engagements across borders and cultures.

Conclusion

We created a Special Issue that supported and enabled a focus on cross-cultural collaboration. This was applied to every element of this project. The Guest Editorial team was established with a view to transcend geographic boundaries and create opportunities for collective expansion of knowledge. The Collaborative Expression of Interest (EOI) process enabled a critical response to authors seeking to make meaningful connections to discuss shared experiences across national lines. We also sought out an internationally relevant peer review team, and acknowledged their contribution to the improvement of this work.

Importantly, the research included in this Special Issue and those that did not feature in the final list all shared one characteristic. These manuscripts were the product of, and description of, a collaborative effort. While the articles in this Special Issue serve as a foundation, there is a need to do more. We must, as a sector, create opportunities to better understand similarities and differences across different contexts, recognising the intersectional nature of research and jurisdictional boundaries.

We believe these articles serve as curation of what was possible with a short amount of time, with more time, the opportunities are endless, and we encourage those engaging with this Special Issue to seek out opportunities to create meaning and innovate in this supercomplex environment.

Conflict of interest

We have no funding or conflicts of interest to report.

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