

**Covid-19, Higher Education and  
Responsible Management: 'business as  
usual' or time for a strategic re-think?  
Evidence from the UK.**

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# Introduction

- This article reports on preliminary findings from semi-structured interviews with senior leaders in HE, focussing on business schools and their strategic and operational responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Offering short, medium and long term predictions and forecasts here is difficult, given the changing landscape of the pandemic and the dynamic scientific and political responses to it.
  - E.g., despite proportion of people working from home in UK more than doubling in 2020, most people did not work from home in 2020, although higher concentrations of home working cities with large numbers of office-based jobs (Partington 2021).
- More immediate challenges include:
  - how to encourage employees to return to the office, perceived to harm younger employees in particular through the loss of observational and mentoring opportunities as well as social and networking opportunities, and;
  - affecting city centres by lowering demand for public transport, cafes, restaurants and other businesses in city centres

# Challenges for HE institutions

- Much media attention on the impact of the pandemic on HE has focused on the threats and uncertainties the pandemic poses, especially the financial problems it might bring. These include:
  - the downturn in international students recruitment;
  - domestic students demanding refunds or deferring/cancelling their studies due to fears over stability of the institution or quality of student experience;
  - concerns over the quality/comparability of on-line teaching and assessment;
  - likely rise in redundancies -especially for casualised staff on non-permanent contracts in countries like the UK and Australia, with marketised HE systems;
  - student anxieties about post-pandemic jobs and careers and concerns over physical and mental health and well-being, and;
  - OH&S concerns (e.g., campus contact being conducive to virus spreading).

# Methodology

- One purpose of our current research is to consider whether an emerging new model of learning (the 'new normal') is merely a short to medium term reaction to Covid-19 restrictions, OR is it a sustainable long-term trend?
- The current research programme intends to explore the design process and long-term objectives of the 'new model', mostly accessed through stakeholder perceptions.
- We also aimed to explore how membership of the UN PRME impacted on HE strategies and operations arising from the pandemic.
  - The material that follows reports on these preliminary findings.

# Methodology

- Interviews sought to assess:
  - experiences throughout the pandemic from March 2020;
  - risk management preparedness of their University;
  - response to and short-term impact of the pandemic;
  - likely medium- to long-term impact of the pandemic on their School and University viz. the extent to which it is anticipated it will prove to be a catalyst for irreversible change or whether it has, for instance, simply reinforced and accelerated change already happening e.g. digital disruption;
  - how their commitment to PRME has influenced their response, if at all, and the likely future relevance and significance of PRME, and;
  - To what extent there is consideration of the student preference for learning models? How this has been impacted by the pandemic?

# Experiences and responses throughout the pandemic from March 2020

- Different phases in the impact of and response to the pandemic
  - Initial phase of shock and emergency (March to June 2020).
  - Uncertainty phase (June to October 2020)
  - Planned move to online, blended following local restrictions (November 2020 to today)
- Priority on health and safety
- Significant impact on resources, particularly academic and administrative staff
- Prioritisation of teaching over research

# Experiences and responses throughout the pandemic from March 2020

“We needed to prioritise teaching and everything became second to teaching...”

“...obviously people have been working beyond what they were expected, not the 35 hours per week.”

“...over the last 12 months, we've had almost like, we've had to develop almost a sort of different psychological contract with the faculty in that. And that psychological contract is run something along the lines of rather than a pandemic, we're all in this together, we all have to see our way through it together.”

“...nothing prepares you for a disruption of this scale. So, that includes technology, the key to the staff working, it includes trying to cover emergency cover for staff who have been directly affected by COVID, or they have very close relatives that are affected.”

# Risk management preparedness

- Overall good level of preparedness
- Problems emerging from the timing of certain policies on staff resources (e.g., voluntary redundancies schemes amid the first phase of the pandemic)
- Misallocation of resources, primarily as a result of the lack of understanding of the requirements for the development of online resources



# Risk management preparedness

“...it's been a really top down process with a lot over constant communications from all levels situation that people really understood what was going on and therefore they complied with their required processes...”

“...universities substitute their staff for all kinds of a professional services so there were some voluntary redundancies in that respect, and so we lost some staff so that was actually tough because they clearly were the academics...”

# Likely medium- to long-term impact of the pandemic

- Most see a new normal emerging from the pandemic
- The financial and organisational positioning of the university will be key for the medium to long term impact of the pandemic
- Concerns over the over-reliance on technology and online modes of delivery vs. the value of face-to-face delivery in addressing the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace

# Likely medium- to long-term impact of the pandemic

“ I don't see us going back to the 2020 model, it's never going to happen, it's going to be hybrid in some form or shape... ..depending on the discipline”

“I think I'm not I'm delighted to use that Darwinian definition over the survival of the fittest; the reality is that if a University is a solid and stronger from a financial point of view and also from a strategic point of view, the chances of becoming a better and surviving and going through these pandemics are higher than situations where universities really haven't got a solid sustainable strategy...”

“Why do we have face to face education? it's because you're learning those critical, transformational transferable skills that you need to be able to function effectively in business in the 21st century, no matter how much work will be shifting to an online experience, what will what will sort of make you stand out is all those things that do involve you being in a face to face environment.”

## **How their commitment to PRME has influenced their response, if at all, and the likely future relevance and significance of PRME**

- Not very clear link between PRME signatory status and short-term response to the pandemic
- It seems that institution commitment to PRME objectives shapes the medium to longer term post-Covid approach/model

## **How their commitment to PRME has influenced their response, if at all, and the likely future relevance and significance of PRME**

“in the last 3-months we are working on what we call strategic academic route maps, so we designed 6 across the entire University. So, one of which is 0 carbon pathways, so our PMRE features significantly in that and my college is driven in that local agenda. So yeah, it is shaping up what we are doing and how we want to deliver business and management education going forward.”

“I would say no a couple of months ago now. But I would say yes now. ...what we have done, as part of our undergraduate review is put the sustainability theme throughout all of our curriculum... .I'm in the process of putting together a new programme for fully online master's in management, and that'll have sustainability at its core. And that really has been facilitated via the conversation about what our prime submission for this year should be all about.

# Preliminary conclusions

- The UK's apparently successful vaccine rollout seems to have made it a more attractive destination for study for many prospective international students from September 2021.
  - But continued travel bans pose continuing challenges to international recruitment, with additional challenges for careers advice and support services over the physical and mental health of students.
- UK HEIs have largely embraced a shift to more use of on-line and blended learning.
- Some evidence of fundamental shifts in pedagogy, with less use of large-scale lectures and consequent impact on space management and campus design.