

Pandemia: Academic Lives and COVID-19, Before, During, and Whenever After

Richard Watermeyer

Surveys of academic staff administered across Australia, Ireland, South Africa, and the United Kingdom make explicit the impacts of universities' responses to the pandemic on working lives. From these studies comes the concept of *pandemia*, a state common to all: the experience of working in universities during COVID-19, and the personal and professional toll of so doing.

Pandemia

Pandemia describes and explains the impact of universities' "corporate" response to the pandemic on academic staff and provides a conceptual lens through which to comprehend the potentially transformative effects of the global crisis on the higher education community and higher education's value proposition.

There is much commonality and overlap to be found in the experience of *pandemia* across the four country settings. Survey respondents routinely articulated how their home institutions had pursued an aggressively business-like approach to managing the pandemic, which disregarded concerns of staff welfare and wellbeing. The vast majority of respondents discussed, through open-text survey responses, how rapid emergency transition to online working had resulted in severe work intensification. Such an escalation of work demands, however, was said to have occurred without appropriate recognition or response from within universities, where it was treated as a matter of individual responsibility. The absence of an ethics of care in universities, matched with unrelenting performance demands—from which the pandemic offered no hiatus—was consequently linked by respondents to widespread, yet unequally experienced deterioration of academics' physical and mental health, burnout, and staff attrition:

"COVID has intensified workload inequity as the problem of the individual. There is a lack of creative response to this crisis . . . we are trying to do the same things with fewer resources instead of rethinking, pulling back, and re-doing. Our competitive ethos is a huge problem."

Disaster Capitalism?

Institutional responses to the pandemic were also regularly compared to "disaster capitalism" and a sense that university leaders were utilizing the crisis to push through corporate agendas. Respondents, for instance, spoke of how the pandemic was being used by management elites in universities to justify the extension of their power base and corresponding marginalization of academic staff from decision-making processes. Equally, crisis conditions were discussed for legitimizing exploitative work practices:

"In my department, the 'moral imperative' of helping the Covid cause has been used to manipulate workers into accepting unreasonable demands in terms of workloads and

Abstract

For academics the world over, the COVID-19 pandemic has been, and remains, a source of profound and enduring disruption. Yet arguably its greatest disruptive influence has been to exacerbate, and thus force a reckoning of, the deep-seated problems that have for some time caused academics to question their future. This article presents survey findings drawn from academics in four country settings and reflections on the deteriorating state of academic life under COVID.

deadlines. As a result, my wellbeing has deteriorated to the point that I have quit my job with nothing else to go to. I expect I am not alone.”

Increased Precarity

Across the board, respondents described their sense of feeling ever more vulnerable in a sector where job precarity is a systemic problem. Yet, crucially, *pandemia* was seen to represent the continuation of an existing downward trend for academics:

“The COVID crisis is not creating new problems so much as it is exposing problems - insecurity, exploitation, managerialism, unreasonable expectations, erosion of pay and conditions, threats to academic freedom - that have been steadily growing for very many years.”

The experience of institutional life under COVID was described as just another chapter of academic struggle and defeat, the fading allure and atrophy of the academic profession:

“COVID and the demands of working digitally have shone the spotlight on what was already broken. And at the end of all of this, the people left suffering won’t be students and they won’t be university bank balances. They will be undervalued and overworked academics with no job security and certainty in employment.”

Government Apathy and Increased Managerialism

Respondents’ accounts are peppered with feelings of neglect, abandonment, and remonstrance against abuses of power. In the Australian context, respondents discussed the apathy and hostility shown by their national government to universities and a failure to support a higher education system financially dependent on the unobstructed flow of international students:

“In Australia the COVID-19 crisis has been used by the Federal government to justify alterations (read reductions) to University funding while at my institution it has been used to ‘gloss over’ previous and ongoing issues of mismanagement.”

Government apathy in these accounts is presented as the reason for the hardening of a corporate approach to the management of Australian universities and university leaders’ eschewal of concerns of staff welfare.

In Ireland, *pandemia* is represented as part of a longstanding “crisis trajectory” that sees universities prioritizing productive efficiency and market competitiveness over the wellbeing of staff. In South Africa, the situation for academics is perhaps even more desolate. In a country with mass poverty and a failing power grid, the impact of *pandemia* is especially grave, yet equally undifferentiated from the accounts provided in Australia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, where the pandemic is similarly attributed to increased workplace inequality, intensified managerialism, and cost-cutting measures that render academic staff ever more at risk.

From Absent Leadership, Collegiality

Yet despite, if not, *because* of a prevalent cynicism of “absent” leadership, we find academics in all four countries claiming a resurgence of collegiality and camaraderie. The strengthening of collective identity and mission—in the South African context discussed as “ubuntu”—is rationalized as the response and tonic to *pandemia*. In the instance of not being “noticed” by their leaders, academics are reported to find solace and resolve by recognizing foremost their role and responsibility to each other, which in one case is described as lifesaving:

“I had a breakdown and became suicidal. The university couldn’t care less. They steam-roller us. If it wasn’t for my awesome colleagues, I’m not sure what would have happened.”

As a result of campus closures, digital platforms were also recognized by respondents for facilitating alternative and more expansive forms of collegial interactions, uninhibited by constraints of time or place.

Pandemia in Panorama

In total, *pandemia* makes explicit the manifold wicked problems of higher education and the urgency of their redress. We find further evidence of staff precarization linked especially to job casualization and the further intensification of an already highly competitive

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academic labor-market. Concurrently, if almost paradoxically, workforce attrition is reported, and, in the United Kingdom especially, the diaspora of academic talent to other “more favorable” international higher education settings (linked also to Brexit). *Pandemia* is also linked to an exacerbation of workplace inequality, a mental health crisis among students and staff, and a breakdown of trust in university leaders.

Yet, *pandemia* is also represented as a clarion call for a different kind of leadership, a leadership that is values-based, consultative, and shared, and that—at the most senior levels—is unafraid to confront the political hostility of populist governments. As expressed by one respondent, the pandemic presents a staging post for renewal:

“Just as in politics, very weak senior leadership (which was only focused on commercialization / bureaucratization of higher education in a very narrow and vulgar manner) and its impact were abundantly exposed by COVID-19 in my own institution, and while that in itself is quite disconcerting, I very much hope this will lead to a change in leadership (and leaders) and a new start.”

A Pathway Beyond?

At a time when the contribution of higher education is so uncertain and contested, focusing on the treatment of those that form its engine and the insouciance of their leaders could not be more urgent. A continuation of the neglect experienced over the course of the last two years—and long before these—will surely otherwise result in the further degradation of academic staff, a result that even disaster capitalists will not profit from. The disruption of *pandemia* may, however, be leveraged in establishing a positive reset for higher education, with the renewal of an ethics of care within universities and espousal of human-centric leadership providing just the start. ▲

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