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SPECIALTY SECTION
This article was submitted to
Educational Psychology,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Education

RECEIVED 19 January 2023
ACCEPTED 01 February 2023
PUBLISHED 28 February 2023

CITATION
Scherman R, Misca G, Walker D and Pagè G
(2023) Editorial: COVID-19 and beyond: From
(forced) remote teaching and learning to “the
new normal” in higher education.
Front. Educ. 8:1148300.
doi: 10.3389/educ.2023.1148300

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Editorial: COVID-19 and beyond: From (forced) remote teaching and learning to “the new normal” in higher education

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KEYWORDS

COVID-19, higher education, student experience, remote teaching, online learning

Editorial on the Research Topic

COVID-19 and beyond: From (forced) remote teaching and learning to “the new normal” in higher education

The COVID-19 pandemic brought extraordinary disruption to the higher education (HE) landscape. Yet, the sector responded in a manner that could be described as ecumenical, as universities from virtually every country on the globe, almost in unison, closed their campuses, sent their staff and students home, and moved all teaching and learning online.

If the pandemic was unprecedented, so, too, was the speed with which faculty were making the (forced) move to remote teaching, giving them little time to process the abrupt changes affecting their professional (and personal) lives. Seemingly overnight, academics had to transform face-to-face classes into forms involving fully digital delivery and assessment; “learning on-the-fly” using novel technologies; and finding new ways to support and inspire students and their learning—all while operating remotely from their homes. Personally, while coping with becoming house-bound and concerned about the health of their families and selves, faculty had to become schoolteachers for their own children; with some forced to take pay cuts or be furloughed.

Students had similar concerns about their own health and that of loved ones, but also how to adjust to changes in their HE experiences, sometimes including fundamental shifts in their living arrangements such as being despatched from campus dwellings back to family homes. Even senior HE managers, fearing long-term economic consequences, were uncertain about meeting institutional obligations to students.

In developing this Research Topic, we, the guest editors (all of whom are academics in our respective disciplines and countries) sought to capture the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the HE landscape—as it was happening—by providing opportunity for the international academic community to pause and reflect on what was transpiring; to explore the medium and long-term consequences of the campus closures and commensurate shifts to digital platforms; and to prepare for the future, perhaps even a “new normal.”

Our aim was to be inclusive, so we welcomed proposals from the broadest spectrum of voices in higher education. And with 44 contributions, we believe we have achieved that goal. Thus, a defining feature of this Research Topic is its breadth and diversity, with contributions from 20 countries, in relation to a comprehensive set of academic disciplines and contexts.

Collectively, the contributions to this Research Topic relate to three over-arching themes: (a) Higher Education Delivery; (b) Lives and Livelihoods; and (c) Reflections on Past and Future. Within each theme, there are *Original Research* articles describing studies that were strategically and purposefully carried out in response to the pandemic's immediate impact on HE. There are also *Perspectives*, *Opinions*, and *Brief Research Reports* reflecting, in some cases, positive experiences; but overwhelmingly, the challenges that staff and students faced at the beginning—and for some, continue to face, in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Higher education delivery

This theme captured the challenges of *emergency remote teaching and learning*; in particular, the response to the sudden shift to fully digital formats that was necessary to accommodate the lockdowns and campus closures. How lecturers and students adapted (or not) to the changed teaching and learning environments was the primary focus of these articles. Within this theme, the single most salient message to come from the contributions is the fact that emergency remote teaching in response to a crisis is nothing like deliberately-designed online teaching and learning.

The majority of manuscripts within this subsection are based on original research carried out in response to the sudden shifts to remote teaching and learning contexts. There were slightly more studies focused principally on the impact this move had on students (Alatni et al.; Biwer et al.; Dikaya et al.; Hoss et al.; Millar et al.), relative to that of lecturers (Erlam et al.; Feldhammer-Kahr et al.). Several studies looked at both participant groups. In New Zealand, for instance, Trafford et al. use cogenerative dialogue with a small group of lecturers and students, allowing them to reflect on how the sudden changes in teaching and learning may have impacted on their educational practices. Lobos Peña et al., from Chile, investigate if the professors' online teaching expectations and previous experience have influenced students' academic performance. They find that students' academic performance is a variable more likely influenced by attributes associated with the students, and not related to the professors' generally positive expectations. Finding the professors to have a relatively positive outlook is something that Lobos Peña et al. have in common with several other papers (Erlam et al.; Feldhammer-Kahr et al.; Trafford et al.).

The teaching and learning frameworks, more so than the people themselves, were also the focus of two papers (Chaturvedi et al.; Verde and Valero). In their *Perspective*, Chaturvedi et al. summarize what they found to be the seven principal teaching methods to create an effective *blended* environment for students and staff in Indian business schools. Verde and Valero explore the pros and cons of three different types of teaching (i.e., presence learning, blended learning, and distance education) adopted by two Spanish universities in response to COVID-19.

A common objective in this subset of articles was to identify sources of influence or strategies utilized to cope or adapt (Biwer et al.; Chaturvedi et al.; Dikaya et al.; Feldhammer-Kahr et al.; Hoss et al.), most of which were interpersonal or attitudinal. One study looked instead at students' engagement with *Blackboard*—their

institution's learning management system—and the patterns that proved most strategic to the students' achievement (Millar et al.).

Not surprising, the COVID-19 context, campus closures, and interruptions to the standard teaching and learning formats, were often framed in a negative light; a challenge to be overcome or dealt with. Yet, a number of studies also chose to look for or report on the positive impact or outcomes associated with these changes (Dikaya et al.; Erlam et al.; Feldhammer-Kahr et al.; Hoss et al.). For example, Hoss et al., in their qualitative study of German students' negative and positive statements, report that while the number of negative statements outnumbers the positive ones, some students found the conversion to remote learning to be advantageous, particularly in time savings, and increased flexibility in regards to their time and work management. Similarly, another study of Austrian and German lecturers found that some reported a sense of satisfaction from the situation—particularly when it was regarded as a challenge more so than a threat (Feldhammer-Kahr et al.).

Practice degrees

A special sub-theme of the *Higher Education Delivery* section was devoted to the unique impact that the lockdowns had on “practice” degrees—those courses/programmes with hands-on training requirements—and how this was managed in the wake of lockdowns and social distancing. In short, the pandemic became a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study *in vivo* the impact that online remote learning had on students' skills development in different disciplines, including English learned as a foreign language (Liu and Yuan), social work training (Fronek et al.; Neamtu and Faludi; Sarbu and Unwin), psychology (Talsma et al.), medicine (Hamamoto Filho et al.), the study of music (Nusseck and Spahn; Ritchie and Sharpe), and that of Sport and Recreation (Godber and Atkins). Empirical findings gathered in different parts of the globe (Australia, Brazil, China, Germany, New Zealand, Romania, and the U.K.), somewhat surprisingly showed that during the COVID-19 worldwide lockdowns, the move to online learning still allowed some HE students undertaking practice degrees, to continue their studies.

This particular context had some positive effects, such as greater opportunities to develop autonomy and self-regulated learning skills, but also some negative effects, such as high levels of anxiety and greater difficulty in developing interpersonal or problem-solving skills—reinforcing the belief that in-person interactions are preferred, if not vital, when learning certain skills or forming interpersonal connections with others. These studies remind us that the learning context can have a significant influence on students' academic performance outcomes and perceptions of their learning processes.

Programmes that train social and healthcare professionals, such as social work and psychology, faced challenges with lockdowns that thwarted apprenticeships and work placements for HE students—crucial components of their professional training. Forced social distancing and lockdowns compelled institutions to either cancel or postpone placements, which had the potential to stall students' progress. Placement agencies and internship environments were left to their own devices, generating

inconsistencies in students' individual experiences and arousing fear that this loss of direct contact between service users and professionals might shift permanently (Sarbu and Unwin).

Godber and Atkins undertook a collaborative autoethnographic study, using a socio-ecological systems framework to organize their own critical self-reflections as lecturers experiencing the same adaptation challenges as their students during the lockdown. They highlight how New Zealand students in Sports and Recreation struggled in the absence of practical learning opportunities, and conclude that the impact of these changes was under-estimated, testing individuals and institutions to new limits.

Several studies focused on the matter of assessments in practice degrees. For example, within the music discipline, Ritchie and Sharpe found that in preparation for assessments, the students choosing to videotape their performance showed better versatility in their preparation methods, compared with students who chose to postpone their assessments, demonstrating important links between resilience, self-efficacy and wellbeing. In their *Opinion* paper, Hamamoto Filho et al. reflect on online methods to assess acquisition of knowledge and “know-how” of Brazilian medical students, suggesting a shift from high-stakes assessments to multiple low-stakes assessments that could remain beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

One programme that seems to have adapted well is the *Australian Postgraduate Psychology Simulation Education Working Group*, who have recommended the adoption of standardized guidelines to include *simulation-based learning*—perceived as “not an inferior substitute to placements”—as an innovative and safe alternative to in-person internships with real clients (APPSEWG).

Finally, as an adjunct to this sub-section, we include two papers on international student experience. From Poland, a study comparing the psychological and academic outcomes for international students, who either returned to their country of origin or remained in the host country, found no significant relationship for country-of-residence (Wilczewski et al.). From Australia, Fronck et al. share their experience of how a social work faculty and community members came together to support international students forced to stay on campus during lockdown.

Lives and livelihoods

While the campus closures and lockdowns created numerous professional challenges, the nature of the pandemic and its need for social isolation also took a personal toll on staff and students. The negative effects of long-term isolation, and their impact on physical and mental health, were the focus on this second theme.

Research on the student population highlighted negative impacts such as academic stress and poor emotional wellbeing (Clabaugh et al.); how pre-existing mental health diagnoses intersected with coping behaviors and vulnerability in women students (Misca and Thornton); how depressive symptoms mediated worsening of academic skills (Calandri et al.); and how student concerns about degree completion and future job prospects affected student wellbeing (Plakhotnik et al.).

However, positive psychological experiences (i.e., higher belonging and challenge, and lower threat) were found to be

associated with lower rates of depression and stress, greater life satisfaction and happiness, and greater optimism about the future (Syropoulos et al.). Although anxiety, boredom, and frustration were present among Mexican students during confinement, the primary emotions were found to be gratitude, joy, and hope, and the main coping strategies used were focused on facing and reassessing the situation (Gaeta et al.).

The overwhelming recommendation from contributions to this theme was a need to increase support for students. Consequently, papers have explored how positive education, and specifically the “PERMA” wellbeing framework, has inspired the development of a wellbeing program for a U.K. university context (Morgan and Simmons), as well as the CRAFT program, based on mindfulness, yoga, positive psychology, and emotional intelligence, to improve HE student musicians' health and wellbeing during the lockdown in Spain (Bartos et al.).

In exploring the impact of the pandemic and emergency remote instruction on college and university instructors' wellbeing, a Polish study highlighted faculty's anxiety, loneliness and apprehension about job stability (Jelińska and Paradowski). Two *Opinion Pieces* reflect on the gender inequalities, which appear to be exacerbated by the changes to working practices (Augustus), especially for academic parents (Harrop).

Reflections on past and future

As mentioned, the special issue contains an impressive range of contributions from institutions of HE adjusting to COVID-19 realities. Often a crisis can highlight existing values, vulnerabilities and priorities and it seems that COVID-19 is no different. For example, shifting to online learning highlighted vulnerabilities of digital exclusion in Kenya (Osabwa) and feelings of “techno-inefficacy” in Spain, leading to “techno-stress” for some face-to-face universities forced to go online (Penado Abilleira et al.). As for existing values, COVID-19 prompted Scherman and Snow to restate the importance of shared physical space, campus culture, and human connection—all of which help to develop virtues and mitigate students' feelings of loneliness, depression, and alienation. Similarly, in the context of teaching languages in Australia, Dutton reasserts that balancing autonomy and community remains key for learning languages online. And, while some authors stressed ongoing values, others were more directly focused on responding to pandemic effects by exploring how to enhance human connection online, ranging from personal reflections of remotely teaching Molecular Cell Biology in the Netherlands (de Vries); to conducting large scale surveys of remote pedagogical techniques (Nguyen et al.). In a similar vein, Wang et al. highlight the importance of instructors for learning in cloud-based virtual classrooms and Dumulescu et al. promote emotionally safe, self-directed online learning in Romania.

Vast unpredictable events such as COVID-19 can also bring about deep changes (Dumulescu and Mutiu), and potential for such change is identified by other authors in the special issue. For example, in New Zealand, Conn et al. contemplate a wider agenda in public health for transformative education; and advocate a shift from a “factory model of education” to a model of “personalized learning.” Similarly—and pertaining to HE Policies

for Transnational Education (TNE) programmes between the U.K. and China—Bremner et al. promote the worth of management tools for scenario planning and crisis management for effectively reducing disruption to teaching and learning.

In summary

Looking back to the beginning of the pandemic, the HE allied and contemporaneous decisions to shift all teaching and learning online must have seemed an effective win-win solution for the sector. The perception seemed to be that with the right technology, and quickly assembled knowledge base for operating that tech, staff and students would both be capable and motivated to move to a digital format from the safety of their respective homes. Thus, providing the essential social distancing that would reduce the spread of the virus, and allow the continuation of all teaching and learning.

What this collection of articles overwhelmingly reveals is that as HE educators, our major mistake was thinking that moving courses online would make them “online courses.” Those who regularly deliver online/distance courses will understand this distinction. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of academics authoring papers in this collection, were teaching classes designed to be delivered live, in a physical space shared with their students. So, even though everyone could log in and enter a shared virtual space, many of the important features of the HE relationship were lost. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that, almost overnight, staff were expected to become experts in a host of digital technologies necessary to remotely deliver their curriculum; and then, to ensure that students were equally equipped—all while managing a myriad of additional COVID-19-related personal matters.

Yet, in the early chaos of this shared response for keeping universities running, moments of inspirational cooperation and accord were happening in the way the international academic community supported one another—communicating through online networks, asking for advice, and sharing knowledge. In fact, for the first-author, it was this amiable sharing of information that led her to propose this Research Topic. It seemed like we were all in this together, and working collegially to support one another.

Even so, this collection belies the notion of a simple shift to online; the reality—as we see here—was far more complex. On the other hand, this collection of articles also shows how resilient HE lecturers and students are, as they (more often than not) overcame the obstacles (both professional and personal), and adapted to the necessary changes.

A unifying feature of this collection is its currency and global relevance—even as the COVID-19 pandemic begins to loosen its grip on the world—due to the forward focus of many of these articles, who have sought to apply what they have learned to HE contexts beyond that of the pandemic.

Be that as it may, some questions remain. For some students, the “emergency remote learning” environment is all that they have known, due to the COVID-19 variants that resulted in repeated campus closures over an extended period. What impact might this have on this cohort, for their ongoing studies, or the value of their education beyond graduation?

In respect of the socio-emotional toll that the lengthy periods of isolation have had on students and staff, some of which was reported here, 2 years on from the start of COVID-19, the World Health Organization reports significant increases in rates of depression worldwide (<https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>). No doubt, faculty and student make up some of those statistics. On the other hand, many of the service sectors relied upon to address this health concern, rely themselves on HE to train their practitioners. Can or will HE be able to address these post-COVID consequences?

Finally, we know little of the long-term impact that the COVID-19 institutional changes will be having on HE. Many of the contributions in this collection report successful adaption to the fully digital environment, which will no doubt influence the ongoing delivery of HE curriculum. Will that adjustment entice universities to remain “online”? Will the pedagogical frameworks that informed most in-person teaching and learning need to be altered so as to accommodate the fully digital or blended revisions? Is a return to pre-COVID-19 teaching and learning modalities even possible, or are we destined for a “new normal” in HE? It is our hope that we do not need to wait for the next global pandemic before we are able to answer these, and other questions.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the writing of the editorial and approved it for publication.

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