

'Pandemia': a reckoning of UK universities' corporate response to COVID-19 and its academic fallout

Left running head: R. WATERMEYER ET AL.

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Abstract

Universities in the UK, and in other countries like Australia and the USA, have responded to the operational and financial challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic by prioritising institutional solvency and enforcing changes to the work practices and profiles of their staff. For academics, an adjustment to institutional life under COVID-19 has been dramatic and resulted in the overwhelming majority making a transition to prolonged remote-working. Many have endured significant work intensification; others have lost – or may soon lose – their jobs. The impact of the pandemic appears transformational and for the most part negative. This article reports the experiences of 1099 UK academics specific to the corporate response of institutional leadership to the COVID-19 crisis. [AQ12](#) We find articulated a story of universities in the grip of 'pandemia' and COVID-19 emboldening processes and protagonists of neoliberal governmentality and market reform that pay little heed to

considerations of human health and well-being.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemia; disaster capitalism; remote working; work intensification; university leadership

Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had a profound impact on the operation and running of universities, with documented deleterious effects on the core missions of teaching and research (Marinoni, van't Land, and Jensen 2020). A transition by universities at the outset of the pandemic to emergency remote working (Watermeyer et al. 2020a) has evolved into a new COVID (ab)normal, laying bare the multiple misalignments of a world not only upended by the virus but continuing to adjust to ongoing legal, social, cultural and economic transformations (Schwab 2017) that predate it. The pandemic has, as will be argued herein, highlighted and further entrenched historical inequalities in the distribution of power in universities and the inability of academic communities to meaningfully address these. Analogously, it has exposed how the exercise of leadership in many universities is singularly focused on the protection and continued acquisition of positional goods (Ahlburg 2020) while at the same time neglecting the welfare of the producers of these. The role and responsibility of universities to their internal and external communities is thus called into question, and never more so where both are potentially jeopardised by executive decisions to physically reopen campuses (Yamey and Walensky 2020).

We use 'pandemia' as a conceptual lens through which to consider the hardening of practices of neoliberal governmentality in UK universities and the effect of such on academic lives (cf. Loveday 2018; Nash 2019; Raaper 2018) and the furthering of a discourse of responsabilisation (Peters 2005; McLeod 2017; Pyysiäinen, Halpin, and Guilfoyle 2017). Drawing on an international survey of 2649 academics, we focus in this article specifically on the accounts of UK participants ($n = 1099$) and how UK academic staff and their universities have responded to the pandemic vis-à-vis governance and leadership. We ask whether pandemia as an instance of 'disaster capitalism' represents a breaking point for academia in the UK – and perhaps other neoliberalised higher education systems – or just another chapter within a history of breached norms, broken trust and lost leadership (see Watermeyer 2020).

Methods

Survey design

An online survey was designed and distributed via the Qualtrics online survey tool. The survey consisted of demographic questions to determine relevant information apropos respondents' education

setting, role and individual characteristics and a series of Likert-scale closed-ended questions designed to identify the impact of COVID-19 on their professional lives. These statements were taken directly from open-ended responses from a previous survey conducted at the start of the pandemic which investigated UK academics' opinions on the rapid shift to emergency remote, online learning teaching and assessment (Watermeyer et al. 2020a). Respondents were also asked open-ended questions designed to capture more in-depth accounts of their personal experiences.

Survey distribution

The target population for the survey was academics working in UK universities. Demographic questions determined whether respondents met this criterion. Those who did not were removed from the sample post hoc. The survey was distributed via professional networks, social media (principally LinkedIn and Twitter) and other online platforms and fora. The (convenience) sampling method was not designed to capture a representative sample. Rather, data were sought to illuminate general patterns and trends characterising the experience of UK academics during the pandemic.

Sample

In total, 1099 responses were collected from UK academics. Our sample features a clear gender bias, with 65% of respondents being female, and a majority of participants (61%) employed on permanent or open-ended contracts. Fifty per cent of participants self-identify as either lecturer, senior lecturer or professor (or equivalent). Participants also included doctoral researchers (14%) and post-doctoral researchers (14%). Sixty-six per cent of participants stated that they were from a 'research-intensive' as opposed to a 'teaching-focused' university (27%).

Data analysis

The survey asked a series of closed-ended questions addressing participants' perceptions on the impact of COVID-19 on their role and institutions. Seven-point Likert scales were used. Prior to analysis, for ease of interpretation, Likert scales (strongly agree, somewhat agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree) were recoded into binary 'agree' and 'disagree' variables. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were employed to define overall trends in the population. Open-ended questions were thematically analysed (Braune and Clarke 2006).

Our analysis surfaced an important distinction. While open-ended questions within the survey were designed to probe participants' perspectives on how COVID-19 was impacting their professional and personal welfare, health and well-being, responses tended to be framed not in direct reference to the impact of the virus itself but the impact of the response of universities or, as transpired more often than not, the response of senior university leaders:

The COVID-19 crisis itself is not the problem. The problem is the responses to the crisis that have exacerbated inequalities. (Teaching post, professional [e.g. law, management, business])

It is thus the impact of the response of universities to COVID-19 on academics' professional lives – and consequently what we call the condition of pandemia – that is the specific focus of discussion. Three core themes, emergent from our analysis, are discussed for being constitutive of pandemia: changes to academics' working conditions; impact of changes to academics' working conditions on their health and well-being; and long-term impacts of changes in the organisation and structure of the academic role. In the specific context of the first theme, changes to academics' working conditions, additional sub-themes are presented and discussed: undemocratic governance; work-based inequality and exploitative practice; cost-cutting; and deprioritisation of research. [AQ13](#) These themes are explored through the testimony of academics, representing a broad cross-section of career stage and disciplinary affiliation. First, however, we consider pandemia as the culmination of governance reforms within universities, reforms that we propose are advantageous to commercial exploitation from crisis conditions.

Pandemia as neoliberal governmentality and disaster capitalism [AQ14](#)

Analyses concerning the state of higher education are more often than not entangled with, if not dominated by, a critique of the transformational effects of universities' neoliberalisation and reorganisation according to new public management technologies (cf. Broucker, De Wit, and Verhoeven 2018; Jankowski and Provezis 2014; Varman, Saha, and Skålén 2011). Academia is more often than not represented as a site of ideological polarisation and power dispute involving a 'rank and file' of academic proletariat – immobilised by the 'total bureaucracy' (Graber 2015) of universities' market reform – and a 'professionalised' (Boitier and Rivière 2016) class of university bureaucrats as power beneficiaries.¹

Where governance in UK universities has moved from an academic collegial model to administration by managerial elites (Olssen and Peters 2005), the sovereignty of academics as autonomous agents is seen to have been eroded (Brehony and Deem 2007; Collini 2017). Marketisation, deregulation and the elevation of competition and productive capacity as the pre-eminent organising principles for higher education have altered the behavioural dynamics and mission focus of universities, who appear increasingly to operate as businesses in pursuit not of public goods but private gains (Brown 2015; Holmwood et al. 2011). The economisation of education in such terms has resulted in the alienation of academics who, as 'victims of deprofessionalisation' (Ekman, Lindgren, and Packendorff 2018, 302) and habitual adherents of social democratic principles, are found to have an increasingly antagonistic relationship with 'managerialist hierarchies' (Gleeson and Knights 2006) and the privileging of entrepreneurialism (Kwiek 2016) in universities. A turn from academic to managerialist forms of institutional governance and reification of academic labour as the accumulation of productive and

positional outputs are observed as corruptive yet normalised trends that have contributed to the consolidation and legitimisation of undemocratic practices within universities, with which academics paradoxically are, perhaps unwittingly yet no less actively, complicit but also most affected (Alvesson and Spice 2016; Leathwood and Read 2013; Watermeyer 2019). Such practices are resisted symbolically in the pages of anti-neoliberal critique and perhaps most abundantly, if not inescapably, in the carousel of social media invective that collectively perpetuates a discourse of ruination. Equally, they are embodied in forms of mass industrial action and other coordinated acts of collective protest (cf. Gibney 2018; Sainato 2021).

Academic 'otherness' and opposition in the neoliberalised university is supposedly rife yet also arguably exaggerated (Kolsaker 2008) and feigned where its enactment is often either undertaken on the basis of conformity with the ideological expectations of peers and/or where advantages of neoliberal collusion produce more malleable academic identities; what Smith (2012) calls 'flexians'. These are also identities produced under the duress of what Foucault (2007) calls 'biopower', mobilised in university settings through technologies of control like performance evaluation, which regulate and frame academic life and produce governable subjects (Morrissey 2013). The corporatisation of higher education thus leads to a specific type of academic citizenship, which Giroux and Searls Giroux (2006, 252) characterise as 'an utterly solitary affair whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain'.

The preservation of a neoliberal status quo and seeming impregnability of managerialism may also be explained by the extent of higher education's global marketisation (Ball 2007; Ball and Yodell 2008; Burch 2009), and responsibilisation as an accepted aspect of governance in universities (Dougherty and Natow 2020). Influenced by the work of Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and Rose (1996), among others, responsibilisation can be understood as the intensified pressure placed on individuals to be self-regulating and ultimately self-responsible (Rawolle et al. 2017). As part of this process, academics are made responsible for their own performances and the performances of others – specifically as relates to the fulfilment of accountability targets and performance indicators (Kalfa and Taksa 2017; Stensaker and Harvey, 2010). They are consequently 'burdened with the responsibility to perform', and if not, 'are in danger of being seen as irresponsible' (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 5). [AQ15](#) As Peck and Tickell (2002) have argued, neoliberalism is both external and internal to us, or 'out there' and 'in here' as it is constituted and enacted through our everyday practices (Ball 2012; Ong 2007). Responsibilisation in the neoliberal university is thus that which ostensibly shapes and defines academic praxis most. Where flanked by contributing cognate pressures of audit culture (cf. Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 2015), new managerialism (Deem and Brehony 2005) and work acceleration (Telling 2018), responsibilisation is cause for profound 'wear and tear' (Chandler, Barry, and Clark 2002) on the academic community and adverse effects on health and well-being. In the context of the global pandemic, the impact of responsibilisation on academics' well-being is cause for concern, not least as an occupational cohort distinguished for 'hyperprofessionalism' and compulsive working

(Gornall and Salisbury 2012). What we discuss here is the condition of pandemic and how it provides legitimacy to economic opportunism and the surrendering of an ethic of care in universities.

We use survey data to consider whether COVID-19 is causing universities to behave like 'disaster capitalists' performing 'orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events' while ignoring the human cost of their 'treatment of disasters as exciting opportunities' (Klein 2007, 6). In the terms of disaster capitalism, the COVID-19 crisis represents an economic opportunity for 'cost-effectiveness' and also private-sector intervention, with for-profit educational entities – and an EdTech industry most especially – poised to benefit (Mirrlees and Alvi 2019; Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020). Relatedly, the effect of COVID-19 in accentuating the vulnerability of universities as public institutions operating within a quasi-market may be seen to contribute to the 'hollowing-out' (Klein 2007) both of critical agency and solidarity among academic faculty and of university leadership, subservient to and shaped by the political and commercial interests of an antagonistic central government; and powerful transnational advocacy groups and for-profit entities (see Letizia 2016).

Results AQ16

Changes to academics' working conditions

Respondents understood changes to their working conditions as influenced by the emergence in their institutions, in response to the pandemic, of undemocratic forms of governance; work-based inequality and exploitative practices; cost-cutting exercises and a more corporate attitude to staff management; and deprioritisation of research.

Undemocratic governance

The COVID-19 crisis is viewed by a clear majority of respondents (84%) as having further consolidated decision-making by centralised senior leadership teams; a finding which links to 60% of respondents stating that the COVID-19 crisis has weakened professional autonomy of academics. The 'imposition of disaster managerialism' within universities is viewed by 70% of respondents to have impaired academics' trust in university leadership, where university leaders are accused of having exploited the crisis for positional gain and in consolidating their power base while further undermining academics' professional autonomy. COVID-19 is consequently viewed by respondents as a means to justify both undemocratic governance in universities and the disempowering of academics:

Trust in the central University leadership has been eroded terribly by their attempts to change our collective employment agreement to make it easier for the management to erode our tenure, pay and conditions. (Associate professor, professional)

We are becoming more atomized and in such an environment, it will be really difficult to push for positive change or to defend various aspects of university life that will inevitably come under attack. (Associate professor, social sciences)

Some of our respondents spoke of what they saw as the duplicity of university leaders curating an image of beneficent employer while concurrently normalising work intensification and sanctioning job cuts. Our respondents repeatedly spoke of the extent to which such decisions – uniformly based on financial considerations – were being made unilaterally by university leaders without staff consultation or input (or that the 'consultation' essentially entailed pre-notification of ratified changes):

My university's executive leapt on the opportunity to call themselves 'Gold Command' and state that consultation on anything would no longer be possible. (Associate professor, professional)

The culling of contracts by way of response to the financial pressures of COVID-19 was attributed by respondents to increased job insecurity and fomenting a culture of fear among academics, thus neutralising any kind of counteraction or resistance to university leadership and ostensibly, emboldening autocratic forms of decision-making:

I'm furious and very disappointed with the response to the crisis concerning the wellbeing of staff. Senior management's hypocrisy has reached new levels in our uni, with emails encouraging staff to 'take some rest' and holidays, while hundreds have already been made redundant or are about to get sacked ... Most colleagues on permanent contracts are scared and don't dare to react – or are simply indifferent for temporary staff – (our uni has already announced a voluntary severance scheme, who knows when compulsory redundancies will come); staff have not been consulted on the uni's response to the covid crisis and everything is simply 'justified' due to the prospective loss in income. (Teaching fellow [or equivalent], art and humanities)

Work-based inequality and exploitative practices

Respondents voiced concerns of the worsening of exploitative practices in universities linked to a pervasive trend of labour casualisation, worst affecting those in the infancy of their academic careers: 'Future posts seem likely to be appointed as casualised contracts to provide managers with greater flexibility to respond to future income variations' (teaching fellow [or equivalent], teacher education). Exploitative practices were described in the context of early-career researchers (ECRs), eager to teach, as an integral part of their career development and future employability, yet without appropriate acknowledgement or recompense:

As a postdoc, I'm hearing more and more stories of other ECRs being exploited in regards to teaching. I myself have been approached to 'pick up' lectures, tutorials, and other teaching that is usually done by senior, tenured faculty (who are also under more pressure with less time). My faculty has cancelled all casual teaching contracts for next year, meaning they will be relying on ECRs even more – but we aren't getting paid more, we aren't being offered any security in our contracts, and some of us can't even put the teaching on our CV because we're not allowed to teach on our visas. (Post-doctoral researcher, arts and humanities)

Concerns of work-based inequality and exploitation were expressed not only in reference to ECRs but to those at the earliest stage of their academic apprenticeship. As one doctoral student wrote:

I think that the rampant neo-liberalism that is the norm at universities will go into overdrive and money will be prioritised before people be they staff or students. As long as bums are on seats and fees keep being paid, that's all universities care about. They will work the academics who survive the job cuts into the ground to achieve financial gain. Those academics will burn out and leave the profession. Then they will be replaced by non-tenured staff who will also be exploited by the university. Teaching and learning will be poor as a result and students will drop out of their courses causing, in turn, greater inequality. How did universities come to this?! I am now reconsidering the idea of becoming an academic after my PhD as I feel so demoralised by the way my predecessors are being treated. (Doctoral researcher, education)

While 91% of respondents stated that the corporate response of universities to the COVID-19 crisis, and a combination of work intensification and cost-cutting, has extended existing work-based inequalities in universities, 67% of respondents stated that the crisis was being used as a foil for exploitative practices, and even 'hyperexploitation of remaining staff' (doctoral researcher, science,

technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine [STEMM]), who although saved from the prospect of forced redundancy would be obligated to accept poorer and more precarious terms of employment:

It will only justify and heighten existing corporatizing policies that emphasize profit and cost cutting. In other words, more temporary low paid staff, higher staff turnover, continued disinvestment in arts and humanities, exploitation of 'flexibility' to increase workloads without increased pay or security. (Associate professor, arts and humanities)

Cost-cutting

Some respondents surmised that the corporate character of universities would intensify as a consequence of pandemic and produce an even more stringent auditing and distribution of university finances: 'Universities are run by bankers, whose aim is producing the highest profit margin at the lowest cost' (assistant professor, social sciences). Those able to wield the axe would, in other words, be spared it:

I suspect that the COVID-19 crisis will further push universities toward being more like corporations, but this isn't a new change. I think the financial challenges brought on by the crisis will sharpen the focus on the economic bottom line, but I don't expect there will be any cost-cutting at the level of upper administration. (Assistant professor, social sciences)

It is worth also noting that while our survey sample was exclusively academic, respondents spoke of how retrenchment and depressed budgets for university personnel would be felt not just by academics but – perhaps with even greater ferocity – professional service staff. Respondents felt that the retrenchment of professional service staff, justified as a necessary cost-saving, would compromise the operational integrity of universities, particularly in relation to servicing the needs of the student body:

The drive for executive to move to digital delivery as a cost cutting exercise will resonate for years to come. While academic staff may suffer it will pale in comparison to non-academic staff, as management currently look for any excuse to remove staff in these areas. What is clearly not understood by exec is it is these employees that facilitate the running of the University, and as more students present with personal issues it is these staff that will be needed to engage with students. (Assistant professor, arts and humanities)

The inter-related nature of the impacts of pandemic and its role in deepening higher education's market crisis, particularly in debilitating the quality of the pedagogical relationship between students and their lecturers, primarily through the latter's work intensification, was also recognised by respondents as a viable challenge to academics' deprofessionalisation and managerialist status quo. The negative impact of pandemic transferred from academics to students, or more specifically onto the student experience, was considered by one respondent as a means of positive disruption to a pre-

existing yet exacerbated problem of bloated consumerism in universities (Raaper 2020) – which might of course be rationalised as market self-correction:

For students, they're waking up to the realities of being a 'customer' and are beginning to resist being seen as a cash cow. They realise that a good education needs good staff, and that good staff are developed by being supported by university management. COVID-19 reveals the glaring gaps in the areas that are lacking support for staff and students. It's a time of reckoning for uni managers. (Assistant professor, social sciences)

Deprioritisation of research

The COVID-19 crisis was also attributed by 64% of respondents to a pivot in universities towards teaching and a reprioritisation of teaching over research, a finding especially salient given that 66% of respondents stated working in 'research-intensive' universities. Unsurprisingly, 75% of respondents stated that the COVID-19 crisis has been detrimental to their research, some massively so, and was a contributor to cancellation of research activity, research awards and even research posts:

We have already seen charity funded research which was signed off by the University pre-crisis now being refused as it will cost the University money and they need to balance the books. (Post-doctoral researcher, STEMM)

I experienced myself the cancellation of two permanent posts that I had applied to as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. (Post-doctoral researcher, social sciences)

A further 72% stated that they have found it difficult to write – which may also be explained by just under half of the respondents (49%) reporting having caring responsibilities and dependents and a sentiment that 'against any KPI [key performance indicator] those of us with lives beyond the academy will fall short' (assistant professor, social sciences). Analogously, respondents confirmed emerging concerns that the research careers of female academics are being most disadvantaged by the crisis, and their research productivity sacrificed in fulfilment of their roles as primary caregivers (Moodley and Gouws 2020). Some even advocated for positive discrimination in the redistribution of research funds according to gender, which it was felt was necessary in maintaining a commitment to equality and diversity and, concurrently, maintaining universities' societal relevance:

Unless there is a very significant reallocation of funding to the research conducted by women and a

mandate to assign women as PIs [principal investigators] on major research projects, the university research sector will lose more than a decade of its advancement in key areas and will lose traction and relevance to society as a whole. (Professor, STEMM)

Impact of changes in academics' working conditions to health and well-being

Respondents described significant escalation of work-related stress, which they attributed to work intensification as a consequence of crisis management. They spoke of the challenge to their health and well-being presented by their institutions' management of national social restrictions and, analogously, massive growth in the pastoral demands of students; digital fatigue; and a sense of social disconnection. They, moreover, signposted waning resilience to changes in their working lives brought about in response to the pandemic.

Work intensification caused by COVID-19 was universally acknowledged by respondents, with 84% stating that the crisis was causing their work–life balance to suffer and 84% stating that the crisis was contributing to work-related stress. Many of our respondents, however, complained not only of stress but isolation and loneliness as a result of prolonged remote working, and articulated their hope of a pre-COVID return:

The lockdown has been a terrible experience of isolation and deprivation and prohibition. All I want is for normality to be restored. (Associate professor, arts and humanities)

One respondent spoke of how universities' financial vulnerabilities in the wake of the crisis and a corresponding increased prioritisation on student retention had resulted in excessive and unreasonable pastoral responsibility that was profoundly affecting their mental health:

I have become a dumping ground for student problems and unreasonable pastoral support demands – all so that the students do not walk. I am tired, fed up and fearful. I have been having suicidal thoughts. This is all I know – I feel helpless. (Associate professor, STEMM)

Others also spoke of desperation in managing augmented workloads and prioritising the development of both in-person and digital teaching content without neglecting their research, and without compromising their personal well-being. Some complained of hypocrisy among management in assigning untenable workloads while appealing to staff to look after themselves:

The senior management seem totally separate from reality – the demands upon workload are insane – I've been told that rewriting my modules to prepare them for online/blended delivery is 'workload neutral' and that I'm still expected to be doing research and we've been told to make sure we take annual leave for our 'wellbeing' but how the fuck do I do all of that? (Assistant professor, professional)

Disingenuity among university management is a theme common to respondents' accounts, which portray hypocrisy in the self-promotion of universities as compassionate employers and a fair-weather commitment to social justice and inclusivity:

Increasingly loud and persistent official rhetoric in support of 'equality, respect and diversity' at the very time when deepening marketisation continues to undermine these in reality, except in those cases where these values do not undermine market relations in the university. (Teaching fellow [or equivalent], language support)

The negative impacts of pandemia to health and well-being are also reported by respondents in relation to students, and 57% who attribute the crisis to an increase in students disclosing health and well-being problems. Respondents also identified negative impacts of the crisis on their colleagues and their students, with 88% of respondents stating that the crisis was negatively affecting the health and well-being of colleagues.

Work intensification was also blamed by 85% of respondents for 'digital fatigue' and always having to be available, with 77% of respondents feeling demotivated. Some also spoke of the invasiveness of the digital classroom to pedagogical praxis and its potential co-option as a source of educational datafication and performance surveillance (see Williamson [2020](#)):

The move to online teaching will increase the capture and legitimisation of digital traces related to academic practice, and these will eventually be codified into new performance measures. I don't fear privacy concerns as much as the birth of digital Fordism for academics. (Assistant professor, STEMM)

Eighty per cent of respondents stated feeling worried about how they would cope in the coming academic year (2020/21). Some directly spoke of their concerns regarding the reopening of university campuses as a direct threat to both their own health and well-being and that of their students. Moreover, campus re-openings were seen to illustrate the extent to which the custodianship of universities is dominated by financial concerns while the health and well-being of staff and students are neglected.

Long-term impacts of changes in the organisation and structure of the academic role

Respondents understood that the long-term impacts of COVID-19 inspired changes to the academic role in the shape of growing labour casualisation; a cul-de-sac of career opportunities; increased role specialisation (see Macfarlane 2011); and the hardening of a culture of anti-intellectualism particularly in policy jurisdictions.

They identified increased precarity as a consequence of labour casualisation and wider proliferation of insecure employment (see Holmwood and Servós 2019). Seventy-eight per cent of respondents stated that the COVID-19 crisis will result in an increase in temporary and casual forms of academic employment. A further 59% of respondents spoke of a common trend in UK contexts of uncoupling research from teaching and the COVID-19 crisis resulting in more 'teaching-only' academic jobs – relevant especially where performance-based research funding systems such as the Research Excellence Framework demand research productivity among all academics employed on teaching and research contracts (Smith et al. 2020). A focus on university performance was also reflected in the accounts of 95% of respondents who stated their belief that the COVID-19 crisis will be used by universities to legitimise cost-cutting initiatives such as closing taught programmes and even whole academic departments. Analogously, 81% of respondents stated that the crisis would damage the job prospects of ECRs. Any sense of the ephemeral nature of these COVID-19-related impacts was starkly rejected by 92% of respondents, who claimed that the changes to academics' working-lives and their health and well-being brought about by universities' response to the crisis, and work intensification especially, will be long-lasting:

The total exhaustion of academic staff and potential mental health problems caused by caring responsibilities, anxiety and isolation will continue long after the pandemic is over. (Associate professor, social sciences)

Yet inescapable from all accounts is the representation of the historical antecedents to pandemia, which frame it as not the first but the latest act of higher education's financialisation and, correspondingly, further incentivisation for academics' exodus:

I had already decided in the two years prior to it that the UK (and, indeed, Western) academy is not somewhere that I want to spend the rest of my career. I'm in the midst of an exit strategy and if that fails will leave the profession. I see Covid-19 making worse all of the reasons I want to get out: devaluing of research, loss of purpose by the sector and unwillingness to articulate the value of what we do, declining support for students financially in terms of skills development, antagonistic attitude of government, unfair workload distribution along lines of gender and age, no meaningful focus on increasing diversity in the long-term, increased standardisation of teaching to models designed by people with very little experience actually teaching in universities. I don't currently see Covid-19 changing any of those directions, but I think it will exacerbate most of them. (Associate professor, arts and humanities)

The isolation and disconnect of rank-and-file academics from university leadership expressed in our respondents' accounts also features in their discussion of universities' neglect by government and the alleged failure of university leaders in successfully lobbying for financial support. Respondents thus point towards much weaker or 'hollowed' ties involving university and policy communities than a knowledge/policy exchange, engagement and impact agenda (see Watermeyer 2019) so prevalent to higher education contexts over recent years would suggest:

There is no sense that we are in this together. It is the neo-liberal agenda of universities forced by lack of funding from central government sources that has contributed to this crisis. The universities appear ineffective in convincing the government to fund them properly. (Associate professor, professional)

A sense of universities, or more especially academics, under siege and unsupported by their public stakeholders was reinforced by another respondent who spoke of academics – in the grip of pandemia – suffering from persistent challenges to their scientific authority:

COVID is changing most the understanding of what it is to be an academic when the experts on COVID have been subject to mob review and their expertise undermined in Twitter battles. (Doctoral researcher, arts and humanities)

Conclusion

Our survey indicates a consensus of the adverse effects of UK universities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic – what we have called pandemia – visited upon the professional and personal well-being of academic communities. The survey also elucidates a shared view that the negative impacts of pandemia on academics' professional lives are not so much unprecedented as the distension of historical malfeasance associated with the organisational transformation of universities not only by 'academic' (Slaughter and Leslie 1997) but also global capitalism:

It is not a change, but the crisis has highlighted how much staff wellbeing is readily sacrificed and ignored. It makes one feel pointless, worthless and disposable as an academic. (Assistant professor, STEM)

Where significant attention has already been invested by those researching the effects of higher education marketisation on academics – specifically as relates to issues of work intensification; job

competition, scarcity, precarity and related anxiety; and the lack of support from management and erosion of trust in institutional leadership (Abery and Shipman Gunson 2016; Kinman and Wray 2015; Kinman and Wray 2018) – the COVID-19 pandemic is represented for not only highlighting but exacerbating further these debilitating effects:

What the pandemic has brought to light is the unsustainable character of the corporate university and of the disdain to investment in people as education producers. (Post-doctoral researcher, social sciences)

These contemporary accounts offer little respite from a view that the response of UK universities to COVID-19 has, perhaps irreversibly and universally, worsened the long-established norms of academic employment and has contributed, much as in other spheres of the labour market, to the contraction of job and career opportunities (Watermeyer et al. 2020b). However, it is not just the mourning of a lost generation of scientific minds – unsupported by a shrinking academia and in many instances the parsimony, even acrimony, of national governments, typified by a trend of anti-intellectualism (Peters 2019) – that makes these survey findings so compelling. It is the sense that within them exists a eulogy to research (unless of course it is directly COVID-related, or indeed targeted towards post-COVID and/or post-Brexit economic recovery) and to subject areas and whole disciplinary and even institutional communities. Moreover, this survey communicates the inescapability of universities from economic determinism and the impotency of their leadership, even in the context of a global pandemic, to escape the binds of capitalism and evolve into the kinds of humanitarian institutions they habitually claim to be. Equally, we find reported that where COVID-19 has increased risk to universities' economic sustainability, so too has it accentuated social division and disparities among its members and an unequal sharing of burden. More so is represented the unequal resilience of academics as workers within a highly stratified, hierarchical and frequently nepotistic system (Barcan 2013).

Accordingly, we find a view of those most vulnerable to the 'corrections' of a quasi-market system exposed to even greater work-based jeopardy; and not just as our survey has shown in terms of the threat of unemployment, but the threat to their health and well-being, it seems, barely recognised by their institutions:

Messages saying you're doing really well and don't forget to look after your mental health mean very little if they are not accompanied by practical steps to alleviate workload. (Teaching fellow [or equivalent], arts and humanities)

Yet, ostensibly, of greatest concern is a view of the powerlessness of academics in the wake of universities' corporatised response to COVID-19 and the continuing reorganisation of their governance into 'hollow-states'. Accordingly, COVID-19 may be seen as a defining moment in the neoliberalisation of higher education in the UK and the privileging of universities' instrumental value. Analogously, pandemic may be understood as a kind of 'shock therapy' (Klein 2007) intentionally applied for the purpose of pushing through 'freer' market reform and availing new (digital) market opportunities or, more so, cost-efficiencies for universities', as one of our respondents attested:

A central aspect of the disaster capitalists in UK HE [higher education] is utilising the shock, cover and excuse of the crisis, to double down on a trajectory of intensification and acceleration of the ongoing neoliberalisation of the sector. (Teaching fellow [or equivalent], social sciences)

A current 'business as usual' approach in UK higher education may be used to showcase existing inefficiencies and justify changes that will likely further enhance and extend a marketised approach to university governance. As an iteration of 'disaster capitalism', pandemic may also reason the non-accountability of universities' neoliberal elites as legitimate, and should academics' efforts stabilise the crisis, their professional immunity may likely further swell:

Universities seem to be using this an opportunity to do whatever they wanted to do – cut degrees, cut staff, prioritise certain areas, etc. And the planning seems so cynical and dishonest. Either this is a total disaster, and who knows what will happen. Or it goes okay because academic staff work their asses off but senior management regard it as validation of their plans and the neoliberal university just gets worse. (Assistant professor, professional)



Pandemic frames higher education as a space where the 'drama of self and government unfolds' and through which is articulated 'truth as the practice of government' (Ball 2016, 1131). This is a different kind of 'truth' to that habitually enumerated by universities and paraded as proof of greatness. It is instead the articulation of the failure of university governance as measured by the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology and the consequent neglect of human need at a time of universal precarity and

social distress. It is evidence of the extent of both universities' democratic unravelling and the deterioration of academic life under intensive market reform. It is also evidence of how the proliferation of managerialism and responsibilisation as technologies of control are profoundly detrimental not only to academic praxis but academics' very health and well-being, and thus, we surmise, academia's capacity to self-perpetuate. Moreover, through pandemic we perceive not so much an opportunity for disruption to such trends, but their embedding as COVID-19's commercial opportunities become apparent.

In such terms, pandemic illustrates isomorphic tendencies in the corporate psychology of universities and the prevalence of 'hollowed' leadership. Manifest is not only the privileging by but the answerability of university management singularly to 'competitive accountability' (Watermeyer 2019) and the extent to which the well-being of academic faculty is a long way behind considerations of financial health, market competitiveness and accentuating powers of governance leveraged by an elite minority. This is a 'truth' not quite so unprecedented as never more so conspicuous. Yet despite the severity of academic fallout in response to universities' attempted management of the pandemic, pandemic is a noose – which much like the virus, appears hard to slip.


Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

¹The authors acknowledge that many people in academic leadership are themselves current and former faculty members. Nevertheless, our respondents generally did not make this distinction, but instead spoke of 'university leadership' in the collective. Their usage is followed as it would be too difficult to distinguish non-academic leadership, such as human resources, from academic leadership, such as deans, since they often act as a team.  

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