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COVID-19 and Management Education: Reflections on Challenges, Opportunities, and Potential Futures

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Introduction

COVID-19 is having profound impacts on tertiary education globally. Border closures, cuts to aviation capacity, mandatory quarantine on entering a country, restrictions on mass gatherings, and social distancing all pose challenges to higher education (HE) institutions. Business Schools (BSs) have larger and more internationally diverse cohorts of students and staff, generating particular challenges, but also often have more mature digital and remote education capabilities that enable responses to COVID-19. Therefore, exploring emergent evidence on how BSs are likely to be affected by COVID-19 over the short, medium, and long term is of significant importance to our community. In this commentary, we share a perspective on the impacts of COVID-19 that draws upon our experience as leaders of BSs in Asia, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Our reflections are limited by our experiences and we acknowledge both our partiality and the diverse broader impacts of COVID-19 on business and society.

COVID-19 and Business School-Stakeholder Relations

As COVID-19 emerged in January and February 2020, the impacts on universities and BSs reflected the pattern of the academic year and the con-

centration of cases in a small number of countries (China, Japan, South Korea). In the UK and parts of Asia, the pandemic emerged mid-way through the academic year, and so manifested initially in challenges associated with navigating end-of-cycle teaching and assessment. In Australia, the crisis emerged at the beginning of a new academic year, and the initial focus lay with serving Chinese students that were prevented from returning to Australia. Subsequently, outbreaks increased exponentially across countries, and impacts broadened to encompass all on-campus teaching, international student activities, and pastoral support. COVID-19 also impacted student recruitment and attempts to maintain financial sustainability through the crisis. BSs rapidly adapted pedagogy and assessment. Currently, BSs are contemplating a more planned and structured adaptation to a “new normal”.

COVID-19 and students

Students are perhaps the BS's most affected stakeholder throughout the pandemic and were at the forefront of BS's minds when designing and implementing responses. Students in the later stages of their courses are concerned to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on their progression and graduation. New students are concerned for the impacts on their experience. Students and their family members have contracted COVID, causing

considerable anxiety within student communities. Because BSs tend to be highly externally engaged, our institutions encountered significant challenges with providing internships, international study tours and exchanges, as well as other co-curricular elements of university life. Considerations regarding whether and how to repatriate students overseas at the time the crisis arose were especially challenging. Many students, especially research postgraduates, are also staff within their universities, or undertook part time work in other industry sectors, especially retail and hospitality. The broader economic impacts of COVID-19 have led to significant numbers of students experiencing hardship, including international students that are stranded in their country of study throughout the pandemic.

COVID-19 and staff

Staff, both academic and professional, have been significantly affected by COVID-19. The pandemic has necessitated the largest and quickest transformation of pedagogic and assessment practice ever seen in contemporary universities. This put pressure on institutional systems of quality assurance and governance as well as increasing workload for faculty and professional staff. This required support for colleagues, including the development of formal training on software and communities of practice through which good practices were shared. Both SMU and Macquarie benefited from some specific adaptations made prior to the crisis. At SMU, there is a requirement that all faculty undertake an Emergency Preparedness for Teaching and Learning (EPTL) because of the smoke haze from forest fires. This meant that the great majority of faculty were trained in online methods. At Macquarie, the launching of the Global MBA programme in partnership with Coursera had led to the development of substantial learning and capacity among both academic and professional staff. However, COVID-19 caused, and is to some degree still causing, considerable stress, uncertainty, and work for faculty. Adaptation of assessment at short notice presented particular challenges, especially in fields with specific accreditation requirements (e.g. accounting, actuarial studies). Shifting exams online has been a test of maintaining rigour and standards. As academic leaders, we have been made acutely aware of the heterogeneous experience and challenge faced

by staff through the crisis. Juggling widespread homeworking, alongside home schooling, navigating other caring and household responsibilities has blurred boundaries between work and home, and has led to longer working hours and greater stress.

COVID-19 and government support for universities

Governments, in Australia and the UK at least, have not quickly responded to calls for additional funding required to adapt to the pandemic. Instead, government has preferred to focus on extending some limited credit lines, offering the generalised schemes of employment protection seen in the wider economy, and signalling specific funding to regional economic recovery. It remains unclear whether or how governments will seek to support the financial sustainability of the university sector. In the UK and Australia, there has been very limited coordination across universities. In contrast, in Singapore the Ministry of Education (MOE) and six Autonomous Universities (AUs) have worked in partnership addressing the many issues linked to COVID-19 to ensure a common approach across all institutions (e.g., the timing and approach to withdrawing from international student exchanges). As Singaporean students turn away from studying at overseas Universities next academic year, the MOE has made more places available to AUs to absorb this additional demand.

COVID-19 and business school-university relations

One of the most profound potential long run impacts of COVID-19 on BSs located in comprehensive Universities flows from its possible impacts on their prevailing business model. Many comprehensive research universities involve a business model in which: (i) research is cross-subsidised by teaching, (ii) disciplines with comparatively low costs of teaching (such as humanities, social sciences, business and management, IT) subsidise high cost of teaching disciplines (such as medicine, laboratory science, engineering), and (iii) international-fee paying student tuition subsidises domestic student tuition. These cross-subsidies enable universities to thrive at the institutional level. COVID-19 threatens to fundamentally undermine the delicate web of cross-subsidies at the heart of comprehensive university financial models.

COVID-19 and external partnerships

The pandemic initially forced BSs to look inward to their own operations and adapting these to meet the challenges of the pandemic. Equally, the attention of many partners shifted to their own core business activities. However, as the crisis has become prolonged, BSs are beginning to seek to actively engage with business partners, advisory boards, alumni and other stakeholders, both to offer support in the form of research, training and advice to help them navigate the crisis, and to enlist their support in responding to the crisis. Participation, for example, of senior advisory board members in online support for the career and employability development of students has been hugely valuable.

Reflections on COVID-19 Emerging Impacts and Responses

Communication, communication, communication

COVID-19 has put considerable strain on schools in relation to the clarity and timeliness of communication with stakeholders, especially students and staff. Resolving uncertainties is a critical leadership activity, especially during a crisis, and a dramatically higher tempo of communication both from university leadership and within our schools has helped to reduce perceived distance between leadership and colleagues. One of the most pleasing benefits of adapting to COVID-19 is the success of holding frequent scalable online meetings through Teams or Zoom that permit open Q&A formats that reassure staff regarding how universities are adapting to the crisis. Communication with students has been more complex because of their idiosyncratic study pathways, and the need for individualised attention to their ongoing support.

Governance, agility, and capacity for innovation

COVID-19 led to significant innovation in our universities regarding the processes and timetables of academic governance. These innovations in normal academic processes introduced considerably greater agility and capacity for innovation into our courses and programmes. Decision making in relation to COVID-19 challenged and stretched the processes in many institutions particularly in terms of the degree to which they could follow due pro-

cess, permit prior consultation and deliberation, and allow for disciplinary differences. The experience of agility through COVID-19 provokes questions regarding whether the current layers and set of discretions are sustainable, whether their processes permit the degree of flexible future thinking and resilience building required, and whether they can iteratively reimagine the future to create a sustainable institution.

Staff adaptability

One of the most positive experiences of COVID-19 for us has been to witness the scale, scope, speed, and quality of our colleagues' adaptation to new circumstances, and the receptivity within our communities to experiment with new ways of engaging with teaching and research. The variety of alternative ways of helping students to continue their learning, colleagues' imagination in designing new forms of learning support and assessment, and staff willingness to deploy new technologies is generating long-lasting impacts. Remote education tools are enabling external partners to play a more prominent role in many aspects of our curricula because they reduce the time cost of that involvement. Necessity is, in many ways, the mother of invention, and it has been hugely exciting to see the inventiveness of colleagues in responding to the challenges of COVID-19.

COVID-19 and Future of Business Schools

COVID-19 is leading to major structural change in HE, driven by the competitive dynamics of brand strength, shifting student demands, the development and diffusion of new learning technologies, the reduction in international students, and the entry of large technology companies into the market. COVID-19 may result in the closure, merger, and restructuring of universities as funding impacts emerge.

At the most fundamental level, COVID-19 poses a challenge to our core activity of supporting the development of students through a broad range of curricula and co-curricula experiences and opportunities. It significantly impedes the delivery of an interactive, personalised and predominantly face-to-face experience based around a rich campus life. Adapting to a prolonged pandemic

will require Universities to build flexible and resilient models of education that enable continuous adaptation to different phases of the “new normal”. COVID-19 has accelerated and intensified long-run pedagogic trends, constituting a natural experiment in which numerous innovations are trialled and evaluated. Early indications are that many of the innovations made during the pandemic will continue to be valued and expected by students beyond the crisis.

Just as COVID-19 has stimulated significant pedagogic innovation, it has also presented significant opportunities for BS research. Understanding organizational and institutional responses to the crisis, exploring implications for work, employment and leadership, evaluating impacts on international businesses in light of supply chain issues, illuminating impacts on individual patterns of consumption and attitudes to risk, highlighting the financial consequences of the crisis and how they might be mitigated, and modelling the progression and impacts of policy interventions are all arenas in which BS research is playing an important role.

The fundamental economics and geography of HE are being challenged by COVID-19.

Universities are being encouraged to respond to needs and imperatives in their local and regional economies and societies, alongside an outlook that is likely characterised by a reduction in international student numbers. This trend will generate notable opportunities but will also necessitate broader adaptation of broad-based HE institutions to an environment where sources of cross-subsidy are less available. This will require the careful recalibration of different value propositions and the development of faculty and staff to be able to operate with a new agility as they switch modes depending on the phase of the pandemic.

COVID-19 has had profound effects on the nature and balance of work in BSs. In addition to work intensification, and the need for rapid adaptation and learning, staff have experienced a significant shift in the balance between research and teaching in their roles. COVID-19 has raised the salience and demands in relation to learning and teaching and reduced the emphasis on research during the crisis period. It is critical both that the career impacts of the crisis are justly responded to, and that consideration to how our vibrant research cultures can be sustained through this, and future crisis.

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