"The COVID-19 Crisis is Not the Core Problem": Experiences, Challenges, and Concerns of Irish Academia During the Pandemic

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This article, drawing on data from an international survey – distributed in the summer of 2020 – explores the experiences and concerns of academic staff (n=167) working in universities in Ireland and their perceptions of their institutions' early response to the pandemic. Concerns related to transitioning to remote online working, impact on research productivity and culture, and work intensification, as intersected by enhanced

managerialism, are ubiquitous to their accounts. As some respondents wrote of potential positive changes, particularly in the delivery of teaching, we conclude by suggesting potential avenues for building on successes in coping with the pandemic with some recommendations for mitigating some of the harms.

Research Background and Rationale

Since the emergence of the pandemic at the start of 2020, COVID-19 has profoundly transformed higher education worldwide. There is a fast-growing body of literature (Watermeyer, Crick, Knight, & Goodall, 2020; Coates, Xie, and Hong, 2021; Moja, T., 2021) encompassing the move to online learning, teaching and assessment across various disciplines, institutional settings, and countries, focusing primarily on case studies and student experience.

While ongoing consequences for student and staff well-being, and work-life balance have been studied and discussed in the academic trade and policy literature, raising concerns about the exercise of leadership in many universities and national contexts (Yamey and Walensky 2020), there have been fewer studies examining the experiences of academic staff vis-à-vis mental health and well-being, their hopes and concerns for the future, or on their experiences of academic leadership during the pandemic. In this article, we draw on Irish data extracted from a wider international survey of N=2,649 academics, examining the COVID-19 pandemic in universities as the lived experience of academic work, encompassing teaching, research, physical and emotional wellbeing, and the responses of leaders of universities as neoliberalised institutions.

Method

An online survey was launched on 19 June 2020 and remained open for two months. The research team (based in Ireland, the UK, India, South Africa, Australia, and Hong Kong, all from member universities of the Worldwide Universities Network) distributed the survey via

opportunity sampling to professional listservs, social media, and personal networks. The survey was comprised of open-ended and closed-ended questions examining participants' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on their sector, institution and roles. The following discussion focuses on the qualitative response from the Irish respondents. Details of wider results are under review.

In total 2,649 responses were collected from across a global higher education sector. Recruitment was most successful in the UK (42%) with the national tertiary education trade union instrumental in survey distribution. The survey thereafter returned highest in the European Union (14%); Australia (14%); and universities in North America (10%). We received n=167 responses from Ireland and n=7 from Northern Ireland (in this paper, we limit ourselves to reporting on findings from Ireland). Academic respondents were representative of the key academic disciplines (22.8% Arts and Humanities; 26.3% Social Sciences; 35.3% STEM; 12% Professional (e.g. law, management business).

The open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2013). Fifty-nine themes were identified from responses given to the question, '*In light of your answers above, what do you think the COVID-19 crisis will change most for those working and studying in universities?*'

Theoretical Perspective

We situate our survey design and findings in a larger framework of neoliberal higher education policy, a transformation that Mercille and Murphy (2017) argued began in Ireland in the 1990s but only deepened with the global economic crisis of 2008 and has been further normalised during the 2020 pandemic. Even as the Irish government instituted pay cuts, hiring freezes, and sectoral budget cuts in the years after the 2008 crisis, universities experienced significant growth in staff-student ratios, intensification of labour casualisation, and deterioration of workplace conditions (Courtois and O'Keefe 2015). Over the last decade, some Irish

universities, supported by policies enacted by the Higher Education Authority[1], have been compensating for their budget shortfalls with the recruitment of non-EU students, deployment of commercially oriented courses, and the privatisation of campus services. In the research context, funding agencies have emphasised commercialisable and applied research, often with an eye to fostering private sector collaborations and intellectual property outputs (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). Even as Ireland's economy has stabilised over the last decades, higher education funding has flagged and these trends have intensified.

Findings and Results

Among Irish survey respondents, concerns related to transitioning to remote online working; research productivity; and staffing (retrenchment/work intensification/recruitment) were most prolific.

Move to Online Education

The move to online working was perceived as negative in the short term by most of the respondents and as a "poor substitute" for face-to-face teaching. Respondents spoke of isolation among academic staff, and students missing out on the aspects of learning that are part of the archetypal campus experience. Several feared that the transition to online learning, teaching and assessment would be primarily profit-driven and market motivated, with institutions targeting uplift in recruitment quotas (especially with non-EU students), online courses aimed at international students and private sector training, and cost savings via staff retrenchment. An assistant professor wrote:

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[1] The role of the Higher Education Authority in Ireland, from its webpage, is "statutory responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of the higher education system". https://hea.ie/about-us/overview/

I think there will be a shift towards remote working and establishment of courses that could be run remotely to international studies. The change in finances will probably result in further insecurity for those on fixed term contracts and cutting of staff resulting in an increased workload for remaining staff.

Research Culture

Respondents identified the impact on research as one of their chief concerns, particularly research which requires travel for data collection. An assistant professor noted:

Those folks who work abroad, say in development studies, archaeology and anthro [sic], are really going to suffer. They'll have to amend their entire research trajectories or start a new line of work. It's such a pity, because they often work in areas of the world which are underrepresented in curricula.

She went on to discuss "starving and closures in the Humanities" and "severe impact on younger generations [that are] just continuing and intensifying the already present crisis trajectory". Drastically reduced access to physical resources such as archives, libraries, and laboratories were stated as impacting productivity; one STEM researcher noted that in their university, laboratories were operating at 30% of full capacity. With significant reductions in research output and opportunities for research funding, some respondents feared that their future funding and career prospects were likely to be harmed. Several pointed to cancelled research leave (or research leave that was granted but the travel which had been the goal of the research leave became impossible), frozen or reduced research funds, and cancelled funding streams, all of which would have significant effects for staff seeking career progression or promotion, or those on fixed-term contracts whose research outputs and ability to attract funding are important considerations for obtaining permanent faculty positions in Ireland or elsewhere.

Woman academics also highlighted the gendered impact of the pandemic apropos research productivity. While some positives were cited (such as the increased flexibility to

work from home to support families), reduced research capacity was in this case felt to be more problematic for woman academics than their male counterparts. A woman assistant professor wrote:

> *I think working from home will be more supported, this is great for those who can work at home and who have childcare if they have children. I think for young child free and carer-free academics, they will have more time to spend on research but those with children will have less. This will lead to inequalities for women with young children who typically take on the bulk of the career roles, while child free males will likely have much more time to publish. This is already being seen in a reduced number of first author papers for women since the crisis.*

A woman full professor in STEM saw the effects of COVID-19 as an amplification of existing gender problems in Irish higher education (Walsh & Loxley 2015):

> *Gender disparities connected to the greater domestic workload for most women at home have blocked the possibility of women achieving their full potential in university life, and the granting of so many 'rapid response' grants to men in the hard sciences instead of to women in general or women in the social sciences has been a major setback to the gender equality and EDI aims of universities overall. Unless there is a very significant reallocation of funding to the research conducted by women and a mandate to assign women as PIs 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.*

Managerialism

Respondents spoke to the pandemic as part of a "crisis trajectory" that has been going on since post-2009 (Mercille and Murphy 2017; Walsh and Loxley 2015). One wrote: "More surveillance, continued unsustainable workloads because we managed somehow initially, and now the money has run out and we all need to stay in crisis mode. We have already been in chronic crisis mode since 2009, so there isn't much more to give." For some participants, the

COVID-19 pandemic is expected to bring about a new era of austerity. An associate professor in the humanities wrote:

> Attempts to increase managerialism and neoliberal orientation even further, reduction in research output in the short and medium term, mental health issues. A new period of austerity will lead to reductions in the expenditure and size of universities, and for some of them to even cease to exist.

One respondent feared the perpetuation of the "crisis" management model "may accelerate the move towards universities seeing students as 'customers'", while another respondent worried that "it will only justify and heighten existing corporatising 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". Other respondents also noted that the negative implications of the pandemic are linked to the longer trend of neoliberal managerialism in Irish universities.

Potential Positive Outcomes

While some respondents expressed concern of the pandemic exacerbating precarity and intensifying negative impacts on research, teaching, and the overall well-being of staff and students, many also expressed hope that the legacy of the pandemic would be at least in part positive. There was general consensus that the additional demands placed on academics to pivot to online delivery, would result in a fuller and sustained utilisation of digital pedagogies, opportunities for pedagogical experimentation, innovative assessment, and reflexive practice. One assistant professor opined:

> [It has] led to greater integration of digital technologies, rethinking of assessment strategies with reduced reliance on final written unseen exams, and more emphasis on pedagogies for greater engagement.

Another assistant professor expressed the hope that online teaching could remediate the inequities that exist due to poor access to teaching materials:

I hope that down the line some of the positive contributions of online/remote teaching can continue to be integrated in teaching at university level helping to remediate inequalities around access to learning material for students with accessibility issues.

Commenting on geographical barriers to higher education, an assistant professor pointed out how the shift to online teaching might potentially facilitate widened and more inclusive participation:

I am optimistic about the way digital learning can open up higher education to a wider range of participants, and break down existing barriers of geography.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the Irish context, it seems that the negative impacts of the pandemic seem to be an intensification of more than a decade of higher education policies based on neo-liberal logics and intensified managerialism. Irish academics reported work related stress, digital fatigue and adverse impact on their work-life balance. The pandemic has simply amplified and illuminated the negative impact of these adverse policies. As one assistant professor wrote:

I am living through my second recession as an academic worker and I am only in my mid-30s. Last time around I saw value for money exercises, higher demands for productivity, and two-tiered pay scales (which I still live with the legacy of to this day) coming in and I am anxious about what is coming down the tracks this time around.

Many respondents have also expressed an elevated sense of anxiety about the possibility of more austerity measures in the form of cuts in research funding and extra teaching workload being imposed on them due to the pandemic via a crisis rationale. In particular, early career academics on fixed contracts were particularly worried since their long-term prospects of tenure and promotion that depend heavily on research productivity and access to funding.

As the intensification and promotion of applied and commercialisable research continues (a trajectory that admittedly began well before the pandemic but shows no intension of slowing down), respondents expressed concern about their own abilities to attract the kind of funding needed to sustain their careers.

These accounts offer little respite from a view that the response of universities around the world including Ireland to COVID-19 has 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 in academia. The opinions shared by a number of academics in this study points to a commonly shared perception that the future of the academic profession faces manifold risks to do with job security, access to research funds, and a general deterioration in quality of research and teaching over a period of time.

The ongoing organisational reform of Irish higher education around market principles has failed to account for staff welfare, health and wellbeing; the global health crisis has brought these trends into even more stark relief. Higher education policies must be re-calibrated to mitigate their negative impact on the academic community as much as possible. In the short term, universities need to prioritise a "human-centric" model of productivity and academic labour that accounts for the ongoing toll the pandemic has been taking on staff, students, and all citizens. On the positive side we hope that the process of transitioning to online has provoked academics into thinking about ways in which this shift can bring positive benefits to the academic community at large while ongoing work on online pedagogy and practice should be promoted and supported through professional development opportunities and funding. However, the transitional tax on staff time and productivity should be factored into hiring and promotion decisions. Special consideration should be given to women and minority staff and staff with caring responsibilities as well as staff on fixed contracts. Lastly, educational

institutions should take active steps in reaching out, listening and responding to their respective

academic communities, and alleviate their anxiety of persistently uncertain times.

Ethical Considerations

Each team member sought and received ethics approval from their own institution prior to

survey dissemination in their country. Respondents to the survey were presented with

information on anonymity of their data, secure data storage and management, and contact

information for the research team on the first page of the survey as part of obtaining informed

consent.

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