COVID-19 and Its Impact on Management Research and Education: Threats, Opportunities and a Manifesto

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Higher education (HE), and in particular Management and Business Education, is facing an unseen crisis. Business schools and learned societies are dealing with a number of pressing short-term problems that potentially threaten their existence. Although HE leaders have to focus on short-term survival, they should not forget about sustaining growth and development in the long term. The current crisis also creates opportunities to rethink our focus and role in the society. To this end, we posit a Manifesto for business and management in HE and learned societies to gain a stronger identity, broker and facilitate interdisciplinary research and become more impactful with, and recognised by, society in post-COVID years.

Threats

The short-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant stopping face-to-face teaching and moving on-line. For business academics this has been a significant issue because of the considerably greater volume of students who study business both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels than other disciplines and because of the expected value in business degrees which often carry higher fees than other subjects. Hence, any perceived reduction in quality of student experience creates greater demand on staff to excel in interactive on-line learning. In the UK, business schools teach 15% of all students, 19% of postgraduates and 31% on non-EU international students (BAM, 2020). The fact that business is the most popular subject for international students combined with the inability of students and staff to travel creates a ‘perfect storm’ of reduction in income, increased complexity and volume of new work and increased cost. This is impacting on university budgets. In the UK, it has been estimated losses to the sector will be £2.5bn and there have been predictions of 30,000 job losses (UCU, 2020). In Australia, a conservative estimate is a revenue decline between AUS$3 billion and AUS$4.6 billion with more than 21,000 jobs at risk in the next six months (Universities Australia, 2020). And in the US many universities are “enacting severe cost-cutting and saving measures”, potentially including pay freezes and reductions as well as job losses (DePietro, 2020).

A potential drop in student numbers has led to financial insecurity, recruitment freezes and possibly mergers and take-overs in the sector. We also see research funding increasingly focusing in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) and health areas which are regarded as
directly relevant to the pandemic and its aftermath. Over the last 10 years, while there has been relatively good nominal growth in research income in universities across subjects, there has been a real terms reduction of 18% in funding of business and management research, and within this a decline of 33% of research funding for business from UK government sources (CABS, 2020). These structural factors impact on decreasing job security, reduced potential for career development and a potential imbalance of prioritisation between business and other subjects.

Similarly, learned societies have lost major activities, such as conferences and workshops, and as a result, their income has reduced dramatically while many costs have stayed the same. For international organizations as EAWOP and BAM, we had to deal with closed borders and a cessation of our normal processes of academic collaboration, knowledge development and capacity building, all of which typically depend on travel, invited seminars and meetings. In BAM, for example, we had been running around 50 events per year and our main conference typically has in the region of 1000 participants from over 50 countries. This year, the physical meeting has been postponed and there is a loss of publication outcomes for academics. EAWOP has had to cancel all small group meetings and summer school and is currently seeking to postpone its bi-annual conference of 2000 participants.

Opportunities

However, we also see the emergence of new approaches to management education and research, which might contain the seeds for a future vision for our communities: (1) the move to on-line learning may stimulate an increase in blended and more accessible forms of education to support life-long learning. Although digital learning environments have been predicted to disrupt management education for decades, most business schools have been slow in changing their educational offering; the crisis has forced a shift from physical to digital in a matter of weeks; (2) teaching styles have had to change and this may have a lasting effect because social distancing will mean that lectures and ‘transfer’ styles of teaching will most likely stay online in learning packages accessible asynchronously by students and the real value will be in the quality of interaction, practical work and case studies conducted online and in person (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020); (3) COVID-19 has provided an ‘electric jolt’ to research, with many academics taking a problem-oriented approach seeking to address the challenges associated with COVID-19. There have long been concerns about an imbalance between rigour and relevance with incentives being aligned more with scoring an “A-journal” publication than adding value to society (cBBRM, 2017). COVID-19 constitutes a “Grand Challenge” for society and management research has shown that it has the expertise and methods to help address such issues (Rudolph et al., 2020); (4) In order to provide meaningful insights to the COVID-19 crisis, researchers are starting to conduct research with business and society instead of about business and society. That is, in COVID-19 times, studies are being co-designed by academics and societal actors (e.g., government, health providers) to aim for the most meaningful results; (5) We see rapid funding, review and communication of research. In learned societies and the academy more generally, we are used to research taking years from design to ultimate publication, whereas now studies have been funded, reviewed and published in a matter of weeks. While we need to be very cautious that these rapid studies pass the test of rigorous peer-review, the new publication model, including making research freely accessible for the public may be an opportunity, as long as funding through grants or other sources support research; (6) We see the emergence of large collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to solving COVID-19 problems (Kniffin et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020). The much-touted inter- and multi-disciplinary team approach may be newly invigorated with the pressing need to understand the health, economic, organizational and psychological consequences of COVID-19.

From a Learned Society perspective, while major conferences have been cancelled and postponed, the BAM conference this year will be ‘in the cloud’ and it is already proving very popular in advanced registrations. Equally, our in-person activities have been replaced with webinars and online meetings. The four which have run so far have had 550 sign ups and participants from over 30 countries. At the same time, our research grants have increasingly fostered international collaboration, for example with the Australia and New Zealand Academy of Management and joint
seminars are underway with the Irish Academy of Management. So, as we all move online, there are sometimes increased opportunities and decreased costs for engaged work across physical boundaries. At the same time, learned societies such as EA-WOP and their academic publications have initiated dedicated small group meetings, special issues and rapid review calls for research into COVID-related management and business research, with a focus on topics like leadership in times of crisis, working from home, technology and work, virtual teams, resilience of individuals and organizations, job loss and insecurity, unemployment and wellbeing and firm strategies for economic recovery (e.g., Kniffin *et al.*, 2020).

**A Manifesto**

- Management research needs to further embrace a problem-driven approach and seek to add value to organizations, businesses and society by helping address pressing problems and grand challenges. This does not need to detract from broader forms of knowledge development but does challenge us to bring theory and data-grounded insight into dialogue with practice (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2017).

  - Learned societies need to break their disciplinary shackles and seek to develop collaborations within social sciences and across other disciplines. Team science and multidisciplinary long-term programmes of research may provide more impact than solo-disciplinary approaches.

  - Management research needs to involve business and societal stakeholders in the research process, not only as end-users but as co-designers of research questions and design.

- Knowledge creation will benefit from rapid communication with public access to research insights, balanced by effective funding for research.

- Universities and funders need to make the most of the quality and potential contribution of business schools in producing collaborative research and educational outcomes and not see them as sources of internal cross-subsidies to the extent that they become depleted.

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