



Vol.8 No.1 (2025)

Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : 2591-801X

Content Available at : <http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index>

Book Review of Jürgen Rudolph, Joseph Crawford, Choon-Yin Sam and Shannon Tan. (Eds., 2024). The Palgrave Handbook of Crisis Leadership in Higher Education. Palgrave Macmillan.

Jennifer Skipp^A

A

Freelance, University of Luxembourg and Trier University, Germany

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2025.8.1.11>

Introduction and context

This volume is a timely addition to our reflections on and understandings of the 'polycrisis' that has affected Higher Education (HE) from both within and without. As the world grapples with the continuing effects of the three Cs: conflict, climate change, and COVID-19, a fourth C, ChatGPT, or, more accurately, artificial intelligence, has joined the list of challenges. Artificial intelligence presents a significant issue for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as they consider both its affordances and threats to teaching and learning in the future. However, even as we move forward, many HEIs are confronting the consequences of past decisions, specifically the 'businessification' of Higher Education. The outcomes of the neoliberal, corporatist principles around which much HE has arranged itself have significantly altered management and organisation practices in HEIs.

This confluence of crises has, perhaps understandably, led many involved in Higher Education to be wistful about times gone by. Many contributors to this volume are hopeful of resetting or reinvigorating the traditional ethos of universities that have become obscured in the neoliberal model or disrupted by COVID-19. Others are more future-oriented. They see the recovery from the pandemic as crisis-as-process, a tipping point which can propel HE forward to fresh ideas about teaching and learning in a modern context facilitated by updated infrastructures and approaches. Regardless of the narrative, what is recognised throughout this volume is the need for strong and adaptable leadership to proactively and wisely steer HE in challenging times. Against this backdrop of polycrisis, each chapter in this volume examines the theme of leadership through accounts of how it has either exacerbated or mitigated the causes and consequences of multifaceted crises.

Organisation

The volume is organised into two sections. The first, 'Headwinds of Crisis', is divided into nine thematic chapters, with themes ranging from neoliberalism to the pervasive influence of the colonial past on HEIs in the Global South. The first of these chapters, by Newstead and Riggio provides

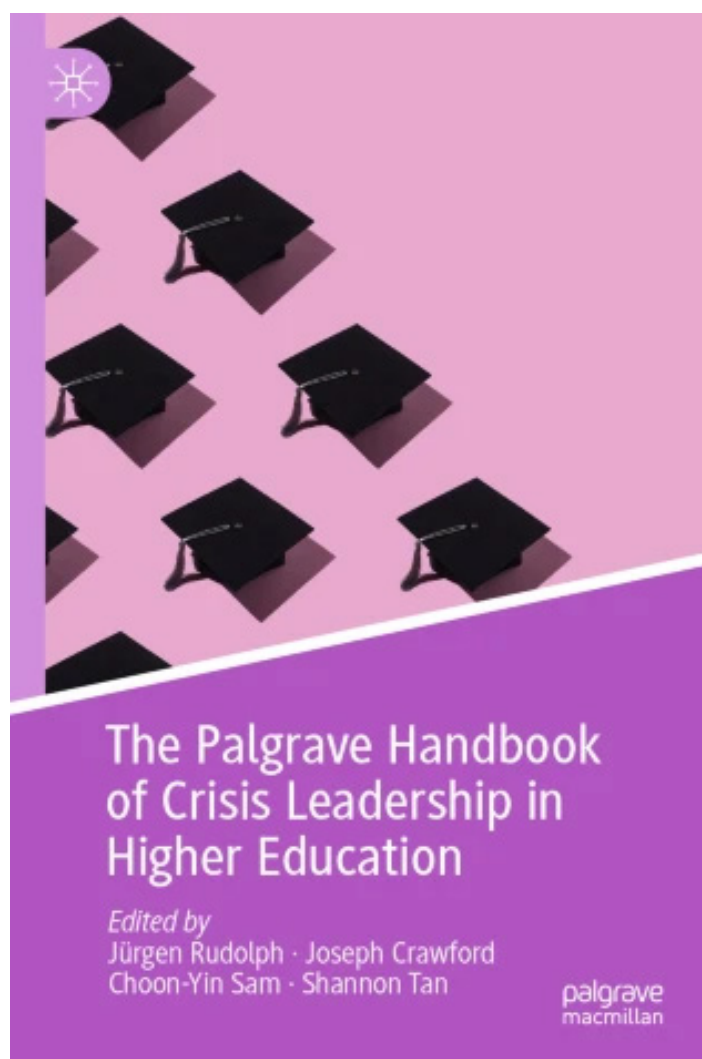


Figure 1: Book cover.

a useful framework of crisis leadership on which many other chapters throughout the volume draw. According to Newstead and Riggio, 'crisis-as-event' can be classified as "unexpected and disruptive events that threaten an organisation's crisis viability and significantly impact an organisation's operations, reputation and/or stakeholder well-being" (p. 20). While COVID-19 was one such event, a

case is also strongly made that it arrived as merely the latest step in a series of negative scenarios, the evolutionary result of deep-rooted and long-practised ignorance, avoidance, inattention or incapacity by those in charge.

The book's second section, "National Cases of Crisis", examines responses to the COVID-19 pandemic from specific national contexts. It covers 23 countries across all continents, ensuring that the reader has a broad perspective of crisis leadership before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. While some of the case studies cover contexts that readers might be familiar with, other under-researched countries, including Cambodia, Brazil, Greece, Egypt, Mozambique, and many others, are also represented.

The chapters on national perspectives are similarly organised. Most start by sequencing events during the pandemic, from government declarations of crisis to the initial stages of lockdown and the implementation of emergency measures, normally the transition to remote learning. Space is then given to evaluations of how the pandemic was managed by leaders from government, authorities and institutions. Each contribution reflects on the lessons that may or may not have been learnt and concludes with recommendations for HE leaders in that particular national context and beyond.

In addition to the five Cs of the polycrisis mentioned at the outset of this review, the chapters on national perspectives also contain other important and brave reflections. For example, from Türkiye on its stymieing lack of academic freedom, and from Brazil on the importance of HEIs in national infrastructures and public education. Others, such as Itangata and Kane, Peter Waring and Crawford et al. draw attention to issues directly affecting HE staff. Others still highlight challenges for students that both pre- and post-date the pandemic, such as feelings of fear, anxiety and depression (Altamirano on the USA) and overcrowded classrooms in Egypt (Richter et al.).

The volume's chapters are methodologically diverse. Many draw on ethnographic methods to document experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the various crises faced by managers and practitioners in HEIs. This is complemented by other chapters, most notably Teo's analysis of the Uzbekistan context, where the student is placed front and centre. Teo applies a grounded theory to 23 interviews with students to evaluate perceptions of HE leadership during the pandemic. Systematic literature reviews and content analyses are also frequently employed by authors to provide a representative picture of the national context they report on. There is also an array of analytical lenses in the volume. Mike Klein, for example, uses intersectionality to examine inclusion and transformation in HE leadership, while Ismail and Aljunied assess HE in the Global South through a humanistic paradigm.

Scope of the volume

This volume is far more than a multi-focal retelling of the pandemic. Whilst it recounts the crises of the approximately 220 million tertiary students worldwide affected by COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2021), it makes clear that this event was a

disruption to an unfolding set of crises in HE. It exacerbated existent ailments and perhaps helped to hide rather than illuminate deeply rooted problems. These issues are laid bare in this volume. The editors, Jürgen Randolph (editor of this journal), Joseph Crawford (University of Tasmania), Choon-Yin Sam and Shannon Tan (both of Kaplan Higher Education Academy, Singapore) have expertly organised the contributions. As a collection, it moves away from the myopic perspectives that were offered immediately after the pandemic by arranging the chapters to chronicle the similarities between different nations' experiences of crises as well as the features that make each context unique before, during and after COVID-19.

This arrangement means that it is possible to see the nuanced and sometimes dichotomous conclusions drawn about the status and future of HE. For example, while many chapters bemoan the unilateral implementation of the product-based business model with its prioritisation of the economics of student numbers over student interests (Banner & Mara), others see the need for universities to adapt to a business model that establishes or maintains competitiveness in a global market (Kefalaki). Nevertheless, there is also a significant degree of uniformity in the conclusions drawn. Many chapters highlight a neglect of infrastructures, specifically information and communication technologies (ICT), that were required during the pandemic, an unreadiness to address such issues and a need to do so.

Whilst many chapters emphasise the short-sightedness of HE and national leaders and a general lack of preparation before the pandemic, there are more positive accounts. This is particularly true in those contributions which document lessons learnt from previous crises. Rudolph, Sam and Tan report on the lack of interruption to education during the pandemic in Singapore due to the clear leadership and government-coordinated action that was established after SARS. Cambodia reportedly responded to each stage of the pandemic in unique and adaptive ways. Clear channels of communication were established between a host of different players, including leaders from government, HEIs, as well as staff and members of the student body, to involve everyone in the response. Glowatz and O'Brien's report from the Republic of Ireland details the success of a transnational education approach to crisis preparation. The University College Dublin instituted an Emergency Response Framework (ERF) as a reaction to incidents at its global campuses in the years preceding the pandemic. Student protests in Hong Kong and the terrorist attack in Sri Lanka in 2019 led to the ERF, which was rapidly adopted during COVID-19. Both Chan and Lam, in their report on China and Hong Kong, note a shift in paradigm from a reactive state to a proactive quest by leaders for a roadmap for future development. Such stories of resulting dynamic and adaptive leadership are a cause for optimism in others.

Evaluation

The size and scope of this volume are the book's greatest strength. The chapters are at their most powerful when read as they have been arranged. Ideally, the reader would engage with them in the order that they have been

cleverly sequenced to receive the full effect. Merely dipping into chapters here and there, as so often happens with a volume like this, may dilute the overall messages and lead to overlooking the important parallels between diverse contexts or the peculiarities of HE in some countries that a reader may not be familiar with.

What is especially striking about the book is those chapters that distil their findings into easily digestible formats and present their recommendations in helpful frameworks. In doing so, the volume can indeed act as a handbook for crisis leaders. Notable chapters in this regard are Muangasame and Wongkit, Toquero and Ramos, and Omona et al. Muangasame and Wongkit provide an insightful round-up of the fundamental elements of crisis leadership: making decisions amidst crisis, trying new practices in curriculum design, monitoring classroom experiences (including online), evaluating student performance, offering consultation sessions, providing health care for staff and students, and IT support. Toquero and Ramos's content analysis of the case of the Philippines has resulted in a conceptual taxonomy of leadership roles: gatekeeper, cultivator, incubator and networker, with the functions of each explained. Such a table could provide an extremely useful framework for those deciding on the training that needs to happen in HEIs for current and future leaders. Omona et al. diagrammatically represent the seven dimensions required for e-learning success. Again, a useful tool for leaders who understand that the pandemic revealed the need to better leverage digital learning and teaching models. Omona et al.'s diagram is particularly pertinent as the issue of accessibility and equity of online learning is one that pervades many narratives of the pandemic.

Indeed, the volume frequently raises issues of equity and accessibility in education. From the division between private and public HEIs within a national context, such as in Egypt, to the continued remnants of educational colonialism experienced in countries such as Malaysia and Ghana. Global equity is hard to achieve when some national systems receive significantly more government investment than others. Other chapters highlight the practical issues associated with accessibility. Oko, for example, makes the point that blended learning was and continues to be problematic in Papua New Guinea without paid subscriptions to platforms. Limited bandwidth means that a one-hour Zoom meeting might take almost all of an instructor's daily allowance. Such case studies give one pause for thought.

Final thoughts

Reading this volume evoked a range of emotions. As a practitioner, it is hard not to empathise with the situations the authors describe, to feel despondent at how core principles of HE are being eroded, or antipathy for managerial hierarchies, or helplessness at a lack of government support and aged infrastructures. Yet, the anxieties and concerns are frequently tempered by the more positive messages from many of the contributors. The editors themselves are keen to emphasise the story of personal and institutional resilience, which this volume presents overall and resonates with my own reflections on COVID-19.

As the editors observe, times of crises and critiques of educational practice often coincide. Yet, a crisis can be a catalyst for re-evaluation, change and regeneration for many, perhaps most significantly for Ukraine, whose infrastructure needs to be newly built. The contributions to this volume demonstrate that it should be possible to use the polycrisis to (re)build a correlative vision of Higher Education amongst staff and leaders, which places the learner at its centre, building a culture that embraces cooperation, coordinated effort and open communication. The volume examines the leadership needed to navigate crises and is thus a valuable resource for leaders, offering both an overview of the challenges, a reflective lens on our responsibilities to students, and useful recommendations for the future of education leadership.