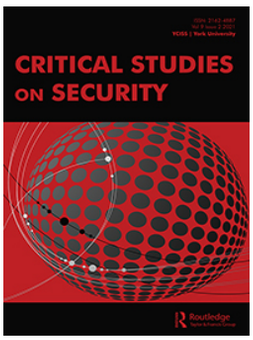

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INTERVENTION

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Ontological (in)security and Covid-19: reimagining crisis leadership in UK higher education

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Introduction

The UK, at present, is characterised by a sense of ontological insecurity. Christopher S. Browning (2018) describes this type of insecurity as 'fundamentally destabilising and challenging established worldviews, routines and core conceptions of selfhood' (2018, 337). This is not a new phenomenon but one highlighted by years of multiple and intersecting crises, the most recent of which is the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of these many crises is felt unevenly. The crises are themselves deeply gendered, racialised and classed, with a disproportionate impact on those living with disabilities and the elderly. As the latest crisis unfolded, a preoccupation with mortality rates fuelled a heightened and persistent state of anxiety, and raises questions about governance, leadership and security (Cuthbertson 2021). The UK government especially comes up short when contrasted with other states who have controlled the virus through effective leadership. Leadership practice is not 'one size fits all'. As the management of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates, effective leadership is contextual and requires detailed understanding of socio-cultural factors but also attention needs to be given to the values expressed by the leaders. For instance, compassion and empathy have been key drivers for New Zealand, whereas transparency has underscored South Korea's approach. What these cases have in common is an effective approach to crisis management that helped to contain the overall death toll.

In contrast, the impact of COVID-19 in the UK both on, and beyond, excess mortality rates has been devastating and has underscored existing inequalities. These inequalities have been exacerbated by over a decade of austerity measures and are expected to become more pronounced at least in the short term as a result of the UK's exit from the European Union (EU), Brexit. Compared to previous pandemic responses, the gendered nature of Covid-19 has been front and centre of public discourse. Yet as Harman (2021, 23) cautions, this shift in discourse has been far from transformative; rather, 'gender norms' are identified as 'a solution to health outbreaks, where gender norms and expectations as to who does care (women), who leads (men) and who counts (men and women, but not non-binary people) are maintained'.

Against this backdrop and often in parallel, UK Higher Education (HE) has had to grapple both with its own crises, including tuition fees and precarity among the workforce, and cuts in funding from international students including those from the EU. The response to the pandemic by the UK government and many HE leaders have underscored the overall precarity of the sector (Wright, Haastrup, and Guerrina 2020). While all academic-management positions must exercise leadership, not all leadership in HE is exercised formally because institutional change requires leading by influence (Mackay 2020, 5). Our focus in this intervention is on leadership and ontological (in)

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security in UK HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, its impact on students, staff and the wider communities in which Universities are located. We seek to open a space to understand the role of empathetic (even feminist) leadership in the context of an increasingly vulnerable sector of the economy (Mackay 2020). That is leadership which prioritises empathy and an ethics of care thus centring the needs of those who are most vulnerable within the University community. By shifting the focus of leadership, our analysis implicitly challenges top-down 'solutions' seeking to fix individual 'resilience' and 'wellbeing', and actively creates an environment in which the members of the organisation feel safe and cared for.

An age of ontological insecurity?

We are living through an age of crises; multiple, overlapping and intersecting (MacRae et al. 2021). Ontological insecurity has become part of the norm of living in the Global North, often designated as a zone of security. The uncertainty and unease in this space is underpinned by 'headlines of increased crime, welfare tourism, terrorism threats, and migration crises' (Kinnvall 2018, 525) and now a global pandemic that has restricted individual freedoms and movements. Many of these insecurities are magnified by the sense that the 'West', a category that is itself unstable, is under constant attack. As Kinvall further notes, 'it seems to be a world in which anxiety and insecurity have become the staple food of "our" existence, a questioning of who "we" are, what "we" believe in, and "who" is to blame.' (Kinnvall 2018, 525, see also Agius et al 2021). In the UK in recent years, austerity and Brexit have become examples of this, contributing to a racialised division between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' (Shilliam 2018). Westminster's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has done nothing to challenge such narratives. Rather, the fear and uncertainty generated by the pandemic have amplified the processes and practices rooted in the politics of exclusion and othering. See for instance, the carceral immigration system that holds asylum seekers in a detention centre in Kent. In the midst of the pandemic, rather than projecting empathy, the Immigration Minister, Chris Philp, doubled down on the 'threat narrative'. Claiming they were 'refusing to self-isolate or follow social distancing rules', he was able to divert attention from the fact that their living conditions did not allow them to do so (Grierson 2021).

Ontological insecurity, the persistent uncontrollable feelings of anxiety, is a useful lens of analysis because it brings to the fore the contentions between leaders and their populations, including in HE, and 'the often-ignored affective relations between these loosely aligned units of analysis'. (Kinnvall 2018, 250). Ontological security is 'understood broadly as a subject's capacity to uphold a stable view of its environment and thereby "go on" with everyday life' and refers to the 'practices that social beings (individuals and groups) utilize to secure their sense of Self through time' (Delehanty and Steele 2009, 524). In times of crisis, it is not just the viability of higher education (its financial security) which is challenged; what is at stake is its ontology or purpose.

UK HE and ontological insecurity in the Covid-19 Crisis

In order to understand the impact of Covid-19 on UK HE, we must look at the trajectory of the sector especially since the introduction of top-up fees in 2006 and the lift of the cap on student numbers in 2014 (Hubble and Bolton 2017). This change in policy forced HE and further education to pivot towards a neoliberal market model, with HEIs increasingly in competition for student fees. The marketisation of HE led Universities to become focused on surplus maximisation in order to secure their financial position. This drive has in turn increased pressure on HEIs to improve efficiencies by concentrating investment in large units that can scale up learning and teaching provisions. The uncertainty factored into this model thus led to an increased adoption of short-term contracts, increasing levels of precarity across the sector. The marketisation of UK HE is thus built

on ontological insecurity, insofar as it is this state of being that maximises competition within the sector. Moreover, the government's refusal to support Universities during the pandemic was not only responsible for indecisiveness over the transition to online learning, but has exacerbated the condition of ontological insecurity. The ubiquitousness of market ideology in the sector has disempowered its leadership to actually lead in a time of crises.

As all sectors of the economy sought to work around the pandemic to limit its spread, the UK government dithered on clear guidance, which had implications for Universities, their students and the communities in which they are located. This was a clear failure of leadership. The government devolved the decision about whether, after the summer, students should be physically in their place of study or study remotely. This was and remains an abdication of responsibility given the growing level of uncertainty and precarity characterising the sector. Certainly, the UK government was not alone neglecting to consider the impact of its approach to HE policy in the context of COVID-19. However, the UK failed to learn the lessons from the US where an earlier return to in-person teaching corresponded with a significant spike in Covid-19 cases and in the community. It was to be expected then that the commencement of in-person teaching during the autumn term and subsequent movement of thousands of students in the UK would ultimately lead to a surge in cases (Leidner et al. 2021).

During the third lockdown starting in January 2021, which followed the end-of-year holidays and saw the closure of schools, some HEIs rushed to take advantage of relaxed UK government guidance (Gov.uk 2021) to classify all of their staff as 'critical workers'. For university managers, this move was intended to support caregivers. However, schools, especially in England, quickly became overwhelmed by the number of requests for children to attend in person. Primary schools were thus forced to juggle requests from essential workers employed across an increasingly vast number of sectors, whist maintaining COVID restrictions on class sizes (Pidd, Weale, and Robinson 2021). This put parents working in the HE sector in an impossible position where they faced a choice between being able to perform their professional roles by taking up precious school and childcare places, or sacrifice their workday to home-schooling. Besides the real-world impact, this gap in decision making on the part of the UK government was at odds with discursive guidance from some devolved governments. In Scotland for example, where education is also devolved to an extent, the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was clear:

> "For all employers, the basic but vital message is that if your staff were working from home during the first lockdown, they should be working from home now and you should be facilitating that" (Sturgeon 2021)

This clearly excluded most, though not all, University staff from the critical worker category. Where both government representatives and University leaders were inconsistent in their message, sometimes even undermining each other, it has been at the expense of staff and students. The pandemic has therefore exposed, rather than created, the ontologically insecure state of UK HE, which in its own way is a microcosm of society.

What is key to understand the reaction of the HE sector is the impact of student fees on expectations of continuity of service. Academic and professional services staff were thus called upon to mitigate the impact of the latent anxieties of living in a pandemic by prioritising learning and teaching. This response reflects the economic rationalities of a highly commodified HE model. However, such response lacked empathy with the lived reality of both staff and students. This is partly due to the rigidity of the HE framework which is inherently gendered, racialised, ableist and classist.

As in other areas of public policy, the pandemic showed the ways in which the discursive and material construction of excellence relies on a level of access and resources that the current neoliberal regime, has not provided as default. Students have had to deal with patchy or no internet, while digitisation seems to have taken Universities unawares and publishers have taken the opportunity to increase the cost of core digital textbooks exponentially and beyond most university resources (Fazackerley 2021), these are not the fault of the pandemic; this is an outcome of

a market-based system which has ignored the basic needs of disabled and poor staff and students in forward planning. It is the opposite of empathetic and feminist intersectional leadership. It is unsurprising that as a result students' mental health is in decline (ONS 2021) on account of the pandemic, that it is ordinary staff rather than University management that must contend with its impact, and that this often unaccounted for additional workload is both gendered and racialised (Wright, Haastrup, and Guerrina 2020; see also Harman 2021).

Conclusion

The University, by which we mean its ordinary members, i.e. staff and students, are contending with multiple failures of leadership as with intersecting crises leading to a persistent state of ontological insecurity. While structural constraints premised on the market-orientated sector limit action, we nevertheless heed Fiona Mackay's call to 'challenge overly pessimistic accounts about the futility of engagement' (2020, 16). Indeed, it is how we survive and come through that pandemic that will define the future of the sector. Covid-19 is indeed a critical juncture for HE. It is necessary for the sector to find '"institutional openings", crisis tendencies, "soft spots" and contradictions on the ground' through which we can exercise agency to subvert the managerialism currency masquerading as leadership. This means moving beyond gender as a solution to the pandemic (Harman 2021), while acknowledging that the crisis is deeply gendered, racialised and classed in its impact. We make the case for re-envisioning leadership that creates space within HE in line with the values of empathy and care, which draws on a feminist ethics.

An approach that has care and empathy at its core actively seeks to dismantle hierarchies and injustices engendered by a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, where many Universities have allowed for greater flexibility around assessment submissions for students, or grade submission for teaching staff, we have seen it occur to no great detriment of the institution, and it has gone a long way to support students and colleagues. The case to continue that approach is strong. This type of flexibility is just one example that creates a space for personal and institutional growth that is not rooted in materialist norms but that seeks to evolve the original mission of the University. A seemingly minor intervention, we have seen this action directly address the sources of anxieties including social inequalities and injustice which are baked into the system. It is a beginning. However, a sustained approach to care and empathy means acknowledging the difficulties and messiness of the pandemic and creating space for the articulation of our lived experiences. For us, engendering the transformation of this system to upend existing power relations is only possible through empathetic leadership practices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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