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Reflections on *The Palgrave Handbook of Crisis Leadership in Higher Education* from a Western Balkans Higher Education Perspective

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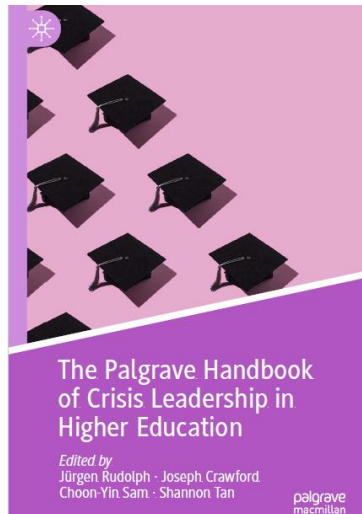
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Abstract

This is a review of *The Palgrave Handbook of Crisis Leadership in Higher Education*, by Jürgen Rudolph, Joseph Crawford, Choon-Yin Sam, Shannon Tan (Eds.) (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic; leadership; higher education; artificial intelligence;



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Going through and reading the chapters of this book, I couldn't help but think of an enormous yet delicate suspension bridge connecting two worlds: on one side, the recent past marked by the Covid-19 pandemic; and on the other, the somewhat uncertain future of higher education, shaped by demographic trends, financing challenges, and the formidable rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in the past two years. Somewhere between, around and over the pillars of this suspension bridge we discern a (poly)crisis of higher education institutions grappling to understand what and how we got through the recent past and in trying to identify ways to deal with challenges. Among these, digitalization, and particularly the artificial intelligence – stand both as blessings and challenges - a sort of panacea set on prevailing the future of the academic, scientific and, even more so, professional world.

Let us consider few facets of this reality in the Western Balkan region to illustrate the complexity in which academia found itself within a period of less than five years. It had just emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic, started to (re)adapt to the theatre instruction, strategizing ways to implement hybrid teaching and learning methods. At the same time, it faced the challenge of understanding shifting demographic trends marked by rapidly declining student numbers, while also adjusting to the growing mobility of staff and students, both incoming and outgoing. Additionally, it worked to meet increasingly stringent criteria for program accreditation and research publication. Last but not least, institutions had to contend with post-Covid inflation, which had effectively halved salaries and diminished the real value of state funding for higher education. This is where university leaderships in the region found themselves when the artificial intelligence made its roll-out in the theatres, exam and research papers, student projects, draft master theses, and even in syllabi.

These challenges of the higher education in the Western Balkan region can be summarized in one sentence of the Introduction chapter by Rudolph and colleagues (2024) where they refer to *polycrisis*, as a convergence of multiple intersecting, simultaneously occurring crises (Tooze, 2021). These crises, according to Popenici (2023), take the shape of migration, political, and energy crises, but also a crisis of liberal democracy and social, inequality and health crises that somehow feed on a common denominator of the crisis of ideas.

Related to trends in higher education in the region, Pavel Zgaga (2017) maintains that compared to most European countries, “the Bologna reforms in the Western Balkan region have been much more demanding and difficult than elsewhere in Europe due to shifting foci between

modernization, employability, and the European dimension on the one hand, and academic processes deeply marked by politicization and privatization, on the other” (Zgaga, 2017, p. 7). Not far from the polycrisis is also the finding by Lucia Brajkovic (2016) that universities in the region:

are still financed almost exclusively by the national governments, and governments are very closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the allocation of funds to higher education institutions; their rules must be followed, even in matters such as student enrollment quotas and faculty and administrators’ salaries. (Brajkovic, 2016, p. 28).

So, this rich and voluminous book – symbolic bridge with its pillars across five continents and spanning over 23 countries - in its more than 600 pages and 35 chapters could not have come at a better time – only to tell our institutional leaderships that we are not alone in this crisis and that we can learn a lot and give-and-take with and from other institutions around the globe facing similar challenges.

The handbook, as the authors call it, structured in three main sections with 35 chapters briefly described in the introductory chapter titled Higher Education in Crisis, provides a noteworthy theoretical and thematic plateau overlooking this complex endeavour in its entirety. This chapter talks about already pre-existing polycrisis and permacrisis that were only intensified and brought to the fore by the Covid 19 pandemic. This situation is explained by the author of the introductory chapter (Rudolph J., 2024, pp. 3-4) as a transformative process of higher education institutions around the world from elitist Humboldtian universities to commercialised higher education institutions. These universities, now already ‘edu-factories’, pressed by dwindling government and external funding, are found compromising their policies, values and processes to cater for their staff and students’ needs. The Introductory chapter also attempts to provide noteworthy analyses of the causes and effects and to put up for discussion various options for ways out from the defined leadership and institutional crisis.

In the second section, titled *Headwinds of Crises* (chapters 2-9) various authors discuss the challenges facing higher education institutions and systems globally. This section applies a cross-cutting thematic approach trying to recognise the key determinants and modalities the crisis leadership takes as it permeates across different countries in the world. Consequently, in these chapters we deal with important dimensions such as dehumanization, neoliberalism, artificial intelligence, environmentalism, inclusion, and transformation - all seen as litmus tests

for the crisis leadership in a context of polycrises in higher education.

Personally, more intrigued by the theme of transformative power of education, I was drawn by the chapter titled Intersectionality for Inclusion and Transformation in Higher Education by Mike Klein (2024). In that chapter the author notably states that:

Our institutions have histories of serving some and excluding or ignoring others. Until those values are examined and attendant structures, policies, and practices are reviewed in the light of intersectional analysis, we are likely to reproduce them, not through malicious ill will, but through institutional inertia that maintains notions of “who we are” and “how we do things”. Leadership can examine what we take for granted or assume as natural uncovering advantages for some identities and disadvantages for other identities. (p. 125).

The chapter on intersectionality theory helped me gain a new insight into our university leaderships' thinking and approach behind the stated institutional principles and policies about student centredness, inclusion and non-discrimination (for instance of minority communities), and equality and participation (for instance of women in institutional leadership), to mention a few. To illustrate this, two intrinsically contradicting phenomena come to the fore immediately.

Firstly, (i) in the name of student centredness, student unions (organizations) are privileged entities influencing even election of senior university and department management. However, according to numerous reports and analyses¹, individual students as a rule hesitate to ask for feedback on their exam results, teachers miss their lectures and exam sessions free of any consequences, student-teacher consultations rarely take place, cases of abuse are not reported fearing consequences, and so on (Kosova Education Centre, 2018). Secondly, referring to codes of ethics, an intersectional analytical approach serves well to explain that despite ethical codes approved and ethics committees set up in every higher education institution (HERAS, 2021), in practice, members of these committees appear to be observing not the code of ethics but a code of honour that 'honours friends not laws'. As a consequence, number of cases referred to these committees is scanty, and even those reported are usually disproved as unsubstantiated. The theory of intersectionality therefore, dealt with in this Chapter, appears useful for institutional leaderships in

¹ Over forty reports between 2017 and 2024 were published alone by ORCA, an NGO-s active in higher education, accounting for issues such as academic integrity, quality in higher education, transparency, inclusion and so on in higher education in Kosovo. Their publications are available online at <https://orca-ks.org/en/publications/>

Kosovo higher education to better understand their (often unintentional) dealings with key groups and issues within the Kosovo academic community.

Further in this section, Tan and colleagues (2024), in a separate chapter deal with the ubiquitous phenomenon of artificial intelligence in higher education in the recent years, after the roll-out of ChatGPT in 2022. The authors provide an in-depth analysis of the crises in higher education, and particularly in student assessment brought about by the AI application. In this context, one cannot but think of the higher education institutions in the Western Balkans which have in the best case been paying lip-service to the already overwhelming presence of AI in key aspects of academic life, only adding another nail to the prevailing crisis. In fact, students have long been 'improving' their performance in written exams with the help of ChatGPT while teachers, lagging far behind their students in digital literacy, have been either watching helplessly or turning a blind eye to the phenomenon. The approach by the university leaderships and staff gives the impression that they are hoping that this 'tsunami' will go away on its own! On their part, authors of the chapter suggest that students must foster digital literacy and ethical engagement with AI tools, understand academic policies, utilise AI for enhancing employability, and incorporate them as writing partners, not as a source of plagiarisable content (Tan et al., 2024; Rudolph, 2023).

This chapter reminded me of Carl Jung's (1959) theory of collective unconscious and archetypes, but also of Doctor Faust's² quest of what comes beyond the limits of human knowledge! We come to ask whether we are moving towards unfathomable knowledge and understanding of the world that surrounds us - and beyond - through artificial intelligence? Or perhaps, is our future as gloomy as Doctor Faust's or, perhaps, somewhat brighter? In fact, it probably depends on us, on how we use the powerful means at our disposal as suggested by the authors in the fragment cited above.

Before moving to the third section, I was intrigued by the chapter *Crisis Leadership in Higher Education - Ukrainian Realities* by Sedochenko and Shyyan (2024), which also serves as a useful transition from the general thematic section to the section on national case studies. Having gone through similar experiences in Kosovo during the nineties, I was curious to see how Ukrainians dealt with the ordeals posed by the war to the academic and leadership processes in higher education in Ukraine. In fact, I learnt from this chapter that to best respond to a crisis is not to focus

² See at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14591/14591-h/14591-h.htm>

only on one period regardless how overwhelming and daunting it can be, as is the case with the recent war in Ukraine. In fact, in this chapter one finds the Ukrainian higher education moving from one transition to another and one crises leadership to another. In a way, in the last 30 odd years after the fall of communism Ukrainian higher education appears to have evolved from a communist to a more liberal one, then continuing to reforms for the Bologna integration processes, further to democratization after the Maidan Protests (2014), to find itself in the total isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic, and finally plunging into the period of the recent war as if intent to serve as a practical illustration of the definition of 'polycrisis' introduced at the outset of this handbook (Tooze, 2021, p. 8). I remembered that in Kosovo during the nineties, higher education served to build a nation (Rexhaj, 2001); while authors of the Ukraine Chapter find higher education in Ukraine helping internally displaced and other students to overcome psychological maladies of the war (Sedochenko & Shyyan, 2024, p. 169).

In the third section, National Cases of Crises, the book contains 23 chapters that could be grouped by the phenomena dealt as (a) challenges imposed by the Covid pandemic and related crisis, (b) transformations that came as a result of the pandemic, and (c) lessons learned by national higher education systems and institutions in the process. Recently engaged in research on the issue of entrepreneurial university management, I found the handbook immensely useful. At this point, I remembered that the authors rightly posited at the very outset of the handbook that "the purpose of the handbook is to provide a reference work of the crisis leadership in higher education that goes beyond the Covid-19 pandemic and also includes other global challenges" (Rudolph et al., p. 9).

I can say at the end of this brief that I see this handbook, as authors call it, of immense proportions both from the geographic, thematic and scientific perspectives, inundated with most recent scientific knowledge, theories and profound analyses of the current trends in higher education globally. However, despite the 'decentralized' character and the broad geography, the handbook is largely coherent and closely knit (i) thematically, by focusing in every chapter on the way external and internal processes are reflected on the crises leadership, (ii) methodologically by applying a rigorous and meticulous approach and (iii) theoretically by referring to the most recent knowledge produced on relevant issues engaging in a thorough analysis of a diverse spectrum of phenomena in higher education seen from the perspective of the crises leadership.

In the end the Handbook can also be read as a lexicon, for ease of reading and based on reader's interest; I can safely say that in this role it

meets even the most demanding academic curiosity of diverse readership with interest in international higher education.

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