The Impact Of Turbulence On Global Higher Education During A Pandemic

Christopher J. Garretson

Robert E. Waller

Thomas J. McCormack

Columbus State University

Pamela A. Lemoine

Troy University

Michael D. Richardson

Global Tertiary Institute

Abstract: With COVID-19, global higher education is chaotic, turbulent, and changing while the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context of higher education is unstable. COVID-19 has disrupted the traditional processes in global higher education.

The 21st Century world is highly complex, unpredictable and turbulent where the interplay between order and chaos provides the opportunity for leadership. There is also abundant disorder, turbulence, unpredictability, and fragmentation. While higher education around the world is no stranger to the turbulence brought on by major social, political, and economic change, the scale and scope of COVID-19 is unprecedented in an era when global higher education is both extensively available and exceedingly internationalized. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled leaders to make high-stakes decisions under conditions of turbulence, threat, uncertainty, and time pressure to find approaches to protect their product and their people.

Keywords: Turbulence, Global higher education, COVID-19, Globalization, Leadership

I. WHAT IS TURBULENCE?

Turbulence is characterized as "a time in which events, demands, and/or persons interact in highly uncertain, changing, inconsistent, variable, unexpected or unpredictable ways sometimes described as when the "ground is in motion" (Emery & Trist. 1965, p. 26). As a result, turbulence occurs and by the time actionable knowledge is obtained the crisis event may have moved on or changed. Ansell (2017) defined turbulence as "a situation where events, demands and support interact and change in highly variable, inconsistent, unexpected or unpredictable ways" (p. 78). Turbulent events are always highly variable and lack predictability; therefore, turbulence is also experienced as chaos because it displays disorder and confusion (Lemoine, Waller, Garretson, & Richardson, 2020).

"The intensification of speed, complexity and conflict appear to be the common factors that that produce turbulence" (Ansell & Trondal, 2017, p. 2). But as Cameron, Kim and Whetten (1987) concluded: "How do public organizations . . . respond to turbulence? We discern two broad strategies:" stabilize or adapt (p. 225). A crisis represents "a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions" (Rosenthal, Charles, & t'Hart, 1989, p 22).

According to Boin and t'Hart (2010), key properties of crisis are threat, urgency, and uncertainty. A crisis occurs where an urgent response is required in an uncertain situation that threatens fundamental values or life-sustaining systems (Zhang, Welch, & Miao, 2018). Therefore, turbulence may produce surprise, volatility, rapid and shifting operational strategies, contradictory demands, and uncertainty (Ansell & Boin, 2019; Drucker, 1993). Turbulence can also be defined "as situations where events, demands, and support interact in highly variable, inconsistent, unexpected and unpredictable ways" (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2020, p. 11). What are

the most commonly impacted components of global higher education that are impacted by turbulence?

A. TURBULENCE AND GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Economic, societal and educational globalization have ushered in a new era creating the opportunity for global higher education to expand while creating turbulence for the institutions and society (Barrett, 2017). Global higher education is swept up in global marketization and the global university market is expanding with increasing speed. Global higher education is essential to the creation, exchange and implementation of knowledge creation and sharing (Jardim, Wegner, & Ladeira, 2020). In this frenzied environment turbulence creates a situation where knowledge and information are more highly prized and more highly globalized than are economic concerns, creating dynamic disequilibrium. However, global higher education is increasingly viewed as a major engine of economic development (Garretson, Lemoine, Waller, & Richardson, 2020). The elaborate interdependence and speed of global society means that the task of managing turbulent events is a far more central task for global higher education and much more is at stake in doing it well (Johnson, Veletsianos, & Seaman, 2020; Stensaker, 2015). The challenge for many institutions today involves maintaining a strong sense of identity while remaining dynamic enough to respond to turbulence as exhibited by the COVID-19 pandemic (Waller, Lemoine, Garretson, & Richardson, 2020).

B. TURBULENCE AND COVID-19

Today's world is increasingly turbulent in which problems preclude the existence of ready-made solutions (Lemoine & Richardson, 2019). Turbulence during crisis demonstrates the decision-making competences of leaders under threat, urgency, and uncertainty (Gross, 2016). Pandemic policy response involves significant tradeoffs, such as curtailing education activity to save lives (Busby, 2020). However, the unsettled science and conflicting information about COVID-19 meant critical decisions were made before leaders had a clear sense of their options (Graham & Donaldson, 2020). Therefore, leaders frequently relied on emergency declarations to make rapid, extraordinary decisions (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020). In a state of severe or extreme turbulence no opportunity for planning was available, since the need for a speedy, well-considered response was crucial (Cobbinah & Agyemang, 2020).

The pandemic was defined by international contagion and the disruption of domestic processes by an unseen threat (Saxena, 2020). COVID response came to be seen broadly in terms of rapid response to protect people, such that COVID-19 is best understood as the politics of crisis where turbulence dominates the environment (Sharma, 2020). Crises often compel leaders to make rapid decisions in lieu of long-term planning as was the case with COVID-19 (Horton, 2020). This temporal complexity often arises from multiple or shifting measures, such as when organizations must shift from routine program action to rapid response (Bigley & Roberts 2001).

Although turbulence creates an impetus for higher education institutions to stabilize their operations, it often simultaneously produces pressure for rapid and unexpected change and may exhibit high volatility (Lemoine & Richardson, 2020). To avoid mismatches with their environment, global higher education institutions were pressed to quickly adapt to these changing conditions (Lipscy, 2020). Turbulence often produces surprises for institutions that it makes planning difficult. Planning depends on an organization's capacity to anticipate the future. Because turbulence makes it difficult to anticipate the future, planning based on fixed planning parameters will often fare badly in these conditions (Moon, 2020). Turbulence negatively impacts quick decision making, but global higher education leaders responded in almost unheard-of unity in closing campuses and moving to online learning to protect people (students, faculty and staff) and their products (student learning) (Marshall, Roache, & Moody-Marshall, 2020). Resilience is about developing the ability to move the organization post crisis to a new position that is better than its state before the crisis (Izumi, Sukhwani, Surjan, & Shaw, 2020). It means to lead through the crisis with enough agility to absorb adversity and improve responsiveness to arising challenges (Breen, 2017).

C. TURBULENCE AND GLOBALIZATION

COVID-19 is a global pandemic which implies that most of the world is impacted. Globalization, a key reality in the 21st century, has already profoundly changed higher education (Waller, Lemoine, Mense, & Richardson, 2019). Globalization is viewed as the reality shaped by an increasingly integrated world economy, new information and communications technology, the emergence of an international knowledge network, and other forces beyond the control of individual global higher education institutions which creates dynamic turbulence (Hazelkorn, Coates, & McCormick, 2018). The entire world has been transformed into one complex system by globalization and continuously increased interconnectedness. Globalization with changes in the world's economy, increasing diversity, and the ubiquitous use of technology has created turbulence and uncertainty for global higher education (Lemoine, Jenkins, & Richardson, 2017), now overlaid with the pandemic.

The world is characterized by changing social, economic, and political dynamics and the constant emergence of new, disruptive requirements and challenges, particularly COVID-19 (Karalis, 2020). Nor can global higher education institutions protect themselves against turbulent problems in a global world in which streams of people, information, and commodities cross borders at an increasing pace (Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). Though global higher education institutions often perceive themselves as objects of globalization they are also its agents and create turbulence by their actions (Mense, Lemoine, Garretson, & Richardson, 2018). Yet, the pandemic has created such a turbulent world that global higher education institutions are mostly questioning their existence and future (Carpenter, Strawser, Dvorak, Forde, & Krsmanovic, 2020).

D. TURBULENCE IN FINANCIAL MARKETS

Governments across the world have steadily minimized their support for public higher education, and costs associated with gaining a degree have increased constantly over the last decade creating a turbulent environment (Bourn, 2018). Most universities are forced to adopt a restructuring model for commoditizing education to make a profit from large numbers of students, termed massification. In order to hold universities accountable despite limited governmental budgets, many nations have adopted performance-based university funding strategies for targeted programs (Umbricht, Fernandez, & Ortagus, 2017; Zerquera & Ziskin, 2020). To complicate this turbulence, citizens and bureaucrats in many countries are asking more frequently what tangible benefits the society is receiving for the tax revenues being spent on higher education (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020).

Society no longer grants privilege and financial commitment to higher education. Tax dollars are scarce or non-existent due to other demands on society (Li, 2017). Many perceive that those receiving the most from global higher education institutions should pay for the privilege which has caused dramatic increases in tuition and fees creating turbulence between students, their families and institutions (Pitman, 2016). Higher education is perceived to be very costly and the costs have been rising rapidly (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2019). Higher education is also widely seen as highly beneficial to the country's economy. For many in underserved regions of the world, higher education has come to be seen as necessary for social mobility and economic success which has increased turbulence for many global higher education institutions (DePietro, 2020). In this unstable financial market will global institutions survive the pandemic (Muftahu, 2020)? Several United States institutions have already closed and more around the world are expected to close (Friga, 2020). With massive funding going to COVID-19 relief efforts in most countries, funding for higher education is at risk (Drayton & Waltmann, 2020).

E. TURBULENCE AND LEADERSHIP

Control-fixated administrative systems must give way to trust-based systems that allow more opportunities for decentralized flexibility, innovation, and adaptation, thereby preparing public organizations to deal with turbulence (Baer & Duin, 2020). Global higher education leaders will have to learn to operate in uncertain and unpredictable circumstances and attempt to solve problems under pressure and without sufficient knowledge about cause and effect (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). The rhetoric of change also plays a significant role in contemporary leadership where each of three challenges (complexity, unpredictability and turbulence) requires a new kind of organizational leadership (Dirani, Abadi, Alizadeh, Barhate, Garza, Gunasekara, Ibrahim, & Majzun, Z. (2020).

Leaders must accept and start from the premise that the world as it is today is a complex interconnected system (Koehn, 2020' McCormack, Lemoine, & Richardson, 2020). Complex systems, particularly social ones, are characterized by dynamics that are often beyond control, making them unpredictable and highly turbulent (Bogusky-Halper, 2020). When dealing with complexity, unpredictability and turbulence leaders are constantly trying to make sense of the challenges they face and search for alternative solutions they could use (McGuinness, 2020. Decision making in complex systems as global higher education is today is not linear and may incur unpredictable risks and may result in perverse effects resulting from turbulence (Gross, 2020). Leadership in turbulent times is not for control freaks or those with a strong preference for rational decision-making based on deep analyses and protracted studies (Baer & Duin, 2020). Decision making for global higher education leaders requires quick decision making and should incorporate an agile and adaptive mindset and operational thinking when dealing with turbulence (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020).

II. IMPLICATIONS OF TURBULENCE

The challenges of globalizations have led to the great expansion of higher education in different parts of the world and change is necessary for global higher education institutions to remain viable during a global pandemic (Lewin, 2020). Global higher education confronts a future filled with challenges, risks and uncertainties. The challenge for many institutions today involves maintaining a strong sense of identity while remaining dynamic enough to respond to outside pressures such as COVID-19 (Smith, (2020). Being aware that global higher education is an increasingly turbulent environment, where uncertainty dominates can make a difference for leaders and their institutions (Evans, 2020). In the knowledge economy, the competency to manage knowledge as a key resource of a global higher education institution implies new opportunities, new challenges, new viewpoints and new learning (d'Orville, 2020). Turbulent times highlight all too quickly the limits of traditional management models for dealing with chaos and crisis particularly as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Buheji & Ahmed, 2020).

III. CONCLUSIONS

- ✓ In global higher education, turbulence, unpredictability and disruptive change are more present than ever.
- ✓ The modern world is highly unpredictable and traditional ways of solving problems are not effective.
- ✓ The COVID-19 pandemic has inadvertently created an opportunity for global higher education leaders to build resilience, tolerance to frustration, and response to turbulence.
- ✓ COVID-19 has made it evident that everything cannot be formalized into predictable, mechanistic patterns that are easy to understand.
- ✓ The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the turbulence, uncertainty and complexity across global higher education.
- ✓ As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, global higher education will likely continue to operate in a continually turbulent and uncertain environment.

- ✓ COVID-19 has made it clear that global higher education is susceptible to external dangers driven by turbulence and uncertainty.
- ✓ The COVID-19 pandemic reveals that the public sector is facing turbulent problems characterized by the emergence of inconsistent, unpredictable, and uncertain events.

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