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From the 'new' to the 'newer' normal: Organisational culture and change within Higher Education

Alan Johnston, Steven Cock, Philip Coombes, Ruby Mathew, Susie Walsh and Lynsey Walker-Smith write...

The COVID-19 pandemic can be traced back to December 2019, with the first case reported in the UK on the 31st January 2020. Subsequently, the UK went into lockdown measures on 16th March 2020. The impact on the higher education sector was unprecedented as UK Universities moved to a system of online delivery, which many were unprepared for, resulting in a large-scale shift in pedagogical practices and approaches to teaching, learning and supporting students almost overnight, as staff and students all adjusted to the 'new normal' of the pandemic.

The 'new normal' became the common term for new ways of working and the adaptations that were taking place within workplace environments to ensure that business operations could continue. As lockdowns eased, this included a considerable expansion in the notion of hybrid working in many industries, which has become the accepted term for a combination of staff members working both from home and from the office.

There is a suggestion that the concept of hybrid working is nothing new within Higher Education, as academics have often had flexibility to work from home throughout their careers. Within the paper by Mathew et al. (2024) we argue that there has however been a further shift in the normality of working life and that within Higher Education, particularly in the UK, we are moving towards a 'newer normal' as the post-Covid-19 era settles, not least because the situation within the sector still remains demanding due to the economic and political challenges currently faced.

This 'newer normal' is the reality of ongoing shifts within the higher education landscape, as organisational cultures continue to change and adapt in the post-COVID-19 era. The ever-shifting cultural paradigm within the UK higher education sector is underpinned, in part, by changing expectations regarding the potential for greater hybrid working options for staff and changing student perceptions regarding hybrid forms of teaching and learning. From a staff perspective, such developments have shifted individuals' perceptions of their roles and their levels of commitment to their career and host institution.

Such changes potentially have implications for the future of the sector. Our article highlights four key areas which we believe require further research in the UK higher education sector in the post-COVID-19 era, notably: (i) changing cultural norms and expectations; (ii) hybrid approaches to working; (iii) academic identity; and (iv) the changing psychological contract. Such research is important as the UK Higher Education sector now progresses towards an even 'newer normal'. The four areas identified above will, in all likelihood, set the context, tone, discussion and debate for the future of the academic sector alongside ever-changing expectations of key stakeholders.

We hope that consideration of those areas identified in our article (see Mathew et al., 2024) will provide a basis to encourage further discussion, debate and research into key issues of organisational culture within this context of the emerging 'newer normal' within the sector.

Reference

- Mathew, R.C., Coombes, P.H., Cock, S., Johnston, A., Walsh, S. and Walker-Smith, L. (2024) Towards a 'newer normal'? A bibliometric analysis examining organisational culture in the post-COVID-19 higher education landscape in the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Changes in Education*.

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