

**Editorial**

**Transformation in Higher Education Institutions in  
cross-cultural contexts during uncertain times**

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Under the influence of global trends such as globalization, massification, and privatization, there is general agreement that most nation states are experiencing reform pressures and transformation process on all sector of society, including higher education (Maassen & Cloete, 2007). These challenges are increasingly global and requires universities to participate in basic and applied research and to educate students who will participate at the highest levels of science and the economy in uncertain times (Altbach, 2017). In order to remain the societies cohesive and manageable, HEIs are required to absorb those massive changes, adapt quickly and be resilient (Papandreu & Shapiro, 2017).

This leads HEIs to consider new configurations of societal, organizational, and technological aspects in times of uncertainty. They have to produce knowledge and train talented people as well as adopt

technological developments (Baptista et al., 2011; Peters et al., 2009; Nowotny et al., 2001). As increasingly global actors, they promote knowledge flows and train national and international students (Horta, 2009) with a different social, economic and ethnic backgrounds (Denson & Bowman, 2013). So public policies should promote more institutional autonomy and integrity of modern HEIs, that integrate HEIs and science policies (Papandreou & Shapiro, 2017). This is particularly relevant as HEIs are becoming partners of scientific institutions and industry sectors (Sidhu et al., 2011).

Similarly, HEIs should provide students with new learning environments in order to educate them for a sustainable society (Shriberg & Harris, 2012). Additionally, HEIs are pressed to fulfil societal roles. In on-going processes of institutional change threatened by corporate-like reforms and neoliberal thinking, they still have to contribute to democratic processes, support policy decision-making, and garner societal trust (Kwiek, 2005). Another essential role of HEIs is the generation and promotion of “cultural norms” in both substantive and procedural terms (Nowotny et al., 2001) as it is associated to claims for the maintenance of a “culture of liberal rationality” (Nussbaum, 1997).

Throughout the past decades, higher education institutions have coped with substantial changes and increasing challenges when it comes to their transformation in size and complexity (Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017). Concurrently, they drive economic change through several initiatives, including the promotion of technological development in firms through employment of graduates, the creation of new firms and university-industry relationships (Baptista et al., 2011), transformative development through innovation and reforms



(Handy, 2015). Another economic challenge is caused by transformational role of international university campuses. From a Western commercial perspective, these campuses were presented as a financial source which created an imbalance between the liberal ideas of the West and the local ideas and ideologies (Chan & Emmett, 2015; Lane, 2018). Equally important, the COVID-19 crisis will certainly bring forth a re-ordering of priorities for many higher education institutions especially in terms of transformation in governance and academic leadership (Hudzik, 2020). More importantly, this global crisis has offered an opportunity to HEIs to improve the process of digitalisation proving a quick switch to blended or hybrid delivery (UCISA, 2020). This results in discussion on transforming university governance, digital governance, and sustainability governance (Wolter, 2007). All of these changes increase the pressure on academic leaders in HEIs (Jarvis, 2018). Despite the uncertainty ahead of them, they have to adapt and find new ways in the tide of internal and external forces (Lliopis, 2012) as well as a style consistent with the context of the culture of institutions, the nature of the tasks and the characteristics and expectations of their team members (CMI, 2015). Thus, the role of academic leaders is becoming increasingly complex, multifaceted and stressful (Meek et al., 2010) and the existing research clearly indicates that this requires skills and experiences that many of them lack (Wolverton et al., 2005). Consequently, academic leadership development for enhancing leadership skills in the new context is strongly emphasized (Zhu & Zayim-Kurtay, 2019) to reduce on-going challenges and straighten the institutions' mission (Evans, 2014).

With such a background, this special issue is relevant of the main scope of the REAL journal (Research in Educational Administration and Leadership) to develop the understanding of the transformation of

HEIs in uncertain times. For this, we mainly engage studies from Chinese and European universities. The choice of Chinese and European universities is based on (1) the relatively long history in European and Chinese HE, (2) common global challenges in both contexts, (3) the need of international audience for understanding the transformation of HEIs in a more in-depth vision, and (4) knowledge gaps from a diverse and international perspective regarding the transformation in uncertain times.

### **Transformation in European and Chinese Higher Education**

HEIs around the World are experiencing immense challenges both in external global needs as well as knowledge and structure required for their development and transformation. The pandemic, massification, online learning and teaching, deteriorating infrastructure, loss of key competences are some of the main drivers of change for the new decade (Moksel, 2022).

As two important players in the global higher education arena, China and Europe are not exempt from these imperatives to change. Apart from their distinctive contextual and structural characteristics, China and Europe have different strengths and weaknesses in higher education. This means that the way they experience and deal with these trends and reforms display variations (Zayim-Kurtay & Zhu, 2019).

The European higher education institutions have been transformed or transforming during the past decade. HEIs in the early nineteenth century have shifted from Humboldtian model of an elite institution giving priority to the acquisition of knowledge to the late 21<sup>st</sup> 's myth of knowledge (Baltaru & Soysal, 2018). In the past twenty years,



European HEIs most frequently focused on Bologna Process and thus increasingly became more autonomous. In addition, they took responsibility for their own future, the quality of education, financial and other resources (Floud, 2006). Moreover, the Bologna Process has offered many opportunities in creating a robust, productive and adaptable framework for European HEIs (EUA, 2020). Similarly, European Higher Education engaged in the Modernisation Agenda in order to enhance the performance and international attractiveness of Europe's higher education institutions (De Boer, Jongbloed, Benneworth, Westerheijden, & File, 2012). With the influence of globalization, European HEIs are facing 'an age of complexity' in which knowledge is not only accessible through HEIs (Smidt, 2015), but has become increasingly available through the private firms and non-academic organizations (Baltaru & Soysal, 2018). In such a context, HEIs in Europe, with full of reforms, are transformed into better managed higher quality organizations (Ramirez & Tiplic, 2014) that support the national progress, human capital and economic development (Baltaru & Soysal, 2018; de Boer et al., 2012). This, in turn, influences how HEIs are governed. Similarly, managing this transformation may present challenges for academic leaders as new forms drive the need for effective strategic planning and decision-making process (Bennett et al., 2018). In order to respond those challenges, HEIs need to improve their governance and train their leaders to run the institutions in a complex environment at the managerial, institutional, regional, and European level (Baltaru & Soysal, 2018; de Boer et al., 2012).

In Chinese HE context, education has been of great interest of Chinese government and citizens since the fourth century. During this long period, Chinese HE has experienced a wide spectrum of change in

perspectives and policies (Wu & Zha, 2018). After the 'open door' policy in 1978, China established international collaborations with other countries especially with Western countries (Liang, Dai, & Matthews, 2020). At that period, internationalization in China was largely limited to students and faculty members' being sent abroad (Huang, 2007). As a response to the arrival of a highly competitive global knowledge economy, China issued its first landmark policy in education. With this policy, Chinese government raised its awareness on the importance of HE development and internationalization (Wu & Zha, 2018) and started to send students and academic staff overseas, establish transnational programs for mutual mobility, merged international dimensions into their teaching and learning facilities (Liang et al., 2020). Among the most profound reforms, the Chinese government has implemented the '211 project' and 'the 985' programme. Besides, more Chinese universities have appeared in international rankings among the top 500 universities (Shanghai Ranking, 2017). Along with these implementations, students and academics in China have also experienced numerous changes in their educational practices. The 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), proposed by the Chinese government as a formal commitment to internationalization, could be an example of this (Lin, 2019). Within the scope of this plan, higher education institutions were recommended to improve their education quality by changing the curriculum and making pedagogical reforms. In response, many scholars (Tan & Reyes, 2016; Wei, 2018) have emphasized the importance of innovative, student-centered pedagogies that focus on fostering student independence and autonomy.



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### **The content of this Special Issue**

In this special issue, we have collected six papers dealing with various issues about transformation in European and Chinese HEIs involving organizational, societal and digital aspects as well as the perspectives, roles and challenges of academic leaders during uncertain times.

The first paper by Chu, Wang and Gao documents the strategic change of industry-featured universities in China due to marketization process. This paper comprehensively covered the transformative development stages of China University of Geosciences (CUG) and summarized features and implications of its strategic change. Referring to the Second Curve Theory, this study reveals that in the context of globalization, marketization and informatization, CUG has set about its transformative development, with guidance and support from the government. Thus, it contributes to the literature on theoretic discoveries and experiences in this field.

Focusing on transforming governance in HEIs, Sziegat uses a holistic and integrated approach to review the governance of German Universities of Excellence, especially of those selected as Universities of Excellence. The findings reported in this study illustrate further discussion on transforming university governance, digital governance, sustainability governance, and good governance for organizational effectiveness and sustainable development.

The third paper on the case study determining the reasons for dropping out of university students, Yilmaz and Sarpkaya present findings from a qualitative data collected from both students and teachers in a Turkish HEI. Specifically, the authors discuss the dropout factors related to pre-admission and after admission process. All these

factors are found to affect their adaptation process, academic integration, social integration, and organizational commitment. The research findings further reveal that the reasons for and process of the dropout are interconnected and divergent.

In the following paper, Matos and Cunha present and discuss how a European public university develops transnational campuses in China and Egypt. With a comparison of governance and pedagogical models proposed for China and Egypt, they explored different expectations of Middle Eastern and Chinese authorities. Their reflection on the transformational role of these international campus offers opportunities for training of future generation of leaders in those regions. They also analyze how business models of these different proposals influence unexpected obstacles which would be helpful in optimizing cooperation.

By drawing on the Turbulence Theory, Örüçü and Kutlugün investigate the experiences of academic staff as well as explore their perceptions on HE leadership and management during the initial phase of the COVID-19 in Turkey. This study illuminates on how leaders in HEIs could address the needs of the academic staff and the university as a whole organization during uncertain times. To achieve these ends, they suggest HE leaders to consider structural and emotional aspects of the pandemic as well as prioritize attributes, namely caring culture, trust, effective communication, and support.

Still on leadership and its development, the last paper by Dinh, Zhu and Caliskan investigates the effectiveness of leadership development program provided in a diverse context. Their survey of 101 respondents identifies the outcome assessment of leadership development program. The results present that self-growth and peer





interaction significantly contribute on leadership effectiveness while networking motivator has a nonsignificant impact. The study further implies the importance of leadership development and its potential to enhance the knowledge and skills of academic leaders due to radical changes and complexities in academic institutions.

Taken together, this special issue sheds considerable light on the transformation of university governance during uncertain conditions and the importance of academic leadership and its development in European and Chinese universities. It also provides unique studies as well as collaborative and comparative ones from an international perspective. Specifically, this issue highlights university governance systems and academic leadership in European and Chinese universities as well as broadens the perspectives on various systems, approaches, strategies or solutions on the transformation of university governance. It explains the importance of transformation of university governance for organizational effectiveness and sustainable development and presents the role of government during strategic change process. Equally important, it examines the recent changes because of COVID-19 and has raised important questions about the roles of academic leaders during uncertain times and touched upon leadership development process to enhance the knowledge and skills.

As we conclude this introductory editorial, it is noted that the space of this special issue is limited and therefore several questions still remain to be answered. Future work is needed to fully understand the transformations and new forms of university governance and academic leadership to generate theoretical and practical innovations to modernize HEIs in the World.

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