Adaptation of the Romanian Universities to the New Normal after the Pandemic Crisis

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Abstract

The paper aims to present the main challenges the Romanian universities face immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic to adapt to the new normal of political, economic, cultural, social, and environmental life. The research is based on a critical review of the literature and on extracting the hard lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic-induced changes in academic life. Dealing with qualitative data, we opted for an interpretative approach based on the Grounded Theory. Although there is no clear definition of the concept of "new normal," we may consider it the new equilibrium among all the forces that define a certain social system immediately after ending the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Adapting the universities to that new normal social, economic, political, technological, and environmental context needs a good understanding of their resilience and all the changes induced by this pandemic crisis. The analysis is performed on four main dimensions: uncertainty, complexity, organizational learning, and resilience. Finally, we shall identify the needs and practical methods for designing and implementing the adaptation strategies for each dimension.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic; complex crises; academic management; knowledge management; intellectual capital; adaptation strategies.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic appeared as an unbelievably powerful disruptive force that generated a series of interactive crises on a global scale. Initially, it was only an epidemic due to the novel coronavirus in Wuhan, province of Hubei, China, declared in December 2019 (Peeri et al., 2020; Solnit, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). But very soon, the novel coronavirus spread in many countries due to its aggressiveness and to the globalization process. The Chinese statistical reports showed that the average incubation period of this new virus was 5.2 days and that the number of infected people doubled every 7.4 days. Thus, each sick person could infect 2.2-3.8 more individuals (Zhou, 2020, p. 35). These dynamics generate a geometric progression curve that may reach a dangerous peak if the health system cannot treat the huge number of infected people with the virus. As a result of rapidly increasing the number of people infected with coronavirus, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a COVID-19 pandemic on 12 March 2020, when 125 600 confirmed cases were reported from 118 countries and regions from all over the world. WHO recommended that governments from the affected countries consider drastic measures for reducing the propagation process of the disease and flattening the epidemiological curves such that the health systems could manage this problem (Gourinchas, 2020).

Although governments took severe measures against coronavirus in many countries, we are still facing the fourth wave of this pandemic, with the new coronavirus' feature. Statistics all over the world show dramatic economic, business, scientific, educational, cultural, religious, and social consequences (Zakaria, 2020). In these conditions, many people ask about what will be after this pandemic. How will it look like the new normal for people and their countries' health, economic, educational, cultural, and social systems? Many viewpoints and models describe the new normal, but there is something that all of them have in common: changes during the COVID-19 are not reversible. The new normal will reflect a new equilibrium among all the forces shaping our social life and our economies, but it will contain residual stress. "Post-pandemic life will be different for countries, companies, and especially individuals. Even if economics and politics return to normal, human beings will not. They will have been through an unusual, difficult trial and have a sense of newfound, hard-won opportunity" (Zakaria, 2020, pp. 3-4).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the main dimensions of the new normal or the post-pandemic future and the universities' strategies to adapt to it. Thus, we may formulate the following research question:

RQ: What are the adaptation strategies of the Romanian universities for the new normal after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis?

The structure of the paper is as follows. This introductory part will be continued with a critical review of the literature focusing on this topic. Then, we shall present the methodology and discuss the findings. The paper will close with some conclusions.

Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic can be considered a *Black Swan* phenomenon because it displays all the features identified by Taleb (2008). First, it is an *outlier* because it was completely unexpected. Second, it generates *dramatic consequences* for people and the economic environment. Third, it makes *the absence of knowledge* more evident than the knowledge we may have from similar phenomena (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020; Reeves, Lang & Carlsson-Szlezak, 2020; Surico & Galeatti, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is considered one of the three major global shocks in the last two decades: 9/11, the crash of 2008, and the coronavirus. "It may be the biggest of them all, and it is certainly the most global. What began as a healthcare problem in China soon became a global pandemic. But that was only the start. The medical crisis prompted a simultaneous lockdown of all business across the globe, resulting in a Great Paralysis, the cessation of economics itself. By some measures, the economic damage from this pandemic already rivals that of Great Depression" (Zakaria, 2020, p. 10).

The *absence of knowledge* (Spender, 1996, 2014) shows, on the one hand, the limitation of our understanding of complex phenomena, and on the other hand, it creates difficulties in finding solutions for exit the crisis. The absence of knowledge shows the gap between what we know at a given moment and the level of knowledge we should have to provide solutions. This gap of knowledge leads to increasing the *uncertainty* of managers in making decisions, which is a real difficulty. The whole

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education in schools and universities is based today on developing scientific thinking, but science is based on deterministic laws, leading to deterministic thinking (Bratianu & Vasilache, 2009, 2010). Deterministic thinking implies that all events are certain and we have all necessary knowledge about them, such that decision-making involves no risks. Although the whole education is designed on the idea of certainty, in real-life, certainty represents only a limited range of events and contexts. Real-life contains mostly uncertain events whose appearance is defined by probabilities. "We are now living in a world which combines known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns, and the growth of the last category presents leaders with a new and littlechartered management challenge" (Syrett & Devine, 2012, p. 2). Understanding uncertainty implies switching from deterministic thinking to probabilistic thinking, a way of considering that life and the social context are full of probable events. We should develop the competence of evaluating their appearance probability and the associated risks. Uncertainty is always associated with risks with different impacts (Hastie & Dawes, 2001; Lindley, 2006), and we have to learn to live with them. There is no way of eliminating risks from real life and real business activity. In this case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the absence of knowledge related to the nature of the virus and how to treat infected people and to produce as fast as possible an effective vaccine created a state of fear and stress both in the medical staff and in the population all over the world (Aum, Lee, & Shin, 2020; Chang & Velasco, 2020; Greenberg et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic showed a high degree of *complexity* which made its understanding and problem-solving very difficult. The novel coronavirus appeared in Wuhan, Province of Hubei, China, and very soon generated an epidemic scaled up to the whole region and country. As a result of globalization, the Chinese epidemic of the novel coronavirus spread in many countries and produces a huge number of infections (Baldwin & Di Mauro, 2020; Guang, Chen, & Zhang, 2020). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, as the number of infected people increased dramatically up to about 200,000 cases across 160 countries (Spinelli & Pellino, 2020). To keep the pandemic under control, governments from all over the world were requested by WHO to introduce drastic measures to flatten the epidemiological curve. Many governments declared an emergency state for a limited period that is usually up to 30 days. During such an emergency state, there are a series of restrictions concerning the mobility of people, traveling abroad, closing restaurants and hotels, closing theatres, sports clubs, schools, and universities. Companies were requested to organize new working programs focusing on teleworking, and schools and universities had to switch from face-to-face teaching and learning to online systems. All of these restrictions had a severe impact on economic activity (Coibion, Gorodnichenko & Weber, 2020; McKibbin & Fernando, 2020; Surico & Galeatti, 2020). "The recession, so to speak, is a necessary public health measure. Keeping workers away from work and consumers away from consumption both reduce economic activity" (Baldwin & Di Mauro, 2020, p. 8).

The health system crisis, due to COVID-19, induced crises in all the other systems of social life from any country. The economic system suffered drastically because of the lockdown imposed by the government and the closing down of many businesses, especially those from tourism. Many people lost their jobs which impacted the lives of their families. For instance, in the U.S., "the employment-to-population ratio (the

fraction of the adult population reporting that they had a paid job) has declined by about 7.5 percentage points. With an adult U.S. population of 260 million, this corresponds to nearly 20 million jobs lost as of 8 April 2020" (Coibin, Gorodnichenko & Weber, 2020, p. 3). At the same time, introducing severe restrictions for people's mobility and traveling had significantly led to a decrease in market demand, which had as a final result a reduction in the production of goods and services (Alvarez, Argente, & Lippi, 2020; Delaporte & Pena, 2020; Hasanat et al., 2020).

Uncertainty and all the changes induced in economics, business, education, culture, sports, and other human activities imposed a series of changes in people's behavior. These changes happened as a result of a complex process of *unlearning and learning* behavior rules and values. For instance, introducing the social distance and wearing a mask in public places changed completely people's behavior. "Emotions, personal experiences, beliefs, and values are dominated by the unconscious cognitive processes, and thus it is very hard to understand the psychology of decision-making adequately, especially in time of crises, when the irrational aspects are more important than the rational ones" (Bratianu, 2020a, p. 418).

The concept of *new normal* is closely related to that of *resilience* that reflects an organization's capacity to recover after a crisis (Allen et al., 2011; Reinmoeller & van Baardwijk, 2005). The concept of *resilience* comes from physics, where it measures the ability of an elastic material to absorb energy and change its configuration as a result of the action of an external force and then recover its initial configuration by releasing the stored energy when the force stops acting on it. Extending its semantic to an organization, we may consider its absorption capacity of change during some external perturbations without changing its basic structure and configuration. According to Walker et al. (2002), resilience "is the potential of a system to remain in a particular configuration and to maintain its feedbacks and functions, and involves the ability of the system to reorganize following disturbance-driven change. In an operational sense, resilience needs to be considered in a specific context" (p. 6). This COVID-19 pandemic complex crisis shows how important resilience management becomes for organizations because that will determine their capacity to recover after this pandemic crisis and to adapt to the new normal.

Methodology

The present paper is based on qualitative research. We performed a systematic review of the topic investigating the most important databases: Web of Science, SCOPUS, and Google Scholar. We considered Google Scholar because it is the largest database, and there are many significant papers published on the present topic in international journals which have not yet been indexed in SCOPUS or Web of Science. We used the main ideas from the Grounded Theory, looking for a building up the meaning of the concept of new normal, and then trying to understand how the Romanian universities can adapt to it. Thus, we studied in detail the most representative papers dealing with the present topic, and we used an interpretative approach to identify and discuss the adaptation strategies of the Romanian universities to the new normal.

Results and discussion

From the critical review of the literature, we identified four main dimensions of the new normal: uncertainty, complexity, learning and unlearning, and resilience. We will now consider each of these dimensions and analyze how the Romanian universities design strategies for adapting to the post-pandemic environment. Figure 1 shows the four dimensions of the new normal.

Uncertainty. It is essential to understand how uncertainty is conditioning any decision-making process and how we have to live with it. Uncertainty is part of our existence (Kahneman, 2011; Taleb, 2007) and the COVID-19 pandemic increased the level of uncertainty due to the absence of knowledge related to the new coronavirus, its efficient treatment, the evolution of the pandemic, and how to produce a necessary vaccine (Gounrinchas, 2020; Peeri et al., 2020; Solnit, 2020). That led to many wrong decisions taken by governments and to debatable reactions coming from the population.



Figure 1. The main dimensions of the new normal

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented shock in education when the governments decided in many countries, including Romania, to close all the schools and universities. They were requested to switch from face-to-face and on-campus teaching and learning into the online system. In Romania, almost the whole school year 2020-2021 was declared online. That was a dramatic decision because schools and universities were not prepared for online instruction. Moreover, many schools did not have an internet connection, and many children did not have access to a computer.

Universities in Romania were in a better position than schools because they are situated in cities with access to the internet, and they disposed of a minimum information technology structure. Some of them developed their online platforms, but they were used only as complementary support for teaching in an offline regime. However, many students and professors had no experience in using these software platforms for teaching and learning. Thus, the absence of knowledge for using online platforms for teaching and learning created in the beginning a lot of confusion and delay in starting the academic year 2020-2021 in good conditions. In such crazy times (Bratianu, 2020b), a decisive role in creating a fast and adequate reaction belongs to

the university governance (Bratianu & Pinzaru, 2015; Carnegie & Tuck, 2010; Christopher, 2012) that is a nonlinear integrator of the organizational intellectual capital (Bratianu, 2013). To cope with increased uncertainty, university governance should develop knowledge strategies, especially emergent knowledge strategies, and increase the university's knowledge entropy (Bratianu, 2019; Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2021). It is a remarkable fact that at the Ministry of Education level, the decision-makers already started to think in terms of possible scenarios, which introduces probabilistic thinking in the decision-making process.

Complexity. The COVID-19 pandemic generated crises in all the vital systems of social life. First, it started a crisis in the health system, and then it induced crises in the economic system, educational system, cultural system, and many others. This interconnectivity between different systems and countries is a primary characteristic of the complex phenomena (Baldwin & di Mauro, 2020; Bratianu, 2020a; Gleick, 2008; Jackson, 2019). Also, these epidemiological phenomena have a nonlinear evolution, making their understanding much more difficult than those simple causal phenomena based on the logic *If A, then B*. As Zakaria (2020) shows, the butterfly metaphor used frequently to describe the nonlinear phenomena can be applied very well to the COVID-19 pandemic: "And in the case of this pandemic, we now all recognize how a tiny viral particle, circulating in a bat in China's Hubei Province, has brought the world to its knees – a real-life example of the butterfly effect, whereby the flapping of a butterfly's wing might influence weather patterns on the other side of the world. Small changes can have big consequences" (Zakaria, 2020, p. 11).

Like in the other European universities, academic life in Romanian universities is based on linear thinking and decision-making (Bratianu & Vasilache, 2009, 2010). Linear metrics are used almost in any aspect of university management due to linear logic included in the specific legislation and of general education in our schools and universities that is dominantly linear. Thus, for the adaptation at the new normal, legislation and the university governance should include nonlinearity and systems thinking. Otherwise, there is no way of dealing efficiently with nonlinear phenomena and economic crises.

Learning and Unlearning. Universities are institutions dedicated to learning and knowledge creation. However, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated through all the restrictions imposed by governments that unlearning becomes a necessary phase before learning new rules and changing people's behavior. Unlearning can be done naturally as a result of forgetting, but it can be done consciously as a result of the pressure coming from the new social and economic changes (Cegarra-Navarro & Wensley, 2019). The most dramatic change that imposed unlearning and then learning new rules was closing the universities and the necessity of switching from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. Many students and professors never used online platforms before, or they used only their offline possibilities. In such situations, the successful strategy was to develop intergenerational knowledge transfer and learning (Bratianu et al., 2011; Lefter et al., 2011).

Another successful strategy is to develop organizational learning such that the whole university becomes a learning organization. Although universities are knowledge-

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intensive organizations and dedicated to teaching and learning, they are not by definition learning organizations. They have to create strategies for increasing organizational learning and feedback loops, and they should have the capacity to develop second loops for improving the whole functioning of the university (Argote, 2013; Senge, 1999). Such a second loop could be that of implementing a *blending learning system* that creates a balance between face-to-face and online learning (Toquero, 2020). However, there is also a tendency of focusing mostly on online education that leads to the uberfication of the university by using the business models developed in the last decade by the sharing economy (Le Grange, 2020).

Resilience. Adaptation of any organization to the new normal after the COVID-19 pandemic implies good resilience (Walker et al., 2020). Universities are resilient organizations due to their social mission and their solid structure. However, disruptive phenomena like the COVID-19 pandemic may damage their performance and even functional structure. University governance should consider specific strategies to increase university resilience. These strategies focus on increasing the university's intellectual capacity and developing resilience management integrated into the general academic management (Bratianu, 2014; Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2017).

Conclusions and limitations

We don't know when the COVID-19 pandemic will be ended, but we have to think about what will be after it and how organizations will adapt to the new normal. All the changes produced during this pandemic are irreversible, and even if people expect to come back to normal life, it will not be the normal situation existing before the pandemic but a new normal that incorporates some of the effects of these irreversible changes. The focus of the present paper is on the strategies needed by universities to adapt to the new normal. However, nobody can answer how the new normal will manifest, but it is possible to identify some of its fundamental dimensions and then think about the universities' adaptation strategies.

The paper is based on a systematic literature review and on interpreting the most significant ideas identified. Thus, the main dimensions which can characterize the new normal are uncertainty, complexity, learning and unlearning, and resilience. Uncertainty is created by the absence of knowledge about the future and the consequences of this pandemic. Uncertainty makes decisions much more difficult than the situation described by complete knowledge and certainty. Unfortunately, education in Europe is based dominantly on deterministic thinking that considers events to be certain and our knowledge fully rational. Thus, changing the way of thinking by considering incomplete knowledge and uncertain events is a difficult task. Nevertheless, university leaders can decrease the level of uncertainty by developing knowledge strategies and especially emergent knowledge strategies.

Complexity needs to develop nonlinear and systems thinking to understand phenomena like this pandemic. Nonlinearity and systems thinking should also be introduced in the academic curriculum, especially for economics, business, and management students. Otherwise, it will be really very difficult to understand how small changes can generate dramatic consequences, like the case of the novel coronavirus. The COVID-19 pandemic started as a health problem in Wuhan, China, and soon became a global phenomenon with unconceivable economic consequences. To understand such phenomena and find adequate solutions, people need to have a well-defined nonlinear component of their mindset.

The restrictions imposed by governments in many countries concerning mobility, travel, and working requested a hard process of unlearning and learning new rules. Thus, learning and unlearning should be considered together in dynamics which has not so far been well-understood. The best strategy to deal with these new dynamics is developing intergenerational learning and implementing knowledge management systems within universities. Finally, universities should develop resilience management such that they will be able to adapt to the new normal in good conditions and with reduced residual stress.

The limitations of the present research come from the fact that it is a conceptual paper based on a systematic review and a limited number of papers.

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