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Pedagogic Innovation in the Post-Pandemic University: A Vicious or Virtuous Cycle?

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper explores the dynamic tensions between innovation and compliance in UK higher education institutions (HEIs), framed within the broader societal challenge of adapting to post-pandemic realities. Through a qualitative analysis, we identify a pervasive gap between the strategic aspirations of HEIs to foster innovative educational strategies and the actual experiences of academics, who encounter significant structural and cultural barriers. This conflict highlights a critical societal issue: the struggle to balance the need for rigorous standards and the imperative for pedagogical creativity and flexibility that can respond to evolving educational demands. We propose a redefinition of compliance to better support innovation, advocating for an institutional culture that promotes risk-taking and trust. This approach aligns with the need to address society's wicked issues by enabling HEIs to be more responsive and adaptable, enhancing their role in driving societal progress and preparing students to navigate and shape an increasingly complex world.

Full paper

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated significant transformations in Higher Education (HE), driving universities towards an entrepreneurial model amidst increasing pressures on academic integrity and financial sustainability. This shift has intensified the existing tensions between innovative educational strategies and traditional university structures, spotlighting the critical balance between managerialism and academic freedom. As universities navigate these challenges, the sector faces potential obsolescence without meaningful adaptation, underscoring the need for a sustainable and inclusive future. The pandemic has not only highlighted vulnerabilities but also opportunities for substantial reform in HE's engagement with society's wicked issues.

LITERATURE

Innovation in HE is widely regarded as crucial for addressing systemic challenges and ensuring institutional adaptability and success. Originating from Schumpeter's concept of "creative destruction," the trajectory of innovation spans invention, diffusion, and ultimately widespread acceptance (Schumpeter, 1942; Christensen et al., 2015). In the educational sector, pedagogical innovations aim for a transformative impact on practices, yet they often face resistance due to entrenched institutional structures and regulatory environments (Walder, 2017; Havelock, 1970). The literature highlights the dual role of individual initiative and institutional support in fostering innovation (Redmond, 2003; Brankovic & Cantwell, 2022). Successful innovation requires not only the generation of new ideas (Walder, 2017) but also an environment conducive to their acceptance and implementation. We emphasize the importance of institutional flexibility and cultural receptiveness in overcoming the inertia that can hinder educational innovation (Clark, 1983; Mampaey, 2018). Our review of the literature informed our initial framework, which subsequently guided our study:
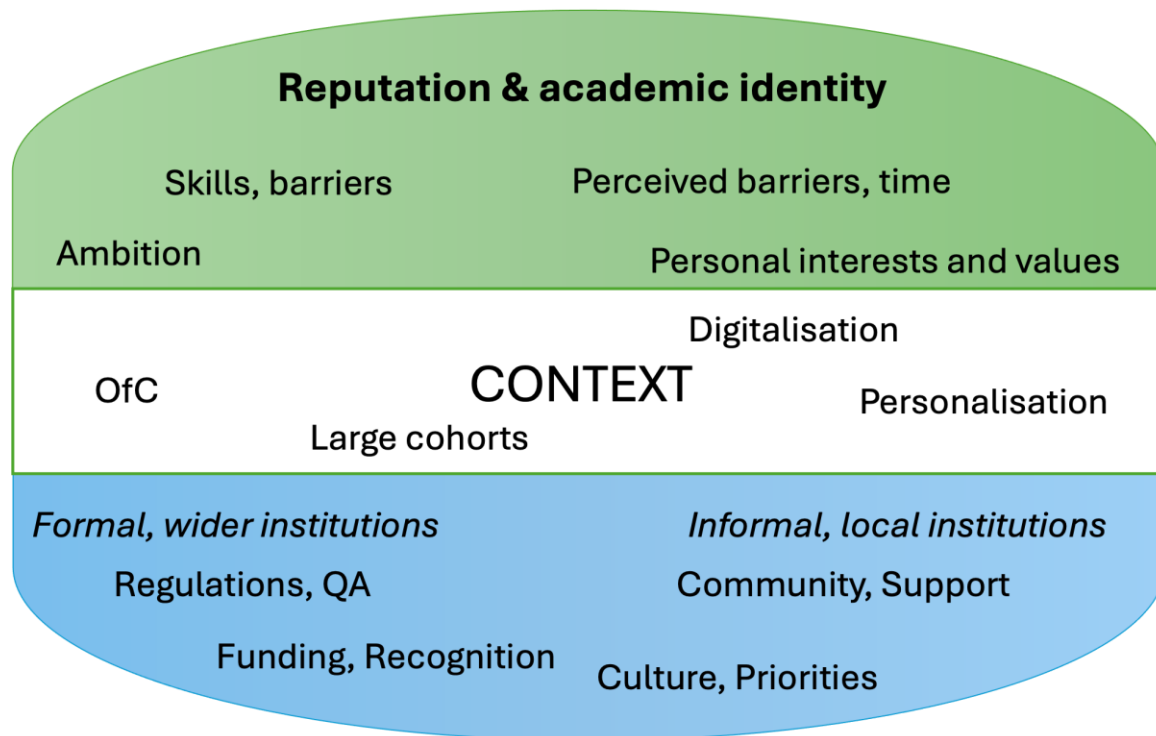

Figure 1 – Initial Framework

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examined the alignment between educators' experiences and university practices concerning pedagogical innovations in UK HE institutions post-pandemic. We utilised purposive sampling to recruit a population illustrated in Table 1.

Sample	30

Overall population	Educator (53%)
	Senior Leader (33%)
	TEL (13%)
University	Russell Group (37%)
	Post-92 (63%)
Role	Assistant (25%)
	Associate (69%)
	Full (6%) professor level
Gender	53% male
	47% female
Contract	Research & Teaching (46%)
	Teaching Scholarship (33%)
	N/A (20%)
Faculty	Veterinary, Medicine or Dentistry (13%)
	Business and Law (43%)
	Sciences (13%)
	Social Sciences (23%)
	no alignment (6%)

Table 1: Overall Sample

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Our findings reveal a significant gap between institutional declarations of commitment to educational innovation and the actual experiences of educators. Despite universities' strategic claims of fostering a culture of innovation, educators face substantial structural and cultural barriers that hinder their ability to implement new pedagogical approaches effectively.

Structural Rigidity and Personal Resistance

Participants reported a lack of institutional agility and flexibility, critical for fostering innovation. The hierarchical structures within universities, particularly noted in the context of business schools teaching flat management theories, were paradoxically rigid. Educators expressed frustration over the prevalent risk-averse attitudes and resistance to change among colleagues, which often led to the perpetuation of traditional teaching methods despite the strategic narrative promoting innovation.

Role Dynamics and Contractual Challenges

The study highlighted role-specific challenges in adopting innovation. Educators on Teaching & Scholarship (T&S) contracts felt a responsibility and external expectation to lead pedagogical innovation. However, their efforts were sometimes viewed with scepticism by Research & Scholarship (R&S) peers, who prioritized research over teaching, exacerbating inter-role tensions. This dynamic was further complicated by the types of employment contracts, with those on T&S contracts facing more pressure to innovate within a conservative framework that often prioritizes traditional metrics over pedagogical creativity.

Empowerment versus Compliance

While some universities are beginning to recognize the need for empowering educators, actual practice often falls short. The formal recognition and encouragement for innovation were frequently overshadowed by a compliance-driven culture that emphasized standardization and risk aversion, stifling genuine innovative efforts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study underscores the tension between institutional compliance, driven by external regulations and internal managerialism, and the need for pedagogical innovation in HE. Compliance often encourages a risk-averse, standardised approach, perpetuating a 'vicious cycle' that stifles creativity and impedes educational innovation. Conversely, a 'virtuous cycle'—where trust, risk-taking, and support for innovation prevail—enhances educational experiences and outcomes, indicating that "optimal" performance from a pedagogical standpoint diverges markedly from traditional compliance metrics. To reconcile these conflicting needs, HEIs must redefine compliance to support flexibility and innovation, prioritizing environments that empower educators to experiment and innovate. This shift could bridge the gap between regulatory requirements and the dynamic capabilities required for academic excellence, fostering institutions that are both compliant and creatively responsive to the challenges of contemporary HE. Moreover, we feel that it links to the issue of whether HE is a place for activism and resistance.

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