

Rethinking Resilience: Institutional Pathways through Disruption in Higher Education

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper develops a typology of organizational resilience in higher education institutions (HEIs) by examining how they navigated digital transformation before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Duchek's (2020) three-phase model of resilience, complemented by process theory (Langley et al., 2013) and organizational creativity (Fortwengel et al., 2017), we analyze four case studies from Germany, Portugal, Canada, and Kenya. Through 27 interviews with teaching and administrative staff, we explore how HEIs define and enact resilience and how creative practices contribute to their responses. Our findings reveal that especially organizational identity and regional context strongly shape how resilience is understood and practiced. Based on our cases, we identify four distinct types of resilience: Digital-Native Resilience, Bouncing-Back Resilience, Faculty-Led Resilience, Infrastructure-Driven Resilience. This study highlights the plurality of pathways through which HEIs respond to disruption, influenced by different internal and external factors shaping its unique form of resilience.

Full paper

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced universities worldwide to transition to digital teaching. This global disruption renewed interest in the concept of resilience, initially framed as the ability to recover from crisis (Boin & van Eeten, 2013), but increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic, processual capacity for adaptation and learning (Duchek, 2020). Simultaneously, the role of creativity in navigating uncertainty gained scholarly attention (Moluayonge, 2020). Yet, the interplay between resilience, creativity, and digital transformation in higher education remains underexplored. This paper investigates how resilience manifests in higher education institutions (HEIs) during periods of disruption and how creative practices contribute to institutional responses.

Theoretical Framework

We base our theoretical framework on Duchek's (2020) three-stage model of organizational resilience: anticipation, coping, and adaptation. We expand this with insights from organizational creativity research (Fortwengel et al., 2017), which sees creativity as an emergent, socially embedded practice, and from process theory (Langley et al., 2013), which emphasizes the temporal and situated nature of organizational change. Resilience is thus framed as an evolving process of organizational sense-making, experimentation, and selective continuity. Creativity plays a pivotal role within this process, particularly when institutional structures are rigid or slow to adapt.

Methodology

Using a comparative case study approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), we examine four HEIs in Portugal, Germany, Canada, and Kenya. These cases were selected to reflect diverse levels of digital readiness, institutional profiles, and regional conditions. Our dataset comprises 27 semi-structured interviews with teaching and administrative staff conducted in summer 2024. We coded the data for expressions of resilience across Duchek's three temporal phases, as well as for creative practices and other emergent themes.

Findings: A Typology of Institutional Resilience

Across all cases and temporal phases, we identified different forms of resilience linked to creative practices. As further important factors shaping these forms of resilience, organisational identity and regional context emerged within our findings. These insights led to our case based typology on organisational resilience:

Digital-Native Resilience (Portugal): The institution's long-standing identity as an open university with digital infrastructure allowed for continuity during the pandemic. Resilience was expressed mainly through stability, though transformation occurred as exams needed to be digitized. Creative practices emerged primarily at the student level (e.g., self-organized online contests), while formal structures remained largely unchanged.

Bouncing-Back Resilience (Germany): A highly traditional HEI treated digitalization as a temporary workaround. Strong identification with in-person teaching limited the adaptation. Notably, digital Resistance was framed as resilience, especially when it served to protect pedagogical quality and professional identity. Creativity remained analog and was perceived as hindered by digital formats.

Faculty-Led Resilience (Canada): A fully online program emerged from faculty initiative within a conservative, campus-based university. The faculty drove innovation despite limited institutional support. Creativity functioned as a coping mechanism and as a catalyst for structural change, highlighting the agency of individuals in navigating institutional inertia.

Infrastructure-Driven Resilience (Kenya): The crisis accelerated digital investment and institutional reform. Resilience was fostered through infrastructural upgrades and the revitalization of underused EdTech centers. Leadership actively encouraged creative practices linking digital pedagogy and entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, structural limitations (e.g., unreliable internet) continued to constrain adaptation.

Discussion

These four types illustrate that resilience in HEIs is not a fixed capacity, but rather emerges through a dynamic interplay of internal and external factors. Instead of viewing resilience as mere technocratic adaptation to disruption, it appears as a negotiated process between continuity and change, shaped especially by creative practices, organizational identity, and regional context. This perspective also challenges the assumption that resistance is the opposite of resilience. In some cases, resistance to digital transformation can function as a strategic effort to preserve educational quality, institutional autonomy, or pedagogical coherence. However, such tensions, often rooted in fears of losing core academic values, should be critically addressed within institutions to enable constructive reflection and inclusive change processes.

Conclusion

Our typology highlights the plurality of ways in which HEIs respond to disruption. Responses range from stabilizing continuity to fostering innovation, and even to actively resisting imposed digital change. All of these reflect deeper negotiations about institutional values, identity, and future direction. Recognizing creativity as an embedded, often informal, driver of resilience and understanding resistance not automatically as backwardness but as a meaningful stance opens up space for more reflective, inclusive, and context-sensitive forms of institutional transformation. Ultimately, for adaptation to be sustainable, creativity must be institutionally supported, not left to individual initiative alone. These insights offer practical implications for policymakers and university leaders who seek to foster value-driven change beyond short-term crisis management.