Framing the Digital Turn: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Resilience and EdTech Narratives in Higher Education

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The discourse surrounding educational technology in universities has intensified during periods of global disruption, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper offers a critical examination of how digital technologies in higher education have been framed around the terms of crisis and resilience. Drawing on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (1993), we examine 68 publicly available documents (2019–2023) from university associations, policymakers, and think tanks in Germany and internationally. Our findings reveal five major discursive strands: acceleration of digitalization, innovation in teaching, cross-sector collaboration, exposure of structural problems, and emphasis on effort and hardship. These strands intersect and compete, highlighting how "crisis talk" is used to legitimize action, shift responsibility, and stabilize particular visions of resilient universities. This study contributes to understanding how HEIs are positioned as societal actors and how crisis narratives influence digital governance in higher education.

Full paper

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, widely described as an exceptional crisis, may ultimately be understood as one among many disruptions facing higher education. Yet its perceived exceptionality has been strategically invoked to justify calls for how higher education institutions need to change. As universities continue to offer spaces for education, expertise and encounter while facing global uncertainty, digital developments, and societal expectations, a central question emerges: What remains from the pandemic experience and how is it being interpreted and mobilised in public debates?

Despite a growing body of research on the impact of the pandemic on higher education and the role of EdTech, there remains limited understanding of how the pandemic has been constructed and legitimised as a crisis in public discourse. As Clark (2024) argues, the

post-pandemic prominence of EdTech not only reflects practical utility but is embedded in an ongoing discursive effort. In the German context, this has prompted new discursive orientations around care, responsibility, and institutional values (Buschkamp & Seidenschnur, 2023). This paper addresses these dynamics by analyzing how key actors have framed the pandemic, educational technology, and resilience. We ask how COVID-19 has been discursively staged as a crisis and what forms of responsibility are thereby produced and reinforced.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

We draw on Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (1993), which conceptualizes language as a form of social practice embedded in broader structures of power and meaning. Our dataset comprises 68 publicly available documents published between 2019 and 2023, including statements from university associations, policy briefs, think tank reports, and commentaries. The time frame was chosen to capture discourses before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic and to delineate a period in which controversial issues were actively debated within the higher education community. The selection focused on texts referencing digital teaching, educational technology, and institutional resilience. Documents were identified through keyword searches and a site-ation pearl growing strategy (Ramer, 2005), ensuring thematic coherence and contextual diversity.

Findings: Five Discursive Strands

Our analysis reveals five recurring discursive strands that shape the construction of resilience and digitalization in higher education:

1. Crisis accelerates digitalisation: The pandemic is portrayed as a catalyst for change that accelerates digitalisation efforts in the higher education sector as a whole.

2. Crisis leads to innovation: The pandemic is depicted as an opportunity to develop new teaching and learning methods.

3. Crisis fosters collaboration: The pandemic leads to the encouragement of collaboration across boundaries.

4. Crisis points to problems: The pandemic highlights existing structural problems and points to resistance or fatigue .

5. Crisis demands effort: The pandemic is used to stress the effort and hardship that universities, staff and students went through

These strands do not emerge in isolation. Rather, they overlap, intersect and compete. Together, they reflect an ongoing discursive negotiation of what constitutes a "resilient university" and who bears responsibility for its realization.

Discussion: Knowledge Governance and the Politics of Framing

The findings reveal the discursive construction of universities as resilient institutions tasked with addressing global challenges, supporting student development, and ensuring digital innovation. Universities are positioned as bridges between individual and societal resilience, simultaneously developing students' capacities and responding to political and infrastructural demands. This accumulation of responsibilities aligns with Macheridis and Paulsson's (2021) observation that "HEIs are held accountable by many different forums, partly due to globalization, partly due to the marketization of HE" (p. 92f).

Resilience emerges not as a neutral descriptor, but as a strategic framing embedded in expectations. "Crisis talk" legitimizes interventions, redirects responsibility, and stabilizes particular policy trajectories. For example, celebratory narratives of innovation often obscure structural inequalities, such as digital infrastructure gaps or precarious academic labor. At the same time, the language of resilience tends to individualize responsibility, prioritizing adaptability and innovation while backgrounding systemic conditions and institutional constraints.

Conclusion

This study contributes to ongoing debates on the future of higher education by foregrounding the communicative dimensions of crisis and transformation. Rather than treating digital change as a purely technical challenge, we show how it is embedded in powerful narratives of legitimacy, identity, and strategic positioning. By tracing the discursive construction of crisis-related documents, we argue that higher education governance must be understood as a communicative practice where digital futures are not only decided, but talked into being. Acknowledging this discursive foundation is essential for critically engaging with the politics of digital transformation and for fostering truly reflective, inclusive, and resilient HEIs.