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Higher Education Leadership Challenges and Responses to COVID-19 in China and the UK: A Need for Ethical, Collaborative and Compassionate Leadership

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought ongoing and profound disruptions across the global higher education sector. Higher education leaders worldwide have been confronted with having to rapidly transition to emergency remote teaching, implement campus lockdowns and safeguard the health and safety of students and staff. Notwithstanding the challenges posed by such far-reaching disruptions, the pandemic has also presented a unique opportunity for us to review and reflect on how higher education institutions (HEIs) should be led through a crisis.

As doctoral students researching higher education in the UK and China, we have witnessed a range of challenges that have emerged within the higher education systems in both countries. During the first few years of the pandemic, the Chinese government implemented stringent measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus, including lockdowns, travel restrictions, a grid management system aimed at controlling the pandemic at the community level and the *dynamic zero-COVID (dongtai qingling)* strategy, which was implemented later in 2021 to minimize outbreaks through regular testing and early detection. Chinese HEIs were among the first in the world to shut down in response to the pandemic, adhering strictly to the governmental guidelines on prevention and control measures. Other countries adopted a more nuanced strategy to *live with* the virus (Stokoe et al. 2022). Whilst the UK government initially adopted a herd immunity approach with less stringent regulations, it provided universities and schools with guidance on campus safety protocols and social distancing measures. The UK higher education sector responded to the pandemic by, among other measures, implementing mass asymptomatic testing programmes and transitioning to online teaching delivery. In both higher education systems, the pivot to the remote provision of teaching and learning was unplanned and largely improvised.

As researchers who have studied in both higher education systems, we aim to review the challenges and responses of higher education leaders in these two contexts during the pandemic and identify insights that can be applied more broadly across contexts in the post-pandemic world.

Higher Education Leadership in China and the UK

The notion of leadership can take on different meanings across different higher education contexts. There are different types of leadership, including academic, research and community leadership. The scope of this chapter is limited to leaders who hold the most senior administrative roles and are responsible for the daily operations and management of their HEIs in Mainland China (hereafter referred to simply as *China* for the purpose of this chapter) and the UK.

In China, higher education leadership positions are typically divided between a party secretary and a president; in this chapter, we will primarily focus on the latter role. This dual leadership governance is a distinctive feature of China's higher education system, with the party secretary heading the institution's party committee and being responsible for higher-level decision-making, whilst the president administers the handling and implementation of these decisions. The party secretary ensures that institutional operations align with the party's ideology and reports directly to their superiors within the party's political system. Presidents, on the other hand, are expected to work closely with the party committee, and some even assume the roles of both 'politicians and educators' (Shen, Huang, and Fan 2020, 2098). This typical structure of shared leadership in Chinese HEIs illustrates the subordination of these institutions to the party's control and the 'politicisation of universities-within-the-state' (Han and Xu 2019, 932). In addition, presidents of public universities in China are typically appointed and dismissed by the government¹ rather than governing boards, as is the case in the UK. Whilst China's higher education sector has been going through restructuring along the lines of privatization and marketization (Mok 2009), it remains largely under state supervision and is characterized by a significant degree of political hierarchy.

On the other hand, higher education leaders in the UK are defined in this chapter as individuals who hold the most senior administrative positions within their respective institutions, such as vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors. They are responsible for overseeing the institutions' operations, managing resources and developing and implementing strategic plans. In contrast to the state-supervised system in China, the UK higher education sector is characterized by a decentralized structure and a strong emphasis on market-based principles and practices. Higher education leaders in the UK operate with a greater degree of institutional autonomy from the state, despite being subject to government funding and regulatory frameworks. Since the introduction of university tuition fees in 1998, there has been a steady and consistent rise in fee levels in the UK. As a result, a substantial portion of the cost of higher education has been shifted onto students. The marked increase in funding from tuition fees and private sources has made UK universities increasingly competitive in attracting and recruiting students, reflecting the importance of student enrolment to their financial viability. This is just one exemplification of the broader neoliberal agenda that has profoundly shaped the higher education landscape in the UK, where the marketization of higher education has become increasingly dominant (Shattock and Horvath 2020). As such, UK leaders give considerable weight to performance indicators and metrics, such as research output, student outcomes, league tables and rankings, to measure institutional success. However, this approach may sometimes be criticized for overlooking the personal development and well-being of students (Troiani and Dutson 2021), the importance of which has become increasingly evident in the wake of the pandemic. We will later present evidence that demonstrates the contrary, showcasing instances where leaders in the UK not only provided both

students and staff with resources and support but also expressed deep concern and empathy for them during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis has posed unprecedented challenges for higher education leaders in both China and the UK, who have been required to make far-reaching decisions in the face of great uncertainties and complexities. To write this chapter, we conducted a systematic literature review to synthesize evidence on two major research questions: (1) What are the major challenges faced by higher education leaders in China and the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how did they respond to these challenges? (2) Building upon the diverse experiences and insights gained from the COVID-19 pandemic, what leadership values and principles can guide higher education leaders in both China and the UK as they navigate future challenges in the post-pandemic world? In October 2022, we ran a search on four databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest and the British Education Index, using a search strategy that we had carefully developed, piloted and revised. Our final search strings are a combination of Boolean operators and variations of four keywords, namely *higher education*, *leadership*, *COVID* and *UK* or *China*. Of the 204 results returned from the databases, forty-four full-text studies were evaluated for eligibility based on our inclusion criteria, and their quality was assessed using the criteria developed by Oancea et al. (2021). Ultimately, we included sixteen studies for data extraction, coding and final synthesis. Out of these sixteen studies, eight focused on higher education in China, six focused on higher education in the UK and two focused on transnational education programmes between China and the UK. See Table 7.1 for more details about the studies reviewed.

Table 7.1 Details of the studies reviewed (N = 16)

Author(s)	Topic(s) of study	Higher education context(s) of study²	Research period
Bremner et al. (2020)	Implementing a Sino-British transnational education programme during crisis	1 transnational programme (UK-China)	Spring semester 2020
Bremner et al. (2021)	Reviewing the development and management of a Sino-British transnational education programme implemented during COVID-19	1 transnational programme (UK-China)	January 2020 to Nov 2020
Cheah, Abdullah, and Xiao (2022)	Paternalistic leadership practices of Chinese university crisis management teams and their influence on decision-making	1 university, China	March 2022
Denney (2021)	Guiding core values in higher education leadership during crisis	Higher education, the UK	March 2020 to May 2021

Author(s)	Topic(s) of study	Higher education context(s) of study²	Research period
Ghosh and DeMartino (2022)	Strategies undertaken by university leaders worldwide to increase capacity for knowledge production	30 universities from 5 countries, 6 of which are from China	Not specified
Hall, Gill, and Gamsu (2022)	Criticisms of the marketization of UK higher education and its reinforcement of a culture of whiteness	Higher education, the UK	Not specified
Lawrence and Wu (2020)	Reviewing discourse on Chinese higher education governance through policy document analysis	Higher education, China	January to April 2020
McNamara (2021)	Challenges faced by conservatoire leaders during the pandemic and their corresponding responses	3 conservatoires in the UK, the United States and Australia	September 2020
Song et al. (2022)	Identifying critical success factors for epidemic emergency management in higher education based on pre-pandemic literature analysis	Higher education, China	Not specified
Sun et al. (2022)	Effect of self-policing management and pandemic prevention policies on university students in China	1 university, China	January 2020 to August 2022
Wang et al. (2020)	Challenges faced by Chinese universities in the early stages of the outbreak and their social contributions to emergency management	Higher education, China	Pre-February 2020
Wolinsky (2020)	Economic challenges faced by HEIs around the world	Anglophone countries including the United States and the UK	Not specified

Author(s)	Topic(s) of study	Higher education context(s) of study²	Research period
Wright, Haastrup and Guerrina (2021)	Reimagining crisis leadership in UK higher education	Higher education, the UK	Not specified
Yang and Huang (2021)	Chinese university responses to the crisis and new opportunities that have emerged	1 university, China	Initial surge until students returned to campus
Yeomans and Bowman (2021)	The employee-focused sense-giving discourse of UK university leaders during the crisis	2 universities, the UK	March to June 2020
Zhang and Tian (2022)	Challenges faced by Chinese university leaders during COVID-19	1 university, China	Before March 2022

At every stage of the systematic review process, we carefully checked for inter-reviewer reliability and resolved any issues or discrepancies. Presented in this chapter are the triangulated insights derived from the systematic review, our own analyses and discussions drawn from other relevant research studies, news articles, reports, official websites of universities and the Ministry of Education, and other documents, including open letters from vice-chancellors.

Despite the limited number of studies covered in our review, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which leaders in these two higher education contexts responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we genuinely hope that this chapter serves as a valuable resource for higher education leaders worldwide as they continue to navigate the new challenges that arise in post-pandemic times.

Leading in Crisis: Challenges and Responses

Upon a thorough examination of the studies, we have identified several major challenges confronting higher education leaders in both China and the UK. Leaders in these two higher education systems operate in distinct socio-political settings, which shape the nature of the challenges they face and their corresponding responses. Although this chapter is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of these leadership challenges and responses, we have selected a few salient themes that have emerged from our review for further discussion in subsequent sections.

Digitalization and Datafication of Higher Education

One of the most widely reported challenges for higher education leaders during the pandemic was the abrupt shift from in-person teaching to the remote provision of teaching. Prior to COVID-19, UK universities were not required to provide teaching and learning online, and investment in online education infrastructure was limited (Howard, Khan, and Lockyer 2021). As a result, the majority of academics were not prepared to adjust to the new mode of teaching, and some students requested tuition fee refunds due to dissatisfaction with the quality of education received during the pandemic.

In contrast, top-tier universities in China experienced a smoother transition and were better prepared to manage critical operations during the COVID-19 outbreak. For example, Peking University had already offered about one hundred online courses before the pandemic (Bao 2020), and Tsinghua University swiftly provided training to its teachers and students on how to conduct and engage in classes remotely in early 2020. Yet, Chinese universities differed in their crisis preparedness. Lower-tier universities reportedly faced a longer period of disruption before they could translate their courses online (Ghosh and DeMartino 2022).

Despite their differences in institutional readiness, HEIs in both China and the UK responded to the pandemic by increasing their investment in online teaching. This is widely considered to be a significant leap towards the digitalization of higher education, which was accelerated by the pandemic.

What is seldom discussed, however, is the critical distinction between *online teaching* and *emergency remote teaching* – the former is the result of the extended, systematic effort of multiple parties, including teachers, instructional designers and technicians in curriculum development and instructional design (Hodges et al. 2020), whereas the latter is not. Due to the abrupt transition to emergency remote teaching prompted by COVID-19, the careful and collegial design process that characterizes online teaching was largely absent. Arguably, many HEIs adopted a quick-fix approach by ‘replicat[ing] face-to-face teaching practices in an online context rather than rethinking teaching in a more fundamental way’ (Denney 2021, 42). However, when investing in online teaching and learning, leaders need to spearhead the development of high-quality courses that are rigorously and specifically designed for online delivery, as opposed to merely migrating face-to-face courses to an online format. Failure to make a clear distinction between the two could mislead students into thinking that they are enrolling in a well-conceptualized and meticulously designed online programme, only to be disappointed and frustrated by the lack of rigour and inadequate delivery in the hastily re-packaged online version of a face-to-face curriculum.

Investing in online higher education programmes allows Chinese and UK HEIs to expand their reach on a massive scale in a cost-efficient manner. For example, at the onset of the pandemic, *Xuezhai Zheda*, a course hub at Zhejiang University that was open to learners globally, received 570,000 visits, and *DingTalkZJU* attracted 300,000 viewers (Yang 2020). Notwithstanding the widespread perception that online teaching can be an opportunity equalizer to support learning for many students, there are still equity and access issues in both the Chinese and British contexts. Specifically, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often encounter more barriers when accessing high-speed internet and reliable connectivity devices. Despite the strides that have been made in bridging the digital gap, substantial disparities remain in China, with an internet penetration rate of 82.9 per cent in urban China and 58.8 per cent in rural areas

as of 2022 (CNNIC 2022). Students from rural China were disproportionately affected by the shift to the emergency provision of remote teaching. Beyond the issues of access, these students encountered challenges in using technology, concentrating and engaging in online learning (Guo 2021). On the other hand, the digital divide in the UK might be less pronounced than in China, but UK students faced similar challenges in engaging themselves fully with remote learning due to the lack of access to necessary resources and to a suitable study environment at home during the pandemic (Office for Students 2020). Furthermore, students with disabilities, special education needs and mental health conditions experienced unique challenges during the period of pandemic disruptions. These students needed additional and tailored support, which might be more difficult to provide in an online learning environment. Additionally, even academics reported difficulties when teaching and working from home since not all of them had access to connection devices and reliable internet networks at home (Sum and Oancea 2022).

To address these issues of equity and access, higher education leaders in both China and the UK invested in resources to support students in need during the pandemic. For instance, universities in Liaoning, China, allocated over RMB 7 million to provide subsidies, communication equipment and mobile data to about 20,000 students (Liaoning Institute of Education 2020). Likewise, the University of Bath in the UK provided digital outreach programmes and worked with charities and corporate partners to deliver physical hardware to students. Other universities offered laptop loans, assistive technology and counselling services for students in need. The University of Bristol provided guidance on low-bandwidth teaching to both teachers and students. These valuable service provisions were not necessarily profitable, yet they were made possible when leaders led with compassion and prioritized the needs of students and staff over cost-efficiency and profitability in decision-making. We will return to compassionate leadership later in more detail.

The rapid migration to remote teaching has not only intensified the digitalization of higher education but also accelerated the integration of data-driven approaches in policymaking in the higher education systems of both China and the UK. Various educational technology platforms and learning management systems have been collecting an increasing amount of data that can potentially inform evidence-based strategies aimed at improving student learning outcomes. In line with the Smart Campus (*zhahui xiaoyuan*) campaign promoted by the Ministry of Education since 2018, Chinese HEIs have been gathering students' data and implementing learning analytics to utilize huge quantities of data to improve attendance and track behaviour (Skampagiannis and Pletsas 2019). During the pandemic, the Ministry issued a notice urging the use of data and digital technologies to improve education management and governance (Ministry of Education 2021). In accordance with this directive, Chongqing Medical University has incorporated facial recognition cameras at the university gates to monitor student attendance and improve campus security. In particular, the facial recognition access control system at the Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine is supported by a big data platform that has gathered a substantial amount of data from students and staff members.

Despite the benefits of datafication in higher education, leaders in this sector need to take into account the ethical implications that may arise from these emerging trends. In the UK, recording lectures was common practice even before COVID-19. There have been privacy concerns over the capture, storage and use of personal data, particularly when in-class discussions involve sensitive topics (Ibrahim, Howarth, and Stone 2021). Since the pandemic outbreak, the higher education sector in the UK has progressively increased its reliance on digital data in governance,

which has sparked growing concerns about data privacy, ownership, surveillance and control. These concerns have been expressed more vocally in the UK than in China. As Williamson, Eynon, and Potter (2020) put it:

The COVID-19 pandemic is being treated as a laboratory experiment in mass-scale datafication of education in ways that might further empower and advance the interests of data-driven edtech companies, researchers and advocates. As millions of students sign up to new platforms in order to be able to access education during the pandemic, long-running concerns over data privacy and the use of data for student profiling and control need to be brought back into focus. (113)

The heightened tension between the potential benefits and ethical concerns of datafying higher education underscores the need for leaders in both China and the UK to deepen their understanding of data ethics and adhere to the ethical frameworks in their respective educational contexts when gathering data from students and staff members. By doing so, leaders can reap the benefits of harnessing data in a responsible and ethical manner whilst mitigating the associated risks.

Internationalization of Higher Education

Whilst the pandemic has had a profound impact on the internationalization of higher education in both China and the UK higher education systems, the resulting challenges have manifested differently in their respective contexts.

The UK has long been one of the most popular destinations for international students. The initial decline in international student enrolments, particularly from China, and due to COVID-19, had an adverse economic impact on those UK institutions that relied heavily on revenue generated from international students as well as government funding allocated based on student headcounts. The coronavirus outbreak therefore exposed the financial precariousness of UK universities (Adams 2020). This was further complicated by Brexit, which led to uncertainties regarding immigration policies and student recruitment.

To mitigate the impact of the pandemic, UK leaders prioritized recruitment efforts for international students (Soler, Harris, and Baldwin 2021). For example, virtual open days and flexible start dates were incorporated as part of their recruitment strategy (Williams 2022). Some universities provided financial support, such as scholarship extensions and hardship funds, to non-UK students experiencing financial struggles during COVID-19. Others offered tuition fee deferrals and pro-rata refunds on accommodation and other expenses (Schleicher 2020). Universities UK, an advocacy organization that includes university vice-chancellors across the UK as members, also produced guidelines on the best practices for supporting international students experiencing financial hardship (Universities UK International 2021).

However, there has been limited research conducted on the actual COVID-19 experiences of international students in the UK. Their struggles with loneliness, homesickness and mental health issues have largely been overlooked. Some international students were required to self-isolate

upon their initial entry into the UK, and many had to complete at least part of their studies online whilst continuing to pay significantly higher fees than their local counterparts. Their psychological well-being could potentially be adversely affected due to a variety of factors, including the feeling of being treated as mere sources of revenue, or *cash cows*, by universities abroad (Raaper, Brown, and Llewellyn 2022).

In addition, to mitigate the pandemic's threat to their financial viability, some UK HEIs implemented cost-saving measures, such as promotion freezes, salary cuts and staff layoffs. These measures were met with much resistance and criticism within the country (Gibney 2022). Some universities sought alternative revenue streams from cultural and commercial activities. However, the financial woes were exacerbated by the fact that those activities were prohibited or partially restricted during the early stages of COVID-19 (Wolinsky 2020). At the onset of the outbreak, the UK government provided financial support and an institutional bailout through the Higher Education Restructuring Regime, but the reception of these government measures varied (Hall, Gill, and Gamsu 2022).

Compared to the UK, higher education in China relies more heavily on government funding as revenue than tuition fees. Also, the population of domestic students in China is significantly larger than that of international students. That said, the internationalization of Chinese higher education has been given increasing importance in order to establish China's global influence and enhance its academic reputation. Prior to COVID-19, China was on its way to establishing itself as a top study-abroad destination for international students, with international enrolments steadily increasing since 2009. Similar to the situation in the UK, when the pandemic first broke out, international students were required to avoid in-person socialization during lockdowns. Although immediate support and remedies were provided, there were reports of psychological distress and deteriorating mental health among international students studying in China (Antwi et al. 2022).

With the highest number of students studying abroad, China has also undertaken efforts to support Chinese students studying overseas (Yang, Shen, and Xu 2022). For example, Peking University, Tsinghua University and Zhejiang University established partnerships with overseas institutions, enabling international students from China to temporarily study on Chinese campuses and complete their programmes remotely during the pandemic (Xinhua News 2020). The Ministry of Education also encouraged the establishment of these Sino-British partnerships to recruit and support additional students whose overseas study plans have been disrupted by COVID-19. Transnational education partnerships had long been a steadfast cornerstone of China's higher education internationalization strategy even before the pandemic (Yang 2016). For example, Tsinghua University had established partnerships with overseas universities to offer fifty-one joint programmes. Nanjing Xiaozhuang University and Jiangsu Second Normal University (the former Jiangsu Institute of Education) partnered with the College of Education of the University of Florida to offer customized teacher preparation programmes for pre-service teachers, as well as a visiting scholar scheme to facilitate faculty exchange between the partner universities. These established networks across institutions helped Chinese universities mitigate the negative shock of COVID-19 by enabling their students to continue studying for international degrees remotely despite pandemic-related restrictions on student mobility. Furthermore, these transnational partnerships facilitated collaboration amongst faculty members, allowing them to

share COVID-19 coping strategies and maintain the continuity of teaching and learning during the global health crisis.

Likewise, one of the top priorities for higher education leaders in the UK is to establish transnational education partnerships with overseas institutions (Soler, Harris, and Baldwin 2021). In 2020–1, a total of 510,835 students from 162 UK higher education providers studied through transnational education, representing a 12.7 per cent increase from the previous year. Sino-British transnational education partnerships have been established for many years (Universities UK International 2022). For example, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, an international joint venture university, was formed in 2006. Additionally, the University of Birmingham has partnered with several Chinese universities to offer bioscience degree programmes that enable students to study in both China and the UK. These partnerships are just a few examples of the many existing Sino-UK higher education collaborations.

Higher education leaders with experience in transnational education partnerships understand the importance of being cognisant of the differences in the environments and cultures in which their partner institutions operate. This awareness was particularly relevant during the pandemic crisis, as varied local COVID-19 situations and educational responses made it challenging to ensure consistency in joint teaching and learning initiatives. One illustration of this challenge is the experience of the University of Glasgow and its partner, the University of Electronics, Science, and Technology in Chengdu, during the pandemic. With UK-based teaching staff unable to return to campus due to lockdowns and travel restrictions, the delivery of joint-university courses was difficult (Bremner et al. 2021). Meanwhile, the Chinese partner institution already resumed face-to-face teaching in the summer of 2020, reflecting the different local COVID-19 situations. Also disrupted by the pandemic were the operations between Queen Margaret University in the UK and their partner institutions worldwide. As a result, Queen Margaret University made temporary adjustments to transnational education programmes by migrating to remote collaboration and revising assessment instruments, whilst demonstrating sensitivity and adaptability to the diverse educational settings and operational environments of partner institutions in the adjustment process (Tsiligiris and Ilieva 2022).

Alongside offering joint degree programmes, China and the UK have identified opportunities for research collaboration. Since the 2000s, the Sino-British research ecosystems have become more integrated, particularly in science and technology-based disciplines. China is on track to overtake the United States as the UK's most important research collaborator (Johnson et al. 2021). Despite ongoing geopolitical and cross-cultural tensions, China and the UK continued research collaborations in addressing global issues and contending with threats from future pandemics. For instance, UK Research and Innovation provided funding for joint research projects, including antimicrobial resistance and epidemic preparedness. In 2022, the Confucius Institute of Lancaster University launched the Lancaster China Engagement Fund to support academics in networking and knowledge exchange activities for China-related engagement projects, allowing academics in both countries to contribute their respective research expertise and learn from each other in the aftermath of the pandemic. These instances highlight the instrumental role of international partnerships in addressing the negative impacts of COVID-19 on higher education and the importance for leaders in transnational teaching and research partnerships to maintain cultural sensitivity and adaptability in the current global higher education climate.

Internal Crisis Communication and Sensemaking

Higher education leaders in China and the UK adopted different approaches to internal crisis communication, which is narrowly defined in this chapter as the dissemination of COVID-19-related information primarily initiated by higher education leaders. This can take various forms, including written communication, such as email updates and letters from vice-chancellors, as well as verbal communication, such as speeches, video messages and town hall meetings. Internal crisis communication can be challenging for leaders in both higher education systems given the complex political and institutional environments within which they operate.

In China, the government adopted a stringent and proactive response to the pandemic and claimed direct control of public emergency management. Set up by China's central authorities, the Central Group for COVID-19 Prevention and Control was the primary decision-making body for the country's pandemic response. The central command structure was replicated by local governments, which promptly established their COVID-19 prevention headquarters with party secretaries serving as decision-making leaders at the local level. Central government policies regarding pandemic response were also passed down to HEIs, which were responsible for implementing them locally. The top-down governance structure in China's higher education was reinforced during the pandemic outbreak, as illustrated by the dismissal of Zhang Lifeng, the Party Representative of Jilin Agricultural Science and Technology University, from his position after clusters of infection occurred within the university (Zhou 2022). Despite its rigidity, this command chain played an important role in containing the virus initially and steering the country throughout the pandemic.

The autonomy of Chinese HEIs gave way to centralized policymaking and the coordination of crisis management policies (Lawrence and Wu 2020). Decisions regarding the closure and reopening of campuses, as well as the resumption of face-to-face teaching, were not always under the purview of higher education leaders. Some universities were unable to host international students for years due in part to the border closure (Leung 2022). Furthermore, Chinese university leaders operate within a complex political environment where the presidents' decision-making can be influenced by the party's agenda. As a result, they have to maintain a delicate balance between fulfilling their obligation to manage their institution's daily operations and securing the endorsement and approval of the party secretary. This has led to the emergence of new political dynamics and challenges for leaders in China (Ma et al. 2021).

Early government policy for higher education providers frequently used the term *zhanyi*, which literally translates to *battle against the pandemic*, reflecting the urgency and determination in combatting the coronavirus and emphasizing the importance of unity during times of crisis. Leaders in China often followed the government's directives on internal communication, particularly with respect to topics like COVID-19. They also used the term *zhanyi* frequently to evoke the collective responsibilities of students and staff in combatting the pandemic and to reinforce the political legitimacy of centralized policymaking (Lawrence and Wu 2020). Thus, internal crisis communication in Chinese higher education was largely characterized by a top-down, politicized and collectivist rhetoric.

Leaders in China typically employed a formal and emotive language style to convey a sense of duty and loyalty to the country. Commonly used phrases included *unite to fight the pandemic* (*tongxinkangyi*) and *care for the university and the country* (*xinxixiaoyuan, xinxiguojia*). The tone

of their communication tended to be uplifting and optimistic, reflecting a sense of pride in their ongoing efforts to curb the spread of the virus and to support their local communities. For instance, the Shanghai Open University positioned itself as *a university for the citizens* and leveraged its expertise in online education to provide technical training to primary and secondary school teachers in Shanghai as they transitioned to remote teaching. Other public services undertaken by universities in China included creating home exercise videos, offering counselling services to local citizens and utilizing their alumni networks to raise funds for donations. Additionally, Chinese institutions with a strong science focus played an important role in nurturing medical talents, providing treatment to patients in their local communities and contributing to vaccine development (Wang et al. 2020).

In short, higher education leaders in China aligned their internal crisis communication with the government's narrative, emphasizing their social responsibility during the pandemic and the need for collective action from different stakeholders to fight the coronavirus. Such rhetoric was conducive to fostering a sense of national unity and solidarity in times of crisis, enabling swift decision-making and cooperation between different stakeholders to work collectively to contain the spread of the virus within their respective localities (Ma et al. 2021).

On the other hand, higher education leaders in the UK adopted a different approach when communicating with students and staff internally. Compared to those in China, where the higher education sector is subject to strong government oversight, HEIs in the UK operate within a decentralized market-oriented model underpinned by a neoliberal ideology (although government policies played an important role in shaping the UK higher education sector's response to the pandemic). Unlike in China, leaders in the UK faced a distinct set of challenges, such as students' vocal demands for tuition fee refunds and staff strikes over job security and workload issues amplified by the pandemic. But the absence of a politically charged, coordinated rhetoric allowed UK leaders to have more latitude in shaping their internal crisis communication strategies to adapt to their unique contexts.

In contrast to leaders in China, UK higher education leaders used a compassionate and empathetic tone in their written communications with other members of their institutions. They expressed deep concerns for students who had experienced significant disruption to their lives using reassuring and supportive language. Their communication style tended to be personal and conversational, with an emphasis on engaging and appealing to prospective students and other stakeholders. In particular, the collective first person pronoun *we*, instead of *you* or *I*, was frequently used to convey a sense of shared identity and belonging within their respective communities (Yeomans and Bowman 2021). In some cases, letters from vice-chancellors concluded with messages of gratitude towards their staff for their hard work and a commitment to working together with the community to overcome difficulties during trying times. These examples illustrate how UK leaders incorporated compassion and empathy in their communication with other members within the institutions.

Another communication strategy used by leaders in the UK is what Yeomans and Bowman (2021) referred to as *antenarratives* or *unfinished narratives*. This approach is a continuous, adaptive process of sensemaking and reframing the narrative to account for new developments and uncertainties. In other words, leaders continuously help students and staff make sense of and adapt to the crisis as it unfolds. To achieve this, higher education leaders employed various digital platforms, such as internal emails, website FAQs and social media, to disseminate regular

updates and information about their COVID-19 response plans, keeping both students and staff informed and involved in the latest developments. Sometimes, internal crisis communication involved dialogic exchanges. For instance, the vice-chancellor and other senior officers of the University of Nottingham led a series of online town hall meetings with postgraduate students and academic researchers to discuss a broader research strategy for the university during the ongoing global pandemic. Similarly, leaders of the University of Manchester solicited students' feedback on the university's response to COVID-19 and integrated their suggestions into future decision-making, thus fostering a sense of connection, community and collaboration.

Whilst leaders in both China and the UK adopted communication approaches that fostered a sense of togetherness during the coronavirus outbreak, there were considerable differences in their respective approaches. In China, internal crisis communication was predominantly shaped by government directives, resulting in a consistent, top-down approach from leaders to students and staff. This approach was instrumental in facilitating collaboration between different stakeholders in preventing and controlling the virus as well as maintaining unity, order and solidarity during the pandemic. In contrast, the communication approach of UK higher education leaders was characterized by dialogic and communal sensemaking. They exhibited a greater capacity for flexibility and empathy when responding to the crisis by adopting a more personal, empathetic tone and displaying a willingness to involve both staff and students in decision-making.

So far, we have examined the diverse challenges faced by higher education leaders in China and the UK, as well as the varied responses and approaches they deployed to address these challenges. In the next section, we will focus on the shared leadership values and principles that can serve as a guide to leaders in both higher education systems as they navigate the diverse and complex challenges of the post-pandemic era.

The Need for Ethical, Collaborative and Compassionate Leadership in Post-Pandemic Era

Leadership is a way of *being* rather than a way of doing. Leadership is value-driven and principled. It cannot be reduced to a series of steps or a quick-fix solution. From the studies reviewed, we found that being *ethical*, *collaborative* and *compassionate* are among the most important values and principles that can guide higher education leadership in China and the UK in the post-pandemic world.

The first principle is ethical leadership, which refers to the practice of leading in a way that prioritizes ethical behaviour and considers the interests of all stakeholders involved. Ethical leaders stay current with evolving trends, serve as role models for others to follow and strive to establish a culture of ethical behaviour within their higher education communities.

As previously discussed, the digitalization of teaching and learning in higher education, which was accelerated by the pandemic, has raised growing ethical concerns. For instance, sharing or reposting teaching materials online may lead to an inadvertent violation of copyright laws. Since late 2022, the introduction of ChatGPT and other generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has further led to concerns about academic integrity and the potential for student misuse. To address these issues, leaders need to educate both teachers and students about copyright

issues and academic integrity and take proactive measures to prevent potential violations of ethical principles in their institution's teaching and learning practices. One such example is the University of Electronics, Science, and Technology in Chengdu, China, which organized training workshops for their staff and students and mandated mock online examinations at the onset of the pandemic to address concerns around online examination proctoring and issues of academic integrity (Bremner et al. 2020).

On a related note, the University of Bristol was said to have provided their students with pre-recorded lectures by academics who had passed away. This caused distress for some students, who were upset about the use of recordings delivered by deceased academics during the pandemic (Turner 2022). This underscores the need for higher education leaders to be mindful of the ethical implications of using educational technologies for teaching and learning purposes and to create a culture of ethics and respect that account for the interests and well-being of all members of the academic community.

As we have previously discussed, the pandemic has accelerated the collection of data on teachers and students through online platforms and learning management systems. These technologies have enabled the monitoring of various aspects of student performance, including attendance, learning progress and course completion. As technology continues to shape higher education teaching, it is increasingly important for leaders in both Chinese and UK higher education systems to not only remain vigilant and responsive to the evolving circumstances of society but also to adopt a more critical and cautious outlook towards the digitalization and datafication of higher education. Specifically, they need to understand that:

The quality of teaching simply cannot be guaranteed exactly by the completeness of the instructional videos watched by the students, or by the frequency with which the teacher uploads the materials; evaluation of courses should be dynamic; ... the university should be an emotional, relationship-focused organism, not a calculating, rational mechanical device. (Zhang and Tian 2022, 7)

Very often, students and staff have little influence over the selection of educational technologies and the data analytics that affect their learning and work. With the datafication of higher education, senior leaders now have greater access to and control over information about teachers and students. This shift in power can create a culture of constant monitoring where students are tracked and profiled in intrusive and potentially harmful ways. Emerging challenges, such as data privacy, digital access and academic integrity, will need to be addressed by leaders in an increasingly complex and rapidly evolving educational landscape.

In the UK, various organizations have issued guidelines on the ethical use of data and different technologies in education, reflecting the growing significance of ethics in the education sector. Some examples of such guidelines include the Data Ethics Framework issued by the government, the Code of Practice for Learning Analytics by Jisc and the Ethical Framework for AI in Education by the Institute for Ethical AI in Education. In 2023, an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the UK and other parts of the world collaborated on a project titled Universities and Unicorns, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, to formulate policy recommendations for the use of educational technologies in the higher education sector (Lancaster University 2023).

Whilst concerns over data privacy in China may not be as publicly expressed as in the UK, there are laws and regulations that govern the collection and use of personal information and data, including the Cybersecurity Law, Data Security Law and Personal Information Protection Law. In 2022, the Chinese government released cybersecurity requirements for online streaming educational platforms to ensure data security and address concerns about privacy (Ministry of Education 2022). Prior to the pandemic, government officials in China had emphasized the careful handling of personal information in educational settings, particularly biometric data such as facial expression recognition, to minimize the risks of infringing upon students' dignity and creating a sense of distrust towards teachers (Ministry of Education 2019).

As we enter the post-pandemic era, data ethics will remain a contested issue. Leaders in both higher education systems have to keep abreast of the latest regulatory frameworks that will shape the future of the use of student data. Leaders have the important task of promoting responsible behaviour in the digital realm and equipping students and staff with data and information literacy. To achieve this, leaders can start by adopting the regulatory frameworks for data governance and management, which are specific to their educational settings and by developing a tailored code of conduct that balances the benefits of emerging technologies with the potential risks that may arise. Leaders should communicate any changes and revisions made to the ethical code with students and staff regularly and foster a culture of transparency and accountability around the collection, storage and usage of data within their institutions. This demonstrates their commitment to leading ethically and adapting to changing circumstances.

The second leadership principle is to be collaborative. Collaborative leaders emphasize the need to work together towards a common purpose. They understand that the pandemic does not necessitate the adoption of a competitive stance with other institutions in student recruitment. Instead, collaborative leaders would see the pandemic as an opportunity for higher education worldwide to expand its international reach through transnational education and joint research initiatives.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a considerable portion of research efforts around the world were uncoordinated and poorly executed, resulting in much research duplication and mismanagement. The rush into COVID-19-related publications was wasteful and led to substantial public disservice (Ghosh and DeMartino 2022). On the other hand, Chinese and UK universities made significant scientific research contributions to generating COVID-19-related knowledge by setting coordinated research agendas. One such example is the Tsinghua-Imperial Research and Innovation Seed Fund, a collaborative initiative launched during the pandemic outbreak in 2020 by Tsinghua University and Imperial College London to provide funding support for early-stage scientific research projects by academics from both institutions to address global challenges. To promote international collaboration, higher education leaders should actively seek opportunities to harness the research expertise of their faculty members and encourage partnerships with research teams across institutional and national boundaries. Through initiating cross-institutional or cross-national dialogues, leaders can bring about *synergistic knowledge production* by leveraging a wealth of generously shared assets, research equipment, infrastructure and resources through collective research capacity (Ghosh and DeMartino 2022).

Collaborative leaders cement their commitment to building much-needed collegiality in post-pandemic higher education and empowering respectful, equitable and meaningful communication from different parties. They understand full well that their capabilities for recovery are enhanced

through collaboration within and outside their institution (McNamara 2021). Alice Gast, then-president of Imperial College London, said, ‘It is clear that the pandemic, as well as other global challenges, cannot be solved by one country or one university alone, and that we will need collaboration and cooperation from all’ (Johns 2020, para. 3).

Apart from international research collaboration, leaders need to coordinate with various stakeholders in their local communities. As previously discussed, Chinese universities demonstrated their social responsibility by proactively providing support and resources to hospitals, schools and the public during the pandemic outbreak. In the UK, HEIs worked with charities and corporate partners to deliver digital outreach services to students. Some universities offered access to their online courses, particularly those focusing on COVID-19-related topics, to a wider audience beyond their student body. Institutions like the University of Sheffield and Hull York Medical School contributed to the national healthcare system by providing fast-tracked graduation options for final-year medical students (UNESCO 2020). Crisis leadership is a shared, collaborative effort, requiring coordination and cooperation with multiple parties, including the government, private sector, health-related organizations, non-governmental organizations and the public (Song et al. 2022).

Furthermore, collaborative leaders work towards building communal disaster resilience in case of future crises. Resilience is about ‘understanding where [the] breaking points are, and stopping well before them’, and it means that ‘members of a community should come together to understand what is broken in a system and agree on ways in which it can be made better’ (Denney 2021, 47) (see Chirisa 2024 for more discussion on *resilience*). To build resilient communities, leaders have to create the space for open and constructive discourse amongst different stakeholders, both within and outside their institution, to identify frailties and shared vulnerabilities in existing processes and systems (McNamara 2021). Leaders who prioritize collaboration see these vulnerabilities not as shortcomings but as opportunities for engaging with the community and building communal resilience and solidarity (McNamara 2021). By prioritizing collaboration, open communication and community involvement, higher education leaders in both China and the UK can build resilient communities that are better prepared to bounce back from future crises and uncertainties.

Last but not least, it is important for leaders to be compassionate in the post-pandemic world. Compassion is a felt and enacted desire to alleviate suffering (Dutton et al. 2006). Despite its devastating impacts, the pandemic has enabled us to see one another as equals since it has created ‘a shared sense of suffering across the community and a call for [people] to support [one another]’ (Denney 2021, 47). Leaders with compassion are those who recognize the unique challenges facing their staff and students during the pandemic. In the UK, vice-chancellors demonstrated compassion by writing open letters to their university communities. Through these letters, leaders acknowledged the adverse impact of the crisis on staff and students’ mental health conditions, expressed sympathy for individuals facing hardships due to COVID-19 and communicated a willingness to offer support to help them through this difficult period. On the other hand, higher education in China demonstrated compassion by providing acts of service to the public. Although some of these Chinese institutions might have received guidance or support from the government to offer such services, their acts of service showcased their capacities for compassion and their willingness to extend support beyond the campus. This enabled them to make a meaningful contribution to their local communities during the crisis.

Leaders in both systems could learn from each other in their approaches to demonstrating compassion: whilst UK higher education leaders already provided services to the public, there is room for them to be more proactive in enacting their social responsibility and extending their positive impact on the well-being of those in need. By doing so, their institutions can enhance their reputations, build stronger, more lasting relationships with local communities and increase opportunities for future collaboration and partnership. Meanwhile, higher education leaders in China could benefit from adopting the dialogic, sensemaking communication approach taken by their UK counterparts. This approach emphasizes the importance of engaging in an open dialogue with other members of the academic community to foster a sense of mutual understanding and connection. By incorporating this communication strategy, leaders in China can effectively communicate compassion and a willingness to support both students and staff in a way that is genuine, flexible and responsive to their needs.

Leaders who exhibit compassion often involve those responding to leadership directives in the process of decision-making and adopt rules and regulations with some degree of flexibility (Zhang and Tian 2022). This is because they recognize that previously established rules may become irrelevant and unjust, and they may not be able to support and care for those in need. One such example is the implementation of flexible working policies, which allowed staff to work from home and adjust their work schedules to accommodate caring responsibilities and other commitments during the pandemic. Additionally, the University of Northampton demonstrated exceptional care for vulnerable employees by refurbishing student halls to provide accommodation and catering for healthcare staff and other key workers during the lockdown.

As previously noted, the prioritization of performance indicators in the UK, such as research output and league table rankings, might result in overlooking the well-being of students and staff, the importance of which has become increasingly evident in the wake of the pandemic. However, there are several counterexamples that demonstrate the opposite. For instance, University College London partnered with Care First, an independent counselling service, to ensure students' access to 24/7 online and telephone counselling support during the coronavirus outbreak. Durham University also provided free, year-round mental health services staffed by trained practitioners and developed a suicide prevention strategy to enhance the safety of students. Additionally, there has been a growing trend in the UK towards offering yoga classes, meditation workshops and mindfulness courses to promote students' mental well-being.

In China, the Ministry of Education spearheaded the coordination of resources and implemented strategies to address the needs of faculty members and students. The focus was on providing psychological support and building resilience to combat the psychological battle against the pandemic (*xinli zhanyi*). Higher education leaders in China made concerted efforts to promote positive psychological states and cope with negative emotions, such as anxiety and depression, among students and staff. These collaborative efforts involved bringing together Chinese experts and scientists to deliver mental health lectures and webinars, as well as creating virtual communities to foster a sense of hope, positivity and mutual support.

It is worth noting that these initiatives placed a strain on the institutions' financial resources and were not necessarily profitable in both Chinese and UK contexts, yet they were meaningful and worthwhile pursuits. Ultimately, leading with compassion requires understanding that institutional success is measured not solely by rankings or research outputs but also by the well-being and flourishing of its staff members and students.

Furthermore, compassionate leaders would create a safe and supportive space for students and staff to articulate their lived experiences and commiserate with one another to grieve for their losses in the post-pandemic years. Through constant reassessments of the situation at different phases of the pandemic, leaders with compassion would also re-evaluate promotion and career progression systems and re-consider the ways in which the existing systems and structures could be improved (Denney 2021).

There are two reasons why compassion is one of the most important values in post-pandemic leadership. First, the pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health and well-being of students and faculty members in HEIs around the world. Its impact on individuals' mental well-being has proven to be widespread, long-lasting and devastating (Allen, Kannangara, and Carson 2023; Sun et al. 2022). Leaders who prioritize compassion in their decision-making and communication are likely to be better equipped to address the mental health challenges faced by their communities.

Second, the pandemic has exposed and possibly deepened existing inequalities in higher education systems worldwide. Compassionate leaders are those who strive to combat the long-standing inequalities within and outside academia that have been exposed, if not exacerbated, by the coronavirus. We expect that more concerns around equity and inclusion will continue to pose new challenges for post-pandemic leadership in both China and the UK. Prioritizing and embracing compassion as a critical leadership value enables leaders to handle these issues by promoting equity and inclusion in their community. When guided by compassion, leaders are empowered to not only address the immediate needs of their community but also set the foundation for an institution that prioritizes communal, humane values over economic benefits in the long run (Denney 2021).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for higher education leaders in both China and the UK, including the abrupt transition to remote teaching, the accelerated digitalization and datafication of higher education, and restrictions on international student mobility. These challenges were addressed by varied responses that were shaped by the distinct socio-political contexts within which the leaders operated. In China, higher education crisis leadership responses were consistent and shaped largely by government directives, whilst leaders in the UK had more flexibility but also faced greater risks of financial instability. In terms of their differences in internal crisis communication, leaders in China typically adopted a formal, emotive and optimistic rhetoric that aligned well with the government's narrative to emphasize unity and solidarity, whereas UK leaders used a more personal, empathetic tone when engaging with the community and involved students and staff in decision-making at different phases of the pandemic. Despite these differences, we call for ethical, collaborative and compassionate leadership in both Chinese and UK higher education in post-pandemic times. Leaders who embrace these values can better navigate ethical issues related to emerging technologies, coordinate efforts beyond their institutions and prioritize the well-being of their staff and students when addressing global challenges in the future.

Chapter Summary: Key Lessons for Leadership in Higher Education

Based on our analysis of studies that focus on higher education leadership in Mainland China and/or the UK, this chapter explores and illustrates how divergent trajectories in leaders' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are shaped by contextual differences, underscoring the crucial role of context in shaping the priorities and values of higher education leadership. This chapter also identifies valuable leadership practices and insights that transcend borders, allowing leaders and researchers to draw upon shared lessons for future crisis navigation.

- Despite the contextual differences, there is potential for learning from each other's approaches to demonstrating compassion: UK higher education leaders can strive to embrace social responsibility more comprehensively, whilst their Chinese counterparts can leverage personal, dialogic communication strategies to demonstrate support and empathy towards both students and staff.
- This chapter proposes a need for leadership in both higher education systems to embody ethical, collaborative and compassionate qualities to address future challenges in post-pandemic times. By embracing these qualities, leaders can effectively navigate the complex and evolving landscape of higher education and safeguard the well-being of students, staff and the wider community.

Questions for Discussion

- How do higher education leaders' responses to COVID-19-related challenges vary across institutions within the same country or region, considering the differences in focus (e.g. teaching-focused or research-intensive), location (e.g. rural or urban) and other levels of stratification (e.g. Russell Group and Project 211 universities)?
- To what extent do leaders across different higher education systems have agency in negotiating policies related to campus safety, the use of technology and the well-being of staff and students?
- How do differences in higher education governance structures and power dynamics affect decision-making and communication during times of crisis?
- How do students and staff perceive the level of support and transparency in their institution's leaders' communication during the coronavirus outbreak?
- What specific strategies can higher education leaders use to foster more collaborative and inclusive decision-making processes in the event of future crises?

Notes

- 1 The party is closely integrated with the government structure in China.
- 2 This review considers different forms of post-secondary education (e.g. conservatoires) within the scope of higher education, with universities being one of the major types of HEIs included.

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