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Title: Remote Universities? : Impacts of COVID-19 as Experienced by Academic Leaders in Finland

Year: 2023

Version: Published version

Please cite the original version:

Pekkola, E., Siekkinen, T., Peltola, M., Laihonen, H., & Kujala, E.-N. (2023). Remote Universities? : Impacts of COVID-19 as Experienced by Academic Leaders in Finland. In R. Pinheiro, E. Balbachevsky, P. Pillay, & A. Yonezawa (Eds.), The Impact of Covid-19 on the Institutional Fabric of Higher Education : Old Patterns, New Dynamics, and Changing Rules? (pp. 365-387). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26393-4_15

Remote Universities? Impacts of COVID-19 as Experienced by Academic Leaders in Finland

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INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic has affected universities and academic work significantly. University facilities were closed as a state of emergency was declared globally, thereby inducing a rapid shift to remote working and teaching (Pekkola et al., 2021; Regehr & Goel, 2020). In a turbulent

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environment, the ability of academic managers to make autonomous decisions has been crucial in addition to their adaptivity and resilience (see Pekkola et al., 2021).

Even before the pandemic, the role of academic leaders had been evolving from a status of *primus inter pares* (a first among equals) towards one of managers having a more hierarchical and accountable role (Carvalho and Santiago 2010; Pinheiro et al., 2019; Pekkola et al., 2018). Even public organisations are influenced by managerial trends (Managerialism and New Public Management), which have increased the organisational control of academic work (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Kallio et al., 2015; Siekkinen et al., 2019). Academic work remains highly autonomous in nature, and distance working was already common before the crisis (Pekkola et al., 2021). This has impacted universities and pushed them towards so-called complete organisations. In other words, universities are converging with private sector organisations in several ways (Hüther & Krücken, 2016).

The change in academic leadership is often discussed at the policy level and seldom analysed in relation to daily management practices. The COVID-19 crisis provides an excellent environment to observe the role and perception of academic managers as managers. Our empirical interest lies in the micro-level analysis of the role of and changes in academic leadership during crises. In this article, we analyse the work of academic managers (deans and rectors) by utilising a survey design that enables a longitudinal approach in examining the changes in managers' work during the crises.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, we describe the national context of the COVID-2019 crisis and summarise the general policy development and academic discussion on COVID-19 impacts for management in the public sector and, in particular, for the higher education system. Second, we briefly present our conceptual approach. Our chapter is connected to discussions on the role of managers during crises, the impact of prolonged crises and managerial resilience. In addition, we discuss the role of information and knowledge in the daily management of academic managers. Third, we present the survey design and data. Fourth, we describe our findings from two subsequent surveys. Finally, we discuss our findings regarding the changing role of academic managers and conclude with reflections on policy and managerial implications.

COVID-19 in Finnish Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic response differed across countries, and its impact varied across sectors. For example, despite the institutional and demographic similarities shared by Nordic countries, their management of the COVID-19 crisis, assessed in terms of preparedness level, strategies and policy response, the role of political leadership and crisis communication, has been described as differing across the five Nordic countries (Christensen & Lægreid, 2021).

In Finland, the first case of the COVID-19 pandemic was identified on 29 January 2020; by 21 March 2020, there were already signs of an outbreak (Tiirinki et al., 2020). Later, the epidemiology of COVID-19 followed a pattern similar to that of many other European countries, with a minor delay, for the years 2021 and 2022.

The Finnish government, with a crisis preparedness level deemed higher than its Nordic counterparts, managed the first wave of the pandemic well by effectively adopting a suppression strategy that relied on collaboration, pragmatic decision-making, clear communication, a well-disciplined public, abundant resources and a high level of public trust in the government (Christensen & Lægreid, 2021). The Finnish government's management of the crisis was characterised by a swift response with strict and proactive measures implemented to stop the virus' spread. The first of these measures was the declaration of a state of emergency from 16 March 2020 until 16 June 2020. This was accompanied by other proactive and strict measures, including recommendations for social distancing; closure of schools, institutions and services; limitations on social gatherings; and even closure of the borders around the capital region, Helsinki (Moisio, 2020).

The initial response to COVID-19 in the Finnish higher education sector is predicated on the Finnish government's early response to the crisis. Like all institutions across Finland, the declaration of the state of emergency, social distancing and the lockdown measures put in place affected the day-to-day operations of Finnish universities during the pandemic, and university leadership had to react to these measures.

Following the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Rectors' Council of Finnish Universities (UNIFI) began to collect and coordinate COVID-19-related information on Finnish universities to provide a platform for discussion, negotiations and coordination (Pekkola et al., 2021). UNIFI acted as the designated platform where rectors could

communicate, collaborate and take joint action in response to the crisis, including the COVID-19 guidelines for universities (UNIFI 2020). Following the initiation of the state of emergency in Finland and in response to the guidelines issued by regional state administrative agencies to education institutions on 17 March 2020, the UNIFI recommended the closure of all campus-based activities and the remote conduct of research and development activities where possible (Pekkola et al., 2021). Measures such as the cancellation of traditional campus-based entrance examinations, with minor exceptions for small-scale exams, were also taken by UNIFI.

Finnish universities responded to the crisis quite swiftly and seriously, taking the necessary centrally coordinated actions to ensure the continuity of university operations (Kivistö & Kohtamäki, 2021). Regarding the continuity of operations during the crisis, one element in Finnish universities' response to the crisis included the law-mandated continuity plan that detailed the management approach of each institution regarding a crisis (Pursiainen, 2018). The existence of continuity plans came in handy for Finnish universities. For instance, Yuriv et al. (2021) noted that Tampere University's continuity plan provided a systematic and centrally coordinated approach to responding to the crisis. Clear communication pathways were established, ensuring timely relay of crisis-related information to staff and students. A swift transition to online teaching and learning was adopted in all Finnish universities, enabled by the availability of the necessary IT and communication infrastructures and IT support services (Kivistö & Kohtamäki, 2021).

A central issue in the continuity of operations of any organisation is funding, and this is no less true for universities. Kivistö and Kohtamäki's (2021) study on the impact of COVID-19 on Finnish universities found that, while the pandemic caused significant financial strain on individuals and private and public organisations, its impact on university finances was positive in the short-to-medium term. This, they argue, was due to policy measures, such as a special increase in student enrolment accompanied by additional funding provided by the Finnish government and special fast-track research funding for COVID-19 research, which saw an increase in university funding (Kivistö & Kohtamäki, 2021).

The pandemic also saw the interruption of student and staff mobility, particularly during the initial phase of the crisis in Finland. Ongoing student exchanges were interrupted, and future exchanges were cancelled in some Finnish universities. According to the Finnish national agency for education, EDUFI (2020), up to 90% of exchange students in some

higher education institutions (HEIs) had their mobility interrupted and returned to Finland, with the majority continuing their studies online. Given the decision by all Finnish HEIs to switch to online teaching and learning, virtual mobility soon became the option for incoming exchange students who, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, had to return to their home countries. In reaction to the pandemic, key mobility funding programmes such as Erasmus +, Nordplus and First + recommended the implementation of blended or virtual mobilities to HEIs in the 2020 autumn semester instead of physical mobility (EDUFI, 2020). Guidance on international travel for staff was issued following the national administration and national health officials' recommendations (Furiv et al., 2021; Kivistö & Kohtamäki, 2021) (Fig. 15.1).

Conceptual Backdrop

Crisis Management and the Work of Public Managers During Crises

Bundy et al. (2016) characterised crises as socially constructed behavioural phenomena that are sources of uncertainty, disruption and change, harmful for organisations and their stakeholders and constituting part of larger processes instead of discrete events. Crises generally have physical effects on entire systems as they involve disruptions that threaten the basic functions and existence of a system (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). Ziakas et al. (2021) noted that crises generally have an entire cause or occur as a response to an incident or societal crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Parsons (1996) classified crises into three types: (1) an immediate, sudden crisis that an organisation cannot prepare for; (2) a slower emerging crisis in which an organisation can stop or minimise negative impact through its actions; and (3) a sustained crisis that occurs over a long-term time frame. Crises threaten organisations' values, functionality and sustainability as they offer limited time to make appropriate and sufficient responses to minimise the risks they pose to systems (Hermann 1963). From an organisational viewpoint, crisis management broadly comprises actions and communication from leaders that aim to reduce the likelihood of a crisis, minimise the negative effects of a crisis and attempt to re-establish order after a crisis (Kahn et al. 2013; Bundy and Pfarrer 2015). Underscoring the importance of crisis response is the consensus that how organisations and people respond to a crisis is equally as important as the cause.
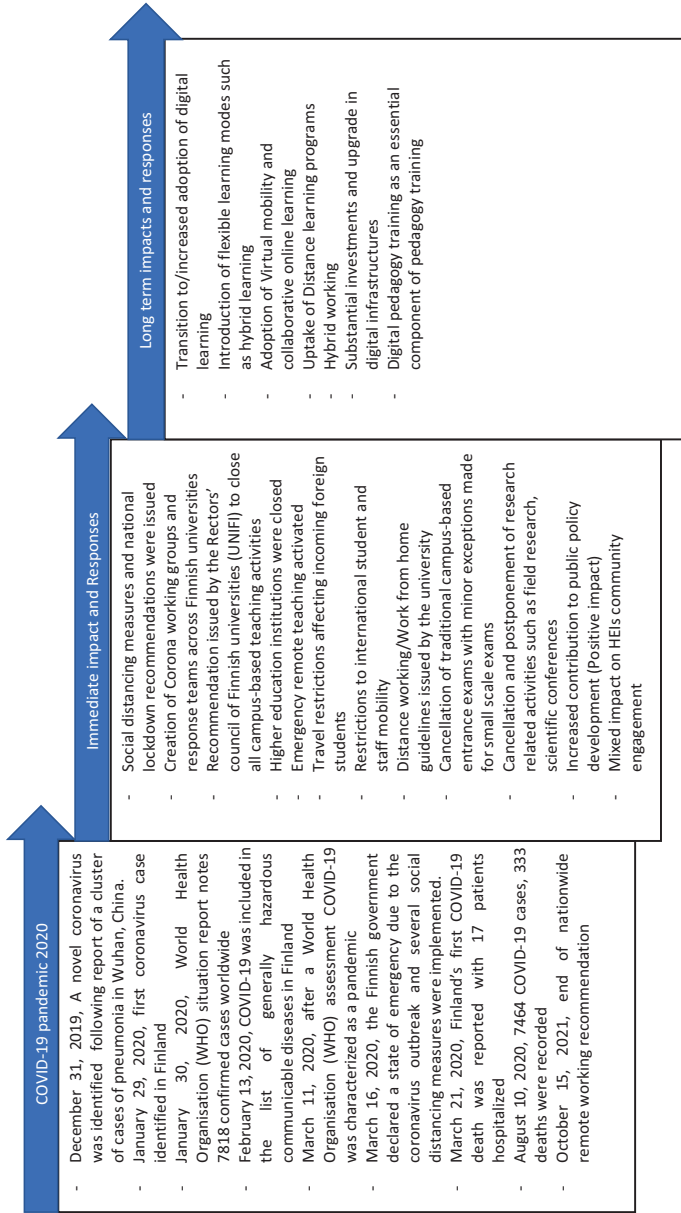
COVID-19 pandemic 2020

- December 31, 2019, A novel coronavirus was identified following report of a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, China.
- January 29, 2020, first coronavirus case identified in Finland
- January 30, 2020, World Health Organisation (WHO) situation report notes 7818 confirmed cases worldwide
- February 13, 2020, COVID-19 was included in the list of generally hazardous communicable diseases in Finland
- March 11, 2020, after a World Health Organisation (WHO) assessment COVID-19 was characterized as a pandemic
- March 16, 2020, the Finnish government declared a state of emergency due to the coronavirus outbreak and several social distancing measures were implemented.
- March 21, 2020, Finland's first COVID-19 death was reported with 17 patients hospitalized
- August 10, 2020, 7464 COVID-19 cases, 333 deaths were recorded
- October 15, 2021, end of nationwide remote working recommendation

Immediate impact and Responses

- Social distancing measures and national lockdown recommendations were issued
- Creation of Corona working groups and response teams across Finnish universities
- Recommendation issued by the Rectors' council of Finnish universities (UNIFI) to close all campus-based teaching activities
- Higher education institutions were closed
- Emergency remote teaching activated
- Travel restrictions affecting incoming foreign students
- Restrictions to international student and staff mobility
- Distance working/Work from home guidelines issued by the university
- Cancellation of traditional campus-based entrance exams with minor exceptions made for small scale exams
- Cancellation and postponement of research related activities such as field research, scientific conferences
- Increased contribution to public policy development (Positive impact)
- Mixed impact on HEIs community engagement

Long term impacts and responses

- Transition to/increased adoption of digital learning
- Introduction of flexible learning modes such as hybrid learning
- Adoption of Virtual mobility and collaborative online learning
- Uptake of Distance learning programs
- Hybrid working
- Substantial investments and upgrade in digital infrastructures
- Digital pedagogy training as an essential component of pedagogy training

Fig. 15.1 COVID-19 pandemic impacts and responses in the Finnish higher education sector

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a crisis characterised by high unpredictability, uncertainty and distress about the future. With the health crisis evolving into an economic, cultural and social crisis, its impacts will have large sociopolitical, economic and existential ramifications globally for a long time to come. Immediate responses to the crisis were primarily aimed at controlling and curbing the virus spread, leading to lockdown measures in numerous countries and closures of geographical borders, restricting the movement of goods and people across countries. Some of the early responses to the crisis in many countries exacerbated negative consequences, as governments and organisations were inadequately prepared. More recently, responses have focused on the related impacts of the pandemic across various sectors of the economy, including the higher education sector.

In general, COVID-19 has changed how and where public sector workers work and their job tasks and demands regarding their work. These changes create new challenges and strains on public sector workers, risking well-being and increasing demotivation and poor work performance (Schuster et al., 2020). Previous studies have highlighted the challenges arising from remote working that have been the new norm for last year, such as increasing risks of professional and social isolation among employees (Buffer, 2020; de Vries et al., 2018) and lack of access to appropriate technical equipment and training in utilising a virtual collaborative environment (Bick et al., 2020). These challenges burden managers as they increasingly face challenges in supervising, monitoring and ensuring that staff stay motivated (Schuster et al., 2020). Furthermore, these challenges are further compounded as public sector organisations face increasing job demands while grappling with constrained job (i.e., supervision and collegial support and effective technical equipment) and personal (i.e., motivation and optimism) (Schuster et al., 2020) resources. These issues suggest negative implications for work engagement, employee well-being and productivity.

Crisis response to and management of the COVID-19 pandemic differed around the world and across public institutions. It has been well documented that the pandemic induced changes for many public sector workers. This was also the case in the global higher education sector, which was severely impacted by the crisis. Conditions for teaching and research activities changed dramatically. Universities were quickly adopting online education, students faced uncertainties about their studies and incomes and staff struggled with challenges such as job insecurity and lack of/inadequate skills and tools for digital pedagogy. In addition, university

management was confronted with devising new methods to ensure continuity in their operations and clear and effective communications with their stakeholders and partners (Crawford et al., 2020; Helin et al., 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020.) The impacts of COVID-19 on teaching and learning mostly centred on replacing classroom teaching with distance teaching and learning. The associated challenges of the transition to online teaching were linked to technical infrastructure and the competencies and pedagogies for online learning (Marinoni et al., 2020), with many teachers resorting to 'learning by doing' due to the dramatic shift to online learning and the lack of necessary management structures to develop the teaching capacities of staff for online pedagogy (Amemado, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020).

Several studies have noted that stakeholder communication is crucial in crisis management (Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Furiv et al., 2021; Illanes et al., 2020), and this was no less so with the COVID-19 pandemic and in the higher education sector. In a survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU), 91% of HEIs surveyed had the necessary infrastructures in place to communicate with their staff and students about COVID-19; however, they still faced challenges in ensuring clear and effective communications streams with staff and students during lockdown (Marinoni et al., 2020). In addition, the high level of uncertainty with the pandemic affected academic planning for the next academic semester/session and consequently caused a high level of pressure on staff to work longer hours to deal with the situation, increasing the risks of burnout (Marinoni et al., 2020).

Crises present conditions to reflect on management approaches, decision-making, leadership and the stability and sustainability of a system (Ziakas et al., 2021). As seen in the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership and stakeholder communication are crucial in response to coordination in HEIs (Illanes et al., 2020). The responses from HEIs in the early months of the pandemic ranged from the suspension of teaching and research activities to transitioning to online teaching and learning to varying degrees, affecting students worldwide in various countries (Brown, 2020). According to the European Association for International Education (EAIE), in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities established communication channels and support for students to enable access to counselling, health services and funding and active communication with stakeholders, including external partners and the local community (EAIE, 2020). In addition, universities dedicated resources to developing or

strengthening their digital infrastructures to enable online teaching and learning, while some universities attempted to retain international students studying abroad. To ensure organisational continuity, several universities established crisis planning groups to develop continuity plans in the areas of teaching and research, business continuity, student response and communication. Despite the challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the experience has also offered opportunities for better crisis preparedness in HEIs and may further result in an increase in the resilience and agility of HEIs in responding to future crises (Marinoni et al., 2020).

Changing Roles of Academic Managers

Before the global COVID-19 pandemic, the role of academic managers had changed to become more central in universities, and their tasks had grown more diverse and broader. As universities have become hybrid organisations, academic work, particularly academic management work, has also become hybrid, including managerial, professional and entrepreneurial tasks (Carvalho & Santiago, 2010a, 2010b; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Lam, 2010; Pekkola et al., 2018; Pekkola et al., 2020; Siekkinen et al., 2019; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). This has been influenced by global trends, such as new public management (NPM) and managerialism, which apply their practices from private sector organisations and aim to increase the efficiency of public sector organisations, including universities (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Evetts, 2009). Universities have been aiming to increase their efficiency by various means, such as controlling the performance of academic work, standardising and structuring their processes and developing and centralising their administration and management (e.g. Deem & Brehony, 2005; Deem 2004; Carvalho & Santiago, 2010a, 2010b; Siekkinen et al., 2019).

Furthermore, in addition to the requirements from society for increasing the efficiency of the university organisation (Bleiklie et al., 2017), there are more pressures related to increasing the relevance of their research activities, widening their pool of funding and emphasising knowledge transfer between sectors via new collaborations (Geschwind et al., 2019; Välimaa et al., 2016). Noordegraaf (2019) connected the widening roles of professionals in general with the concept of connected professionalism. This includes increasing collaboration and co-creation with stakeholders and clients and the idea that professionalism is no longer as 'protected' as before. Based on the aspects mentioned above related to the

changes in the universities' environment, in academic work and academic profession, the role of managers has become more central and their work more complex (Carvalho & Santiago, 2010a, 2010b; Siekkinen et al., 2019). At the start of the pandemic, they had to find solutions to keep university activities running. They were also responsible for the well-being of their subordinates and tried to support them in the best way possible in a novel and stressful situation (Pekkola et al., 2021).

Considering the multiple objectives and expectations of universities and their management, essential strategic management questions in higher education, like in any organisation, are the following: Who are we and who do we want to be (cf. Spender 2014)? These questions may sound trivial, but their answers are essential when navigating environmental complexity and difficult times, such as the pandemic. In the higher education context, this relates to questions regarding the role and basic functions of a university. Although universities are considered almost eternal institutions (Haskins, 1957) and even today their basic teaching mission and many other features resemble their medieval counterparts (Scott, 2006), how they interact with the rest of society changes and evolves, which has important managerial implications. First, objectives define the information and knowledge used to justify the decisions made (e.g., Laihonen & Mäntylä, 2018; Zack, 1999). Especially during a crisis, the basic values and strategic insights provide individual managers with the foundation on which to build. Second, the crisis underscores the importance of knowledge asset management. This perspective has gained some interest, especially in the context of universities (cf. Dumay et al., 2015), but it becomes even more important when human-centered organisations, like universities, aim to respond to rapidly changing requirements. Typically, this kind of organisational resilience (cf. Hamel & Välikangas, 2003) has not been required of the university. However, crisis management calls for flexible structures, low hierarchies and a certain type of fluidity of practices in all functions (cf. Laihonen & Huhtamäki, 2020; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). In such environments, the central role of management is to energise personnel and help them focus their energy on issues that matter the most from the perspective of organisational objectives.

Data and Methods

This chapter is based on survey data collected in two periods: at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis and one year later. To determine how university managers, such as rectors, vice rectors and deans, coped during the COVID-19 pandemic, the first electric survey was sent to managers at all Finnish universities in March 2020. The survey included structured and open-ended questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and different management themes (Pekkola et al., 2021) The same structured questionnaire was sent to the managers in April 2021 to conduct a follow-up survey to determine how the prolonged pandemic and the state of emergency affected university management and managers. The findings from the open-ended questions of the first round of the survey were summarised for managers, and they were asked to reflect on the current situation and all the changes that have happened since spring 2020 in four open-ended questions (see Fig. 15.2 for the survey design).

Both surveys were conducted anonymously, so the responders could not be identified; thus, changes in individual opinions could not be observed. The first round included 34 respondents, and the second 24. The respondents represented almost every university in Finland. Most of the respondents had long experience in working in universities (over 83% of them had worked over 12 years in the university sector) and in university management (approximately 66% had more than 5 years of experience in working as an academic leader). The impact of prolonged crises was analysed by qualitatively analysing the survey findings. The open-ended questions were analysed by utilising conventional content analysis.
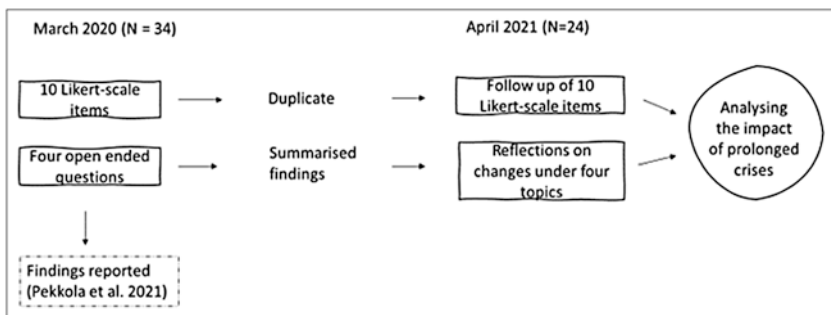

Fig. 15.2 Survey design

Findings

Closed Questions

In the survey, the academic leaders were asked about the functionality of support services, international activities and communication and management systems. All the means except two decreased between 2020 and 2021, indicating that the prolonged COVID-19 crisis negatively affected the functioning of universities. The only two exceptions were questions related to research activities and universities' external communication, which were in a better state in 2021 compared to 2020. There were no major differences between these two years except for questions on the everyday human resources (HR) management in universities, international activities and implementing digital transformation reforms in teaching. This can be interpreted to mean that the immediate response to crises was satisfactory (i.e., online conferences, online recruitment and orientation and shift to digital teaching); however, with the crisis situation being prolonged, the benchmark was no longer survival, but quality of service, and some of the negative effects or externalities of new digital practices had become evident. That said, the universities are in quite a similar situation compared to 2020 with regard to functioning in a state of emergency and in a global pandemic; however, the 2021 situation was slightly more negative than in 2020 (Fig. 15.3).

Managers were presented with key findings from the 2020 survey categorised into four themes and asked to reflect on their answers to determine whether the problems or best practices stayed the same compared to 2020, considering the prolonged nature of the pandemic and resultant changes. In the next paragraphs, we present the main findings of the first survey from March 2020 (see also Pekkola et al., 2020), followed by the summarised reflections of the academic leaders from April 2021.

Open Questions

The first open-ended question entailed the challenges that had emerged during the pandemic and whether they remained the same.

The acute COVID-19 crisis caused the following challenges for academic managers:

- Concern about personnel well-being and coping
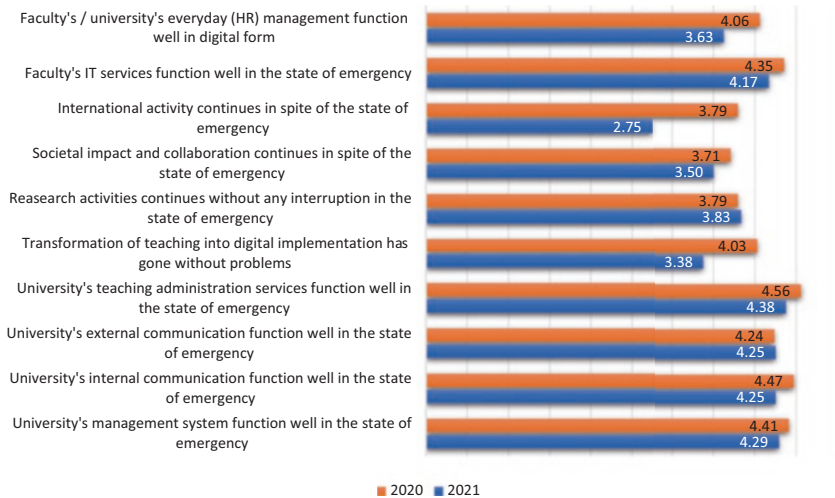- Extensive working hours and endless online meetings

	2020	2021
Faculty's / university's everyday (HR) management function well in digital form	4.06	3.63
Faculty's IT services function well in the state of emergency	4.35	4.17
International activity continues in spite of the state of emergency	3.79	2.75
Societal impact and collaboration continues in spite of the state of emergency	3.71	3.50
Reasearch activities continues without any interruption in the state of emergency	3.79	3.83
Transformation of teaching into digital implementation has gone without problems	4.03	3.38
University's teaching administration services function well in the state of emergency	4.56	4.38
University's external communication function well in the state of emergency	4.24	4.25
University's internal communication function well in the state of emergency	4.47	4.25
University's management system function well in the state of emergency	4.41	4.29

■ 2020 ■ 2021

Fig. 15.3   Means of the answers for each question

- Managing daily routines online was considered worrisome and hectic, and the lack of face-to-face meetings caused communication problems
- The guidelines from officials were thought to be unclear
- All employees were not equipped with 'digi-readiness'

Most of the respondents thought that the issues and challenges had remained the same: online meetings and working days grew longer; people yearned for face-to-face interaction; university staff were getting tired and overloaded with work; usually simple things became more complex than before; and managers were increasingly worried about the general well-being of the staff and students. The staff was becoming drained, and there were signs of apathy as a result of the prolonged pandemic and state of emergency.

Some academic managers also said that the situation improved over the past year since people were adjusting to the situation, and many of the problems had become moderate compared to spring 2020. One of the managers highlighted that there was more information and increased understanding of COVID-19 and all the things related, which made adjusting and coping easier than at the beginning of the pandemic. People

had begun to recognise the positive sides of remote working, the digital leap had moderated and almost everybody had adopted new ways of working. Nevertheless, even though things had improved, there was growing concern about the possible problems and issues that are yet to emerge when the state of emergency ends, and the universities return to the 'old normal'.

The second open-ended question was about the best practices and positive effects resulting from the state of emergency and how these practices may have changed over the past year, between 2020 and 2021.

To address acute COVID-19 crises, academic managers listed the following good and successful practices:

- Online devices functioned without major problems
- Online communication was possible with personnel
- Formal meetings became more efficient, and there were more participants
- Pedagogical development was given priority
- Participation in conferences was possible for a larger share of staff members

As in the first question, managers stated that the positive effects remained quite the same: Managers and the staff discovered effective and practical ways for remote working, the digital tools and their use improved over the year, meetings were getting more efficient and overall efficiency of work improved.

The managers also mentioned a few problems and concerns related to the themes of the second question. Most of the concerns focused on social relations, true and humane interaction and questions on how people do their job. Remote working did not offer proper facilities and opportunities for people and teams to innovate and develop, since the technology and online work did not encourage people to engage in conversations. Therefore, although it appeared that meetings were more efficient than before, meeting content and outcomes were lower in quality and quantity. People also multitasked during meetings, which caused a decrease in inefficiency. University managers were also worried about the onboarding of new staff members and how new colleagues became connected to the community when they had not met their colleagues in person.

The third theme of the open-ended questions was prioritising one's work and workload.

The acute COVID-19 crises caused the following issues for daily prioritising of work and maintaining the ability to work:

- The work schedule changed rapidly
- The workload increased (because of meetings), and the planning of teaching took more time
- The feeling of 'busyness' and missing out of continuity and routines increased
- The line between free time and work blurred, with work being continuous without breaks
- The ergonomics of working at home was inferior compared to the office
- The management and control of the 'big picture' was lost

In their answers, managers stated that the problems remained quite the same: Days were full of meetings without face-to-face interaction, people missed a sense of community and managers dealt with broad and complex issues daily. Some of the managers mentioned that they found it difficult to manage their work in its entirety and that more attention should be paid to ways that separate work from leisure time.

However, managers had noted some changes for the better in some of the responses that were mentioned regarding how the state of emergency and the prolonged pandemic time had become 'the new normal', which helped in coping with basics in work. There was an improvement in the workload since there were not many ad hoc tasks related to surviving with the changes, since people were now used to working in a different way than at the beginning of the pandemic. Managers and staff now had a better understanding of the current situation, and they were better oriented to the 'new normal', which helped managers to better manage their workload and prioritise their work.

The last theme of the survey was managing the ability to work in a prolonged pandemic.

To cope with the acute COVID-19 crisis, academic managers listed the following practices that helped maintain their individual work ability and control:

- Exercise, outdoor activities and sufficient breaks during the workday and the delimitation of the workday
- Scheduling and planning new work alongside forming new routines

- Maintenance of social contacts with employees and colleagues
- Creation of informal online meetings

The main problem within this theme was that people did not have face-to-face interactions and did not feel as connected to their colleagues and community as before. People longed for face-to-face meetings and opportunities to meet their colleagues, and this need increased over time when the state of emergency was prolonged. However, on the whole, the situation slightly improved since some of the staff found enjoyment in working remotely, and it appears that in the future, some of the staff preferred not to go back to how things were before the pandemic started. There were also changes for the worse since taking breaks from work has been a growing challenge over the past year, and it has been increasingly difficult to prioritise work and detach oneself from it when working from home. Fortunately, some of the managers said that informal interactions between colleagues, such as virtual coffee breaks or lunches, were now organised more often than before, which helped with the problems mentioned before.

Discussion

COVID-19 has caused communication problems between HEIs and other government officials. In addition, Marinoni et al. (2020) noted that COVID-19 has severely impacted clear and effective communication with staff and students during lockdowns. Survey findings revealed that Finnish universities and their support services survived the 'stress test' caused by COVID-19 remarkably well. Based on the survey responses that were collected in 2020 and 2021, we noticed a slight decrease, on average, in the statements measuring the functionality of support services and communication related to coping with crises; however, both were perceived to be at a good level.

Furthermore, the surveys indicated a drop in continuing international activities and transitioning into digital teaching. The drop in teaching is probably a sign that in the first wave of COVID-19, these activities were managed well as an alternative survival mode. However, as time passed, requirements became higher, and problems related to digital international activities and teaching became more evident. These problems are probably related to the overall transition of universities and their teaching methods into digital modes, which has been an ongoing incremental process for years. Pre-COVID-19 studies have shown that both teachers and students

have problems in their digital competencies and that digital transformation does not just happen by exposing teachers and learners to technology (Bond et al. 2018).

Moreover, while there has been a drop in international activities, there has been no decrease in the related research. This is interesting, since international activities are often (not always) related to research. To speculate a bit, this can be interpreted as staff having more time for research, drafting applications and writing publications while working remotely. However, the lack of international activities may, in turn, negatively affect research in the long run, since remote-only networking is challenging with regard to finding new collaborative partners. Another important dimension of international activity should probably be discussed more widely. For many academics, international activities form an important social context; therefore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisational social interaction also has to fulfil this gap in professional support that may be essential for work well-being.

Crises are sources of social uncertainty, disruption and change (Bundy et al. 2016), and they also have physical effects on work and working environments (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). COVID-19 is no doubt a crisis for Finnish universities; it has changed both the work and the physical working environments. Both of these changes have affected the work of academic leaders, as they have impacted all public managers (Schuster et al., 2020). It appears that the impact is persistent and has not changed significantly while the crisis continues (time of writing). However, the new normal is seen on a horizon, and uncertainty related to the overall epidemic situation is easing. For managers, one of the main crisis-related challenges is the difficulty in sustaining the system and maintaining routines (Ziakas et al., 2021). The problem of sustainability has been an issue since the first day of the virus. With a prolonged crisis, managers are no longer so worried about 'daily practices' but are afraid that new employees will not be socialised into the working community and that there are unseen social problems when maintaining working practices online.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to observe the perceptions of academic managers about their role as managers. Our empirical interest was in the micro-level analysis of the role and changes in academic leadership and support services during crises. The roles of university managers, deans and

rectors have changed and have become more professional (Carvalho and Santiago 2010; Pekkola et al., 2018; Pekkola et al., 2020). It seems that they have managed to decipher their way out of the crisis. However, the universities' strength, in addition to their resilience, lies in their academic staff (Pekkola et al., 2020), not managers. The autonomy of academic work has been challenged, and organisational control has increased from the impact of NPM and managerialism; however, academics still are self-regulating and critical with regard to their work and work practices. The role of managers increases when the collegial element and community are cut off. The situation is difficult since many social aspects of academic work are related to students and international activities and thus are beyond the control of the working organisation. The managers continue working with daily practices, coordinating academic work, making decisions and planning in addition to organising informal online events. However, from the perspective of academic managers, as the crisis is prolonged, maintaining social connections and control becomes more difficult if staff members are unwilling to continue office work and cannot collaborate internationally.

For universities, the crisis has been an excellent time to ask again 'Who are we?', 'Who do we want to be?' (cf. Spender 2014), 'What are the basic processes and core tasks that need to be maintained' and 'What are the best ways of maintaining these activities?' Universities are considered to be almost eternal organisations. They have central and generally stable functions in societies. The first round of the survey revealed that crisis management was successful because of the autonomous nature of academic work (Pekkola et al., 2021). If the role of universities includes ensuring academic autonomy, freedom of learning and non-interrupted education and research, the loosely coupled organisational structure and organisation of work is probably the best way to ensure resilience (cf. Hamel & Välikangas, 2003). This necessitates dynamic knowledge strategies (Laihonen & Huhtamäki, 2020) and processes that enable the collection and refinement of the needed information to support decision-making not only at the strategic level (e.g., Laihonen & Mäntylä, 2018; Zack, 1999) but also at the individual level of the teacher–researcher. Indeed, crisis management calls for flexible structures, low hierarchies and a certain type of fluidity of practices in all functions (cf. Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). The more universities rely on 'corporate planning' and 'shared and harmonised practice', the more vulnerable they are to external crises.

The stress test has been applied, and it appears that Finnish universities have survived well and that their managers have found ways to cope during crises. Overall, the study raises questions on what it means to be a leader and an academic in remote learning or working contexts. When physical interaction decreases (especially in non-laboratory disciplines), what is the role of the academic manager, and does it move towards more in-depth leadership that partly fulfils the role of lessening collegial support or does it become more or less the work of a 'faculty manager' that ensures that daily practices are covered and that the infrastructure of remote academic work is functional? If travel restrictions continue and international mobility becomes permanently difficult, who will manage and steer the international disciplinary communication that has been mainly organised by scientific associations and individual academics thus far? How this impacts knowledge creation and whether it strengthens the role of university organisations as a platform for social interaction or alienating academics from their communities are crucial questions for future studies.

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