

# Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times

*Special Edition:* A collection of papers from  
the Revitalising Universities in  
(Post-)COVID Times Symposium held at  
University of Tokyo 2022

Guest Editor: Naomi Berman



UNESCO OBSERVATORY  
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

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## ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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**INTRODUCTION** This special Issue presents a selection of papers presented at the Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times Symposium, held at the University of Tokyo, November 2022. This hybrid event gathered academics, educators, and experts from Australia, Japan and other regions to discuss the future of higher education as universities navigate pathways out of the pandemic. The experience of the pandemic may vary between countries based on cultures, expectations, and social organisation, therefore exploring a diversity of experiences and expectations as universities reopen offers a fruitful point of differentiation and comparison between globally diverse educational spaces.

Echoing Connell's original call to rethink the 'good university', COVID has thrown into question taken-for-granted notions about the position of universities, forcing a reframing of understandings around their social purpose. The pivot to online during the pandemic has highlighted the potential for digital technology to transform the way we teach and learn. Yet it has also become clear that such transformation does not come without its social, economic and wellbeing costs. Indeed, questions around whether the response measures introduced by universities across the globe early in the pandemic are still valid and viable need to be asked, as institutions decide what gets kept, thrown away, amplified, or diminished. The symposium provided a space for reflection on these questions as well as broader philosophical and theoretical deliberations on the 'good university'.

**Naomi Berman**  
Guest Editor

# THE CALL: A SEMI-FICTIONAL ACCOUNT OF STUDENT GRIEF DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC

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## BIOGRAPHY

Dr Alexandra Ridgway is a sociologist and socio-legal scholar of family, personal and intimate life who completed her PhD at The University of Hong Kong in 2020. In addition to researching topics relating to family breakdown and relationship loss, Alexandra has also written about her experiences of grief and chronic pain. Her autoethnography on writing a PhD whilst grieving the loss of her father was published in the journal, *Higher Education Research and Development* in 2022. She remains a Fellow at the Centre for Criminology at The University of Hong Kong.

## ABSTRACT

In this piece of semi-fictional prose, I explore the experience of international student grief during the COVID pandemic, specifically within the context of a city-wide lockdown. While the account takes the form of fictional diary entries, it draws heavily of my own personal experience of losing my father whilst studying my PhD overseas in 2018 and, two years later, living through the lockdowns in Melbourne, Australia which, at one point, were considered the toughest in the world. I follow this with some reflections on the key concerns that the piece raises about student grief during the COVID pandemic and use these to suggest some changes universities could adopt to better support these students during times of crisis and more generally.

**APRIL 5, 2020**

The night is still, as is the day. This is not a peaceful quietness but a restless one.

The virus is among us.

Before arriving in Australia, I had imagined beaches and barbeques, warm summery nights, trips in campervans to the desert. I had imagined my skin crusted in dust from wild backpacking adventures, my hair tangled like salty seaweed. I had imagined freedom.

I bought the university sales pitch: the pretty pictures of historic buildings surrounded by lawns and oaks, the telling of rooms full of vibrant, bright students from around the world: speaking together, learning together, growing together and, most importantly, being together.

I had not imagined this: a city halted by a global pandemic, a raging virus with a death toll rising, the emergence of a city-wide lock down, borders closing.

A solitary experience in a room - a desk, single bed, compact bathroom with sink, shower, and toilet. A room whose contours I am getting to know so well. A fan whose whirr implants itself permanently in my mind, going round and round and round. Meals delivered on trays to your door. The allowance of one walk per day, alone. The relief of smelling fresh air, of feeling sun on skin, of hearing the birds who continue to sing, oblivious to it all. The smile in the barista's eyes, their mouth hidden behind a mask, as they hand me my coffee. My gratefulness for this: my only human connection.

My room has but one window, my aperture through which to see the city. All that is there is a grey concrete wall which seems to say – nothing to see here, my dear, nothing to see here.

Above my desk, a previous student has engraved a love heart into the wall. I trace it with my fingers, imagining them carving the round lines. Science guides us to stay apart and, as a scientist myself, I can only agree. Yet, as a human, I desperately want the opposite.

**APRIL 22, 2020**

It wakes me with a startle, the shrill sound of my phone ringing and I stumble through the darkness, hands clambering to find it, scattering papers and pens.

Usually, I live for contact with those from home. Phone calls and facetime - efforts at creating a sense of normality. But today, well today the shrill of the phone is unexpected.

“Hello?”

She breathes in, a pause.

This is not a call for celebration.

“He’s gone”.

She tells of how it happened:

A heart attack while picking cherries in our family orchard;

A fall from the rickety ladder I had urged him to replace;

Laying there until sunset when the rest of the family returned home;

His body shaded in the colours of dusk: his favourite time of day.

Afterwards, all I want to do is howl but the walls are paper thin. Instead, I grab a towel from the bathroom and thrust it between my teeth, biting harder and harder down on it, releasing all that is woken within me. A grief-induced anger for leaving them; a fury at being stuck here in this godawful room; a deep questioning of what ifs. What would have happened if I had been there? What if they had been locked down as I am, if they had not had the freedom to go out for hours on end?

I knew I loved him, but I never knew how much. Now I know. Oh, how I know now. This is a love which knows no bounds, a love that has no words, a love that can only be felt.

I long for a hand to hold, a shoulder to sob into, a person to sit beside me as I wander through my grief. Yet, COVID has made this an impossibility. There are rules to follow.

Email after email is drafted: to the dorm manager, lecturers I have only briefly seen in person, faceless university administrators.

Email after email is deleted: this is not, after all, COVID-related. This is not priority. It is but one death in a world of mounting deaths.

Heart breaking for me but just a number for everyone else.

## **APRIL 27, 2020**

I attend the funeral virtually in the middle of the night, wrapped in the pink and purple pashmina he brought me back from one of his various adventures abroad, its' warm fibres protecting me from the Melbourne winter chill. While the rest of the world has taken great strides technologically, this is not so for the funeral home where we are to say our last goodbyes. The image is small, the casket tiny, like a matchbox on a screen. Not what I expected for my farewell of a man who lived his life on the land, who could lift me up sky high and race me around fields bare footed. But it is nice to hear them speak of him and his wonderful life. I just wish I was there.

Once the ceremony ends, I collapse on the bed in grief-filled exhaustion, leaving the blazing desk light on. I think little about the pashmina which I leave on top of my pile of books, its fabric leaning against the exterior of the exposed bulb.

I wake to a sizzle and a pop, the breaking of glass, the smell of smoke, flames searing. An exploded lightbulb. The pashmina turning from pink to gold. My thoughts are few as I grab it enflamed and race to the bathroom throwing it in the sink and quickly turning on the tap.

Smoke overwhelms.

Alarms in the hallway call out:



Emergency, emergency, evacuate immediately.

Emergency, emergency, evacuate immediately.

We make our way hurriedly down the fire escape and onto the street below. A group of residents who have been living apart, together for the first time in weeks, huddling in the Melbourne cold, doing our best to be 1.5 metres apart.

Breathing laboured. Mind scattered. In shock. I start to dial into my phone: D.A.D – and stop. A realisation, a reminder, of absence. The person to call is no more.

When the firefighters arrive, I call out, “it’s a scarf in a sink, room 207”

We wait in the dark. Shuddering, shivering, silent.

When they return to give the “all clear”, a firefighter is holding the charred remnants of the pashmina that was. “I assume”, he says, “that you don’t want this”. I shake my head quietly, bite my lip, watch in silence as it disappears into the truck.

Back in the room I am an emotional mess. Once infuriating, the whirr of the fan not only clears away the smoke but provides me with a much-needed rhythm as I pack my things to move across the hall.

Order, order, order. I need order, order, order.

Clothes, pens, books, toiletries. My fingers tremble as I pack them, the shock still seething through me.

I search for it - a heart engraved into a now scorched wall, trace it with my fingers.

A knock at the door.

“I know” the student says, “that this is breaking the rules but has anyone checked you for burns?”

I shake my head.

She hands me a bottle of water, carefully looks over my feet then hands and holds them tight. “Do you need someone to stay with you tonight?” The tears well in my eyes but I shake my head. “It is kind of you but no, I will be OK”. “Do not hesitate to find me”, she says, “even in the middle of the night. Room 224”

She stands to leave, her eyes smiling warmly behind the mask. And I am grateful for this: my only human connection.

## REFLECTIONS

The extent and impact of university student bereavement is well documented and yet institutional responses remain limited. While the COVID pandemic has provided an opportunity to address these gaps, few universities appear to have made any significant progress in this space. The role of lockdowns which increased the isolation of students complicated matters further as too did border closures which prevented interstate and international students from being able to be with friends and family during times of personal loss and to attend death-related rituals. The semi-fictional diary entries presented above use a personalised account to reveal how these issues can play out at the individual level and their emotional effects. By interweaving the difficulties of living through a pandemic while also experiencing significant loss, I reveal how the absence of physical interaction can impact the grieving process of students including their decisions regarding help-seeking. Furthermore, the piece reveals how a heavy focus on COVID-related issues had the potential to result in non-COVID-related deaths appearing of lesser importance, thus reducing the likelihood of students affected by these losses to reach out. At the same time, I highlight how small and seemingly insignificant exchanges can act as vital support mechanisms during these experiences. Together these issues point towards the critical need for universities globally to have a comprehensive, evidence-based, and proactive approach to university student bereavement which acts as a baseline of support which can then be enhanced during times of social crisis. At its very core this would include a standardised bereavement leave policy for students, training for staff in how to best respond to student grief, specialised counselling programs and, if possible, a peer-based support program.