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Higher education under threat: China, Malaysia, and the UK respond to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction: Disappearing academic self-governance and endangered academic freedom[i]

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The day before Chinese New Year Eve (23rd January 2020), Wuhan's lockdown shocked the entire nation and subsequently the world. Since then, the tragedy of over 1.3 million deaths from COVID-19 and more than 53 million confirmed cases have created devastating conditions in which national borders have been closed, cities locked down, private lives restricted, and public services, including education, dramatically altered (WHO 2020). Under severe threat (UNESCO 2020a), education is among the most profoundly impacted sectors. Having affected nearly 1.6 billion (91.3%) learners in 194 countries through national closures of schools and universities (UNESCO 2020b), the COVID-19 pandemic has surpassed the 1918 Influenza Pandemic in its scale of global disruption, leading us to uncharted territory where out-of-class learning has been heavily relied upon. Not only must emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al. 2020) confront long-standing unresolved debates regarding learning outside the physical space (since, for example, Berge 1998), but serious social issues have also resulted from the pandemic in which education must play a central role in building a just society (Giannini 2020).

Higher Education (HE) worldwide has been undergoing significant changes in trying to deal with the pandemic, most notably by having swiftly moved classes online. Whether viewed as an emergency pivot (Black and Charlton this Forum) or policy expedient (Ma and Hookham this Forum), shifting from face-to-face to remote/virtual/distance and/or online teaching, hereafter referred to as e-learning (see Bates 2019) could become a new (post-pandemic) reality for academics and students alike, changing HE forever (Frankfurt 2020). To begin to

understand this emerging 'reality' and its implications in different systems, this Forum explores experiences and perspectives in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, Malaysia, and the UK. The openness of the Forum format allowed the respective authors to engage with the still evolving 'pandemic pedagogy' phenomenon (Gurung 2020) as it was and is emerging in their particular setting. Specific to different national contexts, reified in the emergency response to education disruption, the three perspectives individually and collectively shed light on the implications of contrasting states of university governance and overall HE development.

The first contribution by Black and Charlton analyses how overemphasis on e-learning technology over pedagogy during the pandemic has resulted in further managerialism, de-professionalisation, and exploitation of academic labour in the UK. This view is embedded in the long tradition of academic self-governance underpinning disciplinary knowledge and academic freedom (Muller and Young 2014), especially before the demise of the University Grants Committee (UGC) (1919–1988). Having become the state's 'crucial asset' (The Dearing Report, 1997, 12) within its 'arm's length' control, UK HE has been driven toward a state-regulated market, especially through measuring and standardising frameworks including the recent Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF since 2015), the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), and since 2018 the Office for Students (OfS) (Fillipakou and Tapper 2019). The UK perspective echoes broader critical concerns of neoliberalism's far-reaching implications for HE, with university governance, research, curriculum, academic labour, and teacher-student relationships increasingly confronted by challenging pressures from market mechanisms (Muller and Young 2014, Ma 2019). Against this background, Black and Charlton highlight the troubling implications of universities' responses, focusing particularly on their fundamentally managerial/corporate 'statements of intent' that reflect poorly thought-through strategies and pedagogical under-preparedness.

Considering a particular aspect of such pedagogical unreadiness, Pok and colleagues examine how, under the extreme conditions created by the pandemic, a single point of weakness – in this case academic understanding around teaching-related copyright rules – can have a significant impact. Their preliminary study of copyright awareness in online teaching in Malaysia indicates a lack of training for staff on copyright relevant scenarios, which they suggest stems from the rapid growth of Malaysian HE. Driven by globalisation and neoliberal principles, the private sector started to emerge in the late 1980s and was further liberated in 1996 (Mok 2011). In a relatively short period of time, marketisation has produced over 400 private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education, 2020). Established in 2004, the relatively inexperienced Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) understandably faces tremendous challenges to regulate the private sector while maintaining direct control over public universities. Highlighting one of these challenges which has been made prominent during the pandemic, Pok et al. discuss the inadequate legal provision to protect academics' intellectual properties against the emergent transition, resulting in large volumes of original teaching materials uploaded to third party platforms with disputable copyright ownerships. Their study suggests that while MOHE's ambition of becoming a regional education hub by 2020 has driven reforms toward technology savvy education, the overall environment is less auspicious, with undertrained academic staff and legislative frameworks ill-suited to supporting the country's 'blended learning' model.

China introduced the concept of 'Education Informationisation' in 2001, thus entering the e-learning space prior to Malaysia's National e-Learning Policy (DePan 2011), though much later than the UK, where technology enabled learning (TEL) pioneered by the Open University has been widely used since the 1990s. China has seen slow and uneven developments in this area, due to regional economic differences and imbalance of educational resources (Gu et al.

2018). In 2018, while 15-year-olds from Beijing, Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu surpassed their counterparts from other OECD countries on reading in a digital environment (OECD 2019), nationwide only 26.7% of Chinese university students had access to a computer on campus (Ministry of Education 2019). China's scenario was further complicated by its pragmatically fragmented university governance against transnationalism, neoliberalism, and marketism (Mok and Han 2017). Maintaining structural control after legal, policy, and financial decentralisation (Han and Xu 2019), the university Party's grassroots committees, overseen by assigned Party Secretariats (Huang 2019)[ii], have legal authority over presidents' decisions including those state-appointed for public universities (Higher Education Act 2018). Against this unique contextual complexity of HE in China, Ma and Hookham's final contribution presents a crisis management narrative of HE responding not only to the pandemic but also China's delicate situation as its origin. This perspective illustrates remarkable instrumentality which is legitimised by hierarchical authority, accentuated patriotism, and a collective crisis rhetoric.

As a whole, this Forum bears witness to HE's collective resilience in the face of adversity striving for order and service continuance under threat, coping with difficult circumstances and global disruptions. Notwithstanding, it notes decreasing academic governance of the university, reduced academic voice and authority on pedagogy, and the accompanying increasing cohesive academic work without adequate provision of care, support, or protection of intellectual property. While the pandemic and its resulting securitisation discourse intensify and arguably justify this observation (Murphy 2020), these trends mirror widely observed problematic implications of neoliberalism having driven the respective HE reforms. The convergence of concerns noted in this Forum is particularly alarming, since the respective HE sectors have taken different development trajectories featured by highly contrasting national contexts. Most

notably, the UK has the longest, hundred-year-old tradition of publicly and socially endorsed academic freedom (Fillipakou and Tapper 2019) which, while backing up Black and Charlton's critical analyses, may well be our collective last defence and hope for – as far as it is possible – politically neutral and socially unbiased organisation of knowledge. This is of utmost importance since, on the one hand, US education has a likewise powerful tradition endorsing pragmatism and utilitarianism (Dewey 1904, Mitchell 1981). On the other hand, China, currently the second largest economy and a growing superpower in the world, positions its education first and foremost on the 'frontline of ideological work' (Huang 2019, np); where the meaning of academic freedom may get systematically filtered through historied nationalism (Schneider 2014), censorship (Huang 2020) involving 'third parties fearing government retribution' (Law 2019, 172), the 'politicisation of universities-within-the-state' (Han and Xu 2019, 931), and the upheld 'ideological correctness' in social sciences and humanities research (Gao and Zheng 2020, 554). In this trying time, which may render a rhetoric of needing ever greater national solidarity and civil obedience plausible, it is particularly imperative to (re)claim academic freedom empowered by instrumental academic self-governance. Academic freedom stands on the frontline of defending equality and diversity, negotiating between past and present, national and global, and the powerful and the vulnerable. Without academic freedom, difficult questions cannot be asked and issues addressed, and situations which endanger it (even in the context of an immediate crisis like Covid-19) risk jeopardising the creation of knowledge needed for the future of society.

Learning from the emergency pivot: A technology-enabled paradigm shift or emperor's new clothes?

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This perspective addresses one of the most salient issues that arose from the shift from the physical space of face-to-face teaching to the technology-space of remote teaching. We question the over-emphasis placed by university managers and the HE media in the UK upon the medium of transmission as the solution to the COVID-19 educational challenges, that is, the technology of online teaching, rather than focusing upon the pedagogic processes of learning remotely. We examine how this focus upon the medium rather than the message, the emphasising use of the technology rather than understanding the processes of learning, has extended the control of managers, and of newly empowered TEL teams, over academics. Rather than COVID-19 offering a professionally informed paradigm shift in HE, a shift that was perhaps needed, we have, we suggest, instead seen further standardisation through de-professionalisation and managerialism.

When the seriousness of the COVID-19 outbreak within the UK was recognised in early March 2020, HEIs made an 'emergency pivot' to remote provision for the remainder of the academic year. In the majority of cases this meant academics with little or no experience of leading learning outside of physical spaces (Cengage 2020) needed to rapidly adapt face-to-face activities for synchronous and/or asynchronous technology-enabled learning. This 'emergency remote teaching' (Hodges et al. 2020), with its 'pandemic pedagogy' (e.g. Williamson et al., 2020), was worlds apart from well-planned, online courses (Bates 2019).

As we moved towards the new academic year, UK institutions issued 'statements of intent' for teaching in 2020/21. These statements were driven by efforts to persuade students to return or commence their studies, fending off the financial impact of deferrals. For the majority of institutions the statement outlined an approach where larger lectures would be provided remotely to avoid the attendant risks of large gatherings while, where possible, small group teaching would re-commence face-to-face, supported by additional remote provision (McKie 2020).

We suggest such declarations were problematic in five ways. First, despite the offering of face-to-face small group teaching, alongside on-campus student support and social opportunities (McKie 2020), the public discourse led by the popular media was of 'cack-handed' university responses to COVID-19, impending university bankruptcy (The Times 2020) and universities 'remain[ing] closed' for the foreseeable future (Bennett 2020). For example, *The Independent*, in reporting Cambridge University's intentions, asserted 'University to run all formerly 'face-to-face' classes online until next summer', despite the clear statement by Cambridge that this 'online' provision related only to lectures and that all small-group teaching, the heart of the Oxbridge offer, would continue face-to-face (Virgo 2020), in line with social distancing regulations. Despite this 'closure' being widely contested by academics (Westbrook 2020), not least because universities have continued working throughout (Greatrix 2020), this narrative of 'closure' calls into question what the expectations of students were in approaching the new academic year. Confusion and anxiety for prospective or returning students (UCU 2020) was exacerbated by the Office for Students (OfS) requiring 'absolute clarity' in advance of students accepting offers. This was despite the highly fluid and uncertain context, in which vice-chancellors were understandably reluctant to be pushed into over or under-promising (Fazackerly 2020). Consequently, institutions attempting to COVID-proof by reporting their

provision would be largely at a distance were being criticised for not going far enough (Greatrix 2020), while those who proposed a 'COVID-secure working and learning environment' on a 'fully operational campus' from September through a range of safety measures were framed as 'irresponsible' (BBC 2020).

Second, it was clear almost all UK institutions would be relying upon technology at the start of the academic year to 'do the right things' not only for students and academics, but also for their local communities and economy in supporting efforts to mitigate against rising R-rates (Greatrix 2020). However, this technology-enabled learning was described using multiple terms including online, blended, hybrid and remote. Not only did this differing nomenclature risk widely varying practices both within and between institutions, it asserted differing expectations for both academics and students, a challenge exacerbated by the problematic use of 'online' to describe the earlier emergency interventions made in Spring 2020.

Informed by Bates (2019), 'online' education is a distinct learner-led, self-directed approach resulting from careful long-term planning and application of instruction design principles. These principles have been borne out effectively in, for example, MOOCs, where technological advancement combined with a clear, well-planned social constructivist, collaborative pedagogy has offered real inclusive possibility for diverse learners who have been supported to learn at their own pace and in their own style. Significantly, such 'online' provision is distinct from virtual or remote learning which uses technology-enabled solutions to provide students with access to learning materials that would otherwise be accessed face-to-face and from blended or hybrid (HyFlex) learning which involves students following tutor-defined activities or reading, prior to joining synchronous, usually face-to-face, activity. By using the term 'online' rather than 'virtual' or 'remote', as we will explain, university managers were asserting their expectations of academics and TEL-professionals. Indeed, academics and technologists struggled with the 'unrealistic expectations' of shifting from offline to a fully

online approach (Williamson et al. 2020) within such a limited timescale and concurrent with their other professional, research, and personal obligations. The result was significant wellbeing concerns (Flaherty, 2020).

Third, and perhaps most problematic, was how decisions on these new modalities were being informed and reached. While, in our view, an overhaul of UK HE teaching was long overdue, it remains to be seen whether COVID-19 will invoke a digital legacy or re-establish the value of teaching throughout UK HE. Regardless of the legacy of its implementation, and indeed of the terminologies used, we argue UK university managers' COVID-19 planning was being driven by the technology, not by pedagogic processes. Courses, modules and programmes were shoe-horned into prescribed technologies and platforms regardless of the learning problem the tech-solution was designed to enable. Such practice was, we assert, undoubtedly the consequence of several factors. For example, we propose a lack of value has conventionally been placed on teaching in UK HE academic recruitment. Academic promotions have been based upon research excellence rather than teaching ability. While the provision of online videos for academics that instructed on the use of the technology was fairly straightforward, developing, and then educating using, a new pedagogy was much harder to achieve. Moreover, it might also be argued that pivoting to digitally-enabled teaching, an environment in which collaborative learning is best suited, threatened academics' identity as the 'expert'. Academics therefore might have had reason to persist with conventional teaching styles.

Fourth, as Manning (2020, n.p) asserts, online learning has little to do with teaching and more to do with its promises to 'vanquish elitism and deliver engagement, enterprise, and employability', advancing contemporary trends for 'para-pedagogical agendas' rather than engendering students' learning within COVID-induced uncertainty. Concern over this shoehorning of technology over pedagogy is evident in the data generated from an online

survey of UK academics (Black and Charlton forthcoming). This data indicates the levels of anxiety they felt in needing to use prescribed technologies: '*interactions with students are now fraught, the lack of certainty and the need to use this technology is creating excess anxiety*', and the de-professionalisation this was engendering as '*the university has felt that the recording of slides is sufficient a replacement for what we do in the classroom'*. As Clark and Feldon (2014) make clear, the key factor in enabling learning is not the media, but the pedagogy, and this involves the skill and judgment of the educator. So the solution is not merely to deploy technology but to deploy technologies that support the anticipated learning.

A technology-driven approach was also problematic because few universities had sufficient learning technologists to support the development of necessary e-resources. With their skillset being in high demand, recruiting additional technologists was not a simple task, even had there been a desire or funding to do so. Whereas '*what really is needed is dedicated technology teams to ... help develop materials suited to our subject and students ... to do what we need to actually do*', the burden was falling on academics, and management were assuming upskilling academics would 'ensure' student engagement (Stickney et al. 2019). However, should the technology have actually supported the intended pedagogies, upskilling takes considerable time, a resource which was, and remains, in scant supply. The UK's Open University's '*Take your teaching online*' course takes 24-hours to complete so was hardly a quick fix for academics who were juggling teaching with research and administrative/leadership demands, along with caring responsibilities and more. In this context, are technology-led solutions the emperor's new clothes? Are they an unsatisfactory alternative to classroom teaching, hastily administered to academics and students alike?

Fifth, and significantly, while COVID-19 may create a valuable digital legacy, not least in stimulating a move away from large-scale lectures, we observe that in promoting the technology and the term 'online' some universities are seemingly making strategic decisions which go beyond addressing an immediate need to support a longer-term online intention. Yet are these two intents really compatible given the skills and resourcing needs of the latter, and the urgency of the former? Although the lessons learned through the 'emergency pivot' of Spring 2020 will no doubt enhance provision going forward, it was unrealistic to imagine that Autumn 2020 would find universities and academics adequately resourced for true online programmes, or students prepared and able, to engage with this new pedagogy. Short-term, survival solutions, based upon the limited technological repertoire of many academics and universities are neither sustainable, nor strategically desirable for longer term online provision. An authentic move to online education 'must be done the right way' (Wakefield 2020, np) through the complete redesign of the learning experiences. Such redesign though needs significant pedagogical investment and support (Kogetsidis et al. 2020), whereas an approach to the commodification of academic labour, whose deficiencies can be 'remedied' by merely 'upskilling' or 'training' (Taylor-Guy and Chase 2020), extends the control of managers and newly empowered technologists and precludes a professionally informed paradigm shift in HE practices. How are students used to face-to-face contact and ill-equipped for such digital transitions (Williamson et al. 2020) adapting to this new education, and how do we support this? While initial studies indicated students' assessment performance was typically stronger following initial lockdown in spring 2020 (Gonzales et al. 2020), this may be due to the extended deadlines offered and the restrictions on alternative distracting activities. Of significant concern, online education has been criticised for risking accessible inclusive education. The emergency pivot to online learning revealed very substantial variations in UK students' access to technology, not only hardware but also perhaps more importantly data, with

many students having to deal with poor quality internet connections. The gulf is even greater when we consider overseas students who remained in their home country rather than coming to the UK, with internet access for some being unreliable and/or expensive, especially if mediated via a VLE. Trahar et al. (2020) suggest there is often an additional gulf between urban and rural students. The loss of physical interaction also risks opportunities for social capital development, widening structural inequalities (Murphy 2020).

For UK HE, approaching a year on from the initial pivot, and with uncertainty about when face-to-face teaching can recommence, this context presents a wicked problem with no simple solution(s). The COVID-19 crisis has offered opportunities to make positive educational changes away from a lecturer-led towards a more student-centred approach. However, this should not be technologically, but culturally, led. Importantly, what this period has not been, and should not be used as, is a back-door route to a cut-price introduction to a permanent shift to online HE for all. Technology-led solutions risk becoming the emperor's new clothes, engendering further managerial control through the extraction of academics' intellectual property, impeding pedagogically-informed change.

Transitioning to e-learning and copyright concerns: The experience of a private university in Malaysia

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Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic triggered abrupt changes in most aspects of life and work, and higher education did not escape these changes. The most striking change for HEIs was the rapid switch from on campus to remote learning, in many cases explicitly mandated by governments. This switch required institutions and academics to deal with a range of issues, including some longstanding ones previously regarded as relatively unimportant which were brought to the fore and made urgent and more serious by the pandemic. One such issue, for Malaysian HEIs, concerns copyright clearance.

With Malaysia introducing a movement control order (MCO) on the 16 March 2020, the MOHE's advisory note was that all HE teaching and learning had to be done remotely until December 2020. Universiti Tunku Abdu Rahman (UTAR) was established in 2002, and introduced a web-based learning environment (WBLE) just five years later in 2007. In preparation for the ongoing and future trimesters since the pandemic, Online Teaching and Learning (OTL) guidelines were developed to support academic staff. While using ICTs is a norm among the younger generation which form the student body, it may be less so for the lecturers who are now required to deliver courses both remotely and effectively. This abrupt

change surfaced a long-dormant but highly problematic issue in the Malaysian context – copyright issues relating to online teaching and learning materials.

Copyright issues: a preliminary study

Under the Copyright Act 1987, teaching, scholarship and research purposes must be compatible with fair dealing principles, whereby permission from the copyright owner is not required. We conducted a preliminary study adopting Section 107 of the U.S. Copyright Act as a statutory framework to conduct fair use evaluation based on four factors: Purpose (education or commercial); Nature (factual or fictional); Amount (little or substantial) and Financial Damage to the copyright owner. A quiz of ten scenarios depicting compatibility with the principles of fair dealing in classroom or virtual contexts was designed to assess awareness among academic staff and to explore if a short training session would improve their knowledge. We focused on Purpose and Financial Damage principles in our quiz study for their ease of evaluation.

UTAR has 1,315 active teaching staff and we sampled 205 academics, of which 158 had not attended any training on copyright and fair dealing and 47 had attended a 20 minutes training shortly before answering the quiz. We found a significant improvement in average total scores if the respondents had attended the training (see Table 1) on every tested scenario. Less than 50 percent of those who did not receive training managed to navigate those scenarios designed to test their knowledge on the definition of 'education institution' and 'educational purpose' and 'commercial value'. Many did not understand that fair dealing is only applicable to non-commercial instructional, research or investigation, and presentation of research findings. Also, there was a lack of knowledge regarding photos and course packs.

(Insert Table 1 Here)

We also conducted a content analysis of the QS top 20 Malaysian universities' websites which revealed insufficient copyright education and advisory support for staff, though it is possible some HEIs *are* providing this information to stuff in ways which are not publicly visible (e.g. unreported inhouse training or internal documents.) The findings evidence the need to provide training to avoid unintentional copyright infringement and protect academic integrity, requiring adequate resources allocated for such purposes.

Discussion and conclusion

While the UK and China perspectives in this Forum discuss pedagogical and governance aspects of various challenges brought forth by the pandemic, the pandemic-related challenge examined here is far more specific, highlighting the specific legal and governance issues around copyright which, overnight, became massively more significant for Malaysian HEIs as the pandemic drove teaching online. First, the ownership of the digital content created by the educators is difficult to ascertain. For academic staff hired to carry out teaching and research activities, recording and editing of instructional videos are not the reasons they are employed. Therefore, their videos may not be considered work made for hire, while they have to bear costs of purchasing necessary equipment for e-learning. Although Packard (2002) suggests educators can preserve their copyright with a written agreement, young staff who desperately need to start a career lack bargaining power to negotiate with the employer.

Secondly, the copyright consequences of uploading digital teaching materials to third party platforms are uncertain. Malaysian universities have not paid attention to the terms for using these platforms, or they have no choice because they serve the immediate needs. While these platforms do not claim copyright of uploaded materials, the act of submission grants the platform owner the license to use and the right to sublicense the submitted creations to third

parties (Microsoft 2015). The non-exclusive license of reusing and distributing online teaching materials severely compromises the future commercial value.

Thirdly, the Laws of Malaysia Copyright Act is both limited and outdated in the current context, while the U.S. Copyright Act (Section 110) was revised in 2002 (i.e., TEACH Act) which imposes more limitations for online education than teaching in a physical space (also see Palmedo 2020). The Copyright Act in Malaysia needs timely amendments to protect copyright and ensure fair dealing of copyrighted materials for e-learning.

In the rush to move teaching online academics' opinions regarding the copyright of their work for OTL have been largely neglected, reflecting the way in which many experience limited control over the governance of their academic lives. This warrants a call for academic voices to contribute to OTL related university governance, especially regarding copyright issues in Malaysia. We urge HEIs to ensure copyright and fair use practices for the greater scholarly community and legislators to review copyright laws to set the boundary for fair dealing for e-learning. This is particularly relevant to the post-pandemic future where HEIs are being transformed, especially in less developed countries including Malaysia where copyright issues have not been adequately addressed.

Chinese Higher Education during crises: Pragmatic implementation and emergency transition to online pedagogy through localised responsibility

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Introduction[iii]

Identified as the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, China has encountered a variety of challenges for its HE's immediate response and ability to continue providing education, namely: urgency, uncertainty, public awareness, and international relations. This perspective will discuss the ways in which the Ministry of Education provided rapid policy changes and devolved (localised) responsibility to individual Chinese universities and what the potential long-term impact could be on the future of HE in the Chinese context.

The over-riding pressure was for urgency, for immediate action, in the face of great uncertainty with little knowledge available at the time about the new virus and potential future scenarios. This uncertainty created significant difficulties in raising public awareness regarding a realistic balance of risk and control. With these hinderances to formulating well-informed policies, the Ministry of Education's contingency plan required all education departments and providers to act immediately, prioritising the safety of staff and students. Shortly after, the international pressures on China for outbreak containment were intensified as the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on the 31st January 2020. By March of the same year, the regional outbreak had become a global pandemic that saw a real likelihood of disrupting China's national stability and igniting international conflicts with unpredictable implications (Mistreanu 2020, Boo et al. 2020).

The unique governance context described above creates a situation in which the greatest imperative for HEIs is stringent and speedy policy implementation down the hierarchy, leaving little scope for questioning its appropriateness. In turn, a crisis discourse calling for national solidarity, central authority and local responsibility justified Chinese universities' diversified practices fitting their respective contexts for the emergency pandemic online pedagogy turnaround. This part of the Forum reveals the potent role of government and its central authority in Chinese HE, by taking Anhui province as an example to illustrate how, at a policy level, the national emergency response was quickly expressed in relatively more detailed measures in the hierarchical education structure.

Passing down authority and responsibility through policy

On the 21st January 2020, the Ministry of Education issued an overnight contingency plan in response to President Xi Jinping's instructions to combat the Wuhan outbreak, delegating responsibilities to its lower-level departments with clear priorities of prevention control and safety. In the next three days, responses and contingency plans were established across all educational levels: provincial, municipal, and institutional. During the 22th and 26th January 2020, Anhui Education Department issued three guidelines to address the plan, emphasising prevention control by raising awareness and endorsing the severity of the outbreak, discouraging gatherings, and promoting heightened personal hygiene. These responsibilities were further delegated to the lower-level departments and all education providers in Anhui, with an additional 'Warm Reminder: Parents Read Urgently' that was posted on its official WeChat account. When the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Bengbu in Anhui province on the 24th January 2020, its education department suspended all formal educational activities on the same day until further notice. Having revised its previous decision, this one came before

similar higher-level policies, responding quickly to the evolving local outbreak. On that day, the first emergency notice was issued by a local university in Bengbu to restrict campus access.

As international (social) media discourses surged to condemn China on several fronts (Erlanger 2020, Eve 2020, Fisher 2020), China has faced a delicate situation in dealing with both domestic and international pressures. These pressures actuate the government's authority over education governance in China (Education Law 2015, Higher Education Law 2018), especially in ensuring home safety and stability. On the 3rd February 2020, the Ministry issued a letter specifically to 'nation-wide university students', affirming that 'the outbreak is the order, and prevention control is the responsibility'. The Ministry 'believes… (university students) certainly will uphold the mission and responsibility of the time, share the motherland's fate and people's trials and tribulations, and make the due contribution to winning the battle with the new coronavirus'. This strongly advocated sense of national solidarity involved all the main stakeholders, shown particularly in three letters published on the joint website of Anhui Chinese Communist Party (CPC) Committee's Education Work Committee and Anhui Education Department respectively highlighting tasks for[iv]:

> *Party and administrative leaders*: uplift the political standpoint, maintain ground command, leverage Party organisations' outreach, ensure work implementation, and give loving care to teachers and students.

> *Teachers*: realistically uplift political standpoints, uphold confidence of outbreak control, promote and implement prevention control, scientifically arrange teaching during the winter holiday, and reinforce thoughts-politics education (思想政治教, more commonly translated as 'ideopolitical education').

Students and parents: uphold confidence in outbreak control, reduce outdoor activities, increase personal safety awareness, scientifically arrange learning during the winter holiday.

Since both public and private education providers, including HE providers, are under direct jurisdictions of different levels of government in China (Education Act 2015), such letters dictate critical roles that Chinese universities must play prioritising safety, order, and public confidence. The government as the most powerful stakeholder provides central authority in China's HE (Huang 2019, Law 2019), with which Chinese universities are coordinated in full compliance down the hierarchy. Notwithstanding, Chinese universities vary considerably in terms of resources and infrastructure, experience, capacity, and operational autonomy, having to also consider students' home locations (access to internet) and economic status (access to equipment) for e-learning. These factors gave rise to the Ministry's guideline of 'one city one policy' (一地一策) and 'one university one policy' (一校一策), empowering local/institutional decisions while dictating joint responsibilities at city-university levels. Given the late development of e-learning in China, localised decision-making and responsibility often means coping with fragmented practices at an institutional level, battling with a need for order, compliance, and control on the one hand, and little previous experience, no existing protocol, and inadequate resources on the other.

Nonetheless, it is clear the implied priority of 'crisis management' in multi-level policies underpinned the potent focus on prevention control and stability maintenance over pedagogical issues in Chinese HE. This focus passing down from central authorities created a dynamic scenario whereby continuance of operation or a sense of normality was sought under difficult

circumstances in light of local operational capacities of different universities in China. As a result, pragmatic and stringent policies emphasising localised responsibility have been key in Chinese HE dealing with the pandemic, anchored in top-down authority, urgency of collective crisis, and categorical patriotism. Underpinning the central policy's complete authority, such anchors carry legal power, social control, and political sensitivity. These are particularly manifested in the government's internet censorship regarding COVID-19 (Davidson 2020, Huang 2020), and the 'national backlash' against 'inappropriate remarks' by academics who may face criminal investigations for failing to uphold certain legally required moral values (Lau 2020, Pinghui 2020, Sharma 2020).

A challenging road ahead for Chinese HE

We have presented a narrative of Chinese HE managing the multifaceted crisis induced by the pandemic, highlighting the multitudinous alterations of policies during the first few months of it. As pandemic control developed in China, classes were carried out with a more campus-based teaching approach in the September semester, capitalising on existing prevention control experience. Nonetheless, universities still treat blended learning as a contingency plan as opposed to the primary source of teaching. Although online pedagogies were largely overshadowed by instrumental policy implementation and pragmatic pandemic control, it is noteworthy to clarify that top Chinese universities may be (more) comparable to their counterparts in developed countries with regard to TEL. For example, Zhejiang University offered over 5,000 online courses by early March (Wu 2020), while Qinghua University has been home for the Ministry's 'Research Center for Online Education' since 2014. Such more experienced and resource-abundant universities are also the main contributors to a nationally funded project called 'National Exemplary Courses' (国家精品课程) (Ministry of Education 2003). Begun in 2003, the ongoing project aims to build an online HE database of knowledge,

experience, and exemplary cases in the form of recorded lectures and annually updated learning materials, promoted for use by the Ministry in situations where creating asynchronous courses would be challenging and synchronous teaching inviable.

These Chinese universities are likely to accelerate transformative developments in catching up on TEL with universities in more developed countries owing to the pandemic-induced HE policies in China. In part, this is also because of their leading role in China's ambitious education internationalisation strategy to promote 'international courses with Chinese characteristics', prominently featured in the most recent education blueprint jointly deployed by the Ministry of Education and seven other departments on the 18th June 2020. However, the majority of Chinese universities are limited in their capacity to carry out TEL in a fully effective manner and thus will likely utilise a variety of pragmatic approaches to survive the ongoing stringent movement controls. Primarily, this is due to the enormous difficulty in transforming Chinese classrooms' physical setting or size, especially in (the majority of) universities where educational and financial resources were already stretched without yet meeting societal demands for HE (Gu et al. 2018). In hoping to reduce risks, Chinese universities with limited resources may continue imposing stern control on activities and movements in future. For example, some universities require leave applications and 'permission to leave' before staff leave the registered residential area including those who reside off-campus and during national/school holidays, while the 'permission to leave' procedures also apply to staff's (co-living) family members. It is also important to note that this localised responsibility approach would render the affected academics and students particularly vulnerable to the consequences of local/institutional decisions seeking to comply with policy directives when there are scarce resources. Finally, it is concerning that many salient issues regarding TEL have been so far little discussed in China (for example, see the

first two perspectives in this Forum). Overall, there is still a long way for Chinese HE to 'catch up' with some other countries. Notwithstanding, with China setting a strategic footing in promoting border-transcending education by its newest education blueprint, there is hope that international education, especially through TEL which renders cost-effective, fast, and flexible exchanges of educational resources tenable, will bring nations closer despite differences and conflicts during difficult times.

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[i] All translations are ours unless otherwise specified. Unreferenced policy related information and cited laws were obtained and are available at submission from the following (government) websites of the issuing authorities. Contact the corresponding author for details. This research is funded by Anhui Education Department under Grant No.: SK2020A0040.

[ii] Note that the president and Party secretary of a Chinese public university are oftentimes the same person in order to minimise conflicting authority jurisdictions (for example, see Ma and Hookham this Form).

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[iv] Letters and tasks are listed in the original order of appearance. Note: (a) 'the political standpoint' refers to perfect political synchronisation with President Xi's standpoint, while 'realistically…standpoints' implies permitted (slight) variations of thoughts within the boundary of political harmony; (b) the Chinese word 'teacher' is commonly used for both academic and administrative staff working in educational settings.

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Table 1 Percentage of correct answer for 10 questions, average total score and test statistics

Scenario	Without training	With training	x^2 Statistics	t-test Statistics
Q1	52.5	76.6	8.614***	
Q2	74.7	91.5	6.069**	
Q3	35.4	57.4	7.279***	
Q4	53.8	85.1	14.923***	
Q5	62.7	95.7	18.927***	
Q6	29.7	74.5	30.187***	
Q7	55.7	91.5	20.119***	
Q8	15.8	34	7.516***	
Q9	24.1	46.8	9.063***	
Q10	46.2	78.7	15.407***	
Average total score	45.1	73.2		-9.866***
Sample Size	158	47		

Note: each correct answer will be given 10 scores