

Title:

An analysis of change management approaches among multiple stakeholders within UK Higher Education Institutions using Kubler-Ross Change Model

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Abstract

The paper provides discussions on change management for multiple stakeholder groups in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), using the COVID-19 pandemic as our key case study. The key theory that underpinned our study is the Kubler-Ross Change Curve. Drawing from two sets of focus groups consisting of 20 participants across five selected stakeholder groups in UK HEIs – students, lecturers, faculty/school executives, professional/admin staff and learning technologists, our findings revealed that the selected stakeholder groups experienced all the stages of the Kubler-Ross cycle but in varying degrees. Among all the five stakeholder groups, students appeared to be the most impacted stakeholder group by the sudden unprecedented change that arose from the pandemic, given that their responses on shock, denial, anger and depression consist of 53% of the responses of the entire sample size. On the other hand, faculty executives, whose responses on integration constituted 33% of the responses of the entire sample size, appeared to have integrated faster with the sudden change, compared to other stakeholder groups, given their roles as change managers in this situation. We conclude by recommending an extension to the Kubler-Ross change model, arguing that integration is a continuous process, which should be broken down into sub-stages.

Introduction

Change is argued to be the only constant in life (Epstein, 2018). However, two things to consider within a change process are the kind of change (positive or negative) and the spontaneity of the change process. The Coronavirus 2019 pandemic (COVID-19) has affected the way of life and activities of individuals and countries around the world. The disease has caused significant change in behaviour; from social distancing, to the use of face coverings, regular washing of hands and use of hand sanitisers. One area in which the impact of the virus has been felt in the UK is in education, especially in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), where lecturers and students have had to adapt to new ways of teaching and learning (for example, online). This research aims to focus on change management approaches among multiple stakeholders within UK HEIs, using the COVID-19 pandemic as the case study of focus. Further, we examine the impact of the sudden change in teaching and learning activities, due to the pandemic, on HEIs in the UK.

At the time of writing this paper, the UK had experienced three national lockdowns as well as various levels of tiered restrictions (see <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-restriction-tiers-what-you-need-to-know> for a detailed explanation of the tiered system), which considerably affected UK HEIs.

UK HEIs and Response to Change

The pandemic has not only forced a drastic change to the education system, but also revealed the amount of change that is overdue (Marshall, 2018). One of the transformational impacts of COVID-19 is the increased digitisation across the globe in areas such as education, of which UK HEIs are a part (Barnes, 2020). The impact of the pandemic has enabled adaptation to the 'new normal', which has rapidly propelled changes in many industries, especially HEIs (Office for National Statistics, 2020), which have now adopted hybrid working, teaching and learning using platforms such as Microsoft

Teams, Skype and Zoom. The UK Government education department released guidance for students and educators in response to changes caused by the pandemic (GOV.UK, 2020a, b, c). There is no doubt that information communication technology (ICT) will change higher education in the post COVID-19 era, due to the social distancing measures, which have impacted face-to-face teaching, and self-isolation policies (Ayithey *et al.*, 2020). In the UK HEIs, established distance education providers, such as the Open University, for years have been well equipped with the knowledge, technologies and skills to provide high quality virtual education. However, this pandemic has resulted in the ramp-up of similar technologies across other more conventional UK HEIs. That said, the impelled conversion to digitalisation during the pandemic lockdown has had its challenges, especially on the “digital divide,” in some cases on demographic groups, vulnerable groups, such as those from low-income households, first-generation students, the disabled and certain ethnic groups (as well as international students). These groups are likely to be susceptible to digital inequalities or technologically disadvantaged either through lack of access, skills and bandwidth, or social support networks and experience (Hilbert, 2014; Beaunoyer *et al.*, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

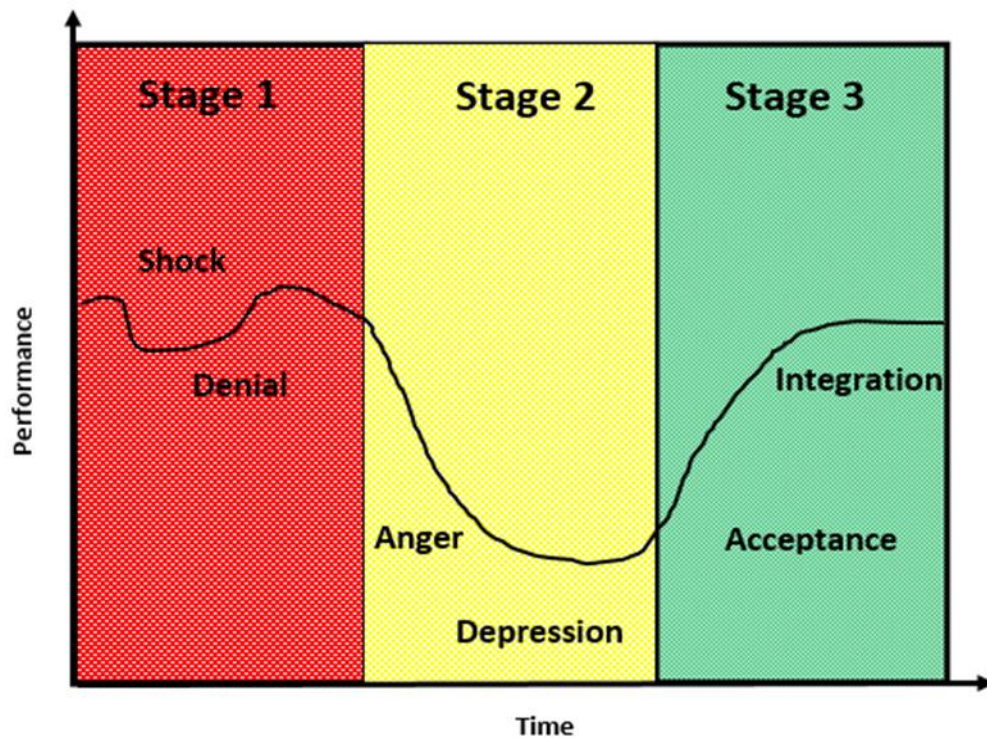
Various authors have undertaken several studies on change management in higher education. For example, Wentworth *et al.* (2020) used Kotter’s model as a tool for investigating a planned change for student evaluation of teaching. Similarly, Kang *et al.* (2020) utilised Kotter’s model to examine a planned change process whereby faculty capacity, especially academic staff, could be enhanced to support students’ success. A similar study to assess the level of academic staff resistance to change was undertaken by Elton (1981) using Lewin’s change model. Other studies which investigate change in HEIs from different perspectives such as Responsible Management Education (Beddewela *et al.*, 2021), collegiality (Burnes *et al.*, 2013) and Lean higher education (Allaoui and Benmoussa, 2014) underpinned their studies using Lewin’s change model. Interestingly, several studies have applied the Kubler Ross model to studies in higher education (Shaw, 1983; Cook, 2006; Buller, 2015; Malone,

2018). However, it appears that most of these studies have adopted a planned approach and in fact, none of the existing studies on change management within the higher education context has undertaken any research from the context of a multiplicity of stakeholders. At a time when there is an increase in the rapidity of change within the higher education sector, this study appears to be of current importance in answering the provocative question of how to navigate an unplanned change.

Kubler-Ross Change Model

The Kubler-Ross grief cycle, also known as the change curve, is based on a model originally developed in the 1960s by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. This was developed originally to explain the grieving process; however, the model has since been applied to change management in the workplace (Rashford and Coghlan, 1989; Tang, 2019). Traditionally, the model consists of five phases: shock, denial, anger, depression and acceptance. However, this model has now been adopted in academic and management circles and a sixth phase, integration, has been included (Bucăța, 2016; Malone, 2018). Based on this, we present our Kubler Ross model for this study in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Kubler-Ross Change Management Curve



Source: Developed by the authors from other Kubler Ross hybrid models

The first phase highlights the initial reaction to change – shock. According to Scherer (1994), shock has a negative effect on productivity. This was evident in the 1970s when there was a sudden fall in oil prices, resulting in a setback in the midstream and downstream sectors of the global oil industry. Although Kubler-Ross argues that this stage may not last for a long period, certainly human reactions to change are inevitable. The denial phase is characterised by the initial resistance to change, whereby those affected are not willing to accept the change, which eventually results in anger and, in the worst cases, depression. Considering this from an organisational perspective, these first four phases (Stages 1 and 2) would have a negative effect on productivity in any organisation. That said, while it is inevitable for these two stages to occur in certain change processes, how this is managed determines how long each of the stages could last for (Sadiq *et al.*, 2000).

Although Kubler-Ross argues that the final phase of the grief cycle is the acceptance phase (given that the model originally addresses a grief process), from a change management perspective, acceptance suggests the commencement phase of the implementation of a change process. At this stage, those who are affected have come to terms with the inevitability of the change, hence the inclusion of the final phase – integration – which focuses on the future and progress to be made. At this stage, the new process has now completely replaced the old.

Research Question

How have stakeholders in UK HEIs responded to the sudden unplanned changes brought about by COVID-19?

Method

After gaining full ethical approval for this research, participants were recruited from across a heterogeneous population. Data was collected via focus groups and participants were drawn from across five stakeholder groups. These include students (undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral), lecturers, faculty executives (course coordinators, programme leaders, head of school), administrators (student support coordinator and student experience officer) and learning technologists. For students, we applied an exclusion, which was to sample only those students who had their learning and teaching face-to-face before the pandemic; this was applied to avoid any bias that could occur from recruiting other student categories, for example distance learning students. Tables 1 and 2 provide a specific distribution of these stakeholders and their stakeholder groups.

Procedure

The study adopted a purposive random sampling technique, given that our aim was to ensure representativeness for the validity of our results. In addition, we selected variables that were particularly informative (Saunders *et al.*, 2015) and rich enough to answer our research question,

which mainly focuses on how stakeholders in UK HEIs have responded to the sudden, unplanned changes brought about by COVID-19. Although this sampling technique is non-probabilistic, our aim was to ensure that our sample would provide in-depth information from a multiplicity of perspectives on the topic at hand. Each of the five stakeholder groups selected consists of four participants each drawn from across UK HEIs.

Our justification for carrying out focus group discussions was threefold. First, given the number of stakeholder groups involved in the study and the different elements within some of the stakeholder groups (e.g. students consisting of UG, PG and PhD; faculty executives consisting of course coordinators, programme leaders, head of school, etc.), we hypothesised participants' responses to such an unplanned change will differ from one another. Second, although our research aimed to understand how various stakeholder groups responded to the sudden unplanned change, we were also interested in the 'why' (Shoaf and Shoaf, 2006), in order to learn useful lessons. Third, Grønkjær *et al.* (2011) found in their study that focus groups were useful to elicit the content, thereby enriching the overall data collected for their study.

The total number of participants was 20; two sets of focus groups were carried out consisting of 10 participants per set. We were guided by the literature on the number of participants in a focus group (Morgan *et al.*, 1998; Bell *et al.*, 2018) which suggest 6-10 participants. Each of the focus group discussion sessions covered all five stakeholder groups and the questions asked mainly centred on their reaction to the pandemic as it relates to learning and teaching from each of the stakeholders' perspectives.

Table 1: Focus Group set one

s/n	Stakeholder group	Stakeholder element	Location of UK HEI
1	Student	MSc	North West
2	Student	Undergraduate	North West
3	Lecturer	Senior Lecturer	East Midlands
4	Lecturer	Senior Lecturer	Wales
5	Faculty/school executive	Head of School	South East
6	Faculty/school executive	Programme Leader	South East
7	Administrator	Student Experience Officer	North West
8	Administrator	Course Administrator	South West
9	Learning technologist	Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Technologist	Scotland
10	Learning technologist	Digital Media and E-Learning Developer (DMelD)	North West

Source: Researchers' compilation (2021)

Table 2: Focus Group Set Two

s/n	Stakeholder group	Stakeholder element	Location of UK HEI
1	Student	PhD	North West
2	Student	MSc	South East
3	Lecturer	Lecturer	South West
4	Lecturer	Senior Lecturer	Scotland
5	Faculty/school executive	Course Leader	West Midlands
6	Faculty/school executive	Course Coordinator	South East
7	Administrator	Student Support Coordinator	West Midlands
8	Administrator	Course Administrator	Wales
9	Learning technologist	VLE Technologist	Wales
10	Learning technologist	VLE Technologist	North West

Source: Researchers' compilation (2021)

The stakeholder groups consists of students, lecturers, faculty/school executives, professional/admin staff and learning technologists. Note that administrative staff who perform student support roles have different titles across different universities. For example, student experience officer and student support coordinator.

Having consented to the terms and conditions of the focus group discussions, these were carried out online. Participants' gave their consent for the discussions to be recorded; however, they had a choice of being either audio recorded only or being both video and audio recorded. Both sessions lasted 60 minutes each and responses were transcribed verbatim by the research team. We were confident that adequate data had been collected, having found similarities in the trends of participants' responses, which indicated data saturation.

Data Analysis

The data was mainly analysed using thematic analysis, which was carried out with the use of Nvivo. We were guided by the stages of the Kubler Ross' model in identifying key themes that emerged from the focus group discussions.

Shock

The kind of shock experienced by participants was more of a cultural shock; this is the kind of shock experienced "*...as the consequence of strain and anxiety resulting from contact with a new culture and the feelings of loss, confusion and impotence, resulting from loss of accustomed cultural cues and social rules*" (Winkelman, 1994, p. 121).

..... it literally just happened like that. Everyone (individually, as groups) were just trying to adapt to this opposite, complete change, so yes it was a shock [Course coordinator]

We found then that because lockdown happened so quickly, a lot of students first went off grid for a little while [Head of school]

It was a bit of a struggle earlier on when we entered lockdown, because everyone was trying to understand what was the best platform to communicate over. But then, slowly we started to move on to having discussions on Microsoft Teams and Zoom [Student experience officer]

According to Baker *et al.* (2020), the 'extreme speed' with which the pandemic came caused shock to businesses. From another perspective, as highlighted by Akkermans *et al.* (2020), the pandemic had the capability of causing a career shock, which was evident in this study.

As a final year student, I have never witnessed such drastic change throughout my studies. It is unfortunate this is happening just a few weeks to ending my studies and I only hope this does not affect my future career [Undergraduate student]

Overall, it was evident from participants' responses that various types of shocks were experienced at varying levels of severity, in the initial stages of the unprecedented change.

Denial

Two main issues resulted in denial among the participants. The first one was more of a psychological factor and the second was the inability to quickly come to terms with the logistics associated with navigating the 'new normal'.

It's been very difficult studying from home because I am a mother of two and I had to home school my children and do my own schooling at the same time [PhD student]

Even if I spend 1hr at work, I am more productive than spending 24hrs at home, so I do not mind going to work any time [Lecturer]

Having to move to online examinations was a major challenge for me as well [Undergraduate student]

Clearly, the situation brought about an inevitable shift from the past, which was not pre-informed, thereby resulting in some kind of internal resistance. Prominent among a list of factors that could cause resistance to change are education and communication, participation and involvement, facilitation and support (Yılmaz and Kılıçoğlu, 2008). However, this was inevitable because of the suddenness of the change, and even more complicated given that education, communication and implementation took place simultaneously.

Anger

Both staff and students expressed anger at not being able to access needed facilities. The findings suggested that the initial cause of anger among participants, especially students, was their unpreparedness for the situation. While most students acknowledged the fact that decisions that led to the sudden changes were taken in their best interest, it did result in anger among them. The theories of change are consistent in their arguments that change should normally go through a process and not implemented suddenly.

As per dissertation, some of us couldn't complete our investigations and we just had to wrap it up suddenly, based on the data we had collected. This is absolutely unfair

[MSc student]

Having to move to online examinations suddenly without prior notice is completely unacceptable. The interests of students have not been considered in this particular decision ***[Undergraduate student]***

In a study by Kerns *et al.* (1994), they observed that the intensity of anger expressed was dependent on the perceived pain of participants. Having to move online (suddenly) meant a change from the normal mode of interaction (face-to-face). Consequently, lecturers expressed concern over the reduced attendance at online classes and general lack of student participation.

Depression

Participants highlighted seven main factors responsible for depression: 1. frustration, 2. challenges associated with the sudden adaptation to a completely online learning environment, 3. loneliness caused by lack of peer-to-peer interaction, 4. distraction caused by working in a different environment, 5. teaching and learning in an 'informal' environment, 6. reduced work output, and 7. cognitive overload.

Literature abounds on the benefits of peer-to-peer learning among students. These include retrieval practice (Karpicke and Blunt, 2011a, 2011b), content mastery (Feldman, 1994) and the ability of students to engage in self-assessment, self-evaluation, self-monitoring, and self-learning (Stigmar, 2016, p.125). Unfortunately, participants, mainly students, felt they had missed most of these benefits, given that these could have been achieved in a more settled, and particularly face-to-face, environment. This particularly contributed to their frustration.

....most times they give us activities to do in class and because you are there present with the lecturer, you would somehow want to participate because you really want to be a part of what is happening, but during the lockdown while we were learning from home, we really didn't have the opportunity to do those activities **[Undergraduate student]**

There was absence of peer-to-peer challenge and peer interactive sessions **[Undergraduate student]**

The issue of distraction and reduced work output appears to be a case of cause and effect. From the responses of the participants, reduced work output was largely caused by distractions encountered during work and learning. Participants' responses suggested that they had far more work to do, given that they encountered distractions while working, which resulted in not completing scheduled tasks timely.

Since our homes have now become our workplaces and of course lots of people have got children running around, babies to be looked after (you know) crying in the background (or whatever), maybe pets running around in the background, it made me a bit less productive because some of the things I would do in few hours now take days **[Student support coordinator]**

Sadly I am not a typical 'work from home' person and I feel compelled to work out of my comfort zone. I am gradually but slowly adjusting but the downside to it is that work keeps piling up as I try to adjust to what seems to be my new normal [Lecturer]

Adjusting my schedule in accordance with the remainder of the family has slowed the pace I will normally engage with my studies [Undergraduate student]

Pre-COVID-19, academic and professional staff had rarely needed to grapple with the enormous amount of tools and technologies needed to complete their jobs, but it appeared that the sudden change to online teaching and learning resulted in even far more engagement with technology to get their job done. From our findings, it appears that the faculty/school executives' stakeholder groups were the participants much affected by cognitive overload.

.....Zooming, skyping, teaming for video conferencing was actually quite exhausting on me physically and mentally because I had to be totally present every moment, every hour of the day for changes we were making [Head of school]

So during those early lockdown days, I was working crazy hours. I felt emotionally and physically drained [Program lead]

Kirsh (2000, p.22), highlights four main causes of cognitive overload: too much information supply, too much information demand, the need to deal with multitasking and interruption, and the inadequate workplace infrastructure to deal with metacognition. It appears that the last two causes were responsible for the cognitive overload participants encountered.

Acceptance

Gradually, participants began to accept the 'new normal' although this was not without its corresponding effects on their lifestyles. Findings revealed that three main factors were responsible for participants to move on to this stage. First, empathy.

Just because I'm head doesn't make me a superpower; I am a person like anyone else so what I am experiencing, no doubt everyone else was experiencing the same [Head of school]

Obviously as a leader, I had to empathise and demonstrate understanding towards how everyone was feeling and of course also reflecting and acting upon how I was actually feeling myself [Lecturer]

Well, to be honest since the lockdown happened I feel like it took some time to come to terms with what has become the new normal [Student experience officer]

The second factor was care and support. Participants expressed their delight on the support provided through the acceptance stage. This level of support, such as constant emails and updates from the university, and regular communication from academic and professional executives, was useful in helping staff progress through the acceptance stage. In the case of students, a recurring response was that the policies on assignment and coursework submissions were updated to accommodate longer extension periods. The third factor that appeared to support acceptance was the provision of flexible and reasonable alternatives to work, as well as learning and teaching.

The positive aspect is..... what you always get from a 'work from home' environment is that you have a lot more flexibility [Learning technologist]

I used to take about two hours to get to university and so it was really good to wake up just 30 minutes before the lecture to just join online [Undergraduate student]

Literature abounds on how flexitime has contributed to better work-life balance and employee satisfaction (Hayman, 2009, 2010; Wattis *et al.*, 2013). Most of the staff members provided various examples of alternatives offered by their various HEIs, ranging from tolerating distractions (from children) during meetings, to lowering their expectations on performance and productivity.

Integration

Our findings revealed that integration is an ongoing process, facilitated by two main factors- innovation and inclusivity. Although the concept of a flipped classroom model and blended learning has been in existence for a few years, it appeared that most UK HEIs adopted these pedagogical approaches whereby the conventional idea of a predominantly classroom-based learning pattern is inverted, which introduces students to the learning material prior to engaging with the tutor in the classroom.

*I commend my university for helping me get back to the learning curve. I think it's just down to the design really.....being able to watch lectures before (virtual) classroom engagement. For me that is more than enough compensation **[Undergraduate student]**.*

From the perspective of lecturers, there appeared to be some respite, given that they were also able to at least provide some teaching and in fact, cover the teaching curriculum reasonably.

*I was glad to hear that the rest of the teachings will be pre-recorded and uploaded because I could not imagine giving my students 'half baked bread' to eat **[Lecturer]***

*I felt a huge relief when I saw the level at which my university rose to explore various technologies for learning and teaching **[Senior Lecturer]***

The other aspect – inclusivity – also appeared to play a great role in facilitating integration among participants. Earlier, participants had highlighted various concerns about working, teaching and learning in such a situation whereby almost everything would be done online. For students, the most prominent concerns centred around issues such as absence of physical cues, variable Internet access and speed, learning disabilities (such as lip reading, hearing or visual impairments), online attention span, focus and lack of interaction. For staff participants (teaching and professional), their main concerns centred around inclusive communication, given that there were bound to be distractions

when working from home with children around, let alone working online. Our findings revealed that participants expressed considerable satisfaction on how inclusivity issues were addressed.

The fact that pre-recorded lectures also come with text notes meant a lot to me. Even before the lockdown, we did not have such luxury. Now I can worry less about not understanding my lecturers' accent **[Postgraduate student]**

Even with dyslexia, I am still able to follow as normal because of the lecture recordings **[Undergraduate student]**

So far, I have had two interruptions. The first was an internet downtime during a meeting and the second was my baby walking into the room during a training session! For both scenarios, colleagues completely understood and in fact made a joke about it **[Learning technologist]**

The integration stage appeared to still be an ongoing process and in fact in its early stage. Given the suddenness of the change, we are unable to conclude that participants have fully integrated into the new normal they have now accepted.

Although we are unable to capture all the responses in the findings section, Table 3 captures the total number of direct quotes for each stage, based on the Kubler-Ross model.

Table 3: Summary of responses by stakeholder groups

Participants	Shock	Denial	Anger	Depression	Acceptance	Integration
Student	4 (30.8%)	6 (43.0%)	15 (65.2%)	15 (60.0%)	10 (43.5%)	3 (14.3%)
Lecturer	4 (30.8%)	4 (28.6%)	1 (4.4%)	3 (12.0%)	1 (4.4%)	4 (19.1%)
Faculty/School executives	2 (15.4%)	2 (14.3%)	4 (17.4%)	4 (16.0%)	7 (30.4%)	7 (33.3%)
Professional/admin staff	2 (15.4%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (8.7%)	1 (4.0%)	3 (13.0%)	4 (19.1%)
Learning Technologists	1 (7.7%)	1 (7.1%)	1 (4.4%)	2 (8.0%)	2 (8.7%)	3 (14.3%)
TOTAL	13	14	23	25	23	21

Source: Researchers' Analysis (2021)

The data represents the number of responses for each of the participants, which denote shock, denial, anger, depression, acceptance and integration. The percentages shown are expressed as a percentage of the total response by all five stakeholder groups to each of the phases of the Kubler-Ross model.

Table 4

Participants/variables	Shock	Denial	Anger	Depression	Acceptance	Integration	Mean	Median
Student	4	6	15	15	10	3	≈9	8
Lecturer	4	4	1	3	1	4	≈3	3
Faculty/School executives	2	2	4	4	7	7	≈5	4
Professional/admin staff	2	1	2	1	3	4	2	2
Learning Technologists	1	1	1	2	2	3	≈2	1.5

TOTAL	13	14	23	25	23	21	-	-
Mean	≈3	≈3	≈5	5	≈5	≈4		
Median	2	2	2	3	3	4		

Quantitative statistics of data

Table 4 shows the results of the descriptive statistics of the data collected for the study. Every researcher has to decide on the particular statistics they wish to report. In the case of this study, we focus on the median (the result of the range, mean, mode are available on request). The median value in this case is seen as a set of ordered numbers of the participants.

Researchers may fall into the temptation to report quantitative values as being absolute values in describing the Kubler-Ross stages depicted above; however, in this scenario, the focus is on the rate at which they arrived at these stages and not whether they arrived there or not. An assessment on whether each of the stakeholders completed the Kubler-Ross cycle is beyond the scope of this paper.

Under the participants, students have the highest median value of 8 while the learning technologists (LT) have the lowest median value of 1.5.

On the average, most student stakeholders experienced denial during the lockdown; most lecturers experienced shock, faculty executives mostly displayed anger, professional staff experienced either shock or anger, learning technologists experienced depression at the initial stage of the lockdown. On looking at the different stages; on the average, shock was mostly experienced by FE and PM; denial was mostly experienced by FE and the lecturers; PS and FE displayed anger the most during the lockdown, lecturers and FE experienced depression mostly, PS were the quickest to accept the lockdown situation; lecturers and PS were the quickest to experience integration.

Discussions, Implications and Conclusion

The findings from this study unveil a wide array of facts and discussions. The study addressed the six key phases of the model to answer the research question.

Regarding shock, the suddenness of the change resulted in participants being disengaged for a while. Literature abounds on the negative impact organisational change has on the mental health of employees (Vahtera *et al.*, 1997; Kivimäki *et al.*, 2001; Day *et al.*, 2017), which was prevalent in participants' responses, of which two of the major factors are technology and reduction in social support (Bamberger *et al.*, 2012). In the case of the pandemic, this was not just a normal organisational change, but also one that happened suddenly and required quick adaptation to the change by the participants involved. Therefore, everyone was affected in grappling with the new technologies that suddenly had to be adopted and there was minimal support at the onset, given that most people were 'learning on the job'. While we assume that most organisational changes would have followed due process before occurring (i.e. the consultation and preparation stages typical of change models), this change was forced by COVID-19, and had to be implemented without extensive consultations, given the urgency of the change. Having said that, it seems that in the stage of shock (from Table 3), although appearing as the variable that had the least responses (13), the impact was quite significantly more on students (4) and lecturers (4) who are directly involved in teaching and learning. Our interpretation on why learning technologists appeared to be least shocked is that most of the changes which had to be made were technology-based, which can be deemed a 'comfort zone' for this particular stakeholder group. Given the impact of the suddenness of the change, our prior assumption was that participants' responses would focus more on the shock they encountered; however, at the time data was collected (May, 2020), most of them had gone past the stage of shock and, upon reflection, they dwelt more on the other stages, having gone past the first stage.

Denial is a response to shock, which is characterised by developing a common defence mechanism in an attempt to shy away from reality. According to Kübler-Ross (1973, p.34), "denial functions as a buffer after an unexpected shocking news". Clearly, the unexpectedness of the pandemic, which resulted in the sudden change, had an adverse effect on participants' learning, teaching and work patterns. Even in cases of planned change, whereby wide consultations have been embarked upon, human beings still demonstrate initial resistance (Corbett *et al.*, 1987; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2018);

therefore, it was not out of place for participants to be in denial regarding such uninformed change (Kübler-Ross, 1973). Our findings revealed that there were more students in a state of denial (6) compared to the other stakeholder groups. In addition, there appears to be a similarity in the trend of the results with the shock phase and we can safely conclude that this was the case because these two phases are classified within stage 1 of the Kubler-Ross cycle.

The initial resultant effect of the shock and denial (stage 1) among the participants was anger. This was mainly because participants had realised that what initiated shock and denial had become the 'new normal', which was not going to change quickly. Naturally, every change process is met by some form of resistance, which could lead to anger by the stakeholder groups that are significantly affected by that change (Vakola *et al.*, 2004). Our findings suggest that students were more vocal in venting their anger on the change process; clearly, this is to be expected as they are key stakeholders with high level of interest as far as teaching and learning is concerned. There appears to be a marked difference between their responses at the initial stage (shock and denial) and we can assume that at this stage, they had taken time to ruminate over their feelings and were now letting them out in anger.

We observed that the acceptance phase was relatively quicker than we hypothesised and this was attributed to two things: first, the continual communication between the university management and other stakeholders – students, lecturers and non-teaching staff; and second, the fact that the whole country and all businesses were experiencing similar shock because of the COVID pandemic. The collectivism associated with the pandemic appeared to have hastened the process from shock to acceptance. Consequently, the length of time associated with a classical Kubler-Ross model has been shortened by these factors.

The final stage – integration, (from Table 3) interestingly shows that this is more prominent among faculty/school executives (5). This is not surprising as our focus group discussions revealed that this stakeholder group is usually involved in facilitating student engagement and creating an inclusive community for students within university faculties. In addition, expectedly, this stakeholder group

should be at the forefront of driving change at a time when it is expected that amongst others, their overarching objective should be the smooth running of the university academic calendar among other key tasks. Next in prominence are the lecturer and admin/professional staff stakeholder groups. Again expectedly, these are key stakeholder groups that are primarily involved in delivering the core constituents of students' experience in the university, hence the need for all these three stakeholder groups to transition faster to the integration stage. Although this finding suggests a clear path into which stakeholders have integrated, we are not quick to conclude that this pattern of integration will remain so, given that integration is deemed a continuous process (El-Halwagi, 2006), therefore we do not rule out a future change in pattern.

We draw some implications from these findings and provide some recommendations. To start with, inasmuch as our findings suggest that UK HEIs worked within their capacities and capabilities to provide a 'soft landing' for both staff and students, the shock created has no doubt impacted on the performance of staff in their jobs. More importantly, some students' academic performance at the time of this sudden change was impacted negatively, this could possibly have impacted on their final grades. Secondly, late adopters would continue to struggle to adjust to the 'new normal', given that it takes a longer time for this category of people to transit through the denial stage during a change process (Bareil, 2013). (Un)fortunately, it appears that some good lessons have been learnt from working remotely during this pandemic, such as a more conscious effort to act in a more sustainable manner and the minimisation of energy and environmental challenges (Kylili *et al.*, 2020; Smoyer *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it appears that most UK HEIs may not return to the exact ways of teaching and learning used before the pandemic. This emphasises our third point, which is that there is a fair chance that for some time to come there could be increased cases of mental health problems among staff and students who have undergone depression because of the suddenness of the change, which has led to increased work-from-home patterns. There are existing literature which highlight the impact of organisational change on employee mental health (Greubel and Kecklund, 2011; Bevan *et al.*, 2020). Further, nearly half are working long, irregular hours, and many are unhappy with their current work-

life balance (Bevan *et al.*, 2020). Similar themes were identified in the data presented here, particularly in relation to the change in working hours as a result of having to home-school children. This is good evidence that work-related stressors, such as poor communication, overload and a lack of control, are associated with poorer mental health and productivity (Cooper, 2018). There is a fair chance that UK HEIs could be significantly affected, given that teaching and learning are core mentally stimulating activities. Therefore, support from managers, co-workers, lecturers and peers, as well as regular communication and access to resources are likely to be particularly important for the maintenance of staff and student mental health and productivity.

Finally, earlier on, we highlighted that most change management theories were developed based on a planned approach, and the Kubler-Ross theory which underpins this study is no exception. However, our rationale for adopting this theory was purely because this appeared to be the theory of best fit for our study, given the different stages the selected stakeholders for this study have undergone and, more importantly, our research question. While our findings evaluated the selected stakeholder groups based on the six stages of the framework, our results suggest that the integration phase is a continuous phase, hence a more extended one than the other five phases. In view of this, we suggest an extension of the integration phase by dividing it into at least three sub-phases (early integration, mid integration and final integration). This would help to ensure that this phase is more closely monitored among stakeholders and can be more easily managed by understanding the exact phase of integration that a stakeholder is currently at.

In conclusion, we believe this study at least provides a valuable first step in addressing how stakeholders in UK HEIs could navigate through an unprecedented change. Further research may look into the development of a hybrid model to navigate through an unplanned change, although this might be quite generic since future unplanned changes may come with their own peculiarities.

Limitations

We acknowledge certain limitations of the study. First, the data were collected during lockdown 1.0 and as such might not have captured events that took place during lockdowns 2.0 and 3.0. Notwithstanding, we consider the findings to be accurate for that particular period. More importantly, our overarching aim was not necessarily an investigation into the COVID-19 pandemic on a stage-by-stage basis, but rather to understand how stakeholders have navigated through an unprecedented change situation, in which the COVID-19 pandemic was considered to be a useful case to study this, using the Kubler-Ross model. Finally, rather than focus groups, we could have aimed to collect data at a more personal level, i.e. interviews; however, we considered the psychological impact the pandemic could have had on potential participants, hence mitigating any potential trauma that could arise from speaking to participants at a personal level.

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