

Addressing challenges to recovery and building future resilience in the wake of COVID-19

Received (in revised form): 4th September, 2023

Cheryl Regehr*

Provost, University of Toronto, Canada

Nicholas O. Rule**

Dean, University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada



Cheryl Regehr



Nicholas O. Rule

*Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and Institute for Medical Science, University of Toronto, 27 King's College Circle, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A1, Canada

E-mail: cheryl.regehr@utoronto.ca

**University of Toronto Mississauga, 3359 Mississauga Road, Mississauga, Ontario L5L 1C6, Canada

Tel: +1 416 978 3948;
E-mail: nicholas.rule@utoronto.ca

Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning
Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 284–297
© Henry Stewart Publications,
1749–9216

Cheryl Regehr is Vice-President and Provost of the University of Toronto, where she serves as a Professor in the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, with cross-appointments to the Faculty of Law and the Institute for Medical Sciences. Her recent research focuses on the impact of stress and trauma on decision-making in high-risk professions. She is the former Vice-Provost, Academic Programs and Dean of the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and has experience in the provision of direct service and administration in emergency mental health, including serving as Director of the Crisis Response Team at Pearson International Airport.

Nicholas O. Rule is Vice-Principal (Academic) and Dean, University of Toronto Mississauga and a Professor in the Department of Psychology. Previously, he served as Provostial Advisor and Chair of the University of Toronto Resilience Project team. He also served as Chair of the Department of Psychology and as Interim Vice-Dean, Undergraduate in the Faculty of Arts & Science, leading the academic programmes through transition at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a Canada Research Chair, his work has shaped the field of social perception, cognition and behaviour.

ABSTRACT

While organisational crisis theory posits a predictable set of stages involving pre-planning and

preparation, acute crisis response, adaptation and recovery, the prolonged and cyclical nature of public-health restrictions related to COVID-19 presented new challenges for institutions of higher education and conditioned students, faculty and staff to adopt a crisis mindset as their baseline. Consequently, moving from crisis to recovery posed unique obstacles at both individual (eg anxiety, exhaustion and post-traumatic stress) and organisational levels (eg transition logistics, labour market changes and student preparation). This paper describes an effort at a large, urban, research-intensive university to directly address the evolution from pandemic crisis to recovery and future resilience. The University Resilience Project recruited a team of senior staff charged with identifying and adopting promising practices created during the pandemic and decommissioning or archiving less useful policies, procedures and activities, with a view to strengthening the university's resilience. Over the course of more than 300 meetings with academic leaders, staff leaders and student leaders, team members created a space to share the experiences of COVID-19, reflect on successes and challenges over the crisis, and identify opportunities to enhance the resilience of the university. This work raised critical insights into the process of adapting to change in an institution of higher learning.

Keywords: emergency planning, higher education, crisis response, resilience

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the COVID-19 virus emerged in Wuhan, China, marking the onset of what was soon to become a global health crisis. One month later, on 25th January, 2020, an individual who had recently returned from Wuhan identified that he was suffering from symptoms of the disease and entered the isolation unit at a teaching hospital affiliated with the University of Toronto. He was confirmed as Canada's first documented case of coronavirus, six weeks before the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic.

Although the world had faced other major infectious diseases in recent years, such as HIV-AIDS, SARS, MERS, H1N1 and Ebola, COVID-19 presented a very different challenge — a novel, highly contagious virus for which there was no existing population immunity and, at the time, no proven treatment or vaccine. For the first time in a century, countries across the globe resorted to using public health measures such as travel restrictions, restrictions on public gatherings, and closures of businesses and institutions as the key pandemic control mechanism.¹ As with all other aspects of society, institutions of higher learning responded quickly, leaving campuses largely deserted: vastly reducing density or closing student residences, cafeterias and libraries; instructing staff to work from home; and moving to alternative delivery modes for programmes and services, such as through online classes and virtual mental health counselling.²⁻⁶

ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSE TO CRISIS

Crisis situations are generally described to occur in three phases: pre-planning and preparation, crisis response and recovery. *Pre-planning and preparation* commonly involves the development of crisis and emergency plans,⁷⁻⁸ and business

continuity plans.⁹⁻¹¹ In the higher-education sector, planning and preparation have been expanded to include mass communication plans¹² and ensuring the continuity of academic programmes.¹³⁻¹⁵ The *crisis response phase* in higher-education institutions during COVID-19 included ensuring that programmes could continue, repatriating students studying abroad, facilitating the continuation of critical research (eg vaccine discovery) and protecting students in residences.¹⁶⁻²¹ In general, *recovery* refers to resuming operations; in the case of COVID-19, however, this occurred in phases as public health restrictions waxed and waned.²²⁻²⁵

It has been suggested that the worldwide scale and ongoing health, political and economic disruptions of COVID-19 resulted in two additional phases in institutions of higher learning.²⁶ The first phase involved responding to the advancing crisis by monitoring the advancing threat and starting to gear up crisis-response structures. The second phase was one of prolonged uncertainty, during which standard approaches to managing crises were challenged, and the impacts on members of the community were less predictable than in a time-limited crisis. The prolonged uncertainty affected academic programmes, enrolment plans, construction projects, workforce planning and the mental health of employees and students.^{27,28}

Models of crisis management assume a return to normal operations. However, the prolonged nature of COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions (a total of 777 days in Toronto, where two of the university's three campuses are located)²⁹ created new challenges. Even once all local stay-at-home orders ended, variable micro-cultures of risk tolerance within the University of Toronto led to differential approaches to resuming in-person activities for students, faculty and staff returning

to campus. Not unlike the changes observed in the labour market outside of higher education,³⁰ many individuals had grown comfortable working, teaching and studying from their homes. Moreover, concerns about lingering health-related threats and pandemic-related stress tempered many individuals' interest in social engagement at levels that resembled their pre-pandemic lives. Conflicting opinions from health experts also fuelled confusion about whether on-campus learning was truly safe, and challenged acceptance of the messages issued by official public health authorities suggesting that the risks of in-person educational activities were now low.

Further, the university had developed an evolving series of emergency management structures aimed at managing the various phases of the pandemic (described in more detail below). People had become accustomed to the more centralised decision-making structure required to manage crisis situations, often referred to as command and control,³¹ and senior staff were reluctant to relinquish this newfound authority. Nevertheless, the university needed to find a way to move beyond crisis to recovery and resilience. Thus, the Provost established the University Resilience Project in April 2022 and recruited a team of senior staff members with expertise in research administration, student services, university operations, human resource management, communications, project management and academic programming, who (along with an academic lead) advised the university's senior administrative leadership in developing a path to recovery.

The first task of the Resilience Project Team (RPT) required identifying the inertia that presented obstacles to recovery. Members of the RPT thus met with students, staff and academic leaders from every operational and academic division

of the university, either individually or in small groups. Over the course of more than 300 such meetings, RPT members created a space to share their experiences of COVID-19, reflect on successes and challenges over the crisis, and identify opportunities to enhance resilience of the university.

This paper thus describes an effort to directly address the evolution from pandemic crisis to recovery and future resilience at a large, urban, research-intensive university spanning three campuses. The RPT worked with academic divisions, campuses and institutional portfolios to identify and adopt promising practices created during the pandemic and to decommission or archive less useful policies, procedures and activities that could be revised to make the university more resilient. Their work raised interesting insights about the process of adapting to change in an institution of higher learning.

RESPONDING TO COVID-19 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Arising from the lessons learned during SARS in 2003 and H1N1 in 2009,³² the University of Toronto began preparations in January 2020, anticipating the possibility that a new highly infectious coronavirus could reach North America. It began by reactivating particular elements of organisational and operational infrastructure related to academic continuity, including: activating the Academic Continuity Team; reminding instructors about policies and practices to support the resilience of academic programmes; and offering to assist with technological approaches to support continuity (for greater detail, see Regehr and McCahan³³ and Regehr *et al.*³⁴).

This pre-planning, alongside fortuitous investments in software in the years immediately preceding COVID-19, placed the university on strong footing to absorb the

pandemic's initial impact. For example, the university had just completed the multi-year development of a new learning management system for courses (allowing for far more interactive online tools); had upgraded its human-resources software (facilitating employee payroll, among other critical, human-resources functions); had purchased institutional subscriptions for the videoconferencing software Zoom; and purchased subscriptions to the Microsoft Office suite including — critically — Microsoft Teams for all of its nearly 100,000 students, 15,000 faculty and 10,000 staff. The impact of COVID-19, however, was unprecedented. Thus, on 13th March, 2020, the university paused in-person course delivery, moving 4,500 courses online over a weekend. Although university leaders anticipated that this shift to remote learning would last several weeks, they soon learned that municipal stay-at-home orders would last far longer.

As noted earlier, as the pandemic continued to evolve, the university implemented an evolving crisis management structure. Initially, just prior to the Province of Ontario declaring its first state of emergency for COVID-19, the university activated its Incident Leadership Team (ILT), which remained in effect from March to July 2020. The ILT structure is defined under the university's Policy on Crisis and Routine Emergency Preparedness and Response,³⁵ and was led by the Provost and the Vice-President, Research and Innovation (a public health expert). Under the ILT, six working groups were established to address academic continuity, students, research, human resources, business continuity and communications.³⁶

In July 2020, there were indicators that the pandemic might be waning and, like other institutions, the university began partial reopening. For instance, public health regulations allowed some academic divisions to resume in-person instruction

in particular essential areas, such as within the university's health-sciences divisions. At that time, it also became clear that senior academic leaders needed to return to other duties, and so they created a new crisis management structure, optimistically named the Response and Adaptation Committee (RAC), comprised of academic and senior staff leads across the university that reflected the original six working groups. This group met regularly, implementing and overseeing safety measures with the intention of returning to in-person operations.

However, COVID-19 was not over and Ontario announced a second state of emergency in November 2020, followed by a third in April 2021. Throughout this time, the RAC managed crisis operations and safety measures in consultation with the Provost and other senior leaders. In June 2021, the Province moved to reopen, and the university prepared for an in-person fall, but by the autumn of 2021, the Omicron variant had been detected and, in December, all in-person exams and classes were once again cancelled. Given the uncertainty in the autumn of 2021, the university reinstated the ILT to work in concert with the RAC.

In early 2022, the Province and the university again began to move into recovery mode, yet we continued to have an emergency structure that had been in place for two years by this point. In addition, across all divisions, initial expressions of anxiety about the global mortal threat posed by COVID-19 converted to an acceptance of the new normal of operating the university in a hybrid fashion, with the majority of instruction and other operations across its three campuses occurring remotely. Yet this was out of step with our role as a campus-based university with almost 100,000 students.

In an effort to resume operations, in January 2022, the Provost began presenting

the idea of moving from crisis to recovery and resilience by establishing the RPT. The RPT would be led by a Provostial Advisor on Resilience, supported by a senior project manager and administrative assistant, and would be comprised of five senior staff from the RAC in the areas of students, academic programmes, human resources, university operations, communications and research administration assigned to the team on a full-time or half-time basis. The RPT would report to the Provost.

As a transitional structure, the RPT was to be in place for 15 months, from April 2022 to June 2023, replacing the RAC. Initially, the work of the RPT was to facilitate the return to campus. In addition, however, it was acknowledged that in disrupting the normal operations of the university, COVID-19 stimulated tremendous innovation. Tasks previously regarded as impossible quickly became necessary. Moreover, the cyclical rise and fall of public health restrictions and evolving protocols and practices conditioned an acceptance of change. This presented an opportunity to reshape the university while the clay was still soft, allowing for changes to existing policies, processes and habits that would integrate the innovations and lessons learned amid the pressures placed by the pandemic. The RPT thus embarked on taking stock of those innovations and lessons through the consultation meetings with stakeholders across all three campuses, recognising that these meetings also served as opportunities to shift thinking, allow reflection and facilitate the personal recovery and transition for critical staff and academic leaders.

It soon became clear, however, that there was a need to provide space for people to express their own personal responses to the shared crisis. The analysis of discoveries and resulting actions that followed focuses on four main themes: challenges

in moving from crisis to recovery; innovations arising from meeting the challenges of adversity; moving forward through recognising efforts and supporting integration; and creating resilience through improving navigation, communication and future-proofing activities.

CHALLENGES IN MOVING FROM CRISIS TO RECOVERY

Moving from a crisis to recovery mindset at the university proved difficult for various reasons. First, the COVID-19 pandemic was not over: the World Health Organization only officially ended its pandemic declaration on 5th May, 2023. Second, the unrelenting stress that the pandemic placed on everyone's personal and professional lives had led to widespread feelings of burnout and a persistent state of general and focal anxiety. Apart from the direct threats to physical health, COVID-19 had wrought tremendous amounts of stress that, coupled with the extra effort required to adapt to its disruptive influence, had left many students, faculty and staff exhausted. Some people described feeling that experiences during COVID-19 were 'deeply bruising', the workload was 'unmanageable' and some of the challenges were 'soul crushing'. Alternatively, others felt a sense of pride and collegiality during the crisis, 'it was astounding, inspiring what we did in such a short time with no huge issues'. Indeed, for some, transitioning away from crisis management itself threatened a loss of great purpose and adrenaline that propelled them to excel and to find meaning.

In addition, once they had adapted, people experienced benefits from the COVID-19 crisis response and the lockdowns. Many found a new balance between life and work demands: working flexibly around children's schedules; eliminating commuting time and 'freeing up mental

and physical energy for other personal and professional tasks’; and saving money on child care, commuting, clothes and work lunches. Others found new meaning and positive challenges at work: ‘the opportunity for secondments during the pandemic was a great chance for people to learn more about the institution and grow their networks’, and a stronger sense of teamwork and community as they worked with others to overcome challenges.

Nevertheless, transition into recovery was necessary as students seeking community through an in-person learning and living experience returned to campus. This involved critical decisions about the future landscape of the university’s academic mission. The University Resilience Project marked a departure from a crisis management approach to a focus on recovery with the stated goal of making the university more resilient.

INNOVATION OUT OF ADVERSITY

Whereas COVID-19 enforced a stress-test on the university’s functions and operations, it also provoked a host of innovations and other positive developments. These included the formation of multiple interdivisional tables that introduced a higher level of information-sharing across the three campuses than existed before. The isolation forced by pandemic restrictions inspired a desire for individuals to reach out to their colleagues working in equivalent positions in other divisions of the university, breaking through previous organisational silos. Further, the desire for support in confronting the challenges and decisions necessitated by adaptations to the pandemic encouraged the grassroots development of communities of practice, many of which proved so helpful that they continued beyond the return to in-person campus operations. Others observing the benefits enjoyed by the members of these

groups have sought to build additional tables of their own, generating a new practice within the university that has left it more connected than ever before.

Unlike some multi-campus university systems, the three campuses at the university share a single governance structure, described as the ‘One University, Three Campuses’ model. Previously, the norm of in-person activities could make participating in academic and extracurricular events difficult. The introduction of widespread fluency with video-chat platforms that had been purchased and installed prior to the pandemic, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom ameliorated this challenge. Students could participate more easily in courses and student-life offerings on any of the three campuses. This has allowed for participation from a more diverse selection of individuals — a great boon to a university that houses only 9 per cent of its total student enrolment.

Another example of how the isolation imposed by COVID-19 has had the ironic effect of increasing the university’s sense of community is that it stimulated the development of an internally facing community website. What began as a resource for members of the university community to find timely information about COVID-19, the website (utoronto.ca/UTogether) has evolved into a vibrant hub for community information that previously did not exist. Similar to the interdivisional tables described above, the website — which started as a means to address a specific need — grew in response to acclaim about its utility in meeting another need that was previously unarticulated.

The COVID-19 pandemic also spurred a number of administrative efficiencies and innovations. For example, the university previously required wet-ink signatures for many of its official forms. When public health restrictions rendered this impossible on its existing scale, electronic signatures

replaced the ink requirement, considerably improving operational efficiency. Similarly, freed from the tether of a physical office, student advising services were able to increase their availability by conducting meetings with students online and extending hours when working within a hybrid model.

MOVING FORWARD: RECOGNISING EFFORTS AND SUPPORTING REINTEGRATION

In the course of its consultations, the RPT quickly recognised that one of its immediate goals was to represent the university's senior administration in acknowledging grief, showing gratitude and communicating recovery goals. As noted above, students, faculty and staff had all suffered major personal and professional setbacks because of the pandemic. Likewise, people across the university's community made tremendous sacrifices to meet the demands of the pandemic that deserved repeated thanks and recognition, which could easily be overlooked within the persistent bluster of crises imposed by COVID-19. Taking time to express appreciation therefore took priority for the RPT in its meetings and presentations. In addition, community members continued to have anxiety about the return to campus and what would happen next. The pandemic had not ended, and significant concern mounted that the university would simply revert to its former state and pace, which felt insurmountable to many individuals in the wake of their pandemic exhaustion. Articulating that the university's past would not be its future and conveying an openness to innovation thus helped to provide reassurance and stability.

Another concern that required immediate remediation related to students' preparation for in-person instruction and campus life. The university welcomes

roughly 16,000 new first-year students annually. With the return to in-person instruction across all divisions in the autumn of 2022, however, an additional 3,100 students (including entire cohorts of some graduate programmes) would be 'returning' to campus for the first time. Added to this, 3,900 returning students had only experienced one or two in-person instructional components (eg labs, tutorials or classes). These extra 7,000 students would require special orientation but, more important, a change in mindset (both for them and for the faculty and staff). For example, students entering third-year chemistry might have had no direct experience with lab safety, having only observed instructor demonstrations in online videos (which for international students attending synchronously from across the world may have been in the middle of the night). Such scenarios posed not just a safety risk, but an educational one. Upper-year students whose familiarity with university life and postsecondary education was restricted to online instruction might not know how to learn from in-person lectures, how to study in busy libraries, or how to take tests in the strict environment of a formal exam hall. The risk of underestimating the challenges of the transition could thus lead to escalations in stress and temptation to seek shortcuts that constitute academic offences. Adding to this the 2,300 new staff and 469 new faculty members hired since the onset of the pandemic, this became known locally as the 'Biggest Back-to-School Ever'.

As noted, the university was still facing the challenge of staff and faculty who had developed new ways of work and a new form of work-life balance, many of whom were reluctant to return to campus. Yet students could not be on campus alone. A back-to-school toolkit for staff managers and academic leaders for helping the faculty

and the staff within their units to transition back to the campuses was created. It contained resources for burnout and anxiety, suggestions on how to help individuals in distress, and language for instructors concerned about public-health protections in their classrooms, among other things. The university made a concerted effort to recognise the efforts of staff and faculty through events, increased numbers of recognition awards and messages focusing on gratitude and acknowledgment of efforts from the President and local leaders. Additional employee-assistance resources were made available, and professional development sessions intended to support staff leaders were initiated.

The university also worked to welcome the entire community back to campus with attractive signs and banners, a bevy of social events, and a user-generated content social media campaign. It also created new online resources for way-finding (eg campus maps, virtual tours and food-finding applications), extended the presence of start-of-semester information booths posted throughout the campuses, and offered additional in-person campus and library tours. Furthermore, special orientation events targeted upper-year students, as did increased offerings of lab safety training (which included the development of online modules).

As the previous semesters had seen some divisions attempt in-person instruction but then need to retreat when public health restrictions increased, the university organised voluntary vaccine clinics across all three campuses and declared November 2022 ‘Vaccine Month’. Pop-up vaccine clinics were organised, with competitions between offices, units and divisions to assure that their constituents had up-to-date booster vaccinations.

Results of the ‘Biggest Back-to-School Ever’ campaign showed success on multiple scores. Traffic at the information

booths doubled compared with previous years. Capacity at some orientation events reported double, triple and even quadruple attendance relative to a regular year. Participation in intramural sports teams reached capacity. Academic programme information sessions reported record numbers. In addition to the customary in-person lab safety training, online lab safety training was developed during COVID-19. Attendance in online training increased 40 per cent over the preceding year. Online resources saw unprecedented levels of traffic, requiring substantial upgrades to the university’s interactive food-map subscription service.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

As the RPT synthesised its findings, it created a set of recommendations that were tested through community consultations and ultimately clustered into three themes that formed the materials for building a more resilient university: navigation, engagement and future-proofing.

Streamlining navigation in a complex organisation

Recognising the need for greater clarity in navigating a university of such a large size and complex structure, the RPT sought to simplify the process for answering student questions, increase faculty and staff awareness and literacy with existing software resources, and create a repository of innovative practices to facilitate knowledge-sharing and adoption. For instance, the university employed a chatbot to help students connect with mental-health treatment options (on campus and outside of the university). Building on the chatbot’s programming, a sibling bot was created to answer general student questions, ranging from ‘Who is my registrar?’ to ‘How do I get tickets to the baseball game?’

Faculty and staff reported during the RPT's consultation meetings that they had a particular administrative challenge and wanted the university to purchase software that would help them respond, unaware that the resource existed already. Thus, the RPT partnered with the university's Information Technology Services to increase awareness of resources and services. After designing several ways to close this specific gap, the Information Technology Services office realised that it would benefit from a broader evaluation of its client services model and hired an external consultant to advise on how to reshape its processes.

Finally, consultations revealed a proliferation of innovations, developments, experiments and adaptations by students, faculty and staff in response to the pressures of the pandemic. Thus, the RPT began assembling a list of novel ideas that individuals had reported in order to formally and fulsomely document them as models for other units in the university. These documents then became part of a digital 'toolbox' hosted on the UTogether website (itself an instance of such a development) with the goal of highlighting particular examples of practices and tools with mimetic potential (ie those that could reasonably work in multiple units).

Facilitating engagement

The uncertainty wreaked by COVID-19 led to a greater need for guidance and information from the university's leadership. Individuals who previously might not have paid much attention to internal messages from administrative leaders now seemed to rely on knowing the shape of quickly changing conditions on the three campuses (eg *when and where are masks required?*), the tools available to support new methods of instruction (eg *how do I fairly administer a timed test with*

students spread across multiple time-zones?), and changes to administrative processes (eg *if the policy states that tenure adjudication meetings must occur in person, how do we meet to review the candidates now?*). This greater need for information and the uniquely rapid pace of changing information exposed cracks in the university's internal communications structure. Recognising these challenges, which — although longstanding — became amplified by the demands of the pandemic, the university's Communications division created a new position for an Executive Director of Internal Communications to study the flow of information within the university so as to construct a formal structure that would improve the speed, accuracy and predictability of internal messages.

Not only did members of the university community long for information during the pandemic, they also longed for connection. As discussed previously, one of the most hailed benefits of the pandemic period was the greater connections that peers formed across divisions. With the advantages of working in proximity suspended by stay-at-home orders, individuals needed to proactively reach out to ask even the most minor questions. Additionally, with geographic distance rendered somewhat irrelevant, these reaches could just as easily extend to someone on another campus as they could to the colleague working in the office next door when on campus. *Less* access to one's colleagues therefore became balanced by *more equal* access to one's colleagues. Collaborative groups thus formed through the aid and normalcy of digital platforms (eg videochat and instant-messaging services). Maintaining these connections might prove a challenge once individuals largely returned to working on the campuses again. Thus, the innovation toolbox added grassroots examples of collaborative networks that had developed.

Future-proofing systems and processes

A key goal of examining the developments that occurred in response to the pandemic was to solidify the structures necessary to assure the university's preparation for its next major challenge. Indeed, response procedures and guidelines refined in response to COVID-19 have already helped the university by informing how it managed its adaptation to a 2022 convoy protest that occurred at a site that borders one of the university's campuses. Looking ahead to other potential threats and arising out of the consultations and other information gathering, the RPT designed a set of initiatives to fortify the university's policies, procedures and practices.

Firstly, it was recognised that some of the university's policies do not anticipate contemporary circumstances. For example, particular policies refer to specific physical spaces that leave unclear how one would operate in conditions in which people cannot legally gather. These required updating to ensure that they could be used more effectively in altered situations.

Secondly, as a major research-intensive university, the university has scholars working on a broad array of topics at sites across the world. When COVID-19 introduced abrupt travel restrictions and halted the majority of on-campus research activity, it needed to contact a large number of researchers quickly with instructions and resources for support. Because the information about research activities exists in multiple nonparallel databases, mounting these communications involved some inefficiency. Field researchers might have filed plans with the Safety Abroad office, scholars supervising uninterrupted chemical processes would register their activities in a hazardous materials catalogue, and individuals whose research involves care-taking for animals had documented their intention to conduct such work with one

of the university's Research Ethics Boards. Collating the contact information from these and other sources requires time that does not cooperate with the conditions of a crisis. Thus, the university began work to streamline communications not just to researchers, but also from researchers who might seek assistance under disruptive circumstances.

Thirdly, the university advises all of its divisions and units to anticipate operational interruptions by developing a business continuity plan. While this is coordinated through a central office, responsibility for these plans resides at the local level. However, because the university functions as an ecosystem, an effective business continuity plan must consider interruptions to connected units that may co-occur with an interruption to one's own. To encourage the creation, enhancement and collaboration between business continuity plans, the RPT developed a hackathon-style retreat for representatives from across the university's divisions to construct or update their business continuity plans together. Completing this task in the same space at the same time facilitated integration of plans, allowed peer mentorship, and furthered the development of community between the administrators responsible for assuring the continuity of their unit's operation. It also allowed for greater coordination and oversight of business continuity plans in a de-centralised organisation. The success of the hackathon has led to plans for future iterations in order to ensure that plans remain up to date.

MOVING ON FROM HERE

As originally planned, the RPT completed its work and was disbanded at the end of June 2023. While there were some calls to have the RPT continue, we reiterated its importance as a transition team, moving

the university from crisis to recovery and resilience. In its 15-month life, the RPT was truly effective in managing the trailing concerns about COVID-19; listening to those exhausted, stressed and in some cases traumatised by the pandemic; consolidating innovations; and moving decision-making and administrative authority back to normal collegial governance processes. While other organisations have found other ways out of this unprecedented crisis, it served as a critical part of the recovery of the University of Toronto — an experiment we hope we will never need to replicate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As with all organisations, institutions of higher learning experienced significant disruption as they worked to minimise the risk of community infection from COVID-19 and ensure the safety of the population. Unlike many crises however, the prolonged nature and continuing uncertainty created a condition in which individuals adapted to states of lockdown and restrictions, and developed new approaches to work, study and life. Consequently, once pandemic restrictions ended, reorienting operations away from crisis and lockdown mode was not met with universal enthusiasm. Some individuals who had been granted new responsibilities and decision-making authority during the pandemic were reluctant to give them up. Many individuals, no longer restricted by the buildings or campuses in which they worked, had discovered newfound means to connect with colleagues across geographical space. Many individuals had discovered the benefits of working from home in order to save commuting time and money, and to better facilitate the balance between work and family responsibilities. However, the primary mission of a university — to educate students — and

the nature of the academic calendar in which students returned to campus in great numbers created an imperative to move into restart and recovery phase. In addition, the strain placed on the organisation and its people during COVID-19 provided insights into flawed and inefficient processes and policies. The ingenuity and adaptative practices of people across the university who worked to address these challenges presented opportunities for improvement and innovation. Thus, the Provost of University of Toronto created the RPT with the explicit aim of assisting the university to move from crisis to recovery and resilience.

Regehr and Goel³⁷ previously suggested a modification to the theoretical models regarding the stages of crisis in organisations^{38,39} to reflect the effects of prolonged uncertainty inflicted by COVID-19. The more than 300 consultations undertaken by the RPT with academic leaders, staff leaders and student leaders provided important insights into the manner in which both individuals and the organisation adapted during the period of prolonged uncertainty and the subsequent barriers to restart and recovery. These insights, depicted in Figure 1 — an adaptation to the model previously proposed⁴⁰ — include student desires for community and the reality of in-person classes and research, juxtaposed with staff exhaustion and the desire for remote work options. Building on these insights, the team then worked with others to develop strategies to welcome people back to campus and facilitate engagement.

In addition, the creativity and innovation displayed during COVID-19 provided new opportunities to build organisational resilience, a stage added to the model in Figure 1. Just as the university's response to SARS-CoV-2 provided it with tools, infrastructure and experience that prepared it for H1N1 and, in

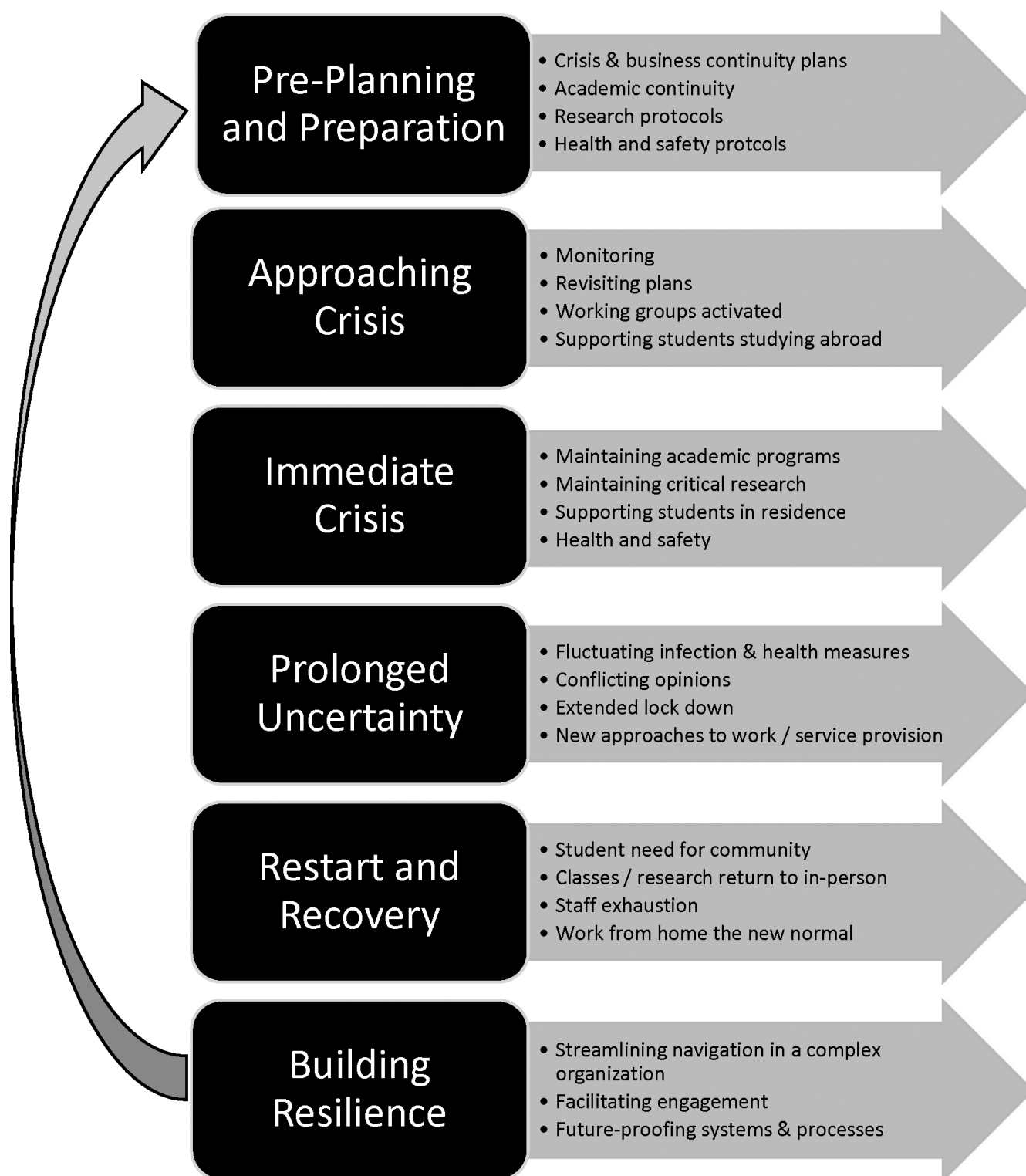


Figure 1 Higher education phases of crisis and response in COVID-19

Adapted from Regehr, C. and Goel, V. (2020) 'Managing COVID-19 in a large urban research-intensive university', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, Vol. 25, Nos. 6–7, pp. 523–539

turn, COVID-19, the much larger scale of disruption brought by COVID-19 must be utilised for pre-planning and preparing not just for future pandemics but also emerging issues related to climate change, cyber terrorism or social-political unrest, among other threats. That the future will continue to present all manner of challenges is a given. The quality and impact of the response to those challenges will depend on the willingness to adapt on an ongoing basis.

Despite the chaos that crises may introduce, the account of the University Resilience Project illustrates how they carry with them unique opportunities for adaptation and innovation. As exemplified by one faculty member speaking during the RPT's consultations, 'The pandemic created a different set of expectations ... There has been frustration and fatigue, but I look back on it highly. It's been a period of creativity, innovation and leadership — a highlight of my career'.

REFERENCES

- (1) Regehr, C. and Goel, V. (2020) 'Managing COVID-19 in a large urban research-intensive university', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, Vol. 25, Nos. 6–7, pp. 523–539.
- (2) Wit, H. de and Altbach, P. G. (2023) 'International higher education for the future: Major crises and post-pandemic challenges', *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, Vol. 55, No. 1, pp. 17–23.
- (3) Regehr, C. and McCahan, S. (2020) 'Maintaining academic continuity in the midst of COVID-19', *Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 110–121.
- (4) De Boer, H. (2021) 'COVID-19 in Dutch higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 96–106.
- (5) Agasisti, T. and Soncin, M. (2021) 'Higher education in troubled times: On the impact of COVID-19 in Italy', *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 86–95.
- (6) Moja, T. (2021) 'National and institutional responses—reimagined operations—pandemic disruptions and academic continuity for a global university', *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 19–29.
- (7) Howitt, A. M., Leonard, H. B. and Giles, D. W. (eds) (2009) *Managing Crises*, Sage, Washington, DC.
- (8) Leonard, H. B. and Howitt, A. M. (2012) 'Leading in Crisis: Observations on the Political and Decision-making Dimensions Response', in Helsloot, I., Jacobs, B., Boin, A. and Comfort, L. K. (eds) *Mega-Crises: Understanding the Prospects, Nature, Characteristics and the Effects of the Cataclysmic Events*, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, IL, pp. 25–34.
- (9) Herbane, B., Elliott, D. and Swartz, E. (2004) 'Business continuity management: Time for a strategic role?', *Long Range Planning*, Vol. 37, No. 5, pp. 435–457.
- (10) Gibb, F. and Buchanan, S. (2006) 'A framework for business continuity management', *International Journal of Information Management*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 128–141.
- (11) Zeng, Z. and Zio, E. (2017) 'An integrated modeling framework for quantitative business continuity assessment', *Process Safety and Environmental Protection*, Vol. 106, pp. 76–88.
- (12) Mann, T. (2007) 'Strategic and collaborative crisis management: A partnership approach to large-scale crisis', *Planning for Higher Education*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 54–64.
- (13) Regehr and McCahan, ref. 3 above
- (14) Schweber, C. (2013) 'Survival Lessons: Academic Continuity, Business Continuity, and Technology', in Van den Bossche, P. (ed.) *Facilitating Learning in the 21st Century: Leading through Technology, Diversity and Authenticity*, Springer, Dordrecht, Boston and London, pp. 151–163.

- (15) Regehr, C., Nelson, S. and Hildyard, A. (2017) 'Academic continuity planning in higher education', *Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 73–84.
- (16) Wit and Altbach, ref. 2 above.
- (17) Regehr and McCahan, ref. 3 above.
- (18) De Boer, ref. 4 above.
- (19) Agasisti and Soncin, ref. 5 above.
- (20) Moja, ref. 6 above.
- (21) Jung, J., Horta, H. and Postiglione, G. A. (2021) 'Living in uncertainty: The COVID-19 pandemic and higher education in Hong Kong', *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 107–120.
- (22) Wit and Altbach, ref. 2 above.
- (23) De Boer, ref. 4 above.
- (24) Agasisti and Soncin, ref. 5 above.
- (25) Moja, ref. 6 above.
- (26) Regehr and Goel, ref. 1 above.
- (27) Sahu, P. (2020) 'Closure of universities due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on education and mental health of students and academic staff', *Cureus*, Vol. 12, No. 4, e7541.
- (28) Savage, M. J., James, R., Magistro, D., Donaldson, J., Healy, L. C. and Nevill, M. and Hennis, P. J. (2020) 'Mental health and movement behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic in UK university students: Prospective cohort study', *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, Vol. 19, 100357.
- (29) CP24 (May 2022) 'COVID state of emergency lifted in Toronto after 777 days', available at: <https://www.cp24.com/news/covid-state-of-emergency-lifted-in-toronto-after-777-days-1.5894829> (accessed 8th November, 2023).
- (30) Jain, T., Currie, G. and Aston, L. (2022) 'COVID and working from home: Long-term impacts and psycho-social determinants', *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, Vol. 156, pp. 52–68.
- (31) Owen, C., Scott, C., Adams, R. and Parsons, D. (2015) 'Leadership in crisis: Developing beyond command and control', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 15–19.
- (32) Regehr and Goel, ref. 1 above.
- (33) Regehr and McCahan, ref. 3 above.
- (34) Regehr *et al.*, ref 15 above.
- (35) University of Toronto Governing Council (2018) 'Policy on Crisis and Routine Emergency Preparedness and Response'.
- (36) Regehr and Goel, ref. 1 above.
- (37) *Ibid.*
- (38) Howitt *et al.*, ref. 7 above.
- (39) Leonard and Howitt, ref. 8 above.
- (40) Regehr and Goel, ref. 1 above.
- (41) *Ibid.*

Copyright of Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning is the property of Henry Stewart Publications LLP and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.