Unpacking curriculum transformation in Higher Educational Institutions in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world: Insights from the DECART project

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted Higher Education (HE), creating extreme volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) and highlighted the necessity for the HE system to be crisis-ready, agile and adaptable. The multiple disruptions facing HEIs posed unprecedented challenges for leaders and highlighted the necessity for curriculum transformation to ensure responsiveness in a VUCA world. The aim of this qualitative research study is to identify the disruptions impacting HEIs with respect to curriculum, and then critically explore what curriculum transformation entails. The 'what', 'why', 'how' and 'when' of curriculum transformation is unpacked. To collect data, a virtual workshop of academics from IMT Atlantique (France), Reykjavik University (Iceland), Vilnius University (Lithuania), RWTH Aachen University (Germany), Del Institute of Technology (Indonesia), and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa), who are project partners in the Designing Higher Education Curricula for Agility, Resilience and Transformation (DECART) research and innovation project funded under the European Commission's ERASMUS+ programme, was conducted. The workshop was held in May 2024. Participants were purposively selected from the project partner universities. In the DECART project, the sharing of innovative curricula and their VUCA properties is central, as well as developing curriculum cooperation modes that are resilient, and ultimately strengthening leadership capabilities for driving curriculum transformation. The aim is to also disseminate innovative curricula structures, curriculum design methods and leadership tools. The focus group data collected through the workshop was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings highlight that disruptions experienced by the participants with respect to curriculum, include pandemics, natural hazards, digitilization, and generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). The diverse and complex understandings of curriculum transformation include innovation, adaptation, technology integration, and changes to be better. The findings provide insights for HE curriculum and programme designers, and leaders.