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European Doctoral Researchers in Business and Organisation Studies Telling About the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Their Work - A Qualitative Study

In Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic "began" in the early spring of 2020, quickly leading to various closures, curfews and quarantines in all European countries. For European universities the radically novel situation meant many kinds of restrictions and reorganisation of their operations, which caused unprecedented challenges to the work of academic researchers, teachers, administrators and students. The focus of this study is on the work of university students, and, more precisely, on the immediate pandemic-related experiences concerning work of PhD students, that is doctoral researchers, in business and organisation studies from several European universities.

There already exist numerous survey- and interview-based analyses of how students in higher education have coped with the exceptional situation, how they have faced severe stress, anxiety and even dread, but also analyses of means they have mobilised to develop new strategies of survival and even success in their work (e.g., ESU 2021, Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett 2021, Ihm et al. 2021). However, there is still an obvious need for qualitative analyses of how the sudden disaster of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced university students to rethink, reorganise and even recreate, with resources available to them, the key elements of their everyday life, and their studies and research work as its important parts. From a broad social scientific perspective, the pandemic has put the inseparable assemblies of agentic individuals immersed in their social/cultural/organisational structures to compelling movement and pressures of change, and it is only with qualitative analyses we can start to understand the varying, contextually specific ways such assemblies have processually evolved through the pandemic time.

The research material of this qualitative study consists of 16 texts (stories, accounts, SWOT-analyses) written by doctoral researchers from several European universities. The writing commission was a voluntary part of an online course on qualitative research methods for European PhD students in business and organisation studies, and the course was co-arranged by the author in May 2020. The doctoral researchers were asked to tell about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their work, but no conditions were put for the exact content, length or form of how they should carry out this writing commission. Most of the participants in the research method course took up the voluntary task.

In the presentation I will introduce some results from my analysis of the 16 texts. As profiles of "survivors", "strugglers" and "in-betweeners/hybrids" could be interpretatively conceptualised from the material, it is interesting to reflect on the social scientifically relevant causes for the differences in the profiles. Generally, the COVID-19 pandemic as a singular mass disruptor has created fascinating challenges from the social scientific point of view, too, because "luck" (good or bad), for example, now seems to have made the kind of strong comeback as a mover and shaker of people's lives that most of us probably were not expecting in the affluent West in the beginning of the 21st century.