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ESSAY

How My COVID-19 Disruption Became My Privileged Boom Time

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Abstract

I was meant to spend the first half of 2020 on research study leave at the University of Cologne. My partner and I rushed back to Australia in mid-March, disrupting our plans and forcing me into a new working paradigm. The disruption wound up sending me into one of the most productive periods of my career. In this article, I reflect on how my privileges—both earned and unearned—have contributed to a boom in my academic work at the same time that it has wreaked havoc on the entire sector. I also reflect on how COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated inequalities in Australian universities.

Keywords

COVID-19; Privilege; Higher Education

It all happened so fast. Monday morning, 16 March, I went into my office to print a few documents, anticipating that the University of Cologne would soon shut down. The cafeteria (Mensa) was especially empty that day, with notices that they would be closed from Wednesday. Tuesday morning. My partner and I woke up to news that Prime Minister Scott Morrison advised all Australians overseas who intend to return home to do so as soon as possible. But that was not us; we were not going home until the end of August, and surely we would be fine in Germany. We could wait this pandemic out. Wednesday morning and a COVID-19 update from Australian Catholic University (ACU). The second section: 'ACU is asking all students and staff who are overseas to return to Australia as soon as possible.' But surely we could still stay in Germany, where the health system was managing the pandemic well. I emailed the Dean and Head of School seeking advice. No response. It was after 5:00pm

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in Australia, but these people check their emails all the time. What was going on? Wednesday night, 11:00pm in Germany: Qantas announced that they would stop flying internationally in the next few weeks. That was it. We may have felt safe in Germany, but we did not want to be stranded. By 3:00am we had booked flights leaving from Dusseldorf the next day. We landed in Australia Friday night—after the borders had closed—but we are both Australian citizens so that was not a problem.

That week was only the beginning of my COVID-19 experience. The virus has disrupted lives across the planet; in the large scheme of things, though, my partner and I count ourselves lucky. We are healthy; we are in Melbourne where we have emerged from our second lockdown with a sense of cautious optimism for the summer. We both have jobs, and high-paying ones at that, which also means we could afford unforeseen expenses (like two last-minute, one-way tickets from Germany to Australia and rent in a two-bedroom apartment in the Docklands). We also have encountered goodwill from landlords, tenants, neighbours, friends and family. In an unexpectedly warped way, I have actually found myself more productive than normal. Still, it has been a journey (and one which is not over yet). This is my story of how COVID-19 disrupted my semester overseas and, for me at least, proved not to be a great equaliser but rather augmented several of my privileges—both earned and unearned.

My partner and I arrived in Cologne on 23 January. I was to spend the next six months on research study leave from ACU, based at the Centre for Australian Studies at the University of Cologne. This was an exciting prospect. I have been friends with staff from that research centre since 2016, and I delivered a guest seminar there in 2018. This semester was an opportunity to collaborate on a project that would combine my background in Australian history with the Cologne staff's background in literature, cinema and cultural studies. We won a 2020-21 Universities Australia-DAAD Australia-Germany Joint Co-operation Scheme grant for a project entitled 'Whom do we Remember? Exploring Cultural Narratives of War and Migration.'¹ The grant was funding a series of workshops and travel from our respective universities, as each researcher would be looking at different ways that literature, art, drama and cinema included and excluded social groups from national narratives of war and immigration. My particular interest was to look at how popular fiction—especially gay romance and erotic fiction—has depicted gay and bisexual Australian servicemen (see [Riseman 2020](#)). While in Cologne, I also planned to write up material from my ongoing ARC Discovery project on the history of transgender Australians and to finalise the manuscript for my new co-authored book *Pride in Defence: The Australian Military and LGBTI Service since 1945* ([2020](#)).

Of course, I had a lot more planned for my time in Cologne. I was scheduled to deliver five guest lectures in three classes. These were on topics ranging from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, to the history of Jewish immigration through to general overviews of Australian Indigenous history. I also arranged for two friends from Australia who were passing through Europe to deliver guest seminars in June. My colleagues in the Centre for Australian Studies put me in touch with the head of Cologne's Gender Studies Program, who scheduled me to deliver a public lecture on the history of transgender military service in Australia (which was timed around Cologne Pride). I was in touch with colleagues in Poland, the Netherlands and other universities in Germany and had guest public lectures lined up across the German semester from April-July. Mixed in with all of this was going to be some travel with my partner (including a long-desired pilgrimage to Eurovision in Rotterdam).

In the end we only had just under two months in Cologne. In that short time we already were making friends, had enjoyed the week-long party that is Karneval (and where I took a strong liking to Kolsch songs), and were just beginning to get a real feel for life in Cologne. While I went to work, my partner explored the city and was enrolled in intermediate level German classes. He even started training with the

¹ As of November 2020, ACU *still* has not sorted the agreement for this grant and we have not received a single dollar. Yet, the university is refusing to let us carry forward the 2020 funds which we never received.

Rheinland Lions: Cologne's Aussie rules' football team, which we discovered on our first weekend because they trained less than 500 metres from our apartment.

COVID-19 ended all of these plans. The staff at the Centre for Australian Studies were very understanding about our situation and our hasty departure. Still, there were a lot of uncertainties, changes and challenges that my partner and I had to navigate—and again I count us as privileged that we were able to do so relatively unscathed. For instance, our house in Melbourne was rented out through the end of August, so we needed to find a place to live. At about 2:00am on the evening before our rushed departure, I found what looked like a pretty good AirBnB in Docklands that was heavily discounted (COVID-19 had already taken its toll on the tourism market). What was most attractive was the large outdoor space, as we would have to spend the first fourteen days in isolation. But the manager rang me the next morning and said he had made an error and the apartment would not be available until the morning after we arrived. He had another place we could stay for the first night if that was okay. Fine (and that first place was absolutely awful—thank goodness it was only for one night!). Once we were in Melbourne, we negotiated to stay in the flat until the end of August, but with the option of leaving early as long as we gave two weeks' notice.

We arrived in Melbourne before the government implemented mandatory hotel quarantine. I do not know how my partner and I would have coped being cooped up in one room together for two weeks. That said, I fully support the decision to bring in the mandatory quarantine. When we arrived at the airport, we only had to fill out a form advising where we would be self-isolating for the two weeks (we put the address of where we were staying the first night because we did not know the other address). That was it—no enforcement or other precautions were taken at the airport. It did not surprise me when the news reported people breaching the self-isolation edict (for the record: aside from the move from that first apartment after our first night, we never broke the self-isolation and stayed in our rented apartment with its spacious patio).

Then there was the return to work and this is where my COVID-19 journey has been anything but an equaliser. I was receiving emails from colleagues, administrators and the union talking about the disruptions to ACU campus life, shifts to online learning and health advice. None of this affected me because I was not teaching. I already had all of the primary and secondary sources I needed to conduct my research and write because I had already planned on doing that in Cologne. So, with nothing else to do but watch Netflix (which I have certainly done plenty of), I got to work and spent the normal working hours researching and writing.

Very quickly my partner and I got into a rhythm, and I thrive on routine so the pandemic actually helped my work ethic. Working in close proximity to my partner was eye-opening for both of us. We were fortunate that he was able to return from unpaid leave to his public service job five months earlier than originally planned. This meant doubling our income almost immediately—again a marker of our privileged positions. In the Docklands flat we set up a home office for him in the lounge room with a desk and chair, while I happily worked on the sofa in the background. I would sit quietly while he had many meetings and phone conversations. I would generally go outside for my meetings because they were less frequent and less formal. He never realised how solitary academic work could be or how 'in the zone' I get when I write. I finally saw what he actually 'does' in his job, and especially was impressed with his style mentoring and supervising more junior staff.

When I say I have been productive during COVID-19 I do not exaggerate. As I sat to write this, I tried to tally all of the work I have done since returning to Australia in March and could not recall it all. But here is the list of what I do remember: researching and writing two journal articles and one book chapter over four months (on top of two articles completed before I left Cologne); assessing several ARC Linkage and Special Research Initiative in Australian Society, History and Culture grant applications; finalising the manuscript for my new book, including the copyediting and proofing; examining one MPhil thesis and refereeing five publications; assessing my first Marsden Fund grant application (New Zealand's equivalent

to the ARC); preparing a rejoinder for an ARC Discovery application, as well as commenting on drafts of colleagues' rejoinders; preparing to convene the International Australian Studies Association (InASA) conference, including making arrangements to move it from November/December 2020 to February 2021 and shifting it online; delivering four guest lectures via Zoom for my colleagues at Cologne, a public lecture to Adam Mickiewicz University in Poland, and a seminar to the Melbourne Feminist History Group; delivering a webinar on LGBTI military service to veterans associations and service providers from around the world; being on the panel for three HDR candidature review processes as well as supporting two of my own HDR students through confirmation and one through a completion seminar; writing two book reviews; going through approximately 92,000+ digitised index cards and requesting access to over 1,500 records at the National Archives of Australia; commencing preliminary research for an ARC Future Fellowship application next year; conducting oral history interviews via Zoom and/or MS Teams; liaising with LGBTI veterans to progress a push for a formal apology for past discrimination; preparing various letters and submissions relating to the government's higher education reforms and the ARC's review into ERA and EI; being elected to and serving on ACU Academic Board; and working with colleagues to set up an LGBTIQ+ Ally Network at ACU.

I am proud of doing all of this while in iso, particularly because traditionally I have never been a work-from-home person. Yet, I know that I could only achieve so much in these circumstances because of numerous privileges which not all academics share:

- I have a continuing position as a professor, which makes me one of Australia's top income earners. Money and job security have not been problems for my partner or me, whereas casual academics have lost jobs and/or faced anxiety around looming job cuts and fewer employment opportunities in the tertiary sector.
- We do not have children. This is not in any way to take away from the joys of parenthood, but it means that I have not had to facilitate remote learning or be a full-time academic and full-time parent. I have nothing to do but work.
- This year I am in a research only role. I have not had to manage the transition to online learning, support the mental health and wellbeing of students and deal with the uncertainties of what will happen next.
- My research projects are all at different stages, which has meant plenty of material to write up and other opportunities to commence pilot research from digital sources.
- As a historian, I do not require laboratory facilities and can work from home. The closing of archives does affect my work, but fortunately there is so much digital material out there that I have had no problem continuing to research (and at my request the ACU Library subscribed to the new Archives of Sexuality and Gender database). I have been able to conduct oral history interviews via Zoom and MS Teams, and hopefully I will be able to travel interstate early next year to access on-site records.

My partner and I managed to navigate the financial and logistical challenges that rushing back to Australia caused—and luck and goodwill have been on our side. We had paid in advance for our apartment in Cologne so were out of pocket by about \$7,500 when we had to rush back. The owner was travelling and rushed back to Germany around the same time that we left. She kindly refunded almost all of the money we had paid in advance. The tenants who rented our house in Melbourne were still working and continued to pay rent. We informed them that we were back and that if they left early we would waive the penalty for breaking the lease. We later offered them a rent discount to leave early. They declined the discount, saying they did not want our money, but left two months early anyways because they bought a house. So after 3.5 months we were able to leave the Docklands flat and return home (and just before lockdown 2.0 began—so not a moment too soon). After a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, ACU's travel insurance refunded my expensive

one-way ticket from Germany back to Australia, and my partner's travel insurance refunded all of our other cancelled travel.

I tell this story to demonstrate that the effects of COVID-19 on academia have been incredibly uneven. My output productivity is booming (although ACU is still reducing my 2021 research allocation by 320 hours or .2 FTE because I supposedly have not published in sufficiently high quality outlets—but that is another article for another day). Meanwhile, staff with bigger teaching commitments have not been given adequate support to transition to online learning. Those professional and academic staff with children or carer responsibilities—disproportionately women—have seen their productivity drop because they have far less time to do the double shift. Staff in 'essential' roles have had to put their health at risk by continuing to work on campus.

Reflecting on my privileges and the gaps within Australian academia as COVID-19 wreaks havoc on the sector has been challenging. Some of my privileges are unearned, most prominently being white, male, cisgender and born into an upper middle-class background. My entire life and career have been successful because of a mix of hard work, strategic networks and a bit of luck, with my privileges sometimes opening doors or—more importantly—not putting up roadblocks. But at the same time, I have worked hard to get where I am. The reason I was research only this year and have climbed the ranks to professor at such a (relatively) young age is because I have played the academia game well: publishing in the 'right' places, writing competitive grant applications, delivering on the promised outputs and building professional and community networks. I have been fortunate to have some amazing mentors (special shout-outs to Professors Shurlee Swain and Pat Grimshaw) and colleagues (the entire History and Arts crew at ACU). I know that not every academic has those privileges, so I live my career by the adage of paying it forward: working to support junior colleagues and advocating for them in whatever forums are available.

I am also very conscious of the storm that is devastating higher education in Australia. Across the sector we are witnessing huge job losses, with casual and more junior staff being the first in the firing lines. At other universities where there have been redundancies, academic and professional staff have had to apply for their own jobs and lived with heightened anxiety as they face uncertain futures. The sector has been split down the middle over whether staff should voluntarily take pay cuts to pay and other conditions to support jobs (and neither the NTEU nor university administrations have handled this challenging issue well).

For most of the year ACU seemed like we were weathering this storm. We have a smaller international student cohort and the university is projecting a surplus of \$46.4 million over the period 2020-22. Still, the university has announced plans to cut \$42 million in staff costs or up to 174 FTE jobs. I am working with the NTEU to fight this unnecessary measure, but it is a tough fight. I worry how these proposed job cuts will affect me and my colleagues in the School of Arts, particularly in the wake of the government's higher education reforms which will see student fees for most humanities units increase by 113%. ACU has a high percentage of low socio-economic status or first in family students—something which we are rightfully proud of—but that means we are more vulnerable to price signals than more prestigious institutions. If from 2021 we have fewer students and less teaching in our humanities units, and if the university continues to prioritise supporting research in institutes (which has certainly been the strategy for the last seven years), then where does that leave my colleagues and me?

Reflecting on the bigger picture, COVID-19 has not created inequities within academia: rather, it has exposed and accelerated problems which have been brewing for decades. As my colleague Hannah Forsyth explains in *A History of the Modern Australian University* (2014), except for a brief period when higher education expanded dramatically in the early 1970s, there was never a mythical time when PhD graduates were finding it easy to get jobs. Yet, the expectations to secure work have been getting harder. When I finished my PhD in 2008, to be competitive for a Level B position in the Humanities you needed to have a

few journal publications and a clear plan to publish your thesis and apply for grant funding. Now it seems that to be even considered for a Level B position, you need to have:

- published journal articles only in A*/A ranked journals;
- a book contract or book with a top academic publisher (at my university you are unlikely to get a look in unless it is with Oxford, Cambridge, Chicago or an Ivy League press);
- teaching experience preferably as a lecturer-in-charge;
- some experience securing grant funding;
- proof of engagement and impact activities, such as partnerships or other work with end users.

On the one hand, these sound like ridiculously high standards; but the difficult reality is that there are candidates who meet these standards and it is a buyer's market for universities. All that COVID-19 is likely to do is raise this bar even higher: fewer positions will mean that universities can be even choosier.

COVID-19 has not driven this agenda. Rather, universities focus their resources to improve their international rankings and attain scores of 4 and 5 in ERA (Trakakis 2020). Universities want to hire strong researchers; when those researchers are successful (such as myself), they teach less. That sounds fair enough, but still someone has to do the teaching, which is why so much of the work force has been casualised. So long as ERA exists I do not foresee anything changing the sector approach to hiring—which, unfortunately, is not an optimistic note on which to end. It also does not help that we have a government hostile to universities, and politicians and commentators across the board have little understanding of the many intersecting mechanisms that drive university managerialism (e.g. ERA, TEQSA, ARC expectations, engagement and impact, international metrics, journal rankings, funding agreements). That said, I would like to give a shout-out and thank you to [Senator Jacqui Lambie](#), whose statements about the recently passed higher education reforms nailed why so many of us working in the sector opposed them.

My COVID-19 experience shows that even with international disruptions, some of us academics have thrived – but now even we find ourselves in a precarious position as we enter the unknown world of 2021. COVID-19 has exposed and accelerated the great inequities of our tertiary sector, which has been held flimsily on the backs of casual teaching and international student fees. Now is anyone in power willing to listen and fix it?

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