

Introduction to the Covid-19 Special Issue

This is not an ordinary Special Issue; it charts the progression of an ongoing pandemic

A Special Issue of a journal typically provides an overview of the current research and perspectives on a topic. As a summation of the state of play in a field, it remains valid for a number of months or even years. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, breaks the mould and does not fit that type of Special Issue. As a phenomenon, it is occurring on an enormous scale, it is constantly changing, it is relatively unpredictable and the consequences are likely to persist long-term.

This Special Issue on Covid-19, therefore, takes a different approach. It draws together a series of commentaries written at various points during the progression of a pandemic. Those articles have highlighted important themes as they have emerged, pointing to potential consequences, topics that need to be researched, and matters that should form part of the dialogue regarding the handling of the pandemic and future directions.

Framing the international Covid-19 situation

The Covid-19 pandemic is often described as an “unprecedented event” (NZIER, 2020). It is indeed unprecedented in modern history in terms of the scale on which events are occurring. Although there have been other pandemics this century, including the H5N1 influenza outbreak, Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV), H1N1, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV), and Ebola, those have tended to be localised events. Covid-19 is a worldwide phenomenon, as vast numbers of people across most countries have become infected or died. Economies have gone into recession, unemployment has continued to rise and governments have initiated economic measures on a scale not seen since for almost a century. The worldwide disruption is significantly affecting societies, public health and the international economy. It is perhaps one the greatest disruptions in living memory.

The pandemic is not an ‘event’ though. The duration of the pandemic is far longer than many anticipated. In April 2020, there was optimistic speculation that the peak of the pandemic may be over by Easter. Harvard epidemiologist, William Hanage, countered with the sobering commentary that “no matter how you crunch the numbers, this pandemic is only just getting started” (Hanage, 2020). He was correct. Six months later, in October 2020, after vast numbers of infections and fatalities worldwide, Europe’s second wave was worse than the first, with outbreak hot-spots in the United Kingdom, Spain and France. In November, the USA cases once again started to soar, hitting new daily highs (Pollett, 2020; Looi, 2020; New York Times, 2020).

It has become clear that the pandemic is, in fact, an era, rather than an event. Furthermore, it is not static. It is fast moving, with constant changes as new developments occur. Although the emergence of vaccines gives hope, any end of the pandemic could still be many months away, potentially in the second half of 2021 (Brueck & Bendix, 2020). When, one day, there is a ‘post-Covid era’, it is likely to be a new world, rather than a simple return to an old pre-Covid situation.

Although the pandemic is a worldwide disruption, the responses tend to be fragmented, with each nation adopting its own political, health and economic responses. The comparative analyses emerging in key health, economic and social areas point to vast differences in approaches and the timing of various strategies (compare, for example, the approaches taken by New Zealand and Sweden). Throughout these, however, there is a near-universal theme of profound changes for work and employment including economic recessions, devastating job losses, the decline whole industries and social instability.

Why is the Aotearoa New Zealand context relatively unique?

Aotearoa New Zealand is in a relatively unique position. It is part of a small group of countries and jurisdictions that have pursued a public health goal of elimination, rather than the mitigation or suppression of the disease. In practice, this has meant that within the country, from a public health perspective, daily life in the latter half of 2020 returned to a situation much more like the pre-Covid era. This New Zealand public health response has attracted international acclaim (Baker et al., 2020; Summers et al., 2020). Alongside this, the country has embarked on a vast programme of state economic intervention, perhaps greater than other countries, and on a scale that has definitely not been seen since the 1930s Great Depression.

In terms of the economy and trade though, Aotearoa New Zealand is not immune from what is happening elsewhere. The country is highly globally connected and dependent on rest of world. The worldwide disruption and measures, such as border closures, affect New Zealand in multiple ways, directly influencing the economy, trade, and the workforce. Together, those factors make Aotearoa New Zealand a particularly important context to explore.

Analysing key work and employment issues

A disruption of this scale that is continuing to evolve over a long timeframe is too vast for a single, one-off issue of a journal. This Special Issue of the NZJER, therefore, serves an important function as part of an ongoing process of analysis and insight. As the pandemic has unfolded, the contributing authors have captured vital topics, analysing the emergent issues, mapping out key themes and initiating an ongoing dialogue that will continue for a considerable time. Those articles have been posted at various times as Early Online articles on the Tuwhera website (<https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/nzjer/earlyonline>), and are now brought together into this one Special Issue.

The sequence of this Special Issue commences with a discussion of the widespread working from home arrangements that form one of the distinctive elements of the pandemic. Nicola Green, David Tappin and Tim Bentley explore the topic, drawing on existing research, highlighting key implications that should inform organisations as they deal with virtual working, and weigh up whether to make this an enduring part of their practices.

Continuing a related theme, Sanna Malinen, Jennifer Hoi Ki Wong and Katharina Näswall draw on past research on employee wellbeing in crisis contexts, along with preliminary evidence from the Covid-19 context, to identify ways in which organisations can support employees' wellbeing in times of extended crises.

The rights and obligations of employers and employees take on a new significance in the pandemic setting, as new situations and new issues emerge. From a legal perspective, Gordon Anderson highlights a number of employment issues of importance.

As a growing proportion of the workforce move to working from home, workers are increasingly subject to intensive electronic monitoring. A recent Trade Union Congress (TUC) report from the UK highlights the “creeping role” of artificial intelligence (AI) in managing people at work and the new challenge of ensuring that AI and technology are used to improve working lives not to “rob workers of their dignity” (TUC, 2020). In this Special Issue, Stephen Blumenfield, Gordon Anderson, and Val Hooper explore this contentious issue in the New Zealand context, addressing dimensions such as the law, employee responses, the erosion of trust, and the role of unions,

While a pandemic potentially affects all of society to some degree, the effects are not equally distributed. Existing inequities are often exacerbated and new inequities can emerge (Myers, 2020; Henrickson, 2020; McNeely et al., 2020; Buckley & Barua, 2020). Gender is becoming a prominent one among those inequities. Annick Masselot and Maria Hayes explore this topic, raising important questions regarding the ways in which women are disadvantaged by the events and policies.

A major disruption can provide a turning point where we can pause, critically evaluate where we have been, and look at new directions for society. This includes creating new understandings of work and employment, and intentionally creating a new order. Annie Newman and Irina Freilekhman address this issue from a trade union perspective. They suggest that there is an opportunity and a challenge for building the post-Covid-19 economy in a way that fosters industrial democracy. In such a new order, workers would be valued for the investment they make, and the contribution they can bring to a more equitable economy.

Continuing the theme of critical evaluation and new directions, Matthew Scobie and Anna Sturman explore the implications of Covid-19 and its response in terms of the potential effect in Māori communities. They question whether the current, inherited concept of an economic order is sustainable, especially given the massive disruptions that are already transforming society. Instead, they propose a need to envisage economies in different ways, and the potential for alternative understandings of work within these visions.

Appreciation to our contributors

Looking back over these articles, I am immensely grateful to everyone involved, the contributors, the reviewers and the editorial staff, who have all made this Special Issue possible. Creating a journal Special Issue can be a busy task under normal circumstances. In this pandemic context though, people have been under considerable extra pressure, both at home and at work. Despite those large increases in their normal workloads, they have written articles, reviewed and edited manuscripts. Together, they have brought this to publication and started a much longer discourse. That, in itself, is perhaps a snapshot of working lives in the pandemic, and a testament to the dedication of all this team.

Bernard Walker
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