

DOI 10.20544/HORIZONS.A.29.2.21. P02

UDC 378:616.98]:578.834

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION¹

Snezana Nikodinovska-Stefanovska, PhD

Faculty of Security – Skopje

University St. Kliment Ohridski – Bitola

ABSTRACT

The scale of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in the 21st century. One of the largest shocks related to the COVID-19 crisis was not only the lethality of the virus itself, but also the chaotic and ad hoc response to it from so many sectors of society. When it became clear in early March 2020 that COVID-19 was spreading rapidly on a global scale, most governments began shutting down businesses, schools, and universities. Many higher education institutions switched to online classes after only a few days of preparation. Many have struggled to decide how to assess student learning remotely, whether to postpone or cancel final exams. A big concern for many higher education institutions has been to avoid increased cheating and plagiarism during online examinations. How higher education institutions will move forward after the pandemic? Will universities return to a “business as usual” or, will use this disruption to transform the education?

KEY WORDS: COVID-19 pandemic, higher education, online teaching, assessment, examinations.

INTRODUCTION

The scale of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in the 21st century. One of the largest shocks related to the COVID-19 crisis was not only the lethality of the virus itself, but also the chaotic and ad hoc

¹ professional paper

response to it from so many sectors of society. When it became clear in early March 2020 that COVID-19 was spreading rapidly on a global scale, most governments began shutting down businesses, schools, and universities. The health crisis has quickly evolved into an economic, cultural, and social crisis. Immediate responses have been developed primarily to control and curb the spread of the infection, and led to the closure of entire countries, the reestablishment of borders for both people and goods.

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world much sooner than anyone could have imagined or expected. Globally interconnected societies, for which whole humanity took so much pride for years, have transformed into life in lockdown with restricted mobility. Worldwide the governing bodies, educational institutions, public and private organizations, all are affected and radically changed their way of functioning within weeks. The education sector is witnessing massive changes and adopting revolutionary ideas shifting entire pedagogical approach. This shift in education from traditional classroom learning to computer-based learning might be one of the largest educational experiments to date.

As country after country imposed partial or total lockdowns in February and March 2020, the number of universities and colleges closing their campus, interrupting face-to face activities, and switching to e-learning, eventually affecting more than 200 million students globally. However, few of these institutions were well prepared for the sudden, disruptive move. A lot of scrambling, improvisation, and continuous adaptation have occurred as administrators, academics, and students struggle to implement online learning.

Within a few weeks, about 20,000 higher education institutions had ceased normal operation, sending home close to 200 million students. Many institutions switched to online classes after only a few days of preparation.

Almost immediately after moving to online teaching and learning, higher education institutions had to make decisions about assessment, examinations, and graduation. Many have struggled to decide how to assess student learning remotely, whether to postpone or cancel final exams. A big concern for many higher education institutions has been to avoid increased cheating and plagiarism during online examinations.

Even if the Covid-19 pandemic was in many ways unique, history has no shortage of examples of epidemics, pandemics and other emergencies. It would also be unwise to assume that the Covid-19 pandemic will be the last emergency of its kind and that there will be no need for future generations – or our own – to learn the lessons of spring 2020 to summer 2021, and beyond.

How higher education systems will move forward after the pandemic? Will universities return to a “business as usual” or, will universities use this disruption to transform education and research to advance sustainable development?

COVID-19 HAS CHANGED UNIVERSITY TEACHING

The disruption caused by the current Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented, and the resulting economic and social measures have brought massive change. To mitigate the spread of the virus, governments around the world have imposed social distancing measures, lockdowns, and cessation of personal contact outside immediate households. The pandemic is thus having a massive impact on educational activity. In a matter of weeks, entire education systems from elementary to higher education had to completely transform activity to evolve to an online teaching-learning scenario. According to UNESCO, higher education institutions (HEIs) were closed completely in 185 countries in April 2020, affecting more than 1,000 million learners around the globe (Marinoni et al., 2020).

COVID-19 has been extraordinarily challenging for universities and students. However, in the space of more than a year, students and teachers have radically redefined their roles in higher education. Significant difficulties have largely been met with determination and invention. The sudden forced closure of face-to-face teaching has led academics and students into “unfamiliar terrain” due to the need to adapt swiftly to total e-learning settings.

Before the pandemic, the online learning environment existed predominantly as a virtual filing cabinet. It was a store of course materials, and not where any of the learning took place. The pandemic has illuminated what can be done with this online space: it can be engaging, enriching, and accessible. Videos and interactive media are now part of how students learn, and discussion boards allow for conversations to continue and ideas to be recorded outside classes.

In a short period of time, academics around the world have had to convert materials and methods rapidly to a format that is suitable for online delivery. This transformation was hasty and compelled by circumstances. The pandemic forced a period of global experimentation with remote teaching (Govindarajan and Srivastava, 2020). Some studies refer to this new system as “emergency online education” (Marinoni et al., 2020). The system posed unprecedented challenges for students, who needed technical assistance, but also for staff and university leaders, who had to reinvent themselves in record time to keep operations running.

Although the process of digital transformation in higher education began years ago, the pandemic has accelerated it, leading to fundamental changes

in a question of weeks. This technological transformation of education involves profound changes in teaching methodologies, essential competencies, and assessment methods, as most HEIs recognize (Jensen, 2019).

This transition from “in-person” to virtual education will have significant implications for the entire learning process, not only extensively modifying methods for assessing learning outcomes but also requiring reconsideration of the skills and competencies required of students in this new setting (Jensen, 2019).

As current social distancing measures will last for some time, education institutions must thoroughly redesign their service to face the new environment. Digital education requires appropriate infrastructure and technological platforms (e.g., Blackboard, Microsoft teams), solid servers that can sustain the virtual workload, and methodological training of professors and students for online delivery using all the technical and educational resources available.² Numerous webinars and guides are available for professors, and most universities have signed contracts with companies such as Microsoft that provide Office or Teams resources or technological platforms to strengthen virtual communication.³

The technological resources available provide multiple options for teaching, such as giving lectures by videoconference, sharing material (e.g., slides, videos, presentations), interacting through chats, creating debate forums or workgroups, supervising practical activities, evaluating and tutoring students, recording explanations and making them available to students, etc.

Furthermore, these tools can be used synchronously or asynchronously and integrated. All of these resources must be supported, however, by an educational methodology to maintain students’ attention and keep them involved in the course. To ensure clarity of the educational objective of each

² The most used technologies to support teaching during the lockdown period were the university web platform; instant messaging tools (WhatsApp, Telegram); video-conferencing tools (Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, Google Meet); and educational apps (Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams); combined with email and telephone conversations to maintain individualized contact with students.

³ Faculty of Security-Skopje also has signed contract with Microsoft that provide Office and Teams resources for students, teachers, and administrative staff.

activity, instructors must design the audiovisual material, plan students' work time, and use the right tools for each activity—for example, for tutoring, videoconferencing activities, or student assessment.

It is important to make sessions dynamic by introducing collaborative and formative tools. It thus also seems essential to introduce active methodologies for the interaction of students and professors, and that engage students in peer collaboration.

EMERGING BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES IN THE ONLINE LEARNING

Covid-19's disruptive impact led to a rapid transformation of educational activity. As explained above, the rapid suspension of face-to-face teaching forced both students and professors to adapt to a wholesale shift in the teaching-learning process. This adaptation was not obstacle-free, and some barriers and challenges emerged in this process (Marinoni et al., 2020). To enable safe transition and achieve a successful transformation, universities must be aware of these potential obstacles and establish appropriate mechanisms to overcome them. Drawing on specific studies (and my own experience) there are barriers from the perspective of the main agents involved in the learning process: students, professors, and institutions (universities).

For the students the major challenge in adapting to online learning was technical problems. Some authors highlight the ways online education can amplify the digital divide (Govindarajan and Srivastava, 2020). To mitigate this barrier, institutions should mobilize resources to ensure that all students have access to a proper IT infrastructure and bandwidth connection, as well as specific support to solve technical problems. Universities must guarantee that students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are not disadvantaged. For students is also difficult to maintain attention in a purely online context, because of same barriers such as: boredom, sense of isolation, lack of time to follow the different subjects, and lack of self-organizing capabilities.

From the professors' perspective, this forced transformation was also stressful, as professors had to adapt quickly to new online techniques, with little or no training in some cases and in record time. The sudden transition from face-to-face to distance teaching also required a teaching staff with diverse levels of readiness to use different pedagogies with specific competencies (Marinoni et al., 2020). The digital divide can also be applied to academics. Some analysts argue that the main difficulties for professors were the high demand for specific skills such as proficient computer knowledge, specific communication abilities for an online setting, proper handling of various teaching-learning tools, and the need to solve specific

problems quickly during learning sessions. Not all faculty members are comfortable in an online setting, and a generational divide may separate those who have relied on classical methods and never used technology tools from the younger faculty who may be more adept with newer technologies (Govindarajan and Srivastava,2020).

CONCLUSION

The disruptive impact of Covid-19 and the availability of digital technologies that can support online learning present an unprecedented opportunity for the transformation of higher education at a global level. We are all involved in a digital world, and the phenomenon of online learning is here to stay. Online teaching has gained relevance and ensured its continuance even after the Covid-19 pandemic.

As this transition to online learning was hasty and forced by circumstances, however, the various actors in the learning processes (students, professors, universities) encountered several barriers in adapting to this new setting. Universities must be aware of these barriers and mobilize resources to overcome them in the short term, paying special attention to the digitalization of learning processes and offering specific technical training to professors, administrative staff, and students. We do not yet know what the shift to virtual learning will mean for the future of higher education at global level, but it is clear that universities should develop a sophisticated combination of face-to-face and online learning to harness the potential of the technological tools available to meet students' expectations and enhance their learning experience in the current digital environment.

The sudden switch to online learning, with little warning or experience, has been difficult for many teachers and students. But, with time to plan, incorporating online teaching will allow lecturers to focus on what activities best suit the subject they are covering and design them to fit. Lectures can be replaced with peer instruction – where students assume the role of instructor and teach their peers – or virtual field trips, where a class is able to take a virtual tour of a physical space.

In the post COVID-19 era, offline or traditional education models will not disappear. They will survive in parallel. However, blended learning i.e. combination of both, must be the norm from a broader futuristic viewpoint. According to the context and the content, both the institutions and teachers both need to blend the two skillfully.

The impact of the pandemic will bring an era of radical technological transformation, with accelerated digitalization to the worldwide higher education system. As universities must seriously rethink and redesign their educational offerings to face this new situation, Covid-19's disruptive effects

have created not only fertile opportunities for transforming HEIs but also difficulties and challenges in this process.

COVID-19 has been a huge challenge for higher education – but universities can learn from this challenge to improve learning and teaching for the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Sjur B., Gallagher T., Harkavy I., Munck R. and Hilligje van't Land (eds), (2021), HIGHER EDUCATION'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, Building a more sustainable and democratic future, Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 25, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, February 2021. Also available at: <https://book.coe.int/en/higher-education-and-research/9141-higher-education-s-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-building-a-more-sustainable-and-democratic-future-council-of-europe-higher-education-series-no-25.html>
2. Govindarajan, V., and Srivastava, A. (2020). What the Shift to Virtual Learning Could Mean for the Future of Higher Education. Harvard Business Review. Available online at: <https://hbr.org/2020/03/what-the-shift-to-virtual-learning-could-mean-for-the-future-of-higher-ed> (accessed 20 August , 2021).
3. Harkavy I., Bergan S., Gallagher T. and van't Land H. (2020), “Universities must help shape the post-COVID-19 world”, University World News. Available online at: www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200413152542750 (accessed 16 July 2021).
4. IAU (International Association of Universities) (2020a), “Global survey: report on impact of Covid-19 in higher education”. Available online at www.iau-aiu.net/IAU-releases-Global-Survey-Report-on-Impact-of-Covid-19-in-Higher-Education,(accessed 12 September 2021).
5. Jensen, T. (2019). Higher Education in the Digital Era: The Current State of Transformation Around the World. International Association of Universities (IAU). Available online at: https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/technology_report_2019.pdf (accessed 10 August , 2021).
6. Kilgore E. (2020), “The coming COVID-19 higher-ed disaster”, New York Magazine (6 May 2020).Available online at: <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/05/the-coming-covid-19-higher-ed-disaster.html> (accessed 14 July 2021).

7. Marinoni, G., Van't Land, H., and Jensen, T. (2020). The Impact of Covid - 19 on Higher Education Around the World. IAU Global Survey Report. Available online at: https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_covid19_and_he_survey_report_final_may_2020.pdf (accessed 16 August , 2021).
8. Jamil, S. (2020) COVID's Lessons for Global Higher Education Coping with the Present while Building a More Equitable Future, Available online at: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/covids-lessons-for-global-higher-education-2/> (accessed 16 August , 2021).
9. UNESCO-IESALC (2020), COVID-19 and higher education: today and tomorrow. Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations. Available online at <https://bit.ly/34TOSvu> (accessed 23 July 2021).

gher-ed-disaster.html, accessed 14 July 2020.