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Shifting from traditional and blended learning approaches to a fully virtual and remote course delivery: Implications from COVID-19

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This contribution discusses the latest opportunities and challenges that affected higher educational institutions, following the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It sheds light on the effects of an unprecedented COVID-19 on higher education services. Educational institutions were suddenly expected to abide by COVID-19 preventative measures, including social distancing and hygienic practices, among others. As a result, many of them migrated to virtual and remote course delivery. This reflective paper urges education leaders and policymakers to embrace online teaching models and virtual systems, as they are here to stay in a post-COVID-19 era. In conclusion, it puts forward key implications to practitioners and identifies future research avenues to academia.

1 Introduction

This year, educational institutions including several universities and colleges have closed their doors to contain the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). This has resulted in both challenges and opportunities for them. Policymakers had to take radical measures, including social distancing, to slow the contagion. Hence, higher education institutions (HEIs) have embraced the dynamics of digital technologies to provide their educational services (OECD, 2020; EUA, 2020). Most of them have articulated emergency plans and disseminated information about the virus trained their employees to work remotely and organized

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virtual sessions with their students and/or other stakeholders (Watermeyer, Crick, Knight & Goodall, 2020). In many cases, their social distancing has led to the closure of educational establishments (EUA, 2020). Thus, HEIs were expected to utilize education technologies to continue their higher educational services.

This contribution deliberates on the impact of COVID-19's preventative measures on HEIs. It identifies the challenges and responses facing HEIs, in the short and medium-term. In conclusion, it discusses the way forward in a post-COVID era.

2 Remote learning through virtual technologies

Several tertiary education institutions were in a position to migrate from traditional and blended learning approaches to fully virtual and remote course delivery to respond to COVID-19 (OECD, 2020). Very often, this contingent situation has resulted in different problems for the teachers and to their students. Both parties necessitated training, facilitation, or orientation sessions to acquaint themselves with electronic learning (e-learning) resources (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2019). They also required appropriate internet connectivity (at their homes) to use their HEIs' learning management systems (LMS) like Moodle, Blackboard, and Canvas, among others. Alternatively, they interacted with their students through virtual meetings, in real-time (Watermeyer et al., 2020). The educators could have used Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) platforms like Coursera and EdX or video-conferencing platforms including Zoom, D2L, Webex, Adobe Connect, Skype for Business, Big Blue Button, and EduMeet, among others. The market for these solutions is supported by cloud providers such as Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, Google as well as national research education networks (NRENs).

Most HEIs relied on LMS as they uploaded asynchronous learning resources, including online content like articles, case studies, video lectures, et cetera. At times, they engaged in synchronous, interactive communications with their students (as they used video conferencing) to improve their students' learning experience. COVID-19 has pushed HEIs to embrace e-learning and mobile learning (m-learning). HEI leaders and their course instructors were expected to develop a new modus operandi to deliver their higher education services. The course instructors were pressed (by their HEI leaders) to provide remote teaching to their students through virtual classroom services (EUA, 2020). As a result, instructors designed formative questions, tests, or exercises that were made available through digital and mobile technologies. Very often, they engaged and interacted with their students in real-time. However, the shift to online classes did not come naturally.

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3 Possible challenges and responses in the short and medium-term

Technically speaking, initially, it has proved difficult for some educators as well as students to acquaint themselves with remote learning. They could have benefited from a responsive helpdesk to support them in case of disruptions and/or to solve technical issues. The students' isolation could have had the potential to unsettle them (de Oliveira Araújo, de Lima, Cidade, Nobre & Neto, 2020) or could have contributed to their lack of self-discipline. The educators' responsibility is to monitor their students' emotional health (Zhai & Du, 2020) and psychosocial challenges (de Oliveira Araújo et al., 2020). They can do so by organizing regular virtual interactions with them to address their sense of loneliness or helplessness, encourage them to share their experience, and discuss coping strategies (Baloran, 2020). In many cases, the educators could have defined the duration of their live-streaming sessions, according to their students' self-regulation and metacognitive abilities.

Their interactive lectures could have been supplemented with non-digital learning activities. HEIs had to ensure that their distance learning programs may be accessed by all students, including those with disabilities or from low-income backgrounds. UNESCO (2020) proposed that the governments could assist these vulnerable individuals by providing them with learning technologies (like laptops or tablets, if necessary) and support them with internet connectivity and other issues. Notwithstanding, HEIs were expected to protect the privacy and security of their instructors and students as they had to upload educational resources through the Internet. Ideally, the online resources, platforms, and applications (apps) that are used for e-learning cannot violate their users' data privacy.

4 The way forward in a post COVID era

Those HEIs that have opened their doors to students and lecturers are encouraging them to wear masks, to keep social distancing, and to limit their gatherings in all public spaces. They have introduced preventative measures include daily screenings on all visitors prior to entering their campuses, as well as stringent hygienic measures. Visitors have to follow local health and safety policies. They are expected to maintain two meters of distance from each other and to comply with the signages in hallways, elevators, and stairwells (Chronicle, 2020).

Visitors ought to be reminded about the nearest hand sanitizing station and to ease congestion at building entrances and exits. While most traditional-age students aren't at serious risk of developing complications if they contract the infection, many HEI employees are. As a result, several HEIs have updated their rules and regulations with COVID-19 procedures. In some cases, they have clarified the consequences of violations. Alternatively, they empowered

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student committees to promote conscientious behaviors among their peers. Campus officials are well aware of the limitations of such measures. Of course, HEI leaders can't control what students do when they are off-campus. Nevertheless, the students have a responsibility to bear as members of campus communities, whose health and safety rely on individual and group behaviors (Chronicle, 2020).

5 Conclusion

COVID-19 has had an impact on the delivery of service quality of HEIs. The pandemic has disrupted the education of millions of students in different contexts. However, on a positive note, it has opened a window of opportunity for higher education stakeholders. COVID-19 has triggered the HEIs (and their course instructors) to use new teaching methodologies involving synchronous, interactive communications to continue to deliver their curricula and educational programs. Their sudden and unprecedented closure has led them to experiment with virtual education technologies and to engage with their students in real-time, through video conferencing software.

There were (and still are) a number of challenging issues and implications for the successful transition from traditional and blended learning approaches to fully virtual and remote course delivery (some of these issues were duly pointed out in this contribution). COVID-19 has affected the service quality of higher education in different ways (Camilleri, 2021a). It urged HEI leaders to embrace virtual technologies to continue delivering student-centered education, to disseminate high-impact research as well as for stakeholder engagement and outreach.

Indeed, there is scope for further research that investigates the impact of remote teaching through digital and mobile learning technologies on the students' learning journey. Prospective research can use different methodologies, sampling frames, and analytical techniques to shed more light on the implementation and effectiveness of remote learning. Future studies can explore the students' perceptions about the service quality and performance of higher education services that rely on distance learning approaches (Camilleri, 2021b). They may also examine the effects of having fully virtual and remote course delivery on the students' experience and their learning outcomes.

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