

The New Shape of Global Higher Education in COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

The effect of COVID-19 in the world made us face unprecedented challenges. It reflects a model of the Butterfly effect. The butterfly effect is the sensitive dependence on initial conditions in which a small change in one state of a deterministic nonlinear system can result in large differences in a later state. Governments have introduced emergency measures to save lives, Working from home has gone from perk to necessity, Lockdowns and closed borders have become part of 2020. As global citizens, it is crucial that we develop social responsibility towards each other to safeguard the entire humanity. At this stage, it's still impossible to say which phase of the pandemic we find ourselves in. Are we at the beginning of the end, or at the end of the beginning? Will we see a second wave of infections? When will a vaccine be ready? We are going through challenging times and the world around us is changing fast. We may not have all the answers to these questions, but we do know that the world will witness lasting changes due to COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 as an international pandemic, has shed its profound impact on all daily aspects of life in the entire world; political, economic, social and apparently the education sector has not been immune.

Keywords: Distance Learning; COVID-19 Pandemic; Virtual Internationalization; Higher Education; Online Assessment; Curriculum Design.

1. Introduction

The entire globe is currently writing a new chapter in the modern history. The situation we are currently facing, given the changing dynamics of COVID-19, articulates a rather immature and vague stage due to the rapid changes developing day after day [Khalil, M., Afifi M. and El-Nahal W, 2020]. The data is changing and the Laboratory research has not yet said its final words and its findings are fluctuating in response to dealing with Novel COVID-19. The novel coronavirus has impacted employment, education, energy, agriculture and other areas of the world economy, including the emotional & mental well-being of citizens. It has also created, uncertainty regarding the implications on higher education including universities, colleges and other institutions in tertiary education. Most governments around the world have taken the decision to temporarily close educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. These nationwide closures had a direct impact on over 60% of the world's student population. [UNESCO, Education, 2020]. COVID-19 implications has already affected the students teaching, learning and assessment and universities have strived to institute eLearning protocols to resume the educational process and there are several international successful models in this effect. The world, in this current health crisis learnt to think outside the box and devise novel methods and tools to pre-empt localised closures and keep the vital mission of the university alive. The Pandemic also had complications on summer exchange programmes, international programmes for overseas student and it will have implications on employability. Most important, the physiological effect on students and graduating seniors that must be regarded with utmost due diligence. Reassuring students is a vital element of institutional response [Zhu, X. and Liu, J., 2020].

2. Virtual internationalization of higher education: policy makers, leaders & international organizations

The sudden and pervasive spread of the pandemic has caught us all by surprise. Many questions have been asked in multiple circles about the nature and future of higher education in an increasingly globalized world. The roles and responsibilities of leaders, educators, administrators and education policy makers, navigate shifting information, priorities, resources, and political and economic concerns towards the demand to rethink comprehensive internationalization post-pandemic pedagogy in order to facilitate internationalization, intercultural learning, and global initiatives in the years of COVID-19. This should be the concern of the international education leaders. In addition, scholarly critical reflection is currently being developed to integrate international activity into core teaching, research and scholarship, and community engagement missions to strengthen internationalization future position within institutions. Most stakeholders have stressed the fact that the future of higher education institutions lies in information technology and all-inclusive distance-learning plans [UWN, 2020].

3. Initiatives of international organizations in response to COVID-19

UNESCO has provided lists of educational applications, platforms and resources aiming to help all entities participating in the educational process to facilitate student learning and provide social care and interaction during periods of educational institutions closure. UNESCO IITE and its global partners from the affected countries and beyond have come together for joint actions under “Combat COVID-19: Keep learning. Together we are on the move!” initiative [UNESCO, Education, 2020]. Most of the solutions curated are free and many cater to multiple languages. While these solutions do not carry UNESCO’s explicit endorsement, they tend to have a wide reach, a strong user-base and evidence of impact. They are categorized based on distance learning needs, but most of them offer functionalities across multiple categories. Also the World Bank contributed towards the crisis curating useful resources and publishing related documents collected and prepared by the World Bank’s Edtech team in support of national dialogues with policymakers around the world [The World Bank, 2020]. These initiatives supplied a comprehensive and beneficial pool of resources in these hard times. These models of proactive initiatives via international organizations towards the worldwide pandemic are commended.

4. The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: addressing the challenges and opportunities: teaching & learning, assessment and curriculum design

The COVID-19 pandemic is a huge challenge to education systems, it has definitely affected the teaching, learning and assessment of the students. Distance education, remote teaching, and online instruction have become essential approaches to pedagogy and curriculum design. All institutions should derive benefit from the mechanisms that they have put in place to continue their educational and training missions in a time of crisis [Daniel, S.J., 2020]. The current concern for higher education institutions is planning the future post COVID-19, and enriching the programmes to meet and accommodate with the current ongoing situation. It is worth mentioning in this context, The COVID-19 response is not the first time that emergency eLearning programmes have been considered as appropriate crisis-response measures. A similar strategy was observed in Fall 2009, where 67% of H1N1 contingency plans involved substitution of online classes for face-to-face classes [Allen, I. E. & Seaman, J., 2010]. Learning on demand: Online education in the United States. Babson Survey Research Group).

4.1. Teaching & learning

There is a transformative potential towards blended learning in the context of the challenges facing higher education due to COVID-19 pandemic. Blended learning supports deep and meaningful learning. Administrative leadership should rethink and restructure the learning experience via implementing blended learning approaches. Blended learning is consistent with the values of traditional higher education institutions and has the proven potential to enhance both the effectiveness and efficiency of significant learning experiences. Constructivist approaches, placing the learner at the centre, with explicit expectations for engagement, can support deep learning, and the ability to appraise information critically [Biggs J, 1999]. In this context, it is important to differentiate between distance learning and blended learning, while distance learning could be conducted entirely remotely. Blended learning is an approach to education that combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods. It requires the physical presence of both teacher and student. There are views, that while dealing with the implications of COVID-19 in higher education, we should bear in mind that in person, face-to-face teaching is how we build relationships and trust. Education isn’t about content delivery, but about processes and skills that can only partially happen at a distance. For some respondents, these relationships are a crucial component of the learning experience. A great deal of teaching is about relationships, Online and real teaching are different and what works in the classroom often does not work online, and vice versa. (Perspectives: COVID-19, and the future of higher education Nate Ralph, Bay View Analytic). In order to overcome this controversial situation and to survive and thrive during this pandemic and beyond facing COVID-19, curriculum design should be addressed to streamline the output in the favor of the students’ learning experience. Educators and institutions should set concrete plans on how to develop and distribute modern learning methodologies to moving forward and utilizing existing online tools. Educators have to bear in mind that transferring to online teaching and learning is a crucial graduate attribute towards digital citizenship. This is a current employability requirement for the workplace. In order to overcome the drawbacks of COVID-19, Universities introduced various models of Synchronous learning (online or distance education that happens in real time) as well as asynchronous learning (that occurs through online channels without real-time interaction) moreover the flexibility of asynchronous eLearning may provide wider access [Doucet, A., Netolicky, D., Timmers, K. and Tuscano, F.J., 2020]. For instance, the University of Cambridge has suspended most of its in-person lectures for most of 2021 and opted instead for synchronous online teaching and distance learning. Many of the universities in Europe and elsewhere will undoubtedly follow suit or at least choose to limit the number of their students on campus or partly use online teaching methods to complement conventional lecturing and tutoring. The draconian anti-risk measures all higher education institutions have implemented, which seem at first glance as natural and logical reactions to the threats posed by the spread of coronavirus, are a prelude to the beginning of a new era in the history of higher education. [UWN, 2020]. Currently, it is difficult to predict what the educational landscape will look like post COVID-19, in part because of the magnitude of the community transmission threat posed by campus interactions. Indeed, discussions are ongoing at many institutions about extension of emergency eLearning through fall 2020 in order to avoid the Northern Hemisphere’s possible second wave of COVID-19. Normalizing emergency eLearning measures post-pandemic pedagogy seem difficult. [Murphy, M.P., 2020]

4.2. Curriculum design

It is vital that the Curriculum Design incorporates the integration of the international graduate attributes to ensure that the students attain these attributes within the intended learning outcomes of the programmes as part and parcel of the course material. Incorporating those attributes will serve towards the Virtual Internationalization of higher education. Currently, courses and programmes are being reconfigured to be conducted online. In this environment, students need to know that their program will provide them with the skills needed to be competitive, as well as agile and adaptable for a volatile workplace. In response, employability attributes, need to be embedded in all courses. A recent NACE survey found that 93% of employers consider “soft” skills equally as important as “hard” skills. Program and course learning outcomes need to articulate these skills and identify in syllabi how they will be developed throughout the course and program just as academic skills are mapped and scaffolded. Communication skills, written and oral, are most frequently cited as lacking by employers and need to be taught in ways that are relevant to workplace scenarios as well as disciplinary. Recent research, for example,

found that 73% of employers had difficulty hiring qualified applicants with strong communication skills. Career services need to be integrated throughout the course of study, not just at the end of the program, so that students build and then are able to represent relevant skills they have developed and demonstrated. As for internships, if they cannot be arranged, then simulated examples and work-related case studies need to be developed, and employers brought in or virtually to describe real-life issues they need graduates to be able to address effectively.

Programs should address employability in an integrated fashion, the need to do so is greater now than ever. Just as we are witnessing a shift to online education, unthinkable even six months ago, we now need to make the development and demonstration of employability skills central to the entire higher education enterprise. Institutions should be transformed to integrate academic, technical, and employability skills to provide graduates with meaningful and rewarding careers. Universities also must consider the role of elective courses to meet the dynamic demand of the entire globe economies that are currently transferring towards digital marketing, and in e-commerce.

4.3. Assessment

Due to the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, most of higher education institutions turn to online education. As assessment is very crucial aspect which is tied learning process, so online assessment approach can be conducted using different tools during COVID-19 pandemic era. It can be applied through several web platforms or assessment software which enable educators to create online tests via modern computers and smartphones. On the other hand, peer-assessment may help in today's situation. Also e-Portfolio tool can be considered as an evidence of student's learning progress. It is very essential for educators to monitor students [Rapanta, C. et al., 2020]. As the e-assessment is a challenge during COVID-19 crisis, Curriculum should be re-designed to be delivered through online approaches. The role of advanced technology is very important to support and facilitate the online formative assessment through software packages like through Socrative and Kahoot apps. We argue that, educators should cooperate to develop new tools to enhance the online assessment during to overcome any future limitations [Mukhtar, K., 2020].

5. Employability of graduates

We will still encounter the effect of COVID-19 on the employability of graduates. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) estimates that COVID-19 may cause the global economy to shrink by nearly 1% by the end of 2020, while the International Labour Organization (ILO) projects an increase in global unemployment of between 5.3 million and 24.7 million, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) projects a 13% to 32% global trade decline this year. An economic recession could impact HEIs in many ways, including: a reduction in employment opportunities for graduates who are likely to enter the job market (UN, COVID-19 and Higher Education, 2020). Experience with the 2008 recession suggests that these difficulties will follow today's graduates for some years, resulting in higher rates of underemployment and unemployment, and lower earnings even when employed. Thus, special efforts need to be made right now to prepare students to compete in this new marketplace.

6. Impact on prospective international students

While COVID-19 has significantly impacted the higher education sector in recent months, some promising insights have emerged from the QS coronavirus survey of prospective international students. Stating that the Impact of COVID-19, has revealed that 42% of prospective international students surveyed would ideally like to start their studies in 2020 and 40% would like to start in 2021. Furthermore, of those respondents who said they wanted to start their studies in 2020, the vast majority (62%) expect that they will commence their course in 2020. This demonstrates that prospective international students are still determined to study overseas in the upcoming academic year, despite the upheaval and uncertainty caused by the coronavirus crisis. Institutions must be proactive in their student recruitment strategies to ensure they can meet this need and address students' concerns, providing regular updates on the university's approach to the crisis, how it will transition back into face-to-face teaching, and what this means for students. Another finding that emerged from recent QS research is that prospective international students are willing to start their studies online in the upcoming academic year, and this willingness increases when a set time period is applied. According to the white paper, 75% of respondents would be willing to start studying online if they knew it would only be for a maximum of three months. [QS, 2020]. There is another view, were other voices predict two to three years of disruption to international student mobility until a vaccine is developed and confidence is restored in travelling abroad. But there is a pending question mark, related to the affordability of mobility, with the United Nations warning that 500 million could be plunged into poverty as a result of the economic impact of the virus. [UWN, 2020]. The aviation industry will also have an effect on mobility of internationalization in higher education, being as well hit hard by the economic fallout of the coronavirus. Coming out of the crisis, travellers are prioritizing health and safety, they'll need to feel confident and protected for travel to restart. It begins from pre-boarding with a shift to a paperless, touchless process; automation across the entire sector is one of the changes the World Economic Forum is taking into consideration. Temperature screenings, physical distancing and wearing masks at airports and on flights will continue to be integrated in the travel industry as needed protective measures. All these are elements that will restrict international mobility. Currently there exists a lot of confusion, ambiguity and apprehension by potential travellers.

7. Conclusion

Finally, Seniors 2020, should be considered from our view as warriors indeed. What they have passed through is a concrete proof of achieving the ultimate graduate attributes. They have demonstrated very high perseverance, transferring challenges into opportunities. As a student centered Educator and mentor, we encourage the workforce to confidently pave the way for them to step in, as they have proven to acquire excellent digital skills and being a model of digital citizens. What they have been through is the key and gate for their employability. The work force requires digital employees, and agile learners, being a 2020 graduate is their credentials to the workforce.

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