The Online Campus. Higher Education Institutions in Time of Pandemics

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Abstract

Higher education systems do not adapt quickly to changes and lack flexibility, so individual and social demands for higher education remain with a fairly significant number of requests and individuals seek elsewhere for solutions. Universities are the key players in the future of Europe. For the successful transition to a knowledge and society-based economy, in this crucial times, a thorough restructuring and modernization is required. Over the last decade, the advancement of new technologies has allowed users to meet their own learning and communication needs both with colleagues and teachers, within their own communities or within external communities. However, online delivery of high-quality video tutorials or classes was never a must or a priority. Once the Coronavirus crisis stroke the entire learning environment was "forced" to migrate online, therefore online learning switched from a preferred or sometimes available option to a new normality. More than three hundred million students around the world did encounter disruptions in their education process caused by the spread of Coronavirus. Educational institutions have not confronted such severe disruption in decades, but unlike any past occurrences, now there is the ability to continue the education with the doors closed. Taking into account that learning by using new information and technology sources has been around for a long period of time, it is remarkable how the impact of technology did not have a substantial influence on education until now. Digitalization in education was meant to happen gradually, but COVID-19 made it an accelerated process with large scale adoption of educational technologies and a boom of delivering courses online. In this paper I perform an analysis through a prospective study on digital challenges in higher education institutions during the latest pandemics. The importance of the analyzed subject is derived from the situation in which universities ended up, during these hard times. Also, the analysis of this subject reveals several factors, besides the digital infrastructure, that are very important in the online delivery of education, and namely: adapted course outline and design; tutor/trainer/professors' skills set for delivering the course in "special" conditions; tracking the understanding; motivating the involvement and compensating for the missing human side.

Keywords: *Higher education, pandemics, online teaching and learning, digitalization.*

1. Introduction

The „campus disruption" caused lately by the by COVID-19 pandemic forced the universities around the world to focus on remote education. Institutions are now planning for the forthcoming 2020–2021 academic year by updating the resources and considering the strategic transformation of the course's delivery. The pandemic has constrained colleges to bring their courses online, but this is only one stage along the way to another educational process, in any case. We can anticipate that emergency of a new model as soon as the pandemics passes. While each education level is confronting its difficulties, it is the higher education that may wind up a learning upheaval. Universities distinguish themselves by the fact that their students are both mature enough to deal with the online learning requirements and tech-savvy to explore new ways of learning. The challenge is harsher for the traditional and campus-oriented universities, because their ability to adjust by picking the correct technological advancements and approaches for teaching and connecting with their understudies might be limited.

2. Online courses – the new normality

At the present time, video-conferencing applications like Zoom and Webex are tossing colleges a survival way-out. Whereas, professors are attempting to keep up a similar commitment with the students as if they could have in a traditional setting, they have to discover solutions to stay away from a sink in the instructions quality that they are giving. The interest of the students for online deliverables will probably increase as a result of COVID-19. Indeed, even before the pandemic, numerous colleges were seeing decreases in enrolment for traditional programs and equal increased demand for online courses. With COVID-19, we are perceiving how yesterday's disruptors can turn out to be the present

lifeguards. While conventional education institutions once saw online teaching and learning as a danger, it has now rescued the system. The adoption of online learning solutions lately has been a really unprecedented action. In a very short period of time, lecturers are applying so called "first aid" arrangement by exchanging totally from face to face to remote guidance, a move that has been constrained upon them by unexpected obligatory closure of the campuses. In any case, they are rapidly understanding that remote learning is only a small step a in the long way to offering online learning. In good part in all this is that the associations started between colleges, online instruction organizations and tech suppliers may proceed also after the pandemics.

2.1. Adapted course outline and design. Tracking students' performance and involvement

Universities have in important decision to make regarding the delivery of the courses in the new conditions and one of the first questions that arises is: Which the remote delivery methodology is used by the academic stuff? They have several options in this regard: synchronous type (online, real-time meetings), asynchronous type (courses prepared in advance) or mix the two methodologies (blended) [1]. Online courses are different from correspondence courses. Rather than focusing on packaging and delivering content, it is better to focus on the interactions between professors and students, between students and other students, and between course content and students. The courses should be as attractive as possible, organized, easy to follow and should not create confusion. Having a large number of technological resources at disposal, the chosen IT source should be of best fit [2]. The goal should always be teaching-related resources to add value or promote student learning. Misuse of resources can quickly overwhelm students, limit student participation and reduce learning interest. Therefore, technologies should help understand the content and avoid duplication. In such a tight time, a clear communication with students is essential. Expectations should be set in order to be as clear as possible, also establishing clear and consistent policies should be a target. Regarding work instructions, students should focus on tasks instead of struggling to complete them. Due to the lack of face-to-face interaction, feedback is crucial so keeping in touch with students and providing personal and class feedback is a must. Given the fact that time of attention is very short, especially when the students are not in the classroom the best solution could be packing course content into "blocks" and switching between these blocks every few minutes to change course content. Content blocks of five to seven minutes are ideal, blocks longer than 15 minutes are discouraging. Pre-made third-party materials like chapters of books, websites, tutorials, online simulations, and articles should be. prepared for splitting the lectures [3]. As fully online teaching methods continue, certain teaching methods should gain wide attention. Universities may compete for students based on the degree to which they implement these teaching methods and their prominence. If the pandemic continues to be uneven and fluctuates for a long time, we may be used to alternating between in-class teaching and fully online teaching [4]. These challenges of the online in higher education might be a new way of doing things that opens up new opportunities. This is an open door for academic staff to figure out how online means that are utilized to conduct online courses can supplement up the traditional learning methods.

Online courses register higher dropout rates compared to similar face-to-face ones; therefore, motivation is a crucial factor when it comes to online learning. Feelings of isolation, frustrations and time constraints are factors that influence the decisions of the students to withdraw from online classes. Most researchers have identified four key parts that are critical to the development of students' motivation in online classes or distance learning: First of all, it is autonomy - having control over what and how it should be done, second comes – ability – feeling that one has the ability to succeed. The third element is relatedness – carrying out the required tasks that will help students establish more connections with the learning environment and last but not least – relevance – students must perceive their tasks as interesting, useful and valuable for their plans/goals. Tracking the students' activity in the online learning may help identify some patterns, understand their working habits and interfere with guidance when necessary [5].

2.2. Instructors' skills set for online courses delivery

Teaching online courses is not just a replica of classroom strategies in other forms. It is a process that requires a diversified approach, one that pays less attention to the time students spend together in a specific place, and focuses more on promoting remote communities and activities that target students working alone. There are studies that assessed the online teaching instructor readiness, which mentioned a reliable set of skills very important in this context: 1) technological, 2) pedagogical and 3) administrative [6].Technological and even social media skills are a fundamental element that are

enhancing the abilities of the academic stuff to interact with students. Administrative part is including skills such as time management and the ability and willingness to answer student questions as soon as possible, for example within 24 hours. It means providing timely and constructive feedback to students, to be proficient and monitor/follow academic integrity problem. Pedagogical/teaching skills refer to student-centered models, professors that emphasize support and guide through learning and not just the delivery and instructions and the ability to establish the online presence and involvement. Beside the three skills already described, other sources mention also: communication skills, assessment and evaluation skills [7]. Instructors with experience in face-to-face teaching methods might need to develop stronger written communication skills. Another important aspect is the accurate assessment of students' performance, professors need to monitor class access, discussion posts, class activity. In a digital education environment, there are new ways to identify learning difficulties and other factors that affect academic performance. Professors ought to assess what works and what doesn't as they conduct the courses remotely, and they shouldn't avoid consolidating the experience gained through these times into future in-person guidance. They should not dispose of what they make but use it as a chance to retool and patch up how they instruct. Traditional classroom teachers have reached high-quality education by relying on a large number of resources, and expecting strong leadership to improve classroom results. Digital classroom teaching demands the same foundation as well as support systems to create an engaging, productive environment that leads to optimal learning. Technical resources do not relieve online teachers of the responsibility to acquire advanced skills through professional development. The emerging technology-dependent online learning environment will require educators to strengthen existing skills and adopt new ones.

2.3.   Compensating for the missing human side

Keeping the human element in the online teaching it is a very important and perhaps challenging thing to do. Although online teaching will definitely change the way teachers communicate with students, the professor-student relationship is equally important for students to learn and participate in online courses and offline courses. So, what makes the online experience less like robot-teaching and more human-centered? The following three principles and related strategies will help teachers maintain the humans' position of people's online courses. First is it about "presence", even if teaching of student-centered online courses is a lot of work and instructors might spend a lot of time setting up the content of the courses, these behind-the-scenes behaviors cannot convey to students the feeling of who is behind the scene. A recent study conducted by researchers at George Mason University and Brigham Young University has shown that lecturer video feedback makes students feel more connected, involved and more responsible for their own learning [8]. Secondly, it is also about empathy. When using asynchronous communication tools, empathy may be more difficult to show, but of course it is possible. Third element is awareness, which in this context means being aware of the students' needs and dedicating some time to support and encourage them whenever is necessary. Even in an environment where there are no face-to-face meetings a sense of community and personal connection with students can be established. Online courses are even prone to create greater connection between academic stuff and their students than traditional ones, but this might happen only by using the right techniques and methods.

3. Next steps – managing the challenges

At the level of higher education institutions, leaders have sought for different ways to resolve the COVID-19 crisis. However, most of them did not look up for solutions outside their organization [9]. They were swallowed by local focus, ignoring what was happening outside. Universities need to establish a control center that would help higher education leaders plan and manage their response to COVID-19 or similar pandemics by setting up work teams with specific responsibility areas [10]. This kind of work-plans should be split into four parts.

1. Find an accurate view of the situation in campuses, virtual classrooms, and the wider community, and draw a meaning from that.
2. After quickly testing hypotheses and alternative methods and ensuring that the values of the university and local community are followed, decide what actions to take.
3. Design a combination of short-term and long-term actions with a pragmatic operating model to develop detailed action plans.
4. Provide effective and flexible planning and responses. The control center must have regular meeting and strengthen the sense of responsibility by tracking the operations, timing and responsible.

Universities should consider whether and how to make changes to the current teaching model for making it more scalable, flexible, accessible, and more attractive. Further on very important aspects to address are ensuring that students receive all the necessary assistance and maintaining educational standards.

4. Conclusion

There is little uncertainty that higher education—in each sector—is now confronting an immense blend of pressure to change. The call for higher education institutions to expand their utilization of online environment for learning and to turn out to be "progressively flexible" is a piece of this specific situation, despite the fact that the meaning of these thoughts in operational terms it is not yet clear. I have mentioned that universities have few choices but to confront the ground-breaking pressures for educational change, but it ought to do this in a planned an informed manner. This will be especially valid by a fast scale-up in the utilization of internet learning, different uses of information technologies and the call for more adaptability, flexibility and responsiveness in the structure, deliver and conveyance of the programs and courses.

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