

DISRUPTED CLASSES, UNDISRUPTED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNT FOR POST COVID-19 ERA

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Abstract: With the COVID-19 outbreak, many governments decided to ban any type of face-to-face teaching, disrupting classes and resulting in many students being unable to return to their institutions. Ensuring undisrupted learning when classes were disrupted needed the reform of the entire educational system to include an online education component. The impact of COVID-19 on remote teaching experiences of academic staff entailed increased workloads, balancing home and work life during the national lockdowns, concerns about students' ability to participate in their studies, and at times feeling isolated. The objectives of this conceptual paper are to analyse the challenges faced by academic staff and students experienced in online learning, predict the changes in post-COVID-19 education, and propose measures against potential future outbreaks. The research tool used for analysing data gathered from different sources for this study was content analysis and the research method was descriptive research. The study was based on secondary data. Case studies of practices from higher education institutions in different countries are cited in the paper for benchmarking purposes. The paper argues that higher education teaching and learning innovations are needed to harness the technological tools used during the pandemic. The conceptual paper supplements the literature on resilient higher education systems in times of pandemics.

Keywords: Adaptability, innovative assessments, professional development, resilience, remote learning, technological tools

Introduction

There is no doubt that the impact of COVID-19 was harsh, and the world has yet to understand its long-lasting effects. Everybody was concerned about whether faculty members, who all of a sudden had to teach in a virtual environment, had any training or experience in teaching online. Hess (2020) argues that despite the swift response of HEIs to COVID-19 being quick to train students and staff, and then move classes online, the process was challenging, and many continue to struggle. Vlachopoulos (2022) argues that while quality higher education is meant to be inclusive and meet students' diverse learning needs, the speed at which emergency remote teaching and learning were developed made it less accessible for some learners, especially as far as access to learning resources is concerned. As opposed to educational experiences that are planned from scratch and designed to be online, emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020). Bozkurt, et al. (2020) distinguish ERT from distance education by focusing on ERT's aiming at keeping education 'alive in times of

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crisis with what is in hand rather than continuing education with field-specific goals planned in advance. (Pandro et al. (2021) lament that similar challenges were identified in the assessment, where changes were observed in assessment methods, delivery of feedback, students' involvement in the assessment, as well as in the assessment criteria and standards. It is evident that the crisis in higher education amplified educational inequalities (Essel et al., 2021) since opportunities to access quality higher education were fewer and unequal.

One of the good things that came out of the pandemic was the emphasis on professional development in pedagogy. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that institutions of HE can be adaptable and even innovative. However, moving forward, the capacity to become more flexible in the way that course offerings are organised is critical. Students today want a lot more customisation of their experience, and there is need to find ways to deliver that in the near future to keep attracting individuals to higher education. Most higher education institutions transitioned to emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) to ensure continuity in student learning, even under sometimes fragmented national regulatory frameworks (Vlachopoulos, 2020). Vandeyer (2021) coined that findings in her study revealed a transition from panicgogy to the pedagogy of compassion. There are a few things coming out of the pandemic that I hope will continue as we move into the future. One is the focus on the importance of teaching. In an attempt to preserve education equity while enabling students to continue studying during the epidemic, most Chinese institutions developed a digital education platform supported by advanced digital technologies for delivering different courses (Huang et al., 2020). Consequently, these changes created uncertainty about whether they led to reliable and equitable assessment, which supports student learning.

In this narrative review study, after reviewing a plethora of studies published between 2020 and 2022 on the implementation of emergency remote learning in higher education it can safely be concluded that most institutions implemented an unplanned distance education practice. As a result, HEIs need to ensure that students recognise that part of their toolset as they go out into the world is to find ways to retool, adapt, and be flexible. It is the purpose of this paper to reflect on the lessons learned from the implementation of emergency remote teaching in higher education and on how governments and policymakers can reimagine and recalibrate university teaching and learning in the post-COVID-19 era. This paper contributes to the literature on academic institutional resilience to adverse conditions like pandemics. By reviewing existing literature and analysing data, lessons learnt for the post-COVID-19 era are exposed. The adoption of an organisational resilience theory that has proved to be highly relevant to the HE context revealed how undisrupted learning continued in disrupted classes (Bartusevičienė et al., 2021; Shaya et al., 2022). A transformation approach that enables institutions to operate more flexibly and resiliently in the long term can help institutions emerge on a stronger footing from today's challenges.

The study aimed to achieve three objectives. Firstly, the study is expected to provide direction on the future of HE. Secondly, a snapshot reflection on what worked, and what did not is given. A discussion of practices that would be helpful to retain going forward. Thirdly, the study highlights the transformation needed in HE to leverage against future adversities. Achieving these objectives will contribute to the broader understanding of how HE institutions can be hubs of innovative teaching and learning in times of crises through implementing blended learning.

Materials and Methods

I used the narrative literature review to appraise the publications indicated by an asterisk in the reference list. Narrative Reviews are not as rigorous as systematic reviews (Ferrari, 2015; Furley & Goldschmied, 2021). Tricco et al. (2016) concur that a narrative review is a type of knowledge synthesis in which components of the systematic review process are simplified or omitted to produce information in a short period of time. This approach enabled a timely synthesis and overview of recently published articles and their key findings. Qualitative methods to synthesise interpretations across a range of studies were employed. The strategy for the selection of articles numerous articles from 2020-2022 was based on peer-reviewed journals only. Articles from 2020-2022 were selected because that is when most articles about the effects of COVID-19 were published. Peer-reviewed journal articles were used because they are believed to draw accurate conclusions based on professionally executed experimentation (Furley & Goldschmied, 2021). The selection criteria used to narrow it down, namely, *university* or *higher education institutions*, *online, remote or blended learning*, and*tertiary institutions* AND *COVID-19*. The selection criteria determine the scope of studies to be synthesised in a review (Tricco et al., 2016). Furthermore, the selection criteria guide the selection of literature during the search of databases or other sources like the peer-reviewed journals in this study.

Conceptual Framework

The most recent attempt at addressing the conceptualisation of organisational resilience was made by Duchek (2020) who laid out a set of theoretical propositions concerning organisational resilience. However, the existence of strategic contexts (knowledge base) and drivers (resource availability, social resource and power/responsibility) are of immense importance for leveraging institutions in the post-COVID-19 era as shown in Figure. 1. Duchek (2020) highlights that the framework, consisting of drivers or enablers of Higher Education Resilience, such as Meta-Capability of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Stages of Resilience Anticipation, Coping, and Adaptation) lead to Higher Education Resilience (HER). The framework illustrates the underpinning qualities of the three consecutive resilience stages, anticipating, coping, and adaptation (Rangachari & Woods, 2020; Bartusevičienė et al., 2021). Whilst the purpose of this paper was not to focus on resilience per se, the qualities of the three consecutive resilience stages play a critical role in the lessons learnt for the post-COVID-19 era. The knowledge base of an organisation is an essential component of organisational resilience.

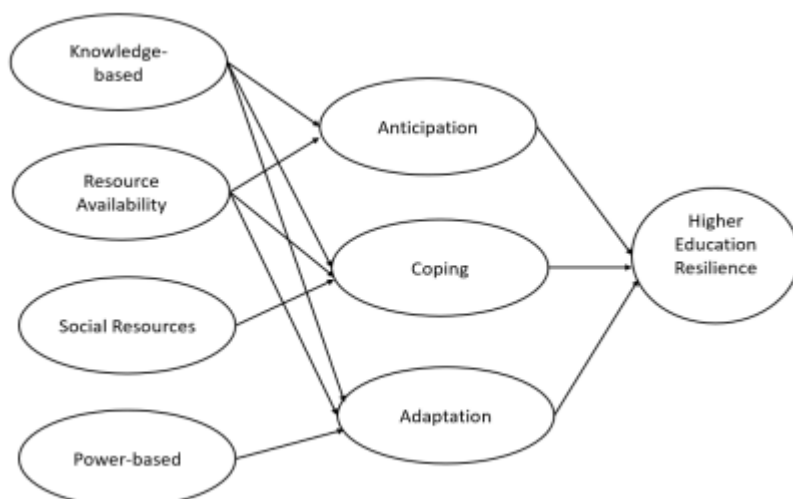


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework for Higher Education Resilience

The knowledge base provides a basis on which important changes are predicted and adapted. For example, the COVID-19 era transformed the way core processes such as the teaching-learning process in higher education. Due to social distancing enforcement on campuses, lecturers and students had to resort to online or distance learning. Resource availability such as quality IT platforms, and fast internet connection apart from computer facilities such as laptops or PCs is essential. Financial resources can be a critical component in handling and recovering from acute crises (de Carvalho et al., 2016). In a study in South Africa, Landa, Zhou and Marongwe (2021) established that access to online teaching and learning platforms and resources for students from poor rural communities was challenging during the COVID-19 era. They further indicate that there were great inequalities in educational outcomes for students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Such situations might affect the future plans of higher education institutions to provide teaching and learning through online-based platforms. In unprecedented situations as a result of the COVID-19 era, the social support system may provide valuable relief to those severely affected by the crisis (Bento et al., 2021). Some of those affected groups may require psychological help or counselling in order to avoid mental or emotional crises that may lead to severe stress and depression. Crises can unlock new openings for the adaptation process, and they can act as an agent of change, since improper actions and seeking new resolutions may be adopted (Abouelnaga et al., 2021). Building these unique capabilities is important for resilience to recognise and manage a crisis such as COVID-19 in order to anticipate quickly and get prepared and thus avoid unnecessary escalation. Various research that provides insight into the sensemaking process in organisations will provide a great benefit for HEI institutions. Within a situation unparalleled, such as in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, where possible solutions can be found only by joint efforts, the sharing of information between units or divisions within the organisation is an important indicator that organisations can benefit from future failures (Vlachopoulos, (2020). Anticipation capability is another critical in organisational resilience. According to Merriam-Webster (2020), ‘anticipation’ implies a prior action that considers or forestalls a later action or the act of looking forward. From these definitions, it seems obvious that the term ‘anticipation’ may be construed as an antecedent or enabler to ‘resilience’ for any incidence of unexpected events or dangers such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A good understanding of the meaning of anticipation and resilience in organisations may lessen the financial and non-financial fallouts from adversities such as the COVID-19 pandemic in the future.

The literature shows that the majority of those establishments showing preparedness to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 adopted and deployed an organisational resilience framework (Brown et al. 2021; During the closure of Malaysian schools, Abdullah et al. (2020) found that having financial reserves, as evidenced by entrenched information technology (IT) infrastructure, was critical in coping with the transition to remote learning (Abdullah et al. 2020).

Results and Discussion

Lessons learned from the disruption of learning during the COVID-19 era

This section discusses the main themes drawn from the narrative review such as; challenges in teaching and learning, online pedagogies, student and lecturer support, assessment, weakness of online teaching infrastructure, and the need to recalibrate higher education. From the literature it can be observed that the impact and quality of emergency remote teaching were different in countries and institutions that were stronger financially; those with fewer resources were left behind in terms of scale, monitoring, and measurement of the teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 era.

Challenges in Teaching and Learning

Learning loss, both in the short and long term was a great challenge for most students. Quantifying learning disruption in terms of “learning loss” proved divisive among faculty. Faculty adapted to new technologies with limited institutional support. Equity and the digital divide were exposed. Difficulty in reliably proctoring remote tests was experienced in some institutions. Poor internet connectivity was experienced mostly in rural institutions. COVID-19 made it difficult for work-integrated learning to continue since most institutions were closed except for those classified as offering critical services to combat the pandemic. Most of the studies indicate that the complexity for both lecturers and students in accessing suitable technological resources was probably one of the most important lessons learnt. Students in most countries were excluded from education due to lack or absence or challenges in accessing digital education environments and learning materials and technological applications used in emergency remote teaching and learning.

Online pedagogies -Digital literacy

Kerr and Schwartz (2020) argue that for online instruction to be successful, academics require time and resources to build out a different kind of pedagogy than that exists for in-person learning. From some studies conducted on academic teaching during a pandemic, findings reveal that classrooms still matter and that technology is an extremely poor substitute for in-person learning (Walker, Brewster and Fontina, 2020; Vandeyer, 2021). Teaching online within the COVID-19 context provided the stimulus to dismantle the polarised thinking of some academics. It moved academics from their comfort zones and forced them to adapt to change (Motala & Menon, 2020). Approaches to university education that emerged in response to the pandemic do have the potential to lead to lasting changes in the higher education ecosystem.



Figure 2: Transition to online learning

Anecdotal evidence revealed that availability of and access to technology are fundamental but not the only conditions for quality higher education (Li et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2021; Mweshi et al., 2022; Shaya et al., 2022). As shown in Figure 2, a combination of educational technology with pedagogical frameworks and theories can enrich teaching and learning and provide an engaging and effective learning experience (Huang et al., 2020). The educators play a pivotal role in the success of the education process; they need to develop a set of transversal competencies, including digital know-how, communication, and collaboration models in addition to subject matter knowledge (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2021). Collaborations between the private and the public sectors may ensure equitable and timely distribution of the resources needed for these transversal competencies to be developed in every institution.

Student and lecturer support

The literature revealed that the creation of support structures for both lecturers and students could ensure the success of higher education. This could enhance the increased confidence in the use of learning management systems. Lecturers should also model effective online study habits and should not assume that all students are digital natives. Large numbers of students need support for stress, anxiety and depression. The use of a variety of technological tools like social media such as WhatsApp as learning tools could also be explored to enhance accessibility and affordability. It is also imperative that institutions of higher learning put in place policies that guard against cyberbullying amid the proliferation of these technological tools.

Assessment

Assessment is very critical for academic integrity. Institutions need to devise innovative assessments which students will find of value (Mouchantaf, 2020). The use of e-portfolios in practical tasks gained prominence in some institutions. Recording lessons, and posting them on YouTube increased accessibility of educational content. The focus should be turning away from the technical stability of learning management systems to concerns about how to support people to get the most out of these educational technology platforms.

Student isolation was also experienced during the COVID-19 era (Bento et al., 2021). For many lecturers and students, universities are places of socialisation and exchange of ideas (Khan et al., 2021). Without those two components, they are not attractive places to work or study. Development of human relations on campus should still be a priority with additional options of digital communities and online networking.

Weakness of online teaching infrastructure

In resource-limited contexts, however, the pandemic was particularly disruptive for teaching, learning, and research in HE. Abudullah et al. (2020) established that having financial reserves, as evidenced by entrenched information technology (IT) infrastructure, was critical at the coping stage with the transition to remote learning.

Recalibrate Higher Education

Resilience mechanisms are needed in HEI (Abdullah, 2021; Shaya, 2022). The use of innovative methods in pedagogy to promote student engagement and accessibility was cited to be critical according to the findings from the literature (Abdullah et al., 2020; Abouelnaga et al., 2021; Akuratiya & Meddage, 2020). Duchek et al. (2020) stress that organisational resilience requires both financial and human resources during the adaptation stages to develop recovery plans and train people and leaders to adapt to and implement changes. Student support needs special attention. Vandeyar (2021) highlighted that an ethic of care and pedagogy of compassion seemed to foreground the practice of many academics. As a result, this moved education beyond the curriculum and educational strategies to cultivate social capital and equal life chances for all. Assessment integrity needs to be maintained in HEIs. Digital citizenship is critical for both students and lecturers to navigate the learning management systems used in HEIs with ease. From the literature, it was revealed that institutions should encourage discussion about how to change institutional policies and teaching practices to promote academic integrity. Landa, Zhou and Marongwe (2021) suggested that there was a need to support online learning in rural areas since this support has the potential to expand higher education access post-COVID-19 era.

Conclusion

HEIs must build the capacity to adapt appropriately to unforeseen incidents or disruptions. Academic integrity (on examination and assessment) related to the online teaching-learning process was established to be a serious problematic area. Future research could be carried out on, how online platforms will change the face of research and innovation in HEIs. A deliberate capacity-building initiative to train both lecturers and students would be instrumental in ensuring a smooth and successful transition from conventional to virtual classrooms. Governments should also provide resources to higher education institutions so they can package support interventions that are informed by student-specific contexts.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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