

Effects of Covid-19 on Higher Education: Challenges and Responses

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ABSTRACT

With the onset of the Coronavirus outbreak, universities and educational centers across the world were forced to close down campuses and to move toward online education and the use of digital tools. Presently, more than 1.5 billion students around the world have been affected by the closure of schools and universities because of the COVID-19 spreading. The International Association of Universities is an independent global non-governmental organization affiliated with UNESCO, founded in 1950. The association is currently monitoring the impacts of COVID-19 on higher education across the world. This is the first investigation of the impact of COVID-19 on higher education at the global level, with its report released in early May. In September 2019, the second global survey in this regard was conducted with member organizations around the world. The purpose of the surveys was to investigate the basic challenges of universities and higher education institutions in facing this disease of the century in short-, medium- and long-terms, as well as to provide basic solutions to help solve existing challenges. In the present article, which was performed as a review study via searching for the latest information available on the credible international organizations' websites, including those of the Centers for Disease Control, the International Organization of Universities, the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, and the World Health Organization, the objective was to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic impacts on higher education and the latest developments on the impact of COVID-19 on universities and training centers, and to provide recommendations and initiatives in this connection. It also provides an opportunity for exchanging information and providing a selection of the latest international news in this regard. Also, in this article, some of the latest recommendations by higher education institutions to continue teaching and learning activities during the social, economic, cultural and health crisis on COVID-19 were explored.

Keywords: covid 19, challenges, Higher education, response

INTRODUCTION

How will universities and higher education institutions respond to COVID-19?

Policies and strategies: Because of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, colleges and universities around the world have taken steps to ensure the well-being of students and staff, as well as members of their scientific faculties. The following is a set of practical course recommendations that universities around the world have administered. Although the procedures by each university and educational institution are unique in its own kind, it is hoped that the following recommendations would provide a good guide for coping with the pandemic conditions of the disease¹.

Communicate with and support your students at the university: The first thing you need to do is to contact your domestic and international students - especially those students of the countries most affected by the virus - and ensure their well-being. Offer support and empathy to them, asking them to explain to you how their family and friends work and live. Depending on the specific needs of the students, direct them to the appropriate support services available. For example, some students may not have access to sufficient budget and financial resources due to the coronavirus and may need financial aids. Others may feel anxious and need counseling and treatment services².

Communicate with and support your students abroad

To further monitor the well-being of your students, it is necessary for you to contact all of them abroad and get informed of the latest news from their country. If you have students in affected countries, you should visit your

institution's risk management office and contact your embassy in the host country for further guidance. Some countries have asked all their students to return to the country immediately. The University of Nebraska in Keryn, for example, will provide financial aid and if it is made clear their students will return to affected countries as soon as possible^{2,3}.

Regulation of policies related to study programs abroad: For the courses that need to be canceled, such as study courses in China or Italy, colleges and universities should contact their students and explain whether these programs will be delayed or canceled. Universities should also explain to students about how to repay the fees incurred. As the issue has flared up, the fees paid by students must be reimbursed in full².

Public health insurance coverage: Make sure all students currently abroad have access to international medical insurance. This is because some insurances may not cover COVID-19. You should also make sure that all international students are insured at your university, so that they can access to local medical care if they contract the COVID-19 virus^{2,3}.

Set policies for travel: While some universities have banned all travel, some others are waiting for a decision. If you are not sure if you need to complete an official mission abroad or to perform a study course abroad, it is recommended that you check out the online travel advisor in the destination country. For example, the inclusive website by the Government of Canada, containing information on travel counseling, has asked all its citizens not to leave the country². The Canadian government has also recommended that entry to Canada be only allowed for Canadian citizens and permanent residency, and that

anyone entering from another country must be quarantined for 14 days to ensure they are not infected with COVID-19. If you have a student returning to your country, accompany them during the quarantine to make sure they receive support and have communication with the society. By following the recommendations of your country's Ministry of Health, you will ensure that you receive the latest and most up-to-date information on COVID-19^{3,4}.

Support for financial funds: Educational institutions and universities may have students and staff from countries with COVID-19 virus. In this case, colleges and universities must apply procedures to support them. For example, an extension of residence for research or of residence for visiting students and making sure that they have access to the necessary budget to cover the necessary costs. In situations where students do not have enough access to the budget due to the outbreak of the virus, such as students who are forced to return to their country soon after the corona outbreak, educational institutions must utilize domestic and foreign financial resources to protect their students and staff from these woes and financial inconveniences. To support students who are directly affected by the virus, the Washington Institute of Technology has set up a coronavirus student emergency fund^{3,4}.

Communicate with your counterparts: Contact your COVID-19 counterparts and express your support for them. Tell them that you support them and encourage them to keep resisting. For example, the Chinese Consulate-General announced an intimate message to the Chinese community on its official Twitter account concerning the support for Regina University^{4,5}.

Keep the community informed and break the social stigma: There is so much misinformation about COVID-19. As an academic community, we need to have enough information about the properties of the virus and how it works. What are the features of this virus? What are its symptoms? How can it be prevented from spreading? Such information must be obtained from credible sources such as the World Health Organization. In this connection, the University of Glasgow hosts live broadcasts on the issue, which has addressed concerns about COVID-19 and provided a comprehensive website including information such as frequently asked questions about how to support students and staff, counseling for travel to countries stricken with the disease and tips on quarantine as well as other relevant recommendations and guidelines. Unfortunately, the issue of racism also arises with fear and ignorance^{2,4}. There have been cases of international students being attacked for racism in the destination country. Make sure infected students enjoy the support they need. It is hoped that these offenses would be prevented in the society by accurately informing the academic community and the general public about COVID-19, and by breaking the social stigma related with people infected with the coronavirus^{4,5}.

What would happen if we have to close down our university?

More than 200 colleges and universities across the United States have suspended classes, holding them online to prevent the spread of COVID-19^{2,3}. If your country is affected by the coronavirus, start planning an alternative

education. Some institutions have opted for the necessary infrastructure to be able to conduct all their courses online if needed. They also prepare programs for their own administrative and academic staff to continue their work so that they can continue to work from a distance. At Ottawa University, for example, office staffs work remotely and continue their activities. Ottawa's Higher Education institutions have moved to online distance learning and teaching so that students can finish the academic semester, and the university thus provides educational services to its international students by telephone and video conferencing^{4,5}.

Provide the necessary support for students who begin their studies in the fall: University institutions should consider systems for accommodating students whose countries are free from the disease, as education courses are suspended and it is impossible for students to travel to the destination country [2, 3]. This is a necessity because the findings of a new study indicate that more than 60% of respondents stated that their plans to study abroad were not affected by the virus. For other students, offering online courses or postponing the start of a bachelor's or master's degree program are two ways to support students affected by coronavirus⁶.

When you are in doubt, try to lead the way: There may be several situations in which you do not know what to do, what resources to consider, or what policies and processes to implement. The following are some of the principles utilized by the Ottawa University when making such decisions: health and safety of students and staff, continuity of activities, programs and services, safeguarding of educational standards and the flexibility in finding possible solutions^{6,7}.

Update information on your community: Make sure you have updated your information about COVID-19, i.e., information on class suspensions, postponing unnecessary trips, or providing instructive information on the virus. Try to provide this information to students and staff in a timely manner⁷.

What challenges do higher education institutions face in this crisis?

Many communities have aimed to increase the resilience of infrastructure and public services as well as the resilience to economic shocks and disasters. Therefore, the resilient University form is claimed as a new approach to incorporate resilience and flexibility [17]. Universities are facing unprecedented challenges due to the outbreak of the coronavirus [7, 8]. Many universities are making attempts to overcome this crisis and maintain continued education, ensure strong student recruitment, and establish a clear and definite relationship with staff and students. According to the surveys conducted by universities, the most common challenges are:

- 1- Preserving the safety and health of students, faculty members and staff while trying to keep current activities normal
- 2- A drop in student registration in summer and autumn
- 3- Lack of public awareness and waging of incorrect information

In addition, living in countries where the health care system is unreliable makes it difficult to ensure that educational institutions are ready to deal with the crisis. In the meantime, the biggest challenge is how to move from traditional education to online learning and how to

overcome problems with lessons and practical training. Other challenges include continuous planning, communication, and encountering ambiguity⁹. The impact of this crisis on students is significant, and this trend denotes shifting financial resources to eliminate the shortcomings that are likely to arise^{2,8}. There are also problems with communication options and distance learning which will constantly create problems under circumstances where access to the required information and resources should be reviewed. One can refer to biggest challenges as maintaining the safety and well-being of students and staff, avoiding intimidation, maintaining continuous educational progress by way of educational innovations solutions such as using online methods, reducing educational costs for less privileged students and the costs incurred while coping with the coronavirus as well as maintaining the entry flow of international students^{2,3}.

What tactics have universities applied to counter the coronavirus outbreak?

Educational institutions are quite vulnerable to a crisis, such as the coronavirus, because most universities are actually larger social groups that, when exposed to the disease, highly contribute to the spread of the disease¹⁰. In the face of this global challenge, most universities have used a range of measures to adapt to new circumstances, including:

- To provide some scheduled lessons online
- To postpone the start date of some education courses until the next semester
- To postpone the application deadline for the next course admission at the university
- To change the deadline for admission applications for the next semester
- To postpone some of the 2020 until 2021 admissions
- To postpone English language exams
- To include intensive English language courses in the curriculum^{8,10}.

To what extent did universities welcome online education?

According to the results of surveys conducted by educational centers, while 50% of the respondents had dedicated some of their education courses to online education, with the continuation of the crisis, this figure would probably continue to rise. Also, 58% of international students expressed interest in studying online due to the restrictions set because of the coronavirus, while 42% stated that they had no interest in online studying courses [10]. In addition, 51% of students in the survey stated they expected universities to allot a more share of their education to online education. Meanwhile, educational technology companies such as iTeach. world, Raftr, Aula and Intergreat are developing and offering distance learning devices and online platforms for free to help universities around the world.

In this regard, Jean-Pierre Gittard, CEO and founder of iTeach.world, posits: "The biggest challenge facing students is the Internet bandwidth". In some countries and in some deprived areas, Internet infrastructure is not suitable for the current situation, which this will leave a negative impact on the online learning experience of some of the teachers and students. According to him, it is necessary for schools and universities to pay more

attention to this issue and to create the necessary infrastructure to the extent possible. Because on the the back of these changes, stand awareness of the society of the benefits of online education as modern education and also realization of digital capabilities in education at schools and universities^{10,11}. This is the very idea of Robert Hensing, CEO of the Chinese online learning company EMERITUS, as he stated:

Moving in the online education direction makes the education system understand the participatory education and the way it is administered. This subject creates an opportunity window for promoting educational experiences and competencies and also attracting more support for the education. Coronavirus has made teachers and students create a revolution in teaching and moving from a lecturer-listener to an interactive model and learning through action. The current situation is the best possible opportunity to empower educational centers across the world^{11,12}.

COVID-19 and learners' mental health: The COVID-19 outbreak has been an unprecedented global crisis and a threat to social and economic solidarity in various societies. The disease is considered a threat to the stability of education systems and a red line for the employment of teachers and professors, and ultimately mass investment in education. This pandemic has questioned the whole learning process at all levels of education to the extent that educational centers and officials have now admitted they were not prepared^{3,4}.

Sailing in the storm: We are now witnessing an inclusive call in the field of education to enter the world of digital technology after the outbreak of the corona crisis across the world^{3,4}. While this is often in the best interest of learners, the Platforming Learning Hulelong institute is increasingly skeptical and has indirectly reminded us that it is impossible for education systems to continue this way. Today, it has been made clear that the main priority is the health and well-being of learners. At times of crisis, people's physical and mental health is often emotionally indescribable. Fighting COVID-19 and flexible measures have extreme psychological consequences for all communities, including: anxiety, depression, fear for ourselves and our loved ones, inactivity, stress, and many more[13]. Educational regulations on preserving the mental health of learners and teachers should be a top priority in emergency programs. In fact, preserving the physical and mental health of learners and teachers should be one of the priorities of the education system in any country, although it is very tricky to do so at times of crisis. The well-being of education staff and education and learning activities have now become a stress-factor. New methods of appraisal under conditions of uncertainty, limited equipment for proper compliance with safety principles under the epidemic conditions of the disease, inadequacy and digital competencies, etc. are all stressors. Meanwhile, the social role of teachers is increasingly significant.

Education under unusual conditions and shortages of sufficient tools and resources are among their problems. For a long time, the very important social role played by teachers and educators has been ignored. However, this emergency condition and the spread of the disease have caused different countries to pay more attention to the training of coaches and to invest in this field; especially in

the area of upgrading the necessary qualifications to provide comprehensive and innovative (online/integrated) education and digital skills. At present, it is very important to develop such skills as emotional intelligence, creativity and other soft skills in teachers and professors. In addition, the education, which begins and ends with a page, denotes denying part of the social aspects within the learning process^{8,13}. In the future, learning with digital skills and investing in it will be of paramount significance for all learners. In past years, education systems were not ready to serve everyone. In this connection, it is critical to outline the skills and rich experience of online education providers in the formal and informal sectors when designing and providing inclusive guidelines for high quality education.

Do not let the educational gap become bigger than it used to be, like the recession that has led to greater inequalities. Today, one of the most noticeable outcomes of the COVID-19 outbreak is a wider gap among learners. Even in Europe, the richest region in the world, there are thousands of learners who need to take online courses, but they can't afford the tools to do so; there are families with numerous children who have to share a computer with all their children; houses with poor internet connections, children with fragile mental health and no motivation to continue learning while finding themselves trapped in home environments. This situation can be seen all over the world¹⁰. These learners have physical or cognitive disabilities who have suddenly lost equal opportunities to learn. Global access to education during the epidemic is one of the objectives and initiatives of all countries that pursue it in various ways. All of which is like unanswered calls from the past that resonate today with the outbreak of the Corona crisis. On the other hand, parents around the world face an unexpected challenge to strengthen their educational support for learners^{3,13}

Recommendations by the Strategic Committee for Sustainable Development Goals on Continuing Education at the Time of the COVID-19 Outbreak

The Coronavirus pandemic is a global health crisis as well as an educational crisis that has put more than 1.5 billion students on a global shutdown of schools and universities. Early in the present decade, activities were focused on expediting progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Following the outbreak of COVID-19 and the holding of an emergency virtual meeting at the Strategic Committee for Sustainable Development Goals, all governments were asked to follow the recommendations and policies pertaining to COVID-19. The policies were: Responsiveness and administering justice, guidance, and educational responses to COVID-19, continuing education and learning, and safeguarding educational rights at times of crisis¹⁴. The Strategic Committee for Sustainable Development Goals calls on all states to renew their commitment to protecting the educational rights of all learners, even those being solely educated in any part of the world. Educational fairness and justice should be one of the guiding principles of all educational responses to prevent the spread of educational, socio-economic and digital inequalities and to provide equal opportunities for all learners, especially vulnerable and marginalized people, including refugees. The Strategic Committee for Sustainable Development Goals calls on all states to unite

their forces to ensure the principle of learning for all, and for education systems to overcome this crisis strongly, more resiliently, more responsively and more inclusively.

This emphasizes the cooperation between the health sector and other relevant departments to ensure the safety and well-being of all learners and provides special vigilance to support the right of girls to continue their education. The Strategic Committee for Sustainable Development Goals confirms the global COVID-19 education alliance launched by UNESCO as a platform for coordinated educational support to countries. It is stated that the vital roles that teachers play in responding to COVID 19 be recognized and protected. The said committee involves and supports 63 million elementary, secondary, and high school teachers who are at the forefront of COVID-19 education^{3,14}. They also play a significant role in maintaining community cohesion and combating discrimination and deprivation. Teachers, especially those working in remote areas with limited resources, require professional support and empowerment in terms of the knowledge, skills, and tools needed for education. The strategic committee also calls on governments to put the safety, health and well-being of teachers in priority. Maintaining employment, their salaries, professional and educational support, as well as providing joint operating systems to share effective methods and educational innovations are among the other emphases made by the strategic Committee for Sustainable Development Goals. At the same time, many students do their homework without the support of teachers.

In this connection, educational officials were asked to provide the necessary guidance and support to these students and their families when providing educational assistance. Ensuring adequate educational commitment by educational and investment centers at the time of the corona disease outbreak can play an effective role in recreating educational centers after the crisis^{2,14}. However, the Strategic Committee has expressed its deep concern that the social and economic shocks caused by COVID-19 will have a negative impact on education-incurred costs in the long run. The Corona Crisis has plagued low-income and middle-income countries. The Strategic Committee has called on all governments to take political and investment commitments seriously during and after the crisis, and calls on international institutions to mobilize the fund for education in low- and middle-income countries through financial mechanisms. Governments should consider the issue of education, especially the education of girls and women in the field of coronavirus disease, in order to increase their awareness and knowledge and families by the time the disease spreads. The Strategic Committee reiterates that financing education is not a cost rather an investment in empowering society and creating equality in societies and creating more inclusive and sustainable societies, and in the meantime, it calls for international solidarity and multilateral cooperation to strengthen the resilience and readiness of education systems at the international level¹⁵.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Following the outbreak of the coronavirus, several procedures and crisis management policies, including how

to deal with student and college behavioral issues, currency devaluation, strikes, etc., were considered by the government and educational institutions, but they did not act explicitly to prepare for or to respond to a pandemic. It appears though that the directors of educational centers around the world are faced with the fact that all principals, colleges, students, parents, service providers, etc. should be educated on how to act under critical situations and should not be intimidated³. Informed decision making is very important for developing crisis management programs. Networking with colleagues, at national and international levels, is an important part of the thinking process that helps one develop or revise his crisis management programs. It's time to engage one's chief of the education center for talks over risk tolerance. Awareness of such issues is critical to the crisis management program as it leads to the creation of an integrated institutional position^{3,10}.

Reality-based policies: Given the immediate response to the crisis, the first questions that professors and education centers ask themselves are, "Should I cancel the curriculum?" "Do I need to adopt a cancellation policy?" And then "Is there a plan to repay the costs?" These are usually the first questions asked by students and their families. If you do not yet have a specific strategy to answer these questions, it is now the time to formulate them⁴. Contact your country's embassy in the destination country to ask for your student's safety. The cancellation of education programs is very important as a positive response. In New York, after the September 11, 2001 incidents, the city and its international exchanges were suspended exactly like what happened in Paris. These kinds of attacks are really saddening and frightening, but there's no need to get them happen again in the same place. As the disease spreads around the world, we are all at risk because we leave home for a variety of reasons, including shopping, attending meetings and offices, using public transportation, and restaurants. This should not be a reason to decide to stay at home, especially in the case of education. We have to decide whether we desire to cancel training programs or create study sites at home and abroad, taking into account all the known facts^{3,8}. Face to face, communication can have a direct impact on the mortality rate of COVID-19 if social distancing is not taken seriously. Therefore, it is imperative for all countries to quarantine their epicenter right from the start to prevent the rapid spread of the disease, which will have irreparable consequences¹⁶. Therefore, there should be no gathering in universities and online education should be considered as prior to traditional education.

Preparing a backup program: It is imperative to use alternative programs or options for education and travel plans. Such support programs should be shared with teachers and students. If you have at your disposal a special program for emergency educational services, publish it on the center's website, brochures, and manuals. This can be very reassuring even if different scenarios were being developed and with not all the facts clear^{3,13}.

Using all moments to learn: Use every moment for students' learning. These are instructive moments because

we can engage students in discussing their own safety, especially when they are about to enter medical centers for education. This helps students ensure to continue their education while maintaining good health and safety.

Overall, according to the polls performed, as many as 80% of educational centers around the world are currently implementing crisis management strategies and programs to prevent the spread of coronavirus^{4,8}.

In the context of the continuing crisis of the Coronavirus, it is the responsibility of educational institutions to continuously review and modify crisis management strategies and measures at educational centers. Keep in mind that flexibility and the ability to quickly adapt to changing crisis situations can offer help to educational institutions to deal with crisis¹⁴.

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