

EDITORIAL

EFFECT OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK ON HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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1.1 Background

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in late 2019 had considerable disruptions on higher education institutions, affecting billions of students in several nation-states worldwide. Approximately 95 percent of the learners have got disrupted by the sudden and unclear closure of learning institutions globally (Dhawan, 2020). The pandemic also threatened almost every sector of university life, all the way from new admissions, course registrations, and campus activities. This situation has led to substantial alterations and transformations in every part of academic life. Conventional instructional systems have been extensively interrupted by societal distancing and restricted transportation to cope with the pandemic. However, even if the limits get lifted, the reopening of universities will bring in new obstacles. As several revised appropriate procedures get implemented, most universities will need adequate time for actual operation and adaptation (Sharma, 2020).

Numerous researchers have disseminated their findings on education systems in innumerable ways after the outbreak. In most learning institutions currently, face-to-face coaching got replaced by other virtual learning methodologies. There is concern that most universities will have to re-structure their academic calendar to adhere to the changing times and the novel technologies. Modernization and alternative educational systems along with evaluation techniques get instantly anticipated. The diseases outbreak has led to the opening of new prospects of laying the groundwork for learning technologies that will be more appropriate in the future (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

The lack of virtual learning infrastructures, instructors' insufficient familiarity with new virtual teaching methods, a non-conducive setting for home learning, fairness, and educational success in the current education presents future problems in the education docket that needs new resolutions. The influence of the pandemic on educational activities worldwide gets examined in several articles. They illustrate that the contagion has taught the world that the education system needs enhancement to cope with the new norm. Learners and educators should get cultured on exhausting various digital educational approaches for future learning purposes, primarily employing virtual educational technologies.

1.2 Covid-19 in the Albanian HEIs Context

The effects of the pandemic on the HEIs did not leave the educational sector in Albania untouched. The key challenges, strategies, and the pandemic's lessons across Albania's HEIs were similar to what the other institutions globally experienced.

Albanian HEIs have experienced many challenges in dealing with the pandemic. One of the most significant challenges was a lack of awareness and preparedness to deal with the pandemic. Most Albanian HEIs did not have business continuing processes (BCPs) and enterprise resource planning (ERPs), which play a vital role in ensuring that the operations of the HEIs are restored to normal after the occurrence of unforeseen events. Changing the mode of learning and working from home were also challenges faced by HEIs. Shifting the Albanian HEIs education delivery mode from the normal classroom or face-to-face learning into online-based learning introduced significant changes for

both students and instructors to adopt. As such, almost all of the HEIs in Albania transitioned from the regular face-to-face learning environments into online lectures, which was a considerable shift since they had never been there before. For courses that were practical or laboratory-oriented, it was not easy to move directly onto online classes. Again, some students were distracted easily during online lectures as they were tempted to surf the internet while listening to lectures. Lecturers were also not left behind as they were faced a variety of barriers working from home. Therefore, HEIs needed to provide the necessary technological infrastructure to enable lecturers to develop and upload content for the students, increasing their overall operational costs.

Despite the many challenges, Albanian HEIs implemented a couple of approaches to curb the effects of the pandemic. On top of their priority, HEIs Management Boards and Senates closed down the institutions for face-to-face learning and moved to online classes. Also, the decision for most HEIs to tweak their academic calendars and engage in the provision of technical advice to Albania's Ministry of Health on controlling the pandemic was necessary. Lastly, Albanian HEIs engaged in short-term research projects to diversify and earn more income, which is required to sustain their operations since most strongly depended on student fee collections.

The Covid-19 experiences have left behind significant lessons for Albanian HEIs to consider going into the future. Institutions of higher learning should embrace business continuity planning to prepare for similar emergencies in the future. They have learned the need to have well-equipped and established university-level, faculty and academic level business continuity plans to highlight the procedures to adopt online-based learning, all the way from preparations, planning, communication and provision of technical support. Similarly, they have learned that they cannot do without planning and familiarizing themselves with several educational tools and methods to deliver content to learners. Albanian HEIs need to embrace backup plans to meet the students' necessary academic

requirements. Of utmost priority, the HEIs should continuously conduct risk awareness programs to identify potential risks and approaches to mitigate the risks during disasters. It is paramount for them to carry out continuous risk assessments to identify risky areas and improve them. Last but not least, HEIs must set aside designated funding to enhance their research and innovations and help during tough times.

1.3 Future challenges in HEIs

The absence of proper proficiency on virtual education equipment is projected to cause additional imperative glitches for pedagogical practitioners, students, and teachers while using or to reference these resources in the future (Palmer et al., 2020). The following are some of the issues that numerous researchers project and anticipate to impact higher education institutions in the future.

Availability, cost, adaptability, classroom mentoring, life-long schooling, and school curriculum are all issues with the introduction of virtual learning due to the emergence of the outbreak (Burgos et al., 2021). Numerous communities and nations experience substantial complications in sustaining a steady online connection and acquisition to readily available digital tools. Whereas countless vulnerable students in emerging economies have no access to web-based educational instruments, digital learning upsurges the student's experience to screen-time that poses several health problems. (Lemoine et al., 2020).

Virtual learning, according to studies, poses a considerable problem to future education due to a lack of direction from both teachers and parents. There are practical challenges with virtual learning, such as the lack of physical settings that are satisfactory to varied learning models. Furthermore, due to the reduction of contact hours for teaching and learning and a communication gap with teachers when confronting educational challenges, students' academic success will likely diminish in the future (Lemoine et al., 2020).

In addition, students have to get assessed virtually,

necessities continuous trial and error, and unpredictability and ambiguity among instructors, schoolchildren, and guardians. The method used to conduct virtual examinations varies depending on the ease, knowledge, and experience of the educationalists and the suitability of the students. Due to the enormous student population, numerous academic institutions have yet to adopt specific plagiarism-checking procedures and other technologies; hence, this challenge will significantly affect future education (Palmer et al., 2020).

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