

COVID-19: Threat or Opportunity for Online Education?

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Introduction

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) began in the Wuhan region of China in December 2019. By February 2020, cases of COVID-19 had been detected on every continent. Governments are advising citizens to be prepared for an outbreak in their community. Today, we are globally experiencing closures in schools and universities, postponements or even cancellations of conferences and other organized events, and social distancing. In addition, we have also seen the promotion of flexible ways of studying and working to hinder the rapid spread of the virus. This position paper aims to reflect on where exactly online education figures into this crisis situation by focusing on four important pillars: (a) policymaking, (b) access to resources, (c) training opportunities, and (d) ongoing evaluation and monitoring.

So Where Exactly Does Online Education Figure Into This Crisis Situation?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's director-general, Audrey Azoulay, said in a recent statement ("Coronavirus Update," 2020), "While temporary school closures as a result of health and other crises are not new, unfortunately, the global scale and speed of the current educational disruption is unparalleled and, if prolonged, could threaten the right to education" (para. 1).

What she's referring to is the approximately 400 million students from countries like China, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Japan, Iran, Italy, Iraq, South Korea, France, Greece, Germany, Singapore, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (among many others) who are currently not attending classes due to this novel virus.

To ensure a continuity in students' learning, even under sometimes fragmented national regulatory frameworks—which make the recognition and accreditation of nontraditional (face-to-face) degrees challenging—some governments are looking to find a solution in online education initiatives. Such initiatives

may include the use of online synchronous communication and the design, delivery, and assessment of online learning activities within a virtual learning platform.

For many online education researchers and practitioners, the COVID-19 crisis is being considered as a unique opportunity to support both students and institutions by filling the gap left by conventional (face-to-face) education. Indeed, online education has a number of advantages, not least that it allows educators and students to continue teaching and learning from any location without interruption. As a result, educational institutions can continue to receive anticipated revenues.

What educators, students, and institutions involved in these “emergency” online education initiatives should keep in mind is that these new measures are, on the whole, untested, and in some cases, they are not applied consistently across educational institutions. In addition, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are not always adequate. Finally, the initiatives can only really be implemented effectively if students (and educators) across the board have reliable access to the technology and resources needed for online delivery.

Given the circumstances, relying on online education as a solution to ensure continuity of learning in areas impacted by COVID-19 may well prove to be overly optimistic. Especially in countries that take a more conservative approach to the recognition and accreditation of online education, the failure of this experiment may lead to the misconception that online learning is ultimately an ineffective learning model. In turn, this may cripple the progress of less traditional ways of teaching and learning.

To avoid this eventuality, it is important to highlight some actions that need to take place for the smooth and effective implementation of online education.

Educational Policymaking: Teachers, Students, and Society Need a Clear and Consistent Plan

Governments and policymakers should create a framework for each level of education—primary, secondary, and higher—that will equally focus on the implementation of online education, the required methodologies, and the desired outcomes of the practice. Good practices, methodologies, and common goals should be cocreated and communicated all groups of stakeholders. National experts in the field can play a key role in codesigning these frameworks with local, regional, or national authorities, for example, ministries of education. Although each institution should be given the flexibility in how to implement online learning, a validated framework and some common goals are necessary to ensure consistency, learning, and achievement.

Access to Necessary Resources: Online Education Is Not Only Tools and Applications

Access to learning opportunities, success at school, and chances of higher and further education should be available for all (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences Digital Society School, n.d.). As such, when we aim to ensure continuity of learning, it is of utmost importance to consider the entire population of educators and students. According to the United Nation’s (2015) Sustainable Development Goal 4, “achieving inclusive and quality education for all reaffirms the belief that education is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development” (para. 4). Does everyone have access to the necessary hardware and software for online delivery? If not, how can we provide such resources to the most vulnerable groups at short notice? Any meaningful effort to this end must rely to an extent on a collaboration between the government and the private sector.

Training Opportunities for Both Educators and Students: Experts Should Be Consulted, and Not Everyone Can Give a Solution

Current research has demonstrated that technology itself doesn’t guarantee an effective—or pleasant—learning experience. This can only be achieved through systematic training initiatives that clearly set out the

teaching and learning that institutions expect of their educators and students, respectively. These training initiatives should be in line with the policy frameworks discussed earlier and should cover both technological and pedagogical aspects.

Ongoing Evaluation and Monitoring of New Learning Initiatives: Teachers, Students, and Administrators Need Ongoing Support

Online education can undoubtedly offer new learning environments that make learning accessible and support students in developing competencies, skills, and attitudes (Vlachopoulos et al., 2012). Evaluation and monitoring of these new environments should be carried out for many reasons: to identify their impact on students' learning experience; to provide us with insights into how and what the students are learning; to provide us with data on how online practices can be improved; and, finally, to provide an evidence base that can be used by other countries looking to implement online education.

Impact on Educational Technology Investments

There is no doubt that this current context is leading to a reconsideration of investments in educational technology, as investors, education technology companies, governments, officials, and policymakers are trying to support this emergency remote-teaching situation (Hodges et al., 2020).

Specifically, we see several education technology companies offering free access for institutions, teachers, and students to some of their products and services, which are now tested by millions of users from all over the world. Moreover, institutions are in negotiations with companies on bigger projects, such as the acquisition of learning platforms, proctored examination solutions, and synchronous communication solutions, among other products and services.

It is important to mention that this uptick in demand does not lead to an increase in sales, mainly because most of these institutions don't have the budget for such initiatives or because they don't have effective procurement processes. At the same time, governments and officials cannot decide on whether they should invest in short-term solutions or a long-term plan.

Ultimately, it is clear that the COVID-19 crisis has in fact presented an opportunity for online education to penetrate new areas and offer sustainable and effective learning solutions to the populations it has impacted. However, a systematic approach in investing, planning, and delivering online learning is an absolute must, as the alternative could be highly detrimental to the implementation and expansion of online education.

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