
E-LEARNING DURING COVID-19: GLOBAL SEARCH FOR MEANING

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ABSTRACT

Technology, globalization and e-learning make the business of higher education more complicated and competitive each day. Innovation and change in university instruction require technology in response to the demands of a knowledge economy where students are engaged in rapid technology adaptation and a constantly changing world. In contrast, instruction has historically been contained on campus, using face-to-face instruction. But, as the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century unfolds, significant changes are being undertaken in universities to accommodate students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Words: Global higher education; e-learning, COVID-19 pandemic, technology, globalization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced most of the higher education community to implement technological applications for instruction and delivery through e-learning (Ali, 2020). Global higher education has been slow to change; although some universities extensively use

E-learning, distance learning, online education, or some other form of technology-driven instruction, the vast majority of institutions were unprepared for the rapid move to e-learning (Callo & Yazon, 2020). As a result, new organizational structures and systems to promote quality e-learning were needed to move from face-to-face to e-learning (Dhawan, 2020). Managing changes in moving university instruction to an online environment has proven difficult and demanding, particularly for many faculty (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2020). Global higher education has recognized that innovation in teaching and learning is absolutely essential, but not without numerous challenges (Dunn & Kennedy, 2019).

Global Higher Education

Global higher education today faces its greatest combinations of challenges: economic uncertainty, accountability and globalization superimposed by emerging technologies and the COVID-19 pandemic (Lemoine & Richardson, 2020). Global higher education institutions are also attempting to develop the capacity to adapt and modify to the new models of knowledge and

information, teaching and learning. This confluence of factors requires the academy to rethink and restructure, both what and how they teach and research, and how they intersect with society (Lemoine, Waller, & Richardson, 2020). E-learning is providing a reliable way for institutions to continue their delivery of education in a virtual environment while many cannot accept students on campus for face-to-face instruction (Naciri, Baba, Achbani, & Kharbach, 2020).

Standards of quality are demanded by an increasingly technological and diverse society, both locally and globally (Lemoine, Waller, Garretson, & Richardson, 2020a). As the cost of higher education rises and as governments break with their long-standing commitments to underwriting this cost, global higher education must explore opportunities and consider new ways of increasing access and constructing additional learning opportunities, such as e-learning, *while* remaining personal and affordable (Richardson, Garretson, Waller, & Lemoine, 2019).

Technology

Along with increasing global competition, technology adds complexity and uncertainty to the global higher education environment. Increasing global interdependencies and the accelerating pace of change demand more flexible, adaptive, and agile global higher education institutions (Waller, Lemoine, Mense, & Richardson, 2019). Effective utilization of technology will decrease organizational vulnerability, as caused by the pandemic, by reducing costs and enhancing adaptability. Increasing accessibility *and* increasing affordability while increasing personalization of learning is paramount for higher education institutions who wish to increase enrollment, retain students, and graduate students who are prepared for the 21st century workplace (Waller, Lemoine, Garretson, & Richardson, 2020).

Technology is transforming higher education by providing a global focus, thereby intensifying the global interconnectedness. Technology has now become central to the global changes, reshaping social, economic and cultural life (Waller, Garretson, Lemoine, & Richardson, 2020). The use of technology is a necessary condition of doing business in higher education. Information needs incessantly drive the demands for increased technological capabilities (Yordanova & Stoimenova, 2020). While technology should be a contributor to increased efficiency for the global higher education institution, the complexity, costs, and utilization of technology are challenges. E-learning allows universities to meet the growing global demand for educational services in any location and access at any time (Lyapina, Sotnikova, Lebedeva, Makarova, & Skvortsova, 2019). Given the level of development of modern information technology, e-learning can provide instant access to information around the world that is on the verge of a new, fourth industrial revolution that will change most production processes (Baliga, 2020).

Higher education is a second level participant in the creation of economic globalism, but it is essential to the creation, exchange and implementation of knowledge. Knowledge and information are more highly prized and more highly globalized than ever before due to the impact of technology (Syed, Ahmad, Alaraifi, & Rafi, 2020). As information systems continue to grow exponentially, administrators in higher education feel constant pressure to overcome technology obsolescence, such that technology infusion in global higher education emphasizes

innovations to provide technology-based learning (McKenna, 2018). Most global universities have made significant investments in educational technologies in an effort to increase e-learning instruction. In this technology driven world of innovation, comparative advantage is short-lived due to the availability of the same technology to all universities. The challenge is to design economically efficient and educationally effective e-learning instructional programs that attract students and produce competent and capable graduates (Waller, Lemoine, & Richardson, 2020).

E-learning

Global and technological change impacts higher education, but refocused teaching and learning provides direction into how the process of e-learning should best be conducted. In particular, the development of e-learning offers promise in assisting administrators, faculty, and designers in creating effective learning environments (Chiong & Fu, 2020). But, in this global society, students desire a degree, not an education, with their goals limited to the acquisition of skills needed for employment and maximizing income. Within this context, universities are being pushed to produce knowledgeable students that society and employers deem valuable, i.e., employability, not knowledge (Daniela, Strods, & Kalniņa, 2019). Technology-mediated e-learning provides the dominant means by which 21st Century higher education is delivered and received (Dennis, 2018).

With e-learning technology, students can determine the structure of their learning process, choosing where, when, and how to learn (Gupta & Gupta, 2020). E-learning reverses the roles and learning of the typical university teacher and face-to-face classroom-learning paradigm and instead becomes a constructivist process with the student becoming the determinant factor (Kumar, 2020). E-learning can provide students with a low-cost, flexible option to expand into global markets. Given the change in student populations, there is a greater need to find more creative, cost and time effective ways to draw students to institutions of higher learning. One such way of reaching a more diverse population is through the use of e-learning (Lemoine, Waller, Garretson, & Richardson, 2020b). The general mission of e-learning is to fully extend quality learning opportunities to diverse populations of learners who either prefer or have a special need of alternative methods of delivery (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Huynh, 2019).

Universities may use site-based, synchronous activities, which are activities conducted in real time or at specified times such as videoconferencing and telecourses. Or they may employ asynchronous activities which do not require participation at the same time, such as online (Sistek-Chandler, 2020). E-learning programs generally have a more diverse student body which allows students to interact with students of all ages, from many different walks of life or in foreign countries. Such diversity will enrich the learning process and be reflected in discussions, assignments and projects (Ossiannilsson, 2018). E-learning programs tend to be win-win for the student and for the institution. E-learning classes cost the university less as classes are held in 'virtual' classrooms which do not require desks, chairs and building space. Additionally, students do not have costs generally associated with classes at a physical college such as parking and housing (Noesgaard, & Ørngreen, 2015).

COVID-19 Disruption of Global Higher Education

Disruption presents a tremendous challenge for global higher education institutions, particularly the disruption of COVID-19 (Lemoine, Waller, Garretson, & Richardson, 2020). Some have advocated that disruption is the force that permitted global higher education to expand and prosper. E-learning can be seen as a major competitive advantage in global higher education by enhancing effectiveness and enabling sustainable development (Lemoine & Richardson, 2019). E-learning has permitted higher education to go global and greatly expand markets and opportunities for product branding and revenue generation (Kolakowski & Ebrahim, 2020). One of the major contributors to the expansion of e-learning in global higher education is the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson, Veletsianos, & Seaman, 2020). COVID-19 led to significant innovation in universities regarding the processes used for teaching and learning, particularly e-learning (Rahim, Burrell, & Duncan, 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 created a unique dilemma and tremendous opportunities for global higher education institutions. The pandemic has produced strategies to embrace e-learning in global higher education institutions and forced most institutions to implement e-learning solutions (Thaba-Nkadimene, 2020). Obviously, some institutions had not planned for e-learning as a possible alternative to face-to-face instruction and most faculty were not prepared to effectively deliver high-quality instruction remotely (Ahmad, 2020). The challenge for universities around the world became how to improve the quality of online teaching and adequately prepare their faculty to deliver instruction in a new format (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). For many institutions, the difficulty still exists. Given the expansion of electronic supported teaching, the crucial question is how and to what extent e-learning will change the quality of teaching and learning (Verawardina, Asnur, Lubis, Hendriyani, Ramadhani, Dewi, Darni, Betri, Susanti, & Sriwahyuni, 2020).

The unexpected change to e-learning became a measure of the institution's agility. E-learning introduced considerably greater agility and capacity for delivery of courses, programs, and communication. However, in this global society, students desire a degree, not an education, with their goals limited to the acquisition of skills needed for employment and maximizing income. Additionally, higher education institutions are being asked to graduate more students while concurrently increasing the standards of quality, simultaneously becoming more efficient, effective and productive organizations (Waller, Lemoine, Garretson, & Richardson, 2020).

But what is the future for global higher education and e-learning while continuing to face COVID-19? The pandemic is not gone. so how will universities adapt? Will some open for face-to-face instruction and face renewed outbreaks? Will others stay completely online? The future is unclear except for one thing: e-learning will continue to be a reliable method for advancing instruction in higher education because universities are forced to increase their e-learning capabilities for the quality implementation of educational programs for the growth and development of their students in a period of disruption caused by COVID-19 (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020).

For some institutions the lesson has been learned: prepare faculty, students, and administrators for further instructional interruptions (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). This requires the academy to rethink and restructure, both what and how they teach, and how they intersect with society, particularly using technology and e-learning (Shenoy, Mahendra, & Vijay, 2020). Whatever the

'Post' COVID-19 timwebrings is an interesting predicament because it is clear that institutions and society cannot be – anytime soon - post COVID-19(Tesar, 2020). It is likely that COVID-19 will be present for a long time, even as multiple countries are now experiencing another outbreak. In this uncertain time, global higher education should focus on the quality of learning, the commitment to bring solutions to societyand the effort to protect and advance knowledge. Survival for global universitiesmeans adaptation to COVID-19: innovate or get left behind (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, &Koole, 2020).

2. CONCLUSIONS

- (1) Higher education must adapt or get left behind.
- (2) Technology should not be an end for global higher education; it should be the means to achieve the end.
- (3) Educators should use technology as a learning tool, to assist the learner with the task of learning.
- (4) Technology must transform the way students learn and the way professors teach and develop applications to assist in e-learning.
- (5) The COVID-19 pandemic has largely transformed higher education by demonstrating the ability of e-learning to reach all students.
- (6) E-learning in the face of global disruption (wars. climate crises. pandemics) remains the only way to ensure continuous knowledge transfer.
- (7) Appropriate staff development is necessary for those faculty who have no experience in e-learning in order to ensure quality learning for students.
- (8) Higher education institutions during COVID-19 faced the tasks of maintaining the learning process while simultaneously ensuring the learning was beneficial.
- (9) COVID-19 has made it clear that global higher education is susceptible to external dangers.
- (10) COVID-19 is not over. How will institutions respond to continued disruption?

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