Beyond COVID-19 crisis: Towards resilient education systems

The unprecedented circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have affected all levels of the educational system. Schools and universities alike have been forced to make rapid transitions from traditional in-person classes to online education to facilitate continuity of education and contain the spread of disease.

On a positive note, this transition has demonstrated the resilience of the education sector and the potential for digital innovation (Marinoni et al., 2020). Nonetheless, many challenges have emerged with the shift to distance education, even in universities that have long been using technology to support teaching and learning. Traditional-based campuses and schools that lacked infrastructure and resources to facilitate the immediate switch to digital education were hit harder. For these campuses, faculty, and students' readiness to move to online platforms partially or entirely was an additional challenge (Sahu, 2020). Regardless of their technological capacities, all of them were compelled to transition to online education or what is known in recent studies as "emergency online education," (García-Morales et al., 2021).

As a result, students, faculty, and education institutions were confronted with multiple challenges, including (a) faculty competencies because digital education requires different pedagogies, (b) students' lack of access to digital devices and internet connections, (c) limited institutional technical infrastructure and services to support students and faculty, and (d) students' psychological and emotional distress (Ewing, 2021; Marinoni et al., 2020). Additionally, the new reality of education has further exacerbated some preexisting challenges related to the quality of education; approaches to assessments; educational inequity, particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged students; and mental health issues among students.

Almost two years into the pandemic and the shift to online education, many questions have yet to be answered: How effective is emergency online education? How will it impact the student experience in the years to come? Will virtual learning become the new normal in education? How will digitalization education redefine the quality of teaching and learning? How will higher education remedy the potential long-term learning gaps for prospective students in the years to come?

The evolving trajectory of the pandemic suggests that the impact on education is far reaching, as the pandemic continues to change socialization, communication styles, and the cultural patterns of education settings (Sahu, 2020). To keep up with these changing demands, universities need to think beyond crisis management and begin long-term planning to ensure a sustainable and inclusive education. This requires rethinking pedagogy and assessment, investing in innovation and faculty development, planning for learning recovery programs, and paying renewed attention to evaluative research and empirical evidence in decision-making (Zhu & Liu, 2020).

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