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COVID-19: An Unexpected and Unusual Driver to Online Education

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Abstract
COVID-19 is creating havoc and contributing to a social panic that has led to a temporary closure of most campuses across the globe. It has become impossible to meet face-to-face for on-campus course delivery and in-person interactions, using the university's physical setting for intellectual and academic pursuits. This article discusses the implications of the shift to online education for higher education.

Based on statistics by UNESCO, as of March 23, 2020, 1.7 billion students and learners around the world were unable to go to school or university. This figure accounts for 90 percent of the world's student population. In the wake of this situation, a consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak, most universities have asked their faculty members to start teaching online, without gauging the challenges of teaching an entire curriculum in that modality. Many university administrations have been faced with the burden of moving hundreds of courses online at once. What message does this unexpected rush into online education send out to the higher education sector? What challenges are most often experienced, and what are the short-term and long-term implications of integrating online courses into higher education?

Increased Legitimacy of Online Education
With this sudden and unexpected rush, online education worldwide has come one substantial step further. Since the late 1990s, when the Internet started playing a role in course delivery, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been gradually leveraging this innovation and changing their strategic directions. Online instruction proved to be

convenient for working adults and appreciated by millennials. This encouraged universities to make use of online instruction to enrich course content and attract students. As new needs emerge among target groups, the legitimacy of online education keeps increasing and its *raison d'être* becomes irrevocable.

For instance, through flipped classrooms, making course materials available online is the best pedagogical technique to teach some academic topics. The benefits are not only pedagogical, but also social and economic. For digital natives, online is a preferred medium for social interactions, and their expectations around multimodality and online tools keep increasing. For working adults, taking online instead of in-person courses has an economic benefit. Online education also fosters a global knowledge society, international partnerships, and content sharing and regional collaboration among universities. It reaches out to refugees and prisoners, expanding the service mission of universities. In countries where higher education is weighed down by massification, online education may be part of the solution for increasing access. And now, online education is being used to circumvent in-person meetings out of fear of contamination from the coronavirus.

Challenges of Online Education

Delivering education online has been adopted by almost all universities around the world at different paces, ranging from the off-line, drop-and-go model to highly intensive, well-structured, and fully online programs. Yet, some challenges are still getting in the way of e-learning in higher education. At African universities, these are mostly relating to connectivity issues, lack of infrastructure, and cost of data, while in Asian countries, such as India and China, the most serious challenges are financial costs, regulations, the digital gap, and the cultural leap for teachers. In Europe, the main obstacles are students' self-motivation and self-organization skills in fully online educational settings. And there is a common misperception that teaching or taking courses online might be less demanding than face-to-face courses. Keeping up with the technology and getting faculty to adapt to the cultural change are seen as the main difficulties at North American and Australian universities. In Latin America, the obstacles are achieving a higher level of engagement among students and ensuring course quality. Without pretending to be exhaustive, this list helps explain the reluctance to online higher education at universities around the world—but progress is inevitable and becoming faster.

Short-Term and Long-Term Implications of the Online Shift

With the COVID-19 pandemic, all these challenges are hampering universities' efforts to shift online. A panel discussion hosted on March 20, 2020 by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* described the current endeavor of faculty rushing to develop courses online as "drinking out of a fire hose."

While this mandatory move online has taken higher education by surprise, the debate should not focus on the opposition between optimists and skeptics. (Optimists think that online education will become mainstream in higher education. Skeptics are doubtful that online education will play any major role in the future of higher education.) In the short term, the question might rather be how to make online education as good and reliable as possible, to maximize the quality of teaching and learning experiences and the level of satisfaction of all users, while it is the only option available for higher education. In the longer term, when the situation returns to normalcy, HEIs might consider including online education as part of their regular pedagogical offer. Making it mandatory for students to take some courses entirely online, as a few conventional universities are already doing, can be a starting point. For universities, following this path is in line with the prevailing digital culture in our society. The growth of online education over the past decade indicates an increasing structural shift for HEIs, and not in the sense of a replacement of on-campus education. Whether to achieve blended learning for on-campus students, or to offer fully online programs for distant learners, efforts should be encouraged to identify best practices, integrate new and emerging technologies, stimulate faculty to be nimbler and more willing to use these tools, turn conventional universities into bimodal institutions, and make access to online education more affordable, convenient, and engaging to learners from all walks of life.

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The current crisis indicates that strengthening online education contributes to increasing public safety and public health. In this regard, governments should be encouraged to make it more affordable and invest in universities' online capacity building, in order to protect the higher education sector in times of social uncertainties and global emergencies. ◢