

Abstract

In response to COVID-19, Italy was the first European country to close its universities and switch entirely to online education. This has turned into an unprecedented national experiment that is highlighting the challenges and opportunities of online education in a system with only limited prior experience.

There Is Opportunity in Crisis: Will Italian Universities Seize It?

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In the early phase of the coronavirus epidemic, when travel restrictions began to take effect, international mobility was the first preoccupation of Italian universities. International offices focused on returning Italian students stranded abroad and ensuring that international students could get home or were safe. This was followed by the suspension, postponement, rescheduling, and cancellation of international projects. The crisis spread quickly and Italy was the first country in Europe to suspend classroom instruction, moving all its teaching activities online. As many Italian universities had largely disregarded the opportunities of online provision, this was uncharted territory.

A National Online Experiment

The switch happened suddenly. Decisions that would normally have taken months were made overnight. At the institutional level, online platforms were identified and training for staff and students provided. At the national level, funding was identified to ensure all students had access. Decisions were made swiftly to ensure that the academic calendar could continue as planned.

As the semester unfolded, classes were underway, tutoring and counseling services were in place, and thesis discussions took place—all online. Academic staff learnt overnight how to move from the physical to the virtual classroom; how to livestream or narrate slides; and how to use chatrooms and polling functions to engage their students and find creative ways to provide a positive learning experience. Administrative teams worked tirelessly to support academic staff. University leaders developed new communication strategies making full use of social media, to ensure everyone was informed and reassured. There were emotional scenes as student doctors and nurses graduated and headed straight to emergency centers to deal with coronavirus victims, in a country that had become the European epicenter of the pandemic.

Was this business as usual? No. The transition to online learning—from a marginal to a mainstream academic activity—happened practically overnight. Even in normal times, this would be a complex endeavor requiring significant planning, resources, and training. Many Italian universities did not have the technological capacity, the academic expertise, or the experience to teach online effectively. Teachers reported feeling overwhelmed and underprepared. They struggled to adapt from in-person teaching and the demands of the online classroom. Workloads were heavier. Students were not always as comfortable as expected. They too needed time to adapt. Many perceived virtual learning as limiting and constraining. Those who have not adapted, have struggled. For them, online learning has been a poor substitute for the classroom experience.

Of course, there is nothing new in this. Online learning has been around for at least 20 years and, as both the pedagogy and technology have advanced, it has developed a unique and rich academic environment that is distinct from traditional forms of academic activity and, in some respects, better. Well-designed online learning is interactive and student centered. It is more flexible and accessible. A combination of face-to-face provision and online (blended) materials serves traditional learners well and offers the opportunity of personalized learning pathways. The days of videotaping traditional classroom lectures and posting links on institutional websites are long gone.

Policy Change Leads to Behavioral Change

Until this crisis, it had been possible for the higher education sector to acknowledge the potential benefits of online education, yet continue with traditional learning and teaching as if online did not exist. The coronavirus epidemic has changed all that. It has

forced engagement with online learning and related technology in a way that had previously been optional. The effects have been extraordinary. The crisis has broken down many of the societal, institutional, organizational, and personal barriers that have often precluded effective cooperation. Social distancing and self-isolation restrictions have forced people to work to ensure that they do not become professionally and intellectually isolated. Italian universities have adapted rapidly, discovering new ways of communication and collaboration. Virtual communities have been established across organizations, groups, and activities that never considered them until now. Many may prove to be more effective than when they inhabited physical spaces.

The crisis has affected behaviors more widely. People have united in the face of adversity, pulling together to offer encouragement and assistance. Teachers are helping teachers. Students are helping students. Teachers are acting as role models for students who despair, encouraging them to reflect on how they can learn in a crisis. They are doing so via a variety of social media platforms. Even those with less experience are acquiring new skills, discovering new ways of learning, cooperating, and building a sense of community. Management teams are communicating regularly to coordinate, inform, and reassure. Remote working and digital meetings are suddenly not just a marginal part of the working week, but are the principal means through which it is conducted.

A potential cultural shift is underway—one that should be captured and cultivated. In the depths of this crisis there lies a huge opportunity. A massive and unprecedented online learning experience is taking place across the entire higher education system, indeed the whole of society. It has the potential to bring institutional, sector-wide, perhaps even societal, improvement. The question is, can we seize it?

There Is a Future—And We Are Free to Write It

As we write, questions remain about how course assessments will be carried out in Italy, a system that relies heavily on individual oral exams over several weeks. It is not known whether any universities will reopen before the end of this academic year or whether they will even be able to reopen as normal after the summer.

Yet, the foundations of new models are often set during the darkest days of any crisis, so it is worth thinking about how the future will be affected by our current experiences. Many will want simply to go back to the *status quo ante*. However, the explosion in the use of online and virtual learning environments, and the associated shift in attitudes and behaviors, mean that even if this is desirable, it is not possible, in Italy or elsewhere.

In the foreseeable future, with many students choosing to stay home or postponing plans to study abroad, online learning will continue to offer competitive advantages to institutions with a strong focus on international mobility and/or a high dependence on international student recruitment. These advantages will be better understood and more widely appreciated. The coronavirus epidemic has shown how fragile our world is; how global problems need global solutions; and how cooperation and solidarity are more important than ever. It has also demonstrated how technology can promote learning, community building, and cooperation and how technology can improve our universities and make them stronger partners in society.

As we look still wider to the challenges of the environment and the need to communicate and collaborate more effectively while traveling less, an online approach to internationalization will represent a valid alternative for many—both short- and long-term—one with which they are now familiar. In the end, we may look back on this awful time as the moment when we, as advocates of internationalization in the higher education sector and society more generally, fully, and finally, embraced the potential of online education and collaboration. ▲

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