

The Argentine University against COVID-19: Old and New Discussions in an Unforeseen Reality

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 quarantine, old and new discussions emerged regarding virtual higher education. Under the current state of emergency, the University of Buenos Aires has postponed the start of the academic year from April to June out of concern for quality and social responsibility. Meanwhile, the vast majority of higher education institutions keeps supporting the right to education through distance teaching.

Since the beginning of the year, Argentina, like other countries in the Americas, has been witnessing the relentless spread of the COVID-19 virus throughout Asia and Europe. The first confirmed case of coronavirus in the country occurred on March 3, and the first death, ten days later. On March 20, the government issued a decree ordering “preventive and compulsory social isolation” for the entire population, suspending all nonessential activities as well as all domestic and international travel and transportation, and closing the country’s borders.

Universities have become leading players in the fight against COVID-19, acting within the framework of their social mission in multiple ways. For instance, they recruit volunteers to assist passengers arriving from international flights who must comply with a mandatory quarantine in hotels. These volunteers also help pack food that students usually consume in university dining halls for free or at low prices, and they give support to elderly living alone. Many institutions are contributing to the production of items in short supply, such as alcohol-based hand sanitizer and masks, and, in some cases, they participate in the production of respirators and hospital conditioning. University hospitals also carry out tests to diagnose the disease.

Most universities are working against the clock to ensure that their virtual platforms are set up for the courses scheduled for the first semester of the year, supporting teachers and evaluating options so that no student is left out because of limited means or technological capabilities. Several already have online classes under way or have even organized online dissertation defenses.

Argentina's Advantage in Distance Education

Argentina has a background that sets it apart from other countries in the region with regard to distance university education. This form of education began to expand at a fast pace at the turn of the century, with several universities at the vanguard of developments. In 2017, the university sector reached sufficient maturity to agree on a legal framework for distance education, based on quality standards, and establishing distance education on equal terms with face-to-face education. The Council of Universities, which represents all university institutions in the country, worked together with the Office of University Policies (SPU) on a regulatory framework specifying quality requirements for distance education. Since then, each institution offering full or partial distance education programs has had to set up its own Institutional Distance Education System, which in turn must be validated by the SPU based on a favorable evaluation by the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation. In addition, each of these programs must be evaluated individually. The process implies that universities offering distance education programs must document how they organize themselves in terms of functional structure, technological infrastructure, specialized human resources, teacher training strategies, and research activity on this type of education.

These regulations are specific to online programs, which at most universities represent only a small portion of the total academic offering. Although it would be a mistake to expect that all courses programmed for the first semester of 2020 may transit to a virtual format overnight, the university system—unlike elementary or high school systems—is well prepared, on a structural level, to face these kinds of contingencies. There is a wealth of experience in distance learning that is currently being used to full advantage.

Yet, individual teachers face a heavy challenge when preparing virtual classes in record time and with different levels of institutional support. For many, the amount of work required is considerable, because of scheduling and lack of pedagogical experience. They have to “learn on the go.” For some, this is a good thing, whereas others struggle. In many cases, experienced educators work alongside young teachers, combining different types of knowledge.

Emerging Arguments against Virtual Education

Following a decision to extend the quarantine, old and new discussions began to emerge, with brand new arguments arising against virtual education, in addition to the traditional ones advocating that face-to-face teaching is irreplaceable. Working conditions for educators at home or lack of experience are arguments used by some unions to claim that it would be best to wait for the situation to normalize rather than offer low-quality teaching. The inequity of technology-mediated education is also a common issue, since many students do not have the means to access it.

Recently, the University of Buenos Aires, one of the main universities in the country in terms of history, number of students, and international recognition, established a new academic calendar postponing the start of the semester from April to June. While acknowledging that each faculty (school) can establish virtual modalities in line with the characteristics of its programs, the university passed a regulation whereby attendance to face-to-face classes is the only authorized option, citing social responsibility and quality concerns. Meanwhile, the vast majority of public and private universities approved virtual classes as a means to sustain academic activity throughout the quarantine period.

It is important to highlight what each university can do, according to its means and possibilities, to ensure the right to education, in a situation where nothing is as it was and where it is crucial to maintain a pedagogical offer. In an unexpected moment of isolation, universities cannot afford to be absent. Moving forward, it is likely that, when activities go back to normal, a seed of change will have been sown. A change that will grow

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from the experience of each of those key actors during this unexpected and exceptional period: students, teachers, and institutions. ▲