

Responding to COVID-19 with IT: A Transformative Moment?

Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit

With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the world's universities have had to close campuses and send their students home. The large majority have shifted to distance education in its various forms to allow classes to continue and students to complete their studies. Teachers and students alike have had to make considerable efforts to adjust. Information technology (IT) specialists at universities around the world have been in crisis mode and have done a remarkable job migrating many courses and programs online, at least to a reasonable extent. The online industry is bombarding institutions and their teachers with tools, training modules, and other products. At least for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis, higher education is being forcibly transformed, with private providers hawking business models and IT evangelists heralding the revolution.

But questions must be asked: Is the distance revolution working, and are we in a “transformative moment”? While data is largely lacking, the answers to both of these questions are still open, but likely mostly negative. It is worth speculating on what seem to be relevant realities and trends, and possible future scenarios. We are aware that these observations are preliminary and based mainly on observational data. Nonetheless, it is worth pondering key points.

Inequalities

Without question, there are massive inequalities in the provision of higher education through distance education. This is true for countries, universities, and the academic community. There are significant variations in how distance education is received. In many lower-income countries, broadband is inadequate, spotty, or even largely absent. Reliable electricity is a problem. These issues are also problematic in some rural areas of rich countries. Many students, especially in lower-income countries and from less well-off families everywhere, do not have access to appropriate computers—efforts to use smartphones for instruction have been challenging. Less well-endowed universities in general have not developed the technical, curricular, or other infrastructure necessary for quality distance education. This is especially true for the burgeoning private higher education sector, which now accounts for perhaps half of global enrollments. Further, there are security as well as politically motivated firewalls limiting access for groups of students and teachers.

Students

Students do not seem to be enthusiastic about the online courses that they are now forced to take. While data is only indicative, students seem to be unsatisfied overall. And they are more likely to avoid participating. This is the case, in particular, for undergraduate education, the level least familiar with online delivery but also where students prefer and need more interaction with their teachers and other students. This general unhappiness may be the result of courses having suddenly been moved online with little preparation either by professors or students. The lack of motivation of students for online delivery will become an issue with the cohort planning to enter higher education this fall. There are fears that many will postpone starting their studies as long as institutions only offer online instruction. This is particularly likely for international students.

Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, higher education is being forcibly transformed. But questions must be asked: Is the distance revolution working, and are we in a “transformative moment”? Today, distance education is ubiquitous—of necessity. However, it is not necessarily very successful. Most probably, hybrid or blended education, will expand. Just as MOOCs, a decade or so ago, did not produce the educational revolution that many predicted, today's massive and hurried shift to distance education will not either.

Faculty

Faculty members are generally wary about teaching online. Before COVID-19, a significant minority in some countries had some experience with online teaching, but it is fair to say that the large majority did not, despite pressure in many universities to offer online courses. The COVID-19 crisis threw all faculty suddenly into the deep end of the online swimming pool, with no preparation. IT professionals and online experts have provided crash courses for faculty. Although most are trying, faculty of a certain age (still a majority of the faculty) lack both experience and confidence to learn new and highly unfamiliar methods and technologies. The fact is that developing high-quality online courses requires skill, new ways of thinking about pedagogy, and money. In the current rush to quickly adapt to distance requirements, these are all in short supply. Further, most academics say that distance teaching requires more time than face-to-face instruction, with no improvement in the outcomes and with less satisfaction.

Inappropriateness

Of course, a significant number of courses and subjects do not lend themselves well to distance education—or, at the very least, a great deal of ingenuity and resources are required. Obviously, laboratory-based courses in the sciences are at the top of the problematic list. Students need to use chemicals, conduct experiments, and in general get the feeling of lab work. Subjects in the humanities such as dance, music, and drama do not lend themselves either to online instruction.

The Community of Scholars—or Lack Thereof

Large traditional undergraduate lecture courses do not lend themselves to deep intellectual pursuits, yet when linked to good discussion groups, they can be quite effective. A common complaint is that most distance courses do not easily cater for group work, community building, or much communication either among students or between students and faculty. Again, there are new technological tools as well as pedagogical innovations that can assist, but these are often unavailable or require significant investment by faculty.

Exams

A major problem is how to examine students. Written assignments can be done online, as well as theses, including their presentations and defenses. But in the case of exams (the most common form of assessment, in particular at the undergraduate level and for large cohorts), there are concerns about fraud but also about privacy (through use of software to check online dishonesty during exams). According to the Dutch Student Union, there is serious concern about the use of algorithms by Google, Facebook, and the leading European provider ProctorExam. If students are denied permission by the software, they will be unable to take their exams and will be delayed in their studies.

Opportunities

This discussion does not imply that the sudden rise in online education is entirely negative. There are opportunities as well, depending on how institutions make use of the accumulated experience. The use of IT in teaching and learning and in research can become a more integrated part of our work. Faculty can partner with colleagues abroad to provide guest lectures by experts who before were only available through textbooks, thereby widening the scope of the curriculum. As we and others have advocated for years, Collaborative Online International Learning, Internationalization at Home, and Internationalization of the Curriculum are alternatives to study abroad, but require leadership commitment, strategic planning, robust pedagogical support, funding, and time: They cannot be improvised.

A Murky Future

Today, distance education is ubiquitous—of necessity. But it is not necessarily very successful. There is already evidence that many undergraduate students are unhappy about completing their semester using distance education. Completion rates will likely suffer. For many reasons, undergraduate students prefer on-campus education. Most probably,

Today, distance education is ubiquitous—of necessity. But it is not necessarily very successful.

though, hybrid or blended education (distance courses integrated in campus-based programs), already common in many countries, will expand. Master's degree programs already widely using online courses, especially in professional fields such as business and management, are likely to expand in scope and number. But just as MOOCs, a decade or so ago, did not produce the educational revolution that many predicted, today's massive and hurried shift to distance education will not either. Hopefully, though, it will lead to an improvement in the quality and sophistication of courses and programs by integrating the online dimension. ▲

Philip G. Altbach is research professor and founding director, and Hans de Wit is professor and director, Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, US. E-mails: altbach@bc.edu and dewitj@bc.edu.