



In collaboration with



Conference Report

Higher Education in the Time of COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities of Online Learning

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Professors Without Borders hosted an **online conference on Friday 26 June on Higher Education in the Time of COVID-19**. The panellists examined the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning experiences within global higher education. The conference provided an open forum for educators and students to explain their approaches to dealing with rapid changes in their educational experiences and the knock-on impact of the pandemic in their countries.

As Coronavirus spread around the globe in early 2020, universities across the world retreated behind the screens as higher education moved online. This provided an opportunity to discover the joys of technology for some, a gruelling and impersonal experience for others, and something in between for most of us.

According to a World Economic Forum article “Some 1.5 billion students have been impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic leaving close to 90% of all primary, secondary and tertiary learners in the world no longer able to physically go to school.” The Higher Education in the Time of COVID-19 Conference brought together lecturers and students from around the world to share their challenges and share experiences that each have faced in adapting to a new teaching environment.

The conference featured **12 guests from around the world**. Seven educators spoke on panel one - **Moving Higher Education Online: pitfalls and opportunities for teachers**; and five university students spoke on panel two: Learning Online: adaptation strategies from students. Tessa de Nassau Co-founder and Trustee at Professors Without Borders opened the conference with an inspirational speech about teaching and learning during a pandemic.

2.0 PANEL 1. Moving Higher Education Online: pitfalls and opportunities for teachers

Dr Caroline Varin CEO at Professors Without Borders moderated the first panel and introduced the **international panellist of educators from around the world** to the audience.

Starting with a **Latin American perspective**, Dr Oscar Palma, Professor of International Relations at Rosario University Colombia outlined three main challenges faced in delivering online classes. **Technological challenges, the holistic health of students, and the state of the education model were the main obstacles to moving higher education online**. Dr Palma explained that internet coverage in Latin America is not as wide and reachable, especially in small towns. Therefore many students were unable to access materials that the university intended to provide during the COVID-19 response. Students who study in cities went back to their home villages to be with family, making access to the internet a challenge. Students who do have access to the internet at home reported it was slow as all household members are connected, making it difficult to engage in online classes. Dr Palma also shed light on **students’ emotional**,

mental and physical health due to COVID restrictions. He stated that students felt anxious due to the uncertainty surrounding their social life, relationships, and educational outcomes while cut-off from their friends. Furthermore, domestic abuse in the home has increased, leaving some students having to cope with a double burden of stress in the home that is not conducive to study.

Finally, Dr Palma explained the education model used in Latin America that fails to promote self-education among students and leads them to depend on their educators. This model does not support the transition to online learning for two reasons; the limited access students currently have with their lecturers and prolonged screen time as most lecturers continue the same teaching load using video communications, leading to technology fatigue. Students at Dr Palma's university are assigned seven to eight courses per semester, with each course equating to three to four hours a week. This led to unintended consequences such as students suffering from nausea and peripheral vertigo and to dizziness and headaches after constant PC usage. Dr Palma concluded by sharing some strategies he had used to improve interaction with students using social media (WhatsApp), focus groups, physical activities and break up groups. He highlighted the use of online guest lectures, which students have particularly appreciated, and the importance of training lecturers in online teaching with an emphasis on pedagogical approaches.

Dr George Richards from Edinboro University USA explained that he teaches 143 students and has had experience teaching online for 20 years, meaning his transition to online teaching went smoothly compared to other educators. The main challenge, however, was ensuring that faculty members were adequately trained especially to those who were reluctant to teach online. Dr Richards stated that excellent technological support was provided by his institution, as students received iPads to study online. A key point Dr Richards mentioned was the **challenges supporting students with special needs** as they required assistance to read and complete online tasks. The risk of seizures was also heightened due to the prolonged time using PCs. Mature students who are also parents found themselves with less time as schools closed, leaving the burden of childcare and teaching on the family. Dr Richards enabled students to upload assignments in a variety of methods such as videos through assignment dropboxes, which provided much-needed flexibility. He stressed **the importance of harmonising the online teaching experience across faculties and universities, to manage student expectations and ensure quality teaching.** Finally, Dr Richards emphasised the importance of maintaining a constant sense of community in the class for students. He maintained that by writing to each student with bespoke messages, including how to improve with assignments, motivation and encouragements. Dr Richards believes that through continuous communication, the students know that he is there even without physical contact. Edinboro University is returning to face to face teaching in the fall, but all faculty members must be ready to pivot online within 24 hours.

Chandni Hirani, a lecturer at the African Leadership University (ALU) in Rwanda, explained that her university faced multiple challenges. Half of ALU's students come from countries around Africa, and the priority was to get students back to their home countries as lockdown

restrictions were introduced. The primary form of conducting classes online was through sharing materials and video communications. However, **some students faced obstacles with internet accessibility**. As a solution, some Rwandan students went to a local internet café just for 30 minutes to get internet access, but again this does not prove sufficient to complete tasks set by lecturers. This solution was useless to students in countries with stricter lockdowns as internet café were inaccessible. Considerable difficulty was faced by those who do not own or have access to a PC. To address the imbalance of students with and without internet access, ALU tried to compile a list of students without internet access and offer them free internet bundles. Despite the university's best effort, an accurate list was hard to obtain as those without internet access were unable to contact the university, leaving them stranded.

On the other hand, Ms Hirani commended the adaptable education model of the university, which made the transition easy as **online learning is composed of student-led models rather than faculty-led**. She highlighted **the importance of moving offline for the students' wellbeing** and assigning work that was more hands-on and less lecture-based. Synchronised online learning across the university is necessary to improve the student experience and set a common standard of teaching. In Rwanda, education institutions must have accreditation by the higher education council to teach online, which proved a challenge for many. Ms Hirani explained that ALU would be approaching the council for the required license as they expect blended learning to continue. Finally, she explained that within her faculty, the grading system has changed from GPA to a pass or fail with flexible submission dates. This change is to benefit all students rather than undermining those who do not have internet or cannot access resources.

Dr Sipim Sornbanlang, a senior lecturer at Srinikarinwirot University Thailand, explained how the impacts of COVID-19 was felt much earlier in Thailand as they had their first case in January 2020. As a result, the shift to online teaching was conducted before the rest of the world. The main challenge with this shift arose as many university educators were only familiar with in-person teaching and found online systems challenging. While students were initially excited for the online transition, this wore off as they started to experience difficulties. Mainly due to prolonged teaching time, loss of focus and dealing with distractions from home or social media.

Moreover, **Dr Sornbanlang highlighted the environmental challenges to online learning in Thailand** as it is a hot country and students without air-conditioning access at home had difficulty concentrating. **A new form of teaching was developed by teaching staff** to combat some of the challenges. A one hour class divided into two 30 minutes session one for direct teaching and another for student discussions. This new method helped to foster community as students had complained about lack of connection between friends since lockdown. The professors equally felt these challenges as three hours of online teaching proved more exhausting than in person and was particularly difficult for those with childcare responsibilities. At SWU, teachers are responsible for 8 courses with 5 assignments in each module. **As educators were teaching from home, they felt students and university administrator expected 24/7 availability**. To ease the challenges of distance learning, SWU provided delivery service for

library materials to both staff and students. Moreover, the university provided electric devices for students to use and purchased Zoom and Microsoft Teams licenses. Although initially, educators used different applications requiring students to download multiple software. Other universities in Thailand also offered students means to free internet access. Dr Sornbanlang concluded by **encouraging the use of pre-recorded lectures, which facilitate comprehension and enable flexibility for both students and professors**. Uploading those lectures to a platform familiar to students such as Facebook can encourage greater reach.

Professor Folasade T Ogunsola provost of the College of Medicine at the University of Lagos Nigeria explained that although there were plans for the university to upload classes and programmes online before lockdown, there was limited capacity to do so at the time. COVID-19 accelerated the decision to upload all materials online; however, there were limitations. Some classes were easier to move online compared to others, such as Dentistry that require hands-on practice. Additionally, some senior faculty members showed resistance to online teaching. While those who depend on the classroom dynamics to draw inspiration found online teaching isolating and **the exhausting time spent online led to a new feeling of being 'Zoomed out'**. Therefore, finding ways to make classes interactive is crucial to move higher education online successfully. Professor Ogunsola highlighted **a significant obstacle to distance learning in Nigeria, which is 'epileptic electricity'** meaning an unreliable provision of electricity that hinders online access. Some students live in areas without electricity or even bandwidth where speech during calls, lectures or catch-ups with staff came out garbled. The university thankfully had a robust online library before the start of the pandemic; however, books are usually difficult to access in Nigeria, especially to those disconnected from the internet.

Professor Ogunsola lauded the opportunities for innovation and implementation of new ideas that benefitted the university. For example, the **'democratisation of education'** provided the opportunity to tap into international networks that allowed students to attend Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and interact with online guest lecturers. She was also encouraged by the financial support of private organisations in Nigeria, ready to help the university move online. **People want to help**. Finally, the entire higher education sector has adapted to a new academic calendar with holidays lost to ensure students can graduate prepared for their professional lives.

Professor Dries Velthuis from the University of South Africa, the second biggest distance learning institution in the Southern hemisphere, explained **the difficulty COVID-19 lockdown imposed even at an experienced distance learning institution**. Administrative support for staff was limited, as many did not have the right tools to work remotely. The motivation of students became a problem, and the general appetite for online learning, which is already quite specific, was tested by the overload of life online. **Professor Velthuis asked educators to think about the necessity of immediacy**. Conferences are not always necessary and can often be replaced by pre-recorded lectures. Assignments need to be convenient. Students, especially undergraduates, need to talk as reading is not enough to stimulate reflection and debate.

Flexibility and adaptability are critical to a successful learning experience. Nonetheless, students faced particular problems in this crisis. Doctoral students could not pursue field research. Mature students with childcare responsibilities no longer had time for their studies. The theft of electricity cables, a real problem in many parts of the world, became a disruptive force freezing all communication. Many students faced financial uncertainty as jobs disappeared, further limiting their access to resources and heightening anxiety regarding the future. In conclusion, **Professor Velthuisen pointed out that remote emergency learning is not the same as online education.** There is a need to connect people moving forward, including researchers, re-prioritise investments in teaching, and expand the higher education community of practice.

Concluding the panel was Dr Andrew Bell, a lecturer at Oxford University. He started by **acknowledging his privileges as a lecturer in an elite UK institution with vast resources at his disposal.** In the UK the lockdown occurred between term cycles, allowing for faculty to prepare their new term online. Certain vocational degrees like Medicine and Engineering proved to be more challenging to conduct online, as practical labs were cancelled. Other assignments were adapted to computer-based exercises. Some students had issues downloading and installing relevant software, but most of them completed assigned tasks. One of the major obstacles, according to Dr Bell, was **how to maintain student engagement and foster direct interaction with teaching staff via this new means of working.**

Furthermore, he stressed the increased demands on faculty time, the more substantial burden of work with online teaching, and **the expectation that teachers had to be available at all hours.** Overall, Dr Bell's teaching experience seemed to improve over time, and he noted increased enthusiasm from his students. He acknowledged that online teaching is integral to 21st Century higher education and questioned the use of large lectures. Nonetheless, **online teaching may create new challenges for teaching students with special needs and requires more interaction.** One impact the COVID crisis will undoubtedly have will be to force a rethink of what the typical higher education experience comprises.

3.0 PANEL 2. Online Learning: adaptation strategies from students

Rachel Warnick, Trustee for Professors Without Borders, moderated the second panel where students shared their experiences with online learning.

Offering a northern perspective, Victor Warlop from the Technical University of Denmark discussed the impact of lab closures on his studies. As a final year student conducting scientific research for his thesis, he had to transform his practical research into a theoretical study and bemoaned the lack of supervision and teaching support. He agreed that his online courses were overall excellent, mainly as his peers all **had access to the internet with clear camera and**

audio able to engage in an online classroom successfully. Despite being shy at first, he said the online classes ended up being some of the most interactive ever. Professors were flexible as they recorded lectures for everyone to study at their own pace, created study cafes and offered adapted assignments. **One advantage of pre-recorded online classes is the ability for students to increase or decrease the tempo**, according to their needs, meaning that a 4-hour lecture can be condensed into one. On the other hand, **there was a need for more self-discipline and motivation for the students**, which was not always easy. Despite teamwork being disrupted, lack of IT support from the university and the lack of access to necessary equipment, Mr Warlop was positive about the overall experience and is eager to start his master's degree at Stanford University in the fall. Starting a new program during a pandemic presents new challenges such as lack of information and uncertainty around travel and student migration in the fall semester.

Kaustubh Dighe a student at Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law (RGNUL), India **highlighted the cultural barriers to education starting with the struggles of accessibility to internet in India**, which needs to be factored in when institutions are making decisions for the next semester. RGNUL was able to address this by providing internet packs and laptops to students or reimburse the costs. He found that engaging with online lectures is challenging, as the lesson was purely didactic with no discussion. Mr Dighe explained that for those with introverted personalities, the concept of engaging with lectures online had been a daunting task, as they would prefer to meet the professor in a private setting. Besides, the **lack of assessments** hinders teachers from knowing their students' needs and ability to adapt classes accordingly. MOOCs are unable to close the learning gap as they did not target all students. Moreover, Mr Dighe pointed out the problem of technology overload, which occurs after prolonged internet usage. He further bemoaned the **unfortunate turn in the cancellation or postponement of internships and work placements that students had lined up before the start of COVID-19**. Students have expressed fears that these events potentially hinder their career progress, especially law students like Mr Dighe for whom in-court experiences shape their future opportunities. Many of his peers have adapted by participating in research initiatives or writing blogs. Mr Dighe concluded that **the traditional education system in India was trying to adapt to online learning**, but had yet to make the pedagogical leap necessary for students to thrive in their academic pursuits.

Adamou Boubacar from the African Leadership University (ALU) in Rwanda highlighted similar points as other panellists with regards to the disadvantages of online education. He believes that humans are highly sociable, and it is the communication and community that makes education valuable. Mr Boubacar pointed out that there was no longer a social life, **just a social media life for students living through this pandemic**. The best parts of education include networking and building social skills, which he and his peers are missing. To make matters worse, poor internet connection for many students negatively affected their learning experience as they cannot interact with their teachers. Lessons were recorded and uploaded to a video

hosting platform like YouTube to address this matter. Half of the students at ALU are not Rwandan and had to return to their respective countries at the start of lockdown. This made accessing lectures challenging as students were scattered across different time zones, and had to log into scheduled classes. Living at home with plenty of distractions, such as family problems and constant social media exacerbated the problem. **Students have less energy when they work online, are less organised and productive.** He recommended that students find a place to focus, create a schedule and get sleep.

The pandemic increased economic concerns amongst students, as many have lost their jobs or internships. It was especially hard for non-Rwandan students who could not return home and therefore had to pay for accommodation. Internet bundles created an additional expense which only exacerbated when students have to access videos, as it uses more data. On the other hand, the online resources were ampler than on campus, thanks to the efforts of the university. Mr Boubacar gave credit to his teachers for making classes interactive through the use of case studies but stressed the need for more small assessment tools such as quizzes, multiple-choice and other outlets to keep students engaged.

Njomeza Blakcori from University College London (UCL) in the UK explained that her experience of online learning was positive and ‘seamless’ with lectures being pre-recorded. She also mentioned that there was a **familiarity across the student body and staff of how to use online facilities and services as it already featured within the student experience at UCL before lockdown.** This included library facilities, assignment submissions and lectures that moved online. Ms Blakcori also mentioned that interaction between students was harder to facilitate and that group work was not always possible, making it harder for those who prefer to work in teams. Moreover, Ms Blakcori spoke about the **evident heightened socio-economic divide during the lockdown** as more affluent students would have found it easier to study. Due to privileges afforded to them such as secure internet connection, financial stability and stable home environments, whereas other students may have had to take on the role of a full-time carer. UCL provided laptops and bursaries for students who needed financial support and kept the student centre open for displaced students. On the other hand, labs were cancelled, and wellbeing services for students were not readily available. **Ms Blakcori concluded by questioning the value of traditional degrees and the future of educational institutions.** With students already having few contact hours at university, was it still worth commuting to university or preferable and cheaper to live at home and study remotely?

The final speaker Chidi Nwogbaga from the University of Pennsylvania in the USA agreed with other students that online learning was a jarring experience. The lockdown fell during spring break, and students could not return to campus. Mr Nwogbaga gave credit to the university for enabling lecturing online and appreciated the sense of independence that came with the accessibility of online education, as well as noting his ever-growing dependence on technology.

Nonetheless, **time was lost when professors could not access the live chat room, and some courses simply cannot be done online.** Mr Nwogbaga explained that he felt **supported through by his college house, with graduate students available for chats, online counselling provided by the university,** accommodating professors and the availability of resources. He explained that it was nice to know that events were happening online, as they gave a feeling of normality, even if people did not attend physically. Mr Nwogbaga went on to **question the economic value of books, especially as library facilities were moved online,** which could contribute to fewer physical books being produced in the future. He **concluded by encouraging a move to more online meetings and fewer mass lectures,** as this would personalise the digital learning experience.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Dr Varin brought the conference to a close, pointing out that the COVID-19 crisis will be a defining experience for this generation and transform higher education. By inviting students and professionals to share their experience, teachers and learners have all gained critical insight that will help design improved programmes for the 2020-21 online academic year.

Professors Without Borders would like to thank all panellists for sharing their time and experience with our audiences and contributing to the betterment of higher education globally.