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**The Impact of COVID-19 on the Higher Education Sector:
Challenges and Opportunities**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has provoked a sudden and disruptive shift to remote and distance learning in the Higher Education Sector. The latter encompasses many complex elements that necessitate careful design and development to endorse a productive education outcome.

This short reflection discusses the impact of the pandemic on the Higher Education Sector in general, shedding the light on the main challenges and opportunities induced by the shift to online education.

Keywords: COVID-19, Higher Education Sector, Distance Learning, Online Education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has fashioned the prevalent disruption of traditional educational systems and practices in human history, provoking a sudden shift to remote and distance learning in the Higher Education Sector (HES), affecting billions of students worldwide (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021) with

lockdowns, and closures of schools and Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Hence, the need to innovate, originate, and incorporate alternative tools has arisen with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, the latter has provided HEI with a rare opportunity to introducing a paradigm shift through digital learning (Dhawan, 2020) by means of various online platforms, distance (online) education and E-learning tools.

Regardless of the colossal challenges faced by both educators and students, these technologies have become a remedy and a savior to HEI, facilitating student learning during the lockdown phases (Subedi et al., 2020). In reality, switching from conventional face-to-face learning to online education depends on HEI's size (to develop a suitable institutional approach), governance models, and disciplinary differences (lab work, practical experiences...), according to the International Association of Universities (2020); and also varies between related stakeholders (students, professors, academics, etc.) who have to adapt to the current situation with little or no other alternatives available.

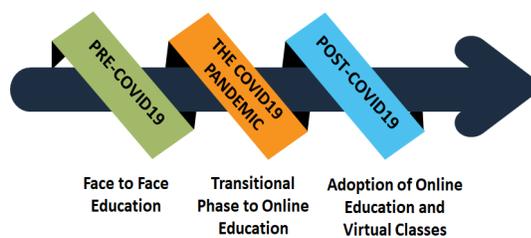


Fig1. The shift to online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the World Economic Forum (2020), the market for online education is projected to reach US \$350 Billion by 2025 due to the pandemic; indeed, with the shift to digital learning, technological platforms (Amazon Web Services Cloud, Azure Cloud, Ali Baba Cloud, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc.) have witnessed a remarkable growth, as shown in figure 2 below.



Fig2. Percentage growth of technological tools with the shift to online education in the first months of the Covid-19 lockdowns (Mendoza, 2020).

In this context, the extent to which HEI stakeholders are prepared to embrace, adopt, and use these technological tools in their online learning activities has been tested (Allam et al., 2020). Consequently, and taking into consideration that the HEI's systems encompass many complex elements that necessitate careful design and development in order to endorse a productive education outcome (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021), what are the main challenges and opportunities of such a COVID-19 induced shift to online education?

What are the main challenges for HEI resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic induced shift to online education?

Many authors have identified challenges of e-learning and online education; from accessibility, affordability, pedagogy, educational policy, connectivity, and internet reliability in various countries (Murgatrotd, 2020), to the drop of students' academic performance's level due to reduced contact hour and lack of teachers' consultation with regard to difficulties in learning/understanding (Sintema, 2020), and to uncertainty, doubt, and confusion among all stakeholders (teachers, students, and parents) vis-à-vis the adopted approach to conduct online exams and assessments, with a lot of trial and error that depends on the educators' expertise and students' compatibility (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021).

In fact, aside from being entertaining, university time improves social skills and awareness, whereas university closures increased families' dependence on technological solutions in order to keep students involved in the learning process, while entertained and connected to the outside world, without the proper means and

skills to keep themselves safe online (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021).

Nyer (2019), compared university students' learning outcomes in a study across various lectures modes: the first one used the conventional face-to-face lectures, while the second was based on online instruction using either a video recording of the classroom lesson, or an edited static transcript of the classroom lecture; he concluded that the second mode of online instruction scored lower than the traditional mode.

Furthermore, the University World News, (2021) stated that many countries have recorded several emerging issues due to online learning which affected its outcome and efficiency; these issues, whether scarce available hardware (laptops, tablets...) for student to use at home, or the difficulty to move courses to an online version especially those related to lab work and experimentation, coupled with lack of experience and skills of both instructors (for online teaching, student assessment, and motivation etc.) and students (to access, learn, and focus online), along with limited social interaction with professors and classmates, have decreased student motivation, engagement, and learning,

affecting disadvantaged students, and lowering trust in its effectiveness and equitability. For Allam et al., (2020), students lack the motivation to learn online and to engage in self-directed learning.

Finally, Farnell et al., (2021) stipulated that current data and projections on the medium term are anticipating that online education shall worsen educational inequality due various reasons. In fact, the inadequate parental encouragement, the lack of access to learning resources, and the lack of a suitable home learning environment will result in learning losses and in disengagement from education, lowering access and participation of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in HEI.

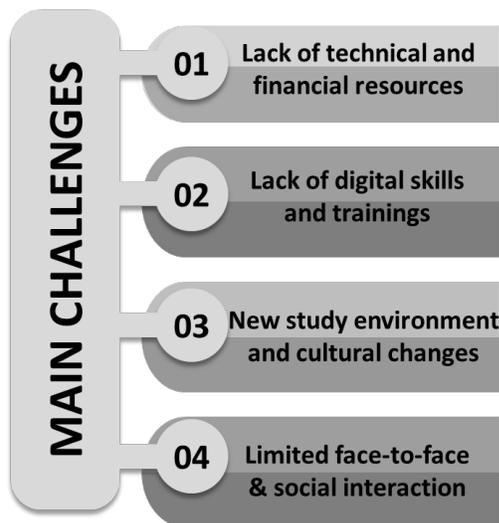


Fig3. Main challenges of e-learning on university instructors and students.

What are the main opportunities for HEI resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic induced shift to online education?

Although there have been overwhelming challenges for HES' stakeholders regarding online education. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided many opportunities especially for those ambitious to introduce an e-learning framework. For instance, since learning from home necessitates parents' financial and academic support, the lockdown has forged a stronger bond between students and their parents. Moreover, online platforms (Google Classrooms, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Webex, etc.) were explored, for the first time, in teaching and learning, and can continue to do so even after the pandemic (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021), allowing for a wide range of innovative opportunities and creative solutions to be uncovered and used for a better enhanced learning experience. The latter has enabled teachers to choose innovative ways of teaching, while allowing students to learn in new ways that weren't possible in a traditional classroom environment.

In fact, many HEI are offering their tools and resources for free in order to facilitate teaching and learning and to ensure a more

interactive and engaging environment; hence, the pandemic has ensured greater openness towards online/blended learning programs and building digital skills of instructors, students, and faculties (Jena, 2020). Furthermore, the crisis provided HEI with a rare opportunity for capacity building while strengthening their management system with remote and online teaching and work.

Additionally, this pandemic helped in prompting reforms in accreditation and quality assurance. During the Pre-COVID, online or even blended learning programs were not included in any accreditation legislation or could not be formally accredited as per existing legal texts.

Finally, the pandemic highlighted the importance of the role of research, cooperation, and innovations for conducting research under challenging circumstances (El-Chaarani, 2021). It may also have led to greater cross-country cooperation, research collaboration, and the catalyst behind the development of online labs between various universities around the world.

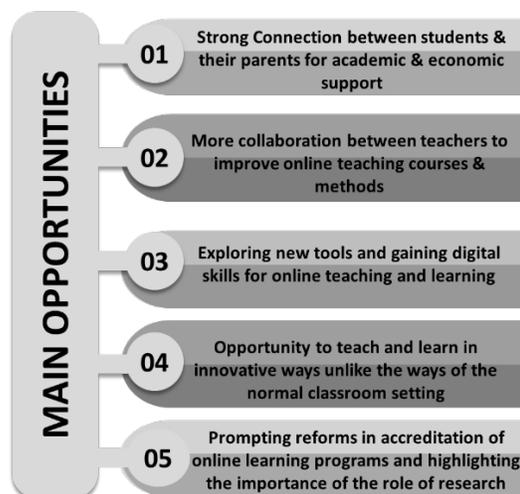


Fig4. Main opportunities of e-learning on university instructors and students.

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