

Higher Education Institution Faculty Teaching Experience during Quarantine: Challenges and Recommendations

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Abstract: The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spread rapidly, sending billions of people into lockdown. To protect students and staff members from this contagious disease, universities worldwide have decided to close and replace face-to-face teaching and learning with distance learning programs. This research, therefore, focuses on how this sudden transition has impacted academics in the College of Computer and Information Sciences (CCIS) at Princess Nourah bint Abdul Rahman University (PNU), Saudi Arabia. The study was conducted by interviewing 15% of this college's academic staff members. Questions centered on their experiences shifting from face-to-face teaching to online delivery. The results help to establish what challenges academics have faced during these unprecedented times, as well as what recommendations can be made to ensure online delivery is conducted smoothly so that harmony may return to the processes of university teaching and learning.

Keywords: COVID-19, Outbreak, Pandemic, Education, Universities, Online learning, Distance education, Higher education, Quarantine, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has certainly changed the world and will be a defining moment of the century (Chahrour, et al., 2020). The whole world has been forced to adapt to a challenging, different way of living, which involves social distancing (Xiang, et al., 2020). People are now required to stay home as much as possible and to wear personal protective equipment when in public (Spina, et al., 2020) [3]. In light of escalating concerns about COVID-19, educational institutions worldwide choose to close their doors—with many closures beginning on March 20, 2020 ((WHO), 2020). Over 1.5 billion students of different ages were affected by these closures ((WHO), 2020). An increasing number of universities have transitioned rapidly from face-to-face to online delivery in all courses and programs (Bedford, et al., 2020).

Hence, it is not surprising that university closures and the sudden transition from face-to-face to online delivery has raised a considerable number of issues for faculty members and students (Al-Rasheed & Berri, Effective Reuse and Sharing of Best Teaching Practices, 2017). This study, therefore, will emphasize the potential impact

of the COVID-19 outbreak on education and staff members that allow them the ability to continue distance learning successfully. Additionally, though online courses were available prior to the COVID-19 restrictions, and though most university staff members have experience with online teaching, the sudden transition to teaching entirely online within a few days has been a huge challenge. Staff members have found themselves facing issues with teaching, giving assessments, and functioning under increased workloads. They have also been suffering heavy financial and time pressures (Al-Rasheed & Berri, Engineering domain expertise through best practices management: Application to the field of education, 2016) (IESALK, 2020) (Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, & Glowatz, 2020). Yet, there are still fewer researches towards the challenges that the higher institutions face through this transition as most of the existing studies concentrate on the effect of the pandemic on the education in general (Affouneh, Salha, & Khlaif, 2020; Atilgan & Tukel, 2021; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2010; Gupta & Goplani, 2020; Hebebcı, Bertiz, & Alan, 2020; Kara, 2021; Kibici & Sarıkaya, 2021; Nnebedum, Obuegbe, & Nwafor, 2021; Paudel, 2021; Viner, et al., 2020; Wajdi, et al., 2020; Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020). Therefore, this research will also highlight the challenges faculty members have faced due to the pandemic and will propose recommendations that may return smoothness and harmony to the processes of university teaching and learning. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section II explains the research methodology, and Section III presents the results and the discussion stemming from them. Recommendations are made in Section IV, and Section V concludes the paper.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

The study is both necessary and significant because the current pandemic is a novel situation for higher education institutions globally, and these institutions are desperate to take advantage of each other's experience. The research results and outcomes will help move higher education institutions toward restoring smoothness and harmony to the processes of university teaching and learning.

Research Questions

1. What challenges have the faculty members faced while transitioning from face-to-face teaching to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What recommendations do the faculty members have for overcoming these challenges and making online teaching smoother and more successful?

Method

This research was carried out in the PNU CCIS. It followed an analytical descriptive approach to explore the challenges faced, and the recommendations expressed, by the faculty members who have had to shift from face-to-face teaching to online delivery. As the sudden transition from traditional teaching to online delivery is a new situation, the study did not need to gather basic information. Instead, it was necessary to ask questions that

would elicit fruitful answers from participants; these answers could then be more deeply explored via further questions to gain more insight into the situation. Therefore, a qualitative research methodology was employed. Online interviews were conducted with faculty members via Skype to deeply explore the participants' attitudes and opinions, as the research was designed to determine how staff members feel or what they think about the sudden transition situation, as well as what they need to overcome the challenges it presents. 15% of the staff members from the CCIS were randomly chosen. The participants were drawn from various departments and academic ranks. They also had different levels of online teaching experience. This was to ensure that the study results would reflect the realities of most of the staff members.

Study Sample

The study sample was chosen from the three departments in the PNU CCIS: The Computer Sciences (CS), the Information Systems (IS), and the Information Technology (IT) Department. The sample consisted of 25 faculty members from the CCIS, which, as of the 2019–2020 academic year, has 171 total faculty members. Therefore, the participants in this sample accounted for 15% of the entire CCIS faculty. The members of the sample were drawn from various academic ranks-e.g., lecturers, assistant professors, and associate professors. The participants also had varying levels of online teaching experience. They were asked about their opinions of the challenges they have faced during the sudden transition from traditional to online teaching, as well as for any recommendations they might have for overcoming these challenges. All interviews were conducted via Skype because of mandatory social distancing rules. Table 1 below shows the distribution of sample according to department, academic rank, and online teaching experience. This study first assumed that all faculty members who volunteered to contribute were representative of the entire faculty at the PNU CCIS. All participants were also assumed to have completed the semester and witnessed the sudden transition from face-to-face teaching to online delivery, and they were assumed to be honest and open in explaining their viewpoints. Figure.1 shows graphical representation for the distribution of sample according to department, academic rank, and online teaching experience.

Table 1. Sample distribution

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Department	CS	12	48%
	IS	8	32%
	IT	5	20%
Academic Rank	Lecturer	7	28%
	Assistant Professor	16	64%
	Associate Professor	2	8%
Level of Online	High	5	20%
Teaching Experience	Neutral	18	82%
	Low	2	8%



Figure 1. Sample distribution

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results emerging from the study and discusses the research outcomes. Table.2 shows the most common challenges identified by staff during online delivery. Figure.2 shows the study percentages of each challenge which explain next in detailed:

Missing Personalization of Teaching and Learning

One of the major challenges study participants reported was that the faculty missed the personal aspect of teaching (60%). Educators are required to do much to convey course content to students. This includes knowing when a break is required, when students have stopped actively listening, and how to ensure engagement with the material through questions, exercises, eye contact, body language, or a well-timed joke. All of this requires the physical presence of the lecturer and a suitable number of students. One participant stated: “It was enjoyable in the beginning to try something new, but day after day, I started feeling like I am not teaching; I feel isolated. I am talking to myself at home.” Digital delivery removes from lecturers much of the responsibility of customizing their content. This indirectly creates barriers concerning feedback and content development, as students are less likely to be engaged, resulting in them making fewer contributions, which would traditionally be a welcomed addition to the lectures.

Assessments while Social Distancing

The sudden transition from face-to-face to online delivery has negatively impacted assessments and evaluations. 72% of the sampled participants agreed that it is challenging to adequately apply online assessments for a course designed to be delivered physically. Traditionally, assessment types are chosen based on the knowledge being tested, and these decisions are made on a one-on-one basis, depending on the course. During the 2020 pandemic, there has been a shift from tailoring assessments for each course to adopting a “one size fits all” approach due to a sense of urgency to respond to the pandemic and a general panic. It is also difficult to monitor how students take tests online and to ensure that they are not cheating. Although a rapid increase in high

achieving students may sound positive at first, it means that many of those students did not actually earn their grades. On participant stated: “I know students that I have taught for a long time, and I can see an unreasonable jump in their grade. Going digital should not have a positive impact on their grades.”

Table 2. Challenges identified during online delivery

Challenges	No. of Respondents
Missing personalization of teaching and learning	15 (60%)
Assessments while social distancing	18 (72%)
Workload	20 (80%)
Personal pressures	21 (84%)
Miscommunication	14 (56%)
Technical issues	4 (16%)

Number of participants: (N=25)

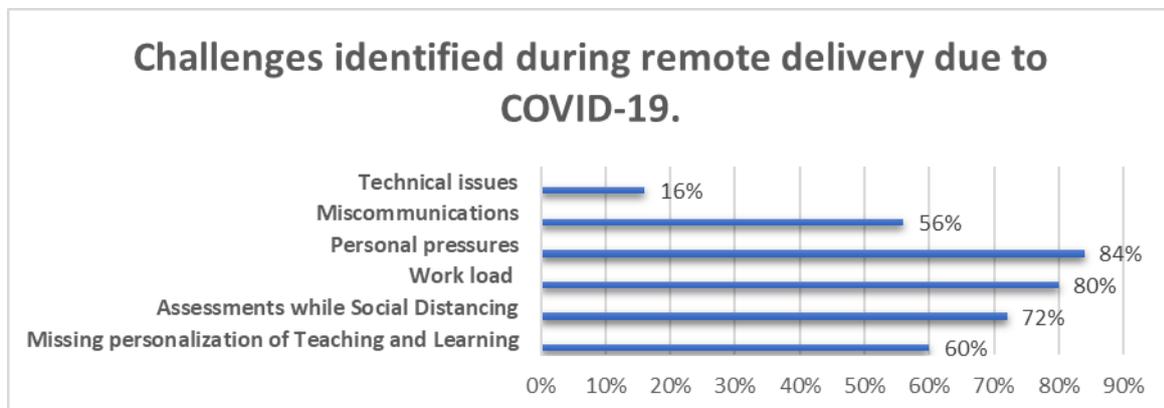


Figure 2. Challenges identified during online delivery

Excessive Workload

Another big challenge reported was workload (80%) due to the change in delivery type. Lecturers have suddenly been expected to do much more. Slides, for instance, have had to be adapted to be more “distance learning” friendly. Research suggests that it takes more time to prepare and deliver an online class than a face-to-face class. Emails from students have increased drastically, as students have been exhibiting a sense of panic, and miscommunications have become more frequent. This means that lecturers have transformed from being purely educational resources to being general student supporters, guiding and helping them through these challenges. This has undoubtedly required much time and commitment. Finally, lecturers have been expected to significantly increase their digital literacy almost overnight. One participant said, “Prior, I had working hours, and now I feel like I work nonstop. My workload in these two months is equal to my work during the whole of last year.”

Personal Pressures

The biggest challenge reported by study participants was personal issues (85%). COVID-19 has placed many pressures on academics, especially those who also have caretaking responsibilities. With schools being closed, academics' parental and career responsibilities have been extended to supporting their children with their schoolwork. Considering that their professional duties have also been increased, their free time was lost almost overnight. All this took place while they were also experiencing high levels of uncertainty and concern over themselves and their families. At the same time, they were the leaders of their pupils, and they had to appear calm and collected and had to know all the answers. Some, especially those with larger families, have found it incredibly hard to work and teach from home due to noise. An interviewee said, "While I am teaching, I pray that I won't be embarrassed by the noise in my house." Another major pressure concerns finances. As they have had to make their homes work-friendly places by purchasing a work desk and chair for the home, or purchase a significant amount of technology to accommodate the rapidly increasing needs of all household members. Suddenly, siblings can no longer share a computer, as their lessons take place at the same time.

Miscommunication

During times of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, people in management positions are looked to for guidance and for setting directions. It has been agreed that academics understand the complexity of the current situation and that there is no precedent for the current crisis. With that being said, academics view management much like students view academics. This means that academics must receive clear communications, must feel that the management has their best interests in mind, and must see clear and direct actions being taken swiftly and smoothly. A criticism presented by 56% of the sample is that it has been difficult to keep up with guidelines, which have kept changing as the climate of the pandemic oscillates. Academics have been receiving emails intended to update them with newly established decisions. However, because all updates have come via email, newer correspondences have voided older ones. This has confused the final messaging and contributed to miscommunications. Additionally, although management has been quick to respond, it has still been difficult to clearly see what decisions have been made, when, and why. These factors have added to the uncertainty academics feel during the crisis. One interviewee stated: "I started to get confused as to what guidance I should follow and this led to me browsing my emails for a long time to ensure that I found the most recent guidance."

Technical Issues

16% of the participants have faced technical issues, especially with internet connectivity. It has not been easy for networks to cope with the sudden extra load, and broadband speeds have been slowing due to the increasing number of people using the web at the same time. Loading asynchronous lectures is another issue, as it now takes longer than it did before the pandemic. Only 16% of the sample complained about technical issues, because the Support Team was ready to help immediately. All parties agreed that their technical support needs

were met, even outside of working hours. This was due to the rotation system, which has ensured that a Support Team technician is online 24 hours per day. To describe this, an academic said, “Whenever I emailed them, they responded, even late at night. Do they not sleep...?”

Conclusion

The sudden and complete transition of all courses to online teaching in the PNU CCIS was challenging. Even though online courses were available prior to COVID-19, and though most staff members had experience in delivering them, they had a few concerns, including: not being able to personalize their teaching as they could in the traditional environment; the credibility of exams; the heavy workload; and the stress and psychological pressure of the transition. To help reinstate harmonious atmospheres in higher education institutions, staff members must be empowered by the university offering them training sessions, giving them more decision-making power over assessment types, providing counselling for both students and staff members, increasing transparency between management and staff, and prioritizing staff and students who need to physically be at the university when the doors reopen. It is important to keep reviewing these factors through surveys and questionnaires to measure satisfaction. Universities across the world must continue to conduct research during this ever-changing situation to clearly grasp what areas require improvement and extra resources.

Recommendations

Empowerment of Academics

This research demonstrates that, during the COVID-19 crisis, academics are being seen as figureheads for their students, and they have naturally picked up more responsibilities. However, academics have been given very little decision-making power; instead, they are stuck between unsatisfied students and ever-changing policies from management. This has increased their demotivation and reflected onto their efforts to tailor course content for online learning.

Additionally, lecturers have had no say in the types of assessments applied in the online versions of their courses. This seems absurd, considering that the lecturers have the greatest connections with their students. Moreover, customary “exam conditions” cannot be replicated in the online environment. Students are now being trusted not to cheat. As expected, some will not adhere to the rules, causing an unusual positive curve and an improved set of results post-COVID-19. This has been seen more frequently among students who have had to adopt assessment types with which they are unfamiliar.

Continuous Training

The COVID-19 crisis is a once-in-a-lifetime conundrum, a point on which all participants in this research

agreed. That said, there seems to be a clear shift of opinions and outlooks between academics with and without technical experience. This clearly shows that, with more training, it is likely that all academics will be more at ease and ensure consistent, high-quality instruction. Making these investments will help address more than one of the previously established concerns. Due to the unexpected abruptness of switching to online education, academics' lack of training was understood this term. However, this will likely not be satisfactory to students in the 2020–2021 academic year. This training should be held during the summer. The staff members will be more relaxed, and this will make it easier for them to understand and practice the training sessions.

Student Engagement

Students' lack of engagement has made academics feel less motivated to teach. To ensure students are engaged, it is important to create more interactive lessons through encouraging virtual group work (with support from programmers). Additionally, when possible, class sizes should be made smaller to facilitate more personal interactions between students and the teacher. In practice, this means that a class of 50 students, which meets for an hour, should be split into two classes of 25 students, which meet for 30 minutes and are followed by additional work to test student knowledge.

Management

COVID-19 has tested local, national, and international leadership worldwide, so it is no surprise that there is room for improving the university's management. Some participants believed that the risk of the virus should have been managed and planned for by the university months in advance, and, if such planning was implemented, there was a lack of communication, which increased ambiguity amongst colleagues. It is commonly believed that, if transparency of planning and decision-making had been publicly provided, or if its confidentiality had been extended to the academics, they would have felt more assured. On the other hand, it is also believed that, when organizations overshare unnecessary details with staff members, it opens management to unconstructive and often distracting criticism, which adds no value. This tends to be avoided during crises, when it is important to balance what information is circulated.

Welfare

Due to the current circumstances, it was necessary to deeply consider the health of academics and staff members—especially their mental health. Counselling should be provided for both students and staff. Ensuring that staff members are well is essential to providing students with the best experience possible. It is also important for students to have access to these services—first, to ensure that they are able to focus on their educations and, second, so that this responsibility does not fall to the academics, who have no experience in dealing with this.

Return to Campus

It is likely that the return to campus will be completed in stages. It will be important to closely prioritize who returns when. First, staff members who have disabilities which prevent them from working efficiently at home, or those for whom working at home is detrimental to their health, must be identified early and prioritized. These should be followed by staff members who are struggling because they have large families, lack quiet workspaces, or are affected by anything else that would hinder the quality of the instruction they provide. Finally, staff members who simply prefer working at the university should return, followed by everyone else coming back into the physical education environment.

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