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Review Article

The impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on higher education: Opportunities and implications for policy and practice

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Abstract

Background/purpose – Besides many psychological, sociocultural, political, and economic problems, the COVID-19 pandemic has also led to radical changes in education systems worldwide, and the current pandemic has probably revealed the biggest education crisis in human history. The COVID-19 pandemic also offered significant opportunities to redesign higher education and to develop and implement effective teaching-learning strategies. The purpose of this article is to discuss the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education from a global perspective.

Materials/methods – This paper is a review article; presenting a brief literature review on the COVID-19 pandemic and higher education.

Practical implications – This article is aimed at inspiring both researchers and practitioners with regards to future research perspectives on COVID-19 and higher education. In this context, the responses of higher education institutions to the global education crisis caused by the current pandemic were examined, and some solution proposals were developed for policymakers and higher education professionals.

Conclusion – The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the worldwide education community acknowledging the fact that urgent adoption of an online emergency remote teaching approach was both necessary and inevitable.

Keywords – COVID-19, coronavirus, higher education, emergency remote teaching, online teaching, online learning, distance education, global education.

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1. Introduction

Having first appeared in Wuhan, in the Hubei province of China, in December 2019, the COVID-19 disease was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, leading to an unprecedented worldwide public health crisis within a very short space of time (Karakose & Malkoc, 2021b; Ren et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2020; Zhu et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant and devastating consequences to our political, economic, and sociocultural life, as well as to public health, on a global scale.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities, schools, and many other educational institutions have been either partially or completely closed in many countries due to measures and restrictions taken by national governments in order to prevent or slow down the worldwide spread of the novel coronavirus disease. As such, the closure of educational institutions worldwide due to the COVID-19 outbreak has deeply affected literally millions of students (Karakose & Malkoc, 2021a; UNESCO, 2020a, 2020b; UNICEF, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020), with the pandemic having instigated what is probably the biggest education crisis in human history.

2. Literature review

2.1. COVID-19 epidemic and higher education

After the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 as a deadly threat to humanity, the pandemic brought about far-reaching changes in every aspect of human daily life, including radical changes to education systems at all levels. In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, learning and teaching environments soon started to change on a dramatic scale for all stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, educational leaders, educationalists, etc.) due to the restriction strategies adopted and imposed by national governments in many parts of the world. Consequently, countries have afforded increased importance to the use of information technologies in education in order to provide effective learning-teaching environments from almost day one, and in many cases, are still in place as at the time of authoring this article. Under this context, countries took rapid steps towards digital transformation in education, and started to actively encourage the application of distance learning, teaching, and assessment approaches far more than had ever been seen prior to the pandemic (Karakose, 2020; Karakose & Kocabas, 2006; Karakose et al., 2014).

With the closure of schools and the postponement of face-to-face lessons in many countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the education activities of school-aged students at all levels (preschool, primary, secondary, and high school) were soon affected; and without doubt, the implications also significantly affected the educational activities of students enrolled at the higher education level as well. In order to compensate for the interrupted educational activities, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it soon became important for higher education institutions to develop and implement effective strategies so as to adapt to the “new normality” (Tesar, 2020), shifting towards fully-online learning as a speedy yet necessary reflex to the coronavirus crisis.

In other words, as the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly reshaped the education style in higher education, universities were also forced to undergo significant change, and to develop their management and working systems in order to meet the rapidly evolving teaching-learning needs of academicians and students. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic

forced the global education community to acknowledge the necessity for and inevitability to adopt online emergency remote teaching as an immediate response to the crises.

2.2. Online distance education and emergency remote teaching

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in it being mandatory on practically a global scale to implement online distance learning across almost every level and type of educational institution. Today, the vast majority of higher education institutions worldwide consider online emergency remote teaching as one of the most effective teaching strategies employed in response to the global education crisis caused by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 outbreak paved the way to initiate digital learning as an emergency alternative education system at all levels of education. Looking from this perspective, more innovative and interactive “online learning” strategies will help to make education systems more resilient and more prepared against possible future crises and uncertainties (Noor et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). In this context, however, the relevant literature states that “online distance education” and online “emergency remote teaching” involve significantly different teaching methods. As such, it is emphasized that it is perhaps more correct to refer to the online teaching-learning strategy employed during the COVID-19 crisis period as “emergency remote teaching” rather than “online distance education” (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020).

From this point of view, it may be said that online distance education has a more flexible, hybrid, and more functional structure besides the simple transference of teaching content; whereas, online “emergency remote teaching” is predominantly a teaching-learning strategy with a focus on knowledge transfer.

Besides the psychological, sociocultural, and economic problems brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, significant opportunities to redesign higher education have ensued, along with the prospect of developing altogether new strategies. In this context, the effective management of the education crisis created by the current pandemic has undoubtedly contributed to the rapid development of learning and teaching environments, and has ultimately facilitated an increase in the quality of educational services provided at the higher education level.

3. Conclusion

In order to limit the accelerated spread of the coronavirus disease, almost all educational institutions worldwide physically closed down in line with decisions taken by national governments. Due to the wholesale cancellation of face-to-face teaching, a transition to online emergency remote teaching was accelerated across all levels of the education sector. At this point, it became inevitable for policymakers and educational administrators to rapidly develop more functional plans, and to implement these plans urgently in order to address the potential for the victimization of disadvantaged students in higher education due to online education fast having become the only viable working solution on offer through which to realize their ongoing education.

It is still very difficult to predict when university campuses will reopen to physical tuition, and what the consequences of this period will have been to the education of the next generation on a global scale. University administrators, academicians, and other related professionals are undoubtedly aware of the profound effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on higher education. As such, academic administrators and practitioners,

through paying close attention to the role of online learning in higher education, need to anticipate the potential effect of certain negativities within the online teaching-learning process, and must therefore develop and implement measures necessary to limit the negative impact and to contribute to alleviating the concerns held by both students and academicians with regards to this issue.

4. Suggestion

It is inevitable that the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-term effects on the academic achievement of higher education students, as in other educational levels. For this reason, conducting scientific research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational environments, and then sharing the results of such research with policymakers and higher education professionals could significantly contribute to the urgent implementation of the measures required to reduce the effects of the pandemic.

In this context, in reviewing the relevant literature, it is understood that many international studies have been conducted on the effects of the pandemic on education. However, it is also seen that a significant proportion of the studies published on this subject have been conducted within the healthcare field (in the Web of Science Core Collection database from 2019 to 2020). In addition, whilst it is possible to say that there have been some scientific studies that have examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, most of the research was not conducted to a sufficient academic level. Therefore, it is important that quality scientific research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on global education is both encouraged and supported by national governments, research organizations, and also by higher education administrators. Higher education institutions and policymakers worldwide may then benefit from the strategic findings of such scientific research in order to reveal appropriate solutions to the educational problems being faced during the pandemic, and therefore help to better prepare all stakeholder groups for similar crises that may arise in the future.

Finally, in response to the global education crisis caused as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that administrators, academicians, and students in higher education institutions care about the role of online emergency remote teaching as a sustainable teaching-learning strategy, and continuously improve themselves based on an innovative understanding of the issues, will help contribute to the institutional preparedness as a rapid reflex against further potential educational crises and uncertainties.

Declarations

Author Contributions The article was written by a single author, who read and approved the final published version of the article.

Conflicts of Interest The author declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval No ethical approval was sought as the article does not present any study of human or animal subjects.

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