

COVID-19 Special Section: Introduction

Emerging from the pandemic: Can the future be resilient, proactive, and sustainable?

Anca Greere

COVID-19 Special Section Editor

doi: <https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe.2445>

Copyright

Copyright for this article is retained by the Publisher. It is an Open Access material that is free for full online access, download, storage, distribution, and or reuse in any medium only for non-commercial purposes and in compliance with any applicable copyright legislation, without prior permission from the Publisher or the author(s). In any case, proper acknowledgement of the original publication source must be made and any changes to the original work must be indicated clearly and in a manner that does not suggest the author's and or Publisher's endorsement whatsoever. Any other use of its content in any medium or format, now known or developed in the future, requires prior written permission of the copyright holder.

COVID-19 Special Section: Introduction

Emerging from the pandemic: Can the future be resilient, proactive, and sustainable?

Anca Greere

COVID-19 Special Section Editor

doi: <https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe.2445>

E-published: May 2022

Abstract: This introduction to the Special Section on COVID-19 experiences, impact, and implications for higher education emphasises the importance of recognising the opportunities and challenges posed by the pandemic experience, especially through emergency remote teaching and learning arrangements, and outlines various studies conducted to pinpoint recommendations for future action within higher education. The conclusions reached reinforce the notion that solutions are context-dependant and culture-specific; still, a high degree of transferability is exhibited across the four continents represented in the Special Section.

Keywords: Emergency remote teaching and learning; COVID-19 higher education response; transferability in higher education; overcoming pandemic challenges; stakeholder engagement.

In November 2021, when the Tuning Journal for Higher Education (TJHE) devoted its first section on COVID-19 experiences in higher education, with a view to documenting the challenges the higher education community had been confronted with and the emerging lessons which it could strategically take into the future, it seemed likely that the end of the pandemic was within reach. There was already a sense of confidence that it would not be long before higher education sectors could make relevant decisions about the various experiences they would want to retain and build on for the future, and the ones they would want to discard and eventually leave in the past. The pandemic resembled crisis management and exposed higher education to risks which had not been anticipated in many contexts. Some institutions likely performed better, usually

by virtue of their pre-pandemic status (i.e. where digitalisation was already a prominent feature), rather than due to thoroughly planned risk responses. Strategically, the main priority was continuity of higher education. Operationally, this resulted in a variety of solutions on the ground. Some such solutions would be deemed temporary, while others had already been recognised as having the potential to morph into more permanent actions, which institutions could see as beneficial for the future. Strengthened resilience and increased responsiveness could serve as targets while the “new normal” would be crafted. The encouragement for more proactive engagement with decision-making seemed most timely, with institutions and sectors possibly able to identify if or how they may wish to reposition themselves regionally or globally.

However, just days from the publication of the TJHE volume 9 (1), the world was thrown back into restrictions and lockdowns following the discovery of the Omicron strand, forcefully pushing higher education back into the uncertainty loop and delaying yet again the much awaited emergence from the pandemic. The TJHE continued to receive and review articles beyond the deadline that had been originally set, in recognition of the fact that pandemic realities still required a strong platform for international exchange of practices and solutions to facilitate a smooth emergence towards the much desired post-pandemic future.

Importantly, the COVID-19 Special Section in this current edition of the TJHE spans international higher education contexts, across multiple continents (Europe, Africa, the Middle East and South America), as it brings together diverse opinions, multiple voices and various perspectives to foster academic reflection, detailed analysis and on-going dialogue which can underpin decisions about the future. As the five articles included originate in very different national settings, we are, yet again, reminded of the value of assessing context specific elements and culturally relevant features in any attempt to compare and validate proposed changes, strategic and operational, which may stand the test of time. Readers will surely appreciate the innovative responses, the focussed approaches, the impactful analyses and the significant findings derived from the COVID-19 pandemic experiences, as highlighted in the following articles. The themes tackled move between overarching perspectives and detailed scrutiny and pinpoint challenges experienced by stakeholders, predominantly teachers and students. The implications of COVID-19 lockdowns are fully considered in outlining pandemic realities in the various national contexts. The conclusions are highly transferable and allow other contexts across the world to benefit from philosophical insights, social considerations, development opportunities and pragmatic solutions, which all have the aim to ensure education achieves its goals irrespective of the harsh circumstances it may face.

The first article '*Virtual education during COVID-19 in higher education: A systematic review*' sets the scene for and provides a bird's eye view of challenges encountered and valuable lessons learned during COVID-19. Co-authored by Fatima del Socorro Torres-Caceres, Juan Méndez-Vergaray, Edith Gissela Rivera-Arellano, Mildred Jénica Ledesma-Cuadros, Yolanda Josefina Huayta-Franco, and Edward Flores, the article proposes a systemic review of virtual higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic by applying a dedicated search methodology across the following platforms: Scopus, EBSCO, Springer Open, ProQuest, and One File. Out of 230 studies identified between May 10, 2021 and June 4, 2021, 45 were declared eligible for analysis with a view to formulating conclusions on online teaching and learning, digital competence tutoring and technological tools, as manifested during remote educational delivery under the COVID-19 pandemic. The studies were in English and Spanish and were interpreted qualitatively, thus allowing for an in-depth perspective into relevant themes.

Pertinently recognising that educational innovation promoting virtual delivery comes with demands on educational resources, improved ICT literacy and a stronger focus on accessibility, flexibility and agility in rolling out teaching and learning activities, the authors set out to ascertain the expectations placed on staff and students and to determine how realistic they can be in context. It is found that, although accompanied by many challenges, online teaching and learning is noted by a majority of studies to constitute a prospect for future developments, saving time and resources and emphasizing autonomy and self-regulation of students. Deploying digital competencies and the need to engage with multiple parallel tools are reported to have enhanced the educational experience. Still, it is highlighted that digitalization expectations increased workload and continuous professional development requirements during the COVID-19 lockdowns, while frequently determining teachers to self-train if they wanted to perform to standard. Interestingly, the study also flags a mismatch between the expectations of educational designers and the realities relating to digital competencies of the young generations, with there being the (sometimes) wrong assumption that modern-day students require little, if any, training to use educational tools.

Although not the prime focus of the study, an important outcome results from the identification of research tools used to analyse COVID-19 realities linked to educational innovation and sheds light in relation to methodological preoccupations and opportunities available during the pandemic and the themes likely to be scrutinized for investigation.

The second article '*Revealing invisibility: Interpreting social and behavioral aspects of the Coronavirus pandemic through student documentary*

photography' takes us to Europe and the Czech Republic as authors Ivo Jirásek and Bohuslav Stránský delve into student reactions to a very strict lockdown imposed by authorities and the options available to facilitate continuity of professionally-oriented, practice-based activities which were deemed imperative for the achievement of learning outcomes. The authors outline the creative solutions applied and the outstanding results which saw Digital Photography students complete assignments as visual narratives or photo novellas, accompanied by verbal commentaries, to reflect the social situation during the COVID-19 crisis.

Art education recognised as a profoundly practice-driven activity, if it is to be successful, the article demonstrates that solutions can be found to compensate the lack of availability in regards internships or the difficulties to sustain laboratory/project-based learning. Such solutions also emphasize the social and citizenship skills which can be accelerated during crisis situations, allowing stronger introspection and self-awareness by comparison with behaviour generated in "normal" circumstances. With the article focusing on identifying the themes, which emerged as part of such assignments, and the social implications of the lockdown context, it is important to note the transferability of the study. As such, the study has the capacity to prompt other practice-based domains to innovate and be creative in order to enable students to have practice exposure and the opportunity to acquire underpinning social skills. Beyond the pragmatic level which addresses an imminent educational gap created by the COVID-19 crisis, the authors also pose a number of philosophical questions aimed at raising awareness about the implications for education, specifically, and societal rights and obligations, more broadly. The article concludes with an invitation to make more use of imaginative opportunities, for education in general, and of the connection between artistic imagination and verbal interpretation, specifically as part of the pedagogical process in art programmes.

In the third article '*Emergency remote teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic: Efficacy of a four-stage model*' Seena Joseph, Robyn Thompson, Subashnie Soobramoney, and Jeanette Wendy Wing present the COVID-19 situation as experienced in South Africa and evaluate the emergency remote teaching model implemented, in consequence. The four stage model is described to have consisted of: preparation, synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning, e-assessments, and reflections, with the involvement of both lecturers and students. The evaluation is qualitative and quantitative and seeks to comparatively analyse the degree of implementation of the model for the 2019 and 2020 academic years, aiming to ascertain levels of development and progress from one year to the next. The study

acknowledges the differences between properly planned online education and emergency remote teaching as rolled out during the pandemic and aims to determine what opportunities may be opened for higher education having gone through the experience of emergency remote teaching and learning.

Overall, it is established that emergency remote teaching served its purpose to allow lecturers and students to progress with planned activities and that the four stages were relevant to ensure consistency and continuity of application. Furthermore, the experience gained is seen to open up the opportunities for pedagogical restructure where a multimodal approach is deemed suitable and can enhance post-pandemic education. As such, the detailed analysis provides transferable recommendations to Learning Management System developers aiming to enhance the design of online classrooms for a successful implementation of multimodal teaching and learning.

The fourth article '*UAE-based first-year university students' perception of lifelong learning skills affected by COVID-19*' is set in the United Arab Emirates. The author, Tanju Deveci, looks at students' perception of lifelong learning skills and the way these might have been affected by the COVID-19 experience, but also how their presence may have facilitated students to navigate the COVID-19 restrictions. The study chooses first-year students recognising that they may have been exposed to a greater risk due to their limited tertiary education experience. Using both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools, aspects such as adaptable learning strategies and goal-setting are investigated to ascertain if the capacity to apply autonomous, self-directed learning was influenced by the unprecedented COVID-19 situation. Interestingly, the study found that under COVID-19 lockdowns students did not manifest any major lapses, and that those who considered having strong lifelong learning skills prior to the pandemic found themselves performing better in response to the expectations set under emergency remote teaching and learning conditions. The study also distinguishes between male and female students and does find some significant differences, with female students finding it more difficult to maintain longer term motivation and to goal-set appropriately. In conclusion, recommendations are formulated towards institutions, generally, and teachers, specifically, in how such findings may be brought into the design of teaching and learning. This impacts on how individual and collective interactions with students might need to be adjusted for best possible results when lifelong learning skills are also targeted for the achievement of learning outcomes, which they are, indeed, in many university settings.

The final article '*Emergency remote education: A perspective of its potentialities and limitations in a Peruvian university*' included in the

COVID-19 Special Section explores emergency remote education through its potentialities and limitations. The Peruvian authors, Israel Barrutia Barreto and Santiago Saturnino Patricio Aparicio, set the background by recognising that a clear understanding of the potentialities and national limitations of each education system in each country facilitated plans of action which could render remote teaching successful in context. Emergency remote education was assumed with restrictions of technological, educational, personal, and social character that did not allow normal development of the learning process during the pandemic.

The study investigates the experiences of 123 teachers and seeks to articulate relevant conclusions which could support future-proofing actions. Amongst potentialities, flexibility and infrastructure are identified; but, it is acknowledged that these also pose elements of limitations, such as time management, study habits and attention span, and accessibility and connectivity, which need careful consideration in context. Digital competencies of both teachers and students and the scarce level of social interaction caused by social isolation are also classed as limitations, and would require increased attention for future developments. The authors conclude that emergency remote education is a valid option and should be considered as policy for the prevention of new events that may generate possible educational interruptions or even require mandatory lockdowns, and agree that such an approach can enhance resilience and offer more sustainability.

Notable, all articles consider future developments and propose that the findings uncovered be used as guidance for any similar crisis situations, with mandatory isolation, which may present themselves in the future. It is evident that, from the perspective of the institutions and the researchers, better risk identification and crisis management are necessary; more policy and planning to mitigate such circumstances of prolonged disruption are essential to avoid the unpreparedness the world of higher education was confronted with under COVID-19. The reactions of teachers and students play a key role in ascertaining what measures need to be in place and what adjustments could facilitate the guarantee of continuity and quality into the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly raised awareness about the need to future-proof through resilient educational responses and sustainable educational offerings. Notwithstanding the challenges that the higher education sector was confronted with, the COVID-19 experience has also revealed a large pool of opportunities, which institutions and governments may wish to proactively embrace. However, if strategic goals are to be re-visited, it remains important for studies such as these presented here to

draw attention to the complexities which have been experienced and to make realistic recommendations which truly justify change in context and culture.

Clearly, emergency remote teaching and learning is not a viable substitute for properly planned and intentionally offered blended or online education, and where decisions are taken to continue with blended or online educational scenarios, the recommendations are strongly pointing towards the need to approach such decisions strategically and in full awareness of the lessons learned. It would be unfortunate for institutional and national contexts to not afford themselves relevant reflection time and proper consideration for how they may wish to position themselves into the future. It would be even more unfortunate to leap into decisions which cannot be strategically justified and which do not resemble the mission and vision of institutional and national cultures.

If at the end of the November 2021 issue, I noted that: “it seems common sense to affirm that, at the current moment, anyone invested in higher education who is still postponing to make strategic decisions in anticipation of post-pandemic times is choosing to ignore the obvious signs of opportunity and the predictive prompts for change,” adding also that “...while 2020 and much of 2021 was, unavoidably, spent in a reactive mode, [for] 2022, a shift towards more proactive tactics will be an advantage”, it now becomes equally important to encourage for such decisions to be the result of ample consultations that ensure all stakeholders are included as partners in the ongoing debate and as co-creators of the future. The options on the table evidence online, blended, hybrid and in-person delivery or a mix of all of the above as feasible and desirable, depending on context, culture, and, why not, ambitions. Multimodality is highly likely to stay into the future penetrating a variety of national contexts and educational cultures. Therefore, it is important that we, as a sector, responsibly and collectively reflect on the lessons learned and assure how multimodality is retained, and that it justifiably is retained, to enhance the quality of educational experiences.

The call for contributions for the COVID-19 Special Section has now closed, but the dialogue needs to continue. Therefore, we invite higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, ministerial bodies, industry representatives, and other stakeholders to continue with this thematic area and TJHE will review and publish any COVID-19 related articles in the general section.