Covid-19: A (potential) chance for the digitalization of higher education

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Abstract

The digital transformation of the higher education sector has been rather slow and, as such, mirrored academia's reputation of being inflexible and opposed to change. The Corona crisis has drastically changed this, forcing universities and higher education institutions to move entirely online in just a couple of days. Covid-19 might be considered the biggest edtech (educational technology) experiment organized so far. This article aims at analyzing Corona's likely impact on the post-crisis period in higher education, as well as to clarify several points of attention.

Keywords: Academia, Digitalization, Edtech, Higher education, Universities

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The digital transformation of higher education has the same reputation as the higher education sector itself: rigid and reluctant to change. It is therefore not surprising that the MOOCs (massive open online courses, Kaplan and Haenlein 2016) which were proclaimed as the future model of education some ten years ago have not taken off. Academics have remained reluctant to stand in front of the camera, either because of great respect for this unknown world or for fear of making themselves redundant. Universities often unfamiliar with the digital sphere did not know how to adapt business models, compensation models, or settle legal questions around intellectual property.

The Corona crisis has changed this rigidness radically, with thousands of universities forced to go 100 percent online in just a few days. Covid-19 could be considered the biggest edtech (educational technology) experiment in the recent history of education. This article aims at analyzing Corona's potential influence on the post-crisis period, as well as providing some food for thought.

Convinced opponents persuaded by the crisis

Covid-19 has forced and motivated nearly all professors, many among them hardline enemies of online teaching, to take their first, second, and third steps in the digital world for educational purposes. Many of them have turned from convinced opponents of online teaching to advocates of digital teaching possibilities. Several students, especially the more advanced ones, have also learned to appreciate online learning. One can only assume that the demand for virtual programs or hybrid formats, i.e., classes taking place partly online and partly face-to-face, will increase in the future. Finally, even the most virulent adversaries among university leaders have been forced to accept the new digital era of teaching. This has strengthened a recent argument for fewer trips, less air travel, and more online learning, driven by ongoing debates on the importance of sustainable development.

Reforming not only the formats

Digital transformation changes teaching formats, but also course contents. Due to digitalization and advances in artificial intelligence (AI), we do not know the future jobs which will exist and the corresponding skills that students will need to master in the years to come (Kaplan 2019). Therefore, future employees will have to show high adaptability to a variety of contexts and realities. Such flexibility can be fostered among students by teaching them an entrepreneurial mindset and topics such as innovation and creativity. Also, a more multidisciplinary approach to education could help. Teaching students the basic concepts of several disciplines enables them to go deeper into those subjects, which may, in the future, be demanded on the job.

Physical space more important than ever

A false good idea would be to believe that thanks to digitalization, physical buildings could be abandoned. University is about more than just learning content. Studying also means creating networks, friendships, and – in some cases – finding one's significant other.

Socializing is, for the most part, easier to do in the real than in the virtual world. Also, students become attached to their (physical) alma mater by creating valuable memories studying and spending time there. Such attachment is of the utmost importance since students turn into alumni and potential donors. With (public) funding of higher education in constant decline, the importance of funding from former students will increase in relevance in the years to come (Pucciarelli and Kaplan 2016, 2019). Buildings need to translate this new reality. Instead of amphitheaters and lecture halls, universities need more space dedicated to teamwork and co-working, exchanges, and discussions between fellow students, between students and professors, and why not alumni and the entire university community. Buildings need to enable a stimulating student life and foster a pleasant atmosphere. Only like this will students (and professors) want to physically come to university and get strongly and permanently attached to their alma mater.

Inequalities to be considered

The massive shift to the online educational world has also shown deep inequalities, not only in terms of IT equipment and bandwidth, but also with regards to students' capacity for online (self-) learning. This reinforces the argument that a university is not only a place of teaching, but also a place of socialization, care, and coaching. Inequalities also exist among teaching professionals regarding their online experience and skills. With the outbreak of Covid-19, most universities organized intensive courses to train teaching staff on distance courses, sometimes with mixed results. Professors discovered learning analytics made available on Blackboard, Moodle, and Co. However, instead of using this data for pedagogical improvement, some of them used this information to control their students better, justifying their poor course performance. Additional and continuous training for teachers will be necessary. These inequalities on both students' and professors' side will need to be considered when designing the future.

Distance learning creating proximity

We often hear that online teaching does not create the same proximity as face-to-face teaching. This subject is of particular importance given the importance of creating student attachment to their university. However, the virtual sphere offers several possibilities to create a feeling of closeness (Mucharraz and Venuti 2020). For example, many institutions offer study exchanges with partner institutions all over the world and these are periods when contact is often lost with students. The same applies to internship periods. The digital sphere, combined with pedagogical innovation, could partly remedy this. In the end, it is a question of finding the proper balance between the online and the offline world.

Pedagogical innovation is key

To truly benefit from the digital possibilities, real pedagogical innovation is needed, rather than marginal changes (Thibierge 2020). One could imagine programs where students spend their first year working at a company while attending online courses to learn basic concepts and theories. This first program part could be followed by an on-campus period with a focus on the application of concepts, discussions, and exchanges between students and participants. The last year could again be spent in the company with specific online tutoring sessions and alike. For multi-location institutions, the virtual components could create an additional link between different campuses (Kaplan 2018b). One could imagine

core courses taking place simultaneously on different sites with student teams made up of members from different physical locations remotely working together on various group works. Online teaching will undoubtedly become of higher importance in any study program. In order to differentiate oneself from the competition, pedagogical innovation might tip the scales (Kaplan 2018a).

Budget impact unknown

The online world undoubtedly creates additional revenue opportunities as the higher education market becomes even more globalized than it currently is (Kaplan 2017). Nevertheless, it also creates a more competitive environment with institutions an ocean away suddenly becoming serious competitors. Besides, high-quality online courses will require new infrastructures and considerable resources (Kaplan and Pucciarelli 2016). One may also wonder whether students and executive education participants will be willing to pay the same tuition fees for online programs as for face-to-face teaching. If this were not the case, and under the assumption that these programs may cannibalize some of the programs already in place, this new virtual era will pose severe headaches to many leaders in the higher education sector.

Covid-19: Opportunity or threat?

To conclude, the health crisis has propelled the digital transformation of higher education. However, it must be made clear that online courses during the crisis have not always had the quality that a student would typically expect in times of non-crisis. During this period, only a few students complained about the courses that were transferred to the virtual sphere in emergency mode. Most of them were thankful for universities' rapidity and flexibility. Also, few professors asked questions about remuneration or even intellectual property. This climate will doubtlessly change after the crisis, and higher education will need to find responses to several academic, budget, legal, as well as operational questions. Education after the crisis will likely no longer be the same as before the crisis. Universities will have to take these questions seriously to turn Covid-19 into a real opportunity and to avoid the post-crisis situation becoming just like things were before the crisis.

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