

Chapter 3

Strategies for Virtual Online Student Support in the First-Year Economics Unit During the Global COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Online internet-based education and virtual teaching and learning have been forced upon the world due to coronavirus global pandemic healthcare crisis. Various internet and communication technology-assisted virtual delivery platforms are used, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, Skype, etc., to conduct lectures, tutorials, workshops, and provide online support to students. The main objective of this chapter is to reflect and compare the teaching and learning strategies in normal situation in contrast with the practice during COVID-19 environment. The chapter formalises an analysis of the challenges faced by lecturers in teaching and delivering first-year economics unit to the students, at the two institutions, and its impact on their learning of the economics core unit offered at the undergraduate Bachelor of Business program.

INTRODUCTION

University and college campuses are not only the places where students study, live and socialise with each other, but also are the cultural hubs that bring students together from across the globe. The recent outbreak of 'Coronavirus Disease of 2019' (COVID-19), has significantly threatened this unique social-system owing to its highly contagious nature and redefined this system of teaching, learning, and growth

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for both students and educators. Online internet-based education and virtual teaching and learning is forced upon the world, due to the coronavirus global pandemic healthcare crisis (Dhawan, 2020; Lockee, 2021). All the countries, including Australia since the emergence of the global pandemic COVID-19 in March 2020, introduced lockdown measures with restricted essential travel for the purpose of visiting doctors, food, and fuel, which then eased with restrictive measures of social distancing, limiting indoor gatherings, restrictive international and domestic travels, that left the pre-pandemic social-system of educational institutions unattainable and unsustainable. As a result, the educational institutions all over the world such as schools, technical institutions, higher-education universities, colleges, and research centres closed their campuses, and decided to quickly adapt to the changing situation. They took the bold step to deliver classes, lectures, tutorials, and workshops by using virtual online real-time face-to-face technology platforms, to avoid social contact and minimise the spread of virus, adhering to the government regulations on one hand, and on the other hand to keep the business of teaching and learning at schools and universities afloat.

Various internet and communication technology-assisted virtual delivery platforms are used, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Skype etc. to conduct lectures tutorials, and workshops (Dhawan, 2020; Lockee, 2021; Martin, 2020). While majority of higher education institutions in Australia may already have some form of online systems, during the COVID-19 outbreak, colleges and universities integrate some form of internet and communication technology into their coursework. It may be a little easier for big universities to upgrade their communication technology given their already existing stronger technology platform, but smaller institutions struggled more to move all their programs online, especially under the weight of the demand.

The COVID-19 pandemic environment forced the governments all over the world including Australia, to adopt measures related to social distancing and lockdown to minimise the spread of virus, resulting in closing of schools, universities, and workplaces, forcing students and teachers to teach and learn from home in a virtual online environment in real time. The pandemic had overnight changed the way universities were teaching subjects and has opened various challenges and opportunities of enhancing face-to-face real-time virtual online teaching and learning delivery methods. This chapter aims to share the changed teaching and learning environment in Australian higher education and develop strategies for virtual online student support in the first-year economics unit during the COVID-19 pandemic environment.

There are four different modes of teaching environment:

1. On-Campus face-to-face learning environment - where minimum technology is used such as PowerPoint slides, projectors, and white board, at a scheduled time, with 80 percent attendance requirement at most universities in Australia for full-time and part-time onshore students.
2. Distance online learning environment - where learning resources such as weekly checklist/planner, recorded lectures, PowerPoint slides, assessment tasks, additional e-reading lists and e-learning resources are made available 24/7 to the students through Learning Management Systems such as Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle) and Blackboard Learn. Both of them are online distance e-learning platforms, which provides students, lecturers, administrators, and learning teaching information technology staff a single and secure integrated system to create and develop personalised learning content, activities in an online environment, protected by a password (Costa et al., 2012; Oproiu, 2015). Students can access Moodle Learning Management System (M-LMS) and Blackboard Learning Management System on cloud, which are secure, at any time, even on a mobile phone.

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