Chapter 11
Exploring the Impact of Digital Learning Platforms on Distance Learning Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic:
A Case of Higher Education Institutions

Omar Mohamed Ali Albakri
Birmingham City University, UK

Abubakar Albakri
Birmingham City University, UK

ABSTRACT

Higher education has been shifting to learning management systems (LMS) for decades. Some universities, like the Open University, have managed to gain international recognition by providing undergraduate degrees to students in different countries. However, in moments of emergency and international disruption higher education institutions need to adapt at unprecedented speed. This chapter focuses on the use of technology in moments of extreme internationalised interference. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a ground for change, students enrolled in presential courses in Spain, Malta, and the United Kingdom were interviewed in order to understand how they are coping with having contact with their academic life exclusively online. The students' impressions, LMS software, and results (assignments and exams) were also discussed. Finally, the chapter analyses the solutions provided by lecturers and students.

INTRODUCTION

In 1971 Suppes (1971) published his findings on an experimental project being developed by the Institute for Mathematical Studies in the Social Sciences at the Stanford University (California, USA), initiated in 1963 with second grade students and finished in 1970 with the authors' predictions for the upcom-

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ing decade. This report represents one of the first analyses of computer-assisted instruction by a higher education institution and one of the main findings revolves around the student psychological model with social and cultural implications on the evolution of the research. Since 1963 computer sciences has evolved immensely. For instance, the internet, created in the 60s started assuming its current format in the 90s, and computer as a whole became widely accessible later in that decade (Leiner et al., 2009). With its wider adoption came a wider range of usages to the online environment. Higher education has always been seen as a privilege to be the world's wealthy men (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Tisdell, 1993; Waters & Brooks, 2010). Affluent families based in the new world's colonies would send their sons to Europe for centuries. A practice which suffered a shift over the centuries considering Times Higher Education has evaluated universities globally and placed North America at the top of the rank with 64 of the world's top 100 universities, followed by Europe with 21 (Baty, 2017; Times Higher Education, 2020). However, the wealth and higher education ratio remained, as the wealthiest countries in the world are still the countries housing the world's top universities.

The ill distribution of top universities versus the world's population has led to several issues with access to a high quality higher education institution to those living in other countries and even to those who cannot afford these top universities. This chapter is grounded on the issues related to distance learning software, with a focus on periods of extreme disrupt. Research on the importance, best practices, benefits and challenges of online and distance learning in higher education has been widely published. However, the emphasis tends to be on the adoption process, investments or the transition/comparison between face-to-face learning and online alternatives.

Dealing with a worldwide pandemic in prosperous times is unprecedented. According to the United Nations (UNAIDS), the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which started in the 80s, is somehow managed through sex education and other precautions. However, throughout history there were four widely studied pandemics: the Antonine and Justinian plagues, the Black Death and the Spanish Flu, chronologically (Hays, 2005; Little, 2006). Excluding the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the other occurred before the advent of digital learning software and had various influences on higher education.

It is well-known that Sir Isaack Newton had to return to his family house due to the plague in 1666 when he formulated his gravity theory (Rickey, 1987; Westfall, 1993). However, apart from discoveries related to the outbreaks, little has been research and published on their impact on higher education. This chapter was developed with one main concern: to understand the impact of a pandemic on enrolled university students during the ongoing quarantine period. The international academic community in the fields related to technology have a particularly important role to play in a disruptive moment such as this: to ensure communication, improvements and guarantee useful systemic change.

Thus, the chapter commences with a critical analyses of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and exploring the most popular software available (Canvas, BlackBoard and Moodle), finally, approaching the on-going issue of physical higher education institutions having to close their doors due to quarantine impositions and migrating towards online classes, seminars, assignments and exams.

Globalised World and Globalised Learning

Learning Management Systems (LMS) are means to an end: they work as platforms, which connect the university administration, students and academics. It can be used for management, training, to track payments, exam results, to monitor participation in classes, to submit assignments and much more. These

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