


Chapter 2

E-Learning and Digital Transformation: Lessons Learned, Challenges, Moving Forward

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ABSTRACT

Continuing education has been facing a challenging time for institutions of higher learning throughout the globe. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions have pivoted to online instruction or employed a hybrid approach to content delivery and student interaction. Important lessons have been learned during this health crisis in which institutions pivoted much of their content online and continued to teach, such as delivering online laboratory exercises. However, many challenges have been identified and solved: delivery of online experiential material, providing internet access for students with poor or non-existent internet access and technology, and maintaining an accreditation schedule. The lessons learned will be investigated and the positive impact on distance education moving forward at different institutions located over 11,000 km apart. As a result, the authors recommend institutions need to significantly develop and apply digital transformation in their administrative and educational systems.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3595-3.ch002

INTRODUCTION

The current challenges facing higher education globally have provided universities with great lessons that need to be carefully studied. There have been significant challenges to face such as the closure of universities and an abrupt move toward distance education. In Iraq, as in other countries, the global pandemic has caused sudden shock and disruption to many institutions that were not prepared for it (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). The reason for the disruption is that the majority of educational systems are fully implemented based on traditional face-face interaction methods. Additionally, technology is not fully developed and is still in the process of finding its place in educational practice. However, the pandemic has made it imperative for universities to make a quick transition from face-to-face teaching to distance learning so that universities can maintain the delivery of education material for their students (Elnikova et al., 2020). Students in their first years of college may have suffered more than other, more senior peers due to the dual challenge of moving to the new environment of higher education and also applying distance learning (Cicha et al., 2021). The latter requires special experience and technical tools in which new students might be lacking.

Digital technology has become a strategic solution to be utilized in teaching practices to ensure pedagogical continuity for our students (Gafurov et al., 2020). This is especially important since the ongoing health crisis may be long-lasting, and we may encounter recurring related events in the future. Universities have made great efforts and have taken available feasible actions such as using some free and paid services offered by Google Workspace, Microsoft, or other professional bodies. Other universities have moved further professionally with purchasing servers and installing their E-learning platforms and inspecting their computer and network equipment for possible upgrades. Another challenge is that the new software and technology tools require sufficient experience so that when implemented they can handle and manage learning resources as intended. Most importantly, the infrastructure of the whole country in terms of networking and internet services is not fully stable and it can be considered the biggest challenge for all (Ameen et al., 2017; Elameer, 2021).

Remarkable teamwork was established from all governmental levels in the ministry of higher education and scientific research in Iraq and institutions themselves in response to this major health crisis. As an example, many training workshops on educational digital and e-learning platforms were organized and held. Furthermore, universities provided great support to students in all aspects of their education to maintain their learning process. Moreover, lecturers have played a pivotal role in delivering the teaching content online using their facilities and resources such as

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