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The impact of COVID-19 on international education: challenges, adaptations, cross-cultural experiences, and globalization

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic remarkably impacted international education, creating countless challenges while also driving adaptation and growth. This paper explores the pandemic's effects on teaching and learning, particularly in higher education, focusing attention on challenges such as technical infrastructure deficiencies, inequalities in access to education, and the psychological impacts on students and educators. It also scrutinizes how institutions adapted through digital transformation, innovative pedagogies, and service learning. Additionally, the paper discusses the role of cross-cultural experiences and globalization in navigating these challenges, emphasizing the importance of cultural engagement and linguistic diversity in fostering a globally interconnected educational environment. By reflecting on these adaptations, this study contributes to understanding how crises can reshape education systems and promote innovation in the face of adversity.

Keywords: COVID-19; International education; Pedagogy; Digital transformation; Cross-cultural experiences; Globalization; Educational inequalities; Online learning; adaptation; Higher education challenges

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2019, led more than 185 countries to close their schools and institutions. Not only did it affect the education system, but it also affected most of the domains in the world. Healthcare and the economy were also major fields that were impacted by the pandemic. All countries followed the lockdowns and measures to stop the spread of the virus; as mentioned before, the schools and universities were forced to close, causing many students to stop, drop out, and face many challenges that the virus brought.

International education was significantly impacted since all students and teachers had to shift to online teaching with all the changes that occurred. A study conducted in Puntland-Somalia showed that universities were all heading to online learning and teaching, yet the shift came with consequences[1]. Furthermore, academic integrity and technological issues were a challenge during the pandemic, and many universities used plagiarism detectors to monitor the quality of learning[2]. Undoubtedly, the pandemic reinforced difficulties and brought many opportunities, such as strengthening environmental policies and hygiene practices, migrating courses, and scaling up teachers' training[3].

2. Impact of COVID-19 on International Education

Many recent studies have documented that teaching and learning were impacted by COVID-19, and educators and students faced various challenges. For example, some face-to-face activities were suspended due to COVID-19, and many

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universities continued teaching and learning using digital and self-study tools. Furthermore, a significant percentage of teaching was canceled at the beginning, and shifting from face-to-face classes to online classes was a big challenge since the quality of teaching was a primary concern in higher education; some studies showed that Africa was the most affected by the pandemic, where the learning has been suspended or postponed in the majority of the higher education institutions, the percentage of shifting to online teaching of European institutions compared to African ones was enormous, the preparation to move to online teaching was not present; therefore, the transformation did not meet the challenge's expectations, though most of these universities were developing solutions to increase the chances of having platforms and access the online teaching and learning, the negative impact of the students' opportunities was spreading[2].

On the one hand, technical infrastructure and accessibility were the significant changes that most institutions faced; since most students could not access the Internet, learning, and teaching were disrupted, and it was unrealistic for many students to finish their academic year. On the other hand, equal opportunities were challenging since students were divided into the ones who had access to the Internet and those who could not access it. Distance learning competencies and pedagogies were also on the top list of challenges. This challenge for faculty to prepare and implement a different pedagogy for online teaching, "learning by doing" was the primary approach that the educators applied through shifting to online; it was their best option over no education at all Universities [4].

3. Challenges and Inequalities increased by the pandemic

Many inequalities emerged due to the pandemic. For example, during the quarantine period, many people showed symptoms of depression, insomnia, stress, and emotional disturbance; the psychological impact on people took many forms like stress and behavior changes such as avoiding crowded places; these symptoms lasted for a long time after the pandemic, many preferred to be social distanced, the lockdown led to an increase of depression, loneliness, child abuse and domestic violence, the social withdraw decreased the economic and social state of most countries. The mental health issue was also a major part caused by the pandemic; the post-traumatic state affected the memory, concentration, and attention of many people [5].

As far as education is concerned, educational inequalities appeared; many children could not have access to the learning material or teaching support, the risk of dropping out of school was increasing, the income inequality was growing, providing learning for some children had a low chance, fairness and inclusion was absent for some who suffered poverty [6]. While gender inequalities had their share due to the pandemic, women showed a higher rate of stress and anxiety compared to men during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown; working mothers were among these women, and many additional tasks were given to these women, like childcare and house chores, these tasks were a challenge to them, since it was plenty to deal with at the same time, helping their children to deal with the fears and uncertainties of the pandemic was another issue they faced [7].

4. Adaptation and Growth In the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought various obstacles to international education. Despite the difficulties, many have discovered how to manipulate the new learning environment and adapt to it. For example, a study on remote work found that online work positively impacted job satisfaction since flexible time increases employees' quality of life[8]. Many companies during the pandemic had to learn how to manage everything virtually; they moved to up-skill the employees, which brought many benefits to the companies; the crisis elevated the levels of digitization to enhance and decrease physical interactions, whether in the health department, education, banks, and other sectors also, to meet the market's expectations, many trainings were launched to respond well to the changes done by pandemic ("Adapting Employees' Skills and Roles to the Post-pandemic Ways of Working Will Be Crucial to Building Operating-model Resilience,," [4]). To sustain consumption and production, the governments had to implement many changes; the pandemic caused many positive and negative environmental effects. On the positive side, the ecological levels of the environment, since pollution and water consumption were reduced, and the awareness of becoming more responsible and environmentally friendly was the primary concern [9].

Furthermore, the education system also found ways to adapt to the new changes. A study was conducted to examine service learning with new strategies to be adopted by the students for development and more engagement. However, the implementation faced many challenges involving faculty with the students, technological and logistical issues; the adaptation involved shifting all the activities to online learning, brainstorming new strategies, conducting online promotional activities, development, revision, and reconstruction of the programs was the central focus through the

whole process; moreover, the measures of continuity of the service learning were also fostered to assure the development of the service[10].

5. Cross-Cultural Experiences and Globalization

The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the importance of cross-cultural experiences and globalization in international education. Since the world has grown more connected, many approaches are needed for students to be ready to take part in the face of this diversity and global change. Many courses were implemented in the curriculum that fostered cross-cultural approaches. Among these aspects, the language was a major challenge since it created a communication crisis during the pandemic; all the fields needed a multilingual population, and Top-down and bottom-up language management were adopted to overcome the language barriers [11].

As far as culture is concerned, a study was implemented to deal with the negative impact of stress during the pandemic. People's physical and mental health was a priority for most countries, and numerous efforts were made to enhance the adaptation process by engaging the people culturally by promoting positive mental health behaviors, holding workshops to gather the concerns, needs, and experiences of different people; therefore, the results can help design a culturally relevant training to students or employees, the models were as forms of collaborative teamwork or group discussions [12]. Digital globalization allows small and big enterprises to participate in global digital platforms; all countries benefit from this advanced technology economically and socially. Most digital platforms change the economy of most businesses, leading to more free services and content exchanges. Digitization and artificial intelligence are the pillars of today's industrial revolution; after the pandemic, digitization became a dire need, and COVID-19 accelerated the advancement of digitization significantly since many companies are expanding and enhancing their digital channels, this digital technology was one of the reasons to reduce the negative impact of the crisis, it also granted many people to broader the awareness and minimize the spread of the pandemic [13].

6. Conclusion

The pandemic changed many aspects of life, including international education; students had to deal with a new challenge, in which they had to learn new techniques and discover new platforms to study online, and teachers had to deal with the new pedagogies to implement in teaching online. The adaptations came with fostering new ways to use the pandemic as a chance to build and up-skill the teachers, staff, and faculty. Learning by doing was a significant phenomenon at that time. Companies and organizations followed the same trend, and employees were framed to understand and meet the expectations of the economy with the new technologies. Cross-culture experiences granted many opportunities to deal with new visions in the future. Due to globalization, the world become more interconnected than ever, and it has become easier to dive in for more knowledge and information with better tools and communication globally.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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