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Engaging with Students and Faculties Online in the Era of the Corona Virus Pandemic: A Higher Education Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education institutions are not strangers to sudden shocks or dips in the economic environment that sneaks upon them and create budget cuts and job losses due to poor enrolments, but quite often these situations have been gradual rather than abrupt, and in most circumstances had provided higher education the space to weed out unviable courses and unsustainable practices. The same cannot be said of the Corona Virus pandemic that has befallen much of the world currently. It came in quick and fast and spared none in its deathly grip. Higher education institutions scrambled to move students and faculty engagement and learning and teaching online. What are some of the effects of this abrupt move, and how has this impacted institutions and international students? This paper will attempt to provide some insights into the ways in which faculty and students are adapting to this new environment amidst anxieties, bereft of the usual campus camaraderie and day to day engagement in person.

Introduction

Universities are bastions of power and responsibility sustained by knowledge and wisdom gained through years of scholastic achievements in research and learning and teaching. John Henry Newman believed that universities shaped students beyond that of academic ability and that the ideal university comprised a community of thinkers, who engaged in scholarly pursuits solely for the love of scholarship. (Idea of the University, n.d.). Academics have continued to expand on the notion of the university and what it represents. In his 2018 book, *The Ecological University,* Ronald Barnett contends that universities have not delivered their mandate fully in a fluid and dynamic environment. His book posits that the expanding realm of universities offer new potential as they are interconnected with a number of ecosystems: knowledge, social institutions, persons, the economy, learning, culture and the natural environment all of which need to engage with one another to benefit society (Barnett, 2018). This concept of interconnectedness and how closely each aspect of society is intertwined with one another, rings true in the present time. The Corona Virus pandemic has affected businesses, educational institutions, and populations alike, and globally higher education institutions have been forced to move learning online due to nationwide shut downs.

The paper draws from an institutional perspective and from the experiences shared by faculty members and students who are caught unaware in a situation that is unprecedented and is bound to be prolonged in duration, at least for rest of the academic year or until effective medical interventions are available. The paper references institutional scenario plans, insights and views from academics and senior faculty members in the United States, Asia and Australia, and details how the shift to online modes is affecting higher education establishments including students and staff at transnational campuses.

The Corona Virus Pandemic and Its Impacts on Academia

Initial Responses

The ongoing Corona Virus pandemic and ensuing global disruptions have been unprecedented for most of us and many economic sectors. As the academic calendar commenced in the southern hemisphere in late February 2020, the world watched countries struggling helplessly, ill-equipped to treat its citizens of the deadly virus sweeping through the lands. The virus that originated in China crossed borders quickly together with the horde of air travellers assisting to transport the virus to all corners of the globe, and governments were left with no choices except to impose travel bans in an effort to contain the virus that has since then exploded exponentially all over the world.

With the mandated ban on physical interactions and social distancing measures, leading to the closure of businesses and educational establishments, higher education grappled with the enormous gravity of what the temporary closures meant. Among the biggest challenges that universities faced, was moving students and faculty and learning and teaching from physical to online learning spaces whilst ensuring accessibility for all. Many higher education institutions utilize learning management systems and platforms to engage with students online as much as they do face to face to provide flexible learning opportunities, offering personalised learning, and seamless educational experiences to students while adopting a blended mode of learning delivery. Blended learning is a combination of learning and teaching approaches that incorporate numerous teaching models comprised of e-learning and face to face (F2F) learning. Blended learning extends innovation to eLearning, through access to online resources and the sustained demand for the interactive and personalized elements available in the learning experience. Through blended learning, the learner is more in control of setting out their experiences and assists higher education institutions to accommodate the individual needs of learners (Benefits of Blended Learning (n.d).

Institutions that had invested substantially in upgrading technology for learning and online systems, and had introduced blended learning to their students, and had maintained continuous professional development for their academic staff, discovered that their investments had somewhat paid off, as the transition to online learning and teaching in the wake of lockdowns and restrictive movement acts declared by governments had been less challenging. Nevertheless, the switch from physical classrooms to online learning spaces was thrust upon institutions. Despite the fact, many institutions were agile and had the capacity to shift learning online, it was a mammoth task to transfer the entire learning and teaching machinery online. Academic teams walked precarious tightropes and kept up frenetic paces to check that all resources were up to date and that students would be able to access and navigate the eLearning systems without any technical hitches.

In transnational higher education institutions that had been practising distributed learning, faculty members and students had had the experience of learning with peers and faculty in offshore campuses in a synchronous manner and were prepared for the temporary glitches due to tech interruptions. These technologies were applied over a period of time and had been tested for shared facilitation of teaching and online assessments for students.

Distributed learning represents a multi-media method of instructional delivery that includes a mix of web-based instruction, streaming video conferencing, face-to-face classroom time, distance learning through television or video, and other combinations of electronic and traditional educational models (Kozlowski & Bell 2006). Distributed learning systems (DLS), allow delivery of teaching by instructors to learners in multiple geographical locations and permits learner-instructor interaction in synchronous or asynchronous modes. Curtin University, Malaysia introduced distributed learning models at the campus in 2015, aligned to the *Learning for Tomorrow* concept introduced at Curtin Australia. This involved enabling collaborative learning and access to lectures and course materials in real time and equipping learning spaces with interactive technology. Students from the global campuses of the university in Malaysia, Singapore, Dubai and Mauritius are able to connect with their peers and faculty at the Perth campus through distributed learning spaces in real-time. These vibrant new spaces were designed to increase student engagement, foster collaboration between staff and students, and provide flexible, technology-rich environments that support active student learning. With the availability of this technology, students and staff at Curtin Malaysia engage in discussions and interact with their counterparts at the main campus Perth in real time (Giridharan, 2019). A number of units are taught in this mode, which empowers joint facilitation of sessions from both the Miri and Perth campuses. Experiences of using distributed learning coupled with robust learning management systems like Blackboard in place, and continuous professional training opportunities for staff to upgrade their knowledge and

skills assisted in the shift to fully online learning delivery models.

The effectiveness of teams coming together in demanding situations had been researched well. A variety of forces drive the efficacy of teams: increasing competition, consolidation, and innovation create pressures for skill diversity. Teams are most effective where there are high levels of expertise, rapid response, and adaptability. Teams with greater collective task and interpersonal cohesion and pride are also more effective (Kowloski & Ilgen, 2006). Teaching teams led by program coordinators and subject leaders worked across campuses to ensure that resources were accessible by students. While lectures had always been available for downloading by students, decisions had to made for the formats for the delivery of tutorials and seminars. For engineering and science courses, the situation was made more complex due to lab requirements. Instructional designers worked with faculty staff to identify strategies and solutions for designing alternate learning tasks. In order for instructional strategies to be effective, facilitators and instructional designers need to be able to integrate learning models with instructional design practices (Giridharan, 2019). While some labs could be duplicated through simulations and virtual experiments, there was a high dependence on accessible technology.

Angst, Uncertainty, and Anxiety as the Situation Unfolded

In early January, when the news of the Novel Corona Virus emerged, the senior executive team led by the Pro Vice Chancellor and the Deputy Pro Vice Chancellor at our university established a Critical Incident Action Team to establish guidelines and formulate a COVID 19 action plan to ensure the safety and well-being of staff and students on campus. Since it was the summer semester only about 25% of the student population had been attending classes. Stringent health and safety measures were implemented across campus to screen temperatures of all staff and students arriving on campus daily, and educational brochures on hand hygiene and cough etiquette were placed in all the main areas of the university. Hand sanitisers and safety masks were made available to everyone on campus as well. Classes were conducted with messages of hand hygiene and health precautions to be observed popping up ahead of lecture slides.

The first semester for undergraduate students in Australian universities commenced in the middle of February coinciding with academic calendars in transnational campuses in Malaysia, where the government announced travel restrictions on visitors from virus hit provinces in China. Some states like Sarawak announced entry restrictions on all visitors from China initially, and by end of February, added countries like South Korea, Italy and Iran to the list. Students from China were the most affected due to travel restrictions. Some students faced issues within China to obtain renewals of passports and approval of inter province travel. With the short interval of time to get back to their campuses overseas, many students were resigned to the fact that they would need to defer a semester or resume classes online. Chinese students who managed to get on flights to continue their studies in Malaysia, were placed in quarantine in their student residences for 14 days with health teams strictly monitoring their progress and well-being.

In the meantime, learning and teaching progressed in face to face settings with students wearing face masks and being seated a seat apart from their classmates up till mid-March 2020. On 18 March 2020, the Malaysian government announced the Movement Control Act for a period of two weeks till 30 March, which meant that all businesses and educational institutions would be closed during the period with only essential and emergency health services available to the public. Many international students returned to their home countries due to the uncertainty of the situation. This included students on semester exchange from transnational home campuses and from universities that had partnership arrangements. However, a substantial number of students chose to remain in student accommodations across institutions in Malaysia.

Academics commenced classes online with trepidation and anxiety. Most of them had minimal experience of teaching fully online and depended on their blended learning experiences to push them forward. Academics who had experiences of teaching courses online previously, advised faculty members to start simple and focus on getting readings and learning activities into campus learning management systems and attempt asynchronous learning practices first, as students may have limited access to the internet depending on where they were, in their homes or on campuses (Darby, 2020).

We conducted several surveys with students to understand how they were feeling and coping with their learning experiences online. Some of the surveys are student led and through an analysis of data and open ended comments, the institution and faculty are readjusting the ways in which learning is delivered. Some of the student comments were positive and encouraging.

They certainly appreciated the fact that most academics were trying their very best to guide and support them in ways that showed they cared. The surveys also helped staff understand what they needed to continue doing to assist students. Some of the comments revealed that students were overwhelmed with the number of messages they received from the faculty and they were struggling to keep up with the changes in schedules. It was especially challenging for students who were in their first year of university as they had had no previous experiences of learning online or learning on interactive platforms embedded in learning management systems.

Darby (2020) advises faculty that with creativity and innovation, students and staff could continue engaging as much as they could on smart phones, stating that the more staff interacted with students online, the more students would feel inclined to interact with the course and their peers turning teaching remotely a much more satisfying experience. She also reminds faculty to be sympathetic to oneself as they will need to continue adapting their teaching until they find a common ground for themselves and students.

The Movement Control Order in Malaysia was extended for another phase from 30 March to 14 April to further contain the virus and continued till 28 April to assist the hospitals to cope with the volume of patients and to prevent further escalation (https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/10/mco-extended-until-april-28-pm-announces). In Australia, the UK and United States, universities remained closed with universities continuing with their operations online.

Dilemma Faced by International Students and Universities

Some universities in Melbourne, Australia, delayed orientation and semester commencement by two weeks due to concerns that international students from China would not be able to enter the country in time for classes due to quarantines and entry bans placed on them. (https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-31/monash-delays-classes-over-coronavirus/11919828). Australian universities are heavily reliant on international students especially from China. About 106,600 **Chinese students** who had planned to commence or resume classes at **Australian** universities and other tertiary institutions had been unable to enter the country due to the travel ban on visitors from China by the government, impacting the Australian economy in lost fees and revenue at

schools, colleges and universities amounting to as much as $ 8 billion Australian dollars (Pearlman, 2020).

Australia was not the only country that faced the prospect of reduced student enrolments from Chinese students. Universities with large numbers of students from China were rushing to readjust academic calendars, delay semester commencement, and provide alternate study plans as they braced for the losses in tuition revenue from cancelled enrolments. In recent years the number of students from China studying overseas had grown constantly with China becoming the largest source of international students in the U.S., the UK and Australia. Statistics from the Institute of International Education (IIE) showed that more than 300,000 Chinese students studied in the U.S. in 2018-19, and over 86,000 Chinese students were enrolled in higher education in 2019 in the UK. (Impact of COVID on overseas Chinese students, 2020).

The number of students from China studying in the U.S. had risen expeditiously as well stimulating a huge increase in tuition-paying undergraduates, and universities started depending on them for their revenue, and many American universities also forged partnerships with Chinese universities in research and other areas (Redden, 2020). The Corona Virus outbreak had prevented many Chinese students from returning to the spring semester due to travel restrictions impacting many U.S universities who had invested in student recruitment activities in China, as Chinese students form the largest group of international students in the U.S comprising slightly more than a third of all international students in U.S colleges and universities (Redden, 2020).

In Malaysia, transnational campuses, faced challenges with Chinese students being unable to attend classes in late February, if they were from the virus hit provinces such as Hubei. Students who were successful in arriving at their campuses were placed in voluntary quarantine at their homes or residences with health and counselling support.

Australian academics Ziguras & Ly (2020), have described the coronavirus outbreak as "the biggest disruption to international student flows in history". They refer to Federal Education department data in Australia that showed 212,000 students from China were studying in Australia in late 2019, making up 28% of the total international student population in Australia, and state that the significant number of reductions in Chinese students, would have a long lasting effect on Australian higher education (Ziguras & Ly, 2020).

The Future of International Higher Education

Many academics, economists and world leaders are predicting that life will not return to normal anytime soon and the world as we know and experience it will not be the same again even after COVID-19 has tapered off to a certain extent. At least some experts are of the opinion that after the Corona Virus pandemic is over, the world will witness a society that is more harmonious and will discover a new economic model that benefits all, and may possibly show more international cooperation for global issues like climate change (Schifferes, 2020). How will academics and students change after countries relax the lockdowns that have been imposed? Many staff will reflect on what resources they utilised and students will think about what resources assisted them in their learning.

Open Educational Resources or (OER) has been gaining interest for a few years and educators from kindergarten classes to graduate schools have been turning to the source to avail of free text books and resources. SUNY Math professor, David Usinski is an advocate for free and open educational resources and explains that OERs benefit students, instructors, educational institutions and curriculum designers as it helps to level the playing field for students from low socio economic backgrounds who are unable to bear the high cost of traditional course materials (Usinski, 2018). As schools and universities have moved to online delivery of learning and teaching, OERs have become a valuable repository for teachers and students to access text books and references to supplement study materials. Many students will continue to study online for much of the academic year or even longer while campuses remain closed and OERs will definitely play a major role in assisting learning.

Education experts encourage academics teaching online to create an online presence to ease student anxieties and to enable them to know their lecturers better. It is recommended that academics start a social media channel for the class and create short videos that explain what the weekly topics are to generate a sense of connectedness (McMurtrie, 2020). It is expected that student anxiety and discomfort will increase in online spaces as they may not be adept at responding to discussion threads and may also face a disruptive learning environment at home shared with siblings and family members, and will need reminders for when assignments are due and regular communications from their teaching faculty (McMurtrie, 2020).

It is predicted that blended learning delivery modes will increase appreciably post the Corona Virus pandemic, as

academics who had been engaging with students online on asynchronous and synchronous systems will tend to utilise these digital platforms complementary to their face to face teaching (Kim, 2020). Professors may also move more content online and use face to face sessions more for discussions, debate and facilitated learning. As humans are creatures of practice and learned behaviours, staff and students will no doubt reflect on their experiences and challenges of interacting and connecting to one another in novel ways and chose to relive those experiences or render them active in the aftermaths of the virus era.

Postmodernist philosophers had grappled with two main concerns: the first was the ability of interpreting text, which is related to hermeneutics, and the second was regarding the ability or adequacy of language to objectively describe truth. Nietzche (1844-1900) posited that truth is nothing more than an illusion and that each one of us constructs our views according to our own perceptions(An introduction to postmodern philosophy, n.d). The second issue regarding the ability of language to define truth was propositioned by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who stated that language is socially constructed and one understands the world according to our linguistic and social construct (An introduction to postmodern philosophy, n.d.). Both concerns seem to have re-emerged in present day in the light of the Corona Virus pandemic. Truth seems distorted as several versions and accounts of events seem to be peddled and espoused on the internet. Speeches of world leaders are heavily laden by rhetoric and retortions. Many have questioned the use of war metaphors to describe the present pandemic. For instance, President Trump referred to his approach to the pandemic as in a war like situation, "*I view it- in a sense as a war-time president".* Susan Sered, a professor of Sociology, stated that she was concerned by the adoption of metaphors to describe the situation as metaphors have the power to signal patterns and evoke unconscious reactions that affect the way we think (Sered, 2020).

In the book," Realizing the University in an Age of Supercomplexity", published twenty years ago, Ronald Barnett, stated that " a new world order is upon us, partly as a result of globalisation, partly as a result of information technology revolution, and partly as a result of other forms of change, we have to reckon with societal and global dislocations that challenge the progress with modernity… we are into a new world order" (Barnett, 2000, p.3). Barnett was referring to the post-modern university in a world subject to "infinite interpretability" or a super complex world. Barnett (2000) calls for universities to prepare students for this world, and coined the term

supercomplexity, referring to challenges faced in professional lives from not just handling overwhelming data and theories within a given frame of reference but also handling multiple frames of understanding, of action and self-identity in a world where fundamental frameworks are multiplying and in conflict. No doubt, universities and higher education institutions need to respond to the present scenario with innovative and creative solutions for long term sustainability.

Conclusion

The paper discusses how universities and its community are coping with being in a situation that no one had prepared for in recent times. It highlights the challenges faced by institutions, faculty and students who are trying to recreate a semblance of normalcy in these turbulent times. The present Corona Virus crisis reminds one of the phenomenon or concept of *supercomplexity* (Barnett,2000), in which the organizations and higher education institutions are being tossed around in a super storm swept by forces beyond their control. Nevertheless, we have to remind ourselves that higher education has endured several crises in the past and managed to emerge stronger through its steadfast commitment to quality of learning, support for students and scholarship and research and innovation. One thing remains clear universities will learn to engage more online even when we return to a new normal world post the Corona Virus pandemic.

Competing Interest Statement

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Acknowledgements

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