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# The Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education and Educational Technology – Part 1

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As COVID-19 continues to ravage the world, UNESCO (2020a) reminds us that, at the peak of the crisis, school doors were closed to 1.6 billion students, from kindergarten to university. This represents 94% of the entire student population, in over 190 countries. Now that the second wave is rolling over us, schools are turning to remote learning once again. It seems that remote learning is here to stay, at least for the next several months.

The terms we are hearing today (e.g., learning continuity, alternative modes, home schooling) speak to the pressing need to transform in-person teaching into digital delivery. Whether eagerly or fearfully, we have entered the unruly cosmos of remote learning. Admittedly, there are advantages for students, such as flexibility, but also obstacles to their motivation, engagement, and perseverance. Educators, for their part, will find it challenging to plan their lessons and monitor their students, and schools, colleges, and universities will be challenged by their educators' lack of experience with online learning.

In any case, remote learning is now front and center on the list of educational concerns for the foreseeable future. This is the time for researchers and educators to put their heads together to help higher learning institutions cope with the pandemic. Hence, in June 2020 the *Revue internationale des technologies en pédagogie universitaire* (RITPU) / *International Journal of Technologies in Higher Education* (IJTHE) launched a call for submissions concerning a thematic issue on postsecondary education during the pandemic. The journal normally publishes from 15 to 20 articles per year, but in response to this single call, we have received a record-breaking 110 submissions. We therefore decided to publish this issue as a series over the coming weeks, and possibly months, in accordance with the journal's policies. Submitted articles should address postsecondary teaching and learning, and all articles will be subjected to a rigorous peer review before acceptance. Although the journal generally publishes empirical studies, it may also feature personal accounts and reflections, as long as they are based on the literature. Given the

unprecedented crisis, we felt it important to include perspectives that shine a wider light on remote learning solutions across countries and postsecondary contexts.

This thematic issue, as well as all upcoming ones that will bring to light the work of researchers interested in educational technologies in this new teaching context, will serve a vital function. It will document the research on remote solutions and present feedback and analysis, theoretical perspectives, and practical implementations. This pooled knowledge can be used to guide decisions as we journey through what promises to be a long and drawn-out emergency. We have accepted articles from some 30 countries from the four corners of the world, from Brazil to Canada, the Ivory Coast, France, Senegal, the United States, and the Kingdom of eSwatini (formerly Swaziland). This international assemblage is telling of the seismic and far-reaching extent of the disaster on higher education systems. Students, educators, administrators, and governments will find the topics meaningful and compelling. Hopefully, the breakneck changes forced by the pandemic will have long-term benefits for education, as Witze (2020) suggests in the *Nature* scientific journal. In fact, universities are swiftly reinventing their higher education offers in response.

This special issue and several upcoming ones address the many challenges for postsecondary education during the pandemic. Moving to online teaching has become a central concern for universities everywhere. They have been making herculean efforts to adapt their courses for their professors and instructors in time for the next term. In addition, a recent EDUCAUSE survey shows that universities are going all out to improve the remote teaching practices and digital skills of their professors and instructors (see McCormack, 2020). At the same time, researchers in this special issue have sought to identify the advantages of remote learning models, and perhaps more importantly, the pitfalls that await learners, educators, and other education actors in this new reality. This is the case with *The Role of Students' Characteristics on the Efficacy of Blended Learning* (first paper), *Teaching Social Work in the Context of a Pandemic: An Example of a Moodle Hybrid Online Learning Environment* (third paper), *Ensuring the Continuity of all Aspects of Education for Undergraduate Students During the Pandemic: Lessons for the Future?* (fourth paper), *Creating and Teaching an Online Business Case Study Using Twine* (fifth paper), *Navigating a "New Normal" During the COVID-19 Pandemic: College Student Perspectives of the Shift to Remote Learning* (sixth paper), *Flipped Classroom During an Online Management Class: An Experiment in Distance Education* (seventh paper), *Going Remote: Faculty Educational Initiatives on Building Community During COVID-19 Through Online Teaching* (eighth paper), *Redefining Teaching and Learning During Lockdown: Lessons for Higher Education* (11th paper), and *The Hyber-Flexible Course Design Model (HyFlex): A Pedagogical Strategy for Uncertain Times* (12th paper).

Other topics address issues of equality, which remain rife in universities and nations alike. As reported by Karsenti et al. (2020) and by the International Association of Universities (2020), the pandemic has exacerbated previously existing social inequities that impact learning as well as digital literacy. In other words, students from disadvantaged areas were already struggling pre-COVID, particularly in terms of access to computers and the Internet. There are significant gaps between student populations, both within the same universities and from one country to the next. In this sense, UNESCO (2020b) reminds us of the crucial role digital technology plays in a COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 world: "the digital divide between those on and offline is threatening to become the new face of inequality," particularly in Africa, where 82% of learners have no Internet access at home (2020). In this special issue, this is particularly the focus in *Navigating a "New Normal" During the COVID-19 Pandemic: College Student Perspectives of*

*the Shift to Remote Learning* (sixth paper), but mostly in *Distance Education and Inequalities in Mexico: The Challenges of Ensuring the Continuity of Education for all* (ninth paper).

This thematic issue will address several other timely topics, such as preparing educators for online teaching (e.g. Crawford et al., 2020) in *Conception of a new Training Unit in COVID-19 Mode: From Doubts and Uncertainties to new Opportunities* (10th paper). Academic success during these challenging times is a major concern for both university students and governments (e.g., Karsenti et al., in press). On this subject, the International Association of Universities (IAU, 2020) reports on government surveys assessing how the pandemic has directly affected university students and describes the more damaging consequences. These questions are raised in *Ensuring the Continuity of all Aspects of Education for Undergraduate Students During the Pandemic: Lessons for the Future?* (fourth paper). IAU (2020) as well as Sahul (2020) also analyze the complex systems of higher education evaluation, delivery and support for distance learners in response to the pandemic, as is highlighted in *Distance Education and the Evaluation Process During the Internship of Public Servants: The Case of the Académie de Limoges* (13th paper). Then there is the need for university students to adapt to the new normal, especially when the light at the end of the tunnel seems extremely far off (Brammer & Clark, 2020), as is highlighted in *Higher Education and Technology: The Ethical Challenges of Capturing the Attention of Students* (second paper).

These extraordinary circumstances have pushed universities and nations to prioritize two missions. The first is to mount a collective international response. The second is where this thematic issue plays a key role: we must overcome this crisis in higher education and do our utmost to reduce the effects on the "COVID generation" of students as far as possible. This thematic issue represents a first step in an attempt to identify and understand the challenges for higher education and to find effective solutions. The lessons we take away from the articles and personal accounts will help students, educators, and universities deal with the many challenges they face and to boldly go forth into the unknown.

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