

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Qualitative Research on Transition into Distance Learning: The Perspective of Higher Education Leaders

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Abstract

The paper presents the successful transition into distance learning and shows the leaders' role in higher education organisations. The authors discuss qualitative research carried out in 2021 on the perspective of the education leaders, their role and their significant impact on the educational process's success and effectiveness. The pandemic period showed the weakness of educational organisations. That was a good chance to review existing situations and organisations' preparation for the transition into distance learning. The research shows the weak points of the organisations and the impact of the higher education organisations' leaders in managing the transition period by assuring high-quality education. The findings/conclusions obtained from the research focus/emphasise the importance of communication between university management and departments, the evaluation provided by students, the balance of traditional things and virtual tools, variety in teaching and learning, opportunities of the didactics and proactive communication. The article will be interesting both to researchers of higher education development problems in the direction of digitalisation (in particular, distance learning organisations) and to practitioners who are directly involved in modernising the educational process utilising online technologies.

Introduction

At the end of June 2020, the UK's Times Higher Education magazine published a survey of 200 university leaders from 53 countries around the world (Jump, 2020). When asked to what extent higher education institutions had switched to online study during the quarantine period, 53% said 100% and 33% had switched 75%. The main reason given for not fully switching to distance education was that some subjects could not be taught at a distance (60%). Other reasons included lack of time to prepare (10%), lack of experience of lecturers in working with electronic tools (9%), insufficient technical facilities (7%), insufficient funds (5%), other reasons (9%).

When assessing how successful the transition was in terms of technical versus training/educational aspects, managers rated the technical factor higher.

When asked whether students' achievements will be assessed during the distance learning process, 79% of respondents answered in the affirmative, 17% said it depends on the specifics of the course, and 4% said no. Another question related to assessment is whether lecturers should be held accountable for low student grades.

A similar survey was organized by the [International Association of Universities \(IAU\)](https://iaui.org/) in March-April 2020, interviewing members of academic communities (faculty representatives, institutional heads and heads of international relations) from 424 HEIs in 109 countries around the world (Marinoni et al., 2020). 59% of respondents said that their institution had closed; in Africa, the figure was 77%. 80% of respondents believe that COVID-19 will have an impact on the enrolment of new

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students in the next academic year. 46% believe that both international and domestic students will be affected. Private HEIs indicated that there will be negative financial consequences. Two thirds of respondents say that the government has provided advice to HEIs on public policy during the quarantine period. 48% believe that the government or the Ministry of Education will provide support to the institution to mitigate the consequences of the situation. Half of the respondents said that the institution's existing partnerships had weakened, but 18% said that partnerships had strengthened and 31% had discovered new partnership opportunities. Two thirds said that the study process had shifted to a distance mode, and the main challenges accompanying this change were technical infrastructure, distance learning competences and pedagogy, and the specific requirements of the fields of study. At the same time, it highlights the opportunities that have opened up: more flexible learning, testing blended or hybrid learning, combining synchronous and asynchronous learning. As many as 89% of HEIs say that the coronavirus has had an impact on the international mobility of students, but 60% report an increase in virtual mobility and/or online collaborative learning. Most HEIs plan to organise examinations in new ways. The differences are more pronounced when comparing geopolitical regions: in Europe, as many as 80% of HEIs are planning to examine students, while in Africa as many as 61% believe that exams will have to be postponed or abandoned.

80% of respondents indicated that the emergency had had an impact on research in their institutions. The biggest impact was the cancellation of international travel (83%) and cancellation or postponement of scientific conferences (81%). 52% indicated that they feared that they would not be able to complete their research projects.

41% of HEIs contribute to COVID-19 research. In just under half of the institutions, the crisis has strengthened the initiatives of the academic community. This is particularly evident in North America, while in Asian countries, community activities have weakened.

Literature review

The social, economic, and cultural spheres of international society have all been affected by the COVID-19 epidemic. The educational sector has been severely affected by this crisis, especially in terms of how institutions typically run. Due to the epidemic, educational institutions were forced to temporarily close, which disrupted the standard format of in-person instruction. The continuation of educational processes was severely threatened by this exceptional circumstance, necessitating quick conversion to alternate teaching and learning methods (Sá & Serpa, 2020). The effects of these changes may be felt across the educational environment, highlighting the pressing need for creative solutions to maintain effective educational delivery in the face of such crises.

The sudden transition to online learning, though not new, has posed significant challenges globally, especially in resource-scarce environments (García-Morales et al., 2021; Heng & Sol, 2021) where educational institutions, teachers, and students were unprepared for the disruption to traditional teaching methods. Limited infrastructure, inadequate technology, and lack of digital literacy skills have exacerbated existing educational disparities, hindering access to quality education (Turnbull et al., 2021). Efforts are needed to bridge the digital divide and implement innovative strategies for equitable and effective education delivery in these challenging circumstances.

According to N.C. Jackson (2019) digital transformation technologies are a dominant paradigm that educational institution must embrace for long-term viability and success. Such technologies as artificial intelligence, data warehousing and predictive analytics enhance agility, responsiveness, and efficiency of said institutions (Bojović et al., 2020). Integrating these technologies fosters innovation, empowers teachers, and improves collaboration, leading to optimized processes and better decision-making.

The transition to distance learning presents instructors with a challenging trade-off between ensuring students' enjoyment and maintaining accessibility. While the shift to remote education offers opportunities for engaging and interactive formats, it also introduces barriers

that can hinder students' access to educational materials and activities (Gillis & Krull, 2020). However, instructors have the ability to employ various techniques to mitigate these accessibility challenges and create an inclusive learning environment for all students. A study by R.M. Cutri et al. (2020) distinguishes circumstances that online courses do not face but were present during the transition period:

- Firstly, there was an urgent need to swiftly adapt instruction to an online format, leaving minimal time for preparation or training.
- Secondly, the transition to online teaching took place amidst the traumatic conditions of a global pandemic, which added an additional layer of complexity and stress to the process.
- Finally, educational institutions had to navigate the uncharted territory of extended online teaching with limited or no information regarding the duration and permanence of this shift.

These circumstances collectively presented unprecedented challenges and uncertainties for educators, administrators, and students, urging them to quickly adapt to the new educational landscape while dealing with the potential long-term implications of this shift. Understanding and addressing these challenges are crucial for effectively supporting and improving online instruction in the face of similar future crises.

A.Y. Alqahtani & A.A. Rajkhan (2020) analysed into the factors influencing distance learning success during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings revealed that technology knowledge management, support from management, increased student awareness, and the demand for high information technology proficiency were the most significant factors. Effective training and support, along with management encouragement, were crucial for enhancing technological proficiency. Moreover, increased student awareness and the expectation of advanced technology skills from all stakeholders were pivotal for seamless distance learning experiences. However, J.R. Bryson & L. Andres (2020) show that digital tools or platforms with human-to-machine interaction capabilities can enhance automated processes for blended learning delivery modes. These tools utilize advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning to personalize learning experiences, provide real-time feedback, and offer tailored content recommendations. By incorporating human-to-machine interaction, educators can optimize the delivery of educational materials and track student progress more efficiently. This integration holds promise for improving blended learning outcomes.

Method

A. Lomellini et al. (2022) says that online learning leaders acknowledge that online accessibility and quality need to be a priority [xxx]. What remains unclear is how online learning leaders are addressing these issues and how they perceive the barriers and strategies related to inclusive online course design at their institutions.

This qualitative study was to understand online learning leaders' perceptions of providing guidelines for all departments on transition into distance learning. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are leaders' perceptions of the current state of institutions' ability to provide high quality well functioning online learning?
2. How are institutions providing accessible and inclusive online learning experiences related to transition into distance learning?

Research design

We used a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions. Qualitative research was chosen to understand complex stories of individuals' experience during the pandemic. In this case, digital accessibility issues are often assumed. This research was exploring the role of online learning departments in accessible and engaging distance learning.

Qualitative research was organized in 2021 during pandemic. The method is designed in a manner that helps reveal the behaviour and perception of a target audience with reference to a particular topic. The authors used interviews to get data from the targets. In total 10 questions were provided for leaders of educational organisations. The interviews were transcribed, edited for accuracy, and imported into the tool where data analysis was organized and developed by MAXQDA open tool.

Data collection and data analysis

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, records were collected and transcription was done by MAXQDA. Research has shown that participants in virtual interviews report positive feedback. The interviews included 10 questions. The interviews were transcribed, edited for accuracy, and imported into MAXQDA for coding and qualitative analysis. To analyse the interview data, I read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data presented.

Reliability, validity, and trustworthiness

The interviews were semi-structured and followed a consistent protocol to increase reliability. Transcripts were presented to participants to discuss and to verify accuracy and help maintain credibility and increase trustworthiness. This strategy helped to ensure that participants felt the transcript was an accurate representation of their thoughts on the topic.

Data of the qualitative research on the perspective of the education leaders

Reasons for managing the situation

After analysing the goals set by universities during the quarantine period, the factors for ensuring quality studies, and the changes in traditional studies, it is very important to mention the deep *reasons for managing the emergency situation*. As many as 18 sub-categories have been identified in the analysis of what helped to manage the situation:

- Focus/communication between university management and departments (8);
- NM experience (6);
- The work of vice-deans in faculties (5);
- Support from a distance learning centre (5);
- Technical equipment (3);
- Leadership of curriculum committees (3);
- Changing community attitudes (3);
- Student Union support (2);
- Efforts by teachers (2);
- Centralised management (1);
- The Faculty as a learning organisation (1);
- Dean's Leadership (1);
- Ensuring a positive psychological climate (1);
- Experience of central services (1);
- Experience from foreign universities (1);
- Timely decisions by the study management (1);
- Students' tolerance towards lecturers (p.s. during traditional studies there were complaints about various subjects) (1);
- Students' drive to learn (1).

Informants identified the *mobilisation, communication between university management and departments* as the most important reason for control, e.g. "2INF: without a doubt, teamwork was mainly due to the fact that there was a constant collaboration between the administration and the faculty administration. Just consulting on different things, sharing best practices, what works well, what could be done differently"; "15INF: The other thing is the organisation and that there was communication, sharing of experience, information and that whole management, I think, has been quite successful."; "14INF And at the same time, we

have followed the general recommendations of the university, so there was also the vice-rector's regulation, the rector's regulations, so we have tried to follow all of that wherever we could"; "4INF: I think these are common-sense decisions. We can't do anything else. <...> just close cooperation internally and experience on our own".

In terms of focus, the *work of the deans in the faculties* should also be mentioned, e.g.: "6INF: I would like to praise J., our dean of studies, who has done a very good job of organising everything"; "14INF: well, even the deans of studies here are helping each other by sharing both good practices and what is needed."

Of course, the *support of the Distance Learning Centre* was also very important, e.g. "1INF: Our distance learning expert took a strong initiative and arranged all the basic training and the tutoring for the teachers."; "8INF: That's where the SP really came in, well, actually he helped us a lot from the beginning. He took that leadership quickly, promptly."

Also the *experience of distance learning*, e.g. "12INF: it was based, I think, on our internal experience with distance learning"; "13INF: distance learning was not a new thing in the university and some of the community had already had some experience".

Other reasons that helped manage the emergency:

- *technical provision*, e.g.: "5INF: And the provision of technical facilities at home for everyone, whoever needed it, everyone had it"; "6INF: We have tablets, so we distributed tablets. We also gave out computers. We divided up and allowed anyone who wanted to take the stationary out.";
- *the leadership of the curriculum committees*, e.g. "8INF: but it was probably the individual curriculum committees that were actively involved in the process and took that initiative and leadership, especially the representatives of some curriculum committees"; "10INF: the curriculum administrators, the curriculum, the heads of the curriculum committees, just showed a level of awareness that is befitting of a university";
- *a change in community attitude*, e.g. "1INF: Communicating in good faith to solve problems rather than create them. That was the key point, I think. The community was very, very strong."; "13INF: It was that kind of focus, collaboration and goodwill that probably made it possible to achieve that goal.";
- *the help of the student union*, e.g. "1INF: The student union also made a very strong contribution by collecting some questions from students.";
- *the efforts of the lecturers*, e.g. "12INF: in all faculties, the lecturers have taken it seriously enough and have really put in a lot of effort". "15INF: I would like to praise the staff that a large part of them really understood the situation, it has to be done, otherwise it won't happen. And it's great that they didn't get frustrated, they tried and it turned out pretty well.";
- *centralised management*, e.g. "5INF: Probably good management of the central apparatus, so that we are not left alone - yeah, that's one of the most important. Not leaving the departments to run on their own, that's centralised management.";
- *the notion of the faculty as a learning organisation*, e.g. "5INF: at least I try to make the faculty a learning organisation, so that we understand that we are all learning together. That it's not that somebody says this is how it has to be, and only that it has to be this way. The other learning process is important, as well as the support, the security of such a lecturer.";
- *dean's leadership*, e.g. "5INF: I have personally spoken to the presenters, because when you work remotely, it's about making sure no one is left behind. It's as if I'm left to my fate, now how I organise is how it will be. No, I try to talk to each presenter once a week, and sometimes two or three times with some of them, at first even every day, but then I try to call my deanery once a week to discuss what is going on, so that they can have a lively conversation with me.";
- *ensuring a positive psychological climate*, e.g. "5INF: That communication, so that people feel safe, so that they are not abandoned, and that help, whether it's psychological or technical, say, or some real help that they need at the time, is very important to keep the

team together, even little things like birthdays, and that's important for that good work. So that if, for example, in a company, a team celebrates birthdays when there is no crisis, even those moments were important during the crisis, to meet during the zoomus for some celebrations, to make the team united.”;

- *the experience of central departments*, e.g. “13INF: It must have been very reassuring to see the vast experience of the ITD department.”;
- *experiences of foreign universities*, e.g. “1INF: the other thing is again the examples of foreign universities, because I have had meetings with colleagues from the , <...> group, our other networks, where we are. These were very useful, sharing experiences, exchanging who is doing what.”;
- *timely decisions by the management of the studies*, e.g. “1INF: rapid mobilisation of the people who coordinated the process, who delivered the training.” “8INF: very timely decision-making. The Senate helped us a lot here. And we thought that maybe they could delegate some of their powers to the Rector. But the Senate said no. We will meet when we need to in order to take timely decisions and they certainly did that.”;
- *students' tolerance of lecturers*, e.g. “1INF: they were tolerant of lecturers, even the older ones who apparently didn't understand some of the decisions at first.”;
- *students' drive to learn*, e.g. “1INF: We opened the library to check out a book for the mailbox ... The students were very quick to accept, standing in line.”.

Success of distance learning during the quarantine period

The following sub-categories were identified in the analysis of the survey data:

- Student satisfaction (7);
- Final thesis defence (5)
- Improved student attendance (4);
- Mastering new distance learning tools (3);
- Encouraging innovative studies (3);
- Development of quality distance learning materials (2);
- Developing student autonomy (2)
- More individual contact between teacher and student (2);
- How the University operates in extreme conditions (1);
- Advantage of remote meetings (1);
- Encouraging cooperation (1).

The biggest success is the *satisfaction of the students*, e.g. “1INF: but it was really very positive from the students' side.”; “12INF: There were very positive emotions from the students. That everything is in order.”; “5INF: And the students noted that our lecturers were quite inventive, they had a lot of variety in the way they conducted the classes.”

Although the final reports were initially a source of great anxiety for many, they were well prepared for and the final defence was also successful, e.g. “1INF: The final defence was ideal”; “11INF: The students did well and settled in and defended their final theses online”.

Some of the informants also said that *student attendance had improved*, e.g. “5INF: This could be related to the fact that students simply attended more classes. Attendance was really quite high.... lecturers identified good attendance right up to the end.”; “4INF: Student discipline, I would say yes - in the first lectures, if you equate attendance to 100% in the first distance lectures.”

Another sub-category is the *adoption of new distance learning tools*, e.g. “11INF: both lecturers and students have become familiar with tools that can be used for meetings, learning, etc.”; “13INF: a large proportion of lecturers have tried distance learning. It is not to be feared, it might not be the main learning method in the university, but we could use it partially.”

Other distance learning successes during the quarantine period (pandemic COVID-19):

- *encouraging innovative studies*, e.g. “13INF: we could change the didactics a bit and focus more on proactive communication. That's probably one of the successes and it's allowed us

to speed up a lot of processes”; “6INF: Traditional things need to be preserved, but these virtual tools, they don’t really destroy the study process, they just help it.”;

- *developing quality distance learning materials*, e.g. “15INF: Recordings, additional tests, additional materials introduced, external sources of various kinds, I think we have raised the quality.”;
- *developing students’ autonomy*, e.g. “15INF: success and what an advantage that has come about, I think the lecturers have seen, students are forced to really study in this way, they have to do a lot of work on their own”.
- *more individual contact between teacher and student (2)*, e.g. “11INF: more individual contact with the teacher”;
- *the university’s performance in extreme conditions*, e.g. “2INF: And it showed the mobilisation of the academic community that, even in undefined extreme conditions, the university is still able to function, to ensure the study process.”
- *the advantage of remote meetings*, e.g. “8INF: One of the good things about these experiences is that we have very clearly realised that there are many advantages to organising administrative meetings, meetings remotely. The ministry has finally realised how much of its precious time it spends on its meetings, which are not always very productive, and all that time it burns for people.
- *encouraging collaboration*, e.g. “At 14INF, we learned that our teachers are really progressive. Then they started sharing additional tools and how they use it creatively. There were certainly some teachers who then voluntarily sent the materials they developed to other faculties.”

Conclusions

1. Informants identified the mobilisation, communication between university management and departments as the most important reason for control.
2. There were very positive emotions from the students that all information is in order and well presented.
3. Respondents declared that traditional things need to be preserved, but these virtual tools, they don’t really destroy the study process, they just help it.
4. Students noted that our lecturers were quite inventive, they had a lot of variety in the way they conducted the classes as all the processes were well managed by department leaders.
5. We could change the didactics a bit and focus more on proactive communication. That’s probably one of the successes and it’s allowed us to speed up a lot of processes

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Authors' contributions

D. Gudoniene: conceptualization, methodology, software, data curation, writing (original draft); E. Dambrauskas: writing (review & editing); S. Kalashnikova: data curation, writing (original draft), supervision; E. Staneviciene: software, validation, visualization, investigation; L. Motiejunas: software, validation; V. Kersiene: data curation, writing (original draft).

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Data availability

The dataset is available on request from the authors (edgaras.dambrauskas@ktu.lt).

Competing interests

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Якісне дослідження щодо переходу на дистанційне навчання: погляд керівників закладів вищої освіти

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Анотація

У статті представлено досвід успішного переходу на дистанційне навчання та показано роль керівників закладів вищої освіти. Репрезентовано результати якісного дослідження, проведеного у 2021 р. серед освітніх лідерів, проаналізовано їх роль та значущість впливу на успішність та ефективність освітнього процесу. Виявлення протягом періоду пандемії слабкості освітніх організацій уможливило вивчення наявного стану та готовності організацій до переходу на дистанційне навчання. У дослідженні показано слабкі сторони організацій та вплив керівників закладів вищої освіти на управління перехідним періодом у процесі забезпечення високоякісної освіти. За підсумками дослідження наголошено на важливості комунікації між керівниками університету та керівниками структурних підрозділів, отримання зворотного зв'язку від студентів, балансу між традиційними підходами та віртуальними засобами, забезпечення різноманіття викладання і навчання, використання можливостей дидактики та проактивної комунікації. Результати дослідження стануть у нагоді дослідникам проблем розвитку вищої освіти у напрямі цифровізації (зокрема, організації дистанційного навчання) та практикам, які залучені до процесу модернізації освітнього процесу з використанням онлайн технологій.

Відомості про авторів

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Ключові слова:

дистанційне навчання, освітнє лідерство, виклики, перехід на дистанційне навчання

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