

Learning from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Iranian Higher Education Responses to COVID-19

Since early 2020, COVID-19 pandemic has led to changes in social and organisational interactions around the world and has affected not only the health sector of countries, but also affected industry, agriculture, and services. Social distancing was emphasised broadly to control the ongoing pandemic COVID-19 and to reduce total fatalities from the disease.

The education has not been immune and various educational institutions, such as universities in the countries affected by the coronavirus, were partially closed. In Iran, as in many other countries, universities were among the first centres to be partially closed because of the pandemic. However, universities tried to take appropriate measures in line with the problem and to have a successful educational and research performance. In other words, COVID-19 pandemic has affected Iranian higher education in various aspects, including reduction of staff presence and maximising the work through telecommuting, the cancellation of physical events, and the shift of face-to-face teaching to virtual and online teaching and learning. Universities cancelled their onsite classes and shifted the teaching and learning processes to e-Learning media. They also conducted online exams. Virtual education has been performed through mobile messenger systems and learning management systems, such as NAVID, VESTA, and MOODLE. For some universities, the virtual mode of delivery was not new. They have adequate infrastructure and experience toward the context of virtual learning. Some other encountered such forms of teaching for the first time, but the transition was quick. The short-time results showed the potential of Iranian higher education for adaptability when confronted with forced changes and crisis such as COVID-19 pandemic. Some significant outcomes are as follow:

- continuing education process via virtual learning;
- upgrading the necessary infrastructure and facilities;
- use of various methods for evaluation of students' learning;
- sustaining teaching and learning in the crisis and preventing a forced pause in education.

The COVID-19 pandemic raises the issues of the future of international higher education. Would the COVID-19 adversely affect international education and student mobility? Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, international academic and research interaction and collaborations attracted the attention of researchers because of their good results. COVID-19 shocked the network of professors, researchers, and students. Professors and

researchers, who had the opportunity to attend international conferences and to get together in scientific meetings, completely missed the opportunity. However, data showed that, in COVID-19 pandemic, universities have gained a unique opportunity to develop joint educational and research collaborations with the use and benefit of communication technologies. International collaboration and international meetings and conferences are still widespread but they are done remotely and online.

What about international students? We must not forget the impact of COVID-19 on international students. In Iran, we conducted a research about it in April. The goal was to highlight international students' concerns in the Corona Crisis. The findings on international students' concerns showed that their voice could be classified into four categories: educational, research, economic, personal-family. According to one of the students: "We're international students here, and it is also a difficult situation for us to understand the virtual classes properly because there is no physical contact with the professor". The other said: "I do not have good internet connection and I need many scientific sources to complete my scientific research". The findings showed that "stopping the doctoral project in sensitive days and the last semester", "pressure due to not having enough time to complete the project", "stopping gathering research data" were repeated by respondents in research concerns. "Missing parents/family", "health", "not controlling the virus", "tuition fee" were repeated by respondents in the economic and personal-family concerns.

In the End: The COVID-19 pandemic provides a great key opportunity for many Universities and higher education institutions. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, many higher education institutions rethink their teaching-learning methods by benchmarking virtual and online education. However, there are multiple questions on the issue. For example, do all students have adequate access to the facilities and infrastructure for using virtual classrooms? Is it possible to use virtual education for all theoretical courses? How to teach practical courses? Does teaching-learning process go one-way or interactive? How to best evaluate students' learning? etc. Finally, COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for new educational solutions to be tested and it can lead to the provision of international teaching-learning and crossing the borders of countries.

Prepared by:
Mahtab Pouratashi, IRPHE, Iran