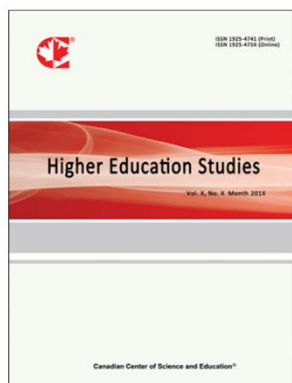


## Online and Remote Learning in Higher Education Institutes: A Necessity in light of COVID-19 Pandemic



Associate Professor Dr. Wahab Ali has recently published an enlightening article titled *Online and Remote Learning in Higher Education Institutes: A Necessity in light of COVID-19 Pandemic* in the Canadian Higher Education Journal. Following is a synopsis of the paper:

In light of the rising concerns about the spread of COVID-19 and calls to contain the Corona virus, a growing number of tertiary institutions have shut down in regards to face-to-face classes globally. The Corona virus has revealed emerging vulnerabilities in education systems around the world. It is now clear that society needs flexible and resilient education systems as we face unpredictable futures.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak various policy initiatives are being launched by governments and tertiary institutions across the world to continue teaching activities so as to contain the virus.

Novel Corona Virus and the resulting COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in more schools and Higher Education (HE) Institutes being faced with the challenge of maintaining continuity of teaching and learning while facing the threat of extended closures. Subsequently, this study intends to examine how teaching and learning can still continue during such unprecedented times.

An exploratory research was implemented to unveil the salient intricacies associated with rapid online learning especially in wake of COVID-19, the worldwide lockdown and social distancing. Meta-synthesis reveals that willingness to embrace change is a major requirement for successful integration of technology as it provides students opportunities to learn and apply the required 21st century skills

The online learning environments foster additional learning experiences where learners can interact, collaborate, and take ownership of their own learning at their own pace and time. Hence, ICT immersed lessons provide a motivating and encouraging learning environment for our students and also it leads to self-directed learning.

Transitioning to online learning at scale is a very difficult and highly complex undertaking for education systems, even in the best of circumstances. Universities need to negotiate with internet vendors to help provide access to online learning for students for free or at a cheaper rate. All these processes may be time consuming but a start needs to be made as it is not a matter of choice but a necessity in response to COVID-19 pandemic.

Taking into consideration the deadly COVID-19 and in its endeavour to avoid its spread governments' worldwide have put in place stringent measures such as national lockdowns and social distancing initiatives. These restrictions have led many universities and HE Institutes to opt for online learning to curtail the spread of Corona Virus.

Findings reveal that universities worldwide are moving more and more towards online learning or E-Learning. Findings also reveal that apart from resources, staff readiness, confidence, student accessibility and motivation play important function in ICT integrated learning. This exploratory paper proposes that staff members should use technology and technological gadgets to enhance learning especially during these exceptional times. Findings also propose online and remote learning

as a necessity in times of lock downs and social distancing due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Likewise, COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing requirement has presented undue challenges on all stakeholders to go online as they have to work in a time constraint and resource restraint situation. It must be established that adopting online learning environment isn't just a technical issue. It is a pedagogical and instructional challenge that requires rapid mobilization across all university staff and resources.

With the spread of the COVID-19, countries are implementing emergency plans to slow down and limit the spread of the virus and simultaneously prepare for a possible longer term disruption of school attendance. In the context of necessary closures, different forms of online education and distance education resources are being mobilised. Findings reveal that teachers in Fiji are going beyond their means to see that their students' education is least affected during COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite limited resources, teachers/facilitators in the study employed the following strategies:

- Utilising Facebook to disseminate information to parents/guardians and learners;
- Preparing relevant worksheets and posting on social media platforms for learners;
- Creating Viber groups and other chat groups for easy accessibility to learners;
- Viber groups are used to facilitate active discussions with parents and students;
- Communicating via Emails with parents/guardians about addressing learner needs;
- Accessing learners through Mobile phones;
- Preparing supplementary worksheets for home-based learning as stipulated by the MoE's directive in order to maintain safety and social distancing norms; and
- Adopting MOODLE and other online platforms as feasible options.

The aforementioned are some of the strategies implemented by the teacher/facilitators. However, findings specifically point out that:

- There is a lack of capacity to operationalise distance learning modalities, and a shortage of appropriate distance learning tools and materials;
- Teachers/facilitators need to work with Ministries of Education to develop catch-up programmes or condensed curricula to avoid loss of school year;
- Ramp up information dissemination and awareness-raising activities to inform students, and parents of the risks associated with COVID-19;
- Ensure that adequate information about the pandemic is provided, especially when it comes to reducing the risk of getting sick and infecting others;
- Offer psychosocial support to learners, parents and facilitators;
- Train teachers/facilitators and other school staff on signs of distress to enable them to identify and refer children who may have specific child protection needs; and
- Device measures to avoid stigmatisation of students, teachers and/or parents who may have been exposed to COVID-19.

Moreover, the World Bank has highlighted a number of concerns as education providers are rushing to go online so that education of the learners are least affected in times of social distancing amidst COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the issues raised by it are as follows:

- Transitioning to online learning at the current scale is challenging and highly complex undertaking for education systems, even in the best of circumstances;
- Moving to online learning at scale raises profound equity concerns;
- Highly motivated learners, especially those with previous experience in online learning, are the most likely to take the most advantage of online learning opportunities;
- When first going online, education systems and parents/guardians should expect dips in learners achievement in the short term;

- Organizing digital educational content to align with existing curricula can be critical in providing users and teachers with a way to ensure that the learning opportunities provided correspond to broader educational objectives within an education system;
- Making content available on a wide variety of devices and mobile friendly is critical;
- Supporting the use of low bandwidth including offline solutions is key to effective learning;
- Staff teaching online need to be supported;
- Universities need to negotiate with internet vendors to help provide access to online learning for learners for free or at a cheaper rate;
- Providing supplemental guidance and support on how to use and access remote and online learning content can be critical; and
- Some academic subjects are easier to move online than others (World Bank, 2020).

World Bank goes further and states that academic subjects that are largely lecture-based and lend themselves to self-study are easier to move online quickly. Subjects in which learning content has already been digitized, especially where it is explicitly aligned with official school curricula, offer better candidates for online learning in the short term than those that do not. World Bank also cautions all to be aware that much of what happens in classes cannot be easily transferred online. Instructional approaches, content, pacing, interaction models, and assessment may all need to be adapted when transitioning to online learning (World Bank, 2020). All these processes may be time consuming but a start needs to be made as it is not a matter of choice but a necessity in response to COVID-19 pandemic.

In essence, ICT has become a potent force in transforming the educational landscape the world over. However, preparing to shift education outside of traditional physical classrooms in response to COVID-19 requires thought, coordination and careful decision-making. This study is a starting point for planning and supporting a significant learning transformation. We need to be optimistic as literature entails a high level of learner satisfaction and interest in ICT immersed learning environment.

There has obviously been a great influence of technology in the online lives of young people. This digitalised revolution can synergise the educational ambitions and interests of the students who have become digital addicts. Overall, COVID-19 has provided the opportunity to adopt online learning as education systems need to be abreast with the rapid emergence of new technologies, thus making online, blended and remote learning a necessity in schools not only in Fiji but the world over.