

Chapter 8

Opportunities and Challenges of E-Learning in Spanish Institutions of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The global health crisis caused by COVID-19 led to the confinement of millions of people all over the world and generated an unprecedented global alarm. A consequence of the confinement was the suspension of face-to-face educational activity in all centres and levels of education, and the adoption of online modality. The aim of the chapter is to facilitate the understanding of the learning framework in online contexts and to explain some of the e-learning practices carried out by the University of Salamanca along the 2019-2020 academic year. It also offers a compilation of the strategies and lines of actions adopted by the university for the next academic year to guarantee the quality of the teaching learning process, to reinforce the technological equipment and telematic networks, to carry out a strong digital transformation of the institution, to bridge the digital divide, and to implement a training programme for teachers and students.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the public health emergency as international pandemic on March 11, 2020. This global health crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has led to the confinement of millions of people all over the world and has generated an unprecedented global alarm (Chen, Jin, Zhu, Fang, Wu, Du, et al., 2020; Geldsetzer, 2020; Sivakumar, 2020). As UNESCO (2020) points out

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most governments have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus what has impacted 70% of the world's student population. Regarding, the latest data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, more than a billion students enrolled in the different educational sectors have been affected by this closure.

In countries like Spain, the Government declared the state of alarm that imposed highly restrictive measures. It was established a limitation on the freedom of movement of people, it was suspended all non-essential activities and was adopted containment measures in the educational and training field (Gobierno de España, 2020a & 2020b). The last measures included in article 9, section 1 of the Royal Decree 463/2020, of March 14, declaring the state of alarm for the management of the health crisis situation caused by COVID-19, implied the "suspension of face-to-face educational activity in all centres and stages, cycles, degrees, courses and levels of education... including university education, as well like any educational or training activity taught in public or private centres." This Decree in article 2 also points out that "educational activities will be maintained through distance and online modalities, whenever possible".

Regarding this situation, most Spanish universities have opted for the transformation of their face-to-face teaching practice models to online ones (García-Peñalvo, Corell, Abella-García & Grande, 2020). In this sense, the Ministry of Universities published a set of recommendations based on general criteria for the adaptation of the Spanish university system to the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2019-2020 academic year (Castells & Pingarrón, 2020). On the other hand, on April 14, it was published a report of initiatives and tools for online assessment in university settings in order to offer alternatives to face-to-face assessment (González, Marco & Medina, 2020).

The Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Castilla y León (2020) published a document with guidelines for the adaptation of teaching of the universities that belong to the university system of Castilla y León to remote emergency teaching. Furthermore, the group of managers responsible for online teaching at the four public universities of Castilla y León, published on May 1 a guide of recommendations for online evaluation at these universities (Abella, Grande, García-Peñalvo & Corell, 2020).

The recommendations of the Spanish Ministry of Universities to be implemented in the 2020-2021 academic year refer to the need to establish a teaching framework with an adapted face-to-face component, so it is necessary to review and adapt the student ratio per class, or to combine face-to-face instruction and online broadcasting. These measures require that Spanish universities prepare contingency plans that must include key elements such as teacher training programmes on online teaching that must include both the purely technical aspects and the methodological ones, the adaptation of the assessment systems of the different Degrees and the establishing of specific schedules with students. The Ministry of Universities proposes a scenario with a preponderance of face-to-face teaching for the next academic year. However, it also includes the need of having a contingency plan that ensures the capacity of the educational system to tackle an online teaching system in case of health emergency.

The global pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 has led to the digitization of universities and their progress towards a more flexible university teaching. This requires a strong digital transformation of these institutions and, therefore, they are working to reinforce the computer equipment and telematic networks, teacher training in online instruction, and student training in the required technical skills to help to bridge the digital divide.

These changes require conceptualizing and reordering the institutional strategy and the existing working methods (García-Peñalvo, 2020a). The model that underlies online instruction is integrated by different elements from the institution strategic plan in which there are a set of academic services that are based

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