

SIRACUSA DOCUMENT

Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education during COVID 19

We are more powerful than what we think! At a low cost! Sami BASHA

Academia Post Corona I + II / 2020

At the conclusion of the two international meetings (14 April; 22 May 2020), together with more than 100 universities from more than 50 countries, more than 100 academics met together to discuss academia post corona. The American University of Sicily (AUS) who hosted this event is proud and happy to communicate the final recommendations and results of this international initiative under the title: Siracusa Document on the “Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education during COVID 19”.

(1) The American University of Sicily hosted the initiative supervised by its advisory board members and in collaboration with all AUS’s global partners. This initiative is inspired by the AUS vision and mission promoting increased internationalization to enrich academia. The first “Academia post Corona” meeting held remotely on April 14, 2020, was designed to be a dynamic international meeting involving scientists to produce innovative recommendations and propose concrete solutions. The second edition was also held remotely on May 22, 2020, as an effort to give participants a voice and an opportunity to share examples of effective and practical solutions to further the first discussion. We are grateful to many who took part in this, but a special thanks goes to Prof. Gregory Light, a former director of Searle Center for advancing teaching and Learning at Northwestern University and Dr. Rebecca Hopkins, Associate Dean of Learner Support and Transition at Western Technical College -- both are on our advisory board and have worked closely with Prof. Sami Basha, president of the American University of Sicily to bring to fruition these important events and document.

(2) Participants were drawn to this important meeting because they are seeking a quality dialogue about the potential role we all have in higher education post COVID. It was a crucial time to revisit roles, examine how the way of life will change with virtual learning and teaching, and discuss the impact of this pandemic on the higher education system worldwide. It was a great learning experience with distinguished speakers who inspired the various discussions. All participants brought their expertise, leadership, vision, knowledge and motivation to the gathering to help pave innovative ways into the future of online teaching and learning.

Preface

Out of these meetings, we are happy to share our perspective on effective practices that should be modelled for a successful and enriching experience in an online teaching and learning environment. It is important to highlight the fact that closure has increased the level of inequality in education, especially for those who were previously suffering especially in fragile countries where the necessary resources are not available. High numbers of students do not have a table to study and a large percentage live in very crowded places without the availability of computers or suitable electronic devices. Thus if we neglect these groups, higher education institutions

become hospitals that treat the healthy and leave the patients out. Further, higher education institutions will continue to perpetuate systemic inequality widening the divides and restricting social mobility.

In addition, there are high percentages of academics who do not have strong instructional skills for online platforms; accordingly, the technology is used to pour content without designing a more meaningful, engaged experience that this technology can offer. Hence, we need to find balance and intentional use of the technology and continue dialogue to improve our practice. Finally, we think that what is taking place around the world has not been a well-structured online teaching and learning experience, but rather an emergency intervention until academic life can return to normal. Many leading universities have shown great success while others are still suffering and will continue to have issues in regard to this sudden change, accordingly, we hope this transition period will give many the opportunity to revisit their curriculum and assessment structures, their academic offerings, and barriers that can be removed for students.

The following 10 points summarize the results of the two meetings. We think that in order to have successful online teaching and learning, there should be a well-defined roles and responsibilities of the main stakeholders in the educational process (decision makers, higher education institutions, faculty, students, and families):

(1) We consider this a time of new **discovery** for us as faculties and of our students and their capabilities to navigate in the world of technology. They can surprise us in their abilities, skills and competences. To make this happen, we need to have sincere dialogue with all students, as an important rule of the educational relationship, and create a healthy environment for them by providing more trust and confidence. Students are active partners -- they should be involved and their feedback invited to help in refining online sessions. Students have insights into their learning needs, and online instruction should also be personalized and intuitive.

(2) We need to implement online teaching and learning in a way that respects the **needs** of all students and ensures that all students have fair educational opportunities. An important focus goes to those students who have individual education programs; but also, generally speaking, differentiated instruction that is culturally responsive and includes deep learning engagement, peer to peer learning, and universal design for inclusive education.

(3) We deeply believe that **pedagogy** should lead the technology and not the contrary. Unfortunately, many of the online courses are a practice of pouring content to be consumed, which doesn't encourage engagement or learning.

(4) A validation of **academic freedom** would be essential for all countries to establish the importance of student and faculty inquiry regardless of learning platform so that faculties are empowered and supported in this rapid transition.

(5) Creating an online community is an **act of courage** and trust building knowledge acquisition that will affect the future of all societies. Accordingly, a similar act of courage should be exercised by governments and companies to obtain quality platforms and tools for the least amount of cost

to students and faculties in order to overcome the **economic** obstacle for online teaching and learning.

(6) We recommend that significant services should continue or should be immediately activated such as **counseling** and psychological support for students. Nevertheless, we believe that faculty availability and presence are key ingredients in eLearning success - especially for students who are struggling.

(7) There is a need to prepare a **guideline**, instructions and training for all faculties, with an executive summary that provides information, clarifications, and key recommendations to take into consideration for improving existing plans and developing new plans throughout the pandemic disruption and beyond.

(8) The following are some examples brought forward by participant's experiences from around the world: (a) Short daily or weekly videos or phone calls can help students be more engaged; (b) It takes a lot of communication skills and creative encouragement (words and action) to create attractive, effective lessons and provide full support to all learners; (c) We suggest that we give priority to mini-lectures/lessons and provide more time for interaction among students; (d) Integration of the mixed context (media, TV clips, newspapers, maps, animation and interactive Internet-based software tools etc.) will help keep student engagement and increase enthusiasm about learning; (e) Provide flexibility for homework schedules; (f) Research and inquiry with active feedback; (g) Problem solving exercises and homework can elevate the motivation of students; and (h) Project based teaching.

(9) A couple of issues should be put under focus and should be elaborated on in specialized sessions: online assessment / online program accreditation / Tuitions / employment / Practical courses (especially in the applied sciences).

(10) We believe that more should be done; still we consider unanimously that online teaching and learning should not be considered a permanent substitute for the face-to-face environment that meets diverse student needs and offers other competences and skills.

American University of Sicily



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