الأمانة العامة لمنظمة التعاون الإسلامي

Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

A Virtual Lecture On

Higher Education and COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities

By

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جامعة عفت
EFFAT UNIVERSITY

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام على أشرف المرسلين سيدنا

محمد وعلى آله وصحبه ومن تبعهم بإحسان إلى يوم الدين

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, and may peace and blessings be upon the most honorable people and messengers

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

Students,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by wishing you and your families my personal best—for your health and safety in these difficult times. Thank you ALL for joining this virtual meeting of OIC on International day of education. I take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to all those doctors, nurses, and workers who are serving so selflessly on the front lines of this health crisis.

My tremendous gratitude goes to HE Dr. Yousef A. Al-Othaimeen, the OIC's Secretary-General and The OIC Assistant Secretary General for Humanitarian,

Cultural and Social Affairs, HE Ambassador Tareq Bakheet for inviting me to speak at this international day for education. Effat University's relation with OIC is long-lasting and strategic. It is not only that we share a lot of core values in vital portfolios like women empowerment, education and providing better future for all, we also share the same founder, the late King Faisal Bin Abdulaziz AlSaud – May Allah rest his soul in peace.

As you might be aware, Effat University is established by Queen Effat Althunian, the wife of King Faisal (God rest both of them in peace). Those who do not belong to my generation and are not residents of Saudi Arabia may not be fully aware about the history of women education here. So, I will brief you very shortly about the Legacy of Queen Effat in Education and the vast paces towards empowering women by education in KSA. We are quite proud to say that Effat University is the first university established for women in Saudi Arabia that is built on continuation of Queen Effat Legacy who established the first school for women in Saudi Arabia. A fact that many do not know, most of the current

female leaders in our society are graduates of that school, Dar AlHanan. I am proud to say I am one of them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Covid-19 pandemic is not only a global health problem but also has severe impacts on human and social life, including employment, education, agriculture and the other spheres of the world economy. According to UNESCO, around 1.3 billion learners across the world were not able to attend school or university as of March 23, 2020, and current UNESCO statistics put this figure at over 1.5 billion. The shift of face-to-face teaching to online teaching and learning, and the cancellation of physical events and activities, formed our "new normality" in higher education.

While the COVID-19 has brought many challenges to higher education in teaching, learning, research collaborations, and institutional governance, it has also brought about an excellent opportunity for various stakeholders to re-think and even re-design higher education with an effective risk-management plan to

make this sector more sustainable and resilient in the future. **My lecture today** will elaborate briefly on digitalization and internationalization of higher education during COVID-19 and what the challenges and opportunities they brought to institutions around the world.

First: Digital Transformation of Higher Education: opportunities and Challenges

I would like to discuss the opportunities and challenges from four viewpoints:

1-Pedagogical Tensions: Content Delivery versus Learning

The Pandemic crisis forces higher education stakeholders to re-consider the role of information and communication technologies (ICT), especially online learning in higher education. Even though online learning has been treated as a remedy for higher education problems (like rising tuition costs), both students and instructors have expressed many negative concerns regarding learning effectiveness and interactions during the pandemic.

The online learning is an amalgamation of various pedagogical models instead of any one single model as it is a specialized learning science that includes delivery of content, behavioral analytics, learning psychology and assessments. This enables to measure the learning progress of individuals and therefore, having a 'hand-stitched' mechanism of delivery is the need of the hour. This is actually opposite to the continuous interactions and discussion in the face-to-face classes, where the teachers get an idea of the prior knowledge and the collective ability of the students based on which they can customize the teaching-learning techniques and lesson plans. However, this becomes difficult in the digital platform. The focus in the face-to face classes is not on delivering the content but ensuring effective opportunities for learning and thus, there is a need to shift from a teacher-centric approach to a learner-centric one. The aim is always to impact learners in such a manner that they are able to understand concepts better, think effectively and apply them practically. Thus, facilitators need to further orient themselves in becoming efficient disseminators of knowledge on digital platforms.

2- Issues of Social Justice: Digital Divide

COVID-19 has actually uncovered the phenomenon of **the digital divide**!!! It's now evident that there is a gap that has to be addressed to make sure that online education is accessible. To date, not all people can afford devices and decent data packages that would enable their remote studies. The divide also underpins the capabilities needed to make use of the technology. As thus, the cooperation of public and private sectors is crucial when it comes to nurturing a sustainable higher education system.

While higher education institutions in developed countries have managed well to implement digital learning, higher education institutes in most developing countries have to overcome many challenges before shifting completely to digital modes of learning. The access to technical gadgets, technical infrastructure are some major reasons behind access to higher education and thus, enabling the divide.

The digital divide has not only led to the exclusion of students from poor and marginalized backgrounds from digital learning but also pushed many underprivileged students towards depression and death. Thus, the pandemic has exposed the deeply rooted inequality and hierarchy between the rich and poor in the developing countries education system. Thus, it can be argued that the digital divide negatively affects the enrollment in higher education institutes and lack of digital access further pushes out students from colleges and universities in most developing states.

3- Online Educational Resources:

With education being forced to move online necessitate the emergence of new business models for the sector, wider investment in online learning and a greater adoption of micro- credentials and other alternative higher education models. Massive open online classes, or MOOCs, have seen a surge in enrollments since March. Enrollment at Coursera – an online platform that

offers MOOCs, has skyrocketed and was 640% higher from mid-March to mid-April than during the same period last year, growing from <u>1.6 to 10.3 million</u>. The surge was driven in part by giving free catalog access for 3,800 courses to their university partners. Enrollment at Udemy – another MOOC provider – <u>was up over 400% between February and March</u>. These surges correspond to lock downs across the world as the pandemic started to rage.

4-The Discourse of Online Teaching-Learning

Technology might simply fail due to non-availability of electricity across in all the places at the same time. Running videos, audios and programs on the online mode and integration with the learning management system of the college might result in problems on the virtual platform. Some theories suggest that more cheating happens in the virtual mode because of anonymity and distance between the students and faculty (Miller, 2016). However, this can be prevented by explaining the students properly, creating opportunities so that

students engage meaningfully with the content and holding them responsible for generating evidence that they have mastered the content (Miller, 2016).

In short and according to Judith Boettcher, an expert in online teaching, "we learn as social beings in a social context" (Miller, 2016). In a face-to-face environment, students get an opportunity to interact with the facilitator and other peers. In such an environment, meetings with teachers, classroom debates and discussions promote social connectedness among teachers and students. Students are affected by the absence and presence of their peers and teachers and thus, online learning needs to accommodate the aspects of social connectedness in their program design. The encouragement of cooperation and faculty-student connections are two of the principles that are connected to the idea of interpersonal connectedness. All in all and among the challenges to overcome is the urgency for the university community not to get caught up in the Coronateaching syndrome. And although the coronavirus has led universities to experiment in the model of distance education, it is important to

keep track of all the experience in order to recognize the positive and negative aspects, and what can be improved or discarded.

Second Internationalization of Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges.

In this area, I would like to highlight the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on student and academic mobility globally and regionally (both in terms of challenges and opportunities), global partnerships and collaboration, and off course we should also examine the impact of COVID-19 on scientific research and cooperation within and across the universities.

1- Student mobility and academic exchange

People across the world had adapted to the pandemic much more quickly than expected, through online tools of communication. The impact of that adaptation, especially the cross-border physical movement of students, academics and scholars, seems likely to be more profound than on any other

aspect of higher education. It is fairly clear that there will be a big fall in the number of international students and scholars globally. This will have a far-reaching impact on those countries in which universities and colleges predominantly rely on charging tuition fees from inbound international students. The universities and colleges in these countries will have to generate funding through other channels to survive. Typical countries include Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, the United States, Japan and South Korea. More importantly, it is highly possible that the role played by inbound international students in the finances of individual higher education institutions and their contribution to the national economy of host countries will become less important and indispensable than it has been until now.

2- GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION:

All of us are aware of the fact that alliances, networks and collaboration took different forms from MOUs to collaborative statements to legal agreements. These different forms encouraged student exchanges, co-teaching, research

and industrial international collaboration. Although the crisis stopped physical internationalization but has opened a window of opportunity for universities to collaborate together, engage even more with society, support governments through research and innovation and to help prepare a more resilient society.

3-Research Collaboration:

The pandemic had its toll on academic efforts and related mobility. Although some HEIs saw their research projects being canceled or delayed, other institutions, reportedly, witnessed an increase in collaboration and the creation of new opportunities. So the pandemic hasn't been all bad news!!! COVID-19 spurred the rapid mobilization of scientists worldwide and has fostered unprecedented global cooperation to develop a vaccine. The World Health Organization (WHO) created the R&D Blueprint, which has "facilitated a coordinated and accelerated response to COVID-19, including an unprecedented program to develop a vaccine, research into potential

pharmaceutical treatments and strengthened channels for information sharing between countries." Artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced computing power have facilitated the unparalleled rapid development and testing of potential vaccines. Through these collaborations, scientific researchers who otherwise may have never crossed paths are now able to discuss and brainstorm over videoconferences, share data, ideas, and findings, and work together to try and help find solutions.

To conclude, I was trying to answer the main question that represent the big question for leaders in higher education, and that is: **What can we expect from higher education institution for the day after Corona?**

The easy and most classical answer to say that classes will be mediated by technology, except in the workshops and laboratories. Hybridization will be the most outstanding option among students as a study modality, allowing the university community to be present on campus and in their homes in order to complete studies without running the risk of contagion. The secret for this

methodology to be successful is to achieve a greater capacity of support mechanisms in the universities for the development of capacities to assume technology as an ally and not as a complication or punishment.

On this grounds and as president of a university, my answer to this question will require a continuous public discourse among leaders of Higher education institutions. The continuous discourse with the community as well as the collaboration between universities and the industry will drive all universities to act as a vehicle for social and economic mobility, search for solutions to poverty and environmental problems. This eventually will help universities carry societal change and keep pace with the increasingly changing world of the 21st century.

Thank you very much for lessening and God bless you.