

Education Resilience in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

Due to the world pandemic, COVID-19, higher education institutions (HEIs) have found themselves in an unprecedented situation. Like no other time before, this pandemic has posed a serious test of resilience of HEIs – hence, the current study sets off to seize this opportunity to study the resilience of Omani HEIs. HEIs in Oman have devised contingency plans in light of the directives and declarations received from the government Supreme Committee responsible for handling the impact of COVID-19. The study aimed at examining the directives received by Omani HEIs against the framework of the securitization theory in order to identify the substances of the basis on which HEIs built their teaching and learning plans. The study was also planned to closely investigate the individual experiences of various stakeholders directly involved in the implementation of the contingency of the teaching and learning plans. Data were collected using document analysis and analysis of reflective texts. Discourse content analysis was applied in order to understand the lived experiences of stakeholders and to identify what shaped their experiences. The discourse of the collected data was analysed using the approach of thematic analysis which helped to identify recurrent patterns concerning the teaching and learning plans of some Omani HEIs during COVID-19. A number of challenges along with the challenges of other HEIs worldwide were identified, such as uncertainty and lack of resources and experience in online teaching and learning. The discussion of the findings in this study revealed dichotomies, as well as agreement, in the way stakeholders perceive aspects of the contingency plans of teaching, learning and assessment. On the basis of this finding, the study calls for a more nuanced approach to strengthen the resilience of higher education. Particularly, the study recommends incorporating processes of normalization of teaching and learning as well as of assessment in HEIs delivery modes as a way to consolidate HEIs' resilience.

Keywords: educational resilience, face-to-face securitization theory, face-to-face education, online teaching and learning, normalization

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Introduction

Resilience is a term in education concerned with the readiness of educational institutions to respond to challenging and unpredictable conditions. One of these conditions is the nowadays, rapid spread of COVID-19, to the extent that the World Health Organization (WHO) classifies it as 'pandemic'. Such a spread has put the HEIs worldwide in an unprecedented situation that they had to respond to. The World Economic Forum (2020) suggests that COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the necessity for educational institutions to review the skills and traits their students need in such challenging and unforeseeable circumstances. The Omani HEIs are no exception. Thus, most of the HEIs in Oman activated what can be called as "Emergency E-Learning" by transitioning to distance learning as a way to respond to this pandemic. Despite of this activation, this situation is still posing questions about the readiness of these institutions to respond to such pandemics.

This research paper aims to study the concept of "Emergency E-Learning" and how it is featured in official announcements from decision makers (i.e., the Supreme Committee entrusted to handle the developments resulting from COVID-19 pandemic, the Education Council and Ministries of Education & Higher Education) in terms of definition, rationale, support, etc. It also investigates how such directives are perceived and operationalised by stakeholders (i.e. admins, teachers, students, and parents). For the former aim, document analysis will be implemented whereas open-ended reflections for the latter. Carrying out such a study in the current time of COVID-19 has the potential to provide uniquely rigorous data. As a result, by studying aspects of resilience in the Omani HEIs system, this research project can effectively contribute in guiding the Omani HEIs to better prepare their stakeholders and programmes for any unpredictable and challenging conditions. Such guidance can be attained, for instance, through developing the educational policy that ensures building resilience in the Omani HEIs, which in turn could ensure readiness and adaptability to respond to similar situations in the future.

COVID-19 and the emergency of online teaching and learning

The sudden outbreak of the novel Coronavirus has posed profound challenges to all forms of social interaction and organisation. As soon as WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic and a global health crisis (on March 11th, 2020), most governments around the world, Oman included, declared the temporary closure of their educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of this pandemic. In a survey based on 424 higher education institutions (HEIs) from 109 countries conducted by the International Association of Universities, it was reported that almost all respondents stopped all on-campus activities (Marinoni, Land, & Jensen, 2020). These nationwide closures impacted over 91% of the world's student populations (UNESCO, 2020). Oman was no exception as it was announced by the Supreme Committee to handle the developments resulting from COVID-19 pandemic that all schools and HEIs were to be closed and that all types of study were moved to be online. The decision came into effect in Oman starting from March 15th, 2020 and remained so for the Spring and Summer terms in all HEIs. Compliance with this directive has impacted Omani HEIs in various ways as shifting to online teaching and learning requires, besides the infrastructure, systems in which teachers are sufficiently adept in managing the use of the multitude of learning and communication software and online platforms. The pandemic undoubtedly has challenged the ability of HEIs to adapt and to be resilient. In the rest of this section

of the study, a variety of experiences of HEIs from around the world are discussed. We also explore the impact of the pandemic on HEIs globally and the opportunities it may bring about.

As a mitigation measure to the threat posed by COVID-19 pandemic to the traditional face-to-face instruction, HEIs worldwide witnessed a rapid transition to online mode of instruction. The swift transition was presented as an alternative to the traditional face-to-face delivery mode in the statements and decisions from Government bodies and HEIs authorities responsible for regulating procedures to contain the spread of the Coronavirus. In a study that included 25 American universities, such decisions were examined from the perspective of securitization theory (Murphy, 2020). Securitization theory has been broadly described in the literature as a conceptual framework to explain (1) the security character of public problems (e.g., COVID-19 outbreak); (2) and the social commitments resulting from the collective acceptance that a phenomenon is a threat (Balzacq, Léonard, & Ruzicka, 2016). This theory helps to study security speech acts issued by authorities such as university presidents and chancellors. According to the theory, an issue is only securitized if the speech act presents a problem as a security threat and if it is accepted as such by the audience. In that study, the issue to be securitized was to continue the face-to-face mode of instruction and the security threat was COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that the rhetorical framing and precise timing of the 25 American HEIs' announcements tended toward the same result that face-to-face schooling could not continue. Although the framework of the theory of securitization might seem to be simplifying the issue at hand, it is useful for the current study as it provides a framework that helps to examine the characteristics of statements and decisions and to establish regularities regarding handling the impact of this pandemic on Omani HEIs. Particularly useful for the current study is the examination of the rhetoric of securitization directives - hence, the decision in the present study to frame its methodology within the parameters of discourse analysis.

In studying this movement to online learning contingency plans, a number of challenges have been identified worldwide. Among these challenges, two stand out as common; these are uncertainty and inequality. The uncertainty surrounding the disease behind this unprecedented situation has led to regulations that kept changing almost on a daily basis (WHO, 2020). With the information about the daily update of the pandemic, it followed that regulations adopted by various HEIs were changing constantly and expected to continue so resulting in very short-term plans stirring the uncertainty about the line of actions to follow (Allen, Rowan & Singh, 2020; Murphy, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). The other common challenge worldwide is the inequality of learning opportunities resulting from the rapid shift to emergency online teaching and learning. Such a shift intensified the workload of teachers because it did not only require uploading teaching materials online but also learning on the go about how to handle online teaching (Allen et al, 2020).

Another form of inequality that emerged amidst the move to emergency online teaching and learning is students', as well as teachers', access to devices and network (Murphy, 2020; Marinoni et al, 2020; Mohammed, Khidhir, Nazeer, Vijayan, 2020). In the COVID-19 IAU Global Survey Report (Marinoni et al, 2020), it was found that most of the HEIs that completely cancelled teaching and/or postponed exams were from various regions of Africa. The report following the survey explains that this was due to the lower degree of access to technology in the studied African regions when compared to the other regions of the world. However, access was still found

problematic in regions where 97% of the respondents reported that they had the necessary infrastructure in place but they still faced challenges in maintaining systematic communication with students. This finding suggests that access is not only linked to infrastructure but most importantly to being able to sufficiently manage and plan communication streams and platforms (Dhawan, 2020). Related to planning and managing is the issue of teachers' competence to handle online teaching and learning. Challenges also include lack of holistic quality assurance systems that help ensure achieving not only learning outcomes, but also social and emotional development of students (Schlund & Weissberg, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). Studies of the challenges of HEIs from around the world elucidate the relation between the rhetoric used by HEIs stakeholders in describing their experiences with emergency online teaching and learning and with educational planning and resilience – hence, the decision in the current study to examine HEIs resilience in relation to how stakeholders perceive certain aspects of online teaching and learning.

The discussion of the challenges brought about by implementing emergency online teaching and learning in the scholarly literature above was also followed by recommendations to develop policies and strategies that “frame the widespread adoption of online learning under COVID-19 as a pathway to a new normal rather than an emergency response” (Murphy, 2020, p. 500). Those studies have also highlighted that HEIs would benefit from a framework of competences through which they could provide professional development programmes for their staff in their attempt to normalize emergency online mode of instruction (Blumenstyk, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). Such mitigation measures could help HEIs become more resilient to any type or form of crises in the future, not only pandemics.

Methods of data collection and analysis

This research paper utilized a qualitative approach as it aimed to gain in-depth understanding of the state of resilience in the Omani HEIs systems. This depth of understanding was achieved by analysing and integrating qualitative data, from written discourse of documents and reflections, within the methodology of discourse analysis. Thus, a reflection form was designed and uploaded online about the stakeholders' practices, perceptions, and experiences of emergency online teaching and learning and towards directives issued on the COVID-19 outbreak. Bryman (2016) argues that one of the most appropriate methods for studying the target practices of any particular group, such as teachers or students, is to analyse a collection of authentic texts. Such an instrument is an example of ethnographic methods that focus “not just on the text itself [but also] on the context of production and reception of that text” (Flowerdew, 2002, p. 237).

The textual materials for this study came from samples of reflections of stakeholders and written directives issued by different HE authorities in the Sultanate. The reflection form seeks information about emergency online teaching and learning practices during the lockdown due to the pandemic. The form was disseminated between August 4 to 12, 2020 and it was open for one week for the participants to fill in. All the teacher and student participants were affiliated with Omani HEIs. In addition to the reflections, eight textual directives were analysed. The textual directives were a useful source to obtain an idea about how face-to-face instruction was securitized and emergency online learning was introduced as an alternative.

The invitation to participate in the study was sent out through social media to a number of potential participants. Minimizing coercion was the reason why social media were used, not official emails. The potential participants were sent invitations to take part in this study regardless of years of experience and institution level whether private or public. A total of ninety-five reflection forms were retrieved from teachers, students and parents. The completed reflection forms were all included in the study. The teacher participants were 46, and they were of various nationalities, such as Omani, British, Indian, and Filipino. Most of them held PhDs and MAs in education. Their experiences, both in and outside Oman, in teaching ranged from three to twenty-five years. The students in this study were 49 who were regular active students from various Omani HEIs. Their mother tongue is Arabic. They were selected randomly to represent the Omani HEIs students. The students were contacted, and they participated on a voluntary basis. To avoid bias by selecting high achieving students, nothing was known about the students' performance. In addition to the teachers, the study has also included four parents. This was to understand their views about the applied procedures in their children's institutions during the pandemic period. The participants were asked for their voluntary participation in the study prior to the online administration of the instrument.

Concurrent with collecting data in each stage, data were also analysed. Data analysis in this research study was not a self-contained phase that started after data collection had finished. Rather, it was interactive in the sense that the researchers constantly moved between it and the different stages and phases of the whole research process. Thematic analysis approach was utilized as a tool for the analysis of texts. Such analysis was carried out through recognizing emerging patterns and themes, and interpreting these patterns in line with the research target. This entailed a coding process of establishing new codes and evaluating the already existing ones. According to Creswell (2007, p.148), "qualitative data analysis consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion".

Various significant ethical issues were considered when conducting this research paper. For example, the participants' informed consent was gained prior to collecting the data. As the reflective forms were online, the participants were made aware that by filling out the forms they give their consent to the researchers to use the data they provide. They were also told that participating in the research was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the research whenever they felt that they might need to do so. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants were also taken into account throughout the study as they were assured that their names or workplaces would not be revealed.

Findings

Almost all the official announcements and statements that were disseminated by Omani HEIs to their staff started with what can be called "anchor". The anchor seemed to establish the grounds for what the announcement is intended to convey. Within the anchor a reference to COVID-19 pandemic and that it is a global issue is explicitly presented. Another feature that is common in almost all analysed directives is the reference to the government Supreme Committee entrusted to handle the development resulting from COVID-19 in Oman and that the forthcoming procedures are in light of the committee's directives. These features are in accordance with the securitization theory as they clearly instate and remind the audience (among which is the HEIs' administration

and staff) of the ‘securitization actor’ (i.e., the supreme committee) and of the ‘security threat’ (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic). Establishing these grounds where the ‘securitizing actor’ and ‘the securitizing threat’ are presented is one of the two components of the securitization theory (as in Murphy, 2020). The other component is the audience acceptance of the directive. The following sections reveal the acceptance of the audience (teachers, students and parents) and clarify their responses and reactions to the securitizing of the face-to-face mode of instruction.

The responses from the three groups of participants (teachers, students and parents) included the use of language that indicated acceptance of the shift to emergency online teaching and learning. Teachers and students described the shift as “inevitable” “necessary”, “timely”, “wise”, and a “good idea”. Some participants, both in the teachers’ group and the students’, justified their acceptance of this shift by referring to the fact that this is a global issue and the same mitigation step was followed in other worldwide HEIs. The parent participants described how they felt about this mitigation step as “happy”. This finding confirms the acceptance of the securitization of the face-to-face instruction and of the emergency online teaching and learning as its alternative. However, the participants in this study also associated shifting to emergency online teaching and learning with some challenges as presented in the following sections. These challenges have been categorized as uncertainty, difficulty and time pressure.

Uncertainty

Upon receiving the decision to shift to online mode of instruction, a number of participants from all three groups described the situation and/or themselves as being “confused”, “frustrated” and “uncertain”. According to the language used by the participants in explaining why they felt uncertain, it appears that the feeling of uncertainty was fueled by the lack of logistics (e.g., Devices and network) as well as online teaching and learning experience. A number of teacher and student participants highlighted that they felt “anxious” and “apprehensive” as it was a new experience for them. For teachers particularly, the uncertainty of the situation seems to be mainly concerning the ways how to handle emergency online teaching and learning.

Table 1. *Sample data*

Data	Area of uncertainty
<p>Teacher Participant 16: I thought how would we manage 100% online teaching?</p> <p>Teacher Participant 33: I didn't know how to reach and engage with the students except through the social media and one or two online teaching platforms;</p> <p>Teacher Participant 4: Challenging experience for us since we didn't introduce the idea of online teaching to the students.</p>	<p>Uncertain about how to handle emergency online teaching and learning.</p>

However, teacher and student participants expressed that the uncertainty of the situation improved over time. They explained that as they went on with it, they gained knowledge and experience. According to previous studies, this independent learning endeavor intensified the

workload of teachers (Allen et al, 2020). What seems to be different in the data provided by the students from those by the teachers is that some students described the uncertainty of the situation as unfair (e.g., participants 19, 22, 23 and 29). For some students, the shift being unfair seems to be a conviction and justified belief. This is clear from the data from students where they used language (such as “it is the reason for my low grades”) by which they explicitly linked the shift to their lower grades in the Spring semester in explaining why they think it was unfair.

Difficulty

The word “challenging” is used by all three participant groups in describing the shift to emergency online teaching and learning. Some participant teachers described the situation as being “overwhelming”. This is attributed, according to the teacher participants, not only to the lack of training in some institutions but also to the students’ attitudes which were described as “not cooperative”. The issue of lack of training was also mentioned by students as they used language by which they expressed their dissatisfaction with how some of their teachers handled online teaching. Students as well as parents pointed out that there was a clear need for training for teachers and students alike. Some teachers who claimed they received training called their experience with the online mode of instruction “successful”. The three participant groups expressed their concern about the ease and availability of the Internet access. A number of the student participants who mentioned access described it as “unavailable”, “unaffordable”, and/or “expensive”. Parents suggested providing devices and free cellular data for emergency online teaching and learning to work well. Due to these difficulties, the majority of student participants, unlike teachers, explicitly requested not to continue with emergency online teaching and learning and to find other alternatives taking into consideration social distancing if and when there is a need for it.

Timing

Particularly for students, and also for some teachers, the timing within a semester or a programme in which the shift happened influenced how it was perceived by students. Some students described it as “bad news” because it happened when it was but a week to the end of the term. Other students described it as “very bad” because it delayed their graduation. Some teachers claimed it was “not suitable” for foundation students who needed more of face-to-face instructions. When it comes to the timing of the shift to online mode of instruction, it seems that all participant groups agree that for it to happen in the beginning or end of the semester added to the difficulty of implementing it.

Discussion

The findings from the document analysis and from the reflective texts of stakeholders reflect an overall acceptance of the suspension of the face-to-face mode of instruction and of the shift to emergency online teaching and learning. Yet, the findings reveal that the embrace of emergency online mode of instruction by HEIs came with a number of challenges. One of these challenges is the level of uncertainty surrounding the situation posed by COVID-19 pandemic. While this echoes similar findings in other studies conducted elsewhere, such as North America (Murphy, 2020), Australia (Allen et al, 2020) and China (Zhu & Liu, 2020), the study provides more details about what it is exactly that teachers were uncertain about. The findings show that the teachers were particularly unsure about: (1) how long the emergency online teaching and learning was meant to last; and (2) how to go about the online teaching mode; yet, by time, their plans as well as the HEIs infrastructure improved. This suggests that Omani HEIs were in a constant revision of

their emergency online plans and were committed to improvement – a conclusion confirmed by a number of teacher participants (e.g., Teacher participants 16 & 30). Improvement over time was also highlighted by students (e.g., Student participants 10 & 13).

Teacher and student participants have pointed out that the difficulty of their experience in shifting to the online mode of teaching and learning was greatly influenced by whether or not they used online teaching and learning before the lockdown. While this might sound like stating the obvious, it still underscores an essential element of education resilience. That is, for HEIs to achieve a sustainable resilience in education, incorporating online teaching and learning is not a mere option as it impacts the level of readiness of the system and competence of teachers to handle teaching and learning in times of struggle and emergency.

Resilience may only be demonstrated in times of adversity (Doney, 2013) ... teachers require 'everyday resilience' (Gu & Day, 2013; Gu & Li, 2013) to manage uncertainty as well as the ongoing intellectual and emotional challenges of their work. Everyday resilience involves more than bouncing back from particular difficulties, rather, it is the capacity to manage ongoing and multiple challenges over time, while continuing to grow and thrive professionally (in Mansfield, Beltman, Weatherby-Fell, & Broadley, 2016, p. 85).

The findings here have indicated that issues with access such as unavailability of cellular network or not possessing a device that supports online teaching and learning platforms did add to the difficulty in shifting to online mode of instruction. Access is the only common issue that the three participant groups had in common. This finding is in line with findings in other studies where access was found particularly problematic for people in rural areas and for those who are in financial hardships (Murphy, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020).

Both teacher and student participants have claimed that the timing when the shift to online teaching and learning took place made it even more difficult. For teachers, it is found that it was particularly difficult because, according to a number of participant teachers, the shift to the online mode of teaching happened when it was but one week to the end of the semester. For students, it was not only the time within a semester that was to their dissatisfaction but also the time within their programme. Students who were in their last semester or those who had one semester to graduate described the situation as "unfair". Some students explicitly blamed the shift for their loss of grades. It is clear from these views regarding the timing of the shift that it is an issue of not only teaching but also assessment. It can be concluded from these views that to improve the resilience of an education system, not only online teaching that needs to be incorporated within regular HEIs teaching and learning programmes but also online assessment.

Recommendations

In light of the findings concerning the emergency online teaching and learning, Omani HEIs would benefit from maintaining their practice of revision and improvement while implementing emergency online teaching and learning. It was evident in the data provided by teachers as well as students that there was improvement in terms of utilization of online platforms and software. Yet, there seems to be a need for further improvement of the infrastructure needed for online teaching

and learning. This might not be directly within the control of HEIs as it requires efforts from the providers of cellular services. However, it still could be done with more cooperation with higher education policymakers. This cooperation is what IAU, based on their Global Survey Report (2020), called “multilateral cooperation” that takes place within the higher education sector and with policymakers – cooperation that could result in “evidence-based policy making mechanisms and more user-friendly digital learning systems” (Zhu & Liu, 2020, p. 4).

As securitization of face-to-face instruction is only temporary, Omani HEIs and others would benefit from setting programmes that blend traditional face-to-face and online modes of instruction. While this is an idea that has been proposed almost two decades ago (Bax, 2003), it is becoming more evident now in the ways COVID-19 pandemic has been handled by various HEIs worldwide. Adding to what previous studies suggested, the current study would push for blending not only teaching but also assessment; that is, incorporating online teaching and online assessment is integral components of the teaching and learning process, not forced into it; i.e., normalized online teaching and assessment. Prior to normalizing teaching and assessment within an emergency online teaching and learning programmes, HEIs would also benefit massively from perpetuating endeavors towards equality of access to and competence in technology, for all.

Conclusion

This paper examined the discourse of COVID-19 announcements and directives that concerned the operations of Omani HEIs. Alongside studying these announcements, various stakeholders were involved in the study by reflecting on their own experiences with regard to the ways in which HEIs responded to the announcements of the Supreme Committee during the time of COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the research paper indicated that the analysed directives were in total accordance with the securitization theory. There also seems to be a mix of opinions regarding the effectiveness of emergency online teaching and learning plans that HEIs adopted. Yet, there is a clear consensus when it comes to the challenges that students and teachers faced whilst applying emergency online teaching and learning – i.e., uncertainty due to COVID-19, difficulty of the infrastructure and experience in online teaching and learning, and timing as to when the shift happened. The study argues that the way forward for Omani HEIs in their pursuit of resilience is in setting contingency plans that strive to achieve higher levels of normalization of online teaching and learning and of assessment.

Limitations and future studies

Since all research studies are confronted by a number of limitations, in this study time was a challenge as collecting data was limited to two weeks of distribution through the use of electronic questionnaires. This constraint contributed to the fact that a small, but sufficient, number of completed surveys were received. Because of COVID-19, we had to rely on the use of electronic questionnaires and because of confidentiality, it was not possible to follow on with interviews.

Future studies could benefit from looking into the issue identified by this study. For instance, a replication study could be used within a single HEI by which each of the highlighted issues in the current study is to be examined in more details. Also, future studies could benefit from investigating the same issues in this study but using mixed methods such as questionnaire, interviews, observations and actual results of students’ performance on exams.

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