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Letter to the Editor

Impact Of Sars-Cov-2 And Its Reverberation In Global Higher Education And Mental Health



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ABSTRACT

Background: : According to UNESCO's monitoring, more than 160 countries implemented nationwide closures, which impacted over 87% of the world's student population. Several other countries implemented localized school closures; should these closures become nationwide, millions of additional learners will experience education disruption. Universities from around the world have been uncertain about how long the coronavirus crisis will last and how it might affect the mental health of students and faculty. The psychological impact has been a critical disruptor, creating anxiety and uncertainty.

Method: : The data were cross-checked with information from the main international newspapers.

Results: : By discussing online and distance education, the coronavirus opens an important and urgent issue that affects mental health – these are virtually unexplored topics, and their results have not been validated yet. Online education is not limited to distance education, as it regards a grouping of learning/teaching procedures completed in cyberspace. Blended learning was, thus, introduced as a tool in personalized learning to adjust to new realities. These are unprecedented circumstances, and we understand they create stress, favoring anguish and a fierce search for new knowledge acquisition.

Conclusions: : Current research highlights that anxiety and depression, exacerbated by uncertainties and intensification of the information flow, will grow extensively. Negative physiological consequences of stress will manifest. For instance, loneliness, which will increase under these circumstances, seems to have a negative impact on education and, therefore, on psychological pain and suffering.

UNESCO estimates that the closure of educational institutions because of the pandemic is affecting half of the world's students – 890 million in 114 countries. Online teaching is now a new routine for some students, but it presents significant challenges. Not all learners have access to this kind of education, considering social inequality in many nations (UNESCO, 2020; FVG, 2020). According to UNESCO's monitoring, more than 160 countries implemented nationwide closures, which impacted over 87% of the world's student population. Several other countries implemented localized school closures; should these closures become nationwide, millions of additional learners will experience education disruption (UNESCO, 2020). Universities from around the world have been uncertain about how long the coronavirus crisis will last and how it might affect the mental health of students and faculty. The psychological impact has been a critical disruptor, creating anxiety and uncertainty (CNN, 2020).

People must continue learning, especially underprivileged children and youngsters, who are mostly affected by school closures, and that is a massive problem to be solved. Although temporary school closures as a result of health crises and other emergencies are not new, the global scale and speed of the current educational disruption are unfortunately unmatched and, if prolonged, may cause psychological pain and suffering at different levels (ABC News, 2020). When learners, parents and teachers get nervous, they make different decisions. With great fear of a strong economic deceleration caused by the coronavirus outbreak, most students and parents now claim that accessibility, the weight of doubt and, above all, the debts that usually accompany a diploma are the main concerns (CNBC, 2020).

The outbreak has changed the schedule of conferences and sports events, and institutions are canceling classroom-based classes and converting them to online sessions. Colleges are being forced to consider large-scale preventive measures to keep students and professors healthy as well as to create plans for when infections materialize on campus. Educational institutions have also been dealing with the impact on exchange programs and foreign students. Colleges and universities must continue to address these and other series of profound and complex challenges in the short term. The real danger, however, may be in the long-term effects of the epidemic. Years of budget cuts and failure to meet students' basic needs make higher education especially vulnerable and potentially unequipped to handle a crisis like this (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). Current evidence shows that poor students will suffer more. About half of community college students and up to a third of four-year college and university students already face insecurity, fear, sense of loss and mood swings (The Hechinger, 2020).

Experts warn that the impact of this lethal SARS-CoV-2 will reverberate in global higher education much longer after the outbreak has been finally controlled. In the most affected areas, universities face the prospect of missing an entire semester or even more (The World University Rankings, 2020). Universities must consider different approaches to deal with the coronavirus to make foreign students more comfortable. Many students completing graduate programs face anxiety and panic due to the numerous implications for courses, assignments, seminars and thesis defenses (The Guardian, 2020). The global scale and speed of the current educational disruption are new (UN News, 2020).

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By discussing online and distance education, the coronavirus opens an important and urgent issue that affects mental health – these are virtually unexplored topics, and their results have not been validated yet. Online education is not limited to distance education, as it regards a grouping of learning/teaching procedures completed in cyberspace. Blended learning was, thus, introduced as a tool in personalized learning to adjust to new realities (USP, 2020). These are unprecedented circumstances, and we understand they create stress, favoring anguish and a fierce search for new knowledge acquisition (Lifestyle, 2020).

Thus, current research highlights that anxiety and depression, exacerbated by uncertainties and intensification of the information flow, will grow extensively. Negative physiological consequences of stress will manifest. For instance, loneliness, which will increase under these circumstances, seems to have a negative impact on education and, therefore, on psychological pain and suffering.

Authors' contributions

MLRN, and FJOA designed the review, developed the inclusion criteria, screened titles and abstracts, appraised the quality of included papers, and drafted the manuscript.

MMM, FJOA, PIMC, LSAL and CBN reviewed the study protocol and inclusion criteria and provided substantial input to the manuscript.

MLRN and FJOA reviewed the study protocol. MLRN read and screened articles for inclusion. All authors critically reviewed drafts and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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