# Innovations

# Recovery strategies in higher education during the post-COVID-19 era

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*Abstract*

*Problem: The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected the higher education landscape, bringing unprecedented challenges and prompting the application of strategies to cope with drastic changes. This study aimed to identify the recovery strategies employed in higher education as institutions gear for the post-COVID-19 era. Methodology: Systematic literature review was employed to draw relevant information from selected literature sources. Significant data were extracted, coded, and synthesized. Findings: The themes that emerged from the systematic literature review were as follows: learning from experiences to improve current capacity, communicating and collaborating with stakeholders, and attuning instruction to the new normal. Conclusion: The application of different recovery strategies benefited higher education institutions as they traverse the post-COVID-19 era. The application of these recovery strategies must be continued as they move towards the new normal.*

*keywords: recovery strategies, higher education, COVID-19 pandemic, post-COVID-19 era, post-pandemic, new normal*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented changes worldwide. It led to social distancing norms such as quarantine and lockdown that restricted movement and strained face-to-face services (Adarkwah & Agyemang, 2022). As a result, operations of industries worldwide were disrupted. Organizations were prompted to adapt to the changing environment by mobilizing their crisis management plans and adjusting the rate and mode of their operations.

The education sector was highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and on all continents were affected (United Nations, 2020 as cited in Stankovska et al., 2022).Educational leaders were pushed to strategize and to find ways to deliver services to the students outside the traditional way while ensuring the safety of the stakeholders (Harris, 2020 as cited in Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023).

The higher education sector faced a 'tidal wave of disruption' and a dramatic change in its global landscape because of the pandemic (MacIntosh, 2020 as cited in Ewing, 2020). Higher education institutions were closed completely in 185 countries in April 2020, affecting more than 1,000 million learners around the globe (Marinoni et al., 2020). Like any other organization, higher education institutions are required to adapt to the situation so that they can continue to fulfill their mission of

delivering instruction and to effectively manage stakeholders, such as students, faculty, and the administrative staff (Nandy et al., 2021).

With this, higher education institutions shifted to remote education, utilizing online, flexible, or blended learning modality to deliver instruction. As the teaching-learning process progressed amidst the pandemic, stakeholders in higher education experienced various challenges. Inequality in educational opportunities, international mobility concerns, sleep disorders from prolonged screen time, and low student achievement in online classes were some of these challenges (Treve, 2021). The sudden shift to a remote environment adversely affected the physical and emotional states of teachers and students (Bryam, 2021).

Additionally, the higher education sector experienced difficulty in the adoption of virtual learning models which caused increased worry and feeling of alienation among students in the learning process (Akramy, 2022). Inadequate ICT systems and technical issues in the use of eLearning platforms such as learning management systems and videoconferencing tools also emerged as impediments in learning during the pandemic (Cesco et al., 2021).

Despite the emergence of various challenges, higher education institutions were able to navigate their way amidst the pandemic and continue their operations in the post-COVID-19 era. The post-COVID-19 era refers to "an evolutionary phase concerning the period emerging after the COVID-19 crisis, which leads the global socioeconomic system and the various actors at all levels to irreversible transformations" (Vlados et al., 2022, p.21). It is also described as "the period after the lockdown has been imposed and in which businesses have been relaxed by the government"(Raimi, 2021, p.317).

The transition towards the post-COVID-19 era signaled the application of recovery strategies to drive operations back to their normal condition or towards an improved state. This study aimed to identify the recovery strategies employed in higher education during the post-COVID-19 era. It is important to examine the recovery strategies in higher education because it provides a clear insight on how identified educational gaps can be resolved as institutions steer the future of education while traversing the current pandemic. Moreover, identifying recovery strategies would help educational leaders and stakeholders in managing and recovering from a similar crisis that might occur in the future.

**Methodology**

Systematic literature review was used in this study. Systematic literature reviews involve the identification, selection, and appraisal of empirical evidence from significant literature sources to answer a research question(Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023).

The review process for this study involved the selection of journals and application of inclusion and exclusion criteria in the selection of researches. The databases used in this study were Google Scholar, Scopus, and Science Direct. The search terms or keywords used for this review included the following terms: recovery strategies, post-COVID-19era, COVID-19 pandemic, post-pandemic, and higher education.

The inclusion criteria included were as follows: studies that were published between 2019 and the first quarter of 2023, studies with an abstract and a full paper written in English, and studies that indicated the recovery strategies employed in higher education institutions to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. The exclusion criteria were as follows: studies not written in English, studies that did not provide findings from the data, and studies published in sources different from journals and conference proceedings. After the selection of studies, relevant data were extracted, coded, and synthesized.

**Findings**

The following themes regarding the recovery strategies in higher education during the post-COVID-19 era emerged from the literature review: learning from experiences to improve current capacity, attuning instruction to the new and next normal, and strengthening relationships with stakeholders.

**Learning from experiences to improve current capacity**

The lived experiences of students, teachers, administrators and other educational stakeholders worldwide reveal the magnitude of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought

challenges but it also opened opportunities for innovation and reflection of current practices in higher education. According to Nandy et al. (2021), the pandemic "has not caused cracks – it has revealed them" (p. 4), suggesting that the pandemic paved the way for the identification of flaws or gaps in the higher education system.

In the recovery process, higher education stakeholders revisited the challenges they faced and solutions they employed amidst the pandemic in order to facilitate their recovery and the improvement of their current capacity. In the context of crisis management, capacity refers to "all the strengths, attributes and resources available within an organization, community or society to manage and reduce disaster risks and strengthen resilience" (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2017, para. 1).

In line with this, reflection and learning were found to be essential in carrying out continuity plans and in enabling higher education institutions to come up with a strategic approach to react productively to adverse events in the future (Shaya et al., 2022). Raising the awareness of stakeholders on epidemics and pandemics and involving them in drills and simulations facilitated the institution's recovery and enhancement of current disaster preparedness capacity(Izumi et al., 2020).

These findings imply that lessons drawn from the pandemic can help higher education institutions bolster their current crisis plans, practices, and systems so that they can emerge stronger from the pandemic and be more effective in responding to future crisis. As the higher education sector recovers during the post-COVID-19 era, institutions have to upskill their employees and invest in staff development (Ewing, 2021). This would strengthen the institutions' ability to effectively and efficiently respond to future adverse events. Reskilling employees in the post-pandemic period would also build resilience, the ability to withstand adversity and recover from challenges (Agrawal et al., 2022).

Aside from reskilling, higher education institutions also have to develop recovery plans that encompass the academic, physical, fiscal, psychological, and emotional aspects of recovery in higher education environments (Cahapay, 2021). By developing multifaceted recovery plans, higher education institutions are able to provide essential services and keep their operations running while nurturing health, safety, and well-being of the stakeholders.

To summarize, learning from experiences to improve current capacity was one of the themes that emerged from the review. This enabled higher education institutions to revisit their current practices and enhance their existing crisis plans to prepare for future crisis.

**Communicating and collaborating with stakeholders**

Communicating and collaborating with stakeholders were essential in the post-pandemic recovery of higher education institutions. The application of communicative strategies helped internal and external stakeholders in higher education identify what steps need to be taken and how they will be implemented (Ahmed et al. 2020). The transparent and consistent dissemination of information to all stakeholders helped higher education institutions in their recovery process (Samarasekera et al., 2021).

Moreover, the collaborative roles that students, teachers, and other stakeholders played proved to be paramount in the institutions' resumption to onsite learning (Adarkwah et al., 2022). The educational leaders' application of participative approach helped build strong partnerships between students and academic faculty which helped in facilitating the stakeholders' post-pandemic recovery (Samarasekera et al., 2021). The consensus among stakeholders in the decision-making process helped the institutions manage the crisis and implement decisions that are beneficial to the stakeholders in the post-pandemic period (Ahmed et al. 2020).

These findings imply that communicating and collaborating with stakeholders provide invaluable support to higher education institutions as they recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Communicating effectively in times of crisis "reduces uncertainty, engages stakeholders, and moves the business forward with purpose and clarity" (Beehive Strategic Communication, 2020). It can also build trust, an essential trait that makes stakeholders more likely to follow directives and cooperate with recovery plans (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2021). As a unit that involves thousands of stakeholders, higher education institutions must put premium on establishing clear channels of communication and ensuring two-way exchange of information.

Aside from communication, higher education institutions also need to strengthen their collaboration with stakeholders. Collaboration opens the opportunity of sharing knowledge and experience that lead to rapid progress and helps establish good practices and mutual trust (BMJ, 2021). Additionally, collaboration can help higher education administrators understand how employees are coping, detect aspects of interaction that can be further improved, and reinforce professional relationships among stakeholders so that they can have a robust support system (Gardner & Matviak, 2020).

Educational leaders have to recognize the value of building and maintaining connections and relationships with stakeholders (Ewing, 2021). Moreover, policymakers must recognize the contributions of stakeholders in the recovery process of higher education institutions and implement favorable motivational policies that would benefit the stakeholders (Adarkwah et al., 2022).

To summarize, communicating and collaborating with stakeholders as a theme highlighted the valuable roles of students, teachers, administrators, staff, crisis teams, and other stakeholders in the recovery of higher education institutions.

**Attuning instruction to the new normal**

The pandemic triggered the need to find alternatives to the conventional classroom-based teaching methods (Izumi et al., 2020).To cope with the limitation on face-to-face communication brought about by the pandemic, higher education institutions shifted to remote learning modalities. Moving towards the post-COVID-19 era, higher education institutions continued to attune instruction to the new normal. Instruction refers to the process of teaching and engaging students with content. In the educational context, new normal refers to the state wherein "education expected in the post COVID-19 age will be different from the way education was commonly practiced in the pre-COVID-19 days" (Xiao, 2021, p.15).

It was found that online distance education which emerged out of care, inclusion, and equity, had a lot to offer in the recovery of higher education institutions in the new normal (Xiao, 2021). The development of robust online platforms became necessary in enabling learning continuity (Stankovska et al., 2022).Moreover, the shift to online delivery made it possible for higher education institutions to continue the teaching-learning process while giving emphasis on the need for intentionally designing online learning for the future (Udeogalanya, 2022).

These imply that embracing change and recalibrating instruction to meet the current and future demands in education is essential in the recovery of higher education. Higher education institutions have to continuously improve their instructional delivery models (Cahapay, 2021). Institutions need to think beyond traditional methods to support teaching-learning innovations and cope with societal transformations brought about by the pandemic.

Considering the wider range of teaching methodology and tools, it is vital for higher education institutions to maximize the internet in effectively providing instructional resources (Izumi et al, 2020).Higher education institutions must capitalize on blended learning which preserves student-teacher connection and peer learning while providing students with flexibility (Phillips et al., 2016, as cited in Platonova et al., 2022).

Additionally, they must be open for bimodal delivery of academic programs since a combination of face-to-face and online learning may be the new norm (Kara, 2021).With this, universities must maximize technology usage while enhancing human inter actions and personalize instruction to keep education relevant in the coming years (Gast, 2022 as cited in Rasli et al., 2022).

To summarize, attuning instruction to the new normal as a theme emphasized the value of adjusting instruction, embracing change, and maximizing technological resources in the recovery of higher education institutions.

**Conclusion**

It is concluded that the application of various recovery strategies, such as drawing lessons from experiences, working closely with stakeholders, and adjusting instruction to fit the needs of the current times helped higher education institutions traverse the post-COVID-19 era. Higher education institutions have to continue the application of recovery strategies as they advance towards the next normal.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that stakeholders in higher education hold recollection sessions or conduct meetings where they can review lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and share suggestions for the enhancement of the institutions' recovery plans. It is also recommended that challenges in technological access and difficulties in delivery of instruction be addressed to ensure the success of attuning instruction to the new normal. Furthermore, constant communication and strong collaboration with stakeholders have to be maintained in the post-COVID-19 era.

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