

Strengthening Connections through Virtual Education

Turning the Challenges of COVID-19 into an Opportunity

By Mahdi Kleibo



Undoubtedly, we are all facing an unprecedented situation brought about by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic that has hit the entire world. It is a difficult period, as we cannot assess entirely the potential risks and their consequences.

This crisis may be the first real call to awareness in Palestine, asking us to tackle the ongoing digital revolution, and we must avoid a poor recovery plan with inadequate responses to the unpredictable situations that might emerge in the near future. Yet, while higher education is being tested in Palestine, serious proactive actions have been embraced by academics with adequate expertise in the fields of crisis management, information technology, globalization, internationalization, and institutionalization. In the spring of 2020, individuals and institutions aggressively responded, aiming to secure learning outcomes, as they were in danger of falling prey to the brutal attack of the novel coronavirus. To endure the restrictions imposed by the need to save lives, efforts to rescue the academic year 2020 have united Palestinian minds who presented solutions and made effective contributions in these troubled times. This common solidarity and mutual support have allowed us to bear the ongoing difficulties, minimize costs, and keep up hope for better days to come.

As mobility restrictions continue to control the socio-economic and education sectors in Palestine, the double burden of adapting to COVID-19 while living under occupation will further reduce the already limited possibilities of advancing education. Both conditions affect access to travel. Therefore, we must find alternative ways to increase the competencies of individual learners, helping them become proactive members of the global knowledge society. We must not only enhance the learning process of students and help them acquire twenty-first century competencies, enabling them to become autonomous and active learners but also provide opportunities for capacity building among lecturers. These efforts will improve the quality of teaching and learning at our universities. Developing innovative education programs and fostering regional integration and cooperation across different regions will improve the skills and levels of competence at higher education institutions (HEIs) in the long term.

Connecting online-teaching strategies to a better and intensified engagement in internationalization requires a rescue plan for the COVID-19 crisis. This can be achieved by adopting and embedding into curricula virtual exchange programs that can be presented as co-curricular activities. Such measures can contribute to a better

When we are detained or imprisoned, we can choose to be free in mind.



Online class during the lockdown.

understanding of how HEIs should address changes, both in teaching and learning and in international cooperation. Predictably, such an approach will be a key topic in post-crisis policy debates on higher education and a priority issue in regional, national, and institutional development efforts.

In response to the upcoming challenges regarding teaching at HEIs in Palestine, the ongoing interactive online courses that are held via accessible virtual media serve to strengthen teaching and learning capacities, as we are applying twenty-first century skills at our residences with increasing ease and comfort. It is impressive to see educators and students continue their educational programs

by adapting to innovative ways of engaging in online learning experiences. Regarding international exchange, Bethlehem University, for example, has been very fortunate to see an increased interest in cooperation and collaboration with the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Project that was initiated during the spring semester of the 2019/2020 academic year. Over 150 registered undergraduate students, staff, and academics have been involved so far in the virtual learning project that aims to complement the traditional physical Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility Program with partner countries. This project expands the HEI scope and reach for individuals who would not otherwise be able to benefit from intercultural learning



Group photo with Bethlehem University staff at a conference on internationalization opportunities and logistics at Deusto University, Spain. Photo courtesy of the author.

experiences. It aims to empower the Palestinian community at HEIs with skills that will help them succeed in their careers and fulfill the needs and demands of the local and international labor market during the information age. Having embedded and integrated the virtual exchange project into my teaching in recent months, I can assert that the outcome has been positive, and I highly recommend this project and approach. Regarding my personal development, the adoption of this method has helped me shift from a teacher-centered learning approach to a learner- and virtual-training-centered approach.

But there are many more opportunities available for online exchange. During the coronavirus pandemic lockdown, the Erasmus + Virtual Exchange Project opened several courses, recruited additional highly qualified virtual online facilitators, and opened more virtual classrooms to welcome a larger number of partner universities. To overcome the obstacles that are created by the occupation, exacerbated by the COVID-19

As we face the difficulties posed by COVID-19, most of us aspire to craft responses that allow us to “rise above.” We Palestinians have been forced to learn to adapt in ways that push us to new levels of insight and performance. The ongoing COVID-19 crisis is only the latest in a series of stress tests for our local education entity. Now, the question is how far the already existing internationalization scheme can be stretched in these uncertain times.

pandemic, and hinder academic development in Palestine, Bethlehem University, for example, entered into an academic La Salle International Collaboration Learning Project with the International Association of La Salle Universities and Universidad La Salle Mexico. This project aims to facilitate a higher quality of education by enabling academic participants to enhance their capabilities. It familiarizes them with the most up-to-date educational learning and virtual training methods to promote international collaboration between Lasallian teachers and students without mobility.

Several online webinar workshops have been organized by the Erasmus + Virtual Exchange Project, developed and presented by the Anna Lindh Foundation and the Mediterranean Universities Union UNIMED. They include the open online course titled “Euro-Mediterranean Intercultural Trends”^{vi} and the webinar “Interested in designing a Virtual Exchange project for your students promptly and effectively? Advice from experienced teaching staff,”^{vii} that were conducted, recorded, and posted on YouTube and also promote and foster a variety of practices in internationalization during crisis management.

The world is changing quickly, and our students’ professional needs change with it every day. Professional preparation cannot be limited to content approach and task development within classrooms. Future professionals must enlarge their horizons and be given the opportunity to know, compare, characterize, analyze, and recognize the differences that exist in various cultural, social, political, and economic contexts.

As the COVID-19 pandemic presents short- to longer-term challenges for the vast majority of societies worldwide, affecting institutions and the pursuit of higher education, internationalization is a vital topic in 2020. Must we reconsider existing structures and come up with new schemes to shape the educational future scope for generations to come? What habits of mind and action are needed to keep us continuously alert and adaptable?

Our upcoming generations are becoming increasingly aware that they are not only citizens of their own communities but also citizens of the world. They are aware of the interconnection between different countries at the social, political, economic, and professional levels. They feel like real members of humanity and recognize the richness that the diversity of cultures offers in our globalized world. They stay permanently connected to the web, building their own reality. We as youth mentors know that many potential recruiters, locally and internationally, require professionals



who possess the skills necessary to interact in an increasingly articulated world. Such skills include the abilities to communicate in other languages, work collaboratively, and solve problems together. These abilities must be combined with a mastery of digital skills and with attitudes towards their peers that are governed by ethical conscience and respect for cultural, linguistic, religious, physical, and ideological differences, among others.

In this context, our HEIs have the obligation to provide globalized exposure and experiences that enable students and educators to face the challenges that the globalized professional world presents to them. The institutions, in turn, face the challenge of how to offer a sustainable platform that provides these experiences, allowing youth and adults to develop these kinds of skills and knowledge, regardless of the professional areas they pursue. To maximize the potential of such virtual experiences, the interaction must be carried out not only with colleagues but also with peers from other cultures, contexts, and realities. Then students and educators can improve skills that range from the mastery of foreign languages to the development of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills, geographic knowledge, and

cross-cultural understanding – skills that have become mandatory today. Such virtual training allows students and educators to be empowered so that they can understand and interact effectively with people from any part of the world, as is currently the case in the professional world. In this way our graduated professionals will have the ability to negotiate, make agreements, plan and define strategies, and solve problems with innovative professional proposals in a globalized context through working together with people located anywhere in the world.

In order to live meaningful experiences that allow knowing other realities and contexts, many of our HEIs must strengthen their internationalization programs by expanding their adaptability through new forms of virtual agreements, offering their students and educators access to academic exchange through virtual study programs. Access to the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility exchange program tends to be available to only a few students due to multifactorial reasons that range from political to economic, cultural, or social factors. Not all individuals will have the opportunity to develop intercultural skills and global competence, so important for current competitiveness. Thus, employing a wide variety

of technologies in educational pedagogy and integrating virtual programs into our Palestinian higher educational system seems a logical and practical solution, if not a necessity. Such forms of accessibility may allow primary administrative staff and educators as well as undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students to enjoy meaningful, transnational, and intercultural experiences. Virtual programs provide important international opportunities for Palestinian academic and youth institutions and organizations that are not able to support a physical mobility experience, including students with special needs. As such, virtual programs offer access to a safe online community to facilitate participation in discussions, increase intercultural awareness, and build twenty-first-century skills through virtual exchange.

I believe that there is an urgent need to influence decision-makers, requesting that they accredit modern teaching methodologies that embed virtual exchange programs to increase the exposure of students and academics and impart the required skills to match the demands and expectations of local and international labor enterprises.

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Classical teaching cannot be limited to addressing content and developing tasks inside the classroom. It is well known that the Palestinian community at higher educational entities requires broad horizons. Students and teaching staff must be given the opportunity to gain knowledge and compare, characterize, contextualize, and analyze the differences that exist in various cultural, social, political, and economic contexts.

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ⁱ For more information, please visit <https://www.annalindhoundation.org/intercultural-trends-course>.

ⁱⁱ For more information on this and similar courses, please visit https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/information-webinars_en.