

# THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES IN CYPRUS DURING COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANISATIONS

## WPŁYW OGRANICZEŃ EDUKACJI NA CYPRZE PODCZAS COVID-19: IMPLIKACJA DLA SZKOLNICTWA WYŻSZEGO

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**Abstract:** COVID-19-induced restrictions on traditional classroom-based contact have posed significant challenges to academic teaching and students as well as to the management of HEIs. The new setting and extraordinary government directives culminated into threats to the quality of teaching, therefore it is important to study adaptation strategies<sup>1</sup> in teaching and valuable lessons learned in an era when learning was substantially converted to online teaching. The main aim of this exploration study has been to identify how teaching staff adjusted teaching strategies during 2020 and what their expectations were with regards to their students' intended learning outcomes, taking into account that learning outcomes are also related to student satisfaction. This is crucial in case COVID-19 restrictions are prolonged and online learning extended. Results from a group of 76 lecturers indicate that they have to some extent engaged in adapting conventional teaching methodologies to the new conditionalities; that for many among them, restrictions have negatively impacted quality of teaching while for a portion of lecturers the attainment of intended learning outcomes by students may have been a very difficult task. Results suggest the need to consider newer versions of teaching strategies identifying student problems; and enhancing engagement.

**Keywords:** online learning, HEIs management, COVID-19, learning outcomes, adaptation strategies, flipped classroom

**Streszczenie:** Ograniczenia tradycyjnego kontaktu na uczelni związane z COVID-19 stanowią poważne wyzwanie dla nauczania akademickiego i studentów, a także dla zarządzania uczelniami. Te nadzwyczajne nowe i dyrektywy rządowe doprowadziły również do zagrożeń dla jakości nauczania, dlatego ważne jest, aby przestudiować strategie adaptacyjne w nauczaniu i wnioski wyciągnięte w czasie, gdy uczenie się zostało w znacznym stopniu przekształcone w nauczanie on-line. Głównym celem tego badania eksploracyjnego było określenie, w jaki sposób kadra nauczycielska dostosowała strategie nauczania w 2020 r. I jakie były ich oczekiwania w odniesieniu do zamierzonych efektów uczenia się studentów, ponieważ efekty uczenia się są również związane z satysfakcją uczniów. Ma to kluczowe znaczenie w przypadku przedłużenia ograniczeń związanych z COVID-19 i rozszerzenia nauki on-line. Wyniki z grupy 76 wykładowców wskazują, że kadra dydaktyczna w pewnym stopniu zaangażowała się w dostosowywanie konwencjonalnych metodyk nauczania do nowych uwarunkowań. Ograniczenia w przypadku dużej grupy nieco negatywnie wpłynęły na jakość nauczania wykładowców, natomiast w świadomości części nauczycieli osiągnięcie zamierzonych efektów uczenia się przez studentów mogło być bardzo trudnym zadaniem. Wyniki sugerują potrzebę rozważenia nowszych wersji strategii nauczania identyfikujących problemy uczniów i wzmacniających zaangażowanie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zdalne nauczanie, zarządzanie uczelniami, COVID-19, efekty uczenia się, strategie adaptacyjne, odwrócona klasa

### Introduction

Educators in Cyprus, as in the rest of the world, after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11 2020, experienced challenges in having to adapt

programmes and learning across the education continuum (Cleland et al., 2020) undergoing an unprecedented "migration" from traditional in-class, face-to-face teaching to online education (Bao, 2020). As of 19 March 2020, almost a billion young people, as declared by UNESCO, had had to stay away from schools and universities. Following

<sup>1</sup> The term strategy implies thoughtful planning to do something.

the government's requirements for "non-stop teaching and learning," coordinated under a common European response to the outbreak of COVID-19 (Coronavirus European response, 2020), most Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Cyprus transitioned to distance learning mode of delivery for each Programme of Study, utilizing online and digital tools and techniques (CYQAA, 10 March 2020). HEIs maintained that "the high quality of education offered by universities in Cyprus continues to be assured, with the active support and constructive contribution of the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (CYQAA)" (Rectors Conference, 2020). Within a short time span, hundreds of faculty members across all types of Higher Education settings, started to teach online while their homebound students attended courses through specialized platforms, following the guidance by CYQAA which emphasized the need to save the academic year from coronavirus (CYQAA, 10 March 2020).

On 31 March, the CYQAA issued Guidelines for Quality Assurance and alternative forms of student evaluation, therefore allowing remote studying and assessment, whilst facilitating many international students who were not permitted to return to Cyprus from their home countries. Approximately 27,000 European and international students are enrolled in HEIs in Cyprus, which is about half of the total student population, based on Ministry of Education calculations.

## Literature Review

Teaching techniques and approaches are of paramount importance (Toquero, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. Online learning techniques facilitate flexibility of time management and place of teaching (i.e. home) as argued by Corbeil (2007) while – under specific circumstances – they may allow students to self-regulate learning, e.g. via video on demand (Sha Looi et al., 2012). Online Learning tools in Higher Education can enhance high quality of teaching (Caballero-Hernandez, 2020). Within a short period of time after its onset, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the role of remote working, e-learning, video streaming on a broad scale (Ebner et al., 2020). Though the aforementioned are true, there is still "ambiguity and disagreement about what to teach, how to teach, the workload of teachers and students, the teaching environment, and the implications for education equity" (Ali, 2020). What is more, deficiencies such as the teachers'

inexperience in online teaching or a complex environment at home, do exist (Murgatrot, 2020).

From the perspective of HEIs Management Teams (MTs), student satisfaction (which is linked to perceived Learning Outcomes), derived from measures such as curricula amendments, is crucial since changes are brought to bear on education performance and attainment goals (Choi et al., 2020). Baber (2020) found that specific factors such as interaction in the classroom, student motivation, course structure, instructor knowledge, and facilitation positively influence students' perceived learning outcome (LO) and student satisfaction. Further, children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder have faced significant challenges in adapting to online learning during the pandemic (Hai et al., 2021) and one may legitimately consider that the same may be true for University students with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.

Therefore, COVID-19 induced changes such as lockdowns and restrictions to movement and face-to-face study, and the shift to distance learning can influence the quality of teaching, the level of LO attainment by students, and student performance and satisfaction which are in turn related to the performance of Higher Education Institutes. Research indicates that during the forceful shift from face-to-face to distance learning mode, students perceived the image of HEIs as one grappling with chaos. This might be because students and instructors cannot see and communicate with each other face-to-face, therefore HEIs should compensate for this disadvantage. Therefore, HEIs leadership should act in a manner which provides insights towards facilitating educational policies that could promote students' positive perception of distance learning in turbulent times (Kulikowski et al., 2021).

The main aim of this study has been to explore the adaptation of learning methods<sup>3</sup> in Higher Education settings in Cyprus, during the transition from face-to-face learning to online teaching amid COVID 19 restrictions and to offer some input on the ongoing discussions about quality of teaching and student learning outcomes. This kind of research is useful in contributing toward a fine-tuned adaptation of the learning process to the new conditions posed by the pandemic.

## Methodology

The participants consisted of 76 academics from four HEIs in Cyprus, who after approval by the

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<sup>2</sup> Techniques signify a series of steps that an instructor takes to employ any general model being used in the classroom, see Orlich, D.C., and al. (2012). *Teaching strategies: A guide to effective instruction*. Cengage Learning.

<sup>3</sup> The term method implies some orderly way of doing something.

National Bioethics Committee of Cyprus (EEBK ΕΠ 2021.01.127), were administered an online questionnaire consisting of fifteen items.

### Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

The majority of participants have more than ten years of teaching experience (57%); 12% have taught for more than six years and the rest of them for five years or less. As regards their employment status, the majority (n=41) are full-time personnel, the rest have a part-time employment contract. 89% of participants usually teach (last three years) at undergraduate level or at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

### Results

The vast majority of the sample (97%) received and/or discussed guidelines or best practices in teaching online during COVID-19, and were therefore familiar with distance learning strategies and methodologies (Fig. 1). Nevertheless, only 15% of the respondents had specifically discussed best practices for teaching with peers at the time.

Figure 2 shows that 47% of the sample experienced a fundamental shift of teaching strategy/methodology due to COVID-19 restrictions while 51% made at least minor interventions to teaching strategy and methodology of teaching due to COVID-19 related restrictions.

Figure 3 shows that out of twenty techniques, teachers pointed to discussion, lectures, and case study as the most helpful ones in transferring knowledge/learning outcomes to students during COVID-19 restrictions. Following closely are assignments, exercises and break-out rooms for collaboration.

The next figure (Fig. 4) shows that, out of twenty techniques, instructors felt that external activities, lectures and role playing were the three least useful.

Instructors selected which three (among twenty) teaching/learning methods and techniques they would consider indispensable for implementation should COVID-19 restrictions carry on into the next year (Fig. 5). Again, lectures, discussions, assignments were by far the top three methods favoured by academics.

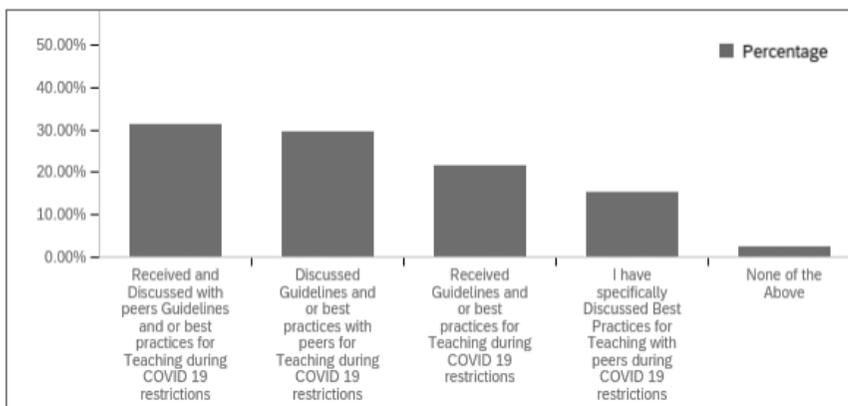


Figure 1. Guidelines and Best Teaching Practices.

Source: own calculation on the basis of research results.

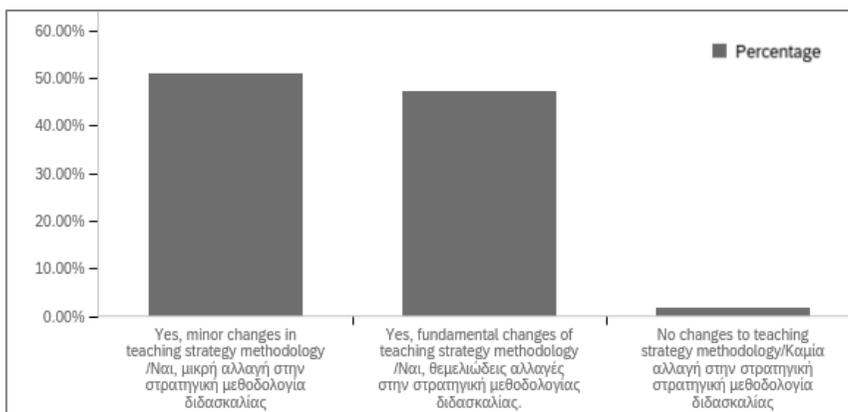
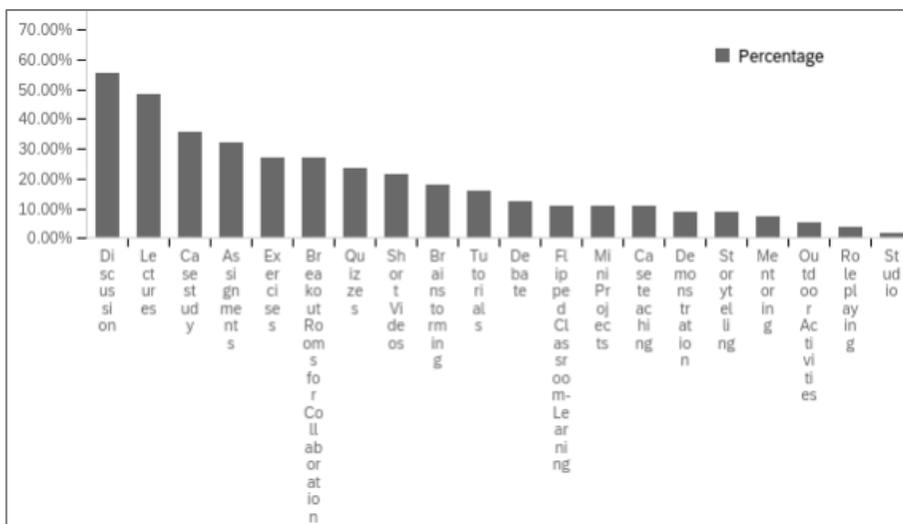
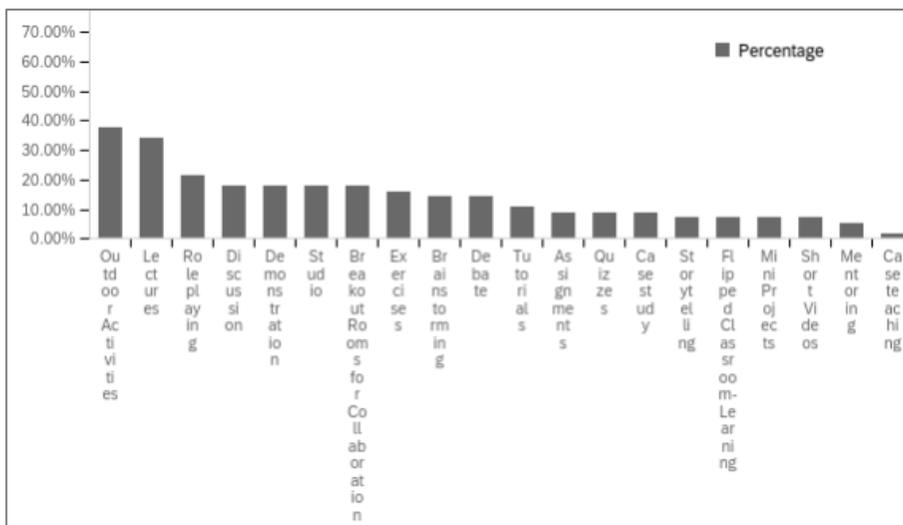


Figure 2. Changes to Teaching Strategies

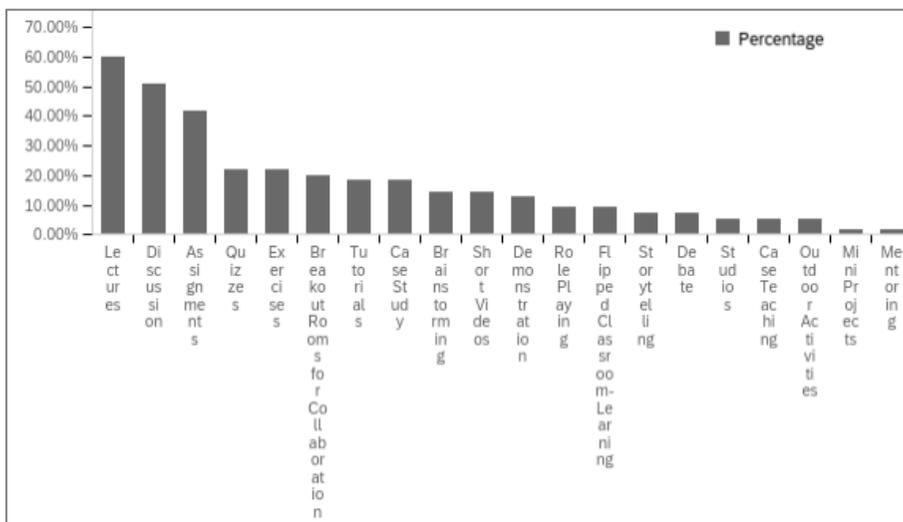
Source: own calculation on the basis of research results.



**Figure 3. Most helpful techniques**  
Source: own calculation on the basis of research results.



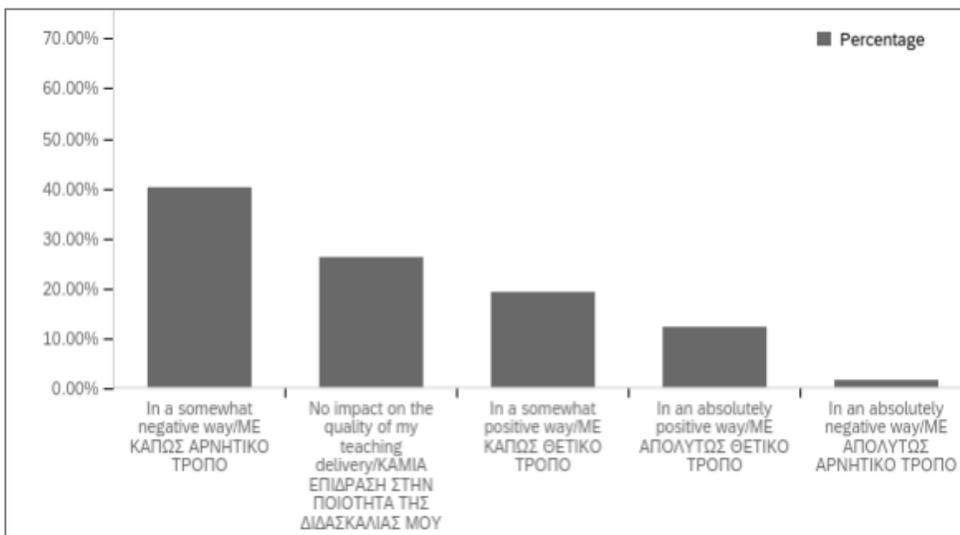
**Figure 4. Least Helpful Techniques**  
Source: own calculation on the basis of research results.



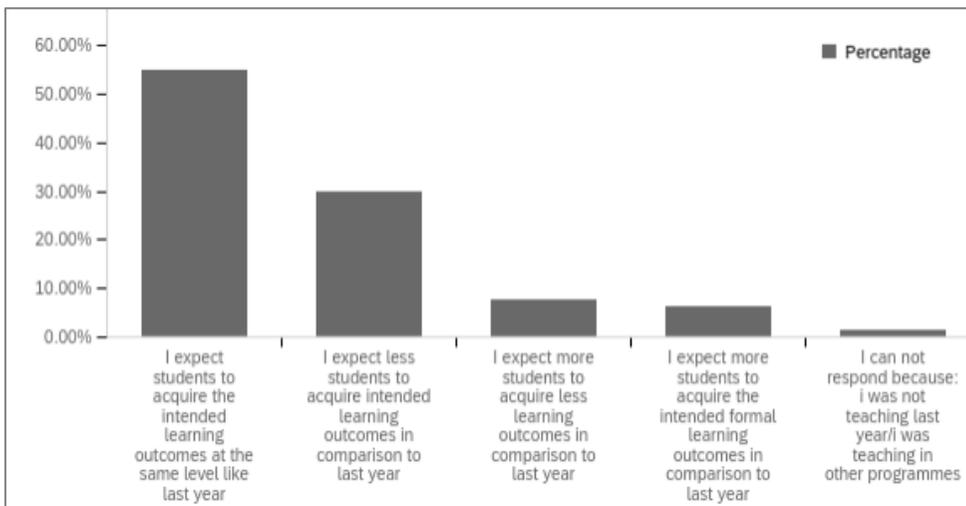
**Figure 5. Indispensable Techniques in online learning**  
Source: own calculation on the basis of research results.

Instructors were asked to assess the positive or negative impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the quality of their delivery (Fig. 6). As many as 40% of the respondents reported a somewhat negative impact on the quality of teaching whereas 32% suggested that the quality of teaching was positively influenced. Lastly, some (26%) felt there was no impact on the quality of their teaching and, therefore, no change on student intended learning outcomes.

Instructors were requested to respond to a question designed to predict the level of student attainment of the intended learning outcomes. 61% of instructors expected/predicted that the attainment of student learning outcomes would be at least at the same level as in the previous regular year while 38% of them expected that less students would achieve the intended learning outcomes or that more students would attain less learning outcomes than in the previous academic season.



**Figure 6.** Impact on the quality of teaching  
Source: own calculation on the basis of research results.



**Figure 7.** Prediction of Learning Outcomes.  
Source: own calculation on the basis of research results.

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore how learning methods were adapted to accommodate the transition from face-to-face learning to online teaching at the start

of the COVID-19 restrictions through a presentation and analysis of the views of a sample of 76 academics in HEIs of Cyprus. The majority of HEIs instructors took practical steps to actively change their teaching strategy. Nevertheless, it seems

that, although admittedly abrupt, the change in teaching approaches did prompt an academic discussion of teaching approaches; but a specific discussion of best practices was very limited. This may have reduced opportunities for enhanced engagement of students within the framework of the new conditionalities of teaching.

Despite the small size of the sample, there are indications that faculty members in Cyprus favour discussion over lectures as a technique or at least employ them on an equal footing, therefore concentrating on maintaining the students' focus and interest on the distant learning content. Along with assignments (instead of written exams and tests), academics view these three methods as indispensable to their online teaching, should restrictions continue. It appears, though, that a significant part of the academic personnel reported a negative impact of COVID-19 on their quality of teaching. This pragmatic approach may be potentially associated with the non-optimistic expectation (shared by one third of the staff participating in the study), that fewer students are expected to acquire intended learning outcomes in comparison to the 2019-2020 academic year. This may challenge findings that suggest a significant positive effect of the COVID-19 confinement on student performance (Gonzalez, 2020).

Notwithstanding this background, it seems appropriate to consider and pursue strategies to enhance skills and interaction since the most evident difference between online and traditional classrooms is that students and instructors cannot communicate face-to-face. Therefore, it is perhaps more appropriate to envisage a balanced combination of synchronous and asynchronous components in order to engage the diverse personalities of students in a more inclusive way which can maximize opportunities for self-learning and guided learning alike (Lapitan et al., 2021). Peer instruction, for example, is a model aimed at transferring learning out-of-class. It is purposed to identify and address common (to students) comprehension difficulties through teacher support (Mazur, 1997). Another method is the Flipped Classroom (Bergmann and Sams, 2022), whereby learning outside the classroom includes resources such as videos sent by teachers with the aim to "freeze time" so that cooperation is achieved through activities and problem solving (Nerantzi, 2020).

## Conclusions

The outcome(s) of COVID-19 challenges to Higher Education teaching both to national and international students in Cyprus may depend on how the learning process develops in the direction

of enhanced learning experience. In this light, new methods need to be employed to facilitate a more student-centered environment despite difficulties (ECTS Users' Guide, 2015). HEIs leadership should secure support for such an endeavor in order to improve student performance and satisfaction which is related to classroom interaction and the achievement of learning goals. As far as HEIs management is concerned, student satisfaction represents a key output variable for their service provision (Moosmayer, 2012). Finally, it must be noted that this study is not without its limitations, since the sample was relatively small and could only offer some indications as to where teaching/learning was directed during the transition to online teaching. New empirical research may shed light on student-centered experiences related to student performance and satisfaction, on the application of student collaborative practice with digital practice and on other forms of enhancing learning in these stormy times.

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