



LETTER to EDITOR

The Professor Support System in reality shock transition from traditional to virtual instruction in Covid-19 pandemic

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Dear Editor,

On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was informed of a cluster of pneumonia detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. On 12 January 2020, it was given notice that a novel coronavirus was the cause of the outbreak. This virus is referred to as SARS-CoV-2, and the associated disease as COVID-19. However, on 11 March 2020, WHO announced the outbreak of the disease (1).

Since then, patient care and health science education have encountered problems for physicians, faculties, and students. Given the paradigm shift to e-learning in the world, in our country, Iran, the most routine instruction had been happened in classroom in conventional and traditional way. The faculties in universities of medical sciences had a little disposition to e-learning. Due to the lack of emphasis on the use of large-scale technology in education, prior to pandemic, empowerment of professors focused more on the pedagogical and content knowledge. The pandemic led to a reality shock among professors all over the country and also the need to pedagogical, content and technological knowledge (2).

On the other hand, professors encountered a severe dilemma with remote education obligation. Thus, continuing this dilemma could have led to a chaos for academic leadership. In this situation, academic leaders faced a crucial responsibility to support the faculties against this dilemma. In line with the efforts that were performed all over the country in covid-19 pandemic, the need to design a professor support system in Birjand University of Medical Sciences (BUMS) was felt.

What was tried?

To support professors against the dilemma for using technology and to facilitate the transition to performing e-teaching, the Birjand University of Medical Sciences (BUMS) provided following interventions:

6. Knowledge support: Since the first step in producing electronic content (e-content) is familiarizing professors with the existing software in this field, BUMS provided educational e-content series for professors to acquire technological knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the educational development center (EDC), which has been publishing single-sheets on medical education for the past few years, dedicated three issues to the titles “constructive virtual teaching”, “ethical codes in producing e-content” and “assessment in virtual setting” since the onset of covid-19.

7. Technical support: Although faculty members may have acquired the knowledge and skills needed to produce e-content, it was certainly important to provide them with technical support to overcome bugs while working with software or troubleshooting in learning management system (LMS). BUMS provided 24-hour technical support for professors during this period.

1. Forming a support group: A support group was created in WhatsApp in which professors shared their own experiences and related announcements. In this virtual community, participants supported each other. Posed questions were answered by technical experts and educationalists in EDC.

2. Designing e-learning courses: EDC designed elementary and advanced courses on “e-learning” to prepare the professors for an effective instruction in post-corona education world.

3. Development of virtual education in laboratory courses: To support professors in laboratory courses, the required infra-structures were provided for training in this setting.

4. Providing preparations for taking student exams in a completely virtual way: Giving final exams to students in a purely virtual way was associated with problems and a lot of resistance. Cheating was the most critical issue which caused a lot of oppositions to hold fully virtual tests. In situations where holding exams in this way seemed unavoidable, the necessary training was provided to professors in order to minimize the possibility of cheating.

5. Development of a system for quantitative and qualitative evaluation of professors' educational performance during the course: In order to support the professors who effectively handled the virtual instruction during the Covid-19 crisis, the performance evaluation system of the professors in related course was changed in such a way that their performance is monitored and evaluated quantitatively and qualitatively. For this purpose, in addition to the routine and quantitative evaluation that was done through the Learning Management System (LMS) and revised in accordance with the conditions of this semester, qualitative evaluation was performed through professors' self-assessment in special forms designed for this purpose. Self-assessment form included the information like the numbers of courses (theoretical, practical and laboratory), the number of formative tests, assignments, feedbacks, online discussion, etc. In the next step, after approval of the department chair and the vice chancellor of the faculty these forms were investigated and reported as the evaluation score.

What lessons were learned?

Professors as the main stakeholders and communicating to them in universities, as well as having a professor support system are crucial elements for academic leaders in crisis. By creating a community including leaders and professors, the needs could be identified clearly, and thus the trust of professors could be acquired. By performing not so complicated tasks to overcome this dilemma, academic leaders could overcome more effectively with less effort. Besides, the evaluation of professors' performance and

distinguishing good and poor performance between them was very effective in motivating them, so it would lead to more accountability. Therefore, creating a flexible evaluation system was crucial.

In addition to creating a support system, formal and informal, for professors, the reflection on the provided supports indicated that students also need a student support system in this situation so that they could overcome in crisis and be prepared for it in the future.

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues including plagiarism, informed consent,

misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, etc. have been completely observed by the authors.

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