

*Conceptual Paper*

# COVID-19 and Online Teaching and Learning at HEIs: Proposing Additional Research from Institutional Work Perspective

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to highlight and call for more research into whether higher education institutions (HEIs) senior management teams are positioned as empowered leaders of change to coercively as well as persuasively implement an alternative online teaching and learning platform, disrupting existing institutions for the benefit of its major stakeholder, students amidst COVID-19. This study used a qualitative meta-analysis method to combine previous qualitative studies to develop deeper meaning through an interpretive process, signalling that more research in this area is required. We argue that the senior management teams in HEIs are influential actors and change agents and have the potential to significantly contribute to institutional work. In addition, we discovered that institutional entrepreneurship has limited research in the study of HEIs and depicts the opportunity to explore the concept of agency and institutional work in the context of HEIs. This study makes a good impression and emphasises the need for future research, particularly on senior management teams at HEIs, to reflect their institutional work in the formation of institutional changes witnessed in the HEIs' virtual classroom platform.

**Keywords:** Institution, institutional work, HEI, COVID-19, online teaching, learning.

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## Introduction

Education helps understand life better and opens up pathways to a lot of opportunities in life. Higher education provides the means to improving one's life, enhancing informed decisions and creating a stout economy. Going to school is the best public policy tool available to raise skills (Burgess & Sieversten, 2021). Prior to COVID-19 the world was different and so was the education system. Face-to-face interaction, lectures and classes were part of daily life.

In the last 50 years there was a huge worldwide growth in the provision of education at all levels but the education systems faced their greatest challenge due to COVID-19 (Daniel, 2020). There is evidence that due to the pandemic some high-income countries are now facing learning losses and increases in inequality (Donnelly et al., 2021). While COVID-19 was first and foremost a health crisis, many countries decided to close schools, colleges and universities (Burgess & Sieversten, 2021).

However, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak, various policy initiatives were launched by governments and various institutions so that teaching activities could continue (Ali, 2020). Some higher education institutions (HEIs) fully adopted online learning pedagogy while others incorporated online learning with face-to-face as a contingency plan or insurance if there was another lockdown in their country (Ali, 2020). In some countries, negligence resulted in a major catastrophe to contain the virus and HEIs had no choice but to comply with the restrictions which were placed by the Government of that country (Ali, 2020; Bao, 2020). This resulted in the senior management teams at the HEIs working on plans so that teaching and learning are unaffected due to the pandemic (Ali, 2020; Bao, 2020).

In this sense, our study calls for further research towards ascertaining the extent of institutional work by the HEIs' senior management teams relating to the switch to online teaching and learning platform amidst COVID-19 resulting in the disruption of an existing institution. Institutional work is a paradigm of the institutional theory which is defined as "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). Institutional theory's isomorphism aspect has been highly studied in the context organisational studies (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In addition, Enders and Naidoo (2018) reveal that institutional theory is one of the dominant research perspectives for the study of organisations and has also influenced scholarly work on universities and HEIs as organisations. However, institutional work perspective needs to be further explored in a HEIs context (Enders & Naidoo, 2018). Hence, this study is calling for further research guided by two research questions. This is as follows:

1. What were the roles played by the HEIs' senior management teams involved in the formation of the institutional change observed in the virtual platform at the HEIs? and;

2. How did these actors enact institutional work contributing to overcoming the student attrition rate and disseminating knowledge-based culture during the pandemic?

The motivation of this study is to highlight the need for research and academic discussions on a new paradigm of institutional theory, institutional work in HEIs context. This research intends to highlight the possible contribution to the literature on creating, maintaining and disrupting institutional work reflected in HEIs relating to the virtual teaching and learning platform switch in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It calls for further research on the roles played by HEIs' senior management teams in the formation of the institutional change observed in the virtual platform in those institutions. It also calls for research on how HEIs' senior management teams enact institutional work contributing to overcoming student attrition rate and disseminating knowledge-based culture during the pandemic. In the next section, this paper outlines the research methods used followed by prior studies' findings to base the need for conducting further research on HEIs' senior management perspective. The paper then integrates institutional work, a paradigm of institutional theory with HEI's senior management teams to reflect their position as powerful actors to bring institutional change in overcoming student attrition rate and disseminating knowledge-based culture during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Research Methods**

This study adopted an exploratory research design to highlight the importance of conducting further research from HEIs senior management teams' perspectives revealing the potential acceptable institutional changes that they may have brought in for social acceptance (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) and to ensure teaching and learning are unaffected in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in HEIs. Exploratory studies are a good way to ask questions and get a baseline of information that may be utilised as a springboard for additional research (Ali, 2020).

Although qualitative research has long been a focus in psychology, meta-analyses of qualitative kinds of literature, often known as meta-syntheses, are becoming increasingly popular among academics (Ali, 2020). A qualitative meta-analysis, also known as meta-synthesis, is a type of meta-analysis that allows for a systematic examination of qualitative studies that is more interpretive than aggregative (Ali, 2020). Meta-analysts are urged to think about their studies' methodological integrity in connection to central research procedures, such as establishing a set of primary research studies and organising primary findings into categories or themes (Levitt, 2018; Ali, 2020). Similarly, this strategy employs robust qualitative methods to integrate prior qualitative studies in order to provide richer meaning through an interpretive process (Ali, 2020). The next section discusses prior studies' findings to base the need for conducting further research on HEIs senior management teams' perspectives.

## **Prior Studies' Findings**

The negative impact of COVID-19 has been intense not only on the health of people (Verma et al., 2020) but the economy also suffered (Joshi et al., 2020) because of the

containment measures implemented in many countries after a global health emergency state was declared by The World Health Organization (WHO) in late January 2020 (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). Studies consistently indicate that the education sector was most adversely affected and had a huge impact on higher education systems globally due to the closure of HEIs (Joshi et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2020; Mahmood, 2020).

Teachers and students across the globe had to deal with the enforced online teaching 'migration' in a very short time span during the outbreak of COVID-19 (Bao, 2020) which has become the main reason for lockdowns and forced digital learnings (Mishra et al., 2020; Joshi et al., 2020). Ali (2020) has put forward the observation that despite deficiencies in the online teaching system, the main aim of the relevant stakeholders was that classes should not be interrupted and must go on. The education system was revamped to shift to online teaching and learning even though it was forced (Joshi et al., 2020). During the time of unprecedented online teaching different governments and educational institutions chose to teach non-stop (Bao, 2020) to ensure education continuity and the three key constituents of online education (institution, teacher, and student) had to comply (Joshi et al., 2020).

It appears that the realities of online teaching and learning remain the same all across the world and the need to teach online was the most likely option. The transition to go with online teaching and learning came with its fair share of problems. While some handled this transition well, others, especially those who had not conducted online classes before, struggled to find their own personal mix of remote teaching strategies (Daumiller et al., 2021; Gewin, 2020). There were ambiguities in how to teach, maintain the workload and create a conducive teaching environment during COVID-19 (Ali, 2020).

There have been different studies conducted across various disciplines, faculties and institutions across the world. It has been stated that the Chinese government banned all face-to-face classes and took all classes online (Ali, 2020). Bao (2020) also confirms that the Chinese government had requested for non-stop teaching. According to Mahmood (2020), the closure of the majority of the Pakistani universities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic forced the shift to online teaching. In Germany, digital learning became a prominent issue proceeding the effects of COVID-19 (Konig et al., 2020) and the same is true for the Indonesian education systems (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). Similarly, at Mizoram University, COVID-19 is cited as the main reason for the switch to online teaching (Mishra et al., 2020). Likewise, in a medical school in India, tailored online classes were introduced to support the didactic lectures which proved to be a huge success (Verma et al., 2020).

Before COVID-19, there was little investment in online learning but even if lack of technical knowledge wasn't an issue, there still was a need for some institutional guidance. Peking University had been offering some online classes before the pandemic, but the massive and disruptive shift of pushing all of its programs to online mode wasn't possible without some form of guiding principles (Bao, 2020). There was a need to go online with teaching, but different universities did it differently (Ali, 2020).

In all the papers reviewed the common theme was that the HEIs, Governments, related government ministries and stakeholders were behind the decision for online classes (Ali,

2020). However, there wasn't any unified policy created that could give clear instructions or directions about teaching online that could be followed by all (Ali, 2020; Joshi et al., 2020). Nevertheless, vigilance was shown by many countries, for instance, the Government of India's role in the issuance of instructions for online learning is commendable as it indicates that everybody worked together to implement online teaching through the creation and use of numerous online teaching tools such as e-Pathshala (e-content), SWAYAM (online courses for teachers), Quick Response (QR) coded textbooks, DIKSHA (e-content), YUKTI web portal, NEAT (enhancing employment ability) and many more (Joshi et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 crisis situation, a lot of research has been done to look at various global practises adopted to maintain student engagement (Ali, 2020), to study the effectiveness of online learning (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020), to highlight some of the challenges faced (Gewin, 2020) and to suggest some remedy to these challenges (Mahmood, 2020). There was a preference for simple technology, however, adaptability was still an issue. The initial challenge for both teachers and students was the struggle to accept the transition because there was not enough time to plan or adjust and they did not have proper knowledge and skills on the use of technology in online learning (Joshi et al., 2020; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). Stressed students were provided counseling and regular feedback on their learning was also greatly assisted (Mishra et al., 2020).

In another study at Chengdu University of IT, there was extensive study and data collected to research on online and flipped learning concepts (Tang et al., 2020). Flipped classroom model to teach medicine in India was described as an interesting concept (Verma et al., 2020). Traditional teaching methods have shown that flipped learning is superior to other types of learning modes (Tang et al., 2020). During a situation such as a pandemic, using a flipped classroom strategy to increase interactivity between teachers and students can enhance student learning (Mehmood, 2020; Verma et al., 2020).

Educational institutions and universities adapted to online teaching quite differently from one another (Ali, 2020). Universities like New York University Shanghai and Duke Kunshan University had previous experiences with using ICT technologies, so they had an efficacious shift (Ali, 2020). A study conducted by Daumiller et al. (2021) uses the integrative digital teaching and learning framework developed by Sailer, Schultz-Per-nice, and Fischer to explore the achievement goals of teachers and how it relates to their online teaching quality. It was stated that teachers who valued the growth of their competencies and qualification perceived the shift as a challenge to learn something new, but those who were not so strong-willed perceived it as a threat. It was also noted that achievement goal is what motivates teachers and this dictates their attitude towards how they experience and handle the enforced online teaching.

Bao (2020) has among some useful strategies suggested preparedness for expected problems in online teaching and learning. However, the fact remains that in order to teach online there was a need to use technology, align the curriculum with the use of technology, invest in the digital infrastructure (including rural areas) and government collaborations with private institutions (Joshi et al., 2020). The use of ICT and the readiness of teachers are considered very crucial (Ali, 2020). Staff readiness and willingness to embrace change is a requirement for online teaching and ICT is required

to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Ali, 2020). However, the integration of ICT into existing teaching pedagogies has to go together with infrastructure support as well as students' willingness and access to these tools because they are also faced with challenges (Ali, 2020; Mishra et al., 2020). It is revealed by Verma et al. (2020) that students want online classes to remain as a part of their curriculum even when classes go back to face to face mode, possibly through replacing theory classes, use of automation process tools for taking attendance online, and use of technology to demonstrate classes.

It is also stated that online teaching is a cheaper and more feasible method even though it will not replicate face-to-face experiences. However, this is limited to only medical studies and all the sources reviewed for this research have not suggested the same for replacement. Even though online classes cannot replace traditional face-to-face classes, the fact that emergency situations can arise at any time should not be ignored and as such being oblivious of technology is not an option (Joshi et al., 2020). It also became very apparent that the students of this day and age are digital natives and have strong bonding with ICT (Ali, 2020) but online teaching and learning causes a great deal of stress (Tang et al, 2020) and was not a preferred mode (nor regarded efficient).

The challenges in online teaching needed to be addressed so that teaching and learning are effective (Joshi et al., 2020). Institutions that had a clear vision made it easier to adapt to online teaching (Mishra et al., 2020). A study conducted in Germany by Konig et al. (2020) made some strong points by stating, firstly, that computer hardware or technology does not necessarily lead to student success. At least in the context of Germany, there are still students who have not shown digital competency or are actually underachievers in it. Secondly, teacher competency should be understood as 'content-specific' cognitive performance. Teachers are now expected to have ICT knowledge and confidence for online teaching and learning. Thirdly, teachers' self-efficacy is a decisive resource and teachers should be obliged to adapt to online teaching. However, this source focused mostly on early career teachers and their ability to adapt to online teaching.

To a very large extent, the same problems exist in online teaching (Bao, 2020) and the educators (teachers) faced similar issues. COVID-19 crisis has presented a learning and qualification situation that required teachers to perform well with online teaching and at the same time effectively engage and support students (Daumiller et al., 2020; Bao, 2020). Konig et al. (2020) also stated that the core challenge of online teaching and learning was maintaining contact with students through the online environment. It also looked at the use of computer technology and how successful mastery of this was important. Students needed to be motivated, teachers needed to keep patience and the creation of a virtual classroom experience was important (Mishra et al., 2020). Just like teachers, the students also need ICT training and support (Ali, 2020).

The findings of a research conducted by Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) show that teachers follow the rules of their institutions, whether it's to conduct synchronous mode of online teaching or to conduct regular discussions with their students, or to provide personal feedback or to grade and report students' work. Therefore, instructional strategies need to be implemented by the HEIs in their curriculum so it could serve as important references for others to improve the efficacy of online teaching and learning.

Mishra et al. (2020) put forward Lewin's 3 step process changing management theory to explain the change and shift to online learning and teaching. They have discussed how change requires unfreezing and refreezing to adapt to changes. The change to a digital platform begins with resistance because of bias, experiences or inexperience (Ali, 2020). At least, in the case of India, it has been said quite boldly by Mishra et al. (2020), that the education system required change. The same sentiments have been echoed by Joshi et al. (2020). They also acknowledge the fact that for any major change there is a need for research, understanding that higher education and institutions are different, consideration of requirements and knowledge of technology and the extensive use of smartphones (Mishra et al., 2020). We noticed from the aforementioned pieces of literature that research specifically on HEIs' senior management teams' perspective is yet to be explored from an institutional work context and the following section's discussion emphasises the need for such research be undertaken soon.

### **An Application of Institutional Work Discussion and Conclusion**

The unwelcome arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting diffusion and lockdowns has unleashed institutional pressures on HEIs to switch from their traditional face-to-face platform of teaching and learning to entirely rely on virtual mode (Bao, 2020; Mishra et al., 2020; Joshi et al., 2020; Konig et al., 2020; Gewin, 2020; Mahmood, 2020; Verma, 2020). The move to teach online is unprecedented and influential institutional actors (such HEIs' senior management team) have to ensure that the switch is implemented by considering the necessary support that is required by both the facilitators and students in the transition phase to online teaching (Bao, 2020). There is no doubt that the widely shared organisational practices in higher education institutions have been challenged by the waves of COVID-19 (Gewin, 2020; Mishra et al., 2020) and empowered actors within the HEIs have to quickly adapt, including creating, maintaining and disrupting institutional changes, especially for social acceptance and to retain students (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, Bao, 2020, Ali, 2020).

Hence, we propose further studies to evaluate the institutional work contribution by HEIs' senior management teams by drawing on a paradigm of the institutional theory that is institutional work which is defined as "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). Enders and Naidoo (2018) reveal that institutional theory is one of the dominant research perspectives for the study of organisations and has also influenced scholarly work on universities and HEIs as organisations.

The early neo-institutional theory emphasised on the notion of isomorphism and organisation's legitimacy is dependent on its adaptation to widely accepted norms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and "depicts organisational fields and their members as rather passive recipients of institutional frameworks that would eventually lead to organisational isomorphism" (Enders & Naidoo, 2018, p. 3).

Moreover, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) highlight the three forms of isomorphic practices like coercive, mimetic and normative that have enabled to diffuse and sustain new organisational practices. Coercive isomorphic form is for instance gaining legitimacy

by adhering to regulatory pressures and stems from political influence (Arena & Azzone, 2007; Mihret et al., 2012). Furthermore, the basic ideology of mimetic isomorphism is when an organisation encounters uncertainty; it may model itself on another organisation that has achieved social acceptance in the same industry (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Arena & Azzone, 2007). Moving to normative isomorphism which is the third source of isomorphic change stems primarily from the impact of the profession (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Mihret et al., 2012). In addition, the early works on neo-institutional theory assert that the institutional arena is full of several exogenous pressures that influence the behaviour and structure of an organisation (Dacin, 1997).

However, a recent body of institutional theory has emphasised on the role of agents in disrupting existing institutions and creating and maintaining novel institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Indeed, new institutions arise when influential agents (institutional entrepreneurs) see in them an opportunity to realise interest that they value highly (DiMaggio, 1988). Suddaby (2010) argues that to better understand how institutional meanings are interpreted within organisations, institutional theorists may focus research on internal perspectives (organised actors). Those organised actors within the organisations with sufficient resources will identify problems leading to institutional change based on proposed solutions and legitimate alternative social practices (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In addition, organisations themselves can influence the socio-cultural environment, for instance with the expanding globalisation, all of which directs that they have very powerful agencies (Suddaby & Tsujiguchi, 2018).

Institutional entrepreneurship has found limited research in the study of HEIs and depicts the opportunity to explore the concept of agency and institutional work in the context of universities and other similar institutions (Enders & Naidoo, 2018). Institutional work is demanded for actors “who mediate between the organisation and its environment, who provide meaning to institutional pressures, who can theorise the failure of existing norms and practices and provide legitimacy to new norms and practices” (Enders & Naidoo, 2018, p. 3).

In this sense, our study is calling for further research as an attempt towards ascertaining the extent of institutional work by the senior management teams at HEIs relating to the switch to online teaching and learning platform amidst COVID-19 resulting in the disruption of an existing institution. In addition, we are proposing that by employing institutional work as the theoretical lens of the study to explore whether the senior management teams are positioned as empowered leaders of change to coercively as well as persuasively implement the alternative online teaching and learning platform and thus disrupting existing institutions for the benefit of its major stakeholder, the students. This study is an attempt to draw attention to the potential contribution to the limited literature on institutional work in the context of HEIs.

We propose that further research may employ a case-study approach for a profound analysis using multiple sources of data (Yin, 1994). Moreover, in the quest to enhance the validity of the findings, we suggest interviews with HEIs’ senior management teams and expected data from documents to be examined related to the institutions may provide patterns that evolved from the reviewed pieces of literature (Mihret & Yismav, 2007; Azam & Nandan, 2021). Following the proposed theoretical framework, institutional



work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), “a case study protocol may be served as the guide in designing data collection instruments, collecting the data, analysing the data and drawing conclusions” (Mihret & Yismav, 2007, p. 473-474). Thus, the proposed empirical analysis will evaluate HEIs senior management teams’ potential to bring acceptable institutional change for social acceptance (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) and probably to ensure teaching and learning are unaffected in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

### Author’s Contributions

Mohammed Riaz Azam came up with the idea to collaborate on this research. He contributed to the purpose, methodology, findings, discussion and motivation of the study. He proposes that the study be looked at through the lens of the institutional work perspective, which is a paradigm of the institutional theory. Shireen Nisha contributed to the literature review, findings and discussions. Jafreen Khan also contributed to the introduction, literature review, findings and discussions of the study. Coming from an English language teaching background, she also proofread the paper.

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