

Editorial for EJEL Volume 19 Issues 1 and 4

Dear readers of the EJEL,

The previous academic year 2020/21 will certainly be one to remember for many years to come. The global pandemic has brought suffering, uncertainty and anxiety to many people around the world, and it has fundamentally transformed the way we communicate in formal and informal settings. The impact of this change has been particularly visible in education, where COVID-19 has achieved in a few months what years of promoting e-learning could not have achieved previously. Schools, colleges and universities around the world have swiftly switched to online delivery modes despite the steep-earning-curves and a lack of time for preparation and detailed planning. Students too had to adapt quickly to the new modes of teaching with Zoom, Teams, narrated Powerpoint slides and other e-learning tools in order to complete their courses and programmes of study. This special issue of EJEL is devoted to this change and in particular to evaluating how educational institutions around the world have implemented the change.

The (virtual) COVID-19 issue comprises eight research papers and one experience report split across two issues - 19(1) and 19(4) - written by authors from Australia, China, Greece, Hong-Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Malaysia, Poland, and Russia who are reflecting on implementations of e-learning in their institutions during the COVID-19 crisis. This is from both teachers' and students' perspectives, and through different research lenses spanning from auto-ethnography (Lin and Nguyen) at one end of the spectrum to very robust quantitative studies at the other end (e.g. Migocka-Patrzalek et al.). In addition to the research papers, and for the first time in EJEL, the issue 19.1 includes a brief experience report prepared by Dr Ken W. Li, a member of our Editorial team. The report describes how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of teachers and students of Chinese calligraphy in Hong Kong have adapted to the online mode of teaching using tools such as WhatsApp, AR and YouTube.

The first research paper in the special issue (listed as the third paper in 19(1)) is by Daria V. Kolesova, Leonid V. Moskovkin and Tatiana I. Popova from the Russian Federation. The article investigates the views and opinions of international students studying Russian as a foreign language at St. Petersburg State University, and those of their teachers, on the benefits and challenges of the urgent transition to group online instruction during the COVID-19 crisis. The findings based on a survey of 100 students and 45 teachers indicate that although difficulties in the online training of the language skills were recognised by both teachers and students, their relationship became less hierarchical in the virtual environment due to greater engagement and independence of students in online lessons. In addition to that, many teachers missed personal communication with students, and noted lack of specialised online tools for teaching Russian and for monitoring students' engagement with online materials. The latter findings may be interesting for tool providers in the Russian Federation.

Angelos Giannoulas, Aglaia Stampoltzis, Kalliopi Kounenou and Antonios Kalamatianos from the School of Pedagogical and Technological Education in Athens, Greece are the authors of the first paper in issue 19(4), on the experiences of Greek students on online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study is founded on a survey of 370 students from 25 academic institutions in Greece. The attendance for online lectures, as reported by the students, was high, but the technical difficulties, such as poor internet connection and low quality of audio, prevented satisfactory communication. That and long lectures, use of slides and lack of interactions with other students were noted as the main issues, and causes of stress for many students. Despite these challenges, the majority of students have expressed interest in continuing online in combination with classroom-based learning. That suggests that the institutions need to invest in training and supporting staff, as well as in technologies, in order effectively to support the online learners.

In the second paper in issue 19(4), Ahmad Fauzi, Raju Wandira, Domi Sepri and Afdhil Hafid from the Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN Imam Bonjol West Sumatra, Indonesia explored students' acceptance of Google Classroom use during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research employs the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by considering relevant factors such as (perceived) ease of use, usefulness, facilitating conditions and price value and examining their effects on the acceptance of Google Classroom technology. The sample comprised 383 student studying at universities in West Sumatra and the data collected with the survey were analysed using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method. The findings indicate the perceived ease of use and facilitating

conditions such as: knowledge about the technology and technical support are significant factors for perceived usefulness of the technology; and usefulness had a positive impact on attitudes towards use and intention to use the technology. The implications are that the institutions need to invest in making the technologies accessible and in providing necessary technical support in order for students to realise the full benefits ('usefulness') of the technology, which in turn could incite students' higher engagement with online learning.

The third paper in issue 19(4) is by Yuqi Lin and Ha Nguyen from Monash University, Clayton, VIC, Australia. This paper provides an interesting critical view on online learning during COVID-19 in Higher Education in Australia, from the perspective of an international student from China. The paper employs the auto-ethnographic method and Biggs' 3P model to analyse the student's approach to online learning and its effectiveness. The study focuses on issues experienced by international students who have not studied online prior to the pandemic, and it challenges the notion that the virtual university is a means of achieving educational equality. The findings show that while the participant could engage with the curriculum to some extent, and with the help of supporting tutors, the challenges related to isolation and lack of confidence to engage in online interactions with other course participants have led to frustration and emotional instability. The authors suggest that the online programme designers should consider individuals' socioeconomic status and the cultural background of *all* students and provide necessary support to those who are new to online learning.

Reema Karasneh, Sayer Al-Azzam, Suhaib Muflih, Sahar Hawamdeh, Mohammad Muflih and Yousef Khader from Yarmouk university and Jordan University of Science and Technology are the authors of the fourth paper in issue 19(4). Their focus is on attitudes and practices of educators towards online learning during the pandemic. The study is based on a web-based survey of university lecturers in public universities across Jordan. The analysis of responses from 508 educators who participated in the survey indicates positive attitudes towards online teaching and satisfaction with institutional support for online learning. The main barriers were related to the technical issues (internet connection), non-professional (family home) environment for teaching, time constraints, lack of training, demotivation, equipment costs, internet subscription fees, and number of students (in online sessions).

The fifth paper in the special issue 19(4) is by Marta Migocka-Patrzałek, Magda Dubińska-Magiera, Dawid Krysiński, and Stefan Nowicki, all from University of Wrocław, Poland. They examine how the pandemic has affected the attitudes of students and teachers from their university towards online learning. Their findings, based on well-executed quantitative analysis of data obtained from 278 teachers and 2301 students from humanities and science faculties, indicate a strong correlation between previous experience with online learning and willingness to use it in the future for both students and teachers. Interestingly the link between the use of 'emergency' online teaching during the COVID-19 crisis and the willingness for its future use could not be established. Moreover, the perception of advantages and disadvantages of online learning varies according to the attitudes i.e. participants with a positive attitude to online teaching more often report its advantages (e.g. flexibility, accessibility and availability) and less often its disadvantages, such as high workload (for teachers) and lower quality of learning (for students). The authors draw some important implications for practice which emphasise the importance of systematic and long-term planning for a successful implementation of online learning.

The authors of the sixth paper in 19(4), A. Nazilah, Che Wan Ida Rahimah Che Wan Ibrahim, Nor Aizal Akmal Rohaizad, Norillah, A., Raja Zirwatul Aida Raja Ibrahim, and Mazidah Dagang are reporting on the perceptions of counselling students in Malaysia on online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings based on the survey responses from 184 students suggest positive attitudes of the students towards the online learning during the pandemic due to its safety and necessity, and the issues reported were in the area of assessment, in particular groupwork, and online tests, as well as the lack of interaction with other students. The preference was for an asynchronous mode of learning, such as PowerPoint with audio, due to the issues with internet stability and speed, and finding a convenient space for studying online at home. Interestingly nearly 30% of the students reported not having internet and 20% not having financial resources to fund the cost of online learning, despite the government's subsidising the internet lines for students during the pandemic. This is an area that requires further investigation and action from the educational institutions in Malaysia.

The final paper in this special issue is by Elham Akbari from the University of Teheran, who investigated the challenges of using a purposely designed educational social network (SHAD) for learning during COVID-19 in middle schools in Teheran. Her findings are based on qualitative analysis of data obtained from 75 interviews

with students, their parents and teachers. The main themes emerging for the data were related to the technical issues with software and hardware infrastructures, lack of students' familiarity with the new tool, lack of appropriate space for effective interactions, unconstructive interference (from parents) in the education processes, the impossibility of adequate assessment of learning, as well as psychological and behavioural disorders by both students and teachers. Moreover, the author found that the quality of learning has decreased despite additional time spent by teachers and parents in learning and teaching processes. On the positive side, students' autonomy improved, and the new environment helped more introverted students to become more involved. Finally, the research results indicate that creating a social network unique to education is not welcomed by the users, who preferred to use their favourite (external) networks. This opens up some interesting questions regarding the importance of stakeholders' perspective on the introduction of new tools in learning and teaching processes.

The articles in the special issues 19(1) and 19(4) provide diverse perspectives on online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic across different countries, disciplines, levels of study, research methodologies, e-learning technologies and from both students and teachers. Interestingly, despite the level of previous e-learning development, similar issues and challenges seem to resurface in different contexts. The importance of stable and accessible infrastructures, suitable learning design that takes into account new issues such as feelings of isolation, online fatigue, private learning spaces, the increased need for interactions with teachers and peers and the need for improvements in online assessment design and implementation are some of the common themes that form a rich ground for further evidence-informed research in e-learning.

Journal Editors,

Marija Cubric and Heinrich Söbke