Setting and Implementing Institutional Policy in a Crisis:

The Arab Academic College for Education in Israel—Haifa

**Synopsis**

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed new challenges on academic institutions in Israel and the world in terms of administration, teaching, and research. The national lockdowns, social distancing, and limitations imposed because of the virus forced institutions to operate under conditions of extreme uncertainty and crisis. The multidisciplinary literature dealing with organizational resilience states that an organization’s resilience expresses its ability to cope with a crisis and return to its former routine within a reasonable period of time after the crisis ends. However, the literature never dealt with or predicted a crisis of this scope, and does not offer ways for academic institutions to confront such an all-encompassing event.

This essay examines the way the Arab Academic College for Education in Israel—Haifa faced the Covid-19 crisis in real time, thereby seeking to contribute to the new scholarship emerging on this topic. The purpose of the study is to examine institutional policy-setting and implementation during a sudden, unanticipated, large-scale crisis and amidst considerable uncertainty. The study relies on the qualitative paradigm and on data collection from two sources: reflections of the researchers and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirteen individuals selected by purposive sampling who participated in setting and implementing policy during the crisis.

The study found six **areas of intervention** in which the college was forced to make immediate decisions, set policy, and implement it to ensure uninterrupted continuity in the institution’s academic routine. These areas were: an ad hoc decision-making mechanism; a physical versus a virtual campus; the staff; online teaching; the students; and the students’ practicum.

Given the findings, the study suggests that academic institutions should not return to their pre-crisis routine. Rather, they should assimilate and integrate the insights derived from the way the crisis was managed and adopt a new administrative mode reflecting the lessons learned during the crisis. One of the suggestions offered herein is to adopt and develop the institution’s digital and technological capabilities at the administrative staff, academic faculty, and student levels. An academic institution’s ability to create and manage a digital campus in and after a crisis is a crucial prerequisite for its resilience and survivability for the duration of current and future crises.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 pandemic, crisis, uncertainty, institutional policy-setting in a crisis, organizational resilience.

**Introduction**

A major outcome of the Covid-19 pandemic has been a range of social systems entering a state of uncertainty (Jung et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2020). The outbreak of the virus surprised and tested academic institutions in Israel and around the world, placing the faculty, researchers, administrators, and students in an unprecedented state of risk and uncertainty.

Immediately after the outbreak of the virus, a new type of international scholarship began to emerge that sought to understand how educational systems, including academic institutions, develop strategies for confronting – and continuing to confront – the COVID-19 crisis and a situation of risk and uncertainty (Agasisti, & Soncin, 2021; Barua, 2020; Boer, 2021; Eringfeld, 2021; Jung et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2020; Sniazhko, 2019).

The concept of uncertainty is defined as lack of knowledge about the future and events likely to affect society, and is expressed by terms such as ambiguity, complexity, risk, and upheaval (Alpers, 2019; Oetzel & Oh, 2014). Milliken (Milliken, 1987) defined uncertainty as the lack of ability to predict something accurately as the result of distrust of the knowledge a person has about a certain situation. From this point of view, uncertainty may be considered a comprehensive environmental variable affecting reality as a whole in significant and complex ways, and having implications for decision-making (Alpers, 2019). This description of uncertainty is especially relevant for the COVID-19 pandemic because of its immediate and global impact, which made it difficult to predict or control events at the national and international levels.

Studies show that an organization’s success in confronting uncertainty reflects its resilience. Organizational resilience expresses the system’s ability to cope with conditions of uncertainty, to be flexible and dynamic, to deal with sudden changes, to respond quickly, and to return to its pre-crisis situation (Gunderson & Holling, 2001; UNISDR, 2010; Williams et al., 2017). Thus, an organization’s resilience is a critical element in effective management during a crisis (Williams et al, 2017). Situations of uncertainty call for immediate action to prevent severe repercussions to the institution and immediate threats to its existence (Baraona, 2013; Sullivan, 2003). They also require the establishment of a mechanism for planning how to confront the crisis and how to implement that plan (Lindell et al., 2007; Oparanma, 2014; Subosic et al., 2008). In crisis management, it is necessary to prioritize and determine the first steps to take, as well as decide how to restore the institution to its normal operations (Baraona, 2013; Seckle, 2001; Mehr & Jahanian, 2016; Weible et al., 2020). Such management demands that the institution prepare a plan that will include procedures, appointments of teams to execute those procedures, and continual training of teams during the crisis (Jahanian, 2010; Mehr & Jahanian, 2016).

Undoubtedly, the situation of crisis and uncertainty into which academic institutions in Israel and elsewhere were plunged due to the outbreak of COVID-19 requires a study of how those institutions faced this crisis and managed the uncertainty (Sharma et al, 2020). Despite the emergence of literature dealing with this topic, there is still a large lacuna in research on how institutions of higher education confronted the pandemic.

Given this background, the present study seeks to make its contribution to the field of policy-setting in academia during a crisis. This chapter makes a contribution to the emerging literature by examining how the Arab Academic College for Education in Israel—Haifa confronted the crisis in real time. Therefore, the case study in this chapter focuses on a description of the college’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis as reported by various office-holders in the institution.

The chapter consists of four parts. The next part describes the research method. Thereafter, we present the data [as collected during the crisis] and analyze them. The final part discusses the findings and presents several conclusions germane to academic institutions’ future handling of high-impact crises and situations of uncertainty.

**Research Method**

The study focuses on the Arab Academic College for Education in Israel—Haifa. Founded in 1949, this college has graduated some 15,000 students since its academic accreditation in 1996. These graduates represent a large portion of teachers in Arab society in Israel. At present, the college has ~7,200 students, ~220 lecturers, and ~60 administrative staff.

This study’s research method relies on the qualitative paradigm and data collection based on two sources:

1. The researchers’ reflections: This method deepens the understanding of a phenomenon (Eringfeld, 2021; Ricoeur, 1991). The reflection relies on the real-time experience of the manner in which the college handled the crisis during its first months by the researchers who wrote this chapter. They also filed weekly reports as per the request of the college’s administration referring reports referred to insights about the conduct of the college, the emerging needs of the lecturers, students, and staff, and the resources needed to provide for these needs.
2. In-depth, semi-constructed interviews with thirteen people selected by purposive sampling to ensure their relevant representation in making decisions on the college’s activities during the COVID-19 crisis. Among those interviewed were six members of the administration, four department and program chairs, and three members of the administrative staff. The interviews, conducted in June of the 2019-2020 academic year, related to the running of the college during the crisis, the challenges the administration, office-holders, the academic faculty, and the administrative staff faced, and the steps taken to overcome the challenges that would frequently arise once the pandemic began. The following were among the leading questions in those interviews:
	1. What areas required intervention and a response?
	2. What steps were taken to train staff and students in the transition from in-person to online teaching?
	3. How was the students’ practicum effected during the crisis?

Before the interviews were conducted, the researchers made it clear to the participants that they retained the right to end the interview if they felt uncomfortable; they were also assured that their anonymity and privacy would be strictly guarded. As the sampling was aimed at a very specific group, we avoided including details (gender, job description) liable to disclose the participants’ identity. In light of the lockdowns and distancing requirements, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were analyzed using the content analysis method, which resulted in a finding of six areas in need of intervention by the college administration.

**Findings**

The findings were categorized and presented according to the college’s *areas of intervention* in confronting the COVID-19 crisis. We emphasize the areas that represented a challenge, and/or areas where activities were negatively affected by the crisis. We identified six areas of intervention:

1. **An ad hoc mechanism to handle the crisis**

When the pandemic reached Israel, and the Education Ministry issued its instructions at the end of January 2020, the college established an ad hoc mechanism for frequent emergency decision-making based on intensive, rolling discussions confronting the new situation. As such, the college’s normal decision-making pattern was significantly altered, as urgency, frequency, and expansion of the decision-making circle were required. The core impulse behind the decisions made was described as “responsibility and determination to act on behalf of the public interest,” as noted by a senior college administrator:

The considerations and motives that guided us in facing the challenge were the heavy responsibility and our determination to act on behalf of the interests of the lecturers, employees, and students. It is important to us to maintain continuity of studies and reduce the impact on our routine.

While decisions were made primarily by the college president, the college dean, and their deputies, the mechanism was expanded to include department and program heads, the dean of students, and senior administrative staff representatives. Moreover, depending on relevance, some of the meetings were conducted with the college’s chief safety officer. As the interviews showed,

It was important to expand the mechanism and allow practical, informed discussions to provide appropriate solutions.

 It was further noted that,

Within a short period of time, the administration made informed decisions because there was no place for risks or delays.

The expansion of the decision-making mechanism had two purposes. The first was to gather information about which diverse office-holders had direct knowledge so that the decisions would be as informed and as data-driven as possible. The second was to enlist various office-holders to supervise the implementation of the decisions in practice. Most of the administration’s decisions were focused on ensuring continuity of all academic endeavors while complying with the instructions issued by the national authorities.

1. **A physical versus a virtual campus**

**The emptying of the campus**

Because of the initial lockdown and Health Ministry guidelines, the campus emptied out, causing a sense of uncertainty for the entire college community. In this context, a member of the administrative staff related:

In the course of 24 hours, the classrooms, lecture halls, hallways, and courtyards that are always packed with people, turned desolate. The entire atmosphere changed completely, and we had no idea what to expect. There was a feeling of total loss.

Consequently, the college administration made a point of strengthening the sense of control with regard to the faculty, the administrative staff, and the students. As a first step, motivated by concern for the health of critical workers who continued to work at the college, and by the hope for the students’ return, the administration decided to set up disinfection stations in every part of the campus and put up posters with information on conduct designed to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection. Both the observance of the rules of hygiene and, later on, the implementation of the Purple Badge protocol, were tracked by the college’s safety officer.

Expectations were high. For a moment, there was a sense that things were under control and that the issue could be addressed by increasing safety measures. However, it soon became evident that the problem facing the college was far more complex, and the accompanying uncertainty was massive. During the first third of March, the government imposed various restrictions through its Emergency Regulations to battle the virus, including the restriction on gatherings and the closure of the school system. The significance of these restrictions was the drastic change to the purpose and core work of the college they caused, with the campus almost fully emptied of students, faculty, and other employees.

**Access of a remote campus**

The interviews make clear that the library services were not sufficiently accessible. Suddenly, the college realized that there was problem with students’ access to the library, especially materials on the syllabi. The administration asked the lecturers to send their syllabi to the library, and the librarians scanned and uploaded all mandatory reading to the school’s intranet. In addition, lecturers were asked to record their synchronous sessions and upload them to the course sites for the students who were unable to attend the lectures.

For courses in which demonstrations and hands-on activities were integral to learning (e.g., arts courses and labs), lecturers were instructed to adopt a “demonstration-based” learning strategy using advanced technological means as alternatives to previous teaching tools: visual demonstrations, animations of scientific experiments, presentations of visual models, simulations, and filmed experiments. For example, science teachers were asked to prepare a digital lab folder for every experiment and to change the components of the final grade by replacing the preliminary quiz with a joint synchronous Zoom discussion with students about the experiment’s scientific background before every experiment. To handle these tasks, lecturers were equipped with cameras, and a film studio was put at their disposal to serve as a resource for teaching the various academic disciplines.

**The challenge of maintaining the routine**

As part of confronting the emergency, the college decided to continue activities that predated the crisis and maintain routines. This decision was based on the conviction that, in a crisis, it is necessary to remind people of what they can do to preserve what they have. This decision had an important impact on the college’s organizational, academic, and interpersonal elements.

Organizationally, the college continued to recruit new applicants for the 2020-2021 academic year, and in May 2020, it began hosting open weeks to encourage applications, the last of which was held two weeks before the start of the 2020-2021 academic year. The administration decided to exempt applications from the normal registration fee and to lower tuition costs in light of the difficult financial conditions many families were experiencing.

Academically, and in tandem with Zoom teaching, the college encouraged the research staff to conduct research relevant to the COVID-19 crisis and to view the situation as an opportunity for real-time research and learning. Furthermore, seminar meetings of the academic faculty, which began in the first semester, continued uninterruptedly via Zoom during the pandemic. “This contributed greatly to the sense of togetherness and unaffected routine, and that we could continue as normal,” in the words of one department head. Moreover, because of its aim to maintain continuity, the college held an online, two-day, in-service program for the academic faculty to prepare for the start of the 2020-2021 school year.

Interpersonally, in honor of Mother’s Day, the administrative staff and academic faculty met up for a festive meal on campus and were presented with flower bouquets, while maintaining the Purple Tag protocol. On April 7, the dean and president of the college invited the academic faculty and administrative staff to a Zoom conversation to extend their best wishes for the month of Ramadan, and on May 13, during a meeting summarizing the activities of administrators, notes were distributed thanking them for their contribution in maintaining the routine despite the crisis. Referring to the preservation of the routine, one interviewee observed:

Every coin has two sides, and it would be a mistake to look only at the dark side of the pandemic. For me, the rosy side is the willingness people showed to work ceaselessly, and for that they should be praised and thanked.

1. **The staff**

**Critical workers**

As a result of the pressure applied by the Finance Ministry, many college employees were put on leave. These were defined as non-critical workers whose absence would not impede the critical functioning of the college in emergencies. The college administration, using professional considerations and subject to the provisions of the law, determined which workers were deemed critical for the optimal continuation of the college’s endeavors and reduced the number of workers coming to work at the college in person. However, it soon became clear that college teaching routinely involves various interdependent groups of workers, e.g., all levels of the academic faculty and the administrative staff. As a result, several people returned to work on campus immediately. Underlying the decision on who was critical was also the questions of the workers’ age and socioeconomic situation, and not just on their criticalness to the college’s ability to function. According to a senior member of the administration,

The workers put on unpaid leave were very carefully selected, and the truth is that the cases were few and far between. We didn’t want to harm people’s morale, so we looked at the workers’ age, their family status, their necessity, and their economic situation.

1. **Online teaching**

**The rapid pivot to online learning**

The need for online learning and the use of digital means proved to be a tremendous challenge in the decision-making process. In practice, this transition was the core of the process and was unanimously supported, as reflected in the college making a significant financial investment in this area. The decision to purchase the Zoom app was based on three considerations: (1) use of the free version is time limited, and it was important to the college not to compromise on teaching quality because of time constraints; (2) purchase of the app would make it possible to hold classes using the college’s own Moodle, which allows the lectures to be stored in the cloud and retrieved as needed. This would make it possible for students who, for whatever reason, had not attended the lecture in real-time to listen to it later; and (3) the desire to protect the privacy of students and lecturers, as all the activity would take place within the Moodle system. A senior member of the college described this as follows:

We are willing to buy all the Zoom licenses and every other logistical tool to attain our goal...Decisions on all aspects of distance learning were made, from buying all the Zoom licenses to every other logistical tool. It was important to ensure a format whereby students would be able to learn while ensuring their privacy and an optimal study atmosphere.

The transition to all-college online learning raised significant difficulties among lecturers, especially their lack of experience with online teaching/learning. This caused frustration and tension, as one of the people interviewed explained:

There’s no doubt in my mind that difficulties came to light regarding some of the teaching faculty in the transition from face-to-face work to distance learning and using the home as a kind of academic “hostel” with all of the attendant difficulties for the family and professionalism.

By contrast, the lecturers’ technical problems with online teaching led to the clear conclusion that the college needed a support system for the faculty to teach their courses, and such a system was immediately put into place. Group training sessions were held, and these covered a range of topics relating to teaching. The Simulation Center team was enlisted in these activities, and every academic department was partnered with a resource advisor to provide immediate personal responses. An intensive system of training and explanation was adapted in which the videos and written explanatory materials were uploaded to Moodle, as described by a senior faculty member:

It is our assessment that this action would be the most significant factor in making it possible to teach classes and give exams and we therefore decided to institutionalize the work of this support system for the 2020-2021 academic year. The purpose of everything we do is to ensure that the college continues to function at every level.

It is important to note that lecturers were asked to submit weekly reports on their work via a dedicated link. These forms allowed the college administration to track the diligence and progress of the academic endeavor. It also allowed lecturers to view the work of their colleagues, which in turn created a space for cooperative learning. One of the lecturers noted that “…while filling out the shared report, I became aware of the work my fellow lecturers were doing and this provided me with creative ideas, which helped me improve my own work.”

**Communications procedures in emergencies**

The pandemic forced the administration to work urgently at all levels while preserving an effective level of functioning both academically and logistically. Since the start of the crisis, frequent meetings were held between the administration and senior administrators, including officers, department heads, program heads, and the dean of students office via Unicko and Zoom. As the interviews made clear, “The high frequency of the meetings was critical to ensure the flow of information and communication in the new reality.” The purpose of the meetings was to articulate procedures corresponding to the need the new reality was generating, disseminate the procedures, and implement them, as well as track their application in practice. These meetings were tremendously helpful in creating a shared space and a sense of confidence and belonging, which in turn led to the team cooperating and assuming responsibility.

One strategy the college administration adopted was to keep students, lecturers, and staff constantly informed by disseminating instructions via email and WhatsApp groups. One interview subject concluded that,

The conduct of the college was very good. It was very helpful that the college really listened to the lecturers and students and constantly made sure to keep everyone in the loop via meetings dedicated to situation assessments, planning, and task allocations.

Due to the lockdown, the administration issued the instruction to open WhatsApp groups to create a close, intimate communications space. It should be noted that, before the pandemic, lecturers were instructed to limit their communication with students solely to the college’s formal systems, i.e., Moodle and the college email account. WhatsApp was considered an informal method up until then. During the crisis, WhatsApp groups were opened for the students, academic faculty, and administrative staff so that each group received the information relevant to its members.

In addition, online meetings were held every week with all the lecturers and employees, which were mainly dedicated to clarifying the rules of conduct in the new reality. The first online meeting, held on March 17, was hosted by the dean and included many employees. Its goal was to provide an explanation for recommended conduct under the new conditions, and, especially, to assuage fears. Subsequent to the meeting, the administration asked all lecturers to be patient and calm: every decision made by a small core team would be followed by a short meeting to keep everyone abreast of developments, which would also be open to questions and clarifications to reduce tension and increase transparency, despite the general atmosphere of uncertainty.

Furthermore, administrations members stayed informed of the directives issued by the national authorities (the Health Ministry, the Council for Higher Education, the Education Ministry, and the MOFET Institute) and also proposed that the college share and exchange information with other institutions of higher education to learn and share methods for coping with the unprecedented crisis.

1. **The students**

**Concern for student welfare**

While the needs of the academic faculty were addressed intensively, the administration placed special emphasis on the demands and needs of the students, and chose to communicate with them via WhatsApp groups and email.

Many students complained of economic distress and the number of students paying tuition dropped sharply:

Many of our students had been working and using their earnings to finance their tuition. But because of the slowdown of the economy, students were suddenly unemployed and couldn’t continue paying tuition, so the Orbit and Moodle systems locked them out.

This problem was addressed by the administration’s declaration that no student would suffer. It allowed students to defer payments and enroll in installment plans for paying tuition, and also voided the data system automatic command that locked out those students who were in arrears. Special attention was given to students who were in their last semester by identifying and providing scholarships. As part of the student support system, a short video produced specifically to encourage them was uploaded on March 25, bearing the following message:

You are not alone. In normal times and in emergencies, we work for you with all our heart. We’ve stayed at work for you. Stay at home and take good care of yourselves for us. We will stay in telephone contact with you… All of us in the administration, the dean of students office, the academic faculty, and college employees.

Leading up to the 2020-2021 academic year, the college, wanting to give new B.A. and M.A. students a positive learning experience, hosted introductory and training sessions on all the personal information systems (Moodle, the library, etc.) A senior administration member stated that, “We are checking out the needs of every college segment. Our inquiries are ongoing and we always try to respond to every emerging need.”

**Reducing student load**

It was important to the administration to support and not overburden the students. In a message sent on April 6, lecturers were asked to hold their synchronous classes at the regularly scheduled times. The following letter responded to this as follows:

Holding classes at times not listed on the students’ schedules creates conflicts and is confusing.”

Interview subjects noted,

I never forget that the student is front and center. I’m aware of the fact that people are in quarantine and that it isn’t easy for the academic faculty to teach from home, but the most important element is the students and we therefore have to pay attention to their needs.

Lecturers were instructed to give students plenty of lead time with papers and projects and to reduce student loads while maintaining academic standards and quality. Similarly, seminar papers and final projects in the M.A. tracks were granted an extension. In addition, lecturers were asked to update and enrich materials and course sites and be available to their students. Before the start of the 2020-2021 academic year, lecturers were told to conduct hybrid teaching (e.g. synchronic teaching for two weeks followed by one week of a-synchronic teaching) out of consideration for quarantined students. Regarding the synchronous classes, it was decided that students were not obligated to use the camera function; this was in response to student feedback, both because of attendance and privacy issues.

**Student assessments**

Assessing student work occupied a significant portion of the steps taken intended to adapt teaching to the unique situation. Lecturers were asked to expand their assessment criteria and add assignments in order to avoid having to rely on a single data point in giving semester grades. A senior administrator described the results:

During the a-synchronous classes, students were given assignments that required serious work and learning. Students had a right to be given grades on these assignments. I think that the grades on the assignments given during the semester serve as an anchor for the grade the student is awarded for the course.

**Exams in the virtual format**

When instructors sat down to prepare the first semester’s make-up exams (scheduled for May), it was decided to cancel the services of the external company the college had used to manage exams and, instead, set up a new exam system headed by a college expert in online learning, and to adjust protocols for holding exams in their new format.

Lecturers were asked to upload the exams to a virtual safe; intensive training was provided to faculty members on writing exams and assignments in Moodle; and the Exam Division and their proctors were also provided with training. Thus, responsibility for the exam was placed entirely on the teaching faculty. For example, instead of being present only at the beginning of an exam, lecturers were now required to manage the whole system and serve as proctors.

Constructing the exam system required the involvement of legal consultants to preserve students’ rights and obligations towards the college, protect privacy, and ensure honesty and integrity. To implement the instructions, students received training on appropriate conduct during online exams. Students with internet problems were permitted to take the exam on campus under the Purple Tag protocol. Despite the difficulties, the exams were held on schedule and students completed their requirements on time. Based on the experience, it was decided to hold second semester exams the same way.

1. **Students’ practicum during the lockdowns**

Our students do their practice teaching at many different schools. Obviously, this routine, too, was disrupted by the crisis. The increase in Arab cities and towns defined as “red” (i.e. having a high incidence of confirmed COVID-19 cases; Israel used the traffic light model – green-yellow-red – to indicate any given location’s contagiousness status) kept many students from reaching their schools for their practicum. In many cases, this involved fears among the students and their training teachers, especially when infections were discovered in some schools where students were practice teaching.

On March 16, the college administration disseminated a page-long list of instructions for the pedagogical trainers on maintaining the practicum during the crisis. It stressed the need for continuing the practice teaching and for maintaining close contact between students and teacher trainers. Interviews disclosed the difficulty the training coordinators experienced when trying to comply with all the instructions, because these instructions changed with some frequency during the first two weeks. One interview subject recalled:

The first few weeks were very difficult. We had to offer alternatives to the traditional training model in place before the crisis. The trainers did not believe training could be done online. One of the trainers thought we were deluding ourselves and that there’s no such thing as “online training.”

To cope with the new situation, frequent meetings were held with the training coordinators in the various departments. These meetings addressed many issues related to communicating with students, training methods, assessment methods, and many more issues that emerged from the new reality. One interview with members of the practicum system noted that the training sessions and enlistment of the coordinators and trainers to the program made it possible to successfully cope with the crisis:

It’s obvious that, on one’s own, it would have been impossible to organize such a setup and that constant communication with the administration and the school supervisors is necessary, even critical. The crisis also helped to forge closer relations with the department heads. While the relations had always been there, they’d never been as intensive before.

Training coordinators held weekly meetings with the pedagogical trainers in the various departments, assisted by the college’s IT personnel who helped construct digital portfolios and an online center for digital resources related to pedagogical training and practice teaching.

Conclusions were drawn and decisions were made as people were working. At first, the trainers were asked to upload assignments to the course sites in Moodle. Later on, they were asked to hold synchronous meetings with the students they were training. In addition, the college built a dedicated website to make the appropriately-adapted study materials on distance teaching accessible, adjusting the assessment measures for the students’ practicum to the new reality. Despite all the difficulties, students were able to present their projects at a festive online event on June 23. Not even this crisis could keep this annual event from going forward. Moreover, as a sign that activity was still going on, the training system initiated a day-long seminar attended by Education Ministry supervisors, school principals, the faculty, and the students. In the first semester of the 2020-2021 academic year, one week of practicum was cancelled because of the lockdown; as an alternative, the Simulation Center offered simulations of lesson plans put together by the trainers.

**Discussion**

The literature dealing with crises and uncertainty never imagined a crisis as all-encompassing as the COVID-19 pandemic, and it offers no suggestions for how institutions of higher education can handle so massive and long-lasting an emergency as this. Therefore, this chapter’s focus is on examining how institution of higher education confronted the COVID-19 crisis in real time and on contributing something of value to the new international scholarship emerging on the subject.

In the current study, we identified six specific areas that challenged the college continuously since the virus reached Israel. These areas can be categorized according to six fields of intervention as Table 1 demonstrates. They are: an ad hoc decision-making mechanism; a physical versus a virtual campus; the staff; online teaching; the students; and the students’ practicum. These areas all experienced drastic changes and required immediate managerial intervention.

**Table 1: Areas that challenged the college and the proposed handling during the Covid-19 crisis**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Areas of challenge** | **Challenge description** | **Policy during crisis** |
| 1. **Ad hoc decision-making mechanism**
 |
| Decision-making | Urgency and frequency of decision making | Expanding decision-making circles |
| 1. **Physical versus virtual campus**
 |
| The campus empties | Control/lack of control over the situation | Disinfection and strict observance of physical distancing based on rules |
| Making a distance campus accessible | Availability of study materials and college services | Scanning all mandatory study materials, recording and uploading lectures and experiments to course sites |
| The challenge of “the routine” | Keeping up activity and continuity | Recruiting applicants; research, academic, and social activity |
| 1. **The staff**
 |
| Critical workers | Critical/non-critical | Setting criteria: age, family and economic status, and necessity of job |
| 1. **Online teaching**
 |
| Sudden pivot to online learning | Continuing teaching while preserving students’ and teachers’ rights | Purchase of digital resources, training, and provision of technical support |
| Virtual communications procedures in a crisis | Maintaining a close and intensive sphere of communications | Increasing the intensity of online sessions, preparing instructions and disseminating them |
| 1. **The students**
 |
| Students’ financial distress | Avoiding suffering to students in tuition arrears because of being unemployed and in financial straits | Deferring tuition payments, making instalment plans available, removing obstacles related to financial difficulties, providing scholarships and grants |
| Exams in virtual format | Placing full responsibility of exams being held on the lecturers (and ending outsourcing contract) | Setting up an internal college exam system, distributing procedures on holding exams and maintaining integrity and honor, training on constructing online exams |
| Assessing students’ achievements | Assessing reality-dependent achievements (distance/at home learning) | Giving significant weight in the final grade to assignments given during the course, with the best assignments selected from among all the assignments completed during the semester |
| Reducing students’ load | Meeting academic requirements while avoiding overloading the student body | Sticking to the pre-crisis schedule, providing sufficient lead time for assignments and extensions for seminar papers and final projects, making course material available on the course websites, hybrid teaching, the requirement to allow camera function is not enforced |
| 1. **The students’ practicum**
 |
| Practice teaching during the lockdowns | The impossibility of practicum via physical encounters during the lockdowns | Assignments of synchronous session, simulations, and peer-to-peer learning |

Without a doubt, the nation-wide lockdowns, the physical distancing, and other limitations imposed because of the COVID-19 crisis forced the college to face challenges at all levels related to administration, teaching, and research, as well as challenges vis-à-vis the students. The college was asked to provide a response to the new situation into which it had been thrust. According to Coombs (Coombs, 2007), the way in which an organization responds to a crisis is connected to the level of responsibility it takes for itself to ensure its survival and continuity. In light of this, the COVID-19 crisis caused a change to the decision-making patterns in the college and required urgency, frequency, and expansion of the decision-making circle.

According to the multidisciplinary literature dealing with organizational resilience during crises, a system’s resilience expresses the system’s ability to face a crisis and return to its routine in a reasonable amount of time as soon as the crisis is over (Williams et al, 2017). The COVID-19 crisis was so overwhelming that academic institutions had never experienced such an impact in the modern era, other than wartime. As such, the current research serves as a new, theoretical contribution to the literature in which we posit that an academic institution should not return to its pre-crisis routine, but, rather, it should assimilate the insights derived from managing the crisis and adopt a new way for conducting the institution. One conclusion of the COVID-19 crisis management offered herein is adopting and developing the institution’s digital and technological capabilities at all levels, from the administrative level to the academic faculty and student level. An academic institution’s ability to create and manage a digital campus during and after a crisis is a crucial condition of its resilience and survivability during the current and future crises.

Given our case study, we suggest several future action methods that can strengthen crisis and uncertainty management:

1. To strengthen organizational resilience, we recommend developing an institutional culture of cooperation and action leading to responsibility and an enhanced sense of belonging.
2. It is necessary to create flexible management methods closely attuned to the needs of the administrative staff, the faculty, and the students, and to learn about future confrontations with crises from these diverse groups.
3. It is necessary to create a support system for students in dire financial straits who do not have the appropriate telecommunications equipment to manage their studies satisfactorily. It is important to note that, despite the response the institution provided in certain areas, some issues still require in-depth attention and an informed resolution. One such issue is the establishment of an emotional support system comprised of several components, including an emergency hotline, workshops for students on strengthening their emotional resilience, and identifying mentors for students who are in trouble and hurting because of the situation.
4. We suggest rethinking the issue involving exam integrity and discussing different ways to ensure fair supervision of online exams.
5. To preserve the quality of teaching, we recommend that the teaching committee make an in-depth examination of the issue of quality of teaching in the virtual sphere in general and in crises in particular.
6. We suggest developing a policy of privacy and ethics in the context of distance learning, including the issue of turning cameras on during classes, which triggers debate and sometimes tension among students and the academic faculty.
7. Putting workers on unpaid leave was difficult for the critical employees. It is therefore necessary to take this factor into consideration when making decisions in identical situations in the future.

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