The period of mandatory on-line education in the spring of 2020—an overview of lecturers' experiences

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Introduction

This contribution to the "notes-from-the-field" section of the JPHE aims to outline the experiences of lecturers at the University of Borås, Sweden (here and after UB), who turned to on-line education as a response to the spread of Covid-19 during the 2020 spring semester.

To obtain a concise overview of lecturers' reflections and experiences, an on-line survey was conducted between May 18 and May 31, 2020. A questionnaire consisting of 11 questions with multiple choice alternatives was used. Respondents were also encouraged to comment and develop their responses further, via email. Due to confidentiality, these comments are not explicitly reported in this text.

This text is not intended to present a deep analysis of events, nor an investigation into whatever theoretical framework one may find appropriate for this type of situation. Rather, our contribution alerts researchers in the field to a special situation many of us experienced, in order to provide opportunities to investigate pedagogical challenges in a time of distress, as well as stimulate further discussion about these matters.

Background

In response to the spread of Covid-19 during the spring semester 2020, a rapid transition to on-line education was implemented at UB. On March 18, 2020, the

decision to turn to on-line education, wherever possible, was communicated across UB.

At UB, many lecturers had experience with distance teaching. However, approximately 40% of those who responded to the questionnaire (detailed below) had never taught on-line. The digital tools used to teach on-line were UB's video conferencing system (ZOOM), and a video recording and streaming system (Kaltura/HB-play). A learning management system called PingPong (LMS) was already in use in both on-campus and distance courses. For both lecturers and students support was available for PingPong, but there was no organized support for ZOOM or Kaltura/HB-play, at the time. Except for the LMS, UB had no transparent organization which supported support digital systems, holistically. In addition to the Department of Educational Research and Development (PUF) and UB's IT-services unit, many lecturers, across UB, found themselves acting as informal support people for their colleagues.

Lecturers had the opportunity to participate in courses and workshops about ZOOM and Kaltura/HB-play. These were organized by PUF and many lecturers chose to participate in this training (see question 3 below). When the demands to teach on-line occurred, many lecturers turned to the person responsible for that training for advice. It turned out that providing support and individual instruction for the first four months of mandatory on-line teaching filled most of his time, including a significant number of consultations outside regular work hours.

The survey

A questionnaire with 11 multiple-choice questions was distributed to all UB lecturers via the LMS. Respondents were also invited to comment and develop their views via email. The survey was distributed to all the UB lectures, approximately 550. 136 people responded to the questionnaire, including 40% of whom had not previously taught on-line. The survey ended on 20 May 2020. Below is a summary of the questionnaire responses. Most questions show some (expected) relationships, but the numerical correlations are quite weak. Comments given by some respondents provided additional information, but are not shown, in order to ensure confidentiality.
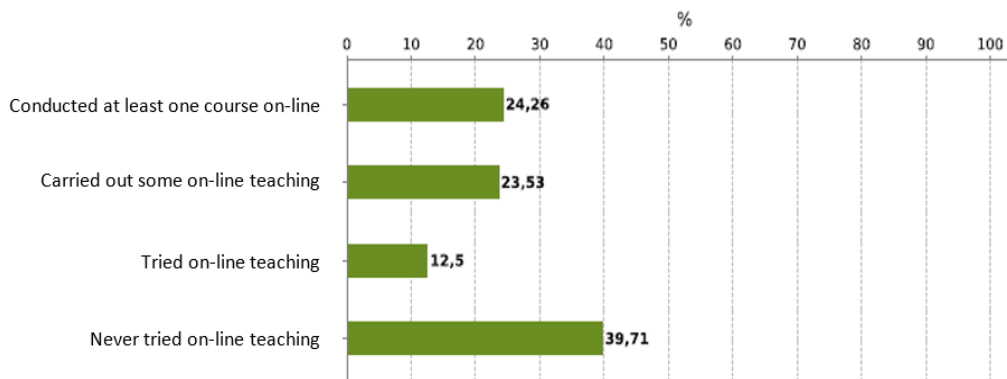
Results

Distribution of respondents by program of study

Question 1. I teach mainly in…
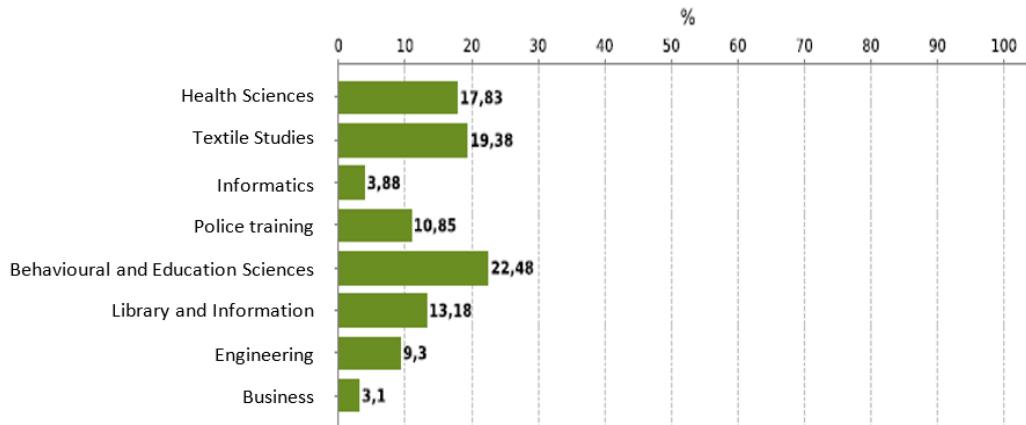
*Distribution of respondents according to previous experience*

Question 2. I had before…

Comment: Approximately 40% of respondents had not tried distance teaching and approximately 25% had previously held at least one distance course. It is not clear if or how examinations were conducted in these on-line courses.

Participation in education offered by the Section for Pedagogical Development and Research (PUF)

Question 3. Before the on-line only period, I had participated in some training on the following... (multiple answers possible)
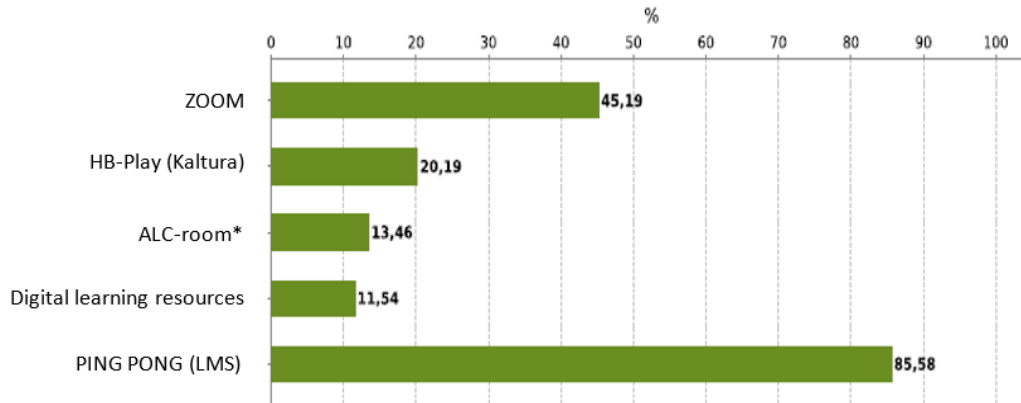

*ALC room (Active Learning Classroom) is a uniquely designed space for active learning with round tables for cooperation, and whiteboards and digital screens at each table. The room is also equipped for blended learning.

Comment: Most lecturers had participated in PingPong training and almost half of them had participated in training on ZOOM.

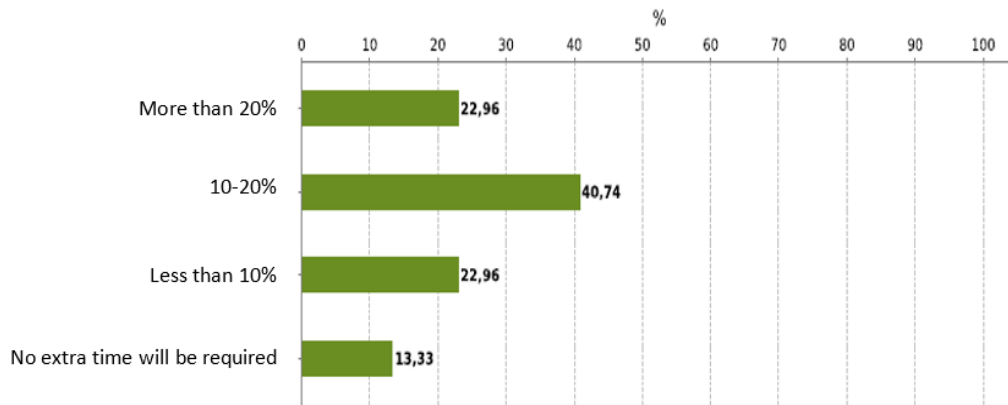*The teachers' assessment of the workload during the period*

Question 4. During the transition to on-line education, I have put extra work into my courses estimated to…
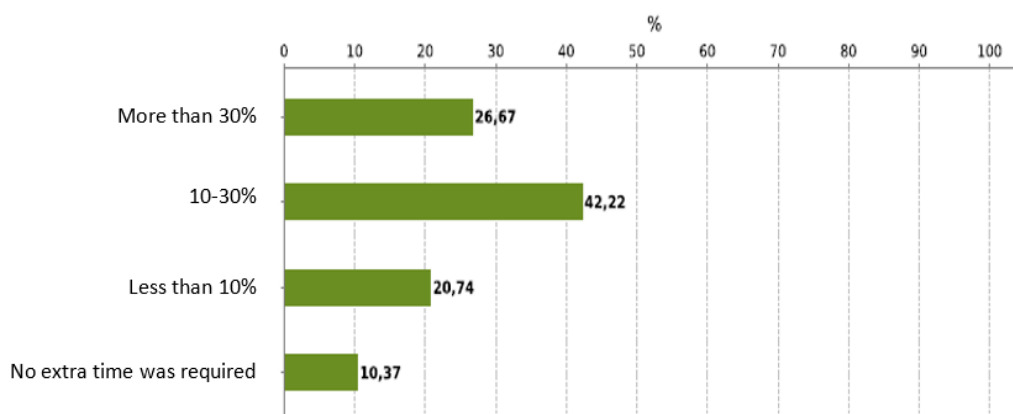
Comment: Most lecturers spent more working time than usual on their courses during the period, but a small proportion of the lecturers already had distance courses and did not need to make any special adjustments.

*The teachers' assessment of the workload for continued distance education*

Question 5. If the teaching is to continue at a distance, it means that my working hours will increase…

Comment: Most lecturers estimated that the workload with continued distance education increases by at least 10%.

Teachers' assessment of collaboration during the period

Question 6. During the period of distance education/work at home, the collaboration with colleagues and the university's other staff has worked…
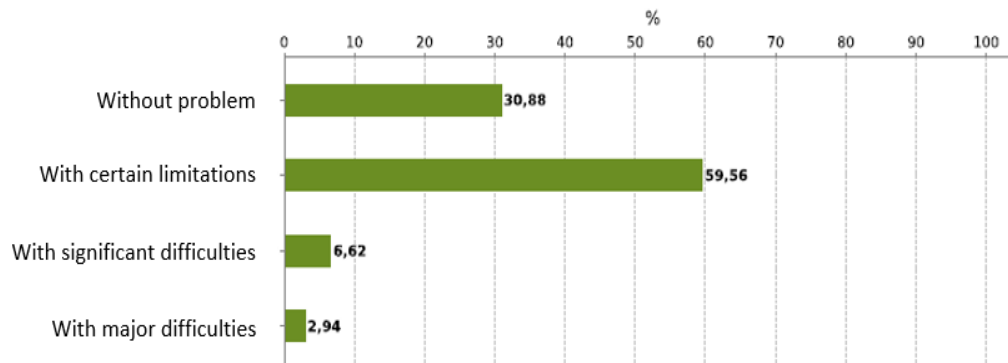
Comment: Most lecturers judged that cooperation and interaction during the period worked well.
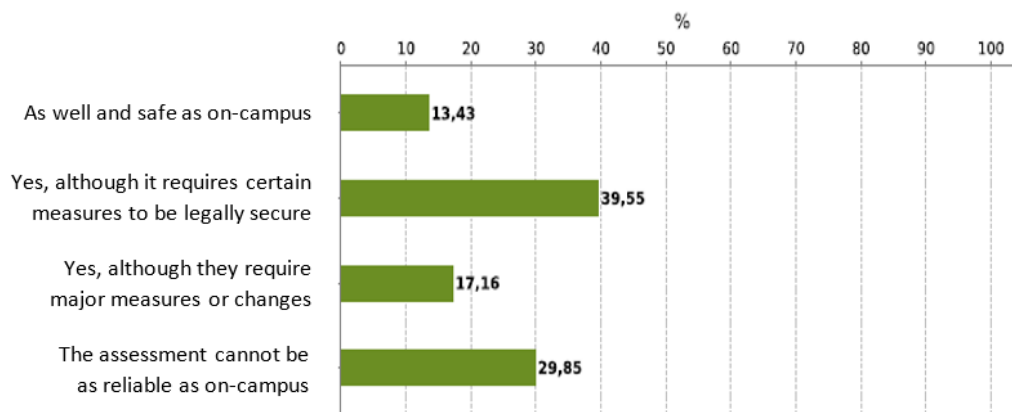
Teachers 'assessment of students' experiences

Question 7. I think that my students' experience of on-line education so far has been…
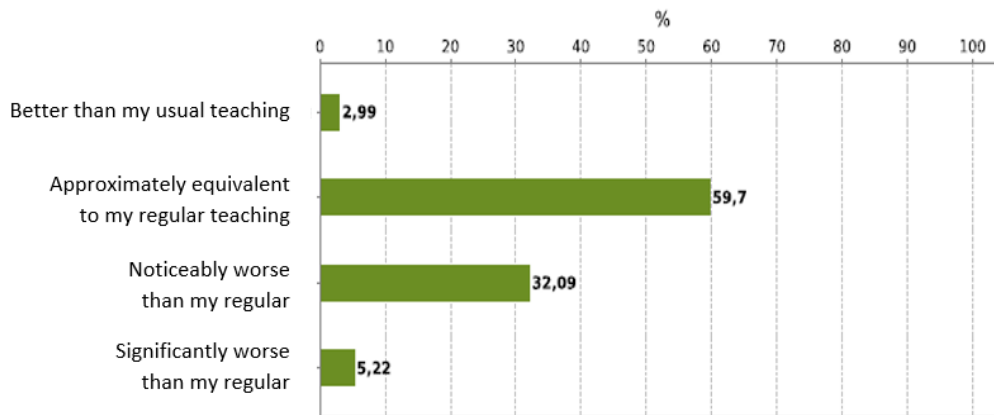
Comment: The predominant picture was that the students' performance in response to on-line teaching had been satisfactory, but there had been problems in some groups.

*Teachers' assessment of the possibilities of conducting examinations online*

Question 8. I think assessment and examination may be carried out at a distance in my field...

Comment: Relevant and legally secure examinations were a problem in distance learning (it is common for on-line courses to still be examined on-campus).

The teachers 'assessment of the students' cooperation during the period

Question 9. I think distance education made collaboration and interaction between my students…
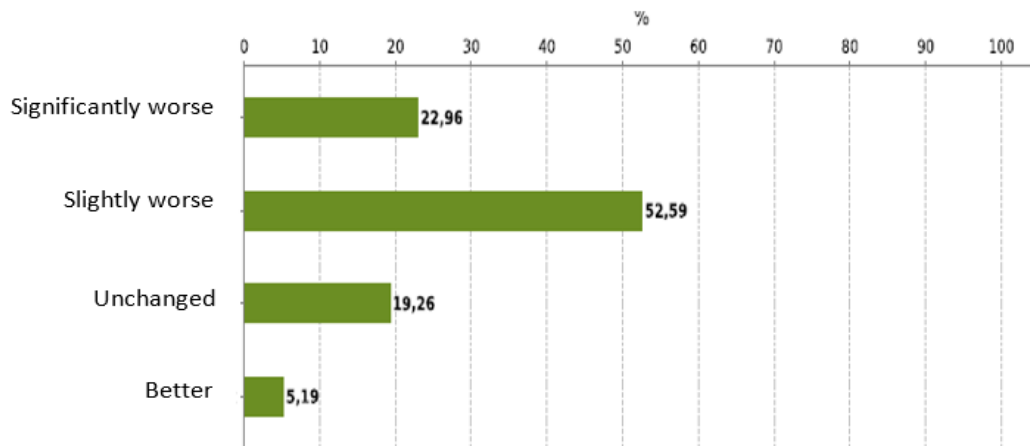
Comment: Most lecturers judged that the collaboration between students during the period worked worse than normal.

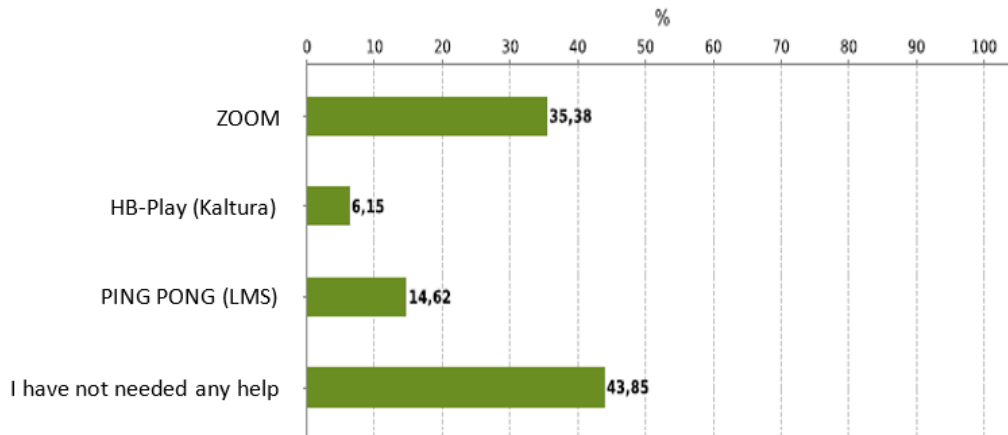*The need for support during the period*

Question 10. I was able to use the digital tools needed to move on to distance learning.
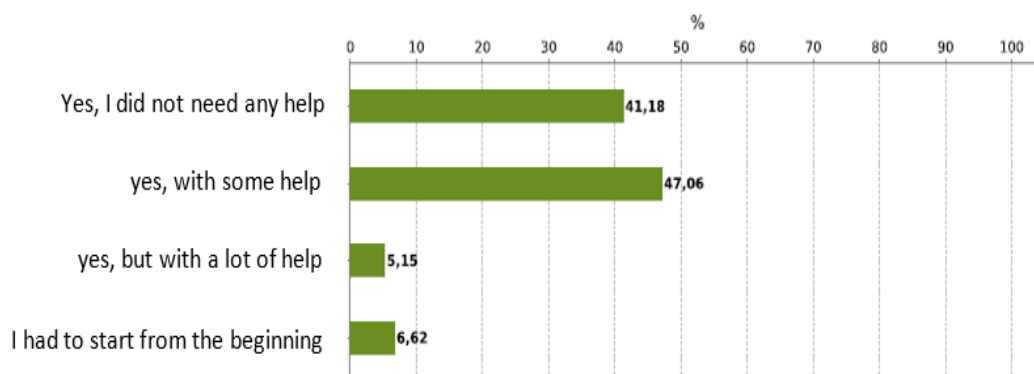
Comment: Most lecturers (almost 90%) passed the period with little help or on their own.

The need for support during the period

Question 11. The most important help for me has been support for...

Comment: For many lecturers, ZOOM was new, and, in some cases, it required significant extra work to get started. The learning platform PingPong was used prior to Covid-19 for both in person and distance learning and most teachers (85%) had attended some PingPong training.

Relationships between different issues

Most of the questions above show some correlations that were expected. The numerical correlations are quite weak and, given the response rate, it is unclear what conclusions could be drawn from a more detailed statistical processing.

Experience and support needs: Groups with different needs

The distribution of answers to question 10 from the four groups with different experience according to question 2.

Responses from the four groups
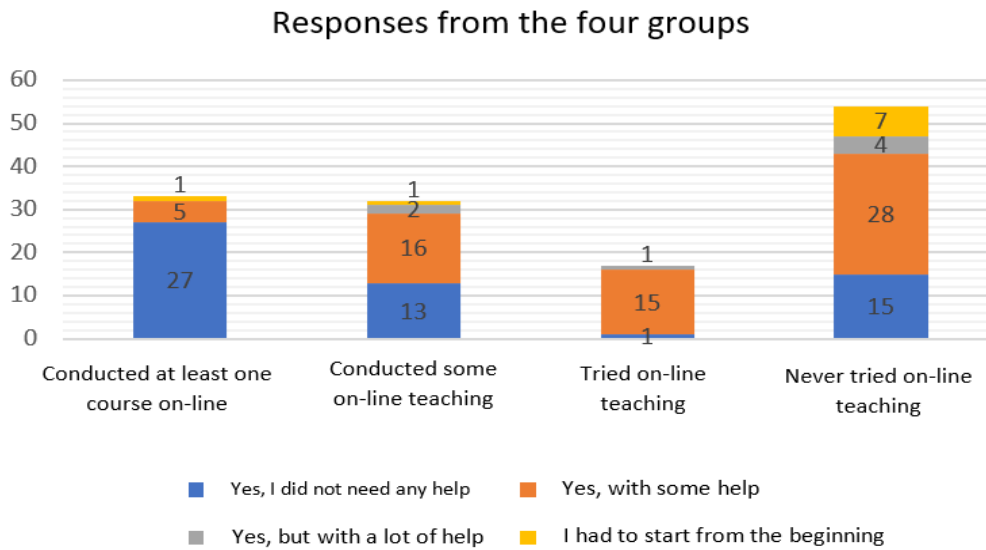
Comment: Lecturers with less on-line teaching experience needed more support, but it was also clear that many of them did well with little or no help. The programs themselves are apparently not a problem for users with good computer skills.

Additional information from e-mail comments and personal communication

Most of the people who commented via email were positive about the support they received. A few comments suggested information regarding how to obtain technical assistance was not clear to some respondents. Comments from a couple of lecturers, who would like to develop the educational use of digital tools, showed frustration about the organization for support and maintenance of digital tools.

Discussion

The results showed that the lecturers managed the conversion to on-line teaching well, even though, in many cases, it required extra work effort. Most teachers felt that the students generally dealt with the adjustment without major problems. There were some concerns, however, about the integrity of examinations.

The overall impression is most lecturers spent extra time on their teaching during the period and they managed to maintain the quality of the teaching. In most cases, the lecturers used ZOOM to deliver the same lessons they would normally deliver in face-to-face teaching. The collaboration with colleagues worked satisfactorily, with some minor inconveniences.

The need for support varied widely with a small group of lecturers who required more assistance, while others managed well on their own. The digital tools used worked well and did not cause any problems for those lecturers who had good computer skills. Many comments were very positive about the support for digital tools during the period. Some lecturers, however, left comments that confirmed it was unclear if and how there was technical assistance available to them. The demand for help during the period mainly concerned the practical handling of and minor technical problems with ZOOM that emerged during lecturers' planning and preparation of single lessons. Usually, 15–30-minute consultations via mobile phone or video conference solved the most urgent problems, but the need for help frequently arose outside ordinary working hours. By appointment, many lecturers received longer consultations with some requiring several sessions to become accustomed to the tools in ZOOM.

If the situation with mandatory on-line teaching were to continue, the problems of conducting examinations in a relevant and legally secure way need to be addressed. Other issues that call for attention are the impact of lecturer and student interaction and collaboration in an on-line learning environment.

Conclusions and recommendations

Courses in digital methods and the handling of educational software are important long-term activities, but they do not diminish the need for basic technical support, judging from the responses above. To improve the availability of support for the digital tools commonly used in education at UB, more personnel need to participate in these opportunities and that may require additional training on Zoom, Kaltura and PingPong.

To secure educational processes in times of crisis, UB should prioritize support for the most commonly used tools, so lecturers can obtain basic help at short notice. This requires a supporting structure and resources that are better coordinated within UB. Therefore, UB could consider strengthening their digital capacity by appointing a coordinator for digital support and training. That coordinator could organize collaboration between support staff, across the university.

To cope with the continuing Covid-19 pandemic, or other potential future crises, this survey suggests areas in which flexibility at UB might improve, in order to benefit students and personnel. Our recent experience underlines the need for support personnel well prepared to provide advice and training that helps teaching personnel adapt in times of crisis. This means that all support staff need good

computer skills and familiarity with the software commonly used across the university.

Some suggestions for future research

We have to wait and see to what extent universities will return to traditional classroom methods when the pandemic is behind us. It is possible this period will stimulate a wider future use of distance teaching methodology.

Another complex and potentially controversial issue is what impact organization and management had in higher education institutions when the situation called for rapid decisions and implementation of adaptations to an uncertain environment.

Only future research can tell how a sudden change to on-line teaching compares to face-to-face lectures in courses given on campus, i.e. what was the impact of this period of mandatory distance teaching on lecturers' workload, study results, collaboration, and interaction. This is a complex yet interesting issue as distance education is usually more cost effective for both students and government, but voices in academia usually are defending traditional on-campus education as qualitatively superior, even if it comes at a higher cost.

The aftermath of the pandemic will surely trigger many critical analyses of how well organizations performed, or which leadership teams—in which sectors— adapted well? Which could have done better? Did we learn anything surprising? We hope our notes from the field contribute to asking healthy questions and new, constructive conversations amongst all of us who had to adapt, as well as those who are still struggling.

Author biographies

Ramón Garrote Jurado is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Borås, Sweden. He is doing research about the interactive use of Educational Software in higher education. He has participated in many international projects and his work has been published in international journals and conferences. He has been honored in two occasions for his work with staff development.

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