



# The Remote Higher Education in Iran over the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Thematic Analysis on Provisions and Priorities of the University of Tehran's Official Website

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought instructional and administrative possibilities and problematics in higher education internationally. In such conditions, the developing countries suffered challenging times for less personnel preparedness, deficiencies in technological infrastructure, and restricted sources of finance for investing. This study argues that Iran's higher education was already pressured under the UCMs before the emergency transition to online education. It therefore focuses on the University of Tehran (UT), one of the most affluent Iranian universities, which stands as a role model in quality and excellence at the national and regional scales. It employs the reflexive thematic analysis method to cover a comprehensive body of COVID-driven content at UT's website, including news, administrative notes, and announcements on new official regulations, teaching guidelines, and consultative commentaries for mental well-being. It provides an analytical model based on three major themes, A) students: technical and emotional support vs. onerous regulations, B) prosociality and social responsibility, C) instructors at University of Tehran: highly expected simultaneously ignored. These major themes entail different subthemes and motifs that unveil UT's developing solutions and obstacles to foster fruitful exchange within the UT community.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Iran, Quality education, Remote higher education, University of Tehran

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## 1. Introduction

According to the United Nations, the COVID 19 pandemic affected the education of 98.6% of learners in 200 countries, equivalent to 1,725 million pre-school to higher education students (United Nations 2020). Then, remote education has become the "panacea" of this crisis, maintaining mainstream education and avoiding deprivation (Dhawan 2020).

Remote education has transformed from accessibility to an inevitable necessity; the best universities therefore began to contest over combining "equity and excellence" (Sahlberg, 2021) in educational policies as a new source of competence and evolution. The qualified digital pedagogy at universities emerged to preserve the minimum difference with F2F (face-to-face) classes and motivate learning progress along with higher resilience and personal adaptation of instructors and students (Linder, Letzel, Tarini, & Schwab, 2021).

An avalanche of scholarly literature was produced in the early few months after the universities forced lockdown to address the tremendous challenges encountered by instructors and students. Concerns and issues ranged from technical problems and internet connection/malfunctions to ineffective online content and lack of focus, motivation, and interaction in virtual classes. Among others, one of the most significant issues confronted by university students and faculty members was the emergence of a widening digital gap worldwide. Inequality and lack of fairness in access and use of ICT in education, thus, limited the meaningful participation of millions of students from marginalized geopolitical, demographic and socio-economic backgrounds. A variety of local experiences have been shared to indicate how a qualified digital pedagogy along with an active engagement in data services and applications is an

unrealistic dream correlated with rural-urban divides (Bokayev, Torebekova, Davletbayena & Zhakypova, 2021; Scully, Lehane & Scully, 2021), the disadvantages of households (Greenhow, Lewin & Willet, 2021; Scully et al., 2021) and the socially isolated and unprivileged communities such as restrictions on people of color or girls' access to the Internet (Sullivan, 2021; Khlaif & Salha, 2020).

In a broader context, the level of preparation, technological infrastructure, and teaching competencies to identify and implement digital pedagogy has not been equally established and adjusted in the developed and developing countries (Wang, Li, Malik & Anwar, 2021). The frustration caused by the forced transition to online classes is further aggravated by losing higher education's material gains and cultural functions in various countries. The domestic and global economies faced a significant recession due to the pandemic as even the academic institutions with affluent financial resources were grappling with grave financial challenges, revenue losses, and tuition refund petitions. COVID-19 cost, for instance, American colleges at least \$120 billion (DePietro, 2020); the Ivy League universities, such as Harvard University, with its \$41.9 billion endowments, reports a deficit of \$10 million (Hubler, 2020). One may therefore imagine this transition cost for developing countries with severe restrictions.

The present study, thus, focuses on the University of Tehran, as an Iranian mother university, to portray its experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though UT is generally perceived as being among the technologically-developed universities nationwide, hosting 11.800 courses, meaning 1 million classes (Khabarban, 1400 [2021 A.D.]), its E-Learn website made a remarkable shift from face to face education to remote education. The University of Tehran can be taken into consideration as a significant case of

study due to the pivotal role it plays in the national higher education system, as well as, an international role model which is ranked among the 400 best world universities according to Shanghai Jiao Tong Ranking (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2020).

The UT's response to the "new normal," its quality alternatives and fresh designs, were not necessarily exceptional comparing many other universities impacted by the pandemic-driven closures. However, contextualizing its challenges under the country's economic pressure and the unilateral and coercive measures (UCMs) of the United States, the university made significant efforts in enabling all its faculty, employees and students for using digital resources and platforms to continue the institutions' "regular" activities. This study addresses the University of Tehran's website in a comprehensive coverage of all COVID-related materials since March 2020, the first spot of the university's shutdown down, including news, consultative commentaries for mental well-being, and administrative notes on new official regulations. The material is coded employing ATLAS. ti software, and the codes are refined as indicated in Table 1.

## **2. Review of Literature**

The impact of the lockdown on the pedagogical models and re-thinking the strengths and deficiencies of the current teaching and learning structures can be considered as the point of concern in almost all universities. The "emergency remote education," as Minsun Shin (Shin & Hickey, 2021) calls the COVID-driven forced transition, brought 'afflictions' (Watermeyer, Crick, Knight, & Goodall, 2021) or tremendous challenges in adapting to this

complicated situation while the flourished opportunities over this short period would gift informed designs of future online pedagogy.

Transferring education to user-friendly platforms through more collaborative and convenient forms and making fast data transmission possible through social media such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and Instagram are instances of this positive change. Moreover, a new perspective on faculty and student preparation is fostered, which is not only relevant to "the best practice recommendations" (Starkey, Shonfeld, Prestridge & Cervera, 2021), but in response to uncertain social and economic contexts (Oliveira, Grenha Teixeira, Torres & Morais, 2021; Starkey et al., 2021).

Making the most of the available technology to make pre-recorded videos, to have interactive class discussions through clear-cut and pre-defined tasks on online platforms, and to provide interesting online content both in synchronous and asynchronous modes are suggested in the literature that has been published during the pandemic in order to address such issues and give practical solutions (Tietjen, Bekiroglu, Choi, Rook, & McDonald, 2021).

Meanwhile, a great deal of the released literature was concerned with "effective communications" between instructors and students: it was difficult for universities to ensure giving the faculty members sufficient skills for expanding the channels of communications and implementing a variety of digital tools in an appropriate context depending on the nature of the courses and students' educational needs (Mahmood, 2021). Taking this context-sensitive approach in remote education is a paramount dilemma the universities and instructors have confronted during the lockdown. As König, Jäger-Biela and Glutsch (2020) present the experience of

Germany, and Jia and Santi's (2021) research indicate that in the Chinese context, designing an equity science instruction tailored for individualized capabilities and needs was vital in a qualified remote pedagogy. For instance, they raise examples of tackling special needs and re-considering the position of students with special needs and disabilities in such a situation.

A vast critical inquiry appeared during the pandemic addressing the field-specific disputes: as a simple review indicates, the challenges on the way of the humanities and arts are much marginalized by the academic discourse compared to pure science and medicine. Medical, dental, and radiology education have undergone severe obstacles due to the lack of access to laboratory sessions, feeling that "practical sessions" and the operation training cannot be mastered with "online modules." The universities, then, have altered traditional teaching methods and substituted them with a variety of methods that would fit the online environment, such as engagement in virtual labs for STEM courses, hybrid of videos, simulations, and assignments such as digital lab notebooks and lab archives (Arezzo, Vignali, Ammirati, Brodie & Mintz, 2020).

Building more equitable, efficient, and resilient higher education systems in this context-sensitive appreciation requires wise investment and high-capital technological infrastructure. The lack of preparedness, socio-economic uncertainties, and insufficient infrastructure have been much more limiting in developing countries (Oloyede, Faruk & Raji, 2021).

Among other developing countries, Iran can be considered even a different case with standing against a consolidated regime of sanctions that the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, Barack Obama, explicitly identified with "unprecedented, crippling sanctions" (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021, p. 310). According to American

sources, the country had already been under the pressure campaign as between March 2018 and March 2020, the average living standard decreased by 13 percent nationally, and the national currency has lost almost one-fourth of its value (Kahalzadeh, 2021).

In such a challenging situation, emergency response teams in the Iranian universities started to work immediately by vacating dorms and holding classes online. Thus, this study intends to analyze the University of Tehran's response to COVID-19 by observing its decisions, standards, and solutions regarding remote teaching as a national role model in the following sections.

### **3. Methodological Framework**

The present paper aims to examine the emergent transition to remote education at the University of Tehran to investigate its remote pedagogical visions, which indicate a national, or even a regional role model in Iran and West Asia. It is an effort to cast the university's pedagogical responses for the required emergent transition to remote education during the two years of mandatory lockdown due to COVID-19, from March 2020-October 2021. The study's corpus encompassed the entire content of UT's website and its derivative pages to include comprehensive coverage of pedagogical guidelines, health protocol guidelines, and awareness-raising guides, as well as news, consultative commentaries for mental well-being, and administrative notes on new and modified official regulations. To locate the relevant information, the keyword "Coronavirus" was searched at UT's website (University of Tehran, n.d.); the entire data regarding this keyword was then examined and analyzed.

The data, which included a large body of content—65000 words—was initially uploaded to ATLAS.ti9.0.15 software in an attempt to generate the most frequent categories of ideas, concepts, and argumentations for reaching as many mutually exclusive themes as possible. This study therefore applies the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) method, which enables the researchers to focus on the “contextualized words” rather than any pre-defined codes (Newton-John, Ventura, Mosely, Browne & Speight, 2017).

RTA is selected as a relevant method for content analysis, as it locates a “phenomenological position” to identify the major themes systematically, without relying on a prior theory or any pre-defined codes (Newton-John et al., 2017). The RTA entails four analysis phases: (1) familiarization, (2) coding, (3) theme development and refinement, and (4) writing up.

Accordingly, the data was thoroughly read and examined to appreciate the content. Sections were segmented to highlight content with pertinent analytic interest concerning the research inquiry. RTA began with the context and meaning detection, as it continued with tagging the excerpts of data with specific labels or codes. The repeated patterns and meaning-making codes were identified, and the themes were developed and named accordingly to portray the founding concerns, recommended solutions, models of teaching, and even emerging ethical principles in UT’s remote education.

#### **4. Discussion and Findings**

Coronavirus pandemic has affected many aspects of people's lives in a way that, to some extent, it is incomparable with the pre-pandemic situation. Education is no exception to this rule, and has



undergone extensive transformations. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the University of Tehran, as the pioneer among academic institutions in Iran, took the necessary steps to improve higher education, both for its community and higher education in the country.

A few days after the official announcement regarding the outbreak of the Coronavirus in Iran, the University of Tehran launched its pandemic procedures to protect the well-being of its faculty, staff and students. The university's initial response, following public health instructions, was to empty dorms. Most students were forced to leave the campus and go home, including international students who were requested to go back to their home countries. This meant that the university was switching to online education as its main strategy and policy to continue education. Upon the closure of the dorms and classes, the university observed the environmental health instructions and sanitized all areas, even libraries, and sports facilities (University of Tehran, Feb. 20, 2020). On the other hand, the quarantine conditions and the university's closure did not prevent the authorities from communicating with students and professors. In other words, the university pursued an engagement policy and established direct contact with students and faculty members. The university authorities held three virtual meetings with students and one with lecturers listening to their comments and questions about the new situation and responding to them (University of Tehran, Mar. 14, 2020; University of Tehran, May 19, 2020).

The digitalization of higher education and quality transition from face-to-face classes to online instruction became an important concern and a promising opportunity for innovation and creation for a post-COVID UT. The thematic analysis of the UT's content

provided a context to categorize and conceptualize the data, as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Major Themes, Open and Selective Codes Reflected in UT's Corona-driven Content

Major Themes	Open Codes	Frequency	Selective Codes	Frequency	Total
Students	Administrative Strictures	10	Administrative Strictures	10	133
	Connectivity and Accessibility	15	Connectivity and Accessibility	15	
	Flexibility in Educational Rules	47	Flexibility in Educational Rules	47	
	Ethics of Compassion and Support	17	Ethics of Compassion and Support	17	
	Mental Health	16	Physical and Mental Health	36	
	Physical Health	20			
Pro-sociality & Social Responsibility	Contests and Campaigns	18	COVID-driven Contests and Campaigns	18	103
	Education with focus on COVID-19	2	Modifications in Educational Policies	2	
	Webinars and Conferences	12	Webinars, Conferences & Support Packages	25	
	Ethics of Compassion and Support	13			
	Sharing experiences and exchanging ideas	26	National and International Exchange of Expertise to Contain the Pandemics Consequences	26	
	Problem Solving approach	32	Problem Solving Approach	32	
Instructors	Administrative strictures	5	Administrative Disciplinary Regulations	14	
	Flexibility in Educational Rules	9			
	Connectivity and Accessibility	15	Connectivity and Accessibility	15	
	Teaching Guidance	8	Remote Teaching Guidelines	8	
	Physical Health	16	Physical Health	16	

Source: Authors

Three major areas or categories of content, as reflected in the table, include the university's focus on students' needs and requests, social responsibility, and the rules of conduct for instructors.

#### **4. 1. Students: Technical and Emotional Support vs. Tough Regulations**

During the outbreak of the Coronavirus, the University of Tehran took special measures for ensuring students' physical and mental well-being, while offering them quality instruction at all levels through online courses and seminars. These measures were, of course, not without flaws, but they gradually improved as the diverse dimensions of the situation were more effectively analyzed and implemented in the university's decisions and procedures. The quarantine conditions and the university's closure created numerous challenges in the education process. However, this academic institution tried to improve the situation of students' education through facilitation measures.

##### **4. 1. 1. Connectivity, Accessibility & Remote Services**

The obligatory quarantine and the closure of universities during the Coronavirus pandemic transformed education and student services; in other words, universities were transferred from the real world to the virtual world, and all classes and student services took place online. This transformation required special communication services as well as immediate training for students as well as some faculty members. The issue of bandwidth and solving students' problems in connecting to the university's educational network were given priority. Hence, the E-learning center held a webinar to teach students e-learning skills for an efficient use of virtual classrooms (University of Tehran E-Learning Center, n.d.). The

center also created support pages for students, which taught them how to use the systems. In addition, a section in the system called "service desk" allowed students to ask their question about connection issues (University of Tehran, 2021, Jun. 15a).

After the university's closure, many students left dormitories and went back to their hometowns; as a result, they lost access to their needed administrative services. Hence, the university tried to provide all its administrative services online. After taking this measure, students no longer had to travel for office work and be at risk. For example, to facilitate bureaucratic and administrative-related errands, the University of Tehran set up a "service counter" system on its website (University of Tehran, 2020, Sep. 5). In another case, the Alborz campus provided all educational, research, financial, and student services in absentia (University of Tehran, 2020, Oct. 11). In addition, students could submit their proposals electronically to their department and follow up on them online (University of Tehran, 2020, May 29).

#### **4. 1. 2. Flexibility in Educational Rules and Regulations**

The new quarantine conditions and university closure created a new situation that needed new rules and regulations. Since the situation was unprecedented, the university modified the existing rules based on trial and error. Numerous changes in certain cases indicated that the university was trying to improve the status quo. However, it seems that the overall result has been positive. For example, the university provided facilities for students of different academic levels to assist them and solve the problem of taking different types of courses during the quarantine, including practical, practical/theoretical, workshop, internship, field operations, project, and laboratory courses (University of Tehran, 2020, Aug. 10).

In multiple cases, the final exam of international students who had returned to their countries was held online, even in cases that their classmates needed to participate in in-person exams (University of Tehran, May 29, 2020). In addition, students were quickly able to drop the courses they wanted, and even the university guaranteed to refund for the courses they already paid for (University of Tehran, 2020, May 19).

#### **4. 1. 3. Administrative Strictures**

Although administrative and educational announcements related to students facilitated the administrative processes, they sometimes became strict and disciplinary: a range of announcements sounded to put the responsibility entirely on the students' shoulders with emphasizing on phrases such as "Consequences ... will be the responsibility of the student" (University of Tehran, 2020, Jun. 21). In other cases, students could not easily withdraw from the semester, and they had to go through a long and somewhat complicated process (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 14).

The university also forced graduate students to defend their dissertations at the end of the sixth semester and even a few months earlier, regardless of their situation (Moradi, 1398 [2020 A.D.]). On the other hand, when the university decided to open the dormitories for Ph.D. students, instead of accepting the responsibility and providing the necessary hygienic conditions for student, the Health Center asked students to sign a "letter of commitment" to take care of themselves (University of Tehran, 2020, Jun. 8).

#### **4. 1. 4. Ethics of Compassion and Support**

The Coronavirus pandemic affected all aspects of people's lives and caused many problems, including economic problems. Some

students would have dropped out unless the UT's emerging ethics of compassion and mutual understanding saved them from damages. Reflecting on a humanitarian outlook rather than the rigid and standardized rules created an empathy between the university officials and students. An instance of such cases is providing electronic devices even for those living in the most remote and rural areas to access online classes. In cooperation with benefactors, the *Interest-free Loan Fund* of the university granted tablet loans to students who had difficulty accessing virtual classrooms (University of Tehran, 2020, Jun. 27a). In addition, *The University of Tehran Donors Foundation* also provided interest-free loans to students so that they do not face difficulties in their living expenses during this difficult time (University of Tehran, 2020, May 11).

UT indicated a responsible way, despite its financial restrictions during the pandemic, to facilitate research and accommodation facilities for doctoral students to continue their scientific activities (University of Tehran, 2020, May 3). In addition, the University of Tehran Press provided 25% discounts on all its books on the online shop to support students and observe social distancing (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 27a). This publication house also provided all its e-books to all students and faculty members from all universities for free (University of Tehran, 2020, Mar. 18).

Concerning student life, as well as the cultural and political education of students, the university tried not to let "the student experience" be affected by the quarantine period. Therefore, the Cultural Department of the university, by setting up a suitable platform, helped students to print their publications electronically during the Coronavirus pandemic and university closure (University of Tehran, 2020, May 26).

#### 4. 1. 5. Physical & Mental Health

Universities have the most precious capital of a country: the human capital. Therefore, protecting this capital is a crucial duty for any university. The University of Tehran has always tried to pay special attention to student's physical and mental well-being. During the Coronavirus pandemic, also, the university prioritized student health over other issues: It took extraordinary measures to maintain students' physical health and improve health care. For example, The Counseling Center argued that smoking is one of the primary sources of virus spread among students. Hence, they focused on this issue and published two books titled *Effective Support* and *Begin Right Now* to reduce smoking among students. They also published posters and educational booklets about the problems associated with smoking (University of Tehran, 2020, May 31).

The health center monitored students' physical conditions through electronic health assessment questionnaires and provided the required services to students (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 22b). However, perhaps the most significant measure taken by the university was the exclusive vaccination of students (University of Tehran, 2021, Aug. 11). In other words, the university tried to vaccinate students as safely and quickly as possible.

The Coronavirus Pandemic was a phenomenon that caused more psychological damage than physical injuries. Social distancing and quarantine caused mental disorders and problems in different groups, especially students. As a result, perhaps the most extensive workload has been on the counseling center.

The Counseling Center examined new students psychologically to make sure that they do not suffer from psychological problems caused by the pandemic (UT Counseling Center, n.d.). This center

did not shut down its services and provided all counseling services to students in absentia and online (University of Tehran, Mar. 8, 2020). The Counseling Center even launched an online counseling system called "MashverApp" to provide mental health services. (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 12a) They organized free online workshops called "Life Skills" to teach students how to deal with difficult situations and make decisions wisely in challenging times (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 22a).

## **4. 2. Prosociality and Social Responsibility**

### **4. 2. 1. National and International Exchange of Expertise to Contain the Pandemics Consequences**

From the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, the University of Tehran, as the mother institution in the Iranian academia, endeavored to fulfill its social responsibility. A few weeks after the closure of the universities, the UT, along with twelve other major universities, tried to develop higher education policies based on new conditions. In other words, by developing these policies, they intended to be prepared for the worst possible situation. These policies included the most effective solutions for holding theoretical and practical courses, the ways in which lecturers should attend classes, and the necessary infrastructural provisions for ensuring high-quality virtual classes. A good instance of this collaboration was exchanging students and accommodating those with essential reliance on labs in their home city universities, as the UT facilitated their temporary access process (University of Tehran, 2020, Jun. 27b).

The University of Tehran also created a variety of social groups and task forces to tackle the emergent confusion and hardship during the pandemic; a scientific committee, e.g., was established



in the joint network with university officials, experts, and other major universities' authorities, including Tehran University of Medical Sciences and Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences. This committee has been holding regular meetings to find practical solutions for the pandemic's medical and social consequences (University of Tehran, 2020, Jun. 15b). The same trend was traceable in the international arena, as the UT, a member of the International Association of Universities (AIU), participated in a project that aimed to examine the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on higher education. UT also encouraged other academic institutions to participate in such global programs (University of Tehran, 2020, May. 30).

#### **4. 2. 2. Problem Solving Approach**

One of the significant tasks and responsibilities of universities is to propose solutions to various social problems/issues. The University of Tehran, as its inherent duty, tried to find practical solutions for different issues caused by the pandemic situation: for example the University of Tehran, along with other major Iranian universities, attempted to provide the government with their scientific and technological capacities to fight the virus (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 8). The president of the University of Tehran and other university presidents held regular meetings with the Commander of Corona Disease Control Headquarters in Tehran to share their latest scientific findings regarding the Coronavirus pandemic (University of Tehran, 2020, May 21).

In other cases, the Kish campus, for example, helped the Kish Regional Education Department to provide a suitable platform for holding virtual classes (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 25c). The University of Tehran Science and Technology Park supported

technological ideas about dealing with the Coronavirus (University of Tehran, 2020, May 16), e.g. a biotechnology company could produce Corona test kits backed by their support (University of Tehran, 2020, May. 2). In another example, the *Data Science and Modeling Research Lab* designed a survey for couples and families to estimate the percentage of asymptomatic patients and helped the officials to have more realistic estimates about the pandemic (Data Science and Modeling Research Lab, n.d.).

At the macro level, the university formed an advisory working group called the UT's *Social Capital Working Group*, which published regular reports on the social consequences of the Coronavirus outbreak in the Iranian society and strategies to deal with it. These reports attempted to provide appropriate solutions in various social, cultural, educational, and political fields. Additionally, the university's *Macroeconomic Advisory Working Group* examined the economic dimensions of the corona crisis and published a comprehensive report on it.

Accordingly, the University of Tehran's commitment to taking a pragmatic approach to problem-solving, various technological, technical, and social achievements in the field of coronavirus control was achieved. For example, technological specialists at UT designed and launched an intelligent monitoring system called "Sina Care Covid" to follow up on the conditions of COVID-19 patients and their families (University of Tehran, 2020, Sep. 26). In another case, researchers at the University of Tehran, collaborating with several other Iranian universities, succeeded in inventing a Corona detection device called RDSS (University of Tehran, 2020, Aug. 19). They consequently produced an Artificial Ventilation machine, which is necessary to support patients with COVID-19 (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 12b).

#### **4. 2. 3. Education with Focus on COVID-19**

##### **4. 2. 3. 1. Modifications in Educational Policies**

Universities are generally obliged to pave the path of education towards solving serious and imminent issues. In the case of the University of Tehran, there are shreds of evidence to indicate this tendency: the financial support has increased for master's theses up to 4 times and doctoral dissertations up to 3 times, provided that they are related to solving corona issues (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 25a).

##### **4. 2. 3. 2. Webinars, Conferences & Support Packages**

The University of Tehran has taken an intersectional approach to share experiences, good practices, and lessons learned in collaboration with other academic institutions, the government, and the private sector. In line with UT's social responsibility, it has kept in contact with researchers, experts, professors, students, and all other relevant groups through online conferences and webinars. The university has been exploring the various technological, scientific, social, and cultural aspects of the Coronavirus pandemic through these events. Holding the International Symposium on Biology, Medicine, and Basic Sciences Approaches to COVID-19 in partnership with the UNESCO, Bolivian Association of Hypoxia, and The Physiological Society in India, is a good instance of that approach (University of Tehran, 2020, Sep. 6).

The social-mental well-being was of high significance in the eyes of the University of Tehran, as the Counselling Center launched a program to examine students from all over the country mentally and emotionally to prevent any psychological damage caused by the pandemic. (University of Tehran, 2020, Sep. 19).

This center also organized *free online retraining and empowerment courses* to improve the capabilities of counselors and psychologists in counseling centers and employees of other organizations (University of Tehran, 2020, Jun. 22). The counseling Center also held free *mental health workshops* for students from all over the country to improve their mental health during the quarantine and pandemic (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 27b).

The economic aspects and damages on businesses regarding Iran's sanction pressures have been a significant concern regarding UT's social responsibility. As a result, numerous webinars, called *Business Development and Legal Challenges during the Corona Crisis*, were held to address managing the mitigation of the effects of the Coronavirus crisis on the economy (University of Tehran, 2020, May 28a; University of Tehran, 2020, May 10). Furthermore, the School of Entrepreneurship held a webinar on *Post-Corona Perspectives on Business in Iran* to provide the necessary advice for local and national businesses (University of Tehran, 2020, Mar. 31).

The University of Tehran supported people and entities outside its community with a primary focus on tackling businesses' economic difficulties and problems. The Science and Technology Park, for instance, launched a *support package* for companies and businesses from all over the country. The package included financial and administrative support, the development of virtual activities, empowerment through education and consultation, and strategic networking between companies (University of Tehran, n.d.). In collaboration with a government news agency, the Faculty of Entrepreneurship published a report examining different aspects of the pandemic and offering companies and businesses solutions to this global threat. This report contains different scenarios and multiple plans for each scenario (IRNA, 1399 [2020 A.D.]).

#### 4. 2. 4. COVID-driven Contests and Campaigns

The University of Tehran held several contests and campaigns to raise awareness among people, especially the academic community, and keep their spirits up. Different contests focus on different communities. For example, the university called for opinions of researchers, students, and professors about *The Image of the World after Corona Pandemic* in different areas and praised the top opinions with recognition and presents (Farāxān-e tasvir-e ..., n.d.). It also launched a campaign against misconceptions about Coronavirus and pandemics, called *#Become-Scientific* (Puyēš-e e'lmi\_šo, n.d.). The University of Tehran also held a competition called *Top Student Ideas for solving Post-Corona Challenges*, aimed to stimulate students' creativity in finding appropriate ways to cope with the Coronavirus (University of Tehran, 2020, Oct. 21).

Campaigns, contests, and sports and arts festivals are identified as efficient venues toward raising awareness of mental health issues. The counseling center, thus, has been active in conducting a variety of contests and campaigns, such as a wide-ranging competition called the *Corona Semester* to boost students' spirits and raise their awareness about their mental health. Staying indoors most of the day, the plea for proper activities and sports are vital for physical and mental well-being. The Department of Physical Education has thus organized virtual sports competitions in various disciplines. The primary purpose of these activities was to boost students' spirit during the difficult times of the pandemic. For example, this department held a virtual dart competition and awarded the winners (University of Tehran, 2020, May 28b). In a similar approach, one of the faculty members of the College of Fine Arts composed a symphonic music titled "The Song of Humanity"

in appreciation and support of the medical staff (University of Tehran, 2020, Aug. 9).

#### **4. 3. Instructors at the University of Tehran: Highly Expected Simultaneously Ignored**

Adaptation to this drastic change of remote education was absolutely heuristic for the UT instructors, most of whom never had the experience of online teaching and its demanding pedagogical and content knowledge. The thematic analysis of UT's COVID-oriented content indicates meaningful outsourcing of class management and its consequent challenges to the instructors and their capacities. At the same time, this "new normal" is considered much normal in giving guides or protecting the instructors tackling their private anxieties and professional disputes.

##### **4. 3. 1. Connectivity and Accessibility**

At the age of online and virtual classes, the most vital element is a reliable connection. Accessibility to virtual classrooms and other online services was a determinant factor in the educational process. The E-learning Center, as the main responsible for online communications, took measures to facilitate the communication between students and lecturers. In multiple announcements, lecturers and professors were informed that they while all the necessary information is posted on the UT E-Learning website, they can also easily access technical support if they need assistance with the E-Learning Platform (University of Tehran, 2020, Feb. 27). The E-learning Center even provided professors with educational videos about using online systems and classrooms (University of Tehran, 2020, Feb. 24).

#### **4. 3. 2. Remote Teaching Guidelines**

Redesigning course syllabi and revising learning goals to be adapted to the requirements and conditions of remote teaching formats became a source of stress and pressure on many university instructors. They were expected to adopt ICT-based teaching methods to engage and enhance students' problem-solving skills. However, the UT literature remained mute against such challenges and solely contained announcements that urged instructors for their maximum presence on the campus during the pandemic. The instructors were simultaneously called to be prepared for online courses with appropriate lesson plans (University of Tehran, 2020, Jun. 27b). They had to carry the burden of the change, including holding exams, modifying assessment practices, and thinking and deciding on acceptable grading policies without efficient guides from the UT resources (University of Tehran, 2020, Jun. 21).

UT's announcements reflect the dividing opinion of instructors about the appropriate forms and formats of exams, from low-stake exercises, projects, and quiz to high-stake final exams and the nature of the exam—online or in-person—, to giving the “authority” and agency to instructors to personally (re)design their classes from A-Z (University of Tehran, Jun. 15a, 2020). Gradual development in teaching provisions, however, improved only months after the lockdown when the UT hosted a course under the banner of *New E-Teaching and E-Learning Methods*, which were predicted with rewarding personnel bonuses for the faculty members (University of Tehran, 2020, Mar. 9).

#### **4. 3. 3. Administrative Disciplinary Regulations**

The direct, assertive, and strict tone in the context of educational announcements is well traceable in UT's literature: the "unity of

procedure" in accordance with the Office of Academic Affairs' specific framework was prioritized over any micro-administrative and miscellaneous provisions in faculties or departments (University of Tehran, 2020, May 9).

On the contrary to the lack of comprehensive plans or detailed programs on remote teaching methods, on the disciplinary side, the UT became more strict in controlling the classes, the presence of instructors, and the quality of their performance by its focal point, the General Directorate of Curriculum Planning and Educational Supervision (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 2).

#### **4. 3. 4. Yes to Physical Health; Mental Health Neglected**

Giving additional support for preserving the instructors' safety and physical health was addressed by the University of Tehran, and the Health Center provided exceptional services for faculty members. The laboratory of this center provided exceptional services for professors during the corona pandemic, including performing all medical tests at home (University of Tehran, 2020, Apr. 25b). In addition, the university put lecturers and faculty members on the priority list of vaccination and performed a complete vaccination process for them (University of Tehran, 2021, Jul. 31). It is worth noting that the UT's major themes did not include any significance over instructors' mental health with complete negligence of their stressful workload and its subsequent symptoms of pressure and depression plus side effects of a general sense of loneliness and isolation prevalent during the pandemics, which can be rather problematic regarding UT's valuable human sources and their significant role and contribution to the quality of education.



## 5. Conclusion

The Coronavirus pandemic has shifted the modern teaching paradigm from a physical to a virtual one with its exclusive enabling and restricting modifications and social aspects. Iran, as a country under the most severe sanctions in history, was hit harder by the wave of the Corona crisis; the lack of proper infrastructures and scarcity of resources made the crisis management immensely arduous. Transition to online higher education was crucially affected as one of the pillars of development; as a result, crisis management in higher education could symbolize the bigger picture of the national response to the pandemic's critical challenges.

The University of Tehran represents Iran's national higher education and is ranked among the best universities in the region. Similar to other higher education institutions, the University of Tehran was to promote a digitally resilient system, and upgrade its technological capabilities along with the personnel competencies during the pandemics. Meanwhile, resolving the digital divide and developing the skills and literacy to use technology in a constructive way has not been done without shortcomings and challenges.

The present research was an attempt to reveal UT's recommended solutions, ideal models of instruction, and emerging ethical concerns through a reflexive thematic analysis of the university website's COVID-oriented content. The broad collected data was processed and analyzed using Atlas.ti software, which enabled the researchers to portray quantitative assessments as well. Three major themes, ranged based on frequency, were extracted as A) students: technical and emotional support vs. tough regulations,

B) Pro-sociality and social responsibility, C) instructors at the University of Tehran: highly expected simultaneously ignored.

Students stand as the major point of concern at UT: their safe connectivity to the UT's E-Learn platform, combatting inequality in access, facilitating the administrative accountability, and their economic and mental well-being are given a high priority both in educational policies and practices. However, the university still remains rather inflexible regarding semester programs, deadlines and defense sessions with putting the responsibility solely on the students' shoulders.

The second highly frequent major theme was indicated to be pro-sociality and social responsibility, meaning, taking an active position with a problem-solving approach toward the COVID-19 socio-economic consequences. The University of Tehran took its social accountability serious via supporting the tech projects and international collaborations in response to diagnosing and treating the disease, as well as controlling the socio-economic losses in entrepreneurial and innovation sections.

Thematic analysis indicates in the third theme that the university did not pay proper attention to the situation of professors and lecturers. The high number of "Administrative Disciplinary Regulations" addressing the instructors (15 cases) indicates UT's language of strictures and restricting verdicts rather than an accommodating atmosphere of providing proper solutions and alternative plans. In other words, the university was putting the burden of decision-making on the shoulders of lecturers, while they were under supervision and administrative strictures. The other issue about lecturers was that the university overlooked their mental health during the grueling quarantine (0 frequency). The mental health of the lecturers and their good spirit could have a

significant impact on the quality of education, but this issue seems to have been completely ignored in the university's discourse and online guidelines.

Regarding the themes of high frequency, still there are gaps of non-frequents, which can be taken into consideration by further studies. Overlooking the differences, such as identity-sensitive solutions or field contexts are among the topics that UT's website did not offer any significant information and/or reflections. The university sounds to imagine all students as a monolith community, while for instance girls and boys might have faced different issues that needed proper and specific solutions. Furthermore, instructors and students from different disciplines have not been differentiated despite their variety of needs and requirements.

Simultaneous with creative responses and on-time acts at the University of Tehran during the pandemic, the present research indicated that there are gaps and deficiencies to be addressed. Among them, the present researchers have faces difficulties in finding pages and texts on the website due to a kind of disorder. One cannot be simply sure whether in such a haphazard presentation of the COVID-driven content, its target populations, including the instructors and students, have had proper access to these announcements and instructions. The "new normal", then, remains a prelude for the University of Tehran, alike other Iranian higher education institutions, to enhance their technologies, content, and cultural approaches on the way of future crisis, such as new waves of the pandemic.

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