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A Post-Pandemic approach towards Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The way forward for Tourism and Hospitality Education. A Review of Literature

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Abstract

The best way to define quality is by describing quality assurance as a continuous developing and enhancement process in upgrading towards excellence. This paper contributes to achieve a better understanding of the development and application of quality assurance in higher education, and highlights room to address from a theoretical and practical perspective of tourism and hospitality education. Quality culture is something that must be kept alive, through various inputs from different stakeholders both internally and externally. Quality assurance is the required requisite which supports educational institutions to keep in line with national and international standards as requested within the educational sphere. Such continuous improvement aspect through quality assurance keeps educational institutions in line with the required standards. It is essential for educational institutions to remain competitive with their counterparts which are competing in the same field. This is also important in order to have excellent quality programmes of study on offer with numerous opportunities to all stakeholders involved even at institutional level.

The change in students' attitude towards their learning process evolved to a level, that nowadays students are eager to know what they are going to learn and how they can continue to advance in their chosen career path. Therefore, quality is important to assure that standards are in place for the benefit of all stakeholders and the institution itself. Policies, procedures, and processes backed up with a quality assurance manual are all an integral part of successful quality assurance practices and culture within an educational institution at all levels. Both academic and non-academic staff within an educational institution must be aware of what is required to maintain and foster an excellent quality culture in place. Through quality, responsibility is shared at various levels within institutions, and this helps in achieving more confidence from all stakeholders involved. The importance of engaging as many as possible stakeholders is to have innovative ideas in enhancing quality assurance initiatives culture. Quality Assurance increase transparency and comparability of standards between and within qualifications and educational institutions achieving greater credibility and utility and function as points of reference for establishing and assessing standards.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Hospitality Education, Tourism Higher Education, Benchmarking, Learning Environment, Assessment

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present a general view and a brief literature review of quality policies and procedures as important factors which contributes to a continuous improvement cycle within higher educational institutions, from a post pandemic approach as the way forward for tourism and hospitality education. It is important that such policies should be on higher educational institutions' websites as public knowledge to continuously support the development of quality assurance culture (ESG, 2015). In response to the COVID-19 crisis, higher education institutions across the world adjusted all their activities to an emergency, remote mode in spring 2020. During the academic year 2020/2021, institutions moved from this emergency mode to exploring a large variety of hybrid or fully online arrangements as the national COVID-19 safety measures shifted depending on the status of the pandemic. Against this backdrop, the role of quality assurance in ensuring that quality standards are maintained and supporting higher educational institutions community in their work, while providing assurance to the public of the status of quality in higher education, has become paramount.

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) establish a set of shared principles for quality assurance. According to the ESG, higher education institutions have the primary responsibility for quality and quality assurance, meaning that internal quality assurance is at the core of quality attainment and the development of a sustainable quality culture. Consequently, this principle is reflected in the design and arrangements of external quality assurance systems, and in the work of quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, across Europe. The sudden shift in the mode of operations caused by the pandemic raised questions around the effectiveness, relevance, and flexibility of internal quality assurance arrangements. What lessons learnt from this experience, should be taken into consideration while moving forward?

Students and staff values towards a better-quality learning and lecturing culture is an asset found, where a good quality assurance system is in practice, working towards and for the benefit of a better learning. Students are observing and understanding the role of quality assurance as an improvement process which at the end they are the ones mostly who are going to benefit from as stakeholders.

To be able to value what they are learning, students need to verify important factors within their learning environment including online learning such as lecturer’s professionalism, diversity of lecturing aids and different assessment styles used to assess their work. To be effective, quality assurance processes should work in relation with what is being taught and what research is showing, so that the educational institutions can plan their strategy for the future both on national and international level. Learning ethos is a true example of what quality assurance can lead to within an educational institution from a student’s perspective. For students, learning ethos are all those factors, which are related to the input given during their studies. These factors may vary from lecturers’ support to students, research taking place within the area of specialisation and student engagement. During the learning sessions including online lectures and online forums, guidance, and support services if needed help in resolving possible academic problems which are analysed and resolved in their respective context.

The importance of students participating in educational institutions meetings, students’ representations on quality boards, and students’ councils help to better integrate student’s participation within the educational institution structure as stakeholders. This help students to be more motivated and supportive in the building up of the educational institutions which will lead to attract more students through their reputation and profile within the tourism and hospitality educational sector.

Quality assurance in higher education processes

When students assess quality academic levels within higher educational institutions, lecturers' pedagogical characteristics are given a lot of weight and importance, especially where it comes to formative and summative assessments (Haapakorpi, Geirsdottir, & Johannsdottir, 2013). Lecturers are assessed against their lecturing standards, innovative methods and lecturing styles, their background and experiences and their attitude towards students where it comes to communication and student support during their studies. Lecturers' qualifications are also given utmost importance when it comes to what lecturers are bringing with them in terms of knowledge and research to be passed and shared with students. Subject knowledge, lecturing techniques and assessment methods are factors upon which lecturers are assessed continuously from students within their respective area of specialisation. This puts more pressure on the importance for continuous professional development for lecturers which must be planned in advance according to specific individual needs. Student centred approach used within the delivery of programme descriptors helps in achieving module learning outcomes for better students' involvement and more motivation for learning and improvement. Progression is related to the pre-requisites needed for the evaluation process, where staff and students are actively engaged in the process, leading to utilization of outcomes (Haapakorpi, Geirsdottir, & Johannsdottir, 2013).

Lecturers' availability and communication are two fundamental factors for a better student's approach towards quality in tourism and hospitality higher education. Lecturers' professionalism is a factor that helps students recognise their lecturers concern and support. Therefore, lecturers in educational institutions need to be fully and continuously professionally trained, to reach students' needs the best they can. This can help students in situations which they can encounter during their studies. It is essential for students that the programmes of studies content give a clear indication at which level quality standards are within the tourism and hospitality education. Sometimes, students criticise programmes of study due to the fact that certain modules within their programme of study seem irrelevant. This problem arises when students start comparing programmes of study within the same educational institution in which they are studying. Synchronization between quality assurance systems (QA) of Study Programmes (SP) according to the international standards is one of the most significant characteristics for refining quality in education (Petrova, & Solovyev, 2014). Most important aspects for students are that programmes of study are clearly designed to fulfil their career needs, module descriptors have clear learning outcomes, quality course content of study which finally they can put what they learnt in practice and also academic material used for referencing which are modern and latest edition (ibid).

More than ever students nowadays are expecting that curriculums are based on a thematic approach which will help them to better understand and put in practice what they learned. Concise objectives within curriculum design help students to better appreciate programmes of study contents because learning outcomes will be direct and much easier to understand. This will help students to prepare themselves better for their study journey and to help them in measuring their academic progression within their specific programmes of study.

Quality assurance has a lot of benefits in educational institutions throughout the students learning process, because it makes sure that the necessary policies and procedures are in place and working. This help students to express themselves better, building more awareness on their career opportunities in the future, be more independent, multi tasked and also offering more challenges to their lecturer's vis a vis the knowledge being taught which they may bring up to discussion upon certain arguments who also can prove them right at times.

To assure that educational institutions keep responding to students' needs through quality learning, quality assurance is vital, because it keeps the learning mechanisms improving to remain competitive. In addition, growing academic attention on quality assurance for lecturing and learning, can be noticed from the increasing number of articles in specific journals within higher education (Steinhardt, et al., 2017) including tourism and hospitality higher education. Student's learning has been discussed for a long time. This process creates discussions on the educational agenda, both on local and international levels. Higher educational institutions are required to enhance their knowledge growth to raise student education from lecturing approach to an approach which is more focused towards learning which prepares students to be professionals with the right competences to make use in the best way of their own knowledge accordingly (Devincenzi, Garau, & Guaglianone, 2018). Quality assurance within the learning process, needs to be understood exactly to see what students' ideas about quality learning are. What are students expecting from the educational institution?

The knowledge shared with students during the learning process, help students to increase their expertise within the specific programmes of study, supports them to personally grow and develop new ideas, increase their life aspirations, and also let them acquire the necessary skills which they will use in their future when they are faced with real situations in their career. Throughout their academic experience in the learning process students develop a high level of the subject studied and specialised skills, enhance their academic expertise in attaining new knowledge, problems that are discussed during theory studies which has to be solved if faced again in the industry workplace and also developing the right academic values related to their area of specialisation. Authoritative important decisions taken at higher levels effect the way things are done at a lower level within the educational institutions. Quality assurance mechanisms plays an important part throughout the students learning process, that with the results gained students can progress accordingly. Moreover, quality assurance departments and personnel as promoters of quality assurance shows significant connections with perceived success (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). It is also valuable that information is gained through various tools such as questionnaires, focus groups, internal audits, external audits, and interviews to gain students' views about their learning experience if it is to their expectations.

Students' learning environment and assessment

It is essential for higher educational organizations to assess to what degree they are operating, if they are in line and within the requirements of learners and other stakeholders, to enhance their capacity to continue to do so (ISO 21001, 2018). Factors that have a significant impact on students learning environment are the decisions taken by educational institutions and academic staff regarding the curriculum implemented and pedagogical aspects within such institutions. These impacts directly on students' abilities, to learn and achieve their goals in their studies. Giving students the opportunity to learn in different styles, motivates them to study better and attain more positive results. Using the same measuring ruler with all students also gives students the opportunity to express themselves more and better with their lecturers' if they may encounter certain difficulties in their studies.

To treat all students the same without any favouritism is crucial in educational institutions, keeping in mind that the individuals that are in a learning environment are the future generation workforce. In a nutshell, students to be able to express themselves about certain concerns and problems that might be facing during their studies, both at academic and personal level must have confidence in the system in place. Support staff, academic staff, and support systems within their learning environment where they are studying are important tools in students' progression. Learning has become to some extent the norm of the day, that from time to time one needs to professionally develop and updates himself or herself accordingly, to respond to students' needs the best he or she can (Evans & Greenwood, 2015).

Emphasis is on the importance of well qualified pedagogically trained professional academic staff to be able to meet all students needs and expectations in their studies (ibid). The physical surroundings in students learning environment such as furnishings may also help students' to better engage in learning. Students' engagement does not mean only that they participate in any task which involve themselves, but they want to feel that motivational boost in what they are doing. Students' engagement helps them in their learning achievements and effects in quality learning that can be in several ways as showed in the table below, such as students' interactivity, sensitivity and intellectual.

Chart 1: Student's engagement

Engagement	Positive	Negative	Not engaged
Interactivity	Does not miss any lectures and participate all the way	High absenteeism rate from lectures and does not show interest	Absent from lectures without any justification
Sensitivity	Fully concentrated	Exclusion	Disinterested
Intellectual	High standard in tasks produced	Doubting guidelines for tasks	Deadlines for producing work not kept

Why is it important for students to engage themselves during their studies in educational institutions also from a post-pandemic approach where lectures are more delivered in an online mode? This is because engagement enhance the learning experience, helps in student's retention studying with educational institutions, promotes equality and socialisation, more curriculum significance, and an advantage for educational institutions for marketing purposes. Not only students as individuals and communally benefit from engagement but also educational institutions' management, tourism, and hospitality education holistically and also the general society. Through their involvement and engagement, students share their learned values and experiences from lecturers with their peers through socialisation. It also helps them to share their experiences and through their interaction with others both on campus and in their private life where they learn from others (ibid). This supports them in giving importance to the knowledge shared with them from their peers and community.

In the past, the majority of student learning research and conceptualizations looked at cognitive processing approaches and enthusiasm (Vermunt & Vermetten, n.d). Student's learning is the step in every student life that prepares them to be ready for their future. This means that they are well-prepared with the required knowledge and skills to direct them to join the future workforce after successfully they graduate in their specific area of specialization. What they learn during their studies may also be used in their continuous professional studies if they choose to further continue with their studies at higher levels. During their studies and learning, students need to overcome certain factors that can affect them also in their social life. The most important is that students are eager to learn and well- motivated for their studies. In such instances educational institutions environment and students support staff are vital. Whatever students learn will be essential as this can be applied in their life (ibid). Students may be coming from various backgrounds. Parents' and other family members educational background can also be important in motivating students to study. The importance given on how to learn nowadays is creating a lot of discussion in the educational sector. Learning approaches main aim should be the focusing on minimizing the gap between both students and lecturers to achieve the best learning experience possible.

Student-centred learning styles lead to enhancements in student performance. When lecturers are shown respect and given the importance they deserve as professionals within their area of specialisation, students' educational response will be improved. To keep motivating students in their studies, lecturers need to continuously develop themselves with the latest innovative lecturing styles and developments in learning resources. Importance is also given to language used between the lecturers delivering the lecture and the audience (ibid). Such language should be understood by everyone to have proper information communication for the benefit of all learners. To get certain students out of their comfort zone to adopt a student-centred learning approach can be particularly challenging. The importance in adopting such approach should be well communicated to students and explained clearly that all students understand why such a change in their learning process. Students must understand clearly that such approaches will offer them better opportunities to help them to learn with different methods, making the learning experience more interesting by sharing innovative ideas and giving more input for their own benefit. Such students' learning approach can be used in small classrooms and on a larger scale where more team-based learning is involved.

The aim of an assessment is to enhance students learning and so that lecturers will evaluate and respond to the evidence that an assessment provides. Assessment can be described as the tool used to verify students learning against a set of criteria or standards set in advance (Cedefop, 2015). Lecturers need to consider how assessments methods and tools will help to gather, analyse, and use assessment information so that it is effective in meeting its purpose for the benefit of students to progress in their studies.

Contemporary educational theory indicates that self and peer−assessment allow learners to (a) enthusiastically participate in the assessment process, (b) reflect more deeply, (c) develop important cognitive skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, decision-making, self−monitoring, and regulation, (d) problem solving, (e) get inspiration from their peer’s work (f) collaborate, criticize constructively, and suggest improvements (g) reflect and make sensible decisions (Siow, 2015). The purpose of assessment is to evaluate if students are learning or not, and if they are competent or not in a specific task. The advantage of formative assessment is that it provides students with the ability that they can keep track on what they are learning and where they can improve accordingly (Kivunja, 2015).

Formative assessment is ongoing and provides information to guide lecturing and learning to improve.

Formative assessment includes both formal and informal methods and this assessment also.

- Keeps track on what students are learning, how this process can be improved and what needs to be delivered.

- Helps to enhance learning through feedback

- Is used continually by providing descriptive feedback

- Delivering of informal and formal feedback through reports
  • It is based on a continuous improving process through students’ previous best (self-referenced, making learning more personal)

- Student is given a lot of importance

Summative assessment is done in a period of time, usually to assess the level of skills and competences acquired by a student after a studying process of various different units forming the course programme respectively. Summative assessment is the final assessment process which follows formative assessment tools which assess student performance and progress throughout the study programme (States, Detrich & Keyworth, 2018).

Summative assessments are evaluative in nature, resulting in a score or grade and also.

- Checks what a student acquired

- Is presented in a specific time of studies, such as at the end of a study unit

- Is communicated to students as part of competences acquired grade

- Usually compares what students learned both from a whole group of students and on
  individual basis

- Such assessment might not involve the student directly
  External benchmarking and the shift in education paradigms towards quality enhancement in tourism and hospitality higher education.

> Change has never been easy, even in tourism and hospitality higher education. It is a process that takes time to change from the status quo within educational institutions. Even if staff members both academic and non-academic together with all stakeholders involved can notice that there is the need for change, such process has to be planned meticulously. Traditional schooling can create more problems than finding the way forward in helping educational institutions to move forward. Still, certain individuals hold their foot on traditional schooling as the best. This is when the need for paradigm shifting in education start to crop up. Educational institutions and students' learning environments will incline more on the aspect of fostering more on student's well-being and positive attitude with the right values.
> Pedagogy has been developed through the use of different lecturing styles and also with innovative educational tools for the most appropriate delivery. Present education is the shifting of knowledge to students and after they are assessed, students are certified as competent or not. Nowadays education focus is more based on the acquiring the right attitudes towards attaining the right knowledge and skills.

Today's learning paradigms are emphasizing the understanding of main academic subject knowledge and skills, which need to be reinforced with the essential skills in the 21st century (Kivunja, 2015). Educational institutions need individuals who research and solve institutional problems rather than just focusing on academics in specific areas of specialization. Life and work environments are very competitive and sometimes complicated to a level that students need more than simple thoughtful skills and understanding of knowledge content (Kivunja, 2015). Students do not just learn from someone who is lecturing them due to knowledge sharing, but also from those who are not lecturing them, the concept of instructional paradigm to learning paradigm.

Such change help students in their behaviour attitude towards critical thinking skills to be prepared to face a fast-changing society. Students must be ready both emotionally and also physically to be able to apply what they learnt at their respective educational institution in their life also from a career point of view. Students' long-term performance improves over the years of studying within their area of specialization by acquiring and learning new techniques, skills and strategies which lead them to adapt themselves well when they are faced with situations which the world can challenge them with either in their personal life or in their career (ibid). Educational past paradigms have minor impact on the new and future paradigms due to the fact that drivers forcing this change are more based on the social aspect and technology. Change drivers and signs for such change to new paradigms in tourism and hospitality education levels help in focusing on a long-term change rather than short term changes. This will be of upmost importance in enabling key stakeholders and decision makers in the education sector how the roles and relationships will change in a positive way.

Benchmarking was originally formulated as a type of good intellect which gathers information to understand how another institution is operated and to close the gap between the two institutions operational procedures (Weller, 1996). Benchmarking within the education sphere can be the tool which helps in the improvement of quality within educational institutions to remain competitive with their counterparts in the educational area. Standards based benchmarking seeks to identify how good student performance needs to be, to meet the learning outcomes and also argues that a second type of benchmarking creates a standard of performance growth or progress over time using baselines (Judd, n.d). Benchmarking processes within educational institutions should be performed from well-trained personnel who are fluent and professionals in benchmarking as a tool for quality improvement. Educational institutions must have internal systematic structures in place to keep them continuously effective and always with a continuous improvement culture. Benchmarking can be the tool used to measure such efforts within such institutions. Through a total quality assurance management and continuous quality improvement practices, benchmarking can be an extremely useful tool. Within the educational sphere it has been identified as a very effective and easy to understand tool, to help educational institutions to remain at competitive high levels within their respective area of study programmes.

Benchmarking can be described as a process which institution can be related to each other through their work and their ongoing processes. Benchmarking as a process that can take place at both the inter-institutional and intra-institutional level (Judd, n.d). Benchmarking processes are performed to give a realistic overview to management and key people within an institution from a different perspective to measure quality, internal processes and to find room for improvement. Benchmarking can be looked at as a method which helps an institution to develop, it can be compared to coaching which helps institutions to reach their desired standards (ibid).

It has to be taken as a holistic approach to evaluate the entire scenario within the institution in question and implemented as an ongoing process in analysing the systems in place. Benchmarking practices helps the institutions to find the right answers for questions that may be flagged during this improvement process.
Such questions could be.

- Do we have the same standards as the other institutions?
- At what level do we need to arrive?
- Which institutions are currently ranked top?
- What are they doing to reach that standard?
- What can we do to be equivalent or better?

The most crucial factor to be organised when preparing for a benchmarking process is to choose which process within the organization in question is to be examined. Each benchmarking mechanism is implemented to tackle specific goals. Accordingly, one mechanism may provide positive results in one area and negative results in another (Kamal, 2013). Then the next step is finding out how the process will be measured and against which institution this is going to happen. Then the data collection process has to take place on the other organization being studied. Data gathered then is analysed and findings are further developed as recommendations. Results obtained are then used to build up an action plan to implement certain differences and enables the necessary improvements to be implemented, which are resulting as differences between the two institutions in the benchmarking study. Benchmarking is not just a process where data is collected but helps in implementing a new approachable concept in how things are done. Performing practices has to be under continuous scrutiny to keep the best practices in place by the new operational systems being implemented.

Students follow up is a key factor in educational institutions to measure student's progression in their specific studies. This is of valuable importance to help students reaching their aims and objectives within the programme of study which they are following. To evaluate if students are progressing in line with learning objectives and outcomes, a benchmark measurement is needed. Benchmarking can be a successful tool to implement the principles of total quality management in schools (Weller,1996).

One of the final students aims of following a programme of study is to start their professional career after they successfully graduate from their studies (ibid). Students must appreciate skills that they learnt in tourism and hospitality higher education institutions and apply the use of these skills on the place of work. Such practices help employers as one of the stakeholders within education to verify that what was developed on paper is used in practice. Benchmarking within such process helps in the transferability of employment good practices from other educational institutions, which at the end together are enhancing communication with the industry to make it easier for students to find practice placements and build upon their career path chosen at a later stage.

Before students develop their individual employment skills through theory and practice, students must develop competences through learning by initiating their learning process. There are a lot of opportunities for those students who choose to study at higher levels. Educational achievement has a solid constructive connection to skill expertise. People with tertiary-level qualifications are in possession of better knowledge and competences than those who lack certain level of certification (OECD, 2017) Through their enrolment in a programme of study in an educational institution, students must develop skills in managing their budgets, expose themselves to learn new skills and also in gaining new knowledge not just based upon their studies.

Benchmarking as a tool helps in the processes towards total quality management in educational institutions. The development and acquirement of benchmarking involves the use of practical tools in order for institutions to be able to diagnose, enhance, collaborate, continuously compare, and measure their work processes. (Tasopoulou & Tsiotras, 2017). Sometimes the academic staff are those to resist certain changes when it comes to culture and mentality change in education, but once they are given the ownership of the situation then themselves give their upmost and do their best. Lecturers' participation in focus groups helps in evaluating processes and make the necessary amendments because lecturers are the front liners facing students' needs on daily basis and the bridge between students' and academic top management (ibid). When such processes are done between lecturers themselves as colleagues, will have better output through their level of trustworthiness and reliability.

During benchmarking discussions which might involve the academic staff members in workshops and continuous professional development programmes, can be the right place for academics to share their experiences. Both on individual level and also as professional educators the advantages and disadvantages and effects of quality, should be incorporated at various education institutional levels. Such processes have particular value in providing a structure for planned benchmarking. Strategically planned benchmarking aims that tourism and hospitality institutions which are known for their exemplary practices or programmes are often used as the targets to be reached in achieving a distinctive level in their comparison. Benchmarking has a lot of benefits, which may vary from offering a plan for acting not just collection of information, making difference between high standards and average standards and inspire 'out of the box' thinking. Benchmarking can be the factor that boosts quality improvement in any institution or business as it is considered a very powerful and practical process where it comes to assessment and improvement (Tasopoulou & Tsiotras, 2017).

Benchmarking is established as one of the most successful processes of assessment and improvement (Tasopoulou & Tsiotras, 2017). The importance of using rubrics as an assessment tool in educational assessment offers occasions for the institution, to demonstrate the level of skills students are attaining within their studies to all stakeholders involved and also to evaluate students' competencies in different areas of specialization. The use of rubrics facilitates standardized assessment criteria and also promotes learning which helps also to share information with employers as stakeholders. This means that students who are shifting to the place of work have developed the required skills within their area of specialisation to be employed accordingly. Implementing rubrics holistically across programmes of studies helps in understanding and describes the validation of such standardized criteria in practice, to apply the necessary changes in the status quo of assessment processes in programmes of study. Advantages and disadvantages of using such rubrics, has to be clear to all stakeholders so that everyone can understand the purpose behind using such tools for benchmarking and in assessing students' skills at a standardized level all across the board.

Rubrics can be designed as task-specific or generic but may also contain elements of both classifications (Jackson & Riebe, 2013). Alignment of assessment with specific module learning outcomes, will be facilitated with the implementation of rubrics. Due to this alignment, consistency in module delivery will also happen, because criteria on what students are going to be assessed upon after their completion of a module will be available to every lecturer delivering such module. This will be an asset in building and designing such analytical holistic rubrics for summative assessments of employability skills (ibid).

Students must also need to be capable to assess their own work and judge that what they are requested to produce from their lectures must be of excellent quality.

To be capable to follow such good practice, students need to know exactly on what they are going to be assessed upon, so that they can verify that their work is in line with what was requested from them as assignment or tasks to be assessed.

General rubrics can be useful to any task or modified to suit several purposes that is, the benchmark descriptors. In general rubrics are declarations of anticipated learning that can be applied in a range of different tasks (Jackson & Riebe, 2013). With such rubrics in place, will be much easier for students to analyse their skills level through shared understanding of benchmarking set standards each year in their programmes of study. The approach both in delivery of programmes modules, student's participation in curricular activities, student e- portfolios, assessed tasks and learning outcomes has to be present to have a successful process for the benefit of all stakeholders. This should provide students with the required standards of the minimum benchmarking levels that they should achieve (ibid).

The use of e-portfolios helps students to gather and keep record of the important evidence of the required employability skills and will provide them with a mapping system for their engagement during such process in achieving the required skills to be presented to their future employers. Either if benchmarking is at national or at an individual institution level must always be based on the identification of strengths and weaknesses of a specific educational institution, to set the required goals for improvement. It has to be a continuous improving process that is constantly looking for best practices and not just a numerical and data issue. Benchmarking has to be an active exercise, where important indicators and benchmarks are clear with the educational institution performance, which can be quantified in comparison with other educational institutions. A key factor how benchmarking information will be used and how it is perceived to be used, in the process of institutional review is important from an institutional perspective to enhance the process as part of the way forward. (Laugharne, 2002).

The main focus of such process targets the exploration of good practices which the aim is to start off the implementation of the required changes. To make the upmost from benchmarking exercises within educational institutions including tourism and hospitality higher education, benchmarking must have the full support from top management and from all other staff at lower levels which their goals are to enhance the institution performance (ibid). To better achieve delivery and learning outcomes of programmes of study, verification and validation of the internal and external processes should be in a planned and systematic manner. Final but not least, to apply new standards and instigate new functional criteria for benchmarking processes has to be fully supported by the right competent individuals. Benchmarking in higher education should be perceived as a tool for enhancing competitiveness and self-evaluation (Kuzmicz, 2015).

Benchmarking is an easily understandable and effective instrument for strengthening the competitive ability of educational institutions and such instrument is used to enhance performances from a quality perspective through different channels within a continuous improving process (Paliulis, 2015). To produce the required results, benchmarking should be placed within the right context to be successful. This means that such contextual framework for benchmarking should consist of constant progression and also change values. This can be applied both as an institution holistically or on specific departmental level.

Full commitment is of upmost importance for benchmarking exercises with the right amount of financial investment and the involvement of key competitive strategic personnel both from the academic and non- academic side.

This is important to attain the best results from the data gathering and in the application of findings point of view (ibid). Benchmarking is not a fast remedy to uncover certain low performance practices in an institution, but it has to be an ongoing improving process which is amalgamated within an institution strategic plan to assist in enhancing institution performance. Benchmarking involves a demanding and specialized methodology from senior management commitment, everyone’s ownership, planning the exercise, processes identification, data gathering and implementing into practice the results attained. Choosing the right participants for the benchmarking exercise is crucial to the success of such exercise.

Methodology

Integrative Review

The integrative review method used for this research paper helped the researchers to evaluate the literature chosen for this paper, and to identify the necessary future research needs for the post-pandemic approach towards quality assurance in higher education. For

the researchers combining various information found was challenging due to the nature of the chapters chosen for this research paper in the literature review. Such methodology included a logical and meticulous approach to the process, especially to data analysis.
The evaluation through the integrative review of the literature used in this paper helped the researchers to be in a better position to analyse their original opinions and thoughts towards quality assurance in higher education and the way forward for tourism and hospitality education. For the purpose of this research paper the integrative method used for the literature review included the evaluation of the present research in line with the paper title and identified areas for future research to be studied in more depth within quality assurance in higher education.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an overview and a brief literature review of the main aspects related to quality assurance as a post-pandemic approach towards Quality Assurance in o be in a better position Higher Education and the way forward for Tourism and Hospitality Education. This process should involve the setting up of goals, ways and means in how these goals are going to be understood and the allocation of the required funds for such changes to be attained. The setting of academic goals has to be similar to those in other institutions which are classified as top ranked within their specific areas. A well-planned benchmarking can sustain and speed up educational institution's enhancement efforts. This is due to the fact that in such institutions a lot of stakeholders participate in decisions taken at top levels. Involved stakeholders might have certain ideas for enhancing institution performance, but on the other hand other stakeholders involved might have different ideas on how to promote better and improve the institution performance in different ways. For this instance, the decision-making team for such an important benchmarking process, has to be a multidisciplinary team. Institution to institution benchmarking can be the start-up of setting up achievable goals based upon each institution best practices in place. Educational institutions best practices can vary from innovative curriculum design, students' performance alongside various types of assessments used, allocation of the required resources for lecturing and learning processes, scheduling, academic staff professional development and involvement from external stakeholders to share their views and ideas from a different perspective.

Recommendations

Benchmarking is being recommended as the way forward because it will offer educational institutions with evidence and information to strengthen policy making, and to address the strong demand for the comparative assessment of higher education systems. The end results found from the benchmarking exercise within the educational institutions in question has to be scrutinised and implementation strategies has to be formulated. Strategies has to be evaluated individually within their unique setting, ethos and in their specific environment. Such strategies have to be planned within their appropriate academic context, as an improving ongoing process in an educational institution setup.The improving plan should consist of setting up goals, systems how these goals are going to be achieved and implemented.

Benchmarking processes has to be based on the collection of data and various exploration methodologies, which makes benchmarking as an optimum process to be used with-in the tourism and hospitality educational institutions. This is due to the fact that such studies are very used within the academic scenario. Benchmarking will offer the required systems for tourism and hospitality education institutions to be externally evaluated accordingly. Application of benchmarking processes will help in creating a structure for sharing information and relevant academic data between educational institutions through various experiences. Innovative new concepts can materialise within the education institutions applying benchmarking by setting the core values, set targets to be reached within specific time frames and an improvement monitoring system should be in place to make the best of the exercise performed.

The below recommended questions can be included in a benchmarking SWOT analysis process that can assist and facilitates the process to find system defects and enhance the current practices within the educational institutions in question.

Educational institution strengths

- What are the institution strengths when it comes to resources, manpower?
- What does the institution do better than the other counterparts in the same area?
- What are the visible strengths of the institution?

Educational institution weaknesses

- What are the wrong performances where the institution is failing?
- What are those weaknesses that are visible from the institution students' and other competitive educational institutions?
- What improvements can be applied to remain competitive with other educational institutions?

Educational institution opportunities

- Where are the best opportunities within the educational field that can be beneficial for the institution?
- What new concepts and systems can be adopted by the institution which can be valuable?
- From which external factors such as funding's, sponsors, and modern technology the institution can benefit?

Educational institution threats

- What are the internal and external factors that are obstructing the institution to progress as it should be?
- What are the products offered by competitors which are negatively affecting the institution?
- Are there any financial problems that are disturbing the institution from investing further?

Restructuring of quality assurance processes can also be enriched by the implementation of benchmarking because findings from this process can detect system defects that can mostly benefit from a total quality management to improve tourism and hospitality education operations.

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Current and Post Pandemic Hybrid Lecturing - Process, Challenges and Possibilities

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Abstract

The Covid-19 Pandemic has necessitated the usage of amongst other processes, that of hybrid instruction. Much has been studied in relation to its benefits in learning and its accessibility for students. However, little has so far been researched in relation to the demands this instruction process has on the educator in general and more specifically on the professional post-secondary academic. Hence this paper is set up with the intention of gaining an in-depth understanding of the academics' experiences and thoughts on the 'imposed' usage of hybrid lecturing.

This will be tackled through the identification of the hybrid lecturing process and how it distinguishes itself from blended lecturing. Furthermore, the investigation of the academics' experiences and thoughts on the usage of this process, the examination of the pros and cons of hybrid instruction, as well as the appraisal of the lecturers' usability of this process in the current and post pandemic stages will also be dealt with.

This study will be based on peer reviewed articles with the intention of establishing what has been dealt with and identified to date. While the analysis of the selected method of primary research to be performed with a sample of post-secondary lecturers, is targeted at giving lecturers a voice in their usage and handlings of hybrid lecturing.

Introduction

Unprecedented challenges and innovative opportunities came around with the COVID 19 pandemic for all academics worldwide (Bodenheimer & Leidenberger, 2020). Partial lockdowns, quarantines and self-isolations had their toil on everyone involved. This disrupted the teaching and learning settings which were known to date. The situation brought about many uncertainties not only in education but also with other sectors including retail, tourism, businesses, and services. (Dente & Hashimoto, 2020). While further restrictive measures brought about the interruption of sporting activities, travel, leisure, group outings and the closing of schools and universities. These instigated considerable stress as well as issues dealing with mental health (Stanton, et al., 2020).

The pandemic caused a crisis in education and brought out further difficulties in relation to the accessibility of education for all. The closure of schools and educational institutions gave no other option to educators but to seek immediate alternatives where in-class teaching was replaced by virtual classrooms and meeting rooms. The rapid application of the required teaching processes in turn gave rise to further opportunities and barriers in relation to the usage of modern technology, the lack of personal IT equipment, poor internet connections and limited or no computer literacy skills. (UN, 2020.)

This study deals with an evaluation of the process of lecturing through the lecturer's application of the hybrid method and its effectiveness for learning to take place. It has been identified as one of the first steppingstones to boost discussions on the current situation and support required for the progression, promotion and practice of future post pandemic studies in relation to the academics' application of the hybrid process.

It is here thought to be relevant to point out that the researched cohort of academics at the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) in Luqa, MALTA are referred to as post-secondary educators (PSEs) throughout this paper. The reason for this being that despite the various ITS documentation provided on its website, such as the P026 Lecturer competence policy (2021), where this cohort is referred to as lecturers, the ITS law Cap 566 sec 10 (n) refers to them as teachers. The term PSE was therefore selected in order to avoid any confusion with teachers of primary and secondary levels of education. While educator is used in sections which refer to those providing teaching at any level.

Identifying the hybrid lecturing process and distinguishing it from blended lecturing

The main obstacle identified during this research is the lack of clarity and distinction in present day literature between blended and hybrid and in many instances how they compare to online teaching/learning. Due to this the researchers were compelled in various sections to utilize feedback dealing with online teaching and learning and have then related this to the hybrid process.

The definition of the main concepts utilized throughout this paper have here been dealt with, with the intention of clarification. The first of these is that of synchronous and asynchronous teaching/learning. The adjective 'synchronous' as defined by the Oxford dictionary (2021) is that of occurring or being present simultaneously with others. Asynchronous refers to its opposite. Hence the term synchronous e-learning is that where the teaching and learning are dealt with at the same time. This is supported by a means of electronic connection between the educator and student/s, allowing for the setting-up of learning communities. While asynchronous e-learning provides the student with the possibility of attending the instruction at his/her preferred and/or selected time, and therefore not being required to be present at the actual time of delivery (Amiti, 2020).

The main term concentrated on within this paper is that of hybrid. The Cambridge dictionary (2021) provides for its definition as being a 'combination of two different things' which together obtain something with 'qualities relating' to both of the separate parts (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021).

Hybrid lecturing, construed by the authors of this paper, in line with hybrid teaching and hybrid learning are identified as the utilization of the same process, wherein lecturing and teaching are looked at through the eyes of the educator. Learning, on the other hand, is that where the focus is placed on the student. The terms hybrid lecturing and hybrid teaching are understood as being equivalent, where the only distinction being that the former relates specifically to post-secondary and tertiary instruction, while the latter to teaching at any educational level.

In definition, the hybrid teaching process is that of the simultaneous meeting of the educators and students where one part of the class attends physically, while the other part attends virtually via some form of teleconferencing. It is therefore a combination of online and in-person student groups who attend one and the same lecture provided synchronously to both groups. Bennett, Knight and Rowley (2020) relate this to the 'blurring of boundaries' so that the in-class and virtual areas are considered as one 'hybrid learning space'. A space where the authors insist the student's learning experience is heightened through the ever increasing major role being taken on by technology and where the question of who authors the decision on the usage of the hybrid process is revealed. (Bennet, et al., 2020, p. 2) Hence the hybrid process is not solely that of the educator having online and the in-class cohorts. It is that where the boarders between the two are dissolved so that the interaction between student to student, student to educator and educator to student are the same irrespective of if the student is in the class or not.

However even here Bennett, et al (2020) may be interpreted to be relating more to blended teaching/learning, where the educator uses technology and in class means to provide for the in-class instruction. A similar analysis is found in the paper entitled Research and practice of hybrid teaching based on AI technology for foreign language translation (2020), where the authors' definition of hybrid teaching is that of the combination of 'online teaching with offline classroom teaching'. They explain that this provides for the benefits from both informatics and traditional teaching (Liu, et al., 2020, p. 664). Kathryn E. Linder confirms this by explaining her understanding of hybrid pedagogy as being that where the input of technology provides for the possibility of the setting up of an assortment of learning environments. Hybrid teaching as the author explains it, is a means of instruction where 'face-to face activities are often combined with technology-mediated activities' providing, as she states, for a hands on learning environment. Here again it not hybrid but blended learning that is being dealt with, as defined in a later paragraph within this section. (Linder, 2017, p. 16.)

In addition, the authors Liu et al and Linder, as is the case with many others such as Byrne and Pytash (2015) amalgamate hybrid with blended teaching. In fact, Byrne and Pytash in their article entitled hybrid and blended learning: Modifying pedagogy across path, pace, time and place (2015) go so far to state that 'the terms blended learning, hybrid learning, and mixed-mode learning are used interchangeably', as do numerous other authors.

It is only in a few articles such as that of Ansi and Ansi (2020) where a fine line and conceptual definition is placed on the traditional, online and innovative learning environments. Under the cap of innovation, they refer to the various usage of technology for virtual and in-class instruction as blends of teaching, under which hybrid lecturing also falls.

The article of Byrne and Pytash referred to earlier, despite being somewhat aged is found to be very relevant to this paper. Highlighted here is the importance of intensive backing and security from the educational entity in the context of 'hybrid spaces'. With equal or possibly additional relevance, they state it should be up to the educator to decide if the utilization of a hybrid model is at all suitable in achieving their planned learning outcomes. Hence placing the selection in the usage of the process in the hands of the educator. This is actually the intended main focus of this current research. (O'Byrne & Pytash, 2015, pp. 137,138.)

Due to the here shown mismatch of hybrid and blended teaching/learning by various authors, it has been thought necessary to also define the latter concept.
A suitable definition amongst many others is that provided by the authors of an article entitled Defining student learning experience (2020). Here it is described as the instruction method integrating both digital and face-to-face means. This description also utilized by Lindner (2017) as discussed earlier in her understanding of hybrid pedagogy, serves as an example of the terminology misinterpretation identified in present literature. Further clarification of blended teaching/learning is that provided by the authors of the article entitled Defining student learning experience through blended learning (2020) where they describe it as that dealing with a planned division of a topic's sessions through some being taught virtually and others in-class and that both forms are provided to the whole physically present class. (Bouilheres, et al., 2020.)

After the clarification of hybrid instruction, the advantages and disadvantages are considered keeping in mind that these are being assessed through the eyes of the educator. Furthermore, it is here relevant to mention that teaching rather than lecturing is utilized within the next section so as to provide for a more accurate review of present literature.

Reviewing literature in the examination of hybrid instruction

Unarguably the pandemic has necessitated an increased application of technology. The usage of technological means allowed for the continuation of teaching at all levels which brought about a developed application of virtual synchronous and asynchronous teaching in its entirety.

Post lockdown saw the continued administration of virtual instruction in certain situations in its entirety defined as online teaching. In other situations, the partial form of technological usage has continued to be applied. Due to ITS having many of its courses already utilizing an application of blended lecturing even pre Pandemic, it has necessitated the identification on if hybrid is at all a useful means of instruction and in other partially in the form of either blended and/or hybrid instruction.

The pros

AI Ansi & Ai Ansi state that educators' experience in the adoption and application of information technology during the pandemic has enforced an interactive social learning experience which pre-pandemic was in many cases not even thought of.

They even claim that online classes have a greater influence and effectiveness on the student than in-class teaching. (Al Ansi & Al Ansi, 2020.)

Hybrid teaching gives a unique and authentic teaching instruction, as Sameer (2014) amongst others puts it, it gets together both the traditional, physical, face to face teaching in class with instructing students online. He states that the benefits of space or time in hybrid teaching are twofold, where educational institutions adopt both a distance learning strategy and an e-learning strategy. He discusses the benefits for students with no restrictions in neither distance, space, nor time which distance learning facilitates. He, amongst others, also brings out the suitability of e-learning to the hybrid teaching environment which enables the flexibility of choice in space and location. (Sameer, 2014; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021; Baranova, et al., 2021.)

Peimani and Kamallipour (2021) misleadingly give flexibility to the educator as an advantage of hybrid teaching. They describe one of the hybrid teaching benefits as that of being able to have a recorded online lesson presented by another person. Here the already indicated confusion in the present literature between online, blended and hybrid is again apparent

Another benefit provided by the same authors and confirmed by many others is that online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams assist the online student to communicate verbally and in writing using chat-based text during the delivery of the lecture. They advise of research having proven that this form of student interaction has brought about a more intricate form of communication than the physical interaction with a classroom. (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021.)

Alnajdi Sameer (2014) names the reduction of travel costs for those following online instruction which in turn serves in a reduction of the carbon footprint as a benefit. He also points out the educational entities' administrative staff satisfaction in the educators' swift and rapid adaptations through the utilization of technological applications.

Furthermore, Ansi and Ansi (2020) assert that the effectiveness of online teaching, here taken as a part of the hybrid process, is influenced by the students' families, their living environment, their space availability, and their technological means. And that these along with the usage of innovative teaching strategies, improved educator digital skills and online virtual interaction have greatly developed the mentality of the digital culture. (Al Ansi & Al Ansi, 2020.)

However, the claim by several researchers that hybrid instruction has become a social and innovative teaching strategy should be accepted with caution especially due to the identified lack of clarity in its definition. This will be further delved into in the following section.

The cons

Higher education has moved within the Pandemic era to a more digitalized system. Online technology has brought change in teaching and learning strategies. However, Al Ansi & Al Ansi (2020) and Peimani & Kamalipour (2021) amongst others also claim that these changes have brought about uncertainty and have served as interruptions to both the learning experiences as well as to the teaching methods.

Li in as early as 2014 stated that Hybrid lecturing constitutes huge challenges for the educator as it requires a great deal of preparation time, improvement in IT skills, having simultaneous digital and face to face organizational skills, a constant presence online and a constant presence in the classroom as well as transparency in the process and its application.

Studies of Peimani & Kamalipour (2021) confirm that the presently essential usage of technology has brought about the requirement of the re-design of the educator's job description in relation to digital duties and responsibilities. Other challenges being faced is the emerging need of instruction design to assist in the creation of digital learning experiences and the requirement to develop student IT literacy and skills. (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021). These challenges are leading to the re-invention of new approaches and lecturing methods which in turn affect the requirement of new classroom management strategies and considerations on the reliability of online assessment. (Bento, et al., 2021)

Armoed (2021) and other authors such as Bento, et al (2021) and Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) discuss the inequality that has arisen through the obliged usage of technology. Peimani & Kamalipour (2021), divide lecturers within higher educational entities into two groups. The 'digital natives' composed of those who are digitally inclined and the 'digital immigrants' who have difficulty in coping with and adapting to the usage of technology. The authors focus positively on this aspect where they contend that this has placed digital immigrants in a position of desperately having to develop their IT skills in an attempt to adapt to the required transformations.

However other authors such as Baranova, et al (2021) in their research on the move to online teaching, point out that this lecturer inequality especially for those who are not so digitally inclined may create barriers in instruction. Dias, et al (2021) further give evidence that difficulties with internet use, internet connection, and technology hard and software enhance the inequality with special emphasis on lecturers in higher education. Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) discuss that the limitations of the digital immigrants in adjusting to new processes involving technology has also affected their setting up and administration of assessment process. These barriers affecting assessment has also been found lacking in present literature and would also serve as an enlightening area for further research.

Furthermore, communication was also found by Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) to be somewhat of an issue. They found that there was little communication between the in-class students and their online peers, so that lecturers had difficulties in the amalgamation of the online with the in-class groups. Hence the theoretical dissolving of boundaries, as discussed in section 1.1, was proved to be difficult if not to say impossible.

Suggestions to remedy this is provided by Sameer (2014). He proposes, as do many others dealing with pedagogy, the working towards the development of safety, belonging and ownership within the whole class, to encourage student participation and commitment. However, as Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) point out that this could be of little assistance in instances with students having limitations in verbal and written skills. They further argue that since most students are not comfortable with being on camera for any period of time, even the limited visibility of body language cannot be utilized. Here again a study as to the reasons for being 'camera shy' would also serve as an interesting study.

A prime concern for both students and lecturers alike is the lack of technological resources. A number of students lack an up-to-date laptop, a fast internet connection or no connection at all, and the lack of knowledge in the usage or availability of the required technological tools. These problems relate back to the educator and the quality of instruction. (Amakye & Olatundun, 2020; Armoed, 2021; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021).

The lack of support also in the selection of the most adequate applications, software and hardware is discussed by many researchers such as Sameer (2014) and Bento, et al (2021). This is supported by Al-Ansi et al (2020) and Bento, et al (2021) amongst others who substantiate the lack of administrative and IT support and infrastructure for the utilization of technology. Dias, et al (2021) enhance these statements by revealing that the issues were augmented through the students' reduced level of teamwork and participation, low level of feedback, low family support, lack of adaptation skills, and an overall lack of drive. The authors confirm that these are causing high levels of stress and other psychological issues to both lecturers and students alike.

Also, an article entitled Feminist trends in distance and hybrid higher education: A scoping review (2021), although concentrating solely on female educators, has served the authors of this paper as an eye opener to the various negative descriptors in reflection of the most common feelings identified amongst educators. The top five were frustration, lack of hope, feeling strange doing both online and in class teaching, high levels of tension, and the desperate sentiment of feeling sad. Even Bento, et al (2021) substantiate this by identifying the lack of empathy, humor, and acceptance during instruction. Moreover, as already mentioned, Sameer (2014) identified that the lecturer had difficulties in getting connected and creating a sense of belonging amongst students.

Finally, Sameer (2014) also states that the different learning capabilities of students may also be a deterrent to online, here again taken as part of hybrid, instruction, with special emphasis on the students' concentration span.

Appraising the post-secondary educator's response and adaptation to the hybrid process

Pre-COVID, online teaching, here again taken as a section of hybrid lecturing, was seen as a tool to be used by the few for the few (Code, et al., 2020). Little thought was placed on online lecturing, let alone a combination of online with in-class synchronous instruction.

Kim and Asbury (2020) in their article dealing with the educator's experience during lockdown outlined six aspects namely those of 'uncertainty, finding a way, worry for the vulnerable, importance of relationships, educator identity, and reflections'. These relate to that which should be taken note of for the improvement of the online process with emphasis on the application of blended and hybrid instruction (pp. 1062-1083). These are discussed in the following sections in line with the hybrid process. These have been seen by the researchers and confirmed by many others to have brought out the most relevant aspects which PSEs are having to deal with in the preparation and application of the hybrid process.

The first aspect discussed by Kim and Asbury is that of the uncertainties which educators were and are having to navigate through without any professional assistance. The authors compare this situation to someone who is verbally instructed on the usage of a parachute and then thrown out of the plane in expectation of being able to apply the provided instructions. They write in awe of the brave educators who have no option but to face this challenge and adapt it to their 'new norm'.

The second aspect of 'finding a way' was more difficult for the previously mentioned 'digital immigrants' than the 'digital natives'. Here the former had, and in many instances still have, problems in the usage and application of technology. These required adaptations to instruction methods have led to stress for educators in being required to devise new creative working patterns so as to ensure the effective transmission of learning. In addition, online sessions have highlighted the vulnerability of certain students and the adapted methods demanded from the educators to provide for these situations.

Another issue is that of the sustaining of relationships. This partial loss of social interaction with those students who are not in the physical classroom environment leads to educator's distress. The gradual slipping away of the educator's developed trusting and communicative environment for the student has now to be substituted with the usage of social media to keep up supportive relationships.

The final aspect listed by Kim and Asburg is the difficulty of maintaining a professional educator identity despite being unassisted by unfamiliar soft and hardware and without adequate skills and training in the application and usage of the hybrid process. As with the other aspects the researchers, as well as many of their colleagues, assimilate this to feelings of 'fish out of water' where they attempted to rectify matters through online free training sessions, you tube videos and self-taught sessions.

Research methodology

The purpose of journey mapping, as well as the online exploratory survey was to identify the advantages and challenges that hybrid lecturing has had and is having on PSEs during the pandemic. These are intended to cater one of this study's objectives, namely that of the investigation of the experience and thoughts on the usage of the hybrid teaching model.

Professor David A. Kolb (1984) in his theory of experiential learning defines reflective observation as being the study of others or the study of self in one's own experiences, thoughts, feelings and reactions. The living through the experience of hybrid lecturing as seen through the eyes of the academic and the reflection there of, is intended to awaken the awareness of that encountered through hybrid lecturing by those who are not in the educators' shoes.

The creation of two personas and their respective journey mapping as a form of reflective observation, has been dealt with by the three authors in their capacity as fulltime senior lecturers at the Institute. The authors have come up with two descriptive journeys of a one-hour lecture for PSE personas Anna-Maria Farrugia and Francina Agius, in reflection of most sessions being held at the same Institute. The former having a class equipped with technological means for hybrid instruction, while the classroom used by the latter persona being vacant of any such technological means.

A SurveyMonkey questionnaire was sent out to the fifty fulltime ITS PSEs from which there was a 96% participant response. A user plan was purchased by the researchers from this provider due to its user friendly participant format and easy distribution features. While its assistive set-up, easy distribution and in-depth analysis features served the researchers well for a cost effective solution for their survey.

Journey mapping analysis

The analysis of the journey maps, discussed and set-up thought the amalgamation of the three researchers' individual experience has brought out several thoughts as reflected below.

Anna-Maria Farrugia prior to the application of the hybrid process was glad that the Institute had planned a more tech savvy means of reaching out to the student. However, upon preparation for its application Anna-Maria experienced that she now had to prepare two lesson plans to suit the in-class and online groups. During the session her time, attention and concentration was divided between the two groups. The allocation of time was required for the collection, set-up and application of hybrid in-class assistive hardware. Any encountered issues in the process, the taking of attendance, the completion of the Covid related student seating plan and the post-lecture dismantling of the hybrid set-up hardware were also time consuming factors. Another aspect was the physical demands that the in-class hardware placed on Anna-Maria. Further brought out issues were those of slow campus WIFI, student connection problems and complaints received by the online students in relation to their inability of fully participating in the session through inadequate class hardware such as weak mics, narrow angled camera lens and the lack of clarity of what was being written on the white board. Anna-Maria's feelings at the end of the session were those of being drained, frustrated and disappointed at not being permitted to provide for the full contents of the planned session.	Francina Agius was elated at the thought of being finally able to provide her sessions without the physical classroom confines. At pre-application stage she had thought it made sense to provide the student with the option of participation location. As with Anna-Maria when she researched the required preparations for instruction in hybrid form she identified that her prep-work had doubled for every session. Also that during the session her time, attention and concentration proved to be more required by the online students In the classroom she only had to connect her speaker to her laptop and connect to teams. However, she was unable to move around the classroom or write on the white board due to these not reaching the online students. Taking of attendance and the completion of the Covid related student seating plan were also time consuming factors. Further brought out issues were those of slow campus WIFI, student connection problems and complaints received by the online students in relation to their inability of fully participating in the session through a lack of suitable class hardware. As with Anna-Maria, Francina's feelings at the end of the session were those of being drained, frustrated and disappointed at not being in a position to provide the full contents of the planned session equally to both groups.

Questionnaire results

The first three questions of the PSE's online survey dealt with their exposure to the hybrid process. 68% of the respondents advised that they are presently teaching hybrid, out of which 74% stated that they had had no option but to apply this process since students had been individually offered the selection of attending in person or virtually.

The following four questions concentrated on the exposure and training of PSEs to this process. Here 59% advised that they had had no exposure to hybrid lecturing prior to having applied it to their teaching environment. 36% said that they had had some exposure, while only 5% informed that they were used to this process through instruction that they had recently received. From the 41% who advised that they had knowledge of the process 56% had self-taught and 33% had received organized training. Asked if they were of the opinion that their exposure had been sufficient it is only 23% of the respondents of this survey who provided an affirmative reply. A common demand in answer to the question of how the PSEs' preparation for the application of this process should have been dealt with was that of training and technological assistance. Here it was stated that fully online lecturing had been an emergency, however hybrid instruction was not so that more thought should have been applied with concentration on the PSE's needs. Respondents place the lack of awareness of ITS management of the requirements for the application of the process as the major deterrent. Suggestions provided concentrated on a skills gap analysis for each PSE, followed by the provision of assistance in accordance with the identified needs.

The PSEs feelings of comfort and safety in the application of hybrid lecturing were focused on in the next five questions. 40% advised that they found it very challenging while only 7% had no issues with handling lecturing in this form. Mixed feelings and that of frustration were named by 42% and 28% respectively, while it was only 19% who voiced contentment and some excitement. The main provided challenges mentioned were those of the lack of PSE experience and knowledge in the creation of a bi-model learning environment, difficulty in the simultaneous concentration on the in-class and online groups, the increased demand on the PSE for the pre-lecture hardware classroom set-up, low internet speed, a lack of online student participation and student cameras being switched off.

Subsequent questions dealing with classroom management brought out the lack of student interaction between those in-class and those online, a lack of the online student's engagement, as well as the absence and/or inoperability and/or faulty classroom hardware.

PSEs suggestions focused on their being relieved of the administrative and technological burdens to enable the full lecture to deal with a concentration on the learning environment with emphasis on student-to-student and student-to-educator connection and collaboration.

Finally, thoughts of forecasted post-pandemic usage of hybrid lecturing revealed sentiments of a lack of conviction in the long-term benefits of this process, but to openness to the study and application of more suitable innovative means of instruction.

Discussion and Conclusion

For this study, the researchers have utilized a SWOT analysis to bring together and present the findings of the conducted primary and secondary research. This selected technique was identified as an ideal tool to assess both internal and external factors currently manifesting themselves on hybrid lecturing. Furthermore, it was utilized in an attempt to provide a realistic exposure to the current situation brought out through the research and experience gathered. This analysis is targeted to be further utilized as a guideline for future possibilities when considering potential methods of instruction during this ongoing pandemic era.

A main takeaway as an English teacher put it in an interview is that 'it is nothing short of exhausting. It's basically like teaching two different classes at the same time in one class period'. Jeff Plaman an online and digital learning specialist supports this and further claims that this demanding teaching form 'doesn't work'. (Heubeck, 2021.)

Figure 1. SWOT analysis of hybrid lecturing

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. Enhances the application of technological skills	1. Changes in teaching and learning strategies
2. Enhances online virtual interaction	2. Highlighted digital immigrants' shortcomings
3. Innovative instruction	3. Broughtout uncertainty, stress and anxiety issues
4. No restrictions in space to reach students	4. Increased instruction preparation
5. Simultaneous outreach to both in-class & online	5. Constant presence & commitment inclass and online
6. Advantages for digital natives	6. Difficulity in the amalgamation of online with inclass groups
7. Encouraging change	7. Increased in mentoring & supervision
	8. Nessesitating change in the class dynamics
	9. Distancing from those attending online
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
1. Possibility of Increase in safety	1. Lack of technological resources
2. Increase in technological online developments	2. Lack of technical support
3. Development of job descriptions	3. Problems with wifi connectivity
	4. Required changes in the educational entity's infrastructure
	5. Lack of of student integrity
	6. Costly hard and software
	7. Re-design of job descriptions

A factor emerging within the strengths of hybrid lecturing common to any form of communication, whether educational, business or leisure is that of the developed utilization of technology. Here the strengths rely on more proficiency in digital literacy, equipment usage and the ease of innovative technology adaptations.

The opportunities resulting from this study demonstrate the possible macro elements affecting this newly imposed lecturing mode. They deal with the external elements to be taken into consideration with the implementation of hybrid mode of instruction. Here at the forefront is the increase of awareness, development and usage of technological means which have for the most part retained an un-understandably back bench position until the breakout of the pandemic. Another main opportunity is that of the redesigning of teach conditions. The moving away from the boring traditional ways of instruction, which in many instances are not inclusive. The lecturing job description has been the same for many years, allowing little space for creativity to keep in line with traditional teaching methods. Thus, now the scenario faced by tertiary educational institutions gives rise to opportunities for being creative and suit more innovative modes of instruction.

The weaknesses resulting from the primary and secondary gathered data, demonstrate the main drawbacks that this system brought with it once it was implemented at the Institute. These included the immediate and rapid transition in teaching and learning strategies which were carried out with none or very minimal training and support. It highlighted the skills gap of the digital immigrants, earlier described as those not as technologically savvy as digital natives, which in turn brought about an increase in health issues, such as the rise in anxiety, frustration and higher stress levels, as well as the confusion in definition and application of the hybrid process.

In fact, the acclaimed hybrid lecturing by many of the ITS PSEs is that of giving an online lecture in front of students both online and in person. What is however overlooked and ignored is the learning that is obtained through the interaction between students amongst themselves with the educator as a go-between. So that the fact that the educator is attempting to address the 2 cohorts simultaneously does not in itself mean that the hybrid process is being applied, or that either of the student groups are learning.

In addition, it was identified that the increased workload and the simultaneous physical and virtual presence contributed to high levels of fatigue through as Helms, Kirby and Merrill (2022) put it, 'the untenable cycle of impossible expectations and burnout'. In support of this McMurtie (2020) confirms that educators were treading into precarious territory with feelings of being 'overwhelmed and under-supported' (pp. 7-10).

This was further intensified through the automatic division into online and in-class student groups and the educator's tedious attempt to amalgamate the two. On the reverse side of the coin the ITS survey revealed that the PSEs were compelled to address the students in-class differently from those online, which also resulted in an increase in mentoring and supervision which now required double the time for preparation and application.

Another drawback is the drastic change which materialized in the traditional and familiar classroom dynamics with respect to which little has to date been researched. The accustomed in-class developed relationships between the educator and students, and between students themselves were in many instances lost, despite endeavors through higher input and motivation to at least maintain them. This bit further into the educator's resultant output.

The threats outlining the effects of external elements focused mainly on the lack of digital resources, professional support, knowledge in technology, internet equipment and Wi-Fi connectivity. These amongst others point in the direction for innovative, quick and drastic changes not only individual educator's output, but also to the entire educational entity's infrastructure.

The outcome of this research also revealed what hybrid lecturing is not. It is not the combined usage of technological means of instruction within the student-present physical class. It is also not the virtual instruction to online and in-class students. This interesting interpretation of hybrid lecturing dealt with the educator providing for all instruction online but being present in class while doing so. This misconceived understanding was confirmed to be that of solely online instruction through the PSE's claims that s/he on occasions held instruction from the office but providing for those students in class and those present online. Through claims of this being hybrid instruction has provided for further confusion amongst the PSEs themselves as well as with management where the repercussions on the educator and the student are more detrimental.

Furthermore, in an article entitled Exploring student and teacher experiences in hybrid learning environments (2022) it is stated, as confirmed by other authors such as Singh, Steele and Singh (2021) to mention a few, is that the effectiveness of the application of this innovative hybrid process is dependent on the supportive culture exhibited within the educational entity.

This support in the form of the promotion of the development of adequate practices in the acquiring of innovative skills is especially required during such volatile and unstable times as the ones which are still being faced despite the relaxing of Pandemic measures. The authors insist, as can be confirmed by the primary research results, that the application of an educator supportive culture would support a smooth transition from traditional teaching to one which is more technologically based.

Suggestions for future

Secondary research has revealed that the disadvantages seem to have by far outweighed the advantages. Sameer (2014) states that hybrid instruction needs acceptance from all stakeholders if such a strategy is to work effectively. Other others insist that innovation is fundamental to the defeat of challenges within especially post-secondary and tertiary education, where the educator should be permitted to act as an agent for his/her own transformation (Bento, et al., 2021; Armoed, 2021).

The structure of the modules or courses are required to be remodeled so as to conform to hybrid lecturing. Some modules have a sequential scheme of work especially in theory classes, whilst others, mainly in practical classes, adapt according to the topic being provided. Hence the allocation of selection of hybrid lecturing should be placed in the expert hands of the PSE, since it is s/he who is the most well versed in the topic and should therefore be provided with the freedom of defining its suitability in accordance with the lesson plans and topic scheme of work.

Lecturing must adapt to hybrid instruction through the creation of new teaching methods and new learning environments, which must be combined appropriate hard and software. These should then be incorporated within the module structures, so as to provide for a coordinated and equal experience for both the online and face-to-face participants.

In addition, as Jimenez-Cortes and Aires (2021) put it, educators should be equally equipped with technological tools together with the training needed to use such tools for the development of a uniform, Institution wide, teaching strategy that facilitates learning by installing empowerment and dedicated support focused on the student.

Researches have brought out that an injection of capital for the further investment in IT assistive staff, equipment and training for all concerned, as well as ensuring its correct implementation is necessary for the successful implementation of the hybrid process.

It should be ensured that students have suitable hardware and if not should be provided with the necessary tools, since it is pointless in instructing the educator to utilize the hybrid process when the students do not have the equipment to successfully participate in this process. Once this is tackled IT literacy skills for both students and lecturers alike should be developed.

The last suggestion deals with the taking of the Pandemic necessitated changes as an opportunity. An opportunity to be built on, rather than it solely being considered as a means of bridging this still existing Pandemic period. This may be affected through the development the Institute's internal social environment, to improve the pedagogical strategy and ensure its transparency and to ensure better and further interaction and teamwork amongst management, lecturers and students. As stated by Baranova, et al (2021) these will support the development of a sustainable culture with a focus on the student's needs.

To conclude one must point out that the hybrid process as it is currently being applied at the Institute of Tourism Studies, has through this research been identified as a hindrance to teaching and learning, rather than a means of a student centered pedagogy which after all is the main objective of any educational institution. Leaving us to ask: To Hybrid or not to Hybrid?

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The Importance of recruitment processes in Maltese Accommodation Establishments Pre and Post Covid-19 Pandemic.

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Abstract

The provision of good services for guests relies on the recruitment and selection process of a company. Good recruitment process is important as it helps the Human Resources' department select the ideal person for the company. Ideally the person chosen needs to be motivated and perform their work as per company standards. Recruitment is therefore a good investment to consolidate and invest in human capital.

Recruitment is an important asset for accommodation establishments. Locally, there are a lot of job opportunities within the hospitality industry. It is difficult to find good and enough personnel to satisfy the various available work positions since a lot of foreign workers decided to move back to their country when the pandemic started and remained in their country until now. The aim of this research is to explore the recruitment processes in various Maltese accommodation establishments. Additionally, this research focuses on the challenges that Human Resources' departments are facing in recruitment. What kind of help are Human Resources' departments obtaining from the Government of Malta and Government-related entities to tackle the issue of lack of applicants? Another aspect of this research is to see what kind of professional qualifications are deemed important by the hotel industry.

The qualitative analysis of recruitment in this research is conducted by interviewing various Maltese accommodation establishments. The results suggest that there are a lot of similarities between the properties interviewed and the recruitment practices and they struggle to find personnel that can work within their property. This research suggests that the higher the star category of the property, the more intense the recruitment process seems to be. All establishments interviewed seem to give priority to employ people that are motivated and willing to work even if they don't have experience in the field. Accommodation establishments are willing to invest and train these people.

Keywords: Recruitment process, Recruitment challenges, Professional qualifications, Motivated employees, Investing in Training, Pre/Post Covid-19 practices

Introduction

Investing in good recruitment processes is a vital asset for companies. Every company has goals to reach so it is important that the selected and recruited staff will be the most ideal for the company's requirements. Good recruitment processes help accommodation establishments to keep standards high and have a good reputation. Once the right staff is selected, it will then be their turn to bring success to the company.

This research is aimed to discover the processes and practices used by the recruitment personnel in Maltese accommodation establishments. The research is intended to see how accommodation establishments are finding the right people to blend with the hotel's standards. This research highlights the professional requirements that are important in the hotel industry. The current situation shows that there are many job opportunities in the Maltese islands since commercial outlets reopened for business (after being closed because of Covid-19 restrictions and protocols from November 20 till May 21), especially in the Hotel Industry since a lot of foreign workers left the Maltese Islands when the Covid-19 pandemic started. Unfortunately, they did not return and this situation created several vacancies. The research also explores what kind of professional qualifications are required, if any, by the Maltese accommodation establishments. This research seeks to find out what help, if any, the hotel industry is getting from government institutions like *Jobs Plus* since there are few available applicants for the job opportunities offered. Additionally, this research will explore the recruitment processes pre Covid-19 pandemic versus post Covid-19 pandemic and the provided staff-related benefits that the Government of Malta is offering to accommodation establishments.

This research paper starts by reporting the employment situation locally and then proceeds in detail with the practices used in the Hotel Industry. The study will continue with a qualitative analysis of the data collected from the Hotel Industry, the systems practised for recruitment pre- Covid-19 and post Covid-19 and the challenges faced daily by the Human Resources' department in Maltese accommodation establishments. An analysis of the data of the different categories of the interviewed accommodation establishments' results will follow in relation to recruitment and statistics of local employment. This research is done to see if good recruitment processes are in line with giving importance to human capital in the recruitment sector.

As the main area of the research is recruitment and the practices used for recruitment in Maltese accommodation establishments, the author collected data from different accommodation establishments which fall under various star categories. The author visited and contacted via email thirteen different types of properties to obtain data. The author created two questionnaires and interviewed the Human Resources recruitment officer or Hotel Managers (as employers) and like this the main information of most of the research questions will be answered directly by the accommodation establishments.

The second step was to access the statistics from the National Statistics office in Malta which in this case the data will be given throughout the year as the process of accessing numbers will be updated every few months. The literature review found prior to initiating the research underlines the common factors that are being encountered from the local accommodation establishments and the local employment/ unemployment situation.

Background of key issues of the local employment situation

Since the pandemic started, there was a decrease in inbound tourism due to airport closure but the number of tourists visiting the Maltese islands increased drastically when the flights and airports opened back their operations.

The increase of inbound tourism also necessitated a lot of infrastructure and environmental developments. Fortunately, the Government of Malta is giving a lot of importance to the Hospitality Industry and new agreements with airlines and other foreign business companies have been finalised therefore Malta has now more opportunities with more investment coming from abroad (Borg, 2016) .

This improvement has helped the Maltese islands to open more job opportunities and at the same time reduce the unemployment rate. The local unemployment rate is 3.6%. In reality there are jobs for everyone and much more but those who would like to have a specific job and did not apply for jobs are resulting in the statistic of 3.6% unemployed percentage rate (NSO 2021). Compared to other European countries we are in a good situation since the unemployment situation in Europe is rated for the same period as 7.3% as an average until the month of October 2021 (Anon., 2021).

Although the Maltese people and the foreigners residing in the Maltese Islands have been given work opportunities within the hospitality sector, hotels and accommodation establishments still find a lot of difficulties in finding employees for the various departments. Additionally, the fact that a lot of foreign workers left the country when the pandemic started did not help the employment situation. By collecting information from the employers of various accommodation establishments, we are discovering the sources that hotels were using prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and post Covid-19 pandemic for their recruitment process and when searching for new employees. Furthermore, this research discovers the different types of advertisements that are being used, and the help given by the Government of Malta and its entities pre and post pandemic.

Literature review - recruitment and recruitment processes

The hospitality industry in the Maltese islands is the biggest industry that plays a big part in the GDP share and employers within this sector invest in their business to obtain the necessary profit. The gain in this industry lies also under the responsibility of investing in human capital thus the employees, that with their knowledge, experience, professionality, and creative ideas make successful and profitable the operation of tourism (Bardrova, et al., n.d.).

Due to the lack of persons eligible to work in the Maltese islands, finding human capital became an issue. It is difficult to find applicants to fill the required posts and in finding the adequate right candidates which can satisfy and exceed accommodation establishments guests' expectations. The job activity within the hospitality industry grows steadily and unfortunately there is a decrease in finding people available to fill the job opportunities offered (Forbringer, et al., 1992).

Finding the right applicant is also important for the accommodation establishments as it brings success and profit to the company as once a good person is employed, the company starts investing in that person by offering training. The training will result as a value asset for the company to deliver better outcomes for the property and the relations with guests as per property standards will increase (Bardrova, et al., n.d.).

Recruitment and approaches for hiring candidates

There are different ways as to how individuals look at the recruitment process. But what is recruitment in reality? Gold and Bratton stated that "*Recruitment is the process of generating a pool of capable people applying to an organisation for employment*" (Gold & Bratton, 2007). From another perspective Bonn, Bonn and Forbringer describes recruitment as the hiring of `*warm bodies*` that are interested to work within the hospitality industry (Forbringer, et al., 1992). Recruitment in the hospitality industry can also be defined as a process which is present in ensuring that the applicant have requisite skills and qualities that are successful attracted to the hospitality business or organisation (Abomen & Blessing, 2013). Additionally, recruitment is the investment in selecting professional and qualified staff to have a positive and profitable operation of tourism and catering companies (Bardrova, et al., n.d.). The concept of recruitment and selection can be defined as the two tools that help the Human Resources' department recruitment officers in selecting the best workforce, giving priority to motivation and efficiency performance (Galea, 2014). Recruitment is also evaluated as the "*vital role in building, nurturing and maintaining the organisational success*" (Yu & Cable, 2014). According to Armstrong, recruitment is described as *"the process of finding and engaging the people to the organisation needs"* (Armstrong, 2012). In addition, recruitment is considered as the "*practices and activities carried out by the organisation with the primary purpose of identifying and attracting potential employees"* (Tyson & Perry, 2008) .

As stated by (Abomen & Blessing, 2013) in order to have effective recruitment practices HR needs to choose the "*most suitable employee that would enable hospitality business to achieve her organisational objective"* and it needs to make sure that they "*attract and engage best suitable employees with the right knowledge skills and attitude to steer the day to day operation of the business*" (Abomen & Blessing, 2013).

The hotel industry needs to make sure that the job opportunities available within its company need to be announced in a good way and in the available sources to attract adequate candidates which will lead their company to success. Additionally, employing professional and knowledgeable persons are important for the company "*so investing in a professional and qualified staff is the key to successful and profitable operation of tourism and catering companies*" (Bardrova, et al., n.d.).

The phase in recruitment in which human resources need to find people is not an easy task. If one really needs staff they need to invest in good recruitment processes. The company head urges to fill in the vacated vacancies as quickly as possible and they are willing to invest in recruitment processes in order to evaluate more the quality than the number of applicants. Employers are also willing to utilise more search channels as an active recruitment network (Chan & Kuok, 2011).

When the situation is that bad in finding staff, some countries try different approaches in order to reach the candidates. In USA one of the approaches used is *REFERALS*, (Forbringer, et al., 1992) stated that "*the theory states that turnover is less when applicants are referred by friends or family"*. By referrals the company will save money on advertising the post "*referral programs can save an employee a great deal of money by reducing expenses associated with advertising and recruiting fees"* (Forbringer, et al., 1992).

Another approach is to hire minorities which in this case it is referring to "*ELDERLY and HANDICAPPED*" people (Forbringer, et al., 1992). When elderly people are already working within the company and before they retire, they can be asked once they are still in good health to proceed in the same career they were practising and this is also permitted as a local practice (European Commission, 2013). In the case of persons with disabilities in Malta, a law states that a company must have a minimum of one disabled person with every fifty workers irrelevant what the company is so this would also be a help to the industry ((Law, 2015)). As clearly stated by Forbringer, Bonn and Bonn : "*Companies hire the manpower from a supported employment labour pool*" (Forbringer, et al., 1992).

Other approaches done locally are internal advertisement, word of mouth, promotions, usage of job portals, usage of recruitment agencies, advertisement of newspapers and websites and walk in recruitment asking for a job and providing their curriculum vitae on the day (Galea, 2014).

The Recruitment Process

When describing the recruitment process every company has its own structure of how the process is, but every company will also be following the company process to find the new employees that best suits the company. But what exactly is the recruitment process? For a company, recruitment process is when they have a specific model of how the company can search and source new employees, where this process resides within the Human Resources Department responsibility (Anon., 2017).

A recruitment process can be broken down into different parts. Whilst the different parts are unique to the organization, a typical recruiting process may commence with the identification of a vacancy, then the preparation of a job description, database sourcing, role making, response management, short-listing, interviews, reference checking and selection (Anon., 2017).

According to Filippo (2017), recruitment is the process when a company is searching candidates for employment, When doing this, the company is also stimulating the applicants to apply for jobs in the organisation. One can conclude that recruitment is an activity created by that specific company to link the employers and the job seekers. The company will be finding and attracting capable applicants for the available post within the organisation. The process begins by discovering sources of manpower from which new applicants are selected. Recruitment is a source to meet requirement of staffing schedules and to employ people in order to facilitate an efficient working force (Filippo, 2017).

The recruitment and selection are the major function of the human resources department and recruitment process is the first step towards creating the competitive strength and the recruitment strategic advantage for the organisations. Recruitment process involves a systematic procedure from obtaining the candidates to arranging and conducting the interviews and requires many resources and time. (Filippo, 2017).

According to a recruitment company the recruitment steps that are applied for each company needs evolve around the following: start by assessing the past and current recruitment strategy the company used and is currently practising. Next step is to build a sourcing strategy and target social media and events-based networking. Once that is done and a group of applicants are found, the applicants and telephone screened and by their behaviour via the phone the company can test if they are really interested and if yes, the company should sell the job opportunity offered. Those interested then are scheduled for a one-to-one interview and if the candidates are eligible for the company needs the next step is to negotiate the work offer. The last step is to get the candidate on board and enrol the candidate. (Anon., 2016)

An accounting management company describes the recruitment process as a step-by-step process of locating, identifying, and attracting qualified people to apply for the available post the organisation is offering. Moreover, it states that recruitment process should have the following phases: starting with identifying the HR requirements where human resources draft the job duties, responsibilities, working conditions and required skills to perform the job. The second step will be to identify possible sources of HR supply where the human resources department will search for a pool of potential candidates for the posts. The third step is to communicate the information where human resources department will inform those potential applicants via electronic sources, media and internet about the vacancies. The fourth step is to receive the application, see the candidates, see who is interested and select the best applicant for the work situation and then see if the other application forms are worth keeping them or not (Tracey, n.d.)

According to another recruiting company, there are eight steps to be successful when recruiting a candidate. These recruitment process steps all depend on the positions required by the company. First a company should pre-select the candidates that applied for the post. Once that is done an appointment for a first interview is scheduled. The company will evaluate the interviewed candidates and write a report on each applicant. This will then lead to the step of short listing the candidates. The firm will be conducting a final interview to choose the best selected candidate and after the best candidates are selected the company will start the reference process by asking information to prior employers about the candidate and giving importance to why that applicant left their prior employers. This is done in order that the company will not commit employing someone who has a negative history and happens to be lucky enough to perform well in the interview. The next step once the reference information is done and discovered that the candidate is clean, the offer about the job is given, and finally if the candidates accept the company hires the candidate (Anon., 2016).

Other Human Resources' department describe the recruitment and selection hiring process in detail. This is done to increase efficiency and consistency in hiring and compliance in the selection and recruitment process. A standard step format that is suggested by the University of California follows by starting to evaluate the vacancy and the need for the vacancy. Is this a new position or is it a vacancy due to a replacement of a position? (Anon., 2015). For a more successful recruitment, step two states that a job description is to be written. This job description will be used at a later stage when the interview is conducted and helps to identify the duties and responsibilities of the job. The third step is to develop a recruitment plan which attracts as much as possible qualified candidates, veterans and individuals with special needs. The plan will include the period of posting the call, the opening and closing date and the placement goals to reach different diversities of applicants. An essential point in the plan is to do additional advertisements and include diverse agencies to help in finding the different type of staffing. The last thing that is included in the plan is to use good sources to identify the qualified candidates. The fourth step is to select a search committee in order to make sure that the candidates are evaluated by more than one person and the members of the search committee should familiarise with the job description designed for that job opportunity in order to know well what to discuss and what to ask and after being able to give their opinion. The fifth step is to post the position in the company career section. Once applicants start applying, the applications submitted will be monitored by the search committee. The sixth step is to review all the applications that are submitted and once the applications are evaluated, they are shortlisted. The seventh step is when a date for the interviews and a panel of interviewers are set, and the candidates sit for the job interview. If the candidates are distant to avoid cost, virtual interviews are also done. Interview questions will be prepared prior to starting interviews and are in relation to position and specific skills. The eight step is when the selection committee meets and tests and discusses the interviewees to choose the best candidate. The interviewee which is on top of the selected list will then be evaluated by doing reference checks with prior employers. The ninth and last step is to finalise the recruitment process where the interviews are reviewed to ensure that the selected candidate matches with the selection criteria and after this is done the candidate is called to negotiate the job offer (Anon., 2015).

Filippo states that companies have two main sources of recruitment where companies can choose their candidates. These sources can be internal and external sources. Internal can be easily done by transferring employees to a department from another department (Filippo, 2017). In this case the author encountered in several hotels in Malta that prior to posting the vacancy on the media, an internal call is always sent to employees on the company Facebook page, via e-mail and placed on the staff notice board. External recruitment sources (Filippo, 2017) is described as finding employees from outsourcing agencies.

Internal sources of recruitment can be done by transferring an employee from one department to another but also by giving the employee a promotion because of a job well and being more efficient. Other external sources for advertising a vacancy could be television, street billboards, accommodation establishment Facebook page, radio stations, newspapers, tourism schools' internship office and of course by word of mouth (Filippo, 2017).

The result of recruitment and selection strategies can improve the organisation outcomes. The process of recruitment is searching for candidates for employment and then offering them jobs within the organisation. The process is also defined as when there is a pool of applicants that are ready to be selected and the needs to be selected matches with the required manpower for staffing schedules to facilitate an efficient working force (Kumari, 2012).

It is stated that organisations still prefer that ideally the post is filled internally by a known pool of associates that are under the control of the same company. Employees are the easiest source of recruitment. The same goes for local accommodation establishments. (Shammot, 2014) The company initially publishes the source internally and if no one applies it is opened to referrals from staff. Once the post/s are still available the next step will be advertising the post externally.

When the company will have a pool of applicants the company starts the selection process and then traisn the selected applicant/s (Shammot, 2014).

The Human Resources' department in an organisation is the fundamental source which is responsible for the process of recruitment and selection. It is this department which chooses the "right" people to join the company. The recruitment process will incorporate a selection method to identify the applicants with a requisite of technical knowledge and good commination skills as the main qualities. Candidates that are willing to be chosen together with the selection criteria and procedures should reflect the product of the company culture. The staff selected should be willing to fit in the company and support its value (Ban, 2008).

All these definitions and processes are very similar but worded differently. Some have more steps during the process, and this shows also more dedication and investment in recruitment and that the company wants to have the best possible employees within the property. The different processes are all leading to what recruitment is, how important recruitment is to a company and how a company can develop the recruitment process to employ the best applicants.

Research methodology

The research is aimed to explore the recruitment and recruitment processes in various Maltese hotels and accommodation establishments. It includes the challenges Human Resources' departments in accommodation establishment are facing in recruitment. The research explores the help that the Human Resources' department is obtaining from the Maltese Government and its entities to tackle the issue of lack of applicants and the monetary support in staff salaries due to lack of business during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. This research also gives an insight of the level of importance of personal qualifications when applying for a job within the accommodation establishments. The research shows the challenges that Human Resources' Departments in various Maltese accommodation establishments are facing in recruitment.

The qualitative methods chosen to collect data are interviews with various Maltese accommodation establishments. This was done to obtain information directly from who is doing the recruitment practices and to see what difficulties are being encountered pre and post Covid-19 pandemic.

Interviews

The qualitative interview is characterised by levels of flexibility and lack of structure, going in depth about the subject in an informal way including open ended questions (Holland & Edwards, 2013). This was done as by the questions it is discovered the meaning of the local reality in the recruitment process scenario in the accommodation establishments. The qualitative interviews show information and knowledge of how the accommodation establishment interviewed recruit personnel and what processes and practices they are using. The interviews provided information of not only the phases of recruitment but also of the recruitment challenges encountered by the accommodation establishments.

The qualitative interviews were planned to generate dialogue between each property interviewed with physical face to face interaction and also via e-mail. This gives more flexibility in the structure of the questions to explore more ideas that come up in the conversation (Holland & Edwards, 2013).

The interviews are all based on the information stated by the Human Resources' Executives, Human Resources' recruitment officers and Hotel Managers of accommodation establishments. The interviews were conducted in a familiar way and although questions were asked in the form of a questionnaire, the management found it easy to answer as the questions were led to following questions in the whole questionnaire. Management was giving their opinion of how the process is and what the challenges are and there was no right or wrong answers in this questionnaire. Each interview lasted around one hour to one hour fifteen minutes. The same interview and questions were conducted in each property with any freedom to answer as they wish. Another set of questions related to Post Covid-19 practices were also sent to the accommodation establishment's managers by e-mail. These were answered by replying to the sent e-mail. The questions were combined to the theoretical framework of the research subject.

Qualitative analysis

The development of the content taken from the properties was analysed and the information was collected in different sections as per property star category. The research shows an insight of the recruitment process within these local thirteen properties interviewed. The information from the interviews is an empirical approach to reach the data of the recruitment and selecting process and the challenges encountered within the accommodation establishments that participated. The questions where holistic and one leading to another, to reach the goal of the required information.

Qualitative analysis can be defined as a summative content analysis with the interpretation of the underlying context (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005). The summative content analysis of this research is the information collected from each property, which was counted as per hotel categories and the comparisons done in the sequence of each star category recruitment process.

Qualitative analysis involves the collection of data from various sources of the same subject. The sources can be evaluated (Leicester, n.d.) and the similarities and differences can be recognised. This is reflecting the research done in the local accommodation establishments that were interviewed and from the information supplied it results in a lot of similarities in the recruitment process. The differences found were mainly in the length of the process according to the hotel category responsibility.

Additional qualitative data analysis is composed of different ways of research to arrive to the same purpose which will give you the required information. Qualitative research is a development of concepts which helps the individual to understand the social world in its natural settings, and giving importance to the meanings, experiences and the views of the persons participating in the research. Qualitative research is also understood as how the economic, political, social and organisational factors influence the individuals (Nigatu, 2009).

The data obtained from the properties was analysed by checking all the recruitment processes information supplied and split them by hotel type. The similarities and differences of each property were evaluated to compile the recruitment processes practised within each type of hotel pre and post Covid-19 pandemic.

Findings and Results

The analysis of recruitment and the recruitment processes pre and post Covid-19 pandemic provided in this chapter is collected from various accommodation establishments in Malta. The interview questionnaires are organised by star category and hotel type.

The questions of the questionnaire are based on theory driven themes of the recruitment and recruitment processes within the Maltese accommodation establishments.

The information provided is related to the hotels that participated in this research, thirteen in total so it might vary if other accommodation establishments could have participated.

Three-star accommodation establishment recruitment process pre-Covid-19 Pandemic

The three-star accommodation establishments interviewed practise a short recruitment process. The first step that is implemented is doing the advertisement of the vacancy. Once the applications start being received by email, the Human Resources' department starts evaluating the letter of application and the CV of the applicants interested in the post and shortlists the applicants. The applicants that are eligible will then start being called for an interview. Since the CV and letter of applications were already shortlisted and after all the interviews are done the management will decide who will be given that position. It is very rare that applicants are called for a second interview. So once the applicant is selected, the applicant will be scheduled for training (Table 1).

Table1 : Recruitment Process in 3 star accommodation establishment pre-Covid 19

Recruitment Steps	Recruitment Process
Step 1	Advertise vacant position
Step 2	Evaluate application letters and CVs
Step 3	Call all applicants for an interview (a second interview is rarely done)
Step4	Select the ideal applicant
Step 5	Start the training programme

In relation to the professional qualifications, the three-star properties stated that it is already difficult to find staff and if advertising that the post needs specific qualifications it makes it more difficult to find applicants. Three-star properties prefer staff that have experience more than qualifications and of course if the post will be for a managerial position, qualifications will be appreciated.

To attract more applicants, better wage packages will help but this unfortunately is not always possible. Moreover, although Jobs Plus provides applicants, sometimes after being contacted, they do not show up for the interview. It was also stated that unfortunately to employ non-EU national takes time and needs a lot of bureaucracy so the government entity should find a better and faster way how to process non-EU nationals work permits.

Four-star accommodation establishment recruitment process pre-Covid 19 Pandemic

In the scenario of the four-star hotels although getting higher in star category there are still a lot of common factors that the accommodation establishments are practising during the recruitment process.

Based on the data collected from four-star properties, one can see the recruitment process is longer than within the three-star hotels although some steps are similar. The four-star properties recruitment process starts with announcing the vacant position internally in their hotel and in hotels that are part of their chain. The Human Resources' recruitment officer will than do the evaluation of the internal staff applications. This will follow by doing an interview to the internal personnel. The next step is either opting to promote one of the interviewed staff or opening the work opportunity application externally. If the post is opened externally, the process of letter of application and CV will start once these will be sent by external applicants.

The Human Resources will schedule and do interviews with every applicant that applied. Once this is done the management will shortlist the interviewed candidates and call those eligible for the post for a second interview. This process will then lead to choose the right applicant for the post. The Human Resources will than write a letter to the chosen applicant informing that the applicant is chosen for that post. Other letters will be sent to the other candidates informing them that they are not being selected. Training will then be scheduled, and the new chosen applicant will be trained accordingly for the employed post (Table 2).

Same as the three-star properties, four-star hotels do not give professional qualifications a priority. The applicant with a positive attitude, that is willing to work and that has experience related to the specific post is the one preferred. Having said that, certain positions related to finance or maintenance require a specific licence and these licenses are obviously a requirement.

Although the Jobs Plus Government entity helps by providing the hotels with applicants, the persons that are usually sent to the establishments are not enthusiastic to work and unfortunately, they are hardly ever employed by the hotels.

Five-star and five-star rated boutique accommodation establishment recruitment process pre-Covid-19 Pandemic

Both five-star hotels and boutique hotels pointed out that the recruitment process for them is all year round as tourism is increasing and besides having demanding guests all the time it is also very difficult to find people to fill the roles. The recruitment process starts from the moment the property starts analysing the staff they need and in which department they will work till the selection process. The new recruits will be either already planned in the budget or else new post that might arise due of new systems being practiced or restructuring of the departments.

Five star and boutique hotels offer an intense recruitment process to select the required applicants for the various posts. The recruitment process starts by doing a staff analysis for the following year. Once this is done a report is formed and both the General Manager and the Financial Controller will be informed with the requirement of new staff or staff replacement. An advert will be than drafted by the Human Resources' recruitment officer and the Head of Department that requires the specific post. The needed positions will start being advertised internally. The next step is evaluation of the internal application and the scheduling of interviews with the internal applicants. Once the interviews are done and some positions might the filled the other remaining vacancies will be opened to external applicants. Letter of applications and CVs will be received by the Human Resources and then evaluated accordingly. Interviews will then be with external applicants and the applicants will have their interviews with the Human Resources' recruitment officer. Once interviews are done, the Human Resources will short list the applicants and call those most eligible for a second interview which this time will be done with both HR and the Head of Department. The applicant/s will be chosen after the second interview and a training programme will be set for the newly recruited chosen applicants (Table 4).

Table 3 : Recruitment Process in 4 star accommodation establishment pre-Covid 19

Recruitment steps	**Recruitment process**
Step 1	Announce vacant position internally
Step 2	Evaluate any internal staff applying
Step 3	Conduct interviews to internal staff
Step 4	Choose to promote internal staff or open advertisements of vacant post externally
Step 5	Once advertised externally; evaluate letters of application and received CVs
Step 6	Conduct interview with every applicant
Step 7	Shortlist applicants and call for a second interview
Step 8	Select the right applicant
Step 9	Send letter to applicants that are not chosen to inform them and call the ideal applicant to inform him/her that he/she has been chosen
Step 10	Start training programme for the chosen applicant.

Same as other star categories five-star and boutique accommodation establishments give more importance to the experience the applicant had and how much the applicant is willing to work more than having just professional qualifications. Like the four-star properties, five-star and boutique accommodation look for professional qualifications for posts within the financial department and any maintenance related licence that is required.

Additionally, even the five-star and boutique properties are given help from the governmental employment entity Jobs Plus but rarely they employ any from the applicants provided as the majority of them are willing to do only light duty jobs.

Table 4 : Recruitment Process in five-star and boutique accommodation establishment pre-Covid 19

	Recruitment process
Step 1	Do staff needs analysis for following year
Step 2	Get approval from General Manager and Financial controller for the addi-
	tional staff for the following year that is either new staff or replacing staff
Step 3	Human Resources and designated Head of Department to draft the advert
	of the vacant positions
Step 4	Announce vacant position internally
Step 5	Evaluate any internal staff applying
Step 6	Do interview to internal staff
Step 7	Choose to promote internal staff or open advertisement of vacant post ex-
	ternally
Step 8	Once being opened externally; evaluate letter of applications and received
	CVs
Step 9	Conduct interview with every applicant
Step 10	Shortlist applicants, do background check of shortlisted applicants and
	call for second interview
Step 11	Human Resources together with Head of Department to select right appli-
	cant after the second interview
Step 12	Start the training programme for the chosen applicant.

Recruitment issues, recruitment processes and staff-related benefits during and post-Covid-19 pandemic

Since the pandemic started, a lot of foreign workers decided not to remain in Malta and travel back to their families and country of origin. This caused a problem locally when the commercial outlets opened back for business with a list of protocols according to the type of service offered.

With the airport opening again for business and the increase in flights, the accommodation establishments found themselves in a situation with lack of personnel during a time that business was gradually increasing.

Additionally, although most of the accommodation establishments remained opened during the peak of the partial Covid-19 lockdown, business was low but still they offered minimum service as per allowed protocols and had to cover the wages of the employees. Some employees were asked to go on vacation due to lack of business or asked to perform some working shifts.

Taking in consideration all this, *3-star accommodation establishments* when their occupancy started getting higher at the beginning of the opening of businesses they managed to cover with the current personnel and given more duty shifts. When the business got higher, they had to start advertising for the vacant positions and managed to find EU Nationals that applied for the posts. Their recruitment process in knowing the limitation of applicants started first by asking current staff to refer the positions to family members or friends, then the post was being advertised in social media, Jobs Plus website and recruitment agencies. Applicants were then interviewed online, suitable applicants accepted for the post and training was given to the new recruits. For every employee the Government of Malta issued to the properties the government grant of €800 per employee monthly and this helped in recovering especially when the business was low.

Looking at the *4-star accommodation establishments*, one can see that the recruitment issue was worse than the 3-star accommodation establishments. It was described as an impossible situation to find workers. The number of staff that stopped working with the 4-star properties when the pandemic started was higher and when business was increasing it was more difficult to find staff to cover customer needs and the services offered. Having said that, four-star properties invested in various sources to have applicants choosing their properties as their place of work. The management encouraged their current personnel to refer the vacant posts to their family and friends. This was done with an additional reward that if the referred employed staff will successfully complete 6 months' probation period the employee/s that referred the particular employee will get a reward of €100 from the referral bonus scheme and an additional voucher of €50 that can be used on food and beverage outlets in the same company accommodation establishments. Additional four-star accommodation establishments advertised the posts on social media, especially Facebook, Jobs Plus website, Hotel website, Linked In and the KeepMePosted site. Furthermore, vacant positions' advertisements was done through third party recruitment agencies, which in turn provided the properties with foreign workers for various departments especially Housekeeping and Food and Beverage. The majority of the four-star properties stated that the main source of how they managed to get the right amount of staff was through direct recruitment companies and from countries in the Far East, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Colombia, India and Nepal. Moreover, some accommodation establishments are offering the foreign workers that are chosen for the work offered, free accommodation in their hotel for a month until they find permanent accommodation locally.

The recruitment process practised by four-star accommodation establishments started with having the calls advertised internally and encouragement of referrals from current personnel. This opportunity was left open until the various posts were found. The Human Resources' department than started advertising the job opportunities within their properties. Once applications start being received, an interview was scheduled with the applicants online. When all interviews were done, the applicants were shortlisted and only the right applicants were selected, and an offer was given to them. Unfortunately, the majority of applicants were inexperienced and not having a will to work. When shortlisting was finally done, only a few candidates were chosen. Once the right applicants accepted the work offer, the work permit/paperwork commenced, If they were EU nationals or residing in Malta the procedure was easy and in a couple of days they were scheduled for training and started working. For non-Eu nationals, working Visa and travel arrangements to Malta had to be prepared first. Induction and on the job buddy system training was given to the new recruits. This lasted for around fifteen days before their actual work. Additionally, the management stated that the grant supplied by the government helped their properties in covering the costs of their current staff per month. This was a relief throughout the pandemic and especially when business was extremely low.

The 5-star and boutique accommodation establishments although having the issue of lack of staff still did not risk employing full-time workers since the pandemic situation brought uncertainty. Having said that, when business started getting better, the five-star and boutique hotels started recruiting part-time workers. The work opportunity calls were still advertised though social media, Jobs Plus website and recruitment agencies but the priority was given to tourism and hospitality students both locally and internationally and when not finding enough staff, subcontractors were involved. Professional qualifications at this stage were not given a priority as it was already difficult to find applicants let alone including the need of having professional qualifications. Those applicants that applied through the advertised post were provided with a virtual interview and shortlisted, until the right applicant accepted and provided with training prior commencing to work. The properties were so depressed in having employees that not all the properties provided the new recruits with a second interview. Additionally, the Government of Malta provided the wage supplement of €800 per employee employed per month, this was a life safer when considering retaining or reducing headcount when the income was low. The hotels provided to their employees with the €800 wage payment per month plus payment for the hours they worked physically at the property.

Similarities of recruitment implications pre and post Covid-19 pandemic

Due to the fact that pre Covid-19 pandemic the business was high within all the types of accommodation establishments, it was difficult to find enough employees for their properties. The recruitment process performed had a pattern which shows that the higher the star category the more intense the recruitment process is. All the different properties made use of social media to advertise the vacant work positions but not all the properties performed a second interview.

Additional professional qualifications were requested only for specific positions and priority in selecting the new recruits was given to experience, the attitude of the applicant and his or her will to work. Motivation and training were a priority within all types of accommodation establishments. All new recruits were trained them according to the area and role they applied for.

Post Covid-19 too, was not an easy situation to find new employees when business started increasing. All the different types of properties had difficulties in finding personnel. They all advertised their job opportunities on social media, jobs plus websites and recruitment agencies. Contrary to the pre-pandemic, the interviews for the applicants were conducted online instead of physical face-to-face interviews. All the properties had and appreciated the wage supplement provided by the Government of Malta every month for every employee employed with their company.

Conclusion and recommendations

This research provides a clear view of how recruitment processes are done in various accommodation establishments in Malta and what difficulties the accommodation establishments are finding in finding personnel for the jobs offered.

It was discovered that before the Covid-19 pandemic, accommodation establishments had difficulties in finding the right amount of personnel for their properties. Once the pandemic started, it brought more difficulties in finding applicants than before. The pandemic caused a problem of having the foreign staff leaving the country and remaining in their native country leaving jobs that are available in the specific properties.

Pre Covid-19 pandemic, the hotels struggled but managed to find candidates for the job opportunities locally. Post Covid-19 pandemic the accommodation establishments found more difficulties in finding personnel and they had to search with third party recruitment agencies, staff from the Far East to manage to solve the issue of having the right number of staff for their property.

It would be good if this research would be continued to be explored when the Covid-19 pandemic will be a thing of the past and when life will be brought to a normal state without protocols and restrictions.

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Group work perceptions and practices in post-secondary hospitality education: A case study at the Institute of Tourism Studies

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore group work perceptions and practices in post-secondary, vocational, hospitality education. The research was carried out in academic year 2020/2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants were lecturers and students at the Institute of Tourism Studies, in Malta. The lecturers were interviewed, while the students took part in an online survey.

Lecturers consider group work to be an efficient teaching and learning tool which enables them to cover more quality content, besides enhancing transversal skills in students. On the other hand, when students are assigned a group task, it does not necessarily mean that they are working together. They usually divide the task among group members who work independently and then convene to assemble the final output, with minimal interaction.

After gaining an insight into existing practices and causes for apprehension, a model is presented which may be used to enhance the understanding and applicability of group work in post-secondary, vocational education, both during as well as after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key words: group work, collaborative learning, teamwork skills, hospitality, Covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

In this paper, the author explores how hospitality educators and students in a post-secondary hospitality institute perceive group work. The aim is to assess whether group work as it is being practised at ITS is fulfilling its role as a meaningful learning tool.

The research questions are:

1. What are the perceptions of ITS educators and students vis-à-vis group work?
2. To what extent and depth are current educational practices at ITS involving group work?
3. Can a model be developed to enhance the understanding and good practices of group work at ITS?

Theoretical literature review

Group work in education occurs whenever students work together on set tasks, in or out of the classroom. It may either refer to the teaching and learning process which requires students to work together, or it may simply denote the specific task being carried out in groups. Group work is practised by teachers of different disciplinary backgrounds and teaching traditions, and it takes on a variety of forms.

Cooperative group work and collaborative group work

Scholars who consider as important the distinction between group tasks and group processes, differentiate between cooperative groups and collaborative groups. Etymologically, the term cooperation is derived from Latin, and it highlights the task (operatio) carried out by the group members. Conversely, collaboration (labor) centres around the work or process carried out by the team in producing the end product. On these lines, Panitz (1999, p. 3) defines cooperation as “a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific end product or goal through people working together in groups”, as distinct from collaboration which he describes as “a philosophy of interaction … where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning, and respect the abilities and contributions of their peers”. Hence a cooperative group consists of a collection of individuals who coordinate their individual efforts to perform a task, whereas a collaborative group is a team of people who share a common purpose and who are mutually committed to the goal and to each other via joint accountability which creates a strong bond and a strong motivation to perform (Surbhi, 2018).

Cooperative and collaborative learning are entwined, and it is hard to separate one from the other (Hassanien, 2006). Some authors opt to use the terms interchangeably while others consider them as two separate pedagogies, like Bruffee (1995, p. 16) who cautions us by saying that “some of what collaborative learning pedagogy recommends that teachers do tends in fact to undercut some of what cooperative learning might hope to accomplish, and vice versa”.

Theoretical framework for group work

Drawing upon sociocultural perspectives, learning is not just an individual cognitive process, but it is an activity that is located between individuals and their sociocultural context.

Theory of social interdependence

Deutsch (1949) used the notion of social interdependence to formulate a theory of cooperation and competition. His basic premise was that the type of interdependence existing in a situation governs how individuals interact with each other which, in turn, affects outcomes. For Deutsch there are two types of social interdependence. While positive interdependence leads to promotive interaction (cooperation), negative interdependence tends to result in oppositional interaction (competition). No interdependence results in an absence of interaction (individualism).

Socio-cognitive conflict theory

In the socio-cognitive conflict theory, Piaget states that the different viewpoints arising from peer interaction lead to a situation of disequilibrium (a socio-cognitive conflict) which has to be resolved via assimilation or accommodation, leading to cognitive development (Bradbeer, 2006). In Piaget’s view, this development is best achieved with peers because they have mutual control over interaction due to shared perspectives and life experiences.

Sociocultural theory of learning

A fundamental Vygotskian theme is that social interaction plays an essential role in the development of cognition. “Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). When learners become involved in group work and internalise the effects of joint activities, they acquire new knowledge of the world and culture.

Group work in a virtual learning environment

Ubiquitous learning is a term used to illustrate the omnipresence that technology reached in recent years in education, and which became a necessity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Teaching-learning experiences are delivered in a virtual manner via wireless communication. Is there still scope for group work in such an ‘impersonal’ learning environment? Online platforms, such as wikis, enable students to work collaboratively, both synchronously and asynchronously, from any location (Abdekhodaee, Chase and Ross, 2017). Yet, it is not easy to make students feel connected to peers and educators in a virtual classroom, even if learning is happening in a synchronous fashion. In the traditional classroom, students are physically close, and they tend to socialise naturally, but this opportunity is missing in online learning. Collaborative activities and community building in asynchronous learning networks pose an even greater challenge from the perspective of the sociocultural theory of learning since students are not together, neither physically nor virtually (Scott and Palincsar, 2013).

Theoretical framework for online group work

The Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated a shift from traditional, face-to-face instruction, to fully online, or blended, or hybrid learning, on a global scale. However, online learning has been in existence far before the pandemic, and a number of theories have evolved about this mode of teaching and learning.

Online collaborative learning

This learning theory proposes that collaborative learning, knowledge building, and the internet are the way to reshape formal, non-formal, and informal education for the Knowledge Age (Harasim, 2017). Knowledge construction, via group discourse, is achieved via three phases. The idea generation phase refers to brainstorming, where differing thoughts are gathered. During the idea organisation phase, the diverging ideas are analysed and categorised through discussion. In the intellectual convergence phase, the group members reach intellectual synthesis and convergence, and unanimous agreement is not necessary. Students are encouraged to collaboratively solve problems through discourse, and the teacher plays the role of facilitator as well as learning community member (Picciano, 2017).

Connectivism

This theory proposes that knowledge occurs when a learner connects to, and feeds information into, a learning community (Kop and Hill, 2008). The community is defined as a clustering of similar areas of interest which allows for interaction, sharing, discussing, and reflecting together. Internet technology has moved learning from internal, individualistic activities to group, community, and even crowd activities (Picciano, 2017).

Community of inquiry

In an online collaborative learning setting, a complete educational experience requires a social presence, a cognitive presence, and a teaching presence (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes and Fung, 2010). Social presence refers to the degree of participation and interaction among the group members. It is the ability of group members to project their personal identity in the online community so that they are recognised as real persons, while gaining a social identity, having purposeful communication, and building relationships (Kreijns et al., 2014).

Benefits of group work

Academic achievement

The notion that group work improves academic achievement has received ample support when explored empirically. Johnson and Johnson (2013) confirm that in cooperative group work

- Students are more engaged in their learning. They spend more time on task than students in a competitive or individualistic environment. They are more involved in activities and attach greater importance to success. They show less apathetic, off-task, disruptive behaviours. Cooperative learning promotes more positive attitudes toward the task and the experience of working on the task.
- The quality of reasoning strategies is enhanced. Learners show more frequent insight into, and use of, higher-level cognitive and moral reasoning strategies than in competitive or individualistic efforts. Cooperation also promotes more accurate perspective taking.

Higher levels of cognitive development and critical thinking

Through the meaningful exchange of ideas inherent in group work, learners play an active role in developing their understanding of the curriculum. Students are required to reason and articulate thoughts, thus enhancing cognitive development. “The sum of knowledge created by the class in dialogue is of greater than that of any one individual in the class, including the teacher” (Lyle, 2008, p. 235).

Social skills and peer collaboration

Collaborative learning also develops empathy and social skills in students. Group members may get to know each other, extend their activities beyond the classroom, help and support each other, understand each other’s differences and resolve group conflict as it arises (Laal and Ghodsi, 2012). Participation in group projects is positively correlated to persistence in post-secondary and tertiary education (Springer et al., 1997, as cited in Colbeck, Campbell and Bjorklund, 2000). When students interact in long-term groups in an instructed mode, group cohesion is increased. The students tend to form communities of learners in which there is respect for each individual’s abilities, skills, and contributions, as well as a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility among group members for the group’s actions (Laal, Khattami-Kermanshahi and Laal, 2014). Less capable group members have a safety net against 'public' failure and the resulting shame.

Training for the 'real world'

Because of its inherent nature, group work may enable the educator to assign more complex, higher-level tasks to students than what would be feasible if they are working individually. Especially in post-secondary and undergraduate years, these tasks seek to emulate actual work situations (Sykes et al., 2014). The students collaborate to produce a comprehensive solution, thus gaining competencies which will be required in the workplace. Educational outcomes are therefore improved.

Vilapakkam Nagarajan and Edwards (2014) affirm that teamwork skills should not be considered as by-products, but an essential part of teaching and learning, interacting with discipline knowledge, both at faculty and course level.

Benefits for educators

Especially at higher levels of education, group work may offer teachers a reduced assessment load, expanded capabilities to undertake more complex work, and improved multicultural relations (Sykes et al., 2014). This is corroborated by Hall and Buzwell (2012) who, besides the reduced marking burden, mention also that teachers benefit from increased productivity by being able to meet students as groups rather than individually. The time saved can be used for meaningful contact when needed.

Group work issues

Free-riders

A common student grievance relating to group work is non-contribution on the part of one or more group members. A social loafer, or free-rider, is a student who contributes little or nothing to a group effort while reaping the benefits, getting the same mark as the hard-working group members. In some cases, this becomes a vicious circle whereby the free-rider influences the group dynamics when the committed group members reduce their own efforts upon perceiving they are doing all the work (Ruiz-Esparza Barajas, Medrano Vela and Zepeda Huerta, 2016).

Less competent group members may contribute work of an inferior quality. Since generally all group members get the same grade, free-riding may be encouraged by the more competent group members, who end up doing more than their fair share of the work to ensure a higher grade, while depriving both strong and weak students from the benefits of discussion and exchange of ideas. Such practice is against the principles of inclusivity, but one cannot blame students for acting like this when their grade is at stake.

Assessment

In continuation with the argument above, assessment is difficult for group tasks. Teachers acknowledge that free-riding is a possibility, and they sometimes decide to allocate part of the mark for individual contributions to the final output, to remove or limit free-riding and to reward students who complete more work (Hall and Buzwell, 2012). Yet, this poses another problem as it is the students themselves who really know who contributed what, not the teacher. A solution for this is when students are asked to write individual journals or to make a peer assessment. Once again, students might feel uncomfortable and reluctant to identify a student that did not contribute to the group project, even though this could be done via confidential submission forms (LaBeouf, Griffith and Roberts, 2016).

Empirical literature review

Ruiz-Esparza Barajas, Medrano Vela and Zepeda Huerta (2016, p. 30) say that “a colourful kaleidoscope of perceptions, expectations, beliefs, and methods when using teamwork is expected to be found among teachers”. These researchers examined the perceptions about group work of ten educators at five different universities in Mexico. They found that positive opinions related to higher quality of work due to group synergy, and that group work develops cooperation skills and empathy towards others. Teachers who organise group work activities for their students no longer perceive themselves as being the sage on the stage or know-it-all experts delivering their wisdom, but as facilitators and expert promoters of collaborative intellectual experiences.

Other educators perceive group work as different from, or marginal to, the normal curriculum, and do not consider it as a pedagogical tool to reach the learning outcomes specified in the curriculum (Blatchford et al., 2003; Vilapakkam Nagarajan and Edwards, 2014).

“Various research studies have uncovered significant interpersonal, motivational and socioemotional challenges unique to the group work modality” (LaBeouf, Griffith and Roberts, 2016, p. 14). Not all educators find it easy to transcend their traditional roles and embrace collaborative learning, despite the advantages it is said to have. Apprehension may result from ingrained beliefs such as the following: group-work means that brighter students just end up helping the less able ones; it is overly time consuming; students are unable to learn from one another; and assessing students when working in interactive groups is problematic when it comes to measure the contribution of the individual group members towards the end result. Teachers are also unsure about how to design effective tasks that legitimise group interaction (Blatchford et al., 2003).

Hassanien (2006) conducted a survey among a small group (n = 72) of final year undergraduate tourism and hospitality students in England. In this research, students felt that group work is, and should be, an integral part and of their studies since teamwork skills are essential requirements to work within these service industries.

From the point of view of students, the negative aspects of group work include logistical problems, contrasting work ethics, different approaches to work, poor communication, getting equal marks without doing equal work, varying grade expectations, lack of (formal) leadership, and the fact that it is generally time consuming (Hassanien, 2006; Bower and Richards, 2006; Cumming, 2010). Additionally, introverts may feel uncomfortable in group work where they have to discuss, challenge, and justify their opinions (Walker, 2007).

Wildman et al. (2021) examined how students involved in long-term projects perceived the impacts of the pandemic-induced transition to online-only work on team processes and performance. The researchers concluded that during COVID-19, there were challenges like progress disruptions, increased ambiguity, and loss of morale within teams. Additionally, the challenges experienced individually could affect the team.

Collaborative learning has evolved over decades. In the past, the logistics and time needed for effective collaboration in face-to-face classes were sometimes problematic. Electronic communication, like email and mobile technology alleviate some of these issues (Picciano, 2017). For example, asynchronous discussion boards are seen as important vehicles for creating knowledge and for generating peer-review and evaluation, since content can be shared with others during and beyond the end of a module (Fredericksen, 2015).

Kleine Staarman (2009) has asked teachers to identify what, in their opinion, are the basic elements of collaboration in the classroom. For teachers, good group work exists when there is “involvement of all participants, egalitarian discussion based on arguments, reflection on ideas, reaching agreement, getting along with each other, listening to each other, stating your ideas clearly, recognising a need for help and giving help” (p. 225).

An interesting study by Falcione et al. (2019) involved three professors and five students across three universities (one in Canada and two in the USA), who individually reflected on past collaborative learning experiences in which they had participated either as instructors or learners. The aim was to identify the characteristics which, according to the participants, make the group experience a positive one. The researchers argued that an intentional and informed approach to collaborative learning is the ideal way to increase the likelihood of success, from both student and faculty perspectives. Their studies revealed that during group work, students are more focused on personal preparation and their collaborative behaviour and are unaware of the efforts of faculty in facilitating a collaborative learning experience. This could be an opportunity for teachers to engage students as partners in designing the task, structuring groups, assigning roles, and in managing conflicts, with the aim of enhancing the positive learning experience.

Methodology

Context of the study

ITS is the main post-secondary vocational institution in Malta focusing on tourism and hospitality. Qualifications are offered in different at different levels, from foundation to Master degrees.

On campus there are multiple specialised hospitality laboratories and kitchens, as well as two training restaurants, to ensure that students receive the essential theoretical and practical education required. ITS students are also exposed to work experiences through the Local Industrial Trade Practice and International Internship, which are a compulsory part of most programmes of study. Therefore, students are exposed to various learning experiences in which they have to work individually, in pairs or in groups.

Strategy of inquiry

A qualitative methodology, namely a case study, has been used in this study. “The case study approach is particularly useful when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural real-life context” (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 1).

It is possible to obtain a rich and detailed understanding of a context when integrating and contrasting different perspectives (Gray, 2014). Data was collected from students via a survey with open-ended and close-ended questions, and by interviewing educators. The source and methodological triangulation helped to develop a thorough understanding of the case and to enhance the reliability of the study.

Surveys

A questionnaire was distributed to certificate and degree students in the first semester of academic year 2020-2021. The aim was to get information from students who are either towards the beginning or nearly at the end of their full-time educational journey at ITS to see in what ways, if at all, the perceptions of students about group work change as they progress through their studies. The certificate students were from different programmes, namely Food Production and Service, Travel and Tourism, and Rooms Division. The degree students were all from the International Hospitality Management programme. By answering close-ended questions, the respondents provided information which could be easily converted into quantitative data, where ‘C’ refers to certificate students and ‘D’ refers to degree students. The open-ended questions gave participants the opportunity to express their emotions, opinions, and beliefs in their own words. These questions provided in-depth answers which emerged freely from the students and yielded qualitative data which was analysed through a thematic approach. 13 responses from 24 degree students (54%) and 42 responses from 100 certificate students (42%) were received.

Interviews

Eight lecturers were interviewed, and in this paper they are referred to with codes L1 to L8. They vary in terms of years of experience and areas of specialisation. The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to understand the educators’ thoughts on group work, and to what extent and depth they practise it with their students.

Coding and thematic analysis

Data was actively read several times to gain familiarity and to notice basic observations and patterns. Broad ideas, concepts, and phrases were identified, and codes were assigned to structure and label the data. The codes were combined into themes by looking for common responses and by identifying patterns in the replies. The themes were then refined, ensuring they presented a cohesive picture of the data set as a whole. Finally, the codes, themes, direct quotations from the raw data, as well as literature were used to produce a cohesive report to clearly communicate the research findings.

Identified Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Definition of group work	Transversal skills
	Learning experience
	Inclusion
	Peer teaching and learning
Group formation	
Time for group work	In-class group work
	Preparation and grading time
	Deadlines for students
Assessment of group work	Peer assessment
Shift from cooperation to collaboration	

Definition of group work

To understand the lecturers' perception of group work, they were initially asked to define it. Their comments included "working with others to achieve one goal" (L7), and "collaboration and communication between different people to use their different (or maybe sometimes similar) skills to achieve a goal that would result in benefit for the whole group" (L6).

Students do not only focus on the outcome but also on the process. For example, one said that she is enjoying group work in practical sessions as she is "working with people who put effort into what they are doing and help out, as well as look out for the other people they are working with, where need be". Another remarked, "I was often surprised by the multitude of ideas generated by the participants, which led constructively to the development of the projects. Moreover, we strengthened each other's communication and teamwork skills".

Further probing during the interviews, and an analysis of the open-ended questions revealed four sub-themes relating to how educators and students perceive group work.

Transversal skills

"Transferable skills are meant to remain useful throughout the various career trajectories that one may embark upon" (Debono, 2020, p. 75). The skills mentioned by the lecturers were leadership, communication, negotiation, working towards deadlines, and problem-solving. Students also believe that group work improves these skills, and one said, "We work in a diverse industry, and it is very unlikely that during our career we will work on our own. Group work helps you get used to the idea of sharing and discussing ideas".

L8 emphasised that these are all secondary skills, and that the main objective of the lecturer is to reach the learning outcomes. He said, “I’m not going to sacrifice those just to give the students the opportunity to fine-tune these other skills. If they have them, they have them; if they don’t, they don’t”. A similar comment was given by L2 who said, “There are skills that can be learnt from group work, but the students will learn them anyway. It does not mean that if they do not do group work in my lesson, they are going to be worse off”.

A survey conducted by Jobsplus and the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCHFE) in 2017 reports that employers believe that team-working skills and oral communication skills are very important. However, “employers in Malta tend to provide training in job specific rather than transferable skills, despite acknowledging that employees require more transferable skills” (Debono, 2020, p. 84). This lacuna strengthens the need for an integration of transversal skills within the curricula from compulsory to post-secondary, vocational and tertiary education.

Learning experience

The lecturers perceive that group work enhances the learning experience via in-class and out-of-class interaction. It seems that while certificate students like, or do not mind, working in groups in practical sessions, one in four would rather have less group work in theoretical modules. One of them commented, “I like to cook with people but don’t like to work with people on other subjects”. A degree student remarked as follows: “I found that I could not rely on my colleagues to provide good work. In one instance, we failed because one of my colleagues plagiarised their entire section of work.” This comment indicates that the students did not interact throughout the assignment, but merely stitched together their individual input at the end, as otherwise they would have noticed the plagiarism before submitting their work.

Inclusion

Surprisingly, none of the lecturers mentioned spontaneously the fact that group work leads to inclusion. L1 remarked that somehow, inclusion happens by itself. His students do not mind having group members with learning difficulties who, perhaps, are unable to make a significant input, even in high-stakes assignments. He stated he has never had situations where special case students are not naturally integrated in group work and added that it is not a charitable act, but more because of a bond that forms within the class. Contrarily, L8 commented that “It’s humiliating when nobody chooses you. And it happens”.

A foreign degree student said that she is “not good at English” and finds video conferencing harder than face-to-face conversations, adding that during the pandemic “people are also much less patient than usual”. This is another form of exclusion that, very often, happens unintentionally. If introvert students sense that the other group members are impatient, they might decide not to participate.

Peer teaching and learning

L3 said that, as he grows older and the age gap between him and the students increases, he finds that there is a difference in the language he uses and that which the students understand. He was referring to the way in which words are put together to convey meaning. He said that often, by getting students to work together in groups, this barrier is somehow eliminated as the students can transmit knowledge to each other using words they are familiar with. Similarly, a degree student remarked, “Some skills, such as computer application skills, which I personally found difficult to grasp, were facilitated when working as a team”. This is in line with Piaget’s socio-cognitive conflict theory, whereby learning is possible because peers have mutual control over interaction due to shared perspectives and life experiences.

Conversely, L8 said that students are often resentful that they have to continuously lead classmates during group activities in different modules. They are not interested in peer teaching and learning. They could be reinforcing their learning, but the benefit obtained is not worth the effort. They feel that they are being made to do the teacher’s job.

Group formation

Generally, the lecturers let the students themselves decide on who to form the group with. They believe that the students feel more comfortable to work with whom they get along well. They also said that this gives the students an element of independence and responsibility in choosing their partners.

The students believe that group work is best when they are free to form their own groups (C=71%, D=85%). A degree student remarked that “While being in a group has its benefits, being in 4+ different groups due to various modules can make it quite a hassle to keep on top of everything”. If student groups are stable across modules and across semesters, they would become cooperative base groups (Johnson and Johnson, 2013), where members support each other in their studies and develop holistically.

When students express the wish to work on their own rather than in a group, they are sometimes given permission to do so. However, the task remains the same, and those who work individually have a harder time to complete it satisfactorily. Therefore, the student who opts to work individually is disadvantaged.

With regards to group size, the lecturers believe that the ideal group size ranges from two to four, depending on the size of the class. L8 is mostly in favour of pairs and believes that the dynamics of a pair differ from those of larger groups. He said that when students are working in pairs, they have to interact all the time, either as speakers or by thinking about a reply. As soon as the third group member is introduced, “one can drift off while the other two are interacting”.

Certificate and degree students tend to favour a group with three to four members (C=74%, D=61%). Students believe that it is important for each group member to have a specific role (C=88%, D=85%). Most students agree that roles should be determined by the students themselves, reaching an agreement between them (C=76%, D = open-ended question). Students believe that the roles should be determined via a group discussion where the strengths of each member are taken into account.

Time for group work

In-class group work

When asked about the reasons why they do group work, seven lecturers (L1 to L7) mentioned time efficiency. When group work is done in class, each student has the opportunity to interact more, and the increased participation leads to a better learning experience. On the contrary, L8, whose lectures are generally of one-hour duration, stated that when there is a tight schedule, group work is time inefficient as "the students need to think on their own first, and then share with whoever is in their group. They start interacting, but they don't have the time to take it anywhere and so the task is not completed, and the learning objective isn't achieved".

'Completing a task' is a very limited view of the purpose of group work. Group work serves to facilitate the 'getting to know one another', the building of trust, and the eventual development of a community of practice which enhances engagement, retention, and mutual support. It is true that it takes time to form collaborative base groups, and teachers very often do not have this time at their disposal. Yet, class activities such as group discussions, brainstorming, group reporting, and group sharing of experiences are not a waste of time. They provide a basis for emotional and social intelligence, hence emotional and social literacy.

Preparation and grading time

The lecturers who assign group work to be done outside the classroom stressed that they do not do this to have less work to correct. They add that it is more time consuming to prepare high-stakes group tasks in order to ensure clarity, divisibility, balance, and fairness. Since the work is done in groups, the scope of the assignment is wider, and more is expected from the students. Grading group work is also more taxing on the lecturer, whether a global mark is given to the whole group or individual marks are awarded to group members.

Deadlines for students

The degree students feel that they are not given enough time to do group work. There were several comments such as, "We were always given very tight deadlines which enticed us to finish the assignment quickly and not embrace the whole learning experience", and "The execution deadlines of the projects are relatively short, which is reflected in the quality of the delivered projects". This shows that the way the lecturers position themselves in pedagogical terms (what they deem to be important or not), impacts the learning experience of the students, possibly limiting the benefits, and sometimes even making the experience counterproductive.

Assessment of group work

Two lecturers seem to consider the single group mark as the only way to mark group work. L4 and L7 reason that since they have assigned a group task, they have to award a group mark. Most students do not agree with a single group mark, and expressed a preference for a system where a part of the mark is common to all group members while another part reflects individual performance within the group (C=64%, D=62%). Students feel that group work leads to 'injustice, as some people may do little or no work and benefit from the hard work of other group members' (C=55%, D=77%). Students also consider that when they are forced to work in groups, it is unfair as the group work might be of poor quality and they end up with a lower mark than what they could have obtained on their own (C=60%, D=46%).

According to Gibbs (2010, p. 1), a single group mark "rarely leads to appropriate student learning behaviour, frequently leads to free loading, and so the potential learning benefits of group work are likely to be lost, and in addition students may, quite reasonably, perceive their marks as unfair". The lecturers who give individual marks say that they consider this system to be fairer, as each student is assessed on his or her own merits. In the marking scheme, which all the students have access to once the task is assigned, they do allocate part of the marks for group cohesion, but the other marks are awarded for individual input in the task.

Peer assessment

Langan and Wheater (2003) mention various advantages of peer assessment, such as empowering the learners by developing their ability to self-evaluate and reflect. The students are in favour of peer marking, at least for part of the marks, since the peers would really know how much each group member contributed to the group work (C=62%, D=69%). A degree student stated that "Very often, the lecturer has no clue on how the team worked on the assignment given, and sometimes marking is unfair", adding that if group members are allowed to grade each other anonymously, usually they would be honest and mark in a fair manner. Other students disagreed with this statement, saying that "disgruntled students" could give low scores to each other due to "bias", "prejudice" and "personal issues".

Shift from cooperation to collaboration

Lecturers seem to differentiate between the younger (foundation, certificate, and diploma) and the older (higher national diploma and degree) students when it comes to group work. According to four of the interviewed lecturers, the more mature students are able to work better in groups than the younger ones. L7 said that this reflects what happens in education and life in general. Students need more guidance when they are young, and more independence as they grow older and become self-directed learners. L5 said that with the foundation and certificate students, the lecturer must continuously monitor and supervise until the students get acquainted with each other and also until the lecturer gets to know the qualities of the students.

Students prefer it when group tasks can be divided into small parts so that each group member can work independently, and then they join their work into one final product at the end (C=60%, D=69%).

The degree students were asked whether they think that the focus of group work which they have been assigned has gradually shifted from 'simply working in groups to complete an assignment' to 'collaborating with peers to obtain deeper understanding and to enhance teamwork and communication skills'. Eight students replied in the affirmative, while the other five do not think so. Those who believe that the type of group work has changed mentioned that as they grow older, the quality and depth of discussions improves. They feel that different learning styles and ideas have strengthened their teamwork skills. A student remarked that sometimes, at the beginning of an assignment, her views completely differed from those of the other group members but “finally the group work changed the way I looked, the way I felt, and the way I thought”. This links to Piaget’s concept of accommodation as the student changed her existing schemas as a result of new information and new experiences encountered during group work.

Those students who do not see a shift in the depth of group work said that the attitude never really changed with focus and pressure being put more on the sources of the research than anything else. Besides, in group assignments, they were not given enough time to expand on learning experiences. Comments included: “I felt that my classmates were disinterested in enhancing teamwork and communication skills and just were narrow-minded and worked for a pass mark”, “the questions and/or topics have never been designed in such a way to encourage group work (collecting research, interviews, etc)”, and “did not have enough group work during the years for it to shift”.

Discussion

ITS Management does not interfere with the academics’ choice of teaching styles, respecting their individuality, as long as the learning outcomes specified in the module descriptor are satisfactorily reached. This means that lecturers are free to decide whether or not to use group work, and if they do, they determine the purpose, type of task, group structure and assessment method. In practical sessions related to food production and preparation, and in service, group work is necessary because on school days ITS caters for paying guests who expect a good product and a timely service.

All the lecturers who have been interviewed use group work, to different degrees, as a teaching and learning tool. Certain group tasks are aimed at reaching narrow academic ends within a standard curriculum. Some lecturers allow their students to exercise a degree of control over their learning, encouraging dialogue as they search for different solutions to a problem. However, the system of cooperative base groups (Johnson and Johnson, 2013) does not seem to be emanating from the academics. Instead, it is the students themselves who, if given the chance, form groups with the same people, across modules and over the years, supporting each other academically and holistically.

Students recognise the fact that group work is valuable as it helps them to improve communication and teamwork skills, gain a deeper understanding of a topic, and make new friends. They believe that the benefit to be obtained depends on the subject, the task, and the other group members. The majority of students prefer to form groups themselves, and to decide on the roles of group members. Group work is an opportunity for the teacher to note both positive and negative class dynamics. It is important that once these are noted, action is taken as necessary. This is an intrinsic part of classroom management, as the teacher is an integral part of the classroom community, and the students look up to him/her to lead and manage the class for the benefit of all students.

Academics invest time in preparing group tasks, whether they are used to break the monotony in a lesson and, even more so, when they are graded. In assigning a high-stakes group task, the lecturers ensure that there is enough work to be done in a group, they have to decide how groups are formed and the assessment method, and communicate this information to the students, who are always at the receiving end of these decisions. It is only rarely that students are given a choice to work in a group or individually and, if they opt to work on their own, they might be disadvantaged.

Some lecturers acknowledge individual effort when awarding marks. This is appreciated by many students, whose two main concerns seem to be free-riders who get the same mark as hard-working students, or that their group grade is lower than what they could have achieved on their own (due to work of poor quality). Yet it may be argued that, by awarding individual marks for the sake of fairness, educators end up reinforcing the traditional individualistic and competitive attitudes, instead of encouraging students to strive towards reaching their full potential while securing the common good. This is the core of good citizenship and should be the ultimate goal of education.

There are innumerable possible combinations of group work practices. The educators acknowledge that, as students mature, they are able to tackle complex assignments which mirror real situations at the workplace, via collaborative group work. This is in line with what Bruffee (1995) referred to as the transition from cooperative to collaborative learning in higher education.

In setting up group activities, ITS lecturers consider how to give the best learning experience to their students, guiding them to obtain good grades in coursework and examinations, and hopefully to develop the right attitudes and behaviours to lead fulfilling lives. However, lecturers have to cover the syllabus within a defined period of time. This is the reason why, in practice, it is very challenging to engage students in pure collaborative learning which requires time for the build-up of mutual trust, and where the learners are self-directed, with the lecturer assuming the role of tutor in an unstructured, problem-based approach to learning (McConnell, 2000).

Collaborative learning seems to be in contrast with the students' preference to have tasks that can be divided into sub-tasks so that each group member can work independently, and then they join their work into one final product at the end. There is no collaboration in this kind of group work, but rather an individualistic approach. The focus is on the finished task not on the process (Hassanien, 2006; Ruiz-Esparza Barajas, Medrano Vela and Zepeda Huerta, 2016).

The students said that when they are assigned group work, the time-frame is too short, and they struggle to deliver the product on time, taking short-cuts when possible and sacrificing collaboration. This may be resolved if the task is assigned at the beginning of the module and students are given interim deadlines, which will help them manage their time in tackling the group task. Additionally, this allows for formative feedback from the lecturer along the way, ensuring that assessment becomes indeed a part of the learning process.

The degree students referred to their internship experience abroad, where they had long sessions specifically targeting interaction among them, and where the focus was not the assessment but the acquisition of teamwork skills. They specifically remarked that they would like ITS to adopt this teaching style.

Model

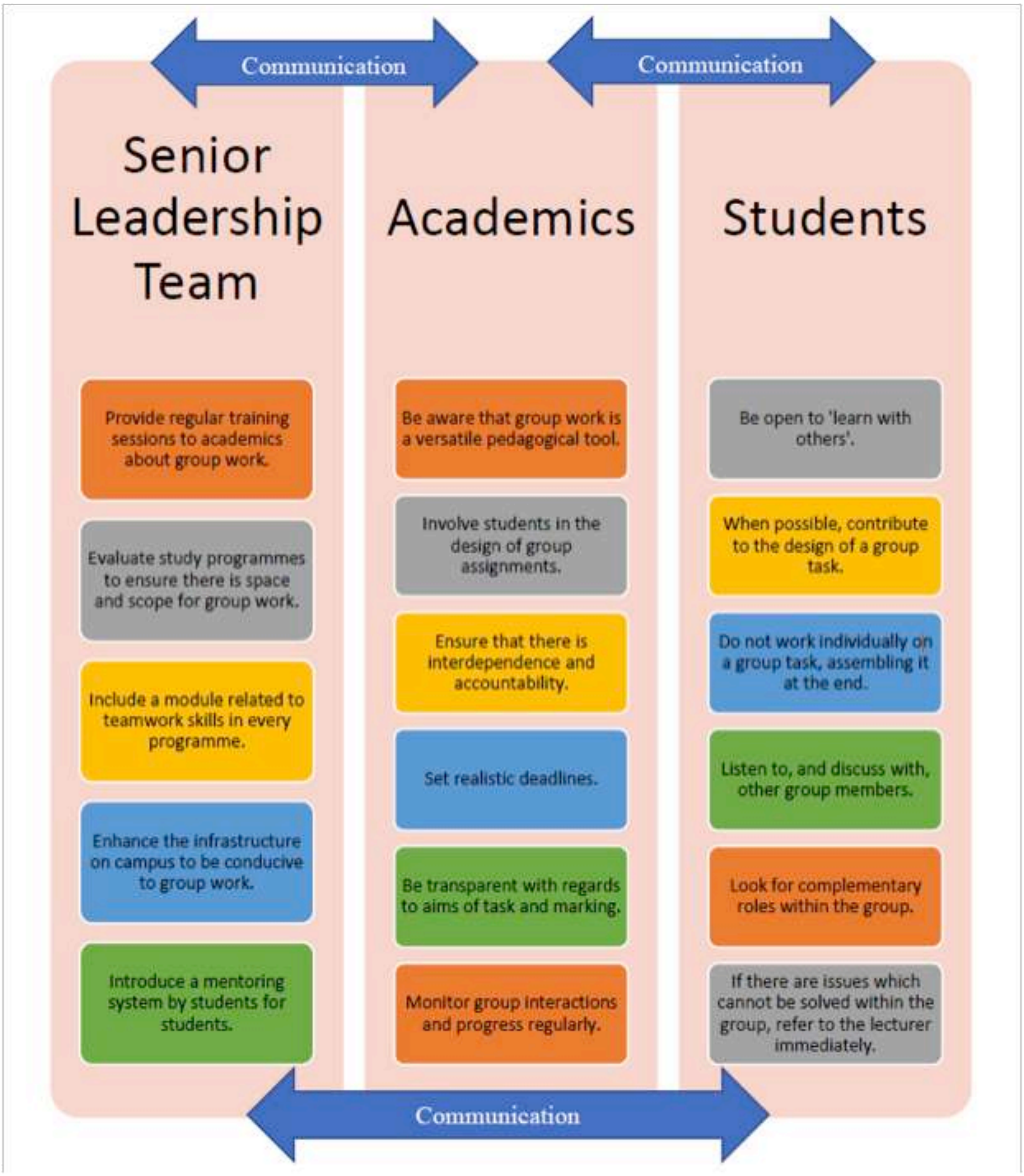
The model which is presented in Figure 1 is intended to enhance the understanding and good practice of group work at ITS. It groups ideas relating to the preparation for, and implementation of, meaningful group work. It is three-levelled, targeting the senior leadership team (SLT), the academics, and the students. It is hoped that this model can assist management and lecturers in developing the ideal group work strategies, ensuring a holistic learning experience for the students.

The points in the model are explained in further detail below.

Senior leadership team

- Provide regular training sessions to all academics about group work. Deciding which approach is most suitable for a particular subject or specific unit, or with a particular class, is not always obvious. If teachers become familiar with the various group work approaches, they will be better equipped to make appropriate choices (in terms of planning and managing group work) for their specific situations.
- Regularly evaluate programmes to ensure there is space and scope for group work. The syllabus needs to be covered within time constraints. If there is too much content and traditional examinations at the end of the modules, students might consider group work as detracting from their study time, and not get the maximum benefit from it. Group work can be used to enhance self-directed learning, placing the lecturer as facilitator of learning rather than the source of knowledge.
- In every programme, include a module related to teamwork skills running over one or two semesters. The content will be commensurate to the academic level of the programme and should include theory but, more importantly, practical sessions. One cannot assume that students know how to work in groups. Teach the students how to work in groups first, by giving them the opportunity to learn through experience, and only then give them high-stakes assignments requiring group work.
- Enhance the infrastructure on campus to be conducive to group work. Students need a place on campus where to work in groups. Even though this is the age of virtual meetings and online learning, students still need a physical space where to meet and work together in groups. Management should try, despite constraints of space, to have some classrooms designated as ‘group work rooms’ which the students may be allowed to book in advance, to work in.
- Explore the possibility of a mentoring system, where the older students tutor their younger counterparts. This system could be beneficial for both parties. The more mature students could coach the younger ones about all aspects of their educational journey, including group work. They could relate experiences where group work was a success or where it failed to produce the desired outcome, and they could provide guidance about what to watch out for. Perhaps the system could be a module in itself, where the older student would be asked to log in a certain number of hours in mentoring and engage in critical reflection about the experience.

Figure 1 - Model to Enhance the Understanding and Good Practices of Group Work at ITS



Vella (2021)

Academics

•Be aware that group work is a pedagogical tool which can take many forms. It ranges from simple informal discussions during a lecture, to complex assignments requiring long-term group cohesion. Group work depends on the module, the topic, the learning style of the students, the time available, and the preferred teaching style of the educator. Recognise the fact that group work can be used to engage and motivate students. For group work to be effectively used, it has to be ingrained in the lecturer's vision of education and pedagogical philosophy.

- If possible, involve the students in the design of the assignment. This will help to give the students a sense of being partly in control of what they are learning, and they will hopefully enjoy doing the task.
- Group assignments should be easily divided in sub-tasks but, at the same time, require interdependence. Ensure the accountability of each group member, either by peer review or by requesting an individual reflection from each member, ideally carrying marks.
- When designing group assignments, ensure they are linked to learning outcomes, and that the deadline which you set is realistic.
- Be transparent with the students. It is important to explain to them the purpose of the task, why it is being assigned in group format. In cases where there are few students in a class, consider treating the whole class as one group. Be very clear about the criteria you are adopting to assess group work, whether you will be awarding the same mark for the whole group (giving reasons) or individual marks for part of the work. Provide the rubric to the students when assigning the task.
- Monitor group interactions and progress on a regular basis so that, if there are problems, these can be identified and rectified in a timely manner. Ideally set interim deadlines to ensure they manage their time well.

Students

- Be open to 'learn with others'. Group work teaches you how to work with others, both in terms of the final output of an assignment and in terms of the process to get there. It is an opportunity to learn from the knowledge and experience of others and to appreciate perspectives which are different from yours. You will also learn more about your own strengths and weaknesses.
- If you are given the chance to contribute in the setting up of the group task, do so.
- Do not waste the valuable opportunity provided by any group task, by converting the project to a number of individual tasks to be sewn up in the end. Do not be biased against group work due to negative past experiences.
- Functional groups are not those that get the 'smart' students, but those that work on relationships. If a group member appears to be loafing, do not jump to conclusions. Check first: it could be that this student has communication issues or does not know how to contribute. Listen to, and discuss with, other group members. A team works together to find solutions and resolve issues.
- Look for complementary roles within the group. As much as possible, try to find ways how to go around, over and through the weaknesses of teammates, focusing on the individual strengths of the group members.
- Make sure you communicate regularly with the lecturer.

The two-way arrows in the model indicate that communication between the SLT, academics and students. The continuous interaction of these three stakeholders determines the quality of the teaching and learning experiences.

Areas for potential further research

Possible further research may take the form of a longitudinal study, whereby a sample of certificate students are followed as they progress to higher level programmes in their educational journey at ITS. This would indicate changes in practices and perceptions of group work. Alternatively, a study could be undertaken in secondary schools, possibly focusing on the subject of Hospitality which students may choose in the third year. The aim would be to compare and contrast group work perceptions and practices in secondary and post-secondary vocational education.

Conclusion

Meaningful group work emphasises how students create knowledge through interaction with peers in small-group settings. This research shows that a considerable variety of group work is happening at ITS, even during the Covid-19 pandemic. ITS programmes are reviewed regularly, but perhaps there is too much content which needs to be covered within time-table constraints and not enough time to focus on long-term collaboration.

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Tokenization and tokenoeconomics - education sector perspective

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Abstract

We are living in a hyper-fast changing world that changes the financial market. Centralization whether in the form of governments, financial institutions, enterprises and organizations is simply being challenged because of the lack of trust associated with data governance often experienced in the form of data breaches or simply a monetization of our data without our permission and/or incentives to participate in this emerging decentralization of structures [Morrow, Zarrebin, 2019].

A decade after the introduction of the Bitcoin protocol, an increasing number of art-tech startups and more or less independent initiatives have begun to explore second-generation blockchains and the emergent practice of tokenization (i.e., the issuance of new cryptoassets primarily to self-fund decentralized projects) as a means to intervene in the structures and processes underlying the rampant financialization of art [Lotti, 2019, p. 287].

In the literature studies, possible scenarios for using blockchain technology in the field of education are considered [Shmatko, Borova, Yevseiev, Milov, 2021]. In this paper, the authors address the significance and complexity of tokenization, the beginning step of NLP in the context of the academia sector.

This study aims to highlight the possibility of developing a smart contract system and blockchain tokenization in universities. The method used in this research is critical literature review analysis and qualitative research (focus groups).

The tokenization implementation can replace third parties as security guards of transaction data with all Blockchain users paying attention and ensuring the integrity of the entire process and activity. This can avoid problems that arise from the presence of third parties in the transaction process [Gunawan, Lutfiani, Aini, Suryaman, Sunarya, 2021]. The implementation of smart contracts and Blockchain tokenization might be seen as the future solution to be process within the higher education sector and called as a manifestation of the agile approach to the strategy.

Keywords: tokenization, tokenoeconomics, education, blockchain, marketing, agile

Introduction

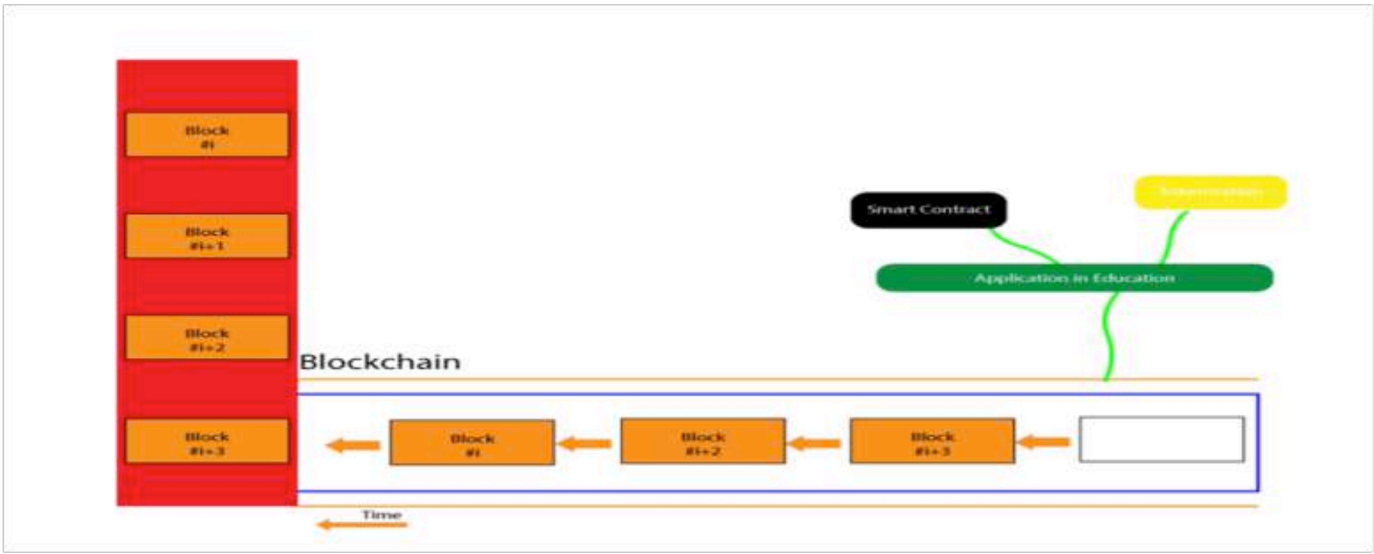
At present technologies play a key role in organizational processes and the differentiation of company structures [Pietrewicz 2018 a] and what we can witness is a revolutionary transition from informatization of the main spheres of human activity to their digitalization. The development of the digital environment requires the support and development of both existing conditions for the emergence of promising end-to-end digital platforms and technologies, as well as the creation of conditions for the emergence of new platforms and technologies.

The main end-to-end digital technologies are:
- big data;
- neurotechnology and artificial intelligence;
- distributed registry systems (blockchain);
- quantum technologies;
- new production technologies;
- industrial internet;
- components of robotics and sensors;
- wireless communication technologies;
- virtual and augmented reality technologies [Shmatko, Borova, Yevseiev, Milov, 2021].

Based on that new digital environment new possibilities of economic and market sector had been and still are developed. One of the important trend that can be observed is a new type of cryptocurrency and full new transaction ecosystem based on it, that in many researchers opinions offers great potential to foster various sectors [Casino et al., 2018] with its unique combination of characteristics, for example, decentralization, immutability, and transparency. Blockchain technology (BT) promises benefits in trustability, collaboration, organization, identification, credibility, and transparency [Leible et al, 2019].

More than a decade after the introduction of the Bitcoin protocol (see Figure 1), an increasing number of art-tech startups and more or less independent initiatives have begun to explore second-generation blockchains such as Ethereum and the emergent practice of tokenization (i.e., the issuance of new crypto assets primarily to self -fund decentralized projects) as a means to intervene in the structures and processes underlying the rampant financialization of art. Yet amidst the volatility of the cryptocurrency market, tokenization has been critiqued as a way to reinscribe and proliferate current financial logics in this new space [Lotti, 2019].

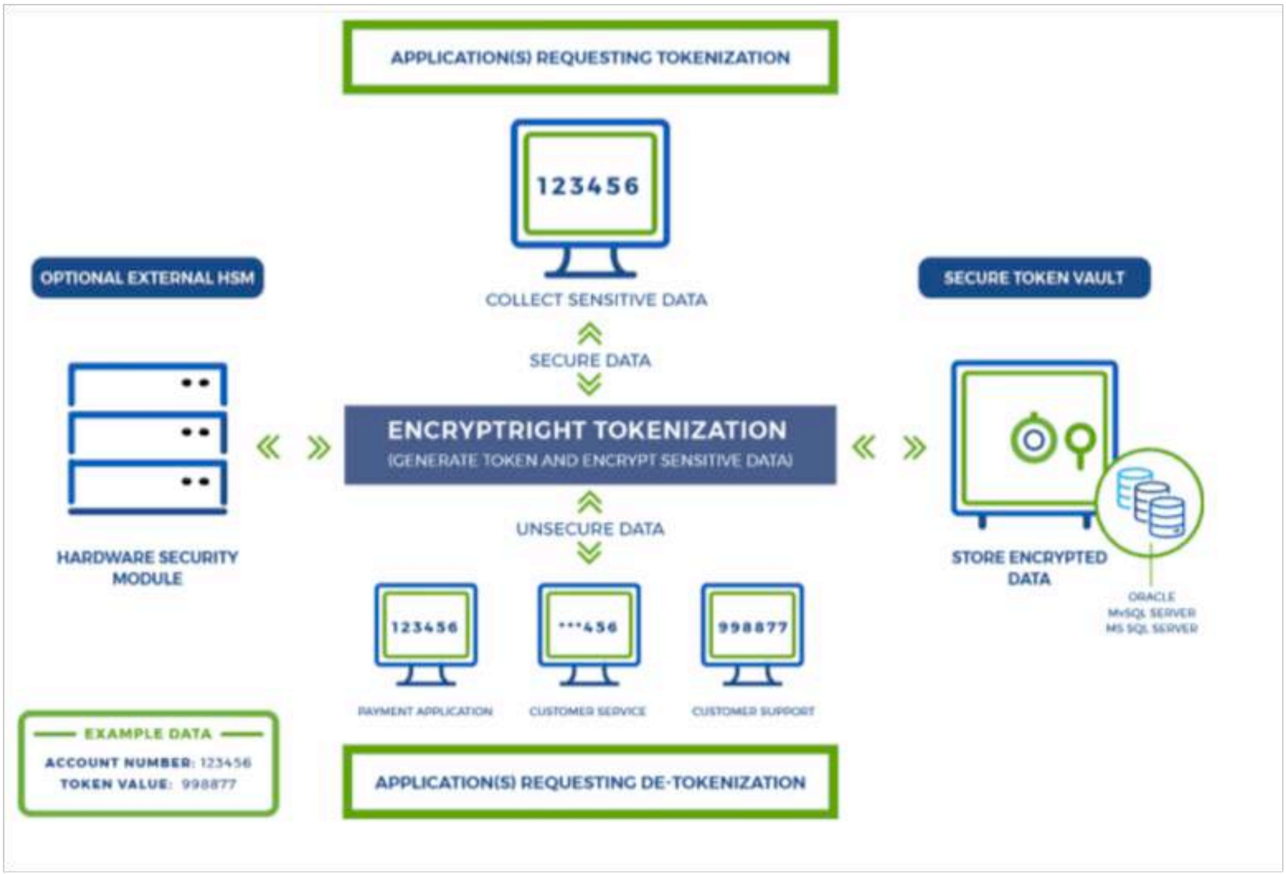
Figure 1. Blockchain application process



Source: Gunawan I. K., Lutfiani N., Aini Q. , 2021, Suryaman F. M., Sunarya A.,

Tokens are financial and governance instruments specific to blockchain-based decentralized platforms. [Pietrewicz, 2018]. Tokenization, in the context of electronic data protection, is the process of substituting a surrogate value (or “token”) for a sensitive data value in a processing system. These surrogate values could be reversible Tokens, which are able to be returned to their original data value, or Irreversible Tokens, which remain irreversible and cannot be reidentified. When using reversible Tokens, effective commercial implementations must allow for the high-speed cross-reference of the surrogate token to the original data, when the original value is required. However, such cross-reference should be limited to authorized users who can access the original sensitive data and must be otherwise impervious to penetration by cyber thieves and other unauthorized users [www.promefactors.com, accessed: 04.03.2022]. Another word, token is a piece of data that stands in for another, more valuable piece of information. Tokens have virtually no value on their own – they are only useful because they represent something bigger. The purpose of tokenization is to protect sensitive data while preserving its business utility. The tokenization process model is presented in the figure 2.

Figure 2. The tokenization process model



Source: [www.promefactors.com] (Accessed: 08.03.2022).

The study of token-economics is known as tokenomics. It covers all elements of a cryptocurrency's creation, management, and sometimes removal from a network. Tokenomics is a term formed by pairing up the two words "token" and "economics". Tokenomics is simply put, how token value is determined and what affects its value [Stalina, 2022]. As Shetty [2021] points out, any factor that even remotely concerns the value of a crypto token should be taken into account when considering its tokenomics. The list of some of the key metrics that any company or organization should check for when trying to decide a crypto token's worth is:

1. the allocation and distribution of tokens
2. the supply of the token
3. market capitalization
4. the token model.

According to the https://101blockchains.com/ tokenization is considered to be the future of data protection "The future will be tokenized in terms of possibilities for tokenization of intangible entities such as time, ideas, or abilities. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider the validity of the fact that tokenization is actually the future."
An example of the one of the first countries in line of following new technologies, and cryptocurrencies trend – therefore "heading into the future" is Lichtenstein.

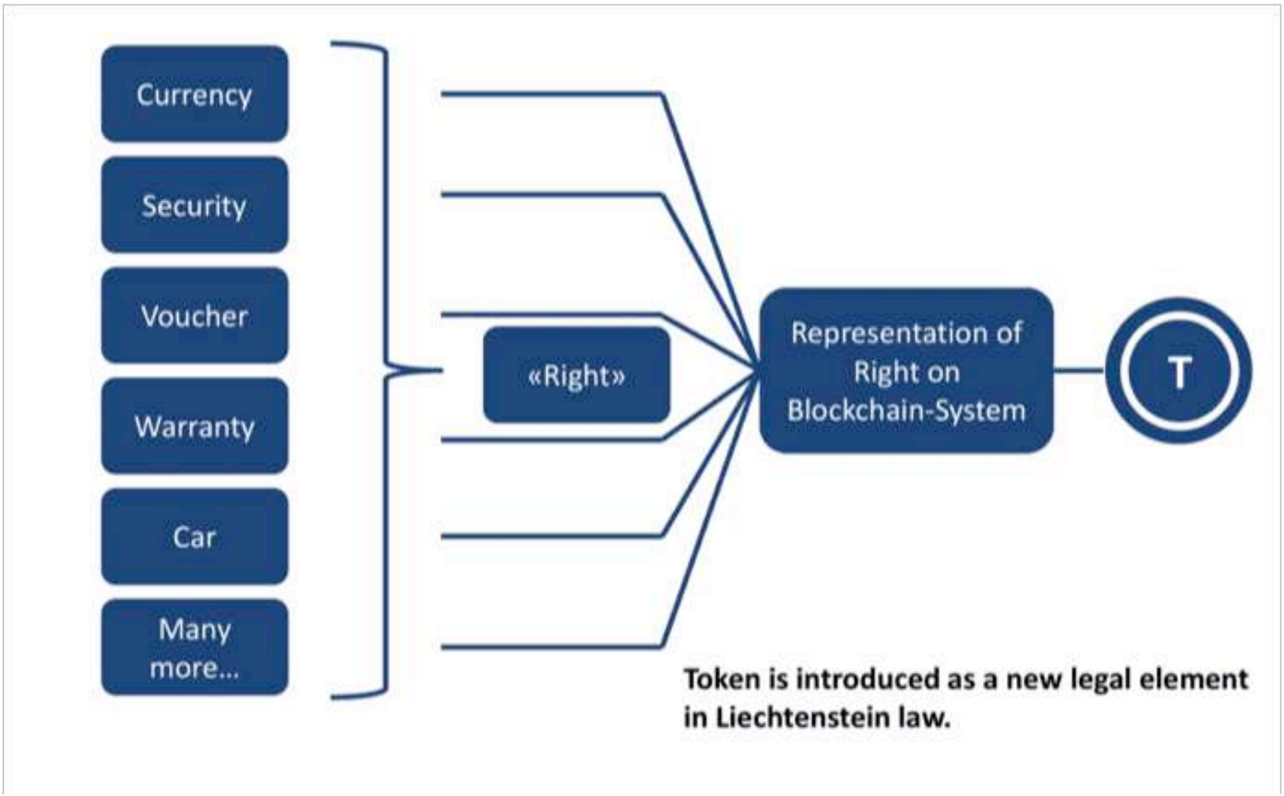
In the beginning of October 2019, the second hearing of the Liechtenstein Parliament on the new Liechtenstein Blockchain Act took place. No significant issues arose during this hearing. The result is that the Liechtenstein Blockchain Act came into force in January 2020 and allows straightforward tokenization of all kinds of assets and rights without legal workarounds (see Figure 3) [Gross, 2019].

Figure 3. Milestones of the Liechtenstein Blockchain Act coming into force

Source: NÄGELE Attorneys at Law LLC, 2019 [in]:Gross, 2019)

Liechtenstein thereby acknowledges that – driven by digital transformation – the physical world as we know it will soon be augmented by a digital world. The situation in which influence and power are primarily determined by an objective digital distribution – and are not linked to physical superiority or resources – has very far-reaching consequences, including political ones. The Token Container Model also creates the need for new players within the economy. Infrastructure needs to be provided before the customer can use a token at the push of a button [F. Bekemeier & Ph. Sandner, 2021].

Figure 4. The Token Container Model – new legal element in Lichtenstein law



Source: The Liechtenstein Blockchain Act (March 3, 2019), Government Principality of Liechtenstein

The education sector meaning

Education is one of the essential factors to advance a nation. Through good education, new things are obtained to be used to create quality human resources [Buchner et al., 2010; Muhamad Nova, 2017]. As many researchers pointed out, if a nation has quality human resources, of course, it can build its nation to be more [Fahmy et al., 2015; Yunita & Maisarah, 2020]. Therefore, every nation should have a good and quality education [Gunawan et al, 2021].

Classical models adopted by most universities still use similar methods from the Middle Ages where teachers teach, and students learn. Most of the new online models we see today, such as for instance MOOCs, extend the same concepts we manage in the classical ones: there is content access, issues development duty, and teachers methodology. These drive students recurrency, low user motivation (for both teachers and students), and a business model that hurts users with high prices, low return on investment, and often unpayable indebtedness for students [Caballero, 2019].

It is important to be aware that, since we are dealing with sociotechnical ecosystems, the design of effective incentive schemes depends both on the pursued objective function, and the specificities of the community of individuals whose behavior needs to be oriented. In this respect, further developments of a truly holistic token design toolkit should also account for the human side, considering aspects such as cultural beliefs, values, and priorities, that may greatly differ from community to community, and play a key role in influencing the response to a given incentive system [Freni, Ferro, Moncada, 2022].

It is important therefore to explore the possibilities of tokenization process within the universities field – that is a community based on knowledge and values union- so strong pillars of civilization existence.

The method

As many researchers point out, even if blockchain technology has been around for a decade, a shared understanding of some fundamental mechanisms is still lacking [Freni, Ferro, Moncada, 2022; Risius, Spohrer, 2017], therefore there is still a scientific gap to fulfill. The paper aims to cover the problematics of the possibility of tokenization of the universities as a concept model.

A literature review contains theories, findings and research materials to be used as the main basis for new research. Literature reviews are at the top of the evidence hierarchy. This shows that literature review is a technique to prove or approach a particular problem or it can be said that literature review is a scientific process that produces output in the form of reports intended to conduct scientific research or focus a research. The description in the literature review is directed at developing a clear and accurate framework for solving the problems that have been formulated in the problem (Parizi & Dehghantanha, 2018; Yuan et al., 2018). This paper is based on literature studies, that as pointed out is a pillar of the theoretical background, and the qualitative studies of a primarily character –that covers the content analysis of the most popular leaders of opinion of the tokenization mechanism sector and new technologies field and also focused groups.

We conducted the focused groups (FG) within the community of the 3 public university in Poland. The divided the groups via categories:

-one FG of the students representatives (from year 1bechelor, masters and doctorate students)
-one academics FG (with representatives of management departments, finance departments, and statistics department (full professors and assistance professors),
- administration group and management group.

All focus groups took place in the special comfortable environment inside the lounge space of the start-up incubator at one of the Universities in Poland (Wrocław University of Economics), and the length of each of the FG conducted took two up to four hours. We created the semi-structured scenario of the FG and the main questions that we’ve asked were:

-Do the representants of the academia know what is tokenization? (after that question we had a presentation about the theory of tokenization)
-Do they think that it is safe ?
-Do they feel like it’s the new trend and the future of collecting the funding?
-Do they think that tokenization can be used as a process within universities?

The interlocutors were able to make discussions, and as well to bring individual opinions.

Findings

Tokenization is a process by which PANs, PHI, PII, and other sensitive data elements are replaced by surrogate values, or tokens. Tokenization is really a form of encryption, but the two terms are typically used differently. Encryption usually means encoding human-readable data into incomprehensible text that is only decoded with the right decryption key, while tokenization (or “masking”, or “obfuscation”) means some form of format-preserving data protection: converting sensitive values into non-sensitive, replacement values – tokens – the same length and format as the original data [microfocus.com, accessed 06.03.2022].

As Freni, Ferro and Moncada [2022] points out, over a decade has passed since Satoshi Nakamoto published an innovative solution to the double-spending problem [Chohan, 2018] based on a peer-to-peer disintermediated network [Nakamoto, 2009]. Tokenization solutions that leverage token vaults can take advantage of more token-generation techniques than vaultless, such as the use of random-number-generators, and all original data is encrypted and centrally stored (defended) in a single secure location. Because of this Vaulted Tokenization solutions are often considered more flexible and more secure. Because de-tokenization can be distributed in a vaultless environment, vaultless tokenization is considered by many to be faster, with less total lag. While there is much debate over the right solution, vaultless environments have proven sufficiently secure in many cases and modern token vaults in very large deployments have proven to be very fast and reliable [www.promefactors.com, accessed: 05.02.2022].

Most of the projects in category of the infrastructure that is called customizable are focusing on private permissioned blockchains that have mainly companies as their target group, but still, universities and research groups can benefit from these infrastructures. Exemplary science and academic-related use cases are data tracking and auditing, education/training of students, project management, distribution of digital assets, timestamping, and the issuance of certifications [Leible et al, 2019].

After the process of literature review we conducted the qualitative study, based on the content/opinions of the most popular bloggers in the field of tokenization and new technologies. The main issues covered where:

-the pros and cons of tokenization system,

-main models of tokenization process,

-main fields (sectors) to be put in the tokenization process – the possibilities.

Tokenization of the universities was not a very often studied topic by “influencers”. Only one of them pointed out that that might be the future for the new age academia.

Referring to pros and cons that the “influencers” refers to one can see balance in their opinions, that can be concluded be a quote:

„If you notice the circulating supply of a particular token has been regularly increased by the project developers over time, you can assume that the value of the token will be going up in the future. On the other hand, if there’s too many tokens being released at once or too frequently, the value of the token might go down" –[Shetty, 2021].

Within the FG conducted the main findings are:

-lack of knowledge in every FG about the tokenization theory and basics, although after getting the knowledge about the process (via presentation provided by the researchers), many participants of the FG showed their interest.

Students enthusiastically reacted on this idea even:
"I can't wait for this opportunity. The access to the articles will be much easier and will save my time that I used to spend in the library."
~ Grażyna, 2nd year student of Business Management
One of the FG members (information technology head of department) said:
"We teach our students about digital transformation and so here we are- implementation of the same in our university should be done to keep the data of our students secure".

On the other hand, some professors raised their concerns about the tokenization idea. Some of them find it complicated. They believe it will exclude old scholars, who are not that confident with IT.

Some of the participants were still not convinced, even if the rest of the FG supported the concept:
"The project has already gained popularity and many Universities will want to follow the trend. However, those solutions must be still developed, but first milestones are done."
-Vice-rector of the University.

Conclusion and further research

Tokenomics is an important part of the crypto-space and all of its underlying dynamics (Stalina, 2022).Many sectors, like finance, medicine, manufacturing, and education, use blockchain applications to profit from the unique bundle of characteristics of this technology [Leible et al, 2019]. Tokenization is a solution that divides the ownership of an asset (such as a building) into digital tokens. These tokens act as "shares", and are similar to non-fungible tokens (NFTs). However, the difference here is that the tokens are fungible and actually tied to the value of the asset. It's a technology developed industry-wide to ensure that cardholder data is kept secure. The purpose of tokenization is to protect sensitive data while preserving its business utility. Blockchain technology has been around for more than ten years, nevertheless, the knowledge about its economic and business implications is still fragmented and heterogeneous [Freni, Ferro, Moncada, 2022].

The paper extends the current conceptualization of tokenization in the education sector by modeling their active use.

Literature analysis and authors' own study showed that definitely it is possible to create and process the tokenization models in the higher education sector, and the arguments that gives that statement a positive meaning are:

- To have a secure database of your students and their Identity

-To avoid Cyberattacks
-To simplify the process of encryption
- To spread the awareness of data security among student.
The specific models and possibilities of tokenization in the field of academia needs to be prepared as a future research.

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COVID-19 as a wake-up call in higher education: A review of literature

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Abstract

The modus operandi of the education system, from early years to higher education, has been deeply shaken with the Covid-19 pandemic which also disrupted the daily activities of all businesses across the world, including the tourism and hospitality industry. It seems that this pandemic is not leaving us any time soon, despite some sporadic periods of optimism.

Due to strict social distancing measures, educational institutions used various platforms and applications to convert their traditional face-to-face teaching methods to contactless instruction. However, the shift was too rapid, and most educators and students were taken by surprise.

Digital knowledge sharing may provide a number of advantages for students, lecturers, and educational institutions. Yet not everyone was in a position to embrace the full potential of online learning, and instead engaged in emergency remote teaching. Proper reflection on how the stakeholders have experienced the transition from traditional to online instruction may act as a catalyst for improvement in creating and delivering knowledge.

This document aims to explore, via an integrative literature review, the impact of emergency remote teaching and learning by identifying the experiences of students, lecturers, and the educational institutions. A SWOT analysis has been identified by the researchers as an appropriate tool to assess higher education in terms of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study also presents recommendations for the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: education, SWOT analysis, online learning, emergency remote teaching, Covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

The Covid-19 virus outbreak demonstrated that it is a severe threat to the world's inhabitants. The pandemic brought a lot of uncertainty and fear because no one was prepared for such a dramatic change to normal habits. It had an adverse impact on daily activities, including socialising, travelling, and learning.

Various restrictions were imposed by health authorities worldwide, including complete lockdowns in different countries, because the virus spreads from person to person through proximity. These limitations forced the hospitality sector to close its doors, resulting in economic disruption to the accommodation and catering industries. Despite the setbacks, the effects of the pandemic encouraged hospitality entrepreneurs to strategically think about the way forward for their business, and how to operate in these unprecedented times in the interest of their organisation.

The education sector was challenged in a different way because the pandemic changed the modus operandi of the education system, from brick-and-mortar to online teaching delivered straight to pupils' homes, with the aid of technology and online platforms (Mohammed et al., 2020). Physical classes were postponed and education was disrupted but teaching and learning did not stop. Covid-19 presented a wake-up call and offered various possibilities for the future of education, from a rise in educational digital platforms that teach specific subjects, to lessons becoming a blend of online and traditional learning. It forced stakeholders to rethink the way forward, and to understand that traditional teaching methods do not necessarily marry well with current and future needs. The real test for educational institutions, from elementary schools to universities and vocational institutes, was how to make this transition in a short time.

There is an increased interest in how education entities responded to the shift the pandemic presented. The European Commission (2020) expressed its concern about whether educators and learners were adequately equipped with the resources necessary for the transition. The European Commission questioned the effectiveness of teaching and learning when technology replaced the physical classroom (Farnell et al., 2021).

Definitions of online learning

Emergency remote teaching (ERT)

ERT happens when a sudden shift occurs from normal teaching and learning practices to online tuition. This switch takes place in uncontrolled situations, such as in the case of a pandemic. ERT accommodates the accessibility of remote learning, using different sorts of teaching tools operated on the internet. As the name implies, ERT is only considered a temporary solution for teaching and learning (Hodges et al., 2020). When the pandemic eases its conditioning factor, everything will, in theory, revert to its original format (Mohmmed et al., 2020).

Synchronous learning

Synchronous learning is when the lecture is scheduled at a specific time and it is broadcast live in a virtual environment, using an online platform such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Google Classroom (Hodges et al., 2020). The students follow the lecture live.

Asynchronous learning

Lectures are not scheduled in live virtual classroom settings. They are recorded, uploaded onto online meeting rooms, and can be accessed by the students any time they want (Hodges et al., 2020; Northey et al., 2015).

Education ecosystems

The term ‘learning ecosystem’ has been used to describe how different components interact within a learning environment. Individuals within a learning ecosystem can form groups and interact spontaneously by forming a community of practice. The way in which the various stakeholders perform and adapt can contribute to, or hinder, the success of the learning ecosystem (Hodges et al., 2020; Northey et al., 2015).

Online learning

Online courses are fully distributed online, providing students with a phenomenal level of flexibility. The students can learn where, when and how they prefer. Classes are always held virtually (never physically), either via synchronous or asynchronous sessions. In online learning courses, students have access to virtual learning tools, such as Moodle, Collaborate, or Blackboard, hosted with recorded lectures, student resources, and e-books (Hodges et al., 2020).

Moodle is an online teaching and learning platform that enables the trainer to build, manage and distribute courses online (Koutoumanos et al., 2014). It is a medium of connection between the tutor and the learners, employing forums, private emails, and chat. The tutor’s role is to facilitate learning and keep track of the students’ progress. Grading tools can be used to assess students (Trenas et al., 2011).

Mobile learning

Education or training is conducted by employing portable computing devices such as smartphones or tablet computers (Hodges et al., 2020; Brantes Ferreira et al., 2015).

Universal design for learning (UDL)

UDL principles focus on making sure that the design of learning environments is flexible, inclusive, and student-centred, to ensure that all students can access and obtain knowledge from module materials, activities, and assignments (Hodges et al., 2020).

Disruptive technology

Education is changing rapidly, even its practices and formats. Traditional learning methods are being replaced by a disruptive approach. The term ‘disruptive innovation’ was coined in 1997 by Clayton Christensen (Flavin, 2017), and it is defined as the replacement of existing technology with a new and effective one, making the former obsolete. In education, the lesson content is still there but it is being augmented with technology (Wortley and PC, 2017). Hence, mobile devices are an aid but the fundamental concept of a programme of studies cannot be changed or altered. In a disruptive world, if devices are used properly, they can become a useful tool for students to advance in their studies (Koszalka and Ntloedibe, 2011).

The difference between traditional teaching and emergency remote teaching

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the term ‘emergency remote teaching’ was cited in several pieces of literature across the globe. This terminology represents the sudden and unplanned shift from face-to-face, conventional teaching and learning to online and digital learning.

Conventional pedagogy uses a systematic approach that gives ample time to plan how learning is achieved, and to reflect upon teaching and learning activities to identify any needs for improvement. This pedagogical approach encompasses a multitude of activities to facilitate the learning process, and to meet the needs of all learners so that no student is left out.

On the other hand, in ERT, the pedagogical principles rooted in theories such as Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s had to be radically re-imagined. Educators had to quickly change from tried-and-tested methods delivered in a static environment to a fluid, always-shifting sphere that functions and exists only with the use of applications and tools, like cameras, screens, cloud computing, and other digital equipment.

The difference between online learning and emergency remote teaching

The sudden shift to different modalities used for teaching and learning brought mixed opinions, with some really enjoying its convenience, others criticising its many downsides and many unsure what to think (Hodges et al., 2020; Mohmmed et al., 2020). It has been stated that online distance education varies from ‘emergency remote teaching’. The most meaningful difference is that ERT focuses only on knowledge transfer, whereas online distance education offers a more structured approach for teaching and learning (Hodges et al., 2020).

In ERT, educators do not have the ideal setup to offer well-planned, quality instruction. In an institution that adopts online learning as one of its tools in its arsenal, this is regarded as a regular mode of instruction, not an exception. For such an institution, online learning is intended to be a long-term solution, not merely a sudden, stopgap shift in a time of crisis. Online learning is accessible and voluntarily adopted by both faculty and students (Milman, 2020; University of the People, 2022).

Objectives

The objectives of this research are to:

- Explore topical literature about Covid-19 and its effects on higher education stakeholders, namely students, lecturers and the institutions.

- Identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) that emerged from the sudden shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning.

- Propose recommendations for a better education system in the post pandemic era.

Literature Review

The difference between emergency teaching and online learning

Online education has revolutionized the way knowledge is communicated and shared. The abrupt transition from traditional brick-and-mortar setting to online education can have an impact on the quality of learning. A study conducted by Hodges et al. (2020) addresses the misconception surrounding online education and highlights that a successful shift from offline to online learning requires careful planning and well-developed instructional materials. Planning, training, and adequate resources are necessary for this transition (Choi et al, 2021). The same study emphasises the responsibility of developing content for online education, as hasty implementations can lead to frustration and outcomes that fall below the desired standards (Hodges et al., 2020).

Additionally, Hodges et al. (2020), and Choi et al., (2021) reported that migrating to online learning during times of crises might pose challenges and result in a less satisfactory experience for the learning community. Courses that are specifically designed for online instruction offer a pleasing experience when compared to traditional courses that had to be shifted to the emergency-remote-teaching-and-learning mode due to the sudden closure of educational premises.

Furthermore, Hodges et al. (2020) emphasised that a quick fix to education can lead to frustration, and during a crisis, difficulties and obstacles to learning can only be effectively managed if courses, instructional policies, institutions, and educators demonstrate flexibility. However, as pointed out by Khidir et al. (2020), excessive flexibility can potentially compromise the quality of education.

Additionally, it has been noted that an asynchronous modality of instruction might be a better fit than synchronous teaching in times of crises because first-generation students might be disadvantaged due to the lack of financial stability (Hodges et al. 2020).

Advantages and disadvantages of transitioning from conventional to unconventional teaching environment

Social isolation strategies were initiated as a mitigation against the spread of the virus. Face-to-face instruction and other experiential learning activities were cancelled in all academic institutions in many countries, including in Malta.

An investigation conducted by Khidir et al. (2020) focused to inspect the unexpected change from a conventional to an unconventional education setting and sought to explore the effectiveness of online education. To measure the effectiveness of the sudden shift to ERT, the context, input, process, and product (CIPP) evaluation model was adopted. The sudden shift in learning modalities disrupted the curriculum due to time constraints, the lack of preparedness, and infrastructure (Hodges et al., 2020; Khidir et al., 2020).

Khidir et al., (2020) case study evaluates the points of view of students and educators by using different research tools, ranging from interviews to questionnaires, to statistical reports from a higher education institution. The experiences, beliefs, and challenges of the community were also evaluated. The data for this interpretation were randomly collected, and result highlighted several advantages and disadvantage.

From disadvantages point of view, the study informed that the redesign of entire modules, teaching material, and assessment methods intended for online use can lead to unwanted stress and frustration on educators. Additionally, the shift to ERT and redesigning an entire module for online purposes creates a burden to educators and consumes lots of their free time. Moreover, the sudden shift from face-to-face to online education can have a negative impact on the quality of learning (Hodges et al., 2020; Khidir et al., (2020); Choi et al., 2021).

Further challenges that were observed were that due to the lack of eye contact and one-to-one attention, students can easily be distracted, and students with learning difficulties, including those who do not have the means to procure the necessary gadgets for their tuition, can be at a disadvantage during a crisis (Khidir et al., 2020).

From advantages point of view the study informed that during crises online education provided a vibrant, and dynamic teaching experience for the community, educators, and students. Additionally, learners had the opportunity to engage with the material at any time because the learning activities were made available in a number of formats, such as recordings, voice overs, and WhatsApp chats learners (Hodges et al., 2020; Khidir et al., (2020); Choi et al., 2021).

Further benefits that were observed were that learners may become more independent depending on learners maturity and motivation, and that the community have the opportunity to explore and familiarise themselves with different learning gadgets, thus acquiring digital literacy (Khidir et al., 2020).

The study by Khidir et al. (2020) recognised that the asynchronous mode offers certain conveniences that synchronous activities cannot offer, because recorded material offers some flexibility, and having resources available anywhere at any time reduces frustration in learners. Moreover, the accumulated resources (such as videos) and teaching and learning methodologies help improve the performance of teaching and learning proceedings, should similar crises arise in the future.

Challenges and opportunities of online learning during crises

The Covid-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to shut down their premises. This sudden closure disrupted all activities within the education system at all levels. A quick remedial solution to teaching and learning had to be employed, and online education was considered the easiest solution.

A review of literature by Adedoyin and Soykan, (2020) examines the challenges and opportunities of online learning in a crisis situation. Two different crisis-response migration methods were identified: external assisted migration, and external integrated migration.

The article highlights that the former migration mode is when educational institutions make use of platforms or cloud systems that are designed by an external corporation. These services are provided to students by the institution at no cost. A common external assisted migration service is Microsoft 365. External integrated migration is when the institution incorporates alternative third-party solutions into their existing systems. Common services that fall under this category are Skype and Google applications, amongst others.

The review also brings to light that online education, and ERT follow different principles. In online education, the structure of the course is focused, and different instructional strategies are taken into consideration in the planning process prior to the beginning of teaching. Conversely, in ERT, due to crisis circumstances, the learning material has to be quickly arranged and designed in a way that makes it compatible with a number of mediums and platforms. It was observed that this haphazard approach causes concerns about quality and equality.

Furthermore, the sudden migration to online education affected the community at large. The article explored socio-economic factors, heavy workloads, and device incompatibility. It was concluded that challenges can be transformed into opportunities (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

Perception of educational institutions to online method of delivery

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the learning process and created new teaching and learning methods globally (Khidir et al., 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). A study conducted by Choi et al, (2021) focused on the perceptions of universities when they were forced to migrate to online and blended learning during the isolation period, as well as any issues encountered.

The study focused on two higher educational institutions in South Korea and Malaysia. Through focus-group interviews, key findings revealed that in the context of hospitality education, online teaching and learning cannot be successful without incorporating blended learning approaches. Additionally, the study emphasised the importance of effective communication between lecturer and students as a fundamental factor in ensuring successful online education (Khidir et al., 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

The results showed that the transition to online learning introduced an excessive workload for lecturers who, due to lack of resources and IT manpower, were left unattended (Choi et al, 2021). Additionally, this lack of assistance to educators affected the overall learning experience of most students (Hodges et al, 2020; Choi et al, 2021). However, despite the fact that most students embraced the transition to online teaching and learning, they viewed online education as less superior when compared to the classical method of teaching and learning methods (Hodges et al. 2020; Choi et al., 2021; Choi et al, 2021).

However, one positive aspect of the imminent shift towards online teaching and learning is the utilisation of diverse tools and methods (Hodges et al. 2020; Choi et al., 2021; Choi et al, 2021).These included real-time delivery (such as the use of Google Meet), asynchronous (recorded sessions), and a combination of both (such as PowerPoint Presentation [PPT] voiceover combined with a live session). The overall experience of these teaching methods is determined by the lecturers' skill in preparing engaging material, the ability to use different tools for online learning, the number of attendees participating in each session, the support lecturers receive from the administration, and the enthusiasm and effort (or lack of it) put into it by the students. However, it is important to note that despite the efforts, hands-on practical experience cannot be fully replaced by virtual instruction, particularly in fields such as hotel-and-tourism education (Hodges et al., 2020; Choi et al, 2021).

Methodology

The objective of this research paper is to understand how higher education stakeholders (institutions, lecturers, and students) have dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic, and to identify any resulting strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, with a view to making recommendations for the post-pandemic era.

Integrative literature review

The researchers have presented an integrative literature review. This is a distinctive form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesises representative literature on a topic in an integrated way, such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated (Torraco, 2016). Integrative literature reviews are generally conducted on dynamic topics that experience rapid growth in the literature, and the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on higher education is a case in point. To the knowledge of the authors of this paper, a SWOT analysis has not yet been carried out in this regard, and the paper contributes to new knowledge on the topic.

Document analysis

The methodology centred around document analysis. Documents are an established means for structuring and transferring information. They are also “a powerful resource for constructing and negotiating social space” (Brown and Duguid, 1996, p. 1), even though the document’s social life is not widely recognised. Document analysis is therefore a social research method, and it includes both the data collection process and the mode of analysis.

Data are thoroughly examined and interpreted in order to produce empirical knowledge and gain understanding. The analytic procedure involves selecting relevant documents, appraising them, and synthesising the data they contain (Bowen, 2009). This research method incorporates both content and thematic analysis. The former is the process of organising information into categories related to the research questions. Thematic analysis means identifying important and interesting patterns in the data to address the phenomenon being studied. According to Bowen (2009), content analysis is carried out, initially, as a first-pass document review to identify the important passages in a document, while thematic analysis involves a deeper focus to progress from raw data to overarching themes.

For this paper, four publicly available journal articles were selected after reviewing a multitude of articles and noticing that there were similar patterns and saturation. Following the guidelines of O’Leary (2014), the documents were retrieved from reliable sources, namely scholarly journals and other educational repositories. The ‘agenda’ of each document was explored, with due consideration to possible biases. Each document was considered an informant, and the researchers explored the texts for the answers to the research questions. The researchers aimed to demonstrate rigour in their analysis. Hence, the documents were independently coded, with the researchers engaging in a back-and-forth interplay with the data, scrutinising the texts, making comparisons, and pinpointing concepts that may cluster together. The researchers then reached consensus on the mapping, codes became major categories, and the content was organised into themes. In addition, a 'snowball' technique was employed, where citations from key studies retrieved in the first stage were reviewed (Benzaghta, 2021). As document analysis is an iterative and ongoing process (O'Leary, 2014), there was the need to gather, review and examine additional documents while the research was underway. Throughout the process, the researchers discussed pertinent issues continuously, giving due consideration to reflection and refinement.

SWOT analysis

A SWOT analysis has been identified by the researchers as an appropriate tool to assess higher education in terms of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The SWOT analysis recognises that there are internal and external elements that aid or hinder an entity in attaining its goals. The internal aspects are within the control of the entity, while the external features are factors out of the entity's control (Sarsby, 2016). Strengths and weaknesses are internal, while opportunities and threats are external to the organisation. Additionally, strengths and opportunities are helpful to the entity, while weaknesses and threats are harmful. Each of the internal factors may be 'matched' with the external factors, and a harmful factor may be 'converted' into a helpful factor (Sarsby, 2016). Thus, a SWOT analysis can be used effectively to produce alternative options for an entity.

During the past decade, higher education has witnessed dramatic technological, demographic, and financial changes, resulting from globalisation, advances in IT and learning technology, and access to public funds (Živković et al., 2015). As a result, various scholars have used SWOT analyses to address these issues and to conduct strategic planning in the higher education sector (Benzaghta, 2021).

Discussion

The three main stakeholders of the education community are students, educators, and educational institutions. Literature informs that the sudden switch to alternative teaching and learning methods affected each stakeholder differently.

Students

Strengths:
- Flexibility
- Students who had the nous and means to use it embraced online education

Weaknesses:
- The lack of interaction
- Not well prepared for online education
- Students who need hands-on sessions in laboratories with specialised equipment, students with special needs and others could not embrace online learning

Opportunities:
- Self-learners

- Work/family and other commitments, asynchronous modalities of teaching permitted flexibility

Threats:

- Emotional turmoil (such as loneliness caused by not meeting fellow students) and not being able to understand lecturers because of lack of immediate feedback during asynchronous learning sessions or when a more personal touch can be particularly helpful

A common similarity in the documents that were analysed is that contactless instruction has been regarded as convenient (Mohmmed et al., 2020), and flexible (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). Online learning was often referred to as a versatile method of instruction by most students (Hodges et al., 2020; Kamentez, 2020).

Online education is characterised by three forms of teaching and learning: synchronous, asynchronous, and a combination of both (Mohmmed et al., 2020). These methods of instruction differ from traditional teaching and learning. In a conventional learning environment, learners are at the centre of the learning process, and individual attention and assistance can easily be provided when needed. Conversely, online instruction does not offer the same level of attention. Learners' difficulties cannot be captured on a screen and, thus, personal attention and assistance is limited. Moreover, with online instruction, students with learning difficulties are at a disadvantage over other learners, because adequate attention and support cannot be provided easily (Soria et al., 2020).

In synchronous teaching and learning, students are able to communicate and virtually interact with their instructors and peers (Soria et al., 2020). A noticeable advantage of the synchronous method of teaching is that students are able to get immediate feedback, and answers to their questions (Volpe and Croiser, 2020). However, a major weakness of this instruction method is its heavy dependence on stable bandwidths (Kamentez, 2020). A lack of internet connectivity causes constant disruption and, consequently, students get distracted from continuing with their learning process. The lack of focus caused by the unreliability of the internet creates unwanted stress and tension amongst students (Soria et al., 2020) and weakens the learning experience of most learners (Mohmmed et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

On the other hand, in asynchronous teaching and learning, students are free to decide when to engage with their learning. Learners have the power to re-listen to the recorded sessions multiple times (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). As cited by Mohmmed et al., (2020), and Hodges et al., (2020), asynchronous teaching and learning is preferred over the synchronous form. It is considered to be more convenient by most learners, especially mature and part-time students (Soria et al., 2020) because they are able to study while meeting their family and work commitments (Mohammed et al., 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020; Soria et al., 2020). In addition, learners are able to study at their own pace and time (Mohammed et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). It was also noted that asynchronous learning persuades students to be responsible for their learning process (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

However, in asynchronous teaching and learning, any questions and difficulties a student has will not be answered immediately. Sometimes, it might even take days for their inquiry to be answered. The slow reaction to learners' questions causes frustration and decreases the enthusiasm and motivation of most students (Volpe and Croiser, 2020; Soria, et al., 2020). According to Volpe and Croiser (2020), this method has a higher attrition rate than synchronous methods of teaching and learning. This could be because, due to the sudden shift to ERT, students reported that the learning material presented to them by some instructors lacks substance and, hence, it makes online teaching and learning less favoured by most learners (Hodges et al., 2020).

Given the difficulties that the pandemic created, the ERT approach enabled students to gain access to learning material presented to them (Mohmmed et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). However, despite the shift to alternative methods of teaching and learning, students studying in vocational institutions, such as in catering, engineering and medicine, were at risk (Kamentez, 2020). These disciplines were threatened by the sudden closure of schools because practical instruction was completely disrupted, leaving learners in these streams at a disadvantage when compared to other 'theoretical' disciplines, because hands-on instruction cannot be replaced, to any significant extent, by online methods of teaching and learning (Mohmmed et al., 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

The most notable weakness that forced learners from adequately making use of all the learning material and resources provided by their instructors was related to technological equipment (Mohmmed et al., 2020; Gallagher et al., 2020). Outdated operating systems and software incompatibility were amongst the difficulties reported by most learners (Hodges et al., 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). These non-responsive software programs and applications prevented learners from retrieving the instructional material (Soria et al., 2020). Moreover, they prevented learners from communicating, meeting up, and sending and receiving any notifications from their instructors and peers (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

Millennials are digital natives because they were born, raised, and are continuously surrounded by technology. This phenomenon makes them more curious and experimental with technological devices. This intersection with technology created a different way of how students can obtain, evaluate and process information (Mcneil et al., 2011; Prensky, 2001). Contrary to expectations, although higher education communities are largely frequented by digital natives, a lack of technological awareness has frequently been reported (Hodges et al., 2020; Soria et al., 2020; Mohmmed et al., 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). However, this threat may be considered an opportunity (Mohmmed et al., 2020), because students are forced to upskill their knowledge in the use of technology (Soria et al., 2020; Mohmmed et al., 2020). Lack of digital literacy prohibits some learners from accessing their instruction on time when lectures are held synchronously. Moreover, due to the lack of familiarity with the platforms used during instruction, unwanted incidents occur on numerous occasions, such as people not being able to or forgetting to mute their microphones or turn off their cameras when something private is going on. Familiarity with video technology is sometimes also problematic, as some students use their knowledge to videobomb online lessons with offensive and improper images as a prank (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). All of these difficulties create unwanted anxiety and frustration amongst the student communities (Hodges et al., 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020; Mohmmed et al., 2020).

Lecturers

Strengths:
•Teaching flexibility
•Gamification
Weaknesses:
•Heavy workload
•Adaptability to sudden change
•Inferior mode of teaching
Opportunities:
•New methods of teaching
•Digital literacy
Threats:
•Large online classes that make it difficult to give individualised attention
•Low digital competencies
•Infrastructure not suitable to support online tuition

Digital change happens when digital processes are combined to enable lecturers to use technologies to teach. This development can materialise when competencies, financing, and technology itself are incorporated together. Technology may be defined as those devices, methods and systems used to gain a practical advantage. Internet technology has created favourable circumstances for implementing different styles of teaching, assessing, and communicating with students. Parchment paper writing, overhead projectors, and blackboards were once innovative technologies. Digital networks, computers, and wireless communication are the corollary of human dexterity (Betham and Sharp, 2013). The past few decades have been a catalyst and a driving force of computer technology, and its gradual use within classrooms has come quite naturally. According to Evertson and Weinstein (2011), with the development of industrial science, the education system is one of the major beneficiaries of computer technology because it can be implemented in different environments.

During the pandemic, the only way to avoid interrupting learning was to switch to online teaching. Educators were challenged to convert tangible curricula and lecturing to an online mode, with the aid of web 2.0 tools. However, this changeover was a real test of perseverance for academic personnel. While most students are digital natives, lecturers may not be as ready and as confident to implement this paradigm shift in such a brief time. It is not easy for a lecturer to implement technology in the classroom, due to a lack of technical knowledge (Everston and Weinstein, 2011). Educators, especially those who are digital immigrants, must be trained on how to use technology for teaching and learning purposes.

Digital platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, proved to be a practical tool for the online delivery of lectures, both for lecturers and for students. However, a major weakness was the lack of proper infrastructure, poor internet connectivity and inadequate hardware. The shift to online learning also created a massive overload of work for lecturers, because they had to relocate the syllabus content to e-platforms for the perusal of students. In many cases, the learning resources had to be redesigned from scratch. Therefore, this has cost lecturers a lot of their time (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020), with the result that most of them became overly tired and frustrated. It took considerable dedication and determination for most lecturers not to give up during such hard times. It must be noted that the majority of students seem to have appreciated the lecturers' efforts to continue delivering lectures in unforeseen circumstances.

Another weakness noted is that some lecturers considered online learning as being inferior to traditional classroom settings. It was not possible for all traditional material to be converted online in the emergency situation caused by the pandemic. A proper online course that lasts a full semester takes between nine months and a year to be created (Mohmmed et al., 2020). Lecturers did not have this much time at their disposal. They did not even have the knowledge, training and support to convert to an online mode. If the lecturers themselves, as the front-liners, are not convinced of the benefits of what they are doing, it is less likely that the delivery of the content will be appropriate and effective.

Apart from adapting curricula to online-teaching methods, lecturers had the responsibility of implementing and adapting pedagogical methods to meet all the students' needs. In some cases, for logistical reasons, online classes were much larger than physical classes. The levels of attention which lecturers could give to individual students was drastically reduced.

Weaknesses, if properly confronted, may be converted into opportunities. This pandemic provided educators with challenges that were transformed into opportunities for enhancing online teaching skills. Online tuition made it clear that lecturers should take the opportunity to engage with their peers to create a niche for online-lecture delivery. It has now become clear that, even in the post-pandemic era, online teaching will remain popular, and that is why lecturers need to be well-supported to be able to deliver proper instruction. This can be achieved via continuous professional development sessions targeting lecturers’ digital competencies or lack thereof.

The Covid-19 phenomenon enabled lecturers to become flexible to teach away from campuses and classrooms. This is a strength which was identified in the reviewed literature. ERT created a new environment that enabled lecturers to implement distance learning, distributed learning, and online and mobile learning to teach their students (Hodges et al., 2020). Lecturers became trendsetters of online learning. Another strength relates to the lecturers’ efforts to gamify the syllabus content. Gamification plays an important part in harnessing students’ motivation during online lectures. In a world awash with high-definition video content and interactive entertainment, online learning may find itself competing for viewers’ attention, so it needs to find innovative ways to keep students interested. There is a substantial probability that students lose interest if a lecture seems derivative and unexciting (Yapici, 2017). Gamification can create intrinsic positive behaviour, which means that students attend lectures on their own initiative, with a willingness to compete and achieve more than other students (Banfield and Wilkerson, 2014). It can be used to assess in a formative way to test students' knowledge at the end of every lecture.

The forced change in the teaching and learning approach made lecturers more inclined to engage in self-reflection, as well as brainstorming with peers, to identify what went wrong and what can be ameliorated, to be integrated into the educational system of the present and future.

Institutions

Strengths:
•Curriculum development
•Staff development
•Socio-economic intervention to support students

Weaknesses:
•Focus on online conversion of curriculum, rather than online pedagogy
•Lack of experience in developing online learning platforms
•Lack of sophisticated technology
•Lack of capacity in support departments
•Incompatibility among disciplines
•Incompatibility with practical learning

Opportunities:
•Gather feedback on current experience to be prepared for eventual future crises
•Create policy, governance and quality assurance documentation related to online instruction
•Create new online programmes
•Widen market reach

Threats:
•Financial constraints
•Time constraints
•Absence of a sophisticated educational ecosystem

Apart from students and lecturers, the institutions themselves are important stakeholders in the higher education system. By institutions, one is referring to the management team of universities, colleges, as well as technical and vocational institutes that award academic degrees or professional certifications.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the normal progress of education, and the providers of higher education have had to implement social-isolation strategies (including physical closure, for a time), while ensuring the continuity of programmes of study. In the face of a sudden shift to remote teaching and learning, it has been the responsibility of the institutions to find and adapt a compromise model that includes the major benefits and eliminates most of the difficulties associated with such methods of instruction delivery.

In a SWOT analysis, strengths and weaknesses are internal factors that affect the education institution. It must be noted that, even prior to the pandemic, there was a concerted effort by several higher education institutions to embrace digital learning to reshape the education system (Choi, Robb et al., 2021). Thus, the urgency brought about by the pandemic did not take these institutions completely by surprise.

Education providers sought to develop curricula to avoid the postponement or cancellation of classes. They strived to provide the infrastructure to allow synchronous and asynchronous delivery of lectures. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) distinguished between external-assisted migration, where institutions make use of platforms designed by external organisations, and external-integrated migration, where these platforms are integrated into the institutions' personal online learning platforms. A major strength is the ability of institutions to quickly understand the needs of lecturers and students when deciding on an online-delivery method to be adopted (Choi, Robb et al., 2021), referred to as organisational agility (Wu, 2020).

The problem of poor internet connectivity was solved by recording lectures, so that students have the opportunity to follow the lecture at a later stage. Moreover, because a recorded lecture requires a lot of data to download, some institutions used the Voice over PowerPoint system, where concise hints were recorded with each slide to guide the students. This system uses a small file with minimal data requirements.

Institutions were also responsible to ensure that lecturers are adequately trained to shift from face-to-face instruction to online teaching. However, as noted by Mohmmed et al. (2020), the focus was on the conversion of old curricula to an online environment, rather than the development of new online pedagogy. The aim was to provide a quick and reliable setup during the crisis, rather than to create a robust educational ecosystem (Hodges et al., 2020).

A weakness which became evident at the onset of ERT is the lack of capacity in support departments, with the result that the educators themselves had to design and develop online instruction. This may lead to suboptimal implementation (Hodges et al., 2020), and it creates immense financial and time constraints (Perrotta, 2020). Additionally, there is no uniform online-learning model which is applicable to all disciplines. Lack of uniformity can result in multiple models being used within the same institution, leading to frustration among students and incompatibility between programmes, applications or systems (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

In vocational higher education, students need to focus a significant portion of their learning time on gaining practical experience and exposure to the real-world. Thus, they may view a greater degree of online learning negatively (Choi, Robb et al., 2021; Leszczyński et al., 2018).

The pandemic made educational institutions tap into their inner strengths to assist students in difficulty by calling on alumni as well as public and private organisations. This socio-economic intervention took different forms, for example, in the provision of free internet, and psychological assistance (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020).

Online education is becoming a popular tool for higher education institutions to better meet students' needs, learning styles and work schedules. Mature learners might prefer the flexibility offered by asynchronous courses, compared to younger learners who thrive in a structured, synchronous learning environment. Institutions might therefore widen their market reach by developing robust online programmes and offer them to mature students. This ties in perfectly with the concept of open-loop education, wherein the boundaries between education and the workplace are permeable, with students coming and going in multiple 'loops' (DeRue, 2018).

Another opportunity for educational institutions is the ability to collect feedback from various stakeholders. This feedback can then be assessed and input in the development of strategy, future policies, and training requirements (Mohmmed et al., 2020). To assist in deciding what online programmes should be developed, institutions require information on, amongst other things, faculty time investment, and on the reliability of the selected technological delivery systems (Hodges et al., 2020).

Recommendations

Any literature review that does not emphasise the implications for future practice, policy, and development of the topic misses a valuable opportunity to engage others in shaping the future (Torraco, 2016). Covid-19 presented a distance learning experience for the whole education community. The gains from the sudden shift to alternative methods of instruction must not be wasted, and the opportunities attained must be evaluated and used as a learning opportunity (Kamentez, 2020). The following are the recommendations of the authors, based on the outcomes of the SWOT analysis:

Students

- Hodges et al. (2020) argue that learning is a social and cognitive process, and institutions need to plan for and support different kinds of interactions during online learning. Learners need to be supported, not just instructionally, but also with co-curricular engagement.

- Education institutions should provide an induction course to all new students about the use of educational technology. The aim of this course would be to ensure that all students have basic digital literacy (for example, how to convert a Word document to PDF format), as well as institution-specific information (for example, an introduction to the virtual learning environment used by the institution, and how to upload an assignment in the repository folder). The advantage of this induction course would be to bridge the gap between digitally savvy students and those who struggle with accessing and making proper use of educational technologies.

Lecturers

- Education institutions should provide ongoing professional training about online tuition to academic staff on a regular basis, so that they keep up-to-date with new technologies and software. Institutions need to train lecturers on how to manage online classes more effectively, and technological barriers to learning should be addressed, to ensure class quality.

- Student teachers should be thoroughly trained in online pedagogy.

- Lecturers should be given psychological support free of charge, especially in the context of dramatic situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Institutions

- Online education should be considered critical in the overall strategic plans of higher education institutions (Choi et al., 2021).

- Institutions should prioritise communication and dialogue for learning, not simply the online transmission of content (Mohmmed et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2021).

- For digital transformation to be successful, trust needs to be established (Cameron and Green, 2019).

- Finally, institutions are encouraged to share information, and to think outside the box. Perhaps this could lead to finding solutions to intractable problems (Hodges et al., 2020).

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