

Coronavirus: Universities are shifting classes online, but it's not as easy as it sounds

March 10 2020, by Kyungmee Lee



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In response to the novel coronavirus, many South Korean universities have moved their teaching online. Students are still provided with the required number of class hours but without [face-to-face contact](#) with teachers.

The ministry of education in the UAE has announced that university teaching will [move online](#). In Italy, the government has ordered the [closure of all universities](#) until March 15. Italian universities, too, are switching to [online teaching](#).

This global shift to online learning follows the example set [by universities in China](#), where the outbreak first began. Such rapid global adoption of online education is astonishing. As a researcher working on the use of online learning in [higher education](#), I have often felt frustrated with the [slow pace of change](#).

Carefully implemented, online learning can make university education more accessible, affordable, interactive and student-centered. However, the way that it is being presented as a [simple and practical solution](#), capable of [replacing](#) face-to-face teaching for a significant period, is misleading.

Time to prepare

Online education is a [complex endeavor](#). It is important to set realistic understandings and expectations of how it can support students affected by coronavirus measures. This is especially the case for universities that disregarded online education before the coronavirus outbreak.

Both academics and students may lack the training needed for quality online learning. Normally, developing [online courses](#) involves a team of experts including academics, instructional designers, programmers and illustrators. The team will collectively follow [systematic design processes](#). Yet in this quick transition, academics who have never taught online will be offering courses that have not been devised in this way.

Facing this unprecedented challenge, most academics will record their lectures using a webcam and the same slides from previous face-to-face

teaching. Some will choose to do live [teaching](#) using telecommunication tools, delivering the same lectures online at normal class hours. Such simple "onlinification" of face-to-face lectures will not result in positive experiences for academics or students.

For the many students that will be using smartphones, there are significant differences between presenting slides on projection screens in [lecture](#) theaters and on small handheld screens. The font size and page ratio of the slides needs to be carefully checked and revised to improve their readability. If [course materials](#) such as key texts are not properly digitized, students' learning can be completely disrupted.

Student engagement

Another issue is retaining student interest. It's always a challenge for academics to maintain students' attention in face-to-face classes. Numerous studies suggest it is even harder with distance students, as demonstrated by [higher drop-out rates](#) in online than face-to-face courses. Useful [online teaching strategies](#) exist, but to novice online teachers burdened with quickly recording online lectures, scouring existing research for clues may seem unrealistic.

An academic in Hong Kong told me about experiences with online classes during the coronavirus outbreak: "In the first week, I got around 50% attendance, which was not bad at all. However, things got worse, and last week, I got one student attending the class, which was frustrating."

At a minimum, each student must have [access to high-speed internet](#) from where they are isolated. For students who are not adequately equipped with basic technological tools and skills, watching poor quality pre-recorded or live online lecture videos will be frustrating.

It is impossible to know each student's living, learning or health conditions during this crisis. Considering many students may be isolated socially and physically and feeling anxious, how ready will they be to learn online? Even under normal circumstances, distance students experience feelings of isolation caused by a lack of face-to-face interaction and social experience. This [has been a problem](#) since the inception of online education back in the 1990s.

Given the spread of the outbreak, this sudden global shift to online learning will not stop in a week or two. Universities will need to carefully consider how to assess and evaluate [student](#) learning outcomes, which will open a whole new set of challenges. Dissatisfied students who find online learning inferior to face-to-face lectures may take action against universities. In Korea, students affected by the switch to [online learning](#) as a result of coronavirus measures are [requesting a refund](#) of their tuition payment.

The perceived [ease and usefulness](#) of online education is largely influenced by users' first experiences. This has a significant impact on its actual adoption. The idea that online [education](#) is being rapidly implemented at the expense of quality worries me, as it may result in [online education](#) being discarded after the coronavirus outbreak ends. Going online has to be carefully planned, and [faculty members](#) at the front line of this movement need more support than a simple operation notice justified by an emergency declaration.

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