Opinion: Academia Must Acclimate to Distance Learning

It is possible that if establishments of education were to work on altering learning styles to be more interactive, there would not be a need for a complete halt to the academic year.

Original Hebrew Article: https://iglob.es/?1001323466
Publication: © Globes
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27.03.2020

On an average day, with no coronavirus, it is easy to understand why students and professors prefer a “frontal” education style. For one, there is a technophobic population, for which it is not easy to operate tools for distance learning, for whom it is much easier to open dialogue and discussions within the class, there is an element of “supervision” on the part of the professor - who pays attention to what the students are doing during the class, and then there is the campus life and social aspect which is an inseparable part of the identity development of a student.
In addition to all of this, we must admit that for veteran establishments, as for all of us, it is difficult to alter habits. Furthermore, the academic establishments are fighting for their existence, constantly dealing with marketing themselves, and find it difficult to focus on infrastructure development - which is exactly the story amongst hospitals who avoided bringing in innovative technology under normal operation, because of the constant pressure under which they are working. And suddenly, along came the virus and compelled all of us to stop, and think a step forward.

Suddenly we discover that smaller organizations are already there, that there are those who have already adopted methods befitting the “Corona period” and afterward. Thus, for example, we see an increasing trend throughout the world of studying from home, already before the Corona outbreak; whether it be the establishment of websites such as Udemy and Coursera, which offer courses and even full degrees from prestigious universities at the click of a button; or as a result of the digital systems for online learning set up by well-known universities throughout the world.

So, where does Israel stand amongst all of this? In the field of academic studies, with the exception of the Open University which combines classic “frontal” style classroom with distance learning, Israel is lagging behind. It is possible that if establishments of education were to work on altering learning styles to be more interactive, there would not be a need for a complete halt to the academic year.

In a survey initiated this week, hundreds of students were asked about their preferences about their learning environment for the upcoming year and the results show that 59.2% would like to begin the semester from home. In addition, 33.5% prefer to wait until the Corona crisis has ended to start the semester from their classrooms, while only 7.3% prefer to cancel the semester completely for risk of the Coronavirus outbreak.

The truth is that we do not need to conduct surveys in order to understand that the world of work is changing before our eyes and the academic establishments
must adapt themselves to the future work environment, in which increasing amounts of workers are working from home. As a result workers will require different skills than those to which they have become accustomed.

Just as in the workplace, academic institutions are facing a serious challenge. Whether or not the Coronavirus will be eradicated, we expect to see a decrease in applications for the upcoming academic year, and thus it is imperative to make haste and formulate academic programs based on distance learning in the spirit of the Open University.

We have seen that whether for the students or for the teachers, it has not taken a very long time to adjust to distance learning. Even though the distance learning did at first falter, based on reports form parents and teachers, the impression received is mostly positive. From the Open University as well, which combines frontal, classroom learning and distance learning, reports are of a greater demand from students for online classes these days, and of an increase in the number of participants in the classes in real-time.

The universities must focus entirely on “stopping the bleeding.” They must use this timeout from studies to provide professors accelerated courses on presenting before a camera, and to begin to create digital, video-based materials step-by-step together with the development of technologies and means for distance learning.

We advise academic institutions in this time period, to invest full vigor in converting the study methods to interactive; not only to overcome the Coronavirus crisis, but because the world is headed in that direction either way. In order for academia to overcome the “crisis” of technological development, it must roll up its sleeves and innovate the techniques used.