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Faculty Readiness for Emergency Online Teaching in Moroccan Universities: Mixed-Methods Evidence and PD Implications

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions worldwide to adopt emergency remote teaching, posing particular challenges in resource-constrained contexts such as Morocco. This study examines faculty readiness for online teaching during the crisis, focusing on three public universities. A concurrent mixed-methods design was employed, combining survey data from 27 professors with interviews from 8 participants. Results indicate that while most faculty rated themselves as intermediate or advanced in ICT competence, a minority integrated interactive or diversified pedagogical practices into their online teaching. Interviews revealed further difficulties, including limited professional training, heavy workloads, student disengagement, and assessment concerns. Nonetheless, faculty also reported gains in technological proficiency and a growing openness to blended learning approaches. These findings underscore the paradox between technical confidence and pedagogical application, highlighting the urgent need for structured professional development and institutional support. The study contributes empirical evidence from the Moroccan context to the broader literature on digital pedagogy, offering lessons for building resilient and inclusive higher education systems in the Global South.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented disruption in global education, with higher education institutions (HEIs) among the most severely affected. In March 2020, universities worldwide closed their campuses and shifted abruptly from face-to-face delivery to what Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond (2020) termed emergency remote teaching (ERT). Unlike planned online learning, ERT was a temporary and reactive measure aimed at sustaining academic continuity during an

unforeseen crisis. The speed and scale of this transition exposed significant gaps in institutional preparedness, ranging from digital infrastructure to pedagogical competence (Daniel, 2020; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020; Alrefaee et al., 2025). For faculty, this meant not only learning to use new technologies under pressure but also redesigning courses, adapting assessments, and finding ways to engage students in fully virtual settings.

Although online and blended learning had been expanding in the pre-pandemic period, particularly in developed contexts, the sudden and wholesale pivot to remote instruction revealed the uneven global capacity to sustain digital education. Researchers highlighted pressing concerns related to instructional quality, digital inequities, teacher readiness, and student well-being (Ali, 2020; Murphy, 2020). At the same time, the crisis accelerated innovation, spurred the use of open educational resources, and fostered greater institutional awareness of the need for long-term digital resilience (Dhawan, 2020; Dube, 2020).

2. THE MOROCCAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Morocco offers a particularly relevant case for examining the dynamics of emergency remote teaching (ERT). Over the past two decades, the country's higher education system has expanded dramatically, with enrolment rising from fewer than 300,000 students in 2000 to more than 1.5 million by 2021—a growth of nearly 400% (British Council, 2021). This massification has been accompanied by national efforts to build a knowledge-based economy. However, persistent challenges remain in ensuring quality, equity, and student completion rates (Ouahabi, El Guemmat, Azouazi, & El Filali, 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, Morocco launched the *Digital Morocco 2020* strategy to modernize its higher education sector through the integration of information and communication technology (ICT). Initiatives included expanding internet connectivity, encouraging the use of digital tools in classrooms, and promoting more flexible learning formats. Despite these efforts, reforms were still in their early phases and had not yet achieved widespread implementation across universities (Ouahabi et al., 2021).

When the pandemic struck in March 2020, the Ministry of Education introduced a nationwide emergency plan to sustain instruction remotely (Draissi & ZhanYong, 2020). Universities quickly adopted platforms such as Moodle, Microsoft Teams, and Google Classroom to deliver courses. Yet implementation varied considerably: well-resourced institutions were able to adapt relatively smoothly, while others relied on fragmented or improvised solutions (Mounjid, El Hilali, Amrani, & Moubtassime, 2021). As a result, both students and faculty faced significant obstacles, including unreliable connectivity, limited access to devices, and insufficient digital literacy (Ech-Chorfy, 2020).

2.1.Faculty Readiness and Professional Challenges

Faculty members were central to sustaining instructional continuity during the pandemic. They were expected to transfer courses online, engage students remotely, and uphold academic standards despite having little prior training or institutional support. For many, this meant navigating multiple layers of challenges simultaneously.

First, **digital competence** varied widely among professors. While some were comfortable with videoconferencing platforms and learning management systems, others had limited experience

beyond basic ICT functions (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020). Second, **pedagogical design** presented difficulties, as instructors were required to adapt courses originally structured for face-to-face delivery to virtual environments. This shift demanded rethinking lecture styles, student interaction patterns, and assessment strategies (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020). Third, faculty reported **workload intensification and burnout**, as they were compelled to master new tools, troubleshoot student problems, and redesign course materials under severe time constraints (Murphy, 2020). Finally, issues of **engagement and equity** emerged. Many professors struggled to sustain student participation, particularly for learners without reliable internet access or digital devices, thereby reinforcing pre-existing inequalities (Sintema, 2020).

In Morocco, these challenges were compounded by systemic constraints, including limited institutional support, infrastructural deficiencies, and the absence of clear national standards for online pedagogy (Mounjid, El Hilali, Amrani, & Moubtassime, 2021). Nonetheless, some faculty members acknowledged positive outcomes. These included improved digital literacy, exposure to innovative teaching strategies, and increased openness toward blended learning models.

Existing international studies have documented faculty responses to the pandemic, but much of this research has centered on institutions in Europe, North America, and Asia (Ali, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020; Gaebel, Zhang, Stoeber, & Morrisroe, 2021). By contrast, there is limited empirical evidence from North Africa and the wider Global South, where resource constraints and digital divides produce distinctive experiences. Moroccan faculty perspectives remain especially underrepresented, despite the country's rapid higher education expansion and ongoing ICT policy reforms.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address two key research gaps: (1) to provide an empirical assessment of faculty preparedness for emergency online teaching in a resource-constrained context, and (2) to identify professional development needs and long-term implications for digital pedagogy in Moroccan higher education.

2.2.Aim and Contribution of the Study

This article investigates faculty readiness for emergency online teaching in Moroccan universities, using a concurrent mixed-methods approach that integrates survey data with qualitative interviews. The analysis examines levels of ICT competence, teaching practices, and perceived challenges during the pandemic, alongside faculty reflections on professional growth.

By situating the Moroccan case within international scholarship on digital pedagogy, the study contributes to three areas:

1. **Policy and practice**: providing evidence-based recommendations for institutional professional development programs.
2. **Comparative perspective**: positioning Morocco's experiences alongside global patterns to highlight shared and unique challenges.
3. **Future resilience**: offering insights into how faculty preparedness can be strengthened to ensure higher education continuity during future crises.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a concurrent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of faculty readiness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed independently, and then integrated during interpretation to achieve triangulation and enhance the validity of findings.

3.1.Participants and Sampling

The research was conducted across three Moroccan public universities situated in different regions. For the quantitative phase, convenience sampling was used to recruit 27 university professors who completed a structured questionnaire. For the qualitative phase, snowball sampling yielded eight professors who participated in semi-structured interviews. All participants were affiliated with Faculties of Letters and Human Sciences, which were among the institutions most affected by the rapid shift to digital teaching. A purposive sampling strategy was also applied to ensure variation in teaching experience, ICT familiarity, and disciplinary background.

3.2.Instruments

The questionnaire focused on four dimensions: (1) familiarity with online teaching environments, (2) ICT self-efficacy and daily digital capacity, (3) design and delivery practices in online teaching, and (4) perceived challenges and training needs. Items were presented using Likert-type scales. The interview protocol explored faculty experiences with course adaptation, perceptions of readiness, challenges encountered, and reflections on professional development during the pandemic.

3.3.Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in mid-2020. Questionnaires were distributed electronically, while interviews were conducted via Zoom and Microsoft Teams, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, using frequencies and percentages to capture patterns of readiness and practice. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with coding focused on recurrent themes such as adaptation, pedagogical and technological challenges, and opportunities for professional growth.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a nuanced picture of faculty readiness for emergency online teaching in Moroccan universities. Survey results showed that most professors considered themselves moderately familiar with online learning environments: 55.6% rated their familiarity as intermediate, 22.2% as advanced, and 22.5% as elementary. In terms of ICT competence, the figures were more encouraging, with 66.7% identifying as advanced users and 25.9% as intermediate, while only 7.4% rated themselves as elementary. These results suggest that although most faculty felt confident in their day-to-day use of technology, their ability to translate technical competence into sound online pedagogy remained limited.

This readiness gap became clearer in reported teaching practices. Just over half of the participants (51.9%) indicated that they combined synchronous and asynchronous approaches. However, only 29.6% designed activities that balanced individual and collaborative learning, 33.3% incorporated digital literacy tasks, and a similar proportion (33.3%) structured activities to promote online social interaction. In contrast, a slightly higher proportion (40.7%) reported that they embedded activities

targeting 21st-century skills such as collaboration and critical thinking.. The most common approach, cited by 70.4% of professors, was the provision of digital resources such as PDFs and Word files. These findings highlight a paradox: while many professors self-identified as technologically skilled, few extended this competence into pedagogically rich, interactive online practices. This echoes international studies such as those by Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, and Bruce (2020), who found that teachers often reported sufficient technical skills but faced significant challenges when attempting to integrate these into effective pedagogical practices. Similarly, Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, and Koole (2020) emphasized that ICT proficiency does not automatically translate into pedagogical readiness, particularly under the pressures of emergency remote teaching.

Qualitative interviews provide further insight into this discrepancy. Faculty described the transition to online teaching as a steep learning curve, relying heavily on trial-and-error, peer collaboration, and improvisation. One professor reflected, "We were learning as we went, experimenting with platforms and trying to keep students engaged despite poor connections." Despite relatively high self-rated ICT skills, many struggled to maintain student participation, ensure interaction, and adapt assessments for online delivery. Concerns about privacy, student confidence, and unstable internet connections compounded these difficulties. These findings are consistent with broader literature on the impact of emergency online teaching. For instance, Ali (2020) noted that many higher education instructors across different regions encountered similar challenges of sustaining engagement and adapting teaching under constrained conditions. Likewise, Murphy (2020) highlighted how the sudden shift to remote learning intensified faculty workloads and limited opportunities for meaningful pedagogical innovation.

At the same time, the findings reveal positive developments. Faculty acknowledged that the crisis accelerated their digital literacy and encouraged them to rethink aspects of their pedagogy. Several participants reported becoming more comfortable with blended or hybrid approaches, highlighting that the pandemic opened possibilities for longer-term integration of digital tools. This perspective is supported by Dhawan (2020), who argued that while online learning posed multiple challenges during COVID-19, it also acted as a "panacea" that exposed instructors to new digital strategies, some of which could be carried forward into post-pandemic teaching. In the Moroccan context, this shift is particularly significant given that national ICT strategies, such as Digital Morocco 2020, were still in their early stages of implementation when the pandemic struck. As Mounjid, El Hilali, Amrani, and Moubtassime (2021) observed, Moroccan universities were unevenly prepared for digital teaching, but the crisis created momentum for stronger integration of technology and pedagogy.

Taken together, these findings underscore both vulnerabilities and opportunities within Moroccan higher education. The paradox of readiness 'high self-reported ICT confidence but weaker pedagogical application' suggests an urgent need for structured professional development. As Mailizar et al. (2020) and Rapanta et al. (2020) both argue, bridging the gap between digital competence and pedagogical design requires systematic training and institutional support. In Morocco, this would mean embedding digital pedagogy into national higher education policies and investing in faculty development initiatives, such as short-cycle workshops, peer mentoring, and access to instructional design expertise. Without such measures, universities risk reverting to pre-pandemic inequalities in digital preparedness. However, with sustained institutional support, the skills and experiences developed during the crisis could serve as a foundation for a more resilient and inclusive higher education system across the Global South.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined Moroccan university professors' readiness for emergency online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, using a concurrent mixed-methods design to capture both

quantitative patterns and qualitative experiences. The findings revealed a paradox of readiness: while two-thirds of participants identified themselves as advanced ICT users, fewer than half engaged in pedagogical practices that fostered interaction, collaboration, or the development of 21st-century skills. Interviews further highlighted challenges related to student participation, assessment, workload, and digital equity. At the same time, faculty acknowledged that the crisis accelerated their digital literacy and encouraged them to explore new approaches, particularly blended and hybrid teaching models.

The implications are twofold. First, technical proficiency alone is insufficient to ensure pedagogical effectiveness; digital competence must be aligned with instructional design and learner-centered practices. Second, structured professional development, including workshops, mentoring, and institutional instructional design support, is essential to bridging the gap between ICT skills and effective online pedagogy**.** Embedding such initiatives into national higher education policy would ensure sustainability and equity across Moroccan universities.

Beyond Morocco, the findings contribute to broader debates on higher education resilience in the Global South. The experience of emergency remote teaching underscores that crises can act as catalysts for innovation, but only when institutions consolidate lessons learned into long-term strategies. By leveraging the gains in digital competence achieved during the pandemic, universities can build more inclusive, flexible, and crisis-resilient learning ecosystems.

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