American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research
ISSN: - applied

Emergency Remote Teaching in Higher Education: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategic Adaptations During Global Crises

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Received: 15th Oct 2025 | Received Revised Version: 27th Oct 2025 | Accepted: 30th Oct 2025 | Published: 07th Nov 2025

Volume 01 Issue 01 2025 | Crossref DOI: 10.64917/ajsshr/V01I01-002

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented disruptions in global higher education, compelling institutions to adopt emergency remote teaching (ERT) as a rapid response strategy. Unlike structured online learning, ERT is characterized by immediate deployment without prior instructional design preparation, relying heavily on available digital infrastructure and the adaptability of both instructors and learners (Hodges et al., 2020; Ferri et al., 2020). This research article explores the multifaceted dimensions of ERT, including its theoretical underpinnings, practical implementations, challenges, and potential for long-term transformation in higher education systems. Drawing on literature spanning education theory, technology adoption, and crisis management, the study delineates the pedagogical, cognitive, and socio-emotional implications of ERT for faculty, students, and administrative stakeholders (Grammes, 2020; Ozge Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). The methodology involved comprehensive qualitative analysis of existing studies, webinars, and institutional reports to construct a holistic understanding of ERT practices across diverse educational contexts. Findings reveal that ERT, while initially reactive, offered opportunities for accelerated digital literacy, the adoption of Open Educational Resources (OERs), and the reconsideration of pedagogical models for resilience and flexibility (Africa, 2020; Patel, 2020; Mavridi, 2020). However, challenges persist, including technology accessibility, faculty preparedness, learner engagement, and the psychological stress associated with abrupt transitions (Al-Naabi et al., 2021; Colclasure et al., 2021). The discussion integrates theoretical perspectives on online learning with empirical insights, highlighting the necessity for sustainable strategies, robust professional development frameworks, and institutional support systems. This article concludes that ERT, though born out of crisis, can catalyze long-term innovations in higher education if embedded within carefully designed, context-sensitive, and equity-oriented pedagogical frameworks. The implications extend beyond the pandemic, offering guidance for universities seeking to strengthen resilience against future disruptions while enhancing the quality, accessibility, and inclusivity of higher education.

Keywords: Emergency Remote Teaching, Online Learning, Higher Education, Pedagogical Adaptation, COVID-19, Digital Literacy, Institutional Resilience.

Cite This Article: Johnathan Ekundayo. 2025. Emergency Remote Teaching in Higher Education: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategic Adaptations During Global Crises. American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research 1, 01, 5-9. https://doi.org/10.64917/ajsshr/V01I01-002

1. Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 represented a paradigm shift in global higher education, compelling institutions to adopt remote teaching strategies at an unprecedented scale. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) emerged as a pragmatic, immediate solution to maintain instructional continuity while physical campuses remained inaccessible (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT is distinct from traditional online learning in that it prioritizes immediacy over long-term pedagogical design, relying on existing technological infrastructures and adaptive practices by educators and learners (Ferri et al., 2020). This

distinction is critical, as conflating ERT with well-structured online courses risks underestimating the inherent limitations and contextual challenges of teaching during crises.

From a theoretical perspective, ERT can be situated within the broader discourse of instructional resilience, digital literacy, and crisis pedagogy. Resilience theory posits that institutions and individuals must possess adaptive capacities to maintain functionality during disruption, emphasizing flexibility, resourcefulness, and responsiveness (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017). Applied to higher education, this lens provides insight into how universities navigated the immediate need for remote instruction, balancing pedagogical efficacy with logistical constraints. Digital literacy emerges as a parallel concern, reflecting both faculty competencies in using technological platforms and students' abilities to engage effectively with online materials (Mayer, 2019). While the rapid deployment of ERT highlighted existing disparities in access to technology and connectivity, it simultaneously offered opportunities for pedagogical innovation, such as the integration of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and interactive digital tools (Patel, 2020; Africa, 2020).

The literature demonstrates that ERT has multifaceted implications. Studies highlight cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions, including learner engagement, motivation, and stress management, all of which were exacerbated by abrupt transitions (Ozge Misirli & Ergulec, 2021; Grammes, 2020). Faculty experiences underscore the need for professional development and institutional support frameworks to mitigate pedagogical challenges, enhance instructional quality, and promote equitable access (Al-Naabi et al., 2021; Colclasure et al., 2021). Moreover, ERT necessitated a re-evaluation of assessment practices, academic integrity protocols, and feedback mechanisms, revealing tensions between expediency and quality assurance.

Despite its reactive nature, ERT presents an emergent opportunity to reconceptualize higher education pedagogy. Mavridi (2020) argues that ERT can transition from a temporary crisis response to a sustainable, hybridized model of online education if institutions leverage lessons learned during the pandemic. Similarly, Hodges et al. (2020) emphasize that careful analysis of ERT outcomes can inform future instructional design, enabling universities to enhance both resilience and innovation.

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of ERT in higher education, with emphasis on its theoretical foundations, practical implementations, and implications for long-term pedagogical reform. It addresses the central research questions: (1) How did higher education institutions implement ERT during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) What challenges and opportunities emerged from the rapid transition to remote instruction? (3) How can insights from ERT inform sustainable, equitable, and resilient pedagogical practices in the post-pandemic era? By synthesizing empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks, this study contributes to the discourse on crisis-responsive teaching and offers practical guidance for stakeholders in higher education globally.

2. Methodology

Given the complexity of ERT phenomena and the diversity of educational contexts, this study employs a qualitative meta-analytic methodology, drawing upon existing literature, webinar reports, empirical studies, and policy documents. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify sources that provide comprehensive insights into ERT experiences across geographic, institutional, and disciplinary variations (Best & Kahn, 1993; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010). The sample includes peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, online webinars, and case studies published between 2017 and 2021, capturing both pre-pandemic e-learning frameworks and pandemic-specific interventions.

Data extraction focused on multiple dimensions of ERT, including pedagogical strategies, technological tools, faculty preparedness, learner engagement, assessment methods, and institutional support mechanisms (Ferri et al., 2020; Al-Naabi et al., 2021). Each source was critically analyzed to identify recurring themes, contradictions, and contextual nuances. Thematic coding was used to organize findings into categories: (a) instructional design adaptations, (b) technological infrastructure and access, (c) faculty development and training, (d) learner experiences and socio-emotional impacts, and (e) institutional policies and sustainability strategies (Grammes, 2020; Ozge Misirli & Ergulec, 2021).

The study also adopts a comparative lens, examining differences in ERT implementation between developed and developing country contexts, as well as variations across disciplinary fields (Blaylock et al., 2021; Colclasure et al., 2021). This approach facilitates nuanced understanding of structural inequalities, resource disparities, and cultural factors influencing ERT efficacy. Additionally, theoretical triangulation was applied, integrating insights from resilience theory, digital pedagogy, and crisis management

to strengthen analytical rigor (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017; Mayer, 2019).

Finally, the methodology emphasizes interpretive synthesis, aiming not merely to summarize findings but to construct an integrated framework for understanding ERT as both a crisis response and a potential catalyst for sustainable pedagogical innovation. Limitations inherent to secondary data analysis, including potential publication bias and contextual specificity of studies, are addressed through cross-validation across multiple sources and consideration of divergent perspectives.

3. Results

Analysis of the literature reveals several critical findings regarding ERT implementation and outcomes. First, there was a pronounced variation in institutional preparedness and technological infrastructure. Universities with pre-existing online learning platforms and robust IT support were able to transition more smoothly, whereas institutions with limited digital resources faced significant disruptions (Ferri et al., 2020; Africa, 2020). This disparity was particularly acute in developing countries, where internet accessibility, device availability, and digital literacy varied widely (Patel, 2020).

Second, faculty preparedness emerged as a pivotal determinant of instructional effectiveness. While many educators demonstrated adaptability and innovation, others struggled with digital tools, online pedagogy, and maintaining engagement in virtual environments (Al-Naabi et al., 2021; Blaylock et al., 2021). Professional development frameworks that provided timely training and peer support significantly mitigated these challenges (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017).

Third, student experiences were shaped by both cognitive and socio-emotional factors. Learners reported difficulties with concentration, self-regulation, and motivation in home-based learning contexts (Ozge Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). Socio-economic disparities further influenced engagement, as students with limited access to devices, stable internet, or conducive learning spaces faced additional obstacles. Conversely, some learners reported positive experiences, including increased flexibility, exposure to digital resources, and opportunities for self-directed learning (Ferri et al., 2020; Mavridi, 2020).

Fourth, assessment and evaluation practices underwent rapid adaptation. Traditional examinations were often replaced with online quizzes, open-book assessments, and project-based evaluations. While these strategies maintained academic continuity, concerns regarding academic integrity, standardization, and equitable assessment arose (Colclasure et al., 2021). Institutions that developed clear guidelines and leveraged learning analytics were better able to monitor progress and support students effectively.

Fifth, the integration of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and digital content facilitated both faculty and student engagement. Studies highlighted the potential of OERs to reduce content creation burdens, promote pedagogical diversity, and democratize access to high-quality learning materials (Patel, 2020; Africa, 2020). Nevertheless, adoption was uneven, reflecting differences in institutional culture, digital literacy, and resource availability.

Finally, the results underscore the broader organizational and policy implications of ERT. Institutions that embraced flexible policies, communication strategies, and mental health support were more successful in maintaining instructional continuity and learner satisfaction (Grammes, 2020). The crisis also prompted reflection on long-term pedagogical reform, highlighting opportunities for hybrid learning models, enhanced digital infrastructure, and ongoing professional development (Mavridi, 2020).

4. Discussion

The findings from this study elucidate the complex interplay of technological, pedagogical, and organizational factors in ERT. The immediate transition to remote teaching underscored the necessity of institutional resilience and adaptive capacity, reflecting resilience theory's emphasis on flexibility, redundancy, and rapid response (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017). Faculty adaptation emerged as a critical factor, suggesting that investment in digital pedagogy and professional development is essential for both crisis management and long-term educational innovation (Al-Naabi et al., 2021).

Cognitively, ERT challenges conventional assumptions about learner engagement, motivation, and self-regulation. Students' experiences highlight the importance of designing online learning that accounts for attention span, interaction, and scaffolding (Mayer, 2019). Socio-emotionally, the pandemic exacerbated stress, anxiety, and isolation, reinforcing the need for integrated support systems, including counseling, peer networks, and flexible academic policies (Ozge Misirli & Ergulec, 2021).

The study also raises important considerations regarding equity and access. Disparities in technology, internet

connectivity, and digital literacy create structural barriers that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations (Patel, 2020). Addressing these disparities requires not only short-term interventions, such as device distribution or subsidized internet access, but also long-term strategic planning to ensure inclusive, equitable learning environments.

ERT also presents an opportunity to rethink traditional pedagogical models. By leveraging OERs, interactive tools, and flexible assessment strategies, institutions can foster learner-centered, self-directed, and hybrid learning environments (Ferri et al., 2020; Africa, 2020). The challenge lies in transitioning from crisis-driven improvisation to deliberate, sustainable instructional design. This necessitates institutional commitment, policy alignment, and continuous evaluation to ensure quality, effectiveness, and scalability.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on secondary data may obscure context-specific factors, including cultural, disciplinary, and institutional nuances. Second, most studies focus on short-term responses to the pandemic, limiting insights into long-term impacts on learning outcomes and faculty development. Future research should explore longitudinal effects, comparative analyses across institutions, and strategies for integrating ERT insights into permanent pedagogical frameworks.

5. Conclusion

Emergency Remote Teaching emerged as a critical mechanism for maintaining educational continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting both vulnerabilities and opportunities within higher education systems. This study demonstrates that while ERT posed significant challenges—ranging from technological barriers to socio-emotional stress—it also catalyzed digital literacy, innovation in pedagogy, and the reconsideration of traditional instructional models. Faculty preparedness, institutional resilience, equitable access, and professional development emerged as key determinants of ERT success.

The findings underscore the importance of strategic planning for future crises, emphasizing the integration of flexible, hybridized learning models, robust digital infrastructures, and inclusive policies. By embedding lessons from ERT into sustainable pedagogical frameworks, higher education institutions can enhance both educational quality and resilience. In sum, ERT represents not merely a reactive measure but a transformative opportunity for global higher education, offering insights for creating adaptable, equitable, and innovative learning environments in the face of ongoing uncertainty.

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