

Chile report 2020

Red Nacional de Centros de Apoyo a la Docencia.

In mid-March, most universities and higher education institutions abruptly started their online classes. After the government announced that Chile was in phase 3 of contagion of the coronavirus, with 61 confirmed cases, more than a thousand academics called on rectors and university authorities to suspend face-to-face classes in educational venues and implement the activities online. The request was heard and over the weekend various houses of study joined the Catholic University and the University of Chile (members of our network) and decided to suspend face-to-face classes and welcoming activities.

Most first-year students did not have the possibility of starting face-to-face activities. This has been extremely hard for them, they had to build their identity as university students from their rooms and in their computers.

From that time on, students faced many cases connectivity issues. Along the country, an important number of students do not have a computer to take part in classes, and they use their phones for that purpose. Higher education institutions located outside the capital city, faced the challenge of getting in contact with students who live in rural areas outside Internet coverage.

To deal with this reality, many universities bought computers and SIM cards for students who could not afford them, but many students have not been able to continue with their studies. During this term, several universities went on “digital” strike, with students not connecting to online classes or showing a paper to the computer camera saying “on strike”. Their claims pointed to low quality online classes, messy organization and lack of support for students.

Online learning, though present in some programs in higher education institutions in Chile is not highly developed (it is only 4.41% of the total enrollment). So, in many cases, there was not experience on how to structure and appropriate answer for this level of demands. This meant that Learning Centers and academic development teams started training teachers on using online synchronic tools (Zoom, Meet, and others), and basic strategies for teaching online. Besides, as a general approach, most institutions started teaching following the already planned face-to-face timetable. The first three weeks into the learning continuity process were of very frantic work for all institutions.

From that starting point, the success of these efforts has varied greatly, depending on the speed and efficiency to design and implement online learning and support processes by the institutions, and also on the income level of the students’ families, and the level of Internet connectivity.

The period between first and second term was used by universities to redesign modules and reinforce digital teaching skills. The beginning of the second term of the year brings new challenges.

The most urgent it is to retake the learning continuation process for those institutions that could not finish their first term, mainly because of student strikes. In many cases this has meant to negotiate and agree with the students on several key issues, like: creating a policy for online

teaching with the participation of teachers and students, including assistive LMS technology, mental health, giving support to the students, limiting the academic load, and improving assessment, feedback and methodology.

Online classes will continue during the second term, but some will turn into hybrid or bimodal classes, as quarantine is easing or ending in some regions of the country. This means not only an organizational and operational effort, but also a methodological one. Some of the key concerns in terms of learning, during the first term, have been timing, balance between synchronous and asynchronous activities, working load, teachers' soft skills, learning visualization (see what they are learning), and assessment. During the second term, we will add to these, more complexity, tiredness, and students' higher expectations on the learning experience.

In the third place, the pandemic has struck a huge economic blow to higher education institutions. Most institutions have seen late payment grow, and a decline in postgraduate enrollment. Some have also seen high numbers of students leaving the university. In all, this implies financial cuts for this year and next, affecting all the processes at the institution including academic development.