THE CYBER CLASSROOM: ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE 2020 PANDEMIC CONTEXT

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Abstract

From February to December 2020, the Government of Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) implemented strict health measures to control the pandemic caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19). Among several other developments, universities in the territory turned to online teaching, which lasted for the entire 2020 spring semester. This paper aims to identify the empirical lessons learned from that period, from both pedagogic and governance points of view, keeping in mind the impact of technological, human-related, and governance challenges. The sustainability of online teaching for a limited period of time was directly related to the effectiveness (and speed) of external coordination (involving the relevant governmental departments) and internal commitment within the university. Despite the relative academic success and the technological transformation, one of the key lessons learned is that online teaching cannot effectively contribute to the processes of secondary and anticipatory socialization in the same way as in-person learning. Therefore, online teaching is not sustainable as a stand-alone tool in higher education. It fails to deliver secondary and anticipatory socialization particularly with regard to the sense of connection and togetherness. Clearly, the current model of academic governance has not been designed to face this type of challenge.

Keywords: Pandemics 2019 (COVID-19), Higher Education, Governance, Sustainability, Lessons Learned, Socialization, Macau (China)

1. INTRODUCTION

On a campus without students, there is no university. For university professors and lecturers, students are our primary concern and the focus of all our endeavors to continuously improve what we offer them. When we think about what is most important in terms of what we strive to achieve every day, we believe that the central task is to develop an inner joy for learning in students — a sort of self-motivational process capable of triggering a genuine interest in learning not only when enrolled in higher education but also for the rest of their life. Education is a process that leads individuals to apprehend reality, acquire an array of skills, and make the best possible decisions. “Education is primarily about developing an intellectual and rational curiosity, which leads individuals to develop transformational skills and moral standpoints” (Leandro, 2018, p. 38).
As Spencer (2014) stated, “Teaching is leading students into a situation [from] which they can only escape by thinking”. Education mainly contributes to a secondary and anticipatory socialization process, when students actively learn to build options and make relational informed decisions. Thus, in this context, relationships are at the center of our pedagogic modeling.

Recent events experienced by the authors, after the campus reopened in fall 2020, were the motivation for this study. One coauthor recounted an encounter with a student this semester: “A student approached and asked if he could give me a hug. When I looked at his face, I did not recognize him immediately … and I replied, ‘Who are you?’ With a broad smile, he said — I have been attending your online classes on business ethics”. Something similar happened to the other coauthor when he met his students for an in-person lecture on transportation studies: these students had actually attended another online lecture on Travel Agency Operation and Management which he also conducted in the past spring semester 2020. “However, when the same group of students entered the class wearing masks, it seemed like they were new students […] At that moment, I thought to myself that I should work on my interpersonal relationships, and to establish the necessary rapport between us, even though they were not new students”.

This paper aims to identify lessons learned from the practice of acknowledging, adapting to, and recognizing the challenges presented by the 2019-2020 pandemic, as a contribution to pedagogy and academic governance. At City University of Macau (CityU), as early as January 2020, a system was established to guide the informal measures to be implemented at CityU in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The General Affairs Office, the Quality Assurance Office, the Information Technology Office, with the support of the General Affairs Office, worked together to interpret, supplement and implement governmental guidelines. Initial, bilingual (Chinese and English) provisional guidelines were internally dispatched and amended several times from February to October 2020. Furthermore, since the majority of the students from mainland China studying in Macau had to return and remain in their hometowns due to the closing of the border between MSAR and the mainland PRC, their learning experience during the lockdown and beyond will impact the delivery of teaching, with implications for educational outcomes for many years to come. When we look back on the overall experience, its relative success (in-person classes resumed in October 2020) appears to rest with protracted close coordination between CityU and the Higher Education Bureau (DSES), the Health Services Bureau, and the Coronavirus Information Office, the informally implemented a set of policies to ensure the health security of academic and research activities designed to achieve consensual and innovative governance, and to adapt to new pedagogic solutions; and 5) student involvement and participation.

In terms of methodology, this paper is based on empirical experiences, qualitative research, and participant observations of two scholars with dissimilar cultural experiences. It examines technological challenges that stand in the way of socialization and academic empathy. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses technology-related challenges. Section 3 presents human-related and Section 4 — governance-related challenges. Section 5 concludes.

2. TECHNOLOGY-RELATED CHALLENGES

The spring semester in 2020 was challenging for many professors, academic staff, and certainly students. Due to the rapid spread of the coronavirus pandemic in East Asia, academic authorities immediately put into place a set of policies designed to ensure the health security of academic communities under their jurisdiction. MSAR higher education is regulated by the City University of Macau (CityU), which is a department of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Bureau (DSES), which is a department of the MSAR Government. The MSAR Government receives regular political guidance from Beijing Central Government and coordinates policies and implementation measures, with the governments of the neighboring provinces (HKSAR and Guangdong in the province), in the context of the Greater Bay Area. CityU is one of the ten higher education institutions in the territory. It is a private trilingual university, with a regional and international perspective and philanthropic mission to be of service to the municipality. In 2020, CityU had over 270 full-time equivalent teaching staff and 8,000 students enrolled in bachelor’s, master’s, and Ph.D. programs in areas such as Tourism Studies, Business and Management, Social Services, Finance, Psychology, Law, and Research in Portuguese-speaking Countries Studies.

In terms of academic management, CityU manifests the essence of Chinese culture in its effort to achieve consensual and innovative governance, guided by a very practical approach. Only the first informal measures to be implemented at the beginning of the pandemic was an internal WeChat account to keep the staff informed of the situation at all times. Set up by the Human Resource Office, the WeChat app rapidly disseminated information about internal decisions and governmental guidelines to CityU students and staff in mainland China for the Chinese New Year holiday. As documented in Table 2, in February 2020, the MSAR Government decided to impose strict limitations on Chinese nationals and banned all foreigners from entering the territory. Consequently, most of the mainland Chinese students could not return to MSAR, where they had access to all the academic materials.

The decision to close the land and maritime borders (which remained partially closed in December 2020) had an immediate consequence, which was the need to look for an interim alternative solution. Instead of in-person classes, courses had to...
be taught completely online. In addition, overseas academic staff that travelled outside MSAR, could not return, without a 14-day quarantine. The government of MSAR instantly implemented a program to help universities purchase the necessary materials, and to move from a teaching system driven by in-person lectures to online teaching. Two key concerns surfaced in our minds immediately: the operation of the online platforms and the tailoring of the new syllabi. As teaching staff in higher education, it was a challenge to put together a brand new teaching methodology and content in such a short time. We had not more than 2 weeks to explore all the possibilities offered by the new digital platforms, supported to some extent by our information technology office. According to UCLG (2020), "Regarding remote education, we let schools choose based on [the] guidance of the government, we started an online education and we haven’t stopped studying online to satisfy the need for students to learn", Zhang Weiming, Deputy Director of Xi’an Big Data Bureau.

At CityU, several internal coordinating meetings took place to create top managing solutions, as well as to provide opportunities for faculty-level management to give their views and feedback. Within a short time, our academic offices were equipped with new smart cameras and different software options, which most of us have never used before. To avoid having the students create accounts for several platforms, the use of Microsoft Teams was recommended by the CityU ITO, although the academic staff had the freedom to use other options such as Zoom, iCan, Tronclass, or Yuketang. Although the majority of our students are millennials and we consider them digital natives, they too had to cross the digital divide, especially those who use digital technology for social media activities. Our next challenge was to ensure that all students had decent hardware and a quiet individual space with adequate privacy to follow classes. Looking back, we note the existence of a double digital divide. Academic staff and students had to learn how to use the ad hoc teaching technology (which narrowed the digital divide) and they also had to adapt spaces and familiar schedules to the new use of technology and to deal with other family members in their household who were also facing the same situation, having to work remotely and also requiring their own space.

Unlike courses designed for in-person interactions, online courses were a combination of asynchronous and synchronous modes of instruction. Yamagata-Lynch (2019) asserts, “Synchronous delivery modes can provide a stronger sense of connection among participants, and a blended online synchronous and asynchronous course can strengthen social presence” (p.204). Other authors such as Hrastinski (2008) and Perveen (2016) also recognize the benefits of blending asynchronous and synchronous modes of instruction. Hrastinski (2008) asserts that “asynchronous and synchronous complement each other” (p.54). Based on this fact and on the need to limit the number of online teaching platforms which students are required to use for classes on different topics, the faculty heads issued verbal guidelines for adopting decentralized teaching solutions.

One important aspect of asynchronous learning is the fact that students do not participate at the same time, and therefore they can manage their time with a certain degree of flexibility. Hrastinski (2008) emphasizes that when participants cannot be online at the same time, asynchronous learning “is thus a key component of flexible e-learning. In fact, many people take online courses because of their asynchronous nature, combining education with work, family and other commitments” (p.52). On the one hand, asynchronous online teaching involves making available teaching content designed to help students develop skills in line with learning objectives. The organization of these materials should reflect the essential learning outcomes of the course. As a consequence, we uploaded visual teaching support tools such as PowerPoint from lectures, short videos, maps, institutional website links, selected short passages, official speeches, and selected shortlists of complementary bibliographies. Our experience was that asynchronous online teaching was particularly important since students had more time and stayed at home.

On the other hand, academic staff had been instructed to deliver synchronous online teaching using the Microsoft Teams software, with each real-time live lesson lasting two hours (short breaks included). This software enabled class management, assignment handing-over, and teacher-student interaction as well. Interactive lectures were conducted during this real-time live interaction as well. Interactive lectures were conducted during this real-time live interaction as well. However, for the vast majority of the academic staff, this was the very first time we had had to manage a platform, connecting lecturers to students located more than 2,000 km away, not embedded in the traditional academic setting. One of the remarkable aspects of such management was the fact that lecturers continued to teach, regardless of their physical absence from the campus because of the government’s restrictions on movement. The new online teaching technology allowed the subject coordinators to coordinate syllabi, monitor preparation activities, supervise classes, and coordinate the teaching loads. As a consequence, the adverse impact on the full- and part-time labor contracts was minimal or nonexistent.

At the start of the switch to online classes, students rarely talked, discussed, or asked questions. They were not comfortable with turning their cameras on, and most of the time they attributed their lack of participation to technical faults and offered familiar objections to the use of web cameras. Students have always turned their cameras off in the presence of cameras in the classrooms, but they were not comfortable with being at the center of the scene and with the possibility of their lesson being recorded. Meyer (2014) puts forward a possible explanation for this: “The Americans focus on individual figures separate from their environment, while Asians focus on [the] background and the links between these backgrounds and the central figures” (p.109). Female students were particularly conscious about their visual appearance in front of web cameras. They rarely switched on their web cameras on their own initiative. Consequently, students preferred to listen passively, and think by themselves, rather than to share their creations or ideas in an interactive way. As professors, we directly observed Wi-Fi connectivity problems, audio disturbances caused by interference from the surroundings in the communication process (such as dogs barking, crying babies, interactions with close relatives, noisy vehicles passing by,
repairs and renovations upstairs, in the vicinity, and so on), as well as the inability of some students to focus or concentrate for such long periods of time. In addition, to make sure that the Wi-Fi connection would be strong enough to reach all, receptors (students) were advised to turn off their web cameras (and other Wi-Fi devices at home). We observed that turning off cameras and other Wi-Fi devices made them feel lonely in their home. Most of the time their bedroom functioned as their new classroom.

Students said that being alone often caused them to lose their focus and caused thoughts to drift, particularly in the case of long theoretical explanations. Lecturers promptly adjusted the lecture content by dividing lectures into more sections, repeating theoretical explanations more often, scheduling more breaks, and arranging more opportunities to interact. Initially, at least, online teaching was conducted mostly as a one-way process (speaking and image) with the possibility of written feedback, occasionally using both ways. The dialogic process was reduced to several occasional interactions, and the lecture continuum was lost. As a result, students started to be active on their social networks, communicating intensively among themselves during online classes. In addition, we observed the use of mixed-use languages (Chinese and English). Forced by family member was learning it the first time parents and family noticed that their younger siblings. We felt like invaders of their own private spaces to teach their family members on a regular basis. Since the whole family was confined at home, mothers and sisters started to form small groups, gathering in the house of one of their course mates but pretending to be in their own private isolated room.

Furthermore, we also noticed the different reactions of families that now had a stranger (often speaking a language they do not command) entering their own private spaces to teach their family members on a regular basis. Since the whole family was confined at home, routines and sisters started to pass by behind students, often waving and smiling at us. Others asked students to look after their younger siblings. We felt like invaders of a sacred space. Indeed, we required family routines to be organized according to our needs and schedules, the priority for Wi-Fi use went to the invader who was the most urgent matters that were alien and students were using two computers (students) were advised to turn off their web cameras (and other Wi-Fi devices at home).

The second phenomenon was that we started to receive invitations to participate in international webinars and to engage in collaborative online teaching, which broadened the participation of our students as well. The reach of these webinars (and collaborative teaching), as well as the technology associated with them, probably opened new avenues for space at home, because of their own need to work from home; and family members carried out normal activities, without due regard for the needs of the students. In the first three cases, we observed a willing adjustment by the family to create the right space for learning.

After two to three weeks of practice, we were fully adapted to our approach to teaching in synchronous online courses. In-class assignments began to have different dynamics and small groups of students (4–5) were engaging more often in cross-discussions. We also noticed that some students were using two computers — one to follow the synchronous online teaching, and another to verify the information to support their answers. More and more, we received comments on the feed of messages that helped us expand our explanations further. Students also started to comment on other students’ comments.

By the middle of the semester, students were better adapted to the new conditions, while they became more involved, their anxiety levels also increased. More and more students devoted themselves to a certain level of preparation, became confident to share information and to debate different points of view. Regular attendance grew to more than 90%, and assignments requiring personal feedback were the highest in number. The dialogic process gained momentum, and the lecture continuum returned. The MST chat function turned out to be particularly popular and cross-discussions became confident to share information and to debate different points of view. Regular attendance grew to more than 90%, and assignments requiring personal feedback were the highest in number. The dialogic process gained momentum, and the lecture continuum returned. 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revolution’ in academia and higher education will be reversed after the return to normal”. This pandemic crisis certainly pushed us out of our technological and pedagogic comfort zones, in a way that substantially enhanced the ability to obtain synergetic academic benefits. Collaborative teaching and open academic webinars are certainly two important technological opportunities that have reached the point of no return.

3. HUMAN-RELATED CHALLENGES

The human aspect of online teaching was probably the most difficult to manage. During the 2020 spring semester, we observed four types of human-related challenges: 1) self-disengagement; 2) communication challenges; 3) cultural difficulties; and 4) socialization issues.

3.1. Self-disengagement

At the beginning of online teaching, students were effectively disengaged from the university. The entire human context was suddenly missing: space, voices, noises, colors, atmosphere, and proximity to others (peer presence) disappeared. Students had to stay at home and a sense of self-empowerment was absent because they were under the usual rule of family authority. Initially, students regarded this as a sort of trade-off between their self-empowerment (they could not be on their own as before) and their health. However, as the coronavirus outbreak dragged on, their levels of anxiety clearly increased and we started to be concerned about students’ emotional health. Students began to feel that their socialization process had also been sanitized and decimated, preventing them from engaging in their own network of human relations.

According to emotional processing theory, a fear schema might present itself after a subject experiences or witnesses a traumatic pandemic. This schema is the mental representation of the distressing events and the associated behavioral emotional responses associated with that traumatic experience (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Foa, Huppert, & Cahill, 2006; Foa & Kozak, 1986). In our case, we perceived that students became psychologically distressed when they were told that the online teaching would be extended throughout the entire semester and not as initially planned for 2–3 months only. Most students expressed their support for government security measures, but at the same time, voiced their wish to resume in-person classes as soon as possible. Some of them stated that they felt protected and cared for by the government, the university, and their family. At the end of the modules, when asked to identify two positive and two other points for improvement, the large majority of the students mentioned their wish to return to campus as soon as possible. Online lectures began after a long dialogue on the perspectives related to the control of the pandemic, the governmental security measures, and students reporting about their own situation and emotional health. There was one student, who for 4–5 weeks could not communicate with us verbally, because the microphone of his computer could not be replaced and he was living in a block under strict quarantine measures. In the middle of the semester, most students, especially those in bachelor’s degree courses, required encouragement, and their teachers provided a listening ear.

3.2. Communication challenges

Following the same line of reasoning, in addition to the noise problem mentioned earlier, we also noticed the problem of poor online communication feedback. Lakoff and Johnsen (2003) discuss the meaning formation, establishing parity between words and containers of meaning. They put it as follows: “the speaker puts ideas (objects) into words (containers) and sends them (along a conduit) to a hearer who takes the idea/objects out of the word/containers” (p. 10). In other words, in the communication process, it is the receiver who de-codifies the meaning, not the sender. In the same vein, Fiske (1990) asserts that “feedback helps the receiver to feel involved in the communication. Being aware that the communicator is taking account of our response makes us more likely to accept the message: being unable to express our response can lead to a build-up of frustration that can cause so much noise that the message may become totally lost. Though feedback inserts a return loop from destination to source [...] to make the process of transmitting messages more efficient” (p. 22).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human dimension</th>
<th>Socialization and culture (adaptation difficulties)</th>
<th>Human dimension</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intention (difficult to decode)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stress management and empathy (takes longer to build)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship (dominantly formal and conventional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framework (family surroundings impact)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Online Microsoft Teams (software) + Platform (hardware — iPads, iPhones, and laptops*)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sender (S)</td>
<td>All the time bidirectional</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Voice — sound</td>
<td>Dominantly unidirectional S—R occasionally bidirectional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple images (Professor and screens)</td>
<td>Dominantly unidirectional S—R Occasionally bi-directional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback (occasional/limited) and the contextual clues are poor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise due to Wi-Fi connection (higher than face-to-face)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Redundancy (high level) is needed to compensate entropy</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Entropy (higher than face-to-face)</td>
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<td>Technical dimension</td>
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* These are the most popular devices used in online teaching from the students’ side.
The difficulties associated with the fact that there was no permanent direct visual contact between lecturers and students deeply impacted the communication process because “The final step of the communication process is feedback. Feedback means receiver’s response to sender’s message. It increases the effectiveness of communication. It ensures that the receiver has correctly understood the message. Feedback is the essence of two-way communication. Feedback is the transmission of the receiver’s reaction back to the sender […] feedback enables it to adjust the communication performance” (Fiske, 1990, pp. 21-22). Table 1 depicts a communication model based on our online teaching experience. In simpler words, problematic feedback led to adjustment difficulties in the context of two-way communication. When lecturers are unable to see the students’ faces and read their body language, the adjustment to student needs becomes slower or nonexistent. That was one of the reasons leading to the sharp demand for individual feedback. Often, the loss in communication was a source of complaints, sometimes due to genuine causes, sometimes used as an excuse to escape hard questions. Likewise, a higher level of redundancy is necessary to compensate for the lack of feedback, and that makes the process much more time- and energy-consuming. All in all, the initial syllabi length had to be shortened. From the sender’s point of view (lecturer), the constant managing of different screens and monitoring the feed of messages for indirect feedback required additional engagement, the extent of which was difficult to anticipate and which only served to increase the workload.

3.3. Cultural difficulties

As Table 2 depicts, the majority of the non-local student population in Macau originates from mainland China and is largely composed of female students. The number of students from mainland China enrolled at CityU is slightly higher than 63% of its total. Given the dominant Confucian-Taoist-Buddhist mainland Chinese culture, developing a positive relationship with students was a priority for the university academic staff. University lecturers in MSAR found that online teaching required more time for building trust and developing a better relationship (guanxi, 關係) with the students. Indeed, in this perspective, guanxi played an important role. According to Cheng (1996), guanxi refers to one of three things: 1) the existence of a relationship between people who share a group status or are related to a common person; 2) actual connections with and frequent contact between people, and 3) a contact person with little direct interaction.

Table 2. Number of non-local registered students, 2019-2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>China (mainland)</th>
<th>Hong Kong and Taiwan</th>
<th>Europe</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>7,888</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>11,016</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18,904</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>93.87</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>&lt; 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Tsang (1998) asserts that guanxi can be divided into two types: blood relationship jai ren and social interconnection wai ren. Building the group status is the natural result of frequent interactions, which leads to the creation of a sense of social interconnection. A practical example in the academic context is the number of recommendation letters requested by students at the end of the semester. The higher number of requests for recommendation letters is positively correlated with a higher perception of academic and social connectivity. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, delivering lectures was “mission impossible", but it became a mission possible because of online platforms. However, the absence of complementary engagement was challenging for non-Chinese lecturers teaching first-year bachelor’s students, for some of them it was their very first experience with online technology. Some situations recounted to the authors might serve to illustrate the situation. For instance, a stable internet connection with an adequate connection speed is necessary for each member of any online cyber classroom. Lecturers received ample feedback reports from students, and they noted limitations posed by poor internet connection, in particular on mobile platforms. Students even expressed their worry about their online attendance and cyber classroom participation and the lack of a good internet connection at home. Sometimes lecturers patiently spent more time with students to fix technical issues before beginning the lecture. When we realized that one of the reasons of poor Wi-Fi connections was related to the use of mobile platforms, we suggested the use of laptops instead of the popular iPhone (or iPad). However, not all students had access to laptops in their home environment.

Another solution was to organize optional experimental classes before the beginning of a new module. As time passed by, the technical environment of the cyber classroom became more stress-free, which also encouraged feedback to be given in a natural manner. This helped to mitigate the development of a digital relationship, which to a certain extent helped to suppress the human gap associated with online teaching. Lecturers rapidly learned to be very flexible, to stimulate their students’ imagination to capture their attention, to be extremely patient, and not to judge the initial difficulties faced by each student.

The end of the semester brought a new concern because some students, in particular post-graduates, were planning to go abroad to continue their studies or for research in collaborative international projects. The news about the pandemic situation abroad made them feel safe at home, but everyone had a strong sense of isolation. When HKSAR closed
its maritime border with MSAR, when South Korea suspended regular flights, and finally when the situation began to escalate in the United States, COVID-19 dominated all the narratives. “From 4th February it was no longer possible to take a ferry between Hong Kong and Macau. The ferry was not only the preferred means of transport for tourists but also a much faster and convenient option linking Macau with central Hong Kong. The HKZM bridge remained open, but the relative isolation of the bridgehead meant that it took a series of bus trips to reach central Hong Kong (Zuev & Hannam, 2020, p. 6). Fearing for the long-term effects on their research projects, a limited number of post-graduate students took advantage of the initial window of opportunity and returned to MSAR. They also underwent a 14-day self-quarantine period.

The supervision of these students and oral examinations also had to be adapted to the new context. Processes were delayed or slowed down, with access to resources partial and interaction channels limited. Most of the planned overseas research trips were cancelled or postponed.

3.4. Socialization issues

Foremost, we all learned the importance of the university space as a locus of socialization, fostering social experiences and creating cultural opportunities to flourish. As Cromdal (2006) argues, socialization essentially represents the whole process of learning throughout the life course and it is a central influence on behavior, beliefs, and actions. Therefore, the university — as a space of dynamics, schedules, occupancy, events, encounters, frustrations, discoveries, emotions, contacts, performances, challenges, opportunities, routines, rules, and dreams — is certainly a very important part of any socialization process. The importance of the university space as part of the secondary socialization process (learning what is the appropriate behavior as a member of a smaller group within the larger society) is clear because a very different behavior is required in the university as compared to the home space. Home online teaching encourages the extension (replication) of family behaviors, not the acquisition of new social skills.

Primary socialization is the first process that may shape the self and frame symbolic interaction by family relationships (Castells, 1996), then becomes a member of society (Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2011). As the two major social institutions, family and work (Hage & Powers, 1992) must teach roles, behaviors, and norms for preparing the child for life in the “macro-society”. Through the family, the child becomes socialized to bond, generate social interaction, and comprehend significant concepts concerning trust, love, and togetherness (Whitbeck, 1999). Particularly in relation to the idea of “togetherness” within a family, online home teaching over an extended period of time has the potential to adversely affect primary socialization because it dictates (in the sense of imposing new arrangements) familiar routines, boundaries, schedules, and the division of spaces. From our vantage point, we saw that students’ families experienced a certain loss of privacy and intimacy when classes were taught online. Children who have already provided in primary socialization, are ready to learn new roles and norms instead of old ones or opposing values and roles through secondary socialization (Nash & Calonica, 1996). Apart from primary socialization, the process of secondary socialization initiates socialized individuals into new domains of their society (Berger & Luckman, 1966), by forming individual perspectives from further knowledge, skills, and values (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011). In addition, the university space is a contributor towards anticipatory socialization, because it is the site of the processes of socialization in which a person “rehearses” for future positions, occupations, and social relationships. Neither secondary socialization nor anticipatory socialization can effectively be exercised through a system of teaching driven exclusively by online solutions. Perhaps the solution lies in blended teaching methodology as Kim and Bonk (2006) suggest “blended learning will perhaps be a more significant growth area than fully online learning” (p. 29).

4. GOVERNANCE-RELATED CHALLENGES

The design of CityU’s governance system was based on in-person classes. In a culture of participatory decision-making and decentralized implementation, online teaching as a stand-alone means of teaching has brought new challenges. New pedagogic and management solutions had to be identified in a very short time. Moreover, given the culture of strong regard for governmental guidelines as a driving force for transformation, the university as a private institution strived to maintain the quality of teaching and safeguard the labor contracts of all personnel. From January to October 2020, the sustainability of academic governance was ensured by strong government support (which facilitated the technology transformation) and teaching quality controls (syllabi coordination and adaptation, students feedback, and teaching oversight). Several safety measures suggested by the government were implemented by the university, and all relevant departments were involved. Complementary academic management decisions were taken at the higher decision levels and implemented in a decentralized manner. Students were involved since the beginning of the pandemic, and their feedback was crucial for finding the best tailor-made solutions. Figure 1 depicts the key aspect of this dynamic process, involving close coordination between different actors and a remarkable unity of efforts.
In-person classes resumed in October 2020 in a controlled manner. Figure 2 depicts a number of measures that were implemented since the resumption of academic activities: 1) social distancing; 2) control of accesses; 3) readily available hand sanitizers; 4) universal temperature control; 5) the continuation of online lectures and exams for students located in affected areas; 6) universal and compulsory use of face masks; 7) sanitizing pads for equipment; 8) individual apps to trace locations and for nucleic acid testing; 9) reduction in the number of group activities and field visits; and 10) reduction in the number of visiting scholars travelling from affected countries.

**Figure 2. Pandemic security measures**

*Source: Authors’ elaboration.*
The university adapted to the government rationale in the fight against the COVID pandemic. Table A.1 in Appendix also depicts a chronological summary of the measures implemented by MSAR Higher Education Regulatory Authorities. Three aspects of academic governance are evident: 1) early warning and the subsequent measures; 2) the need to control movements of people and therefore to contain the spread of the virus; and 3) the phased resumption of in-person classes.

We have mentioned earlier that on-campus without students, there is no university to call attention to the importance of the socialization role of higher education. Indeed, in exceptional circumstances, like those advanced by COVID-19, a campus without students still can be perceived as a university. If online teaching is understood as a temporary remedy, and the mitigating measures to compensate for the erosion of the socialization process are placed in a coordinated and timely manner. Among these actions rest the need to address technological and sanitary challenges, the necessity to reinforce human-cultural-communicating skills, and the requirement of permanent internal coordination and anticipatory external guidance.

5. CONCLUSION

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the authors aimed to identify lessons learned from the empirical experience of acknowledging, adapting, and recognizing the challenges presented by the 2019-2020 pandemic. The participant observations took place in MSAR, during the spring semester of 2020, which was unforgettable for the majority of the university population. To this day, after the resumption of in-person classes, the echoes of the pandemic still resonate on the campus, especially with regard to preventive security measures. At the beginning of October 2020, when students returned, one observed positive energy permeating the air and an unusually high level of collective joy.

In this empirical study, the authors found that after an initial period dominated by technological challenges, the human aspect of online teaching was probably the most difficult to manage. Online teaching continued after the middle of the semester, and the isolation felt by students heightened their sense of disengagement from the university campus. In the cyber classroom of online teaching, students did not have their lecturer's attention focused on them all the time, nor were their peers involved in all issues of interaction. Initially, this setup made them feel relaxed because health safety concerns were addressed. However, the initial feeling of relaxed led into unbearable social isolation, brought about by their sense of disconnection from university life because they were stuck at home. Students also missed being part of an academic environment on a daily basis. As we mentioned before, students naturally wanted to be with their peers, despite the security measures imposed on gathering in small groups or despite their intensified virtual social communication. Indeed, during online teaching, students became even more active on social media, which was predominantly used to discuss academic matters. After making sure they had the necessary technical requirements, students had to look for a “balance” in their family space, interacting with their family members and being part of their routines. Students spent more time performing their regular academic activities and tasks, and they asked for more individual feedback. They frequently used and referred to lecture recordings for clarifications and further explanations.

From the academic staff’s point of view, the new software/hardware and technical support provided by the university as well as the flexibility, early management, and availability were central to academic governance. Online teaching turned out to be more time-consuming and certainly more tiring due to three main reasons: 1) it requires preparation (lecture and platform); 2) it requires more availability on the part of lecturers to give individual feedback; and 3) it requires permanent attention to multiple features, during the delivery of online lectures (audience attendance, PowerPoint sharing, feed of comments, student reactions, status of the microphone, and quality of the sound). Apart from the syllabi content, lecturers had to act as counselors most of the time to help reduce students’ level of stress and to build relationships based on mutual trust. In view of cultural differences in the context of the MSAR classroom vis-à-vis the different regions in continental China, it is of paramount importance that the teaching model is driven by a constant motivation to build a consistent relationship. The cyber classroom made this process more difficult and lengthier, but we never lost sight of its importance. Students had more free time, but it was harder to encourage them to read or to engage in extra-academic activities. Unlike the regular classroom, the cyber classroom required more time, imagination, dynamics, and preparation. Moreover, the new opportunities arising from burgeoning online webinars as well as more initiatives to empower collaborative teaching and academic research are seen as the benefits arising from the academic challenges faced during the pandemic.

The main takeaway is probably the lesson learned from the entire process: the reinforcement of the importance of the university as a material space integrated into the socialization process. Combining technical and human skills in tandem significantly contributes to the processes of secondary and anticipatory socialization. If we understand socialization as a process of adherence to values, then the university is the likely center of excellence for nurturing anticipatory positive socialization, because it creates pleasurable experiences, brings rewarding opportunities, and actively encourages socialization processes that teach students to replicate similar behaviors in the future. On a campus without students, there is no university. In the online university, it is difficult to forge a sense of togetherness among students and they struggle to benefit from secondary and anticipatory positive socialization.

On the one hand, online teaching brought technological challenges and noteworthy advantages. Some of these advantages certainly help to improve our teaching effectiveness with controlled costs. On the other hand, online teaching should be understood as a complementary teaching medium, in the context of blended teaching methodology, or as an interim way to connect academic actors and not as a protracted stand-alone solution. Last but not least, in terms of academic
governance and sustainability of online teaching, we have learned the importance of working side by side with governmental authorities, academic partners, domestic staff, and students. Likewise, the vast majority of the students expressed their support for the government and university security measures, even after the resumption of classes in October 2020. Students also voiced their disappointment that online classes did not deliver the same results as in-person classes. Strong cultural factors limit the efficacy of online teaching as a stand-alone means of teaching and the building of relationships. Combining both ideas, it appears that online teaching as the main method of instruction in bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. programs must be used to supplement and not to replace in-person methodologies. But then again, the positive side of this pandemic seems to be related to technological advancements, which have led to a blend of teaching methods, greater use of webinars, and more intensive planning on collaborative teaching. Online teaching is not considered the only means of teaching, and it will certainly not be disregarded or minimized as it was in the past.

REFERENCES

APPENDIX

Table A.1. Sample of measures implemented by MSAR Higher Education Regulatory Authorities during the COVID-19 outbreak from January 1 to August 31, 2020 (Part 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24 January 2020</td>
<td>DSES</td>
<td>Instructions delivered via meeting with the directors of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): the second semester of the 2019–2020 academic year (AY 2019/2020) — all courses were tentatively postponed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 January 2020</td>
<td>SS/CDC</td>
<td>CDC Technical Guidelines (052.CDC-NDIV.GL.2020): Prevent novel coronavirus infection — Advice to HEIs and students: 1) pay attention to the epidemic information released by the Government and support various preventive measures; disseminate and update information related to disease prevention to students and staff in a timely manner; 2) pay attention to the health conditions of staff and students and take their temperate regularly, if anyone develops a fever or respiratory symptoms, advise them to wear a mask and seek medical attention; allow them to stay away from school/work and to stay at home for rest if recommended by medical personnel; 3) if anyone presents with a fever or respiratory symptoms, ask them whether they have travelled to Mainland China or stayed in any other places with high transmission risk in the last 14 days prior to the onset of illness and whether they have had contact with a confirmed patient; 4) ensure that disposable paper towels and alcohol-based hand sanitizers are provided in public reception areas; Wash hands frequently with water and liquid soap, or rub hands with an alcohol-based hand rub; do not touch the eyes, nose, and mouth before performing hand hygiene.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 January 2020</td>
<td>SS/CDC</td>
<td>Instructions via email to the HEIs: As the institutions had postponed the beginning of the second semester of AY 2019/2020, and are considering possible further postponement, teaching staff are recommended to start preparations for online teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 January 2020</td>
<td>SS/CDC</td>
<td>MSAR Government press release (NEWS 1-2-122383): [...] The date of class resumption of all tertiary and non-tertiary education institutions and tutorial centers will be postponed until further announcement (Post: 30/01/2020): the MSAR Government has announced that the date of class resumption [...] Exemption from work by the Government: In accordance with the approval from the Chief Executive of MSAR, public services staff are exempted from work on 30 January–10 February 2020 in order to reduce crowd gathering and infective risks. Staff members who are exempted from work shall stay at home and avoid going out. Unless it is urgent and necessary, all staff members shall avoid leaving MSAR.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 January 2020</td>
<td>DSES</td>
<td>MSAR Government information: Measures to be taken by HEIs in response to the situation caused by the novel coronavirus [Post: 30/01/2020] official guideline document to Higher Education: [...] 1) cyberschool; 2) no gatherings; 3) campus open &amp; clean; 4) staff movement urge; 5) movement control of students from Mainland China; 6) cancellation of group activities; 7) suspension of exchange with mainland China, and 8) alert for overseas exchange.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 February 2020</td>
<td>SS/CDC</td>
<td>CDC Technical Guidelines (052.CDC-NDIV.GL.2020): Prevent novel coronavirus infection — Advice to HEIs and students: 1) avoid going out, do not travel to MSAR or other areas; 2) do not gather or assemble; stay at home or in the dormitory whenever possible; 3) face mask is compulsory on the campus: everyone should wear a mask when working, doing activities or having classes in the venue; 5) try to keep a distance from others in the workplace, home or dormitory; and 6) wash hands frequently with water and liquid soap, or rub hands with an alcohol-based hand rub; do not touch the eyes, nose, and mouth before performing hand hygiene.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 February 2020</td>
<td>DSES</td>
<td>CDC Technical Guidelines (072.CDC-NDIV.GL.2020): Prevent novel coronavirus infection — Advice on class resumption for HEIs: 1) before the resumption: travel tracking of all staff and students, HEIs should have the detailed travel history of all staff and students before class resumption, they must arrive in MSAR 14 days prior to class resumption. The institution shall accommodate relevant students in designated locations for the 14-day cohort health management. The institution shall notify relevant students for the 14-day cohort; 2) after the resumption: monitoring of health, measures to reduce contact, environmental hygiene; 3) management of cross-border staff and students (who are MSAR residents): reallocation of workplace or seats of such individuals in order to prevent them from working in a crowded workplace. Suspend or reduce as much as possible the duration and frequency of face-to-face contact with students of different classes in order to minimize the risk of cross-infection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 February 2020</td>
<td>SS/CDC</td>
<td>Government information: Individuals who have been to countries or regions outside China will be subject to clinical observation [Post: 16/03/2020] — Government Order 72/2020: From March 18 non-resident are prohibited from entering MSAR except for Chinese citizens [Post: 17/03/2020]: From March 18, 2020 (00:00 am), all non-residents except those from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and holders of non-resident employee identification cards are prohibited from entering MSAR. Government Information: Epidemic Prevention management for students, teachers and staffs returning to HE in MSAR [Post: 17/03/2020] [...] Government information: HEIs in MSAR will resume activity partially from April 1 [Post: 18/03/2020].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Health Services Bureau of MSAR (SS) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

2 Higher Education Bureau of MSAR (DSES).
Table A.1. Sample of measures implemented by MSAR Higher Education Regulatory Authorities during the COVID-19 outbreak from January 1 to August 31, 2020 (Part 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17 March 2020</td>
<td>DSES</td>
<td>Official Guideline document on class resumption for HEIs. Before resuming any teaching activities, the institutions are required to inform the Higher Education Bureau of their plans for class resumption. Faculty members and students should be notified of the resuming arrangements no less than 14 days in advance. 1) Initially, classes for different years and different subjects should be scheduled at different times where possible. In order to avoid drawing crowds of students at the same time on the same floor of a teaching building, classes may be resumed altogether or in batches; 2) the institutions should be well informed of the numbers of faculty members and students who resume class as well as the routes and means of transport to be taken by the faculty members and students to return to MSAR. After returning to MSAR and class resumption, faculty members and students should avoid cross border movement; 3) the institutions are required to confirm the attendance and absence of faculty members before the resumption; For students who have been in quarantine, under treatment, or have recovered, and those who cannot return to MSAR at the moment, they should be provided with an alternative arrangement for class resumption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 March 2020</td>
<td>SS/CDC</td>
<td>MSAR Government information: 1) tourists from overseas are prohibited from entering MSAR; 2) MSAR residents returning from overseas, Hong Kong, or Taiwan have to undergo medical observation for 14 days upon arriving MSAR; 3) residents from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan who have travelled overseas in the past 14 days are prohibited from entering MSAR; Residents from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan who have been to Hong Kong and Taiwan in the past 14 days prior to their entry have to undergo medical observation for 14 days upon arriving MSAR.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 April 2020</td>
<td>SS/CDC</td>
<td>HEIs are to resume partially: programs only for MSAR resident students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 May 2020</td>
<td>SS/CDC</td>
<td>HEIs are to resume partially: for mainland Chinese students but only for the purpose of graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 July 2020</td>
<td>SS/CDC</td>
<td>Government information: Quarantine-free travel to Guangdong for MSAR people with a certificate stating they are free from COVID-19 [Post: 14/07/2020]: The Guangdong government imposed a 14-day quarantine on arrivals from foreign countries as well as Hong Kong, MSAR, and Taiwan on March 27. The Guangdong government lifted its 14-day quarantine requirement for arrivals from MSAR as of July 15. Guangdong's quarantine measure for arrivals from elsewhere remains in force.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 July 2020</td>
<td>DSES</td>
<td>Official Guideline document on the start of the academic year 2020/2021 for HEI.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 July 2020</td>
<td>DSES</td>
<td>HEIs started the academic year 2020/2021 on campus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Selected information based on Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Higher Education Bureau (DSES), and Government Information Bureau.