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Sustainable organizational adaptation: Private higher education's strategic response to emerging challenges

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Abstract

This study analyzes organizational development and change approaches based on private higher education institutions (HEIs) responding to COVID-19 encounters. Through case studies and stakeholder interviews, it pinpoints four key factors: organizational adaptation, faculty role redefinition, digital transformation, and sustainability. Remarkably, sustainability emerges as a critical aspect, integrating environmental, social, and economic considerations into strategies. These include lowering environmental impact, fostering social equity, and safeguarding economic resilience. The study highlights the importance of understanding HEIs' responses to crises and their effect on organizational development. The understanding of the study can inform policymakers and administrators, enhancing crisis management and organizational strategies for greater resilience. By assimilating sustainability into these strategies, HEIs can align with global agendas like the UN Sustainable Development Goals, contributing to a sustainable future for higher education.

Keywords: COVID-19, Curriculum change, Digital transformation, Higher education institutions, Sustainability, Sustainable development education.

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1. Introduction

It is a stern warning that pandemics have occurred in the past and will likely occur again in the future, such as the COVID-19 epidemic [1]. Though harmful viruses could not be stopped from spreading, it is essential to be ready to decrease

their negative consequences on communities. This current pandemic has had a significant negative impact on the global economy, affecting all societal segments and delivering profound changes in consumer and business behavior [2]. Several businesses had to close because of the pandemic, which caused unparalleled disruption in various industries. Vendors and products encountered several challenges related to consumer demand, sales and marketing, labor, supply chain, health and safety, as well as cash flow [3]. Academicians, students, and the organizational staff of HEIs are considered to adapt too quickly to the inexperienced reality because of the crisis, compelling HEIs to move to remote mode [4]. This abrupt movement exposed socioeconomic inequities, which posed difficulties in the effort to provide remote education to everyone [5]. Advantaged students who have access to resources and support networks are better equipped to adjust to different learning possibilities because of the pandemic. In contrast, impoverished students face challenges when pursuing online education because there are not enough digital resources and encouraging environments [6]. Numerous schools that have experienced disruptions from lockdowns and closures have suffered learning declines and potential long-term economic implications. Higher education has also been adversely affected by the pandemic, which has raised concerns about the value of university education and has compelled a shift to new teaching methods, such as digital learning [7].

Everything has been unexpectedly disrupted as numerous higher education institutions realigned for Education 4.0 due to the pandemic. These shifts are apparent in several aspects, such as postgraduate employment [8], shift in mobility patterns [9], health and wellbeing [10], teaching evaluation methods [11], learning [12] and even the descriptions of education [13]. Virtual learning extended the traditional classroom instruction. Now, it is widely used in teaching [14]. For educators and policymakers, the COVID-19 epidemic offers an opportunity to reexamine educational practices and reassess what is significant, essential, and desired for future generations. Due to COVID-19's disruptive nature, education must be completely restructured [15]. The sudden global pandemic outbreak started almost immediately. During this two-year epidemic, numerous institutions of higher learning implemented virtual platform learning and constantly adjusted to innovative and advanced educational management, curriculum, and pedagogy. Consequently, experts in private higher education will share their experiences and strategies for effective transformation in higher education institutions.

1.1. Significance of Study

The study holds significant value for various stakeholders in private higher education and beyond. Its findings can inform strategic decision-making within institutions, offering insights into specific organizational development strategies employed to address turbulence caused by the pandemic. Acquiring knowledge is crucial for enhancing resilience and adaptability in the face of unforeseen disruptions. Beyond practical applications for educational institutions, the research has profound impacts on the academic community by expanding the insight into organizational development in private institutes, providing a foundation for future study. Additionally, policymakers can benefit from the study's insights when formulating policies related to organizational resilience. In a nutshell, the research has the potential to positively impact decision-makers, practitioners, and policymakers and contribute to the broader academic discourse on effective responses to crises in the educational sector.

1.2. Limitation of the study

This study sheds light on the multifaceted strategies adopted by private educational institutions to navigate the turbulence caused by the COVID-19 epidemic. However, it is crucial to recognize certain limitations inherent in the research. Firstly, the generalizability of the findings may be constrained, as the research's insights are derived from a specific context, and variations across regions and cultural settings may exist. Additionally, the time sensitivity of the study is noteworthy, given the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic's impact. Strategies that were effective during the data collection period might require reassessment in the face of ongoing developments. The study's reliance on expert opinions introduces an element of subjectivity, and while expert insights offer depth, they may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within different institutions. The focus on four major themes may leave gaps in understanding, overlooking other critical aspects of organizational development. Furthermore, the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as students and administrative staff, could provide a more comprehensive picture. Lastly, the study primarily addresses responses during the pandemic, leaving the long-term sustainability and post-pandemic dynamics of these strategies as areas for further exploration.

1.3. Research Objective

The research aimed to comprehensively explore the organizational development strategies implemented by private educational institutions to navigate the obstacles caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the specific organizational development and change strategies employed, the study seeks to provide insights into how higher education institutions navigated the complexities brought about by the pandemic within the context of private higher education institutions. The study thus aims to contribute valuable knowledge for understanding how organizations in private higher education proactively responded to these unprecedented circumstances, fostering resilience and adaptability through effective organizational development strategies.

1.4. Research Questions

Based on the study objective, the research question developed for the study consists of: *What specific organizational development strategies did private higher education institutions employ to adeptly address the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of private higher education?*

This research question comprehensively addresses processes and dynamics involved in the implementation of organizational development and change strategies within the context of private higher institutes responding to the impact of COVID-19. It invites an extensive exploration of the strategies employed, the challenges encountered, and the key factors influencing the success and long-term viability of these initiatives. The focus is on understanding how institutions navigate the complexities of shifts due to the pandemic, fostering adaptability, and building resilience within the organizational fabric.

2. Literature Review

Orsmond [5] examines the influence of COVID-19 on organizational transformation, accentuating the essentiality aimed at adaptable and inventive methods for navigating ambiguity. Moreover, he stresses the significance of responsive strategic leadership and organizational strategies for long-term sustainability and the ability to adjust quickly to changing conditions. In addition to its gradual effects on education, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled significant alterations in organizational development (OD) in academic settings. Scholars have scrutinized different facets of these changes and strategies in which organizations have handled the crisis. Chen and Sriphon [15] denoted how the pandemic impacts leadership within organizations. Their research investigates the ways that exceptional challenges have impacted leadership roles and styles. They asserted that for an organization to successfully manage a pandemic and retain transformative and adaptive leadership techniques, it must be resilient in the face of uncertainty. Marques et al. [16] examine how COVID-19 influences organizational development, which is an initial element of sustainability. Their study underlines the value of organizational flexibility and proactive crisis management tactics. To safeguard an organization's long-term survival and beneficial inputs to society, the study highlights the value of sustainable practices. Considering the intricacies of the pandemic, Juneja [17] investigated how organizational development contributes to resilient change management.

2.1. LR for Sustainable Development for Higher Education

2.1.1. Digital Transformation in Higher Education

Higher education institutions have used digital platforms to enhance learning experiences. Studies examined how digital tools have changed educational methods, creating an inclusive infrastructure and institutional adaptability [18]. However, the adoption of digital tools has not been standardized, with some institutions facing barriers such as a lack of infrastructure and unequal access to the Internet [19]. Even though some institutions face barriers, institutions that implement these digital innovations will have long-term academic benefits.

2.2. Institutional Adaptability and Resilience

Adaptability is always important for higher education institutions because they aim to create an evolving academic landscape. When institutions can respond effectively to barriers, they will have stable operations and ensure student success. Private higher education institutions that implement flexible policies and diversified learning modes demonstrate greater resilience in facing unexpected changes [20]. On the other hand, some private higher education institutions have created hybrid teaching models to provide greater accessibility. Plus, cultivating a culture that is full of innovation within the institutions leads to continuous improvement, and it makes the educational system prepared for future uncertainty [21]. Resilience is not only about short periods of adjustment, but it also involves a long-term commitment to creating sustainable academic environments [22].

2.3. Curriculum Development

The shifting expectations of students and the dynamic requirements of the job markets have made many institutions revise their curricula [23]. Students need to have skills such as analytical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving skills to prepare them for real-world challenges. Faculty members play important roles in this transformation because they must adopt new teaching strategies that align with modern learning [24]. Nowadays, professional development programs have also been introduced to help lecturers strengthen their teaching methods and use technology in their courses [6]. By continuing to refine the curricula and investing in faculty training, private higher education institutions can ensure that students receive quality education, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4.

2.4. Sustainability Initiatives in Higher Education

Sustainability has emerged as a key focus in higher education as institutions strive to integrate environmental, economic, and social considerations into their practices and policies [25]. Many universities are incorporating sustainability into their academic programs and encouraging students to cultivate critical thinking skills related to global challenges. However, the implementation of sustainability strategies can be hindered by limited resources and resistance to change [26]. To address these challenges, institutions should collaborate with industry partners to weave sustainability into their research agendas [16]. On a positive note, numerous universities have launched initiatives aimed at waste reduction, carbon footprint minimization, and enhanced energy efficiency [27]. These efforts not only benefit the environment but also result in considerable cost savings for the institutions. By nurturing sustainability within academic programs and aligning campus strategies and operations accordingly, higher education can play a significant role in promoting long-term environmental well-being [28].

2.5. Organizational Development and Change Strategies through COVID-19 in Private Higher Education: Online curriculum delivery and digital transformation

Acknowledging the shift in digital education and delivering courses online is the most visible development in higher education institutions. Prior research has examined the swift digital change in higher education institutions amid the worldwide epidemic crisis. Abdulrahim and Mabrouk [25], Bhagat and Kim [29], Mahmud et al. [30], García-Morales et al. [11], Hai et al. [21], Kutnjak [31], Mhlanga [32] and Nandy et al. [22] are a few of these studies. Mahmud et al. [30] and Mhlanga [32] asserted that the pandemic taught us valuable lessons about digital transformation. As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, higher education institutes are undergoing significant changes as it becomes urgently necessary to digitize training and education processes while collaborating with academics who lack the fundamental technical abilities for online learning. The pandemic had an extreme impact on education, making in-person instruction and learning in classrooms rare and favoring online distance education and emergency remote learning [33]. Therefore, the higher education system is obligated to find a solution to sustain its competitiveness and continue offering high-quality education in the age of digital shift, unruly technological advancements, as well as a hastened shift [11]. According to Nurhas et al. [3], persons who are digitally ready and prepared to adapt to change can build a stable and strong work environment in higher learning institutions. Collaborative online international learning, according to Li and Lalani [34], has recently grown in popularity as a cutting-edge and cost-effective educational technique for providing students with access to worldwide educational opportunities at home. Cooperative learning during the learning process can motivate students to exert more effort, improve teamwork, and accomplish a collective goal [14]. Similar studies also emphasized the advantages of the cooperative virtual global learning endeavor, according to research by Laal and Ghodsi [35], Esche [36] and Appolloni et al. [37].

2.5.1. Adaptation and Resilience Management

Some earlier researchers looked at context-related resilience elements in higher learning institutions amid the COVID-19 epidemic. This entails altering the learning strategy to raise faculty members' strength [38, 39] psychological wellbeing to improve students' resilience [40, 41], comprehensive organizational resilience simulation for higher educational stakeholders [22, 42, 43]. It's also crucial to have a strong e-learning infrastructure and for people to be tech-savvy when learning online [44]. Instructors and students must have the ability to use technology and be committed to doing so. Gast [45] contends that for universities to remain relevant and be able to provide the caliber of education demanded in the twenty-first century, they must integrate the use of technology, improve interpersonal interactions, and personalize instruction. Although technology has been used more for learning, according to Martin [46] artificial intelligence (AI), big data, statistical investigation, and other advanced technologies can help us do our jobs more proactively and effectively, in addition to technology that has been used more for learning. They can also energize the workforce, giving them more time to engage with the pupils and their coworkers. Future labs are likely to include virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) features to supplement face-to-face interactions among students and academics. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, augmented reality and virtual reality had been regularly used in real-world instruction for risky situations besides cutting-edge technology, for instance, military applications [27], astronaut education [47] and nuclear power plant management training [48]. Although augmented reality and virtual reality are not yet widely used in the education sector due to implementation costs and technological maturity, they are still considered the greatest choices to enhance students' practical learning in the digital-physical dimension [49].

2.5.2. Curriculum change

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to curricular revision that goes beyond solely shifting how teaching is delivered. Instead, it should focus more on what students need to learn and be learner-centric. Once highly regarded knowledge and skills start to lose their significance. During the pandemic, curriculum modification entails more than just adjusting how teaching is delivered. It should be more learner-centric and centered on what students need to learn. Once highly regarded skills and knowledge begin to lose their significance. It is no longer essential to repeatedly memorize or practice skills or knowledge connected to collecting, accumulating, and regaining information, for example. To adapt to today's changing environment, the curriculum needs to be revised to provide more emphasis on skills like analytical reasoning, innovation, inquisitiveness, cooperation, entrepreneurship, growth mindset, and international competency [50]. The updated curriculum should be developed with further flexibility. A common educational strategy being implemented in higher education to prepare graduates for life in the period of Industry 4.0 is outcome-based education (OBE), which places a high emphasis on learning outcomes and objectives [48, 51]. With the aid of this system, all graduates leave higher education institutions with the abilities, characteristics, know-how, and competence required in the modern world.

2.5.3. Sustainability

The global epidemic has altered our world, and events might certainly not be the same. Policymakers and educators need to think of the most critical demand for sustainability education that occurs these days and soon. The foundation of sustainable education should be transformative learning to support behavioral, attitudinal, and societal change [9]. The world of today demands that we prepare students for sustainable development. Today's world requires that we educate for sustainable development. One of the experts highlighted environmental sustainability and global networking as aspects of long-term educational sustainability. Future economic and social system volatility can be reduced by engaging in sustainable development [19]. The education sector is viewed as a global service provided by quasi-business entities within a knowledge economy that was becoming more complex and competitive prior to the introduction of COVID-19. Higher education institutions conducted multiple strategic research studies due to these issues [33]. The epidemic caused a fundamental shift

in the education sector, compelling higher learning institutions to adopt more innovative tactics to accept, deal with, and adapt to radical events [46]. The pandemic outbreak was unprecedented in the modern economy, and it is this uncharted territory that has resulted in numerous problems in the education sector.

2.6. Lewin's Change Management theory

Towards tackling the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 outbreak in private institutions, the research employs Lewin and Cartwright [52]. Change Management Model as a comprehensive and structured framework. To grasp the dynamics of change, we have adopted Kurt Lewin's change model Lewin and Cartwright [52], a valuable theoretical framework for understanding change processes. While originally crafted to explore how individuals navigate change, its applicability extends to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic [53]. Lewin formulated the change model to illustrate how individuals respond to changes in their lives, delineating three key stages: unfreezing, movement, and freezing [54].

The first phase of change, known as "Unfreeze," entails preparing the organization to recognize the imperative nature of change, involving the dismantling of the existing status quo before establishing new operational methods [55]. This involves acknowledging the interruptions caused by the epidemic and elucidating the reasons necessitating adaptation. Thus, prior to implementing change, the organization needs to progress through the initial unfreezing step. The primary objective of the unfreezing stage is to cultivate an understanding of how the current status quo or prevailing level of acceptance poses challenges for business, given the inherent resistance to change among individuals.

Following the introduction of uncertainty in the unfreeze stage, the change phase marks the point at which individuals initiate the process of resolving uncertainty by exploring new approaches to tasks [55]. However, people begin to embrace methods that appear supportive of the new direction. To comprehend and contribute to the success of such a concept, individuals must grasp how they can benefit from it, with time and communication emerging as two critical elements of change. Time is essential for individuals to understand alterations, and they must feel a strong connection with the organization during this transitional period [38]. Subsequently, the change stage concentrates on implementing strategies to address the impact of COVID-19, such as incorporating digital technologies for remote learning and fostering an innovative culture. Continuous support, training, and resources play a pivotal role in facilitating a seamless transition and promoting collaboration among stakeholders.

Ultimately, the Refreeze stage endeavors to solidify the organization in its transformed state by instituting fresh norms, practices, and operational methods that harmonize with the adjusted organizational structure. Commemorating achievements, instituting feedback mechanisms, and delivering continuous support are essential elements of this stage. Lewin's model, which prioritizes awareness creation, the proficient execution of changes, and cultural assimilation, provides a methodical approach to navigate the intricacies of organizational development and change strategies amid the challenges posed by the pandemic in private higher institutes.

Based on Lewin's change model, the term "refreezing" is commonly used to denote the process of reinforcing, stabilizing, and solidifying the new state following a transition. Changes in organizational procedures, goals, structure, offerings, or personnel are validated and established as the new norm. According to Oyedotun [2], once these changes have taken shape and individuals have embraced the new ways of working, the organization is deemed ready to refreeze. This refreezing manifests in the form of a stable organizational hierarchy, well-defined job descriptions, and other aspects. The refreeze stage assists both individuals and the organization in internalizing or institutionalizing the changes, ensuring their consistent application in everyday operations [55]. The absence of this newly established state can pose challenges when addressing subsequent change initiatives efficiently.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodology and phenomenological inquiry to assess the implementation of organizational development and change strategies as a consequence of COVID-19 in a private higher institution. The researchers' hypotheses that it is possible to comprehend, categorize, and arrange the experiences of leaders and specialists in a more coordinated way are supported by phenomenology. This investigation entered the world of the specialists to try to understand how they perceived the pandemic and what their strategies were. To identify the critical methods of organizational development and change tactics during the pandemic, the researchers explored the perspectives and thoughts of leaders' experiences. Phenomenology is concerned with the individual's subjective experience. The importance of adequately depicting actual human experience is emphasized by the phenomenological method [1].

Five experts from private higher education institutions were specifically selected as leaders. The participants were chosen using a criteria-based strategy and a snowball sampling method, which involved requesting the original participant to recommend additional participants [56]. All participants had to meet the following criteria: be leaders or practitioners, with a maintained position of leadership for more than 10 years. The primary approach used for data generation to access the participants' private lives was phenomenological interviewing. As stated by Van Maanen [57], conducting interviews may be a useful way to collect experiential narrative data and examine it to develop a deeper and more thorough understanding of human phenomena.

Transcripts, memos, and personal records were collected and chronologically organized based on the data provided by the participants' experiences. Interview transcripts were assessed, memoranda were written, and they were then followed up based on first responses and observations [58]. The transcriptions were then analyzed using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological method. Emphasis was placed on any reports in the transcripts that appeared to relate to the participants' experiences in executing organizational development and transformation strategies within private higher education. Using this approach, the researchers were able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subjects' life experiences.

Using a horizontalization strategy, complete remarks about higher education leaders' experiences implementing organizational development and change strategies were retrieved from the interview transcripts. Each claim was given equal weight and consideration. Meaning statements were developed when the pertinent and significant statements were attached to another Word document. The redundant or overlapping sentences were then cut. The additional categories were acknowledged as invariant constituents of the understanding [59].

The meaning units were examined to determine if the inquiry was sufficiently precise and accurate to account for the phenomenon of hybrid work practices. Non-essential and unacceptable meaning units were eliminated. Each meaning unit was grammatically rephrased to better express the participant's idea. The invariant perspectives were then categorized after being grouped into themes. Subsequently, the themes were evaluated in relation to the participants' experiences.

In addition to noting the meaning units, general descriptions of the experience's textures, which were based on the participants' shared episodes and experiences, were also recorded along with exact quotations from the examples. The clustered themes and the invariant perspective were combined in this specific series of events. The individual textural description was then used as a starting point to develop the individual structural description of the experience [59].

The individual textural description created during the phenomenological reduction served as the foundation for the individual structural description. The organization expressed how the organizational development strategies during the pandemic were practiced. Once the participants' precise textural and structural descriptions had been determined, a second interview was scheduled with them to conclude the interview process later. Transcripts of a second interview were also made available. All the participants seemed to be familiar with this tactic.

To complete the research's synthesis phase, the textural and structural descriptions needed to be combined into a single document. A participant's overall account of the experience is provided by the ensuing composite textural-structural description [59]. The next stage was to compile a comprehensive account of the relevance and essential components of the event. The goal of the essay is to better explain to the reader the underlying meaning of the hybrid work experience, which is its essential and consistent nature.

The triangulation method was used to evaluate the study's trustworthiness by speaking with authorities in the associated subject to locate several sources of data. Additionally, a sizable number of library materials have been assessed to compile information for validity verification. The researchers were able to offer a precise and objective description of the phenomenon by making use of a range of methodologies, including semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews.

To ensure that the findings or interpretations of the findings aligned with both the participants and the researchers, member checks were carried out [60]. Participants have all received email copies of the transcripts, an explanation of the information, and participant biographies for evaluation and comment. Peer examination was employed to ensure the researcher maintained regular contact with the committee members, and reflexive notes were frequently taken to incorporate their input while reviewing the results with them.

4. Data Analysis

The research process involved a detailed analysis using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The narratives and incidents of the participants' experiences incorporating spiritual intelligence into their leadership practices were arranged through the transcription of notes, personal documents, and other materials. To find invariant components and extract meaning units, the data was analyzed using horizontalization, categorization, and theme clustering.

The analysis began with highlighting relevant statements from interview transcripts and progressed to creating meaning statements. Redundant statements were eliminated, and the remaining ones were rephrased and grouped into categories and themes. Individual textural and structural descriptions were developed for each participant, followed by a second interview to enhance completeness. The synthesis phase integrated textural and structural descriptions into a composite representation of participants' experiences.

Coding procedures involved labeling, transcribing, and storing audio recordings with corresponding codes. Initial coding, categorization, and theme development were carried out during and after transcription. Repeating ideas among respondents were identified, organized into themes, and further abstracted into theoretical constructs. Memos were written throughout the process to record the researcher's thoughts and aid in emerging categories.

Saturation, indicating the point where data becomes repetitive and exhaustive, was reached after the ninth participant in this study. Trustworthiness was emphasized through meticulous coding, memos, and the decision to stop data collection at the point of saturation. The report aims to provide readers with a precise identification of the essential, invariant essence of integrating sustainable organizational adaptation experience into higher education institutions amid the pandemic.

5. Findings and Discussion

The study's results are presented in response to the study's research objectives:

Four major themes were discovered based on the analysis:

- 1) Organizational Adaptation and Resilience
- 2) Faculty Skill Utilization and Job Redefinition
- 3) Digital transformation and online learning
- 4) Sustainability

5.1. Organizational Adaptation and Resilience

The essentials of organizational adaptation and resilience techniques in building a culture of creativity, inclusion, technological integration, and continuous learning are some of the important aspects highlighted by experts from Private

Higher Education. They emphasize that adaptation is proactive rather than merely reactive, enabling institutions to foresee problems and seize opportunities. Consequently, organizational adaptability and resilience stand out as the pillars of the journey of organizational development and transformation in higher institutions amid COVID-19. They make it possible for organizations to face ambiguity, welcome innovation, assist students, and adhere to their core objectives. As mentioned by the experts, the significance of these approaches will persist as the higher education landscape evolves, encouraging institutions to succeed in the face of difficulty and make constructive contributions to the global education ecosystem. As higher education institutes rebuild systems amid the pandemic recovery period, flexibility and resilience can help communication with people and the environment, as well as clarify the underlying reasons why academics, researchers, students, and other stakeholders experience stress [22].

“When faced with challenges, a resilient educational system will be able to adapt rather than look for opportunities to invest in new technology to raise the standard and accessibility of instruction. Digital transformation is the best course of action.” (Respondent 1).

As such, to safeguard the endurance of education while prioritizing the health of students, faculty, and staff, organizational resilience in private higher education towards responding to the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates that they swiftly adjust to remote learning, reorganize administrative procedures, and maintain support services.

In order to navigate the COVID-19 epidemic without affecting their main activities, universities must determine their capacity for change (Respondent 3).

Organizational adaptation became essential for survival during the COVID-19 epidemic. Institutions that swiftly embraced online learning, encouraged remote work, and established flexible regulations demonstrated their dedication to continuing business as usual while prioritizing safety (Respondent 4).

“Organizational resilience becomes an important element of success in the ever-changing higher education context. It is the capacity to seize opportunities from setbacks and quickly change course while upholding academic integrity. Resilient institutions embrace change as a fuel for growth, which helps them not just survive upheaval but also flourish.” (Respondent 5)

As part of change management adaptation, the experts in private higher education have also emphasized the importance of having a robust e-learning infrastructure and technological competence in online learning for academicians and students to cope with digital tools. In order to stay updated, the experts highlighted the significance of higher institutions adapting instruction, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and incorporating new technologies.

“To be more flexible, we are collaborating more closely with overseas partners, adding online components to the curriculum, and providing more alternatives and ways for choosing a program. Additionally, we want to give our pupils the option to enter, quit, or switch over. (Respondent 4)

“Technology integration during COVID-19 served as a prime example of organizational resilience. Digital tools were introduced by resilient institutions to support collaborative projects, virtual labs, and interactive online learning. Engagement was guaranteed by this combination of technology and pedagogy, demonstrating that flexibility not only endures crises but also improves the educational process.” (Respondent 3)

5.2. Faculty Skill Utilization and Job Redefinition

As stated by the experts, skill utilization and job redefinition among academicians and staff in higher education are intended to ensure that instructors have the knowledge, tools, and assistance they need to successfully meet the new challenges presented by online and hybrid learning settings. Initiatives for organizational growth focus on offering faculty members training courses and workshops to improve their abilities to teach online. These courses cover subjects like online pedagogy, making good use of technology, and producing engaging online content.

“Faculty members are embracing online instruction in these difficult times, exhibiting tremendous adaptability. To ensure that educators succeed in the virtual classroom, effective training programs that concentrate on interactive virtual pedagogy and digital tool utilization are crucial” (Respondent 1)

Higher education has provided flexible opportunities for professional growth that accommodate various schedules and learning preferences. These strategies, according to experts, enable faculty members to improve their skills at their own pace while still maintaining their teaching obligations through webinars, online courses, and self-paced modules. According to Li and Lalani [34], virtual learning demonstrates how improving information retention can be achieved while taking up less time. It indicates that the shift caused by the coronavirus might be long-lasting. The current epidemic will transform how technology is used in education going forward, as well as future pedagogical strategies. Adedoyin and Soykan [61], for example, have placed a strong emphasis on utilizing the digital revolution to create a modern roadmap for online teaching as well as learning. Utilizing social media and mobile learning has also been advocated by earlier researchers [18, 62] on effective as well as cooperative virtual education throughout the pandemic. Additionally, Sá and Serpa [24] underlined how the digital revolution enhances sustainable digital development in higher education and enables collaborative learning among academic settings. Additionally, digital transformation promotes new teaching strategies such as blended learning and online learning to build resilient and durable values in the classroom [37] during the pandemic.

“Professional growth that is both synchronous and asynchronous has been beneficial. Live webinars offer in-person engagement, whereas recorded meetings let educators review the material whenever it's convenient. This dualistic approach maximizes skill retention while supporting different learning styles”. (Respondent 2)

".... flexible professional development has become a lifeline for educators. To maintain effective and engaging instruction, instructors can upgrade their skills at their own speed via asynchronous online courses, webinars, and microlearning modules" (Respondent 3)

In addition to that, as stated by the experts, collaboration between faculty members, instructional designers, technicians, and other support staff was fostered by organizational development initiatives. Through this partnership, academics were able to develop online courses that were both technologically sound and effective.

"Cross-functional collaboration really shines where education and technology meet. Online courses that highlight both efficient teaching techniques and the seamless use of digital resources are created by academics working with educational technologists" (Respondent 4)

Organizational development strategies in higher educational institutions also placed a strong emphasis on the necessity of ongoing assessments of the support needs of faculty and their efficacy. Institutions continued to be flexible, making changes in response to ongoing feedback and shifting conditions.

"The pandemic's dynamic character demands a dedication to ongoing evaluation and change. A learning environment that thrives in ambiguity is fostered by institutions that routinely solicit input from staff and students, evaluate the efficacy of online teaching techniques, and make prompt improvements". (Respondent 5)

"The pandemic forced us to reconsider how we create curriculum. Continuous evaluation makes sure that online courses are still applicable and useful. Teachers can modify their approaches to the shifting virtual environment by routinely examining learning objectives, content delivery, and evaluation techniques" (Respondent 3)

According to Li and Lalani [34], big data, artificial intelligence, statistical investigation, and other advanced technologies can help us do our jobs more proactively and effectively, in addition to technology that has been used more for learning. They can also energize the workforce, giving them more time to engage with pupils and their coworkers. Future labs are likely to include augmented reality and virtual reality features to supplement direct interactions between students and instructors. Prior to the pandemic, augmented reality and virtual reality were regularly employed in real-world teaching for risky situations, besides cutting-edge technology, for instance, military practices [27], astronaut learning [49] and training for overseeing nuclear power facilities [48].

5.3. Digital Transformation and Online Learning

Utilizing technology to reinvent and improve conventional teaching techniques is a key element of digital transformation and learning innovation in higher institutions. According to experts, developing dynamic and interesting learning environments involves using virtual classrooms, online collaboration tools, multimedia resources, and interactive assessments. Learning innovation focuses on the investigation of novel teaching strategies that make use of technology's potential to support educators and students in their pursuit of knowledge and skills. Personalized learning experiences, improved student engagement, streamlined administrative procedures, and data-driven insights to guide educational decision-making are just a few of the many advantages that have been revealed by combining digital transformation and learning innovation. This method encourages flexibility, equips students for the digital era, and places institutions at the forefront of the changing face of education.

"The digital shift that changed educational paradigms was triggered by COVID-19. The need for learning innovation drove educators to investigate flipped classrooms, gamification, and blended learning strategies. This incident shows that combining technology and pedagogy may promote dynamic and successful learning experiences despite physical limitations" (Respondent 1)

"Through the creation of a shared online international education program, we could improve the quality of education at our university by showing students the online mobility skills that are integrated with the official program. (Respondent 2)

Learners can interact with classmates from other universities whilst working simultaneously on subject-expert learning activities to improve their intercultural competencies and digital abilities (Respondent 3).

The experts in private universities also claimed that cooperative online international learning is a crucial technique that enables students to participate in global learning experiences without having to leave their homes. These experts emphasize that this method of collaborative learning encourages more student involvement, teamwork, and the accomplishment of common goals throughout the learning process.

"Through our adaptable methods for delivering online education, we promote diversity and worldwide learning so that professors and students consisting of varied linguistic as well as cultural backgrounds can profit from online learning pedagogies. When it comes to co-learning with our partners, we encourage diversity and global learning within both inbound and outward online mobility as well as student interchange. This will support talent enhancement and global civic capability in addition to enhancing soft and personal skills, particularly in communication and problem-solving (Respondent 4).

"The pandemic brought home how important digital transformation and instructional innovation are to contemporary education, not only as trends. The need for innovation in remote learning gave rise to peer collaboration platforms, virtual labs, and adaptive learning systems. The relationship between cutting-edge pedagogy and technology became clear as educators adjusted" (Respondent 5).

5.4. Sustainability

A focus on sustainability is one of the organizational development techniques used in private higher institutions amid the pandemic. Institutions continue to incorporate sustainable practices into their daily operations because they realize the necessity for long-term existence. This entails conserving resources, reducing environmental damage, and promoting an environmentally conscious culture. Higher education institutions that prioritize sustainability are not just adjusting to the COVID-19 difficulties but also fostering a resilient and environmentally responsible future. Based on the experts' statements,

higher education has been compelled to re-examine its plans and prepare for new challenges because of the pandemic. Sustainability has become a crucial organizational development strategy for institutions navigating these historic times during the crisis. Traditionally associated with environmental stewardship, sustainability now refers to a comprehensive strategy that considers not only ecological impact but also economic, social, and institutional well-being. Forthcoming surprises in the economic and social processes can be avoided through the involvement of sustainable development [19]. Prior to COVID-19, the education sector presented as a global service offered by quasi-service in a knowledge economy that was getting more complex and competitive prior to the introduction of

“ I believe the universities must incorporate sustainable development into their curricula, promote sustainable development research, green their campuses, support regional and local sustainability initiatives, and collaborate and exchange knowledge with international networks (Respondent 1).

To achieve the 17 SDGs by 2030, we require strong collaborations and active participation from university leadership (Respondent 2).

“Sustainable techniques require that courses be in line with practical needs. Institutions that incorporate problem-based learning, experiential learning, and multidisciplinary collaboration ensure that graduates have the abilities and outlook necessary to make a significant contribution to a sustainable, transforming world”. (Respondent 3)

“Our emphasis is on conserving resources, minimizing our environmental impact, and raising environmental awareness among our staff, academics, and students. In addition to being in line with our dedication to high-quality education, this strategy places us in a position to effect change for the better, assuring the long-term success of both our school and the environment.” (Respondent 4)

6. Discussion

Experts from the study emphasized the consequences of proactive organizational adaptation and resistance techniques toward fostering a culture of creativity, inclusion, technological integration, and continuous learning. Organizational adaptability and resilience were highlighted as pillars for navigating the challenges presented by the pandemic, enabling institutions to face ambiguity, innovate, assist students, and maintain their core objectives. The significance of these approaches was seen as persisting in the evolving higher education landscape. Quotes from respondents emphasized the need for resilience in the face of challenges, proactive adaptation to new technologies, and the role of organizational resilience in ensuring business continuity and safety.

Fostering new organizational roles during emerging situations, like the current COVID-19 pandemic, involves adaptive resilience [26]. The enhancement of new skills and resources, such as relationships with people both inside and outside the organization to solve enigmas and further work abilities, is what allows resilient organizations to continue [28, 63]. Enhancing organizational capability in risk assessment and planning to anticipate and effectively manage unforeseen crises is part of this [64].

In the face of challenging disruptions, organizations that actively enhance their adaptive capacity consistently acquire and apply gathered understanding [65]. This enables them to operate effectively under a broader spectrum of circumstances, Burnard et al. [47]. Ducheck [66] highlights two distinct types of capabilities crucial for adaptation, including change learning competencies. Organizations emphasizing resilience amid change commonly exhibit adaptive characteristics and proactively respond to evolving situations [67].

Several previous researchers have explored factors related to resilience from the perspective of higher learning institutions amid the pandemic. For example, some have focused on enhancing students' resilience through considerations of psychological well-being [40, 41]. Others have developed comprehensive organizational resilience models tailored to participants in the higher education sector [43]. Additionally, there is research addressing the adaptation of teaching processes to foster the resilience of teaching staff members [38, 39]. Furthermore, scholars have investigated the role of digital transformation, encompassing the improvement of digital supplies, technological revolutions, and virtual curriculum approaches, as strategies to enhance resistance [37, 68].

In addition, experts underscored the importance of skill utilization and job redefinition among academicians and staff in higher education to effectively meet the challenges posed by online and hybrid learning settings. Initiatives for organizational growth focused on providing training courses and workshops for faculty members to enhance their abilities for online teaching. The flexibility of professional growth opportunities was highlighted as beneficial for educators to upgrade their skills at their own pace. Quotes from respondents emphasized faculty adaptability in embracing online instruction, the significance of flexible professional development, and the collaboration between faculty members and support staff to create effective online courses.

Numerous research studies have proposed factors such as the allocation of resources for technology infrastructure, professional development, and continuous support for educators as crucial components [69]. It is emphasized that collaborative endeavors involving educational stakeholders, including administrators, educators, and students, play an important role in the ongoing evaluation and enhancement of the blended learning experience.

The digital revolution in higher education was discussed as a response to the changing paradigms triggered by the COVID-19 epidemic. The implementation of digital tools, virtual classrooms, collaborative online international learning, and innovative teaching strategies was identified as a key component of this transformation. The experts stressed that the pandemic accelerated the shift towards combining technology and pedagogy to promote dynamic and successful learning experiences. Quotes highlighted the function of the digital shift in reshaping educational paradigms, creating collaborative online international learning programs, and the significance of technology in promoting engaging learning experiences.

Afaishat et al. [70] accentuated the consequences of embracing technology in the post-pandemic era towards tackling emerging issues and solutions. Neglecting this aspect may cause universities to suffer from inflexible structures, poor responsiveness, and bureaucratic decision-making procedures. Scholars like Nurhas et al. [3] have outlined the issues associated with the swift digital revolution in higher education amid the pandemic. Mhlanga [32] in addition, drew conclusions regarding the essential lessons learned in digital transformation during the pandemic. It is critical to recognize that higher education institutions now have new opportunities because of the widespread adoption of digitalization during the pandemic outbreak. Adedoyin and Soykan [61] have underscored the significance of adjusting to digital transformation in order to steer online teaching and learning in a new direction. Furthermore, for efficient and cooperative online learning throughout the pandemic, earlier researchers have recommended the use of social media [62] and mobile learning [18]. Furthermore, Sá and Serpa [24] have observed that digital transformation improves sustainable digital development in higher education and makes it easier for academic communities of practice to co-create knowledge. Additionally, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital transformation encourages innovative teaching strategies like blended learning and distance learning, which support resilient teaching methods and sustainable values [37]. A robust and sustainable work ecosystem in higher education can be established by individuals who are willing to embrace digital transformation, as highlighted by Nurhas et al. [3].

Sustainability emerged as a crucial organizational development strategy during the pandemic. Institutions were encouraged to incorporate sustainable practices into their daily operations, addressing not only ecological impact but also economic, social, and institutional well-being. The experts emphasized the importance of universities promoting sustainable development through curricula, research, green campuses, and collaborations with international networks.

It emphasizes how important it is for universities to support sustainable development, work together to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and integrate sustainable practices into courses that align with real-world requirements. These themes collectively depict a comprehensive picture of the strategies and initiatives undertaken by private higher education institutes to navigate the challenges caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, fostering resilience, adaptability, innovation, and sustainability within their organizational frameworks.

The pursuit of sustainability remains a constant strategic mission for every higher education institution. The global pandemic has brought about profound changes in our world, reshaping it in ways that may endure indefinitely. Considering these transformations, policymakers and educators must prioritize sustainability education as an urgent and essential component of the present and future. The fundamental concept of sustainability education revolves around revolutionary learning, particularly aiming to foster changes in attitudes, behaviors, and societal norms [9]. Learning for sustainability becomes imperative in the current era, with a focus on lasting sustainable efforts encompassing environmental considerations and international networking, as highlighted by experts in the study.

Academic institutions are becoming more aware of their obligation to set clear sustainability standards as important institutions within their communities. Sustainability is ingrained in the core strategies, visions, and missions of many universities. Harvard University [71] provides an example of its sustainability mission statement, which reads, "Our mission is to translate research into practice and empower people to be stewards for the future in order to advance solutions to evolving global health and environmental challenges that benefit the common good." Additionally, the University of Tasmania articulates its sustainability [41]: *"The University of Tasmania plays a vital role in leading our place-based and globally connected communities in understanding and delivering sustainable futures."*

7. Conclusion

Towards responding to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, private higher education institutes have strategically adapted their organizational frameworks through multifaceted approaches. The foremost strategy involves cultivating organizational adaptation and resilience, emphasizing proactive techniques to foster creativity, inclusion, and technological integration. These institutions have recognized the pivotal role of adaptability in navigating ambiguity, innovating, and assisting students, with a persistent commitment to core objectives. Organizational resilience is seen as a cornerstone, achieved through the development of adaptive capabilities, reflective learning, and proactive responses. Faculty members have been pivotal in this transition, with initiatives focused on skill utilization and job redefinition. Training courses and flexible professional development opportunities have been provided to enhance faculty abilities in online teaching, acknowledging the need for adaptability in embracing digital learning environments. Simultaneously, the accelerated pace of digital transformation and virtual learning has emerged as an important paradigm shift. Digital tools, virtual classrooms, and collaborative international learning adoption have reshaped pedagogical models, recognizing technology as a transformative instrument. Finally, sustainability has become a central tenet of organizational development, with a focus on ecological, economic, social, and institutional well-being. These strategies collectively form a comprehensive response to the evolving landscape, fostering resilience, adaptability, innovation, and sustainability within the private higher education sector.

Apparently, the case study offers a distinctive lens through which to understand their reactions to crises. The short-term projects conducted resonate through the organizational development corridors, influencing these institutions' future courses for years to come. These findings have far-reaching implications that affect legislators, higher education leaders, and educational institutions. These stakeholders are given a comprehensive tool by the study for managing crises, improving organizational performance, and strengthening flexibility. The knowledge gained from this research develops a collaborative resolution to thrive in the face of difficulties, apart from merely surviving, ultimately shaping a future that exemplifies resilience, creativity, and transformative growth in an ever-changing educational landscape.

Concisely, the study underscores profound implications for private higher education institutes in navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategies identified for organizational adaptation, faculty skill utilization, digital transformation, and sustainability not only reflect immediate responses but also hold lasting significance for the evolving higher education landscape. The emphasis on organizational resilience and adaptability suggests a paradigm shift towards a more agile and innovative sector. The spotlight on faculty development signifies a recognition of the focal role educators play in modeling the learning opportunity. Accelerated digital transformation points to a fundamental change in pedagogical approaches, underscoring the changing potential of technology in education. Moreover, the commitment to sustainability signals a broader societal responsibility undertaken by higher education institutions. These implications collectively advocate for a holistic and forward-thinking approach, urging institutions to not only weather immediate challenges but also proactively shape a resilient, adaptable, technologically integrated, and sustainable future for higher education. The study serves as a valuable guide for institutions seeking to navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic educational landscape with resilience and innovation.

8. Limitation

This study sheds light on the multifaceted strategies adopted by private higher institutes to address the COVID-19 pandemic challenges. However, it is crucial to recognize certain limitations inherent in the research. First, because the study's generalizability is based on a particular context and there might be variances in different geographical and cultural contexts, the findings' generalizability may be limited. Additionally, the time sensitivity of the study is noteworthy, given the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic's impact. Strategies that were effective during the data collection period might require reassessment in the face of ongoing developments. The study's reliance on expert opinions introduces an element of subjectivity, and while expert insights offer depth, they may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within different institutions. The focus on four major themes may leave gaps in understanding, overlooking other critical aspects of organizational development. Furthermore, the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as students and administrative staff, could provide a more comprehensive picture. Lastly, the study primarily addresses responses during the pandemic, leaving the long-term sustainability and post-pandemic dynamics of these strategies as areas for further exploration. Acknowledging these limitations is essential for interpreting the study's implications and guiding future research endeavors in this crucial domain.

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