

Coping Responses to Emergency Remote Teaching During a Pandemic: Lessons from Lecturers in Malaysia

Josephine Chan Ie Lyn^{1*}

¹ School of Education, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Wawasan Open University, Penang, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author. Email: josephinechan@wou.edu.my

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Abstract

During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the higher education sector had no choice but to pivot to emergency remote teaching. The current study aims to explore emergency remote teaching coping responses of Malaysian lecturers and to determine if there are any differences in technology acceptance of Malaysian lecturers between older and younger generational cohorts. A qualitative approach was taken, with individual interviews conducted to gather data from 13 Malaysian lecturers. The findings of the study revealed that while some lecturers struggled with the initial emergency remote teaching, they eventually managed to quickly adapt to the steep learning curve of embracing the new teaching mode. This was due to the use of various coping strategies, such as seeking support from colleagues and friends, finding ways to make the best of the situation, and looking at the positives of emergency remote teaching. In terms of technology acceptance, the findings highlighted that this was more related to the individual's technological mindset rather than generational factors. The study also provided valuable insights for higher learning institution management when faced with future disruptions caused by environmental, safety, or health crises. The findings of this study suggest that management should provide support and resources to lecturers during the transition period and consider their psychological well-being when implementing new technologies. Additionally, management should educate lecturers on the use of new technologies, especially in times of crisis, when traditional methods of teaching may no longer be feasible.

Keywords: *Coping responses, COVID-19 pandemic, emergency remote teaching, higher learning institutions, IT user acceptance and resistance model, socio-technical theory.*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted almost every aspect of daily life, including education. With lockdowns and social distancing measures in place, traditional face-to-face teaching became impossible, leading to a rapid shift towards emergency remote teaching. Emergency remote teaching refers to the sudden shift to online teaching as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike traditional online teaching, which is well-designed and planned, emergency remote teaching is a pandemic pedagogy that is intended to be a temporary solution during a crisis (Milman, 2020; Whittle et al., 2020). The sudden transition to emergency remote teaching has presented numerous challenges and stressors for educators and students alike. From lack of technology and inadequate training to difficulties in engaging students and maintaining a sense of community, the transition to remote teaching has been far from easy. Despite these challenges, emergency remote teaching has proven to be a viable alternative, providing access to education for students who would have otherwise been left behind. Extant studies have largely focused

on online teaching and challenges faced by lecturers during the pandemic (Afrianty et al., 2021; Bond et al., 2021; Ngudgratoke et al., 2020; Pillay et al., 2021; Soomro et al., 2020). However, the story is not complete, as not many of these studies focused on using the psychological aspect of coping with the sudden need for emergency remote teaching. Although Daniel (2020) shared the experiences of how a business school in Canada successfully coped with the transition from campus to online, he did not further explore the individual coping responses of lecturers. The experiences and challenges of emergency remote teaching in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are important to understand and document.

Therefore, this study aims to delve deeper into the coping responses of higher learning institution lecturers in Malaysia during the sudden shift to emergency remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the experiences of these lecturers, the study intends to shed light on the challenges and stressors they faced during this unprecedented situation. This study intends to analyse the coping responses of the lecturers through the lens of two theories: Trist’s socio-technical theory (Adams & Ivanov, 2015) and Bhattacharjee et al.’s (2017) information technology (IT) user acceptance and resistance model. While the use of new technology during the pandemic was forced upon the lecturers, the focus of the study is not on the technology itself but rather on the coping responses of the lecturers when faced with emergency remote teaching. Understanding how these individuals coped with the sudden change is important because lecturers play a crucial role in shaping the future of nations. Their ability to adapt to and effectively use the technology will directly impact the students they teach and the quality of education they receive. The findings from this study have the potential to inform future policies and practices related to emergency remote teaching and provide insights into how higher learning institutions can better support their lecturers during times of crisis. By documenting the experiences and coping responses of these lecturers, this study will contribute to the larger conversation about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and provide valuable insights for the future.

Figure 1 depicts the sequence of events during the pandemic and how the traditional classroom teaching model was disrupted, leading to a sudden shift to emergency remote teaching. This sudden shift created a disjointed socio-technical system, which caused difficulties for both lecturers and institutions. Despite these difficulties, users (lecturers) and organisations (higher learning institutions) were able to adapt to the new system, albeit with varying levels of success.

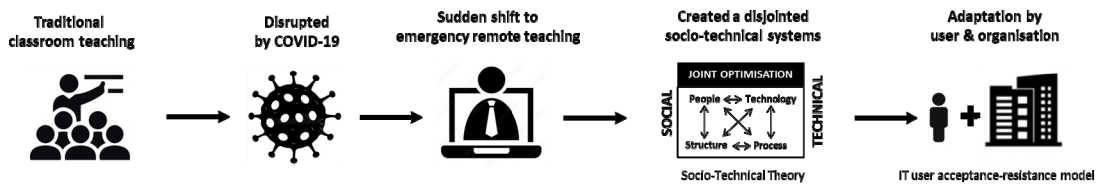


Figure 1. Sequence of Events

2. Literature Review

Trist’s socio-technical theory, which outlines a combination of human and technical elements needed to achieve optimisation of workplace performance, is useful for underpinning implementation strategies of information technology (IT) in higher learning institutions (Adams & Ivanov, 2015). There are four components within two subsystems. Under the social subsystem, the focus is people and structure while under the technical subsystem, the focus is technology and processes. All these components are interrelated and interact with one another, where if one component changes, it will affect the other components (see Figure 2).

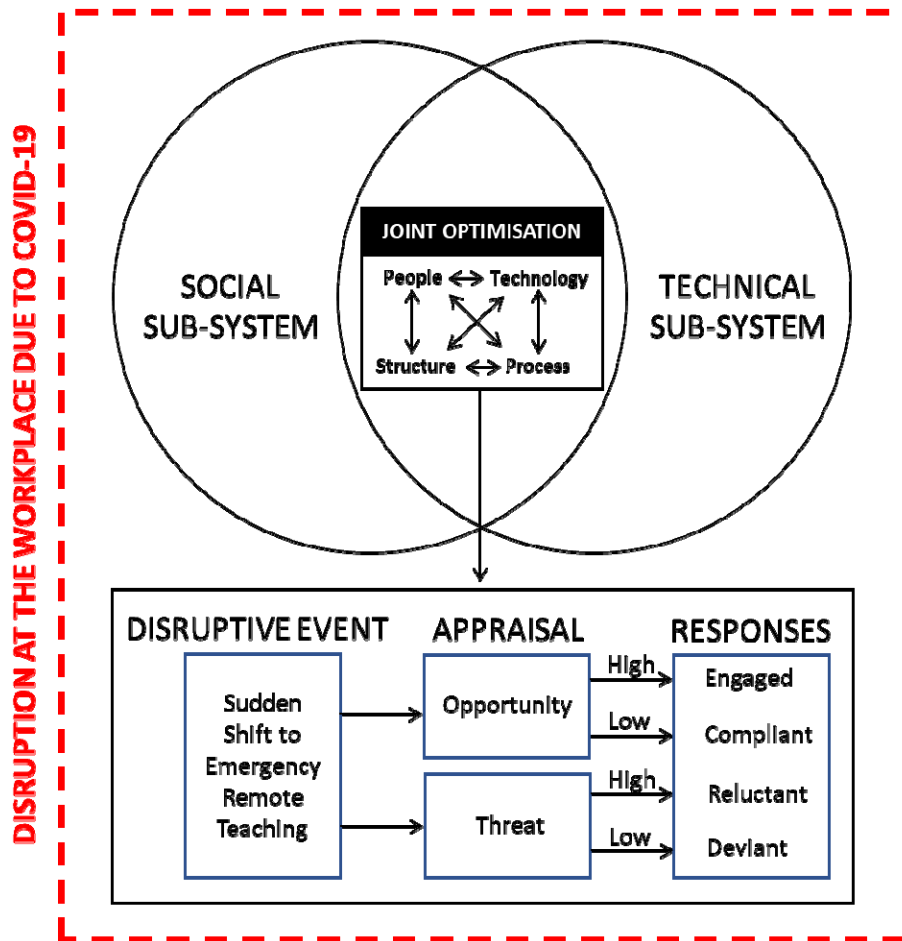


Figure 2. Underpinning Theories of Socio-Technical and Coping Response

Note. Adapted from Adams and Ivanov (2015); Bhattacharjee et al. (2017)

However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it quickly became apparent that the joint optimisation of Trist’s socio-technical components, specifically the social subsystem components, cannot be achieved due to the restrictive lockdowns. The performance of lecturers during the emergency remote teaching was affected, as these lecturers were experiencing isolation whereas they were usually surrounded by colleagues, administrative staff, students and parents. Additionally, the full technology dependency, inadequate support, limited engagement from management to coordinate activities, and lack of peer collaboration made matters worse. Support from the organisation, which includes the technical, people and organisational subsystems, can provide employees with a good working experience (Bentley et al., 2016).

Additional understanding of the coping responses of lecturers is needed (see Figure 1). Bhattacharjee et al. (2017) adapted the coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and the IT adoption research of Beaudry and Pinsonneault (2005) to establish their own coping responses to mandatory IT use. They argued that the mandatory usage of IT due to a disruptive event, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, forces IT users to first appraise if the event is an opportunity or a threat. The user responses may then differ e.g., some may accept the new IT (engaged or compliant) while others may resist it (reluctant or deviant). Table 1 further describes the different types of new IT users.

Table 1. New IT User Responses

User type	Perspective	Description
Engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Views the disruptive event as an opportunity and has a high control level over the event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likes to experiment Is innovative Discovers potential new ways of using IT Has sense of IT ownership
Compliant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Views disruptive event as an opportunity but has low control level over the event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally, feels positive toward IT use Sees it as a necessity or mandate from employer
User type	Perspective	Description
Reluctant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Views disruptive event as a threat but has a high control level over the event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fears or have reservations on IT use Sees IT as distracting their work Tendency of reverting back to old working methods
Deviant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Views disruptive event as a threat but has a low control level over the event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sees IT as challenging their work or autonomy Directly avoids IT use Strongly opposes or undermines IT implementation Employs delaying tactics

Note. Adapted from Bhattacharjee et al. (2017)

The responses of users towards using the new IT may also change over time, along the spectrum of deviant to engaged user or vice versa. As such, gaining insight into this is crucial for higher learning institutions so that appropriate actions could be implemented to increase the lecturers’ performance when teaching online from home. Continuous monitoring of the lecturers’ responses toward emergency remote teaching is crucial. Bhattacharjee et al. (2017) also cautioned against using a “one-size-fits-all” approach when implementing new IT usage.

Deeper exploration into the coping responses of lecturers during emergency remote teaching is needed, especially from the perspective of generational cohorts. According to Prensky (2001), the behavioural preferences of IT or digital technologies adoption are different. Baby boomers and generation X lecturers, who were born from 1949 to 1960 and 1961 to 1981 respectively, are known as digital immigrants due to their later exposure to digital technologies. Generation Y lecturers, who were born from 1982 to 2000, are considered digital natives as they were born into the digital age, thus, having early exposure to digital technologies. Some stereotypical IT assumptions of the older generational cohort (baby boomers and generation X) are reduced performance when faced with new IT adoption (Lyons et al., 2015) or lack of positive online environment at the workplace (Lokuge et al., 2019). Additionally, the presence of older generational cohorts in the tech-savvy generation could cause tension and communication breakdowns at the workplace (Urlick, 2020).

Under the current COVID-19 pandemic context, findings from past studies seem to indicate that generation Y, who are digital natives, would perform better with emergency remote teaching. For instance, generation Y employees quickly adapted to working from home while baby boomer and generation X employees prefer working in the office as they miss direct contact with their managers and colleagues, and find it difficult to strike a work-life balance (Raišien et al., 2020). Generation Y university lecturers are deemed more capable in their IT skills and more likely to use computers in their teaching (Soomro et al., 2020).

Interestingly, some research evidence also indicates no difference between generation cohorts in new IT adoption. Rather, it is having the mindset of being willing to try out new IT technology that makes a difference (Imran & Gregor, 2019). As there is much to learn about the different generational cohorts’ acceptance of new digital technologies (Kesharwani, 2020), the current study intends to fill this research gap.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. to explore emergency remote teaching coping responses of Malaysian lecturers.
- ii. to determine if there are any differences in new technology acceptance of Malaysian lecturers from older and younger generational cohorts.

3. Research Method

A qualitative research design was used for this study where data was collected from March to April 2021. The selection criteria of the research participants were based on different generational cohorts, different types of higher learning institutions (college, university-college, university), different states (West and East Malaysia), and consent to participate in the research. In this design, 13 lecturers from different generational cohorts (digital immigrants and digital natives), were purposively sampled from diverse higher learning institutions in various parts of Malaysia. The identified lecturers were recruited either through personal contacts or based on recommendations. Through this approach, rapport and trust could be easily established between the researcher and the interviewees, thus, enhancing the data collection process (Bennett, 2014). Although the small sample size limits the external validity or generalisability, the depth and detail of the lecturers' experiences were needed for the study, which could not have been achieved through a bigger-scale study. According to Trowler et al. (2002), experiences are highly contextualised and as such small-scale studies provide more room to explore the complexities of intertwining experiences.

Based on their demographic profile, the lecturers taught a wide range of subjects in various fields of Humanities, Social Sciences and Sciences, with an average teaching experience of approximately 14 years, where more than half of them (69%) had zero prior emergency remote teaching experience. The older generational cohort consisted of four baby boomer lecturers (RP1 to RP4) and five generation X lecturers (RP5 to RP9) while the younger generational cohort consisted of four generation Y lecturers (RP10 to RP13). The study applied in British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) guidelines and numbers from RP1 to RP13 were assigned to ensure the anonymity of the lecturers who participated in the study.

Data was collected via research interview, mainly conducted through Google Meet with the exception of two lecturers who preferred phone interviews. On average, the interviews lasted about 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded via Audacity recording software and manually transcribed verbatim into a Word document. Individual interview transcripts were given to the respective lecturers who had participated in the research, for confirmation and amendment upon request. Clegg's (2008) approach was used to open up a dialogue rather than impose the researcher's own questions. The lecturers were asked open questions which focused on challenges faced and responses toward the sudden implementation of emergency remote teaching and coping responses in order. The findings closely examined the experiences highlighted by all lecturers who participated in this study.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings clearly indicate the different responses of lecturers toward the mandatory use of IT as mentioned by Bhattacharjee et al. (2017) (see Figure 3).

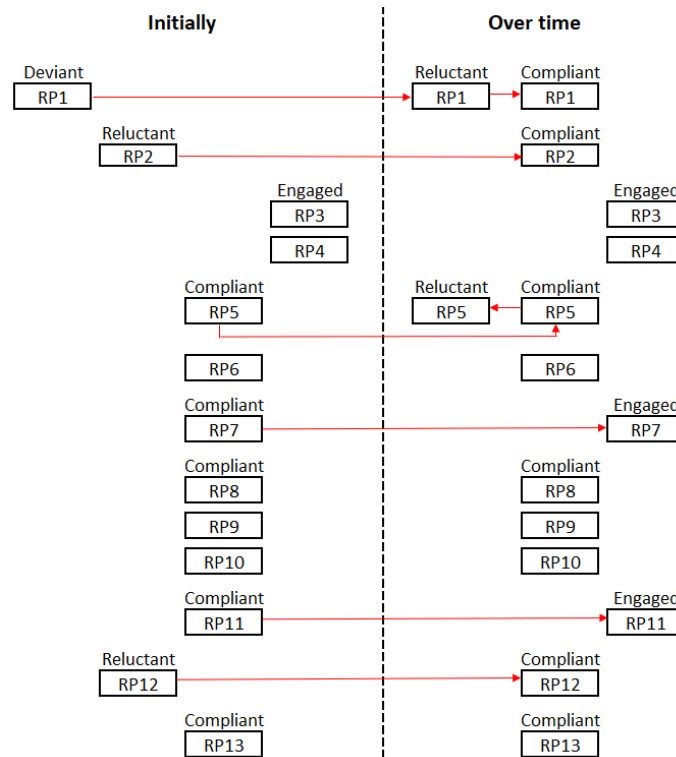


Figure 3. Coping Responses of Lecturers

4.1. Learning from the Emergency Remote Teaching Coping Responses of Lecturers

Three of the lecturers (RP1, RP2, RP12) were either deviant or very reluctant to change due to fear of the unknown or a preference for familiar methods, while the others were compliant (RP5-11, RP13) or engaged (RP3, RP4) with the changes. Nonetheless, lecturers who were initially resistant toward emergency remote teaching, specifically RP1, have come to realise that there is no choice but to accept the situation and change. As in Pillay et al. (2021), changing oneself is a way of coping with the challenging situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In hindsight, when sharing her experience, RP1 felt a bit embarrassed over her initial reaction. Due to the inevitability of emergency remote teaching, she was thankful for the training on using Microsoft Teams and decided to put more effort into learning the new online teaching platform. RP1 then found the whole emergency remote teaching a good experience and felt proud of her achievement. She even perceived herself to have done better than her colleagues from the same generational cohort – *“But it was a good experience. I want to pat myself on the back as it was my first-time teaching online but I think I did very well compared to the other oldies”*.

In RP1’s case, a whole range of coping responses could be seen, from avoidance to reluctance, and after the initial emergency remote teaching experience, compliance due to having knowledge of how to operate Microsoft Teams and the ease of use. RP1’s experiences with technology did not stop there as she further engaged with technology by making online payments, something she previously never wanted to do – *“I have gotten used to online teaching and become a bit more tech-savvy. Honestly speaking, for a person that does not believe in online payment, I really hate it, but I have no choice. I thought at one point in time, MCO 1.0 will finish. But it never did because came CMCO, then MCO 2.0. So even if I don’t like online payment, I have no choice. I have to go and do it”*. RP1’s experiences support Bhattacharjee et al.’s (2017) argument that users of new technology can experience a continuum of experiences and not just positive or negative experiences. However, if positive experiences are not continually supported, the users of new technology could potentially relapse into the negative continuum of experiences. As in the case of RP5, who reverted to the traditional way of manual marking assessments after a failed attempt to do online marking during the initial stages of emergency remote teaching. Additionally, the administrative staff in his university also preferred receiving marked answer scripts to reviewing them online.

“No choice!” was the most evident explanation cited in all the higher education lecturers’ experiences of coping responses. Almost all respondents, from the oldest (RP2 in his 60s and RP5 in his 40s) to the youngest (RP10 in her 30s) generational cohorts mentioned this. RP4 sums it best: *“When you accept the reality as what it is, rather than fight*

against it, you learn from it. You find ways to deal with it and to become better at it. Then there isn't a need to cope. The way to cope is to learn how to do things more efficiently, to learn how to manage your time better, to learn how to do things differently and to learn the different technology that is there". The pandemic left everyone with little choice and forced them out of their comfort zones into learning a new emergency remote teaching approach (Bhattacharjee et al., 2017; Pillay et al., 2021). The learning curve was, however, extremely steep and filled with struggles – "I had a hard time to change my method from physical teaching to online teaching. But we have to try to adapt because we are now under lockdown. So, I have to learn Microsoft Teams. The university gave us training but learning in the classroom is not the same as when we use Microsoft Teams to teach. So, everything was haywire. But it's okay. Technology is something that when something is not right or when you make mistakes, you learn from it" (RP5).

4.2. Individual Attitude, Not Generational Cohorts

In the end, across the whole range of baby boomers, generation X and generation Y lecturers, one very important point was highlighted: individual attitudes. Regardless of whether lecturers were from the older or younger generational cohort, it all depended on the individual. According to RP3, a baby boomer lecturer, "Some people can do things independently. Everything, they do on their own. They learn things on their own. So, this type of people... not so much stress... Some people are very dependent. They keep on depending on training and workshops. Without that, they cannot survive". As for generation X lecturers like RP8, he is "really keen to have another experience other than the face-to-face teaching". RP8 is also of the same opinion as RP3 that they should not rely too much on their colleagues and as such, "...regardless baby boomers or Gen-X, we need to be willing to pick up or learn new things. Especially from the academia side, we have no choice. We are forced to learn". RP6 said, "a good teacher will find ways whether you're technologically insufficient or not, you will find ways to make yourself more relevant in the technology age". Even generation Y lecturers such as RP11 and RP13 voiced similar opinions. "I find that certain individual who is a lot older is more tech-savvy than me" (RP11). Age has no bearing on whether a person is tech-savvy or not – "It all depends if that person wants to take up the challenge and learn new stuff or not. Because I believe that age is just a number. As long as you have the will to learn, it shouldn't be an issue" (RP11). RP 13, a generation Y lecturer, is of the opinion that, regardless of the generational cohort, as long as there is the initiative to explore new technology, a person will be able to learn that new technology as information is readily available through Google and YouTube videos. As such, she feels "that it is still depending on the individual. If they have the initiative to learn, they can do it. Even if they're [from the] older or younger generation".

4.3. Overall Process of Coping Responses of Lecturers

Figure 4 presents the overall process of emergency remote teaching coping responses of the lecturers during the pandemic. When a disruptive event such as the COVID-19 pandemic happens catalysing unpredictable changes, there are two responses of either to avoid or to accept and learn how to cope with the changes. The choice of making a negative or positive response will directly impact a person's performance.

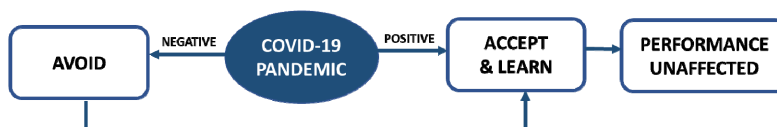


Figure 4. Overall Coping Responses of Lecturers

4.4. Recommendations

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted into an endemic stage and many higher learning institutions have reverted to face-to-face or hybrid teaching, we will never know when another similar pandemic or environmental crises will disrupt teaching and learning in the future where emergency remote teaching will be reinforced again. Therefore, based on insights gained from this study, the following practical suggestions are for the management of higher learning institutions to consider when handling the different types of IT users, regardless of the different generational cohorts, at their institutions.

Engaged IT users: They are known to like experimenting or discovering potential ways of using new technologies. Management of higher learning institutions should leverage engaged IT users by involving them in pilot or new IT projects. In the long run, this type of IT users could become mentors to less engaged IT users as they have a sense of new technology ownership.

Compliant IT users: These users generally feel positive and comply toward new technology adoption. Although compliant IT users view new technology adoption positively, management of higher learning institutions need to ensure that continuous training and support are provided to prevent a reversion into the reluctant IT user spectrum.

Reluctant IT users: These users are fearful or usually having reservations toward usage of technology. They view technology as a distractor for their work and tend to revert to their usual working approaches. Thus, management of higher learning institutions should develop awareness programmes on the new technology and challenges and benefits of adopting the new technology. Continuous motivation should be provided in order for the reluctant users to see the new technology usage as an opportunity and not a threat.

Deviant IT users: This last group of users view new technology negatively. They see the new technology as taking over their work or lessening their autonomy at the workplace. They directly avoid new technology usage by employing delay tactics and strongly oppose or undermine the new technology during implementation. Management of higher learning institutions should keep these users updated and informed of the new technology. During implementation, it would be best to get their feedback and input. Also, management should continuously motivate them to see the adoption of new technology as something helpful and not threatening their work. Moreover, 24/7 technical support is a must for both reluctant and deviant users.

5. Conclusion

The study explored the coping mechanisms used by higher learning institution lecturers in response to the sudden shift from traditional face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching. The study was conducted in Malaysia and involved interviews with 13 lecturers from various higher learning institutions. The findings revealed that the majority of lecturers initially struggled with the sudden change, experiencing anxiety and discomfort. However, some lecturers were able to quickly adapt and embrace the new mode of teaching. To manage their emotions and stress, the lecturers used a range of coping strategies, such as seeking support from colleagues and friends, finding ways to make the best of the situation, and looking at the positives of emergency remote teaching. Some lecturers initially resisted the new technology and the use of online teaching platforms, but eventually, they had to come to terms with the reality of the situation and adapt to the new normal. To their surprise, they found that once they accepted the new way of teaching, it was not as bad as they had initially thought. The findings also indicated that acceptance of new IT has nothing to do with generational cohorts; rather, it depends on the individual's mindset toward technology. The insights gained from this study have several implications for higher learning institution management when faced with the implementation of new technologies in response to future pandemics or crises. The study highlights the importance of providing support and resources to lecturers during the transition period and the need to consider the psychological well-being of lecturers when implementing new technologies. Additionally, the study emphasises the need to educate lecturers on the use of new technologies, especially in times of crisis when traditional methods of teaching may no longer be feasible. In conclusion, the study provides valuable insights into the coping mechanisms used by higher learning institution lecturers in response to the sudden shift to emergency remote teaching. The findings of this study can inform future policies and practices related to emergency remote teaching and help ensure a smooth transition for both lecturers and students.

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