

---

## HOW DOBA BUSINESS SCHOOL ADOPTED ITS BUSINESS MODEL DUE TO CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC?

*Marina Letonja, Živa Veingerl Čič, Anita Maček, Marko Divjak, Doba Business School,  
Slovenia*

---

### Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic (pandemic) is posing difficult and unpredictable challenges for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). They have to adapt their business models (BMs), traditional working mechanisms and the way they transfer their knowledge to their students. The aim of this paper is to show how HEI of applied sciences overcame these challenges, and how they adapted its BM. The case study methodology was used. Based on the case of DOBA Business School Maribor, Slovenia, authors present how it reacted to the changed business and education circumstances. Discussion and concluding remarks stress out the lessons Doba Business School has learned from the pandemic so far and how these insights can help other HEIs to change their BMs in order to cope better in these challenging times.

### Introduction

Knowledge management is essential to drive organizations through the various uncertain circumstances. The understanding of needed changes and adaptation of BMs is essential to manage the knowledge of HEIs to get through the pandemic. Capacity of creating, employing, and deploying knowledge is critical to protect the business and to guarantee that it can continuously contribute to the value creation dynamics. The pandemic has caused experimentation with online learning by HEIs, as many have so far used traditional teaching. It is safe to say that the pandemic will have an impact and has already affected education and we are convinced that much will change in this area even after the pandemic is over, especially if online learning proves successful. Therefore, we are interested in how to adapt the higher education BMs to ensure that students have access to quality higher education, despite the transformation of knowledge transfer from traditional to online teaching.

The multidisciplinary field of knowledge management can provide useful insights to help to think and rethink the BMs with a knowledge management capacity of effectively

absorbing and reacting to the pandemic' impacts. Online teaching in HEIs requires additional support for teachers in the field of didactics for online learning, online assessment of knowledge, using technology to encourage interaction, cooperation between students, in short, transformation of study implementation (Dominko Baloh, 2020).

But pandemic is also an opportunity for improvement. Circumstances have shown that those organizations that have succeeded in adapting to change in a timely manner and dared to try new BMs were more successful. Many HEIs were faced with uncertainty, fear or lack of knowledge about the transition to fully online education. Many of questions were not responded quickly. We are currently conducting "trial and error" experiments and are learning from mistakes. Adaptation of both, professors, and students, is needed in the midst of teaching semesters. Revision of content of the courses, the new methods of assessment and examination is required.

As online learning universities and universities with blended or traditionally distinct BMs are studied, the primary goal of this paper is to present various adjustments to the BM of private universities due to the pandemic through a presentation of the experiences of Doba Business School. Although online education is a great time saver, it also requires the adaptation of professors, online mentors and students. Students and professors who met in classrooms a few weeks ago are now trying out alternative methods of collaboration and knowledge transfer.

As part of adapting to online education, Chinese universities have organized a series of educations for faculty members with emphasis on pedagogy, didactics of online teaching, and building relationships with students (Zhaohui, 2020). In the classroom, the professor can immediately detect if students are absorbing concepts and can change the pace of teaching accordingly. When teaching online it is necessary to choose different mechanisms for determining the appropriateness of acquired knowledge. The solution is certainly a continuous and repeated examination. Many professors are not trained at the moment to properly carry out the online learning process. A major problem of online education is also the isolation of students and the inability to establish a belonging to a group that in real life creates a sense of competition and motivates everyone to succeed (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020).

The aim of the study was to investigate and detect the lessons learned from the adaptations of BMs of Doba Business as private HEI due to learning methods in the situation of pandemic.

## Methodology

In order to reach the main aim of the research authors used case study design. The case for research was private HEI in Slovenia, Doba Business School Maribor.

Doba Business School is the leading provider of online learning in the Slovenian higher education area. It has more than 20 years of tradition in online learning with more than 9000 graduates, development, scientific and research work, first-rate knowledge, use of modern and innovative pedagogical approaches, and internationalisation with international students position Doba Business School among the most ambitious HEIs in Southeast Europe.

## Presentation of Doba Business School adaptation to the pandemic situation

In this section the researched case will be presented in detail. In the Table 1 adaptation of business model is presented.

Table 1: Adaptation of BMs of Doba Business School

BM blocks	Doba Business School
Value Proposition	Online study implementation model that functions in pandemic without adaptations. Webinars (within courses) opened to the public. Active response to the needs of education providers to share experiences with online learning. Proactive approach to the government educational institutions with the offer of sharing more than 20 years of online study experiences.
Customer Relationships	Supportive, motivational communication with students, academic and professional staff. Subtle pandemic communication with Croatian students (the earthquake in Croatia). Extending research and pedagogical to the consultancy role. Sharing experience in online learning with public (SIQ) Sharing online study experience with governmental institutions. (NAQHE).
Channels	Flexibility of academic process. Use existing online communication tools (MS Teams, Blackboard, Go To Webinars) for students and external publics From marketing focused communication to professional and pandemic communication.
Customer segments	Students Businesses Professional publics Governmental public
Revenue Stream	No short-term effects.

### **How Doba Business School Adopted its Business Model due to Coronavirus Pandemic?**

Key Activities	Study implementation – adaptation of pedagogic process regarding additional motivation, flexibility in deadlines for submitting assignments, pandemic communication. Informing students on current situation through website, video, and email communication. Use of new communication channel – MS Teams for all meetings of pedagogic and professional staff, with management.
Key Resources	Increased extent of workload of academic staff due to motivational activities, additional deepened communication with students and businesses and due to increased professional communication. Increased extent of workload for professional staff, online mentors.
Key partnerships	Deepening partnerships with businesses – inclusion of guest speakers from businesses into webinars for students about the current communication with employees on hold, laid off, on remote work and working in the company.
Cost structure	Program for potential defaulters.

---

As it can be seen from the Table 1 key activities within the adoption of the BM were concentrating on effective informing process of students; implementation of different online tools that enable home working and different measures implemented in order to encourage motivation. Regarding key resources block increased extent of workload of academic staff due to motivational activities, additional deepened communication with students and businesses and due to increased professional communication was recognized. On the revenue it did not have any short term effect. And regarding channels that were used, MS Teams, Blackboard, go to webinars were used the most.

Given the existing clear, modern and efficient organization of the Doba Business School, the adjustment of the BM was quick and efficient.

During the pandemic, Doba Business School also faced challenges of adaptation of the study implementation model. Below the process of adaptation is explained in detail.

### ***Personnel and legal implementation***

All employees were ordered to work from home in accordance with the applicable labour legislation and the existing rules. Employees were acquainted with key instructions and with tips for protecting personal data and business secrets while working from home. Legislative measures related to mitigating the consequences of the pandemic for employers were regularly monitored and Doba Business School acted in accordance with them. There were regular online meetings within departments to ensure that everything worked smoothly and with as few complications as possible.

### ***Organizational implementation***

Doba Business School adapted and upgraded the existing model of organization and cooperation among managers and employees, which took place entirely in the online environment (meetings, weekly coordination, reviewing key tasks, solving operational challenges etc.). Heads of organizational units communicated with their co-workers with a motivational-oriented letter several times a week, and the Director of the Doba Business School held weekly online meetings with all employees to inform them about the current events at the Doba Business School, the successes during that time and the organization and implementation of work. All employees were acquainted with the entire communication with students, Work tips, prepared by professors, were shared.

### ***Technical implementation***

Instead of many tools for online inter-personal communication, employees have started to use only one communication channel (MS Teams) uniformly. Considering the technical possibilities no major challenges were faced when introducing work from home, also due to effective technical assistance. Students and other stakeholders of the Doba Business School did not feel any consequences of our employees working from home.

### ***Adjustments of the study implementation model***

The existing online study model was adapted only in communication with students, which has become even more subtle and flexible (e.g. extension of assignments submission deadlines).

### ***Implementation of the study process***

The implementation of study activities continues in accordance with the existing model, without interruptions or changes, according to the plan of courses in a virtual learning environment. All assessment of knowledge is taking place in accordance with standards and protocols.

### ***Social responsibility and information***

Doba Business School is committed to the active co-creation of favourable social conditions in the environment in which it operates, which is why enhanced information during the pandemic was provided. Every 14 days, a letter was sent to all the stakeholders informing them about current events at the Doba Business School, papers written by professors and related to the current situation were shared. The students and the interested public were offered a free tour of a series of webinars, with tips on how to deal with constant change during this time. The Dean writes a letter to all stakeholders of the Doba Business School once a month, in which he writes about the current and future economic situation and measures. The webinars from the regular learning process, which we opened to the public,

were attended en masse – for example, a webinar on communication and impact techniques was attended by more than 800 participants.

## **Discussion and proposals for further research**

The aim of this paper was to demonstrate how Doba Business School Maribor responded to the introduced lockdown measures and adapted its BMs accordingly. The core element of the BMs of Doba Business School is reflected in the implementation of accredited study programs, which serve as the main source of revenues. It can be seen from the analysis that Doba Business School, which has been pursuing fully online implementation of study programs for more than 20 years, has not changed a lot. Online courses were implemented as scheduled without major interruptions. However, the professors did adjust their communication and assessment requirements, taking into account that most students were challenged with heavier burdens due to remote work, additional family obligations, even natural disaster etc. The professors did communicate with students more frequently, used more supportive messages and demonstrated more flexibility regarding the assignments' submission deadlines.

However, it needs to be emphasized that high quality online education is much more than just transferring the lectures into virtual environment. Online learning is not about using technology as such; it is about exploiting the benefits of technology for the purposes of pedagogy and to enhance the attainment of learning outcomes. Online learning is highly student-centred while traditional learning is highly professor centred. In other words, in online learning the courses should be designed in a substantially different way, which requires an efficient virtual learning platform as a basic precondition, course design experts, IT support and most importantly skilled professors. First, the professors should understand and accept the paradigmatic shift from traditional to online teaching, and second, they should possess specialized pedagogical skills to be able to adopt novel pedagogical approaches typical for online teaching, in order to effectively support the students in the process of attaining the learning outcomes. The relevance of proper pedagogical and didactical skills for high quality online teaching was emphasized by many experts (e.g. Dominko Baloh, 2020; Zhaohui, 2020).

It would certainly be interesting to analyse how the sudden shift to online teaching affected the students, their knowledge gains and the attainment of course-specific competences and learning outcomes, which serves as a viable suggestion for further research.

Also, it would be interesting to monitor if and how will HEIs proceed from mere immediate actions to introducing more advanced and proficient models of online learning in their business and study implementation strategies in the near future. As indicated by DeVaney et al. (2020; p.5): “As the emergency subsides but normal fails to return, HEIs need to do

more. There's a good likelihood that virtual learning — in some capacity — will need to be a part of education for the foreseeable future. HEIs need a response framework that looks beyond the immediate actions. They have to prepare for an intermediate period of transition and begin futureproofing their institutions for the long term.”

Apart from adapting the study implementation model, other shifts in the BMs were also identified as described in Table 1. Table 1 shows Doba Business School intensified and adapted the communication with external stakeholders (future students, business organizations, teaching experts and professional audience). With its long tradition of online learning, Doba Business School has taken the opportunity to position itself as an expert and a leading provider of high-quality online learning. This has been achieved by organizing a series of events and by providing advice on the implementation of online learning for different professional associations. Also, in times of pandemic, Doba Business School completely changed its promotional marketing communication to reach potential students with supportive, professional, and pandemic communication. Content-specific papers and webinars with hands-on advice on how to overcome the pandemic have been prepared and shared with the audience.

## Conclusions

Although the adopted case study approach has limitations in transferring the key findings to a wider population, it still seems reasonable to speculate that traditional and online HEIs have experienced and responded to the pandemic in a substantially different way. While traditional HEIs were mostly struggling with the sudden switch to online teaching and learning, HEIs with prior experience with online learning implementation, on the other hand, had the opportunity to increase productivity, to search for and to respond to new business opportunities and to enhance their reputation as experts in online learning.

## References

- De Massis A., & Kotlar A. (2014). The case study method in family business research: Guidelines for qualitative scholarship. *Journal of Family Business Strategy*, 5(1), 15-29.
- DeVaney, J., Shimshon, G., Rascoff, M., & Maggioncalda, J. (2020, May 5). Higher Ed Needs a Long-Term Plan for Virtual Learning. Harvard Business Review (online) [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2020/05/higher-ed-needs-a-long-term-plan-for-virtual-learning>
- Dominko Baloh, J. (2020). Je prihodnost visokega šolstva v izobraževanju na daljavo, Finance. Retrieved from <https://topjob.finance.si/8960495/Prihodnost-slovenskega-visokega-solstva-je-v-izobrazevanju-na-daljavo?cctest&>

Govindarajan, V., & Srivastava, A. (2020, March 31). What the Shift to Virtual Learning Could Mean for the Future of Higher Ed, Harvard Business Review [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2020/03/what-the-shift-to-virtual-learning-could-mean-for-the-future-of-higher-ed>

Harrison, H., Birks, M., Franklin, R., & Mills, J. (2017). Case Study Research: Foundations and Methodological Orientations. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 18(1), Art. 19. Retrieved from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1701195>

Osterwalder, A., & Pigneur, Y. (2009). *Canvas BM Generation*. Self published.

Zhaohui. W. (2020, March 16). How Chinese university is responding to coronavirus. World Economic forum [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/coronavirus-china-the-challenges-of-online-learning-for-universities/>