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Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts on Higher Education in East Asia

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted higher education in East Asia, prompting institutions in China, South Korea, and Japan to shift rapidly to online learning. This study systematically reviews institutional responses via crisis and disaster management theory and the technology acceptance model. Key challenges include digital disparities, faculty preparedness, student mental health, and international student mobility restrictions. While South Korea's robust digital infrastructure facilitated a smoother transition, China faced connectivity gaps, and Japan struggled with initial online adoption. Despite these challenges, digital learning innovations and increased student satisfaction have emerged. The findings highlight the importance of crisis preparedness, equitable technological access, and mental health support. This study provides insights for strengthening higher education resilience and informs policy recommendations for future disruptions.

Keywords: COVID-19 response in higher education; digital pedagogy; distance learning; international students in Japan, South Korea, and China; international student mental health

Around the world, COVID-19 has affected all areas of education, including higher education institutions and their responses to this virus. To prevent the spread of the virus, higher education institutions (HEIs) responded by observing

social distancing rules, resulting in an abrupt move from in-person to online teaching and learning (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020). Students, faculty, and staff shifted to online learning, which led to difficulties in student assessment and evaluation, supporting international students, managing travel restrictions, and ensuring the psychosocial well-being of students (Wu et al., 2025). Moreover, virtual learning platforms make it difficult for students to engage, especially in poorly resourced institutions with limited access to technology (Demuyakor, 2020; Feng et al., 2021).

East Asia—comprising China, South Korea, and Japan—represents a critical region for studying the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education due to its distinct sociocultural and technological landscapes (Park, 2025). These nations have consistently ranked among the top 10 countries producing the largest numbers of international students over the past several decades (Institute of International Education, 2024). Additionally, they are home to globally influential higher education systems that play a significant role in shaping regional and international academic trends (Knight, 2004). Furthermore, East Asia's diverse approaches to managing the pandemic, rooted in varying governmental strategies and cultural norms, offer a unique opportunity to compare institutional responses within a shared regional context. Understanding how these systems adapt to unprecedented disruptions provides valuable insights into resilience and innovation in education. To structure this analysis, this study applies two conceptual frameworks: crisis and disaster management theory (CDMT; Boin et al., 2008) and the technology acceptance model (TAM; Davis, 1989). The CDMT is used to analyze institutional and governmental responses to the pandemic, decision-making, and policy shifts in higher education (Comfort et al., 2010), and the TAM serves to explore how students and faculty accept and engage with digital learning platforms, considering perceived usefulness and ease of use (Al-Fraihat et al., 2020; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000).

Examining the similarities and differences in institutional adaptations across these countries allows for the identification of best practices and lessons learned, which can inform the development of robust crisis management frameworks. Moreover, exploring the impacts on students' academic experiences, mental health, and access to resources is essential for addressing equity and inclusivity in education during crises. These insights are not only relevant for the region but also provide transferable knowledge for global higher education stakeholders aiming to enhance preparedness and resilience against future disruptions. Thus, this study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the following: 1) How did higher education institutions in China, South Korea, and Japan adapt to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic? 2) What are the key similarities and differences in institutional responses across these three countries? 3) How did these responses impact students' academic experiences, mental health, and access to resources? 4) What lessons can be drawn to inform future crisis management and policy development in higher education?

METHOD

This study employs a systematic review of the literature to synthesize the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education institutions (HEIs) in East Asia, with a specific focus on China, Japan, and South Korea. The selection process was guided by thematic and regional relevance, ensuring a focused examination of the pandemic's influence on higher education policies, practices, and technologies in these countries. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to enhance the relevance and rigor of the review, ensuring that only studies contributing to the research objectives were incorporated.

The thematic categorization in this study was guided by both theoretical foundations and emergent patterns identified during the review of the literature. Given that the primary objective was to examine how higher education institutions responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was essential to structure the findings into meaningful categories that captured the core challenges and adaptations experienced by universities, faculty, and students. The selection of themes was informed by two primary considerations: alignment with existing theoretical models and recurrent patterns observed in the reviewed studies. The categorization process was first shaped by established frameworks relevant to crisis response and technology adoption. Crisis and disaster management theory (Boin et al., 2008) provides a lens through which institutional and governmental responses to the pandemic can be analyzed, whereas the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989) helps explain variations in digital learning adoption across different institutional and national contexts.

In addition to the theoretical basis, the themes were determined through an inductive review of the selected studies, allowing for the identification of consistent focal areas in the literature. As the articles and conference proceedings were analyzed, several recurring topics emerged as central to understanding the pandemic's impact on higher education. These themes included government actions, digital pedagogy, technology and resources, international students, university students in training, and student mental health. Each of these themes represented a distinct but interconnected dimension of how universities navigated the crisis and maintained educational continuity.

The theme of government actions captured policy decisions, funding allocations, and emergency response measures that influenced higher education institutions during the pandemic. The theme of digital pedagogy focused on the effectiveness of online teaching models, the instructional strategies adopted by faculty, and the challenges associated with remote learning. Technology and resources emerged as another critical theme, addressing disparities in infrastructure, the accessibility of digital tools, and the overall effectiveness of online learning platforms. International students were identified as a distinct category because of the unique challenges they faced, including mobility restrictions, academic disruptions, and the availability of institutional support. The category of university students in training was particularly relevant for those enrolled in professional programs that required hands-on experience, such as medical, dental, and engineering fields, which faced unique obstacles in

transitioning to online learning. Finally, the theme of student mental health was essential in capturing the psychological and emotional impact of the pandemic on university students, as well as the role of institutions in providing mental health support services.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles and conference proceedings abstracts were selected on the basis of the following inclusion criteria: (1) studies reporting impacts on higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) studies reporting impacts on educational technology implemented as a response to the pandemic; (3) studies in which the sites included either individual East Asian countries or the East Asian Region, with the definition of East Asia being China, South Korea, and Japan; (4) studies reporting impacts of the pandemic on university-level students and/or instructors; (5) studies reporting impacts of the pandemic on higher education institutions (HEIs); (6) studies reporting governmental and institutional responses to higher education policy resulting from the pandemic; and (7) studies included in SCOPUS.

The exclusion criteria were as follows: (1) book series; (2) studies on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic not related to higher education; (2) studies on the impacts of the pandemic on primary and secondary education; (3) studies reporting impacts on East Asian international students where the primary research focus was on the impacts on non-East Asian countries or HEIs; (4) studies with a focus on the COVID-19 virus and its mitigation; and (5) studies not included in SCOPUS.

This structured review methodology ensures the inclusion of high-quality, peer-reviewed research aligned with the objectives of the study. By narrowing the scope to studies published within SCOPUS, this review guarantees an academically rigorous foundation for exploring the interplay between pandemic-related challenges and institutional responses in higher education. Furthermore, this approach identifies patterns, challenges, and opportunities within the rapidly evolving educational landscape of East Asia, laying the groundwork for future research and policy recommendations.

Search strategy and the selection of literature

The SCOPUS database was used to search for relevant articles and conference proceedings. Four search term classifications were used: (1) Exposure: 'higher, education, university'. (2) Outcome: 'COVID-19, COVID-19, online'. (3) Location: China, Korea, Japan. (4) Identity: 'Chinese, Korean, Japanese'. The use of 'AND' was used to combine search categories, and 'OR' was also used to combine categories. The subject 'Social Sciences' was used to filter searches related to China and South Korea. Owing to the limited number of articles related to Japan, the use of the subject filter 'Social Sciences' was not necessary.

The first reviewer (TAB) performed the initial screening and collection of titles and abstracts. The second reviewer (YP) verified the results for relevance to

this systematic review. The exclusion of articles and conference proceedings was resolved by consensus. Finally, the authors further explored articles with limited information in their abstracts and by reading their introductory, results, discussion, and conclusion sections as well as by investigating conference proceedings.

Data Extraction

Each study selected for this systematic review was analyzed to collect the main research focus, results, and conclusions as reported in their abstracts. Summaries of the main findings were composed to highlight only the key takeaways from each abstract.

Data Synthesis

Key findings from each abstract were categorized by related themes and countries. The following themes were identified in the selected studies and subsequently used to categorize key findings: (1) government actions; (2) digital pedagogy; (3) technology and resources; (4) international students; (5) university students in training; and (6) student mental health. The key findings were organized according to the following countries: (1) China, (2) South Korea, and (3) Japan.

RESULTS

The SCOPUS searches for articles yielded 135 articles and conference proceedings. After the articles and abstracts relevant to this systematic review were screened, 72 articles and conference proceedings were selected. During the extraction of key findings, seven additional articles and conference proceedings were eliminated from consideration. In total, 65 articles and conference proceedings abstracts were included in this review. In this systematic review, eight countries were included: (1) China, South Korea; (2) China, South Korea, Japan; (3) China, Canada; (4) South Korea, Finland; (5) South Korea, Taiwan; (6) South Korea, Malaysia; (7) Japan, Sweden, Kenya; and (8) Japan, China. In the case of the articles on Japan and China, the content related to China was not included in the systematic review, as it focused on secondary education in China. However, the content of the article related to Japan focused on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Japanese higher education and was thus included in this systematic review. For the studies that focused on countries outside of China, South Korea, and Japan, only the findings related to China, South Korea, and Japan were included in this systematic review. The total number of articles with a single-country focus includes (1) China, 23 articles; (2) South Korea, 16 articles; and (3) Japan, 16 articles. The total number of articles and conference proceedings abstracts included in this review for each country are as follows: (1) China, 25 articles; (2) South Korea, 21 articles; and (3) Japan, 19 articles.

Table 1: Systematic review selection criteria

Selection criteria	Justification and parameters	Example of relevant source
Type of publication	Conference proceedings abstracts and academic articles	Chen, Y., Hou, A. Y. C., & Huang, L. (2022). Development of distance education in Chinese higher education in perspectives of accessibility, quality, and equity under COVID-19. <i>Asian Education and Development Studies</i> , 11(2), 356–365.
Target regions	Japan, South Korea, and China	Jung, J.-H., & Shin, J.-I. (2021). Assessment of University Students on Online Remote Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic in Korea: An Empirical Study. <i>Sustainability</i> , 13(19).
Topic relevancy	Studies containing information on impacts and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education in East Asia	Mogi, M., Furuyashiki, T., Takuma, K., Otsuguro, K., Tanaka, S., & Minami, M. (2021). Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on pharmacology education in the universities and colleges in Japan: nationwide emergency survey jointly conducted by the Physiological Society of Japan and the Japanese Pharmacological Society. <i>Folia Pharmacologica Japonica</i> , 156(6), 21025.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education in China

Owing to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Chinese government issued the “Suspending Class without Stopping Learning” policy, shutting down HEI campuses and shifting to online learning (Yang, 2020). Many difficulties stemming from a lack of online teaching infrastructure resulted despite governmental efforts to address those challenges.

Government Action

In response to the lack of resources, the Chinese government responded by providing online teaching resources for teachers. Moreover, some online courses are taught synchronously rather than asynchronously, as asynchronous course offerings present difficulties for Chinese instructors (Fu et al., 2021). However, despite government efforts, policy responses have lagged and failed to address the immediate nature of the issues presented by online instruction (Chen et al., 2022). In addition, there was governmental concern for the quality and equity of HED provided online during the pandemic, despite the government’s favorable stance toward distance education (Chen et al., 2022). According to Yang (2020), China’s government and oversight of public universities allowed for rapid responses to the

pandemic due to a lack of “audit culture”, making it a laudable success to be modeled by other nations. However, Yang (2020) reported that strict action was taken in China regarding the funding of HED since 25% of budget cuts affected all tier one, two, and three HEIs, with research funding, in general, being largely slashed as well.

Digital Pedagogy

Despite funding cuts and other initial frustrations experienced by faculty and students across China, many students reported that they were satisfied with their online learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, as reported by several studies on undergraduate and graduate students in China. One study on dental students in China reported that a majority of students were satisfied with their online learning experiences but would prefer to have had more student-instructor interactions in their learning (Wang et al., 2021). This study further reported that 97% of undergraduate dental education students moved to online formats because of the pandemic. Learning dentistry is typically considered a hands-on subject; hence, reported student satisfaction is noteworthy.

Another study reported that students and faculty were generally satisfied with their online learning experiences but ultimately preferred to return to in-person learning when possible (Huang, 2020). In Huang’s study, the instructors reported challenges that came from a lack of face-to-face interaction, a lack of instructor familiarity with online teaching technologies, adjustments to teaching plans and methods, and quick turn-around times to adjust during the onset of the pandemic and maintain student attention. These difficulties faced by instructors do not appear to have been uncommon, as another study reported that instructors did not feel sufficiently prepared to deliver online education (Tsegay et al., 2022).

A lack of reliable or available technological infrastructure also contributes to online learning difficulties (Chen et al., 2022). One study on the experiences of Ghanaian international students who chose to remain in China during the pandemic reported overall satisfaction with their online learning (Demuyakor, 2020). However, their greatest barriers were the high costs of the high-speed internet required for learning and the lack of reliable internet connections needed for online learning. The lack of reliable technological infrastructure and attention by the government to address this issue appeared to have had the anticipated impacts one would expect in a fully online learning environment.

Even with these types of barriers, once again, many students reported that the quality of online education was generally positive for English classes at a transnational university in Chengdu (Yiwei, 2021). Huang also reported that students were required to be self-disciplined and more proactive than usual to be as successful as online HED students (Huang, 2020). Furthermore, HED students generally experience greater impacts than compulsory education students do in China, as many face pressures of employment and a widened gap between higher-performing and lower-performing students (Xiao & Li, 2020).

These experiences, as reported above, paint a picture of layered frustration with the overall quality of HED online learning that has occurred during the

pandemic. Most instructors and students, while generally satisfied, experienced problems. There was difficulty in the initial transition to online learning mandated by the Chinese government, followed by a lack of knowledge to be successful on the part of the instructors and students. As frustrations continued, higher-performing students continued to be successful, whereas those with less intrinsic motivation were blamed for the shortcomings of the online learning model. For example, the majority of dental schools identify students' learning motivation as the main issue for online learning (Wang et al., 2021). The undertaking of online learning as a model for HED during the pandemic consisted of a mix of successes and failures in China.

Technology and Resources

In terms of experience with technology and tools for learning, several studies have investigated the successes and failures of online learning (Mok et al., 2024). Social media, particularly WeChat, was used to provide resources to international students residing in China during the pandemic (Yang, 2020). On the other hand, WeChat was an unsuccessful platform for delivering English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course in China. EFL students who learn through WeChat have lower language abilities when this social platform is used to practice and study English (Li et al., 2021).

Concerning learning platforms, several studies have addressed the need for improvement. One study reported that students' perceived ease of use of online learning platforms impacted their self-efficacy (Jiang et al., 2021). Another study reported a need for better teaching platforms to provide successful online education (Xiao & Li, 2020). A third study reported the limitations of online teaching platforms due to low levels of autonomy for students (Yiwei, 2021). One study on dental education reported that 74% of dental instructors used live-streaming for online courses (Wang et al., 2021), indicating the necessity and efficacy of the live-streaming platforms created during the transition to online learning in China. A study on web conferencing platforms for educational use in China revealed that the need for web conferencing platforms for educational purposes has increased (Li & Wang, 2021).

Despite the increased need for online learning platforms, the need for knowledge on how to use them has also become apparent. One study showed that instructors lacked the necessary technological and pedagogical training to successfully use online platforms (Tsegay et al., 2022). However, even with this lack of training and resources, instructors created videos and learned to manage online classrooms over time, showing the positive effects and growth achieved through these hardships. One study revealed that the pandemic united instructors behind collective goals, motivating them to care for student well-being and desire to improve their teaching skills (Fu & Clarke, 2021).

International Students in China

Finally, in terms of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility among outbound students in China, several studies reported that Chinese students remained in China and studied it through their international institutions' online platforms. When weighing out whether to remain in China or to study abroad, the top considerations among Chinese students included health risks, dissatisfaction with online learning, discrimination against the Chinese in the Western world, and perceived opportunities for cross-cultural experience (Cheng & Agyeiwaah, 2021). This led many Chinese students to choose to study online through transnational education instead of moving to a host country's institution for their studies (Wang, 2022). The students who remained in China reported the need to be highly adaptable to changing conditions of infrastructure and resources. However, as one study showed, their choice to remain was beneficial for their mental health, as overseas Chinese students were more likely to be depressed than students who remained in mainland China (Feng et al., 2021).

Impact of COVID-19 on higher education in South Korea

The COVID-19 crisis emerged during the winter break of 2019--2020 in South Korea, immediately before the beginning of the new school year. The first case was identified on January 20, 2020, and the situation rapidly exacerbated after the beginning of community-level mass infection on February 18. Research indicates that the spread of the virus resulted in mixed views about online learning caused by the sudden shift to this mode of learning, affecting students' satisfaction with online instruction.

Digital Pedagogy

Despite sudden shifts to remote instruction, higher education researchers have noted some positive effects in response to the pandemic. First, South Korean college students' problem-solving abilities improved in 2020 (Jang & Lee, 2021). Second, university students reported feeling satisfied with online education. Survey responses from 313 college students in South Korea indicated that the new method of learning had a positive effect on the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of online learning (Han & Sa, 2021). Educational satisfaction and acceptance of remote learning were positively impacted by the perceived ease of use and utility of distance learning. However, although satisfaction levels seemed to be high, learners' core competencies, including knowledge construction, responsibility practices, and socialization, decreased significantly in 2020 (Jang & Lee, 2021).

Jung and Shin (2021) surveyed 182 college students to examine the relationships among online learning quality, learner satisfaction, and flow. More specifically, the researchers categorized online learning quality into three components: system quality, information quality, and service quality. A structural equation model of AMOS 21.0 revealed that all three components of remote

learning quality had a positive effect on both flow and learner satisfaction, and flow also had a positive effect on learner satisfaction. Similarly, researchers have assessed the satisfaction level, success, and quality of online learning programs during the pandemic through focus group interviews (Choi et al., 2021). To support learning and ensure the success of online learning, Choi and colleagues advise considering blended learning.

These findings shed light on the difficulties and experiences that students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators in South Korea are advised to consider students' perspectives while implementing future similar learning initiatives and developing strategies that increase both student satisfaction and the efficiency of remote teaching techniques. Enhancing university students' core competencies is essential in the new learning environment of the post-COVID-19 age. Finally, effective communication between lecturers and students is a crucial component of success (Choi et al., 2021).

International Students in South Korea

A cross-sectional descriptive study identified two factors that led to preventive behavior among international students in South Korea during the pandemic (Jang et al., 2021). A survey of 261 international students in South Korea revealed that during the outbreak of a highly contagious disease such as COVID-19, attitudes and trust in the quarantine system affected personal preventive practices. It is common for international students to receive limited information about quarantine guidelines from the countries in which they are studying (Jang et al., 2021). Moreover, in a case study of 15 international exchange students who were forced to take online classes, participants reported feeling isolated and lonely (Stewart & Lowenthal, 2022). Some pointed out diverse learning experiences, whereas some interviewees reported that there was little-to-no social interaction.

University Students in Training

Medical education in South Korea underwent major changes caused by COVID-19, resulting in an increase in technology adoption (Lee & Park, 2021). All lectures moved online, but clinical students continued their hospital placements during the pandemic, except for the first 3–5 weeks during the first surge in 2020. The initial technical naivety of the faculty and lack of technical resources were short-lived, and the medical students settled well, showing a much higher-than-expected level of student satisfaction with online education. Practical skills, which benefit most from onsite hands-on experiences such as anatomy dissection, were delivered through a blended approach in some medical schools. During the early stages of the COVID-19 epidemic, nursing faculty members used a variety of educational techniques to improve their clinical skills and reduce restricted clinical exposure (Kim et al., 2021). The academic standards of students in dental education programs have been affected by COVID-19 (Herr et al., 2021). Researchers found that dental students preferred and adapted well to distance

learning in dentistry during the COVID-19 pandemic after evaluating the overall satisfaction and effectiveness of the web-based learning program in dentistry.

Impact of COVID-19 on higher education in Japan

With the spread of new coronavirus infections in Japan, higher education institutions have transformed their educational format from in-person instruction to distance learning. This change, similar to higher education in South Korea, brought difficulties for the student body as well as for other educational stakeholders. In Japan, 86% of universities postponed Spring 2020 classes, only 16.2% of universities continued with full in-person instruction, 60.1% provided hybrid classes, and 23.8% offered full remote learning (Yamada, 2022). In a survey of 202 universities in Japan, 85% reported that they changed the lecture method, and 70% changed practical training to the online mode (Mogi et al., 2021). This situation has resulted in significant issues, including mental health problems, the disruption of daily routines, the quality assurance of online education, and copyright issues caused by such rapid shifts. However, there were unexpected benefits of online methods, such as student satisfaction with class flexibility and repeatable learning, which resulted in more than 60% of universities considering the use of newly introduced educational styles even after the pandemic.

International Students in Japan

The rapid shift toward remote learning was a critical response to the pandemic, but it also affected incoming international students. Owing to the strict restrictions banning most international travel to Japan, universities have accepted almost no new international students for immediate studies. Incoming international students have had to postpone the start of their studies, risk losing scholarships, or rely entirely on remote attendance as they are located in their home countries. For outgoing Japanese locals, international study is still possible because they can return to Japan as needed, but they are still subject to restrictions that may be in place by their host countries and education institutions (Yamada, 2022).

Technology and Resources

Many academic libraries have been closed, and users have had to use eBooks instead of printed books in libraries. As eBooks are not yet commonly used in Japan, Kodama et al. (2021) examine the impact of the pandemic on the use of eBooks in academic libraries in Japan. As a case study, the usage data for each eBook platform at Kyushu University in Japan were analyzed, and the overall trends in each period before and during the pandemic were revealed (Kodama et al., 2021). Researchers have examined how many times eBooks were accessed before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of total access events in 2020 was greater than that in 2019 for all nine platforms. The platform that had the highest access count growth rate was JSTOR, with an 846% increase. The

usage of eBooks in the Maruzen eBook Library, which holds many Japanese textbooks, was examined in detail. eBooks on mathematics, medical science, and programming languages were in constant use both before and during the pandemic. eBooks in law and economics started to be used during the pandemic. These results indicate that the pandemic has evoked new needs for eBooks in certain fields.

Student mental health

The COVID-19 epidemic has affected research and instruction throughout Japan, with disruptions to regular instruction causing severe psychological distress. In a survey of 571 medical students in Japan, researchers examined factors linked to psychological distress among medical students from March through May 2020, which was the period of enforced home quarantine in Japan (Arima et al., 2020). Self-efficacy and self-esteem were found to be significant factors for predicting psychological distress. Thus, improving personal resilience should be a priority in Japanese higher education institutions with a specific focus on enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy. Initial programs may target students with higher levels of self-efficacy in emergencies, such as those encountered in reactions to the current COVID-19 outbreak. In contrast, in everyday circumstances, these initiatives should focus on pupils who have lower self-esteem as a main method of preventing depression.

Comparisons of China, South Korea, and Japan

This review highlights notable similarities and differences in the response of the three countries' higher education institutions to the COVID-19 pandemic. First, while all three countries implemented strict measures and lockdowns early on, their government actions varied in their timing and policies. In China, universities were closed and shifted to online learning immediately, and the government closely monitored the spread of the virus and implemented surveillance measures, whereas South Korea implemented an extensive testing and contact tracing strategy. Universities were closed temporarily, and a mixture of online and in-person classes was adopted in both South Korea and Japan. The South Korean government enforced social distancing measures and implemented travel restrictions, whereas Japan initially took a less stringent approach, relied on voluntary restrictions and gradually implemented stricter measures as the situation evolved.

Second, digital pedagogy differed across the three countries. South Korean universities quickly transitioned to online learning platforms and digital pedagogy, utilizing live-streamed lectures, video conferencing, and online discussion boards to facilitate remote education. While Chinese universities also shifted to online learning, they were able to employ a narrower range of global digital platforms and tools due to internet censorship. Japanese universities faced challenges in transitioning to online learning due to technical and cultural factors.

They relied on a mix of online and offline classes, utilizing digital platforms for lecture recordings and assignments.

Third, in terms of technology and resources, owing to a robust digital infrastructure and a tech-savvy population, which facilitated the adoption of online learning, Chinese and South Korean university students had access to advanced technology and resources. Owing to its strong IT infrastructure and high-speed internet, universities and students in South Korea had access to reliable connections and advanced technology for remote learning, whereas Japan faced some challenges in terms of technology and resources. While the country has a high-tech reputation, there are concerns about limited access to technology and internet connectivity, especially in rural areas.

Fourth, international student experiences vary across countries. China temporarily suspended the entry of international students during the pandemic. Some universities offered online programs for international students, whereas others delayed admissions or offered flexible study options. Similarly, South Korea implemented travel restrictions, affecting the entry of international students. Some universities offered online programs, whereas others provided support for quarantine and safety measures for incoming students. Moreover, Japan implemented travel restrictions and entry bans for international students. Many universities offer online programs and remote support for international students, and other institutions provide financial assistance and scholarships to support affected students. Fifth, similar difficulties arose among university students in training in all three countries. China implemented strict lockdown measures, which affected internships and practical training for university students. Many programs were postponed or transitioned to online formats where possible, whereas South Korean universities faced challenges in providing hands-on training and internships due to the pandemic. Some programs were postponed or adapted to online formats, whereas others implemented strict safety measures for in-person training. Japanese universities also faced difficulties in providing practical training and internships. Some programs were delayed or shifted to online formats, whereas others implemented safety measures and adapted training to comply with COVID-19 guidelines.

Finally, negative impacts on student mental health in all three countries were found. China recognized the mental health challenges faced by students during the pandemic and provided psychological support services. Thus, online counseling and mental health resources were made available to the students. South Korean universities prioritized students' mental health and provided counseling services remotely. For example, online resources and platforms have been established to address mental health concerns. Japanese universities also acknowledge the mental health impact on students and provide remote counseling services and mental health resources. Support systems have been established to help students cope with stress and anxiety. A study of 821 university students in South Korea, China, and Japan revealed that high percentages of students demonstrated a good understanding of COVID-19 information, including prevention methods and transmission mechanisms (Zhao et al., 2020). The Japanese group presented the most severe depression symptoms, whereas the

Table 1: Comparative Table

Feature	China	South Korea	Japan
Technology Adoption	Limited access to international platforms due to internet censorship (e.g., WeChat)	High-tech infrastructure with reliable internet connectivity	Strong technological base, but rural areas had internet gaps
Digital Pedagogy	Primarily synchronous; limited resources due to censorship	Adoption of live-streamed lectures, video conferencing, and discussion boards; advanced tech integration	Mix of synchronous and asynchronous; reliance on lecture recordings; hybrid use of digital platforms for recordings and assignments.
Faculty Training	Limited initial training, instructors had to learn on the job	Moderate support and training; quick adaptation to online tools	Limited initial training, although some institutions provided support
Internet Access	Disparities between urban and rural areas; issues with connectivity	Reliable infrastructure across most regions	Mixed results; better infrastructure in urban areas, rural areas had challenges
Government Response	Immediate policy for online learning, but lacked rapid support for faculty	Quick adoption of testing and contact tracing, university closure	Slow initial response, but eventually implemented strict measures
Mental Health Support	Growing concern for student mental health; online counseling services	Significant focus on mental health; online counseling available	Mental health issues identified; online support resources implemented
International Students	Some international students stayed, some took online courses	Travel restrictions limited new international students; some remained for online programs	Nearly no new international students accepted; reliance on remote learning
Student Satisfaction	Generally, positive but preferred in-person learning.	High satisfaction due to ease of use and utility of online platforms.	Mixed, with appreciation for flexibility but concerns about quality.

Chinese group reported the greatest preventative practice scores. Hence, it is highly important that educational departments and health authorities monitor the mental health of university adults and develop strategies to enhance mental health in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, an online cross-sectional questionnaire survey revealed that most students have a good understanding of COVID-19 information (Zhao et al., 2021). Students in South Korea had greater preventive behaviors than did students in mainland China, yet a higher percentage of South Korean students (28.7%) had moderate-to-severe depression than did students in the mainland group (18.9%). High degrees of worry about family members contracting COVID-19 and developing it, as well as having the suspicion that they may have come into contact with patients, were linked to more severe depression. For students in mainland China and South Korea, exposure to greater preventive activities reduced depression symptoms. These findings could serve as a guide for more research in various areas to develop strategies (such as psychological counseling and promoting physical activity) to lessen depression symptoms among university students.

DISCUSSION

When considering the many studies that reported the impacts of COVID-19 on HED systems in China, South Korea, and Japan, five significant areas stand out as research themes related to HED in this region. The first is the governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic. China, South Korea, and Japan all facilitated the shift from in-person to online learning. While the Chinese government mandated this transition, many South Korean and Japanese HEIs also made this transition. In all three countries, government support and policymaking appeared to have lagged behind the immediate need presented by the pandemic. In the framework of CDMT (Boin et al., 2008; Marginson & Xu, 2024), China's centralized policy mandate facilitated a swift transition to online learning, ensuring rapid institutional compliance. In contrast, South Korea adopted a technology-driven adaptation strategy, leveraging its robust digital infrastructure to maintain educational continuity. Japan, however, implemented gradual policy shifts, initially relying on voluntary restrictions before enforcing stricter measures, which led to a slower response. These variations highlight the critical role of national crisis preparedness and governance structures in shaping higher education strategies during emergencies.

The second was the underprepared nature of faculty and students to succeed in online learning. Each country faced barriers with respect to the transition. The lack of policies, infrastructure, training, and knowledge left many instructors in difficult situations. However, overall, many students across these three countries were satisfied with their online learning experiences. China stands out among these three countries in terms of technological issues due to a lack of ICT infrastructure. All three struggled with upskilling their faculty and supporting their students, but China's lack of reliable internet in some areas made it stand out

in terms of student-reported issues with online learning. Within the framework of the TAM (Davis, 1989), the success of technology adoption in higher education is influenced by both institutional support and individual digital literacy. South Korean students, benefiting from a well-developed digital infrastructure, reported greater perceived usefulness and ease of use, which in turn contributed to greater satisfaction with online learning. In contrast, students in Japan and China encountered more significant technological and instructional barriers, such as limited faculty preparedness and inconsistent access to digital resources, resulting in varied experiences and lower overall acceptance of digital learning platforms. These findings highlight the importance of technological readiness and user-centric support systems in facilitating successful online education.

Third, despite issues faced with online learning, all three countries reported that their students and faculty experienced positive experiences with online learning during the pandemic. Students appeared to have enjoyed the convenience of online learning. For example, in Japan, 60% of institutions reported a desire to continue offering online learning (Mogi et al., 2021). This stands in contrast to a report in China that showed that students still prefer in-person learning to online learning (Huang, 2020). Moreover, across these countries, faculty also reported learning new skills and developing models for online learning.

Fourth, mental health stood out as a research topic of interest for HED students in these countries. While other variables (e.g., personality) may have played a role in their decision-making process and mental health (Park, 2020), studies were specifically concerned with how much students knew about protecting themselves. Other studies have investigated the demographic factors that indicate the likelihood of depression among university students. Studies that have examined mental health have shown that there are increases in depressive moods and episodes of anxiety among East Asia university students (Park, 2025).

Finally, the impacts on international student mobility stand out as a research topic of interest. Some studies have focused on students choosing to remain mobile, whereas others have emphasized issues experienced by international students who choose to remain in the host country. Both Japan and China suspended the reception of international students. For Chinese students who remain in China, issues related to navigating HEIs outside China require them to be proactive to be successful. Overall, there continues to be a lack of understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 in these regions within the higher education field.

In addition, the comparative analysis reveals both shared challenges and unique responses among higher education institutions in China, South Korea, and Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic. While all three nations shifted to online learning, disparities in technological infrastructure significantly influenced outcomes. South Korea leveraged its robust digital infrastructure, enabling smoother transitions, whereas rural areas in China and Japan faced internet connectivity issues. These differences highlight the critical role of national technological readiness in mitigating the educational impacts of global crises.

These findings demonstrate the importance of integrating digital pedagogy and robust technological infrastructure into higher education policies.

Governments and institutions must collaborate to ensure equitable access to online learning resources, particularly in rural and underresourced areas. Furthermore, the mental health challenges identified across all three countries highlight the need for proactive psychological support systems within higher education.

As seen in past research (Boin et al., 2008; Comfort et al., 2010), centralized government mandates, such as those in China, align with crisis response strategies that emphasize top-down control, whereas South Korea's decentralized approach leveraged digital infrastructure for crisis adaptation. Additionally, the findings align with TAM (Al-Fraihat et al., 2020; Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), as perceived ease of use and usefulness influence student satisfaction. South Korean students, who had prior exposure to online tools, reported higher acceptance rates than did their Chinese and Japanese counterparts, where technological barriers exist.

Implications

A critical analysis of institutional responses within crisis and disaster management theory (Boin et al., 2008) suggests that rapid policy enforcement alone does not guarantee effective educational continuity. China's top-down approach enabled an immediate shift to online learning, yet faculty members lacked adequate training in digital pedagogy, leading to inconsistent student experiences. South Korea's technology-driven approach has proven more adaptable because of existing investments in digital education, allowing universities to integrate synchronous and asynchronous learning effectively. In contrast, Japan's delayed response and initial reliance on voluntary restrictions hindered early adaptation, resulting in fragmented institutional strategies. These findings highlight the necessity of proactive crisis preparedness policies in higher education, ensuring that universities have preestablished contingency plans, digital training programs, and infrastructural investments before future crises occur.

The technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989) provides further insight into the factors influencing the effectiveness of online education. The findings suggest that technology adoption was not merely a function of infrastructure availability but also depended on the user experience and institutional support. While South Korean students demonstrated greater perceived ease of use and usefulness of online learning due to strong digital infrastructure, students in China and Japan faced technological barriers, including internet accessibility issues and insufficient faculty preparedness. This finding indicates that investments in digital infrastructure must be accompanied by comprehensive digital literacy initiatives for both students and faculty. Higher education institutions should implement mandatory digital competency workshops and provide subsidized technology access for students from underserved regions to ensure equitable access to online learning.

In addition to these immediate recommendations, the findings also point to broader implications for higher education policy at the national level.

Governments must recognize that digital transformation in higher education is no longer a temporary response to a crisis but rather a fundamental component of future learning ecosystems. National education agencies should develop standardized guidelines for online education quality assurance, ensuring that digital courses meet rigorous pedagogical and accessibility standards. Furthermore, cross-national collaboration between higher education institutions can foster knowledge-sharing networks, enabling universities to exchange best practices in online education and crisis management.

For future research, although this systematic review provides an understanding of the responses to COVID-19 within the higher education field, several variables have not been considered. For example, professors' capacity in the virtual setting; cultural differences; socioeconomic and environmental factors; and different types of online learning (synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid). Future researchers can consider the value of studying several countries or regions comparatively to assess the online practices implemented and how different educational stakeholders react to these measures. Although there is broad consensus regarding high levels of student satisfaction with online learning despite technical challenges (e.g., Huang, 2020; Choi et al., 2021), the preference for in-person learning among Chinese students highlights a cultural dimension that warrants further exploration. Moreover, by comparing regions, contextual factors can be examined to understand how different countries or regions responded better to the pandemic. Moreover, considering this review, some studies would have been more significant with a greater sample size. Finally, the focus of the literature tends to be on learner perceptions and experiences, so future research may consider investigating instructors' or professors' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

This study is a wide-reaching look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on China, South Korea, and Japan, applying CDMT (Boin et al., 2008) and TAM (Davis, 1989) to analyze higher education responses to COVID-19. The findings indicate that substantial research has been conducted to understand the impacts of the transition to online learning experienced by these East Asian countries, reinforcing that government policy (Comfort et al., 2010) and technology adoption behavior (Al-Fraihat et al., 2020; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000) collectively influence institutional and student experiences. Additionally, mental health has been a strong concern among scholars interested in HED in China, South Korea, and Japan. Each region found its way to address the needs faced by its students and implemented online learning as the educational model, allowing for the continuation of learning within the context of safety restrictions. Students and faculty appeared to have struggled in this region with the initial move to online instruction but appeared to have been generally satisfied with their online experiences. Other impacts of the pandemic on East Asian HED included a focus on international students, the quality of online learning, and the upskilling of faculty and students to succeed in the online learning environment.

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This article incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools in selected sections. The AI-generated content was reviewed and integrated in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity guidelines. The final manuscript has been thoroughly assessed to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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