

**INTERACTIVE SESSION** **TECHNOLOGY****Higher Education Redefined: Virtual Education at Ahlia University**

Collaboration in educational institutions usually involves cooperation among students, faculties, sponsors, and universities. Unlike the corporate world, higher education institutions have generally fallen behind in adopting the latest technologies and have continued to rely primarily on face-to-face (F2F) collaboration. F2F learning predominates because of the widespread view that it helps students stay focused, connect with each other, follow a standard timetable, and improve their physical wellness and mental alertness. Faculties believe that it enables them to better understand and assess their students' qualities and shortcomings and to fulfill their roles as mentors. F2F learning enables students to share their perspectives and have their questions addressed with a level of personal interaction that digital learning cannot replicate.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced universities to rethink their assumptions. Although many universities worldwide had already begun to implement virtual learning before the pandemic hit, they were at varying degrees of implementation when the lockdowns began, and many had to rush to catch up.

Ahlia University Bahrain, the country's first private university, has effectively moved the bulk of its operations and services online: teaching, academic advising, career development services, counseling services, digital library services, payment services, document management, internship programs, student activities, and student complaint services. The university prepared itself for the online transition by implementing a series of measures spread over a period of two to three months. This included addressing infrastructural requirements for online education: optimum Internet speed, network upgrades, and licensing of Microsoft and other open-source or affordable software packages. Short videos and manuals on how to use different technologies and e-learning platforms were prepared to help students, faculties, and administrative bodies. Online training and support were provided through a hotline, its official website, virtual training courses, as well as through WhatsApp, other social media, and YouTube videos. The university provided its members with access to Microsoft Office 365 and a library of e-books as well. Security policies were implemented to enhance the protection of information and privacy. Faculty underwent intensive training to strengthen the

educational process itself and ensure that there would be no disruption in the event of an emergency.

Microsoft SharePoint, a web-based cloud collaboration tool for information storage and management, had already been implemented by the university toward the end of 2019. SharePoint is used to share and maintain up-to-date information and to expand awareness of the university's plans, decisions, events, rules, and policies among students and faculty. SharePoint has built cohesion, harnessed collective knowledge, and driven organizational efficiency by sharing common resources. It has also promoted collaboration between the internal units of the university and external bodies.

To conduct classes online, Ahlia University chose Microsoft Teams, a collaborative tool that allows users to chat, make calls, share documents, and conduct meetings. The university's IT team linked time tables and class lists from the university's Student Information System database, which stores and tracks all student information, including grades and attendance records, to Microsoft Teams using application programming interfaces (APIs) to import relevant course details. Using Microsoft Teams has enabled the university to create a secure environment where access to Teams chats and groups is barred to outsiders. All classes are recorded so students can review and recall all that has been taught. Advice, career development, and counseling services for mental health issues have also been made available through Microsoft Teams chats and calls.

The course details and class list from the Student Information System have also been linked with Moodle, an open-source learning management system. This has contributed significantly to mass enrollment and secured authentication. Through Moodle, instructors use quizzes, chat messages, forums, workshops, uploaded course materials, assessments, and surveys with tracking and reminder options to improve their students' efficiency in studying and to ensure the timely completion of assignments and courses.

To conduct online webinars and conferences with industry specialists and other universities, Ahlia University has used Zoom in addition to Microsoft Teams. As of September 2020, the university has participated in 9 webinars, 12 local conferences, and 34 international debates and conferences involving universities and industry specialists from Asia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Middle

East. Before the adoption of platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, the number of Ahlia University's international collaborations were limited to only around 11 per year. Moving discussions online has greatly reduced expenses due to travel while facilitating the exchange of knowledge and encouraging academic contributions. The success of these collaborations has

prompted Ahlia University to consider focusing on online platforms even after the pandemic is over.

*Sources:* Ahlia University-Bahrain, "COVID-19," [www.ahlia.edu.bh](http://www.ahlia.edu.bh), accessed December 17, 2020; Ahlia University, "WTUN Webinar Series—Online Learning and Teaching: Lessons Learned from COVID-19-Part 2," Youtube.com, July 21, 2020; Ahlia University, "WTUN Webinar Series—Online Learning and Teaching: Lessons Learned from COVID-19-Part 1," Youtube.com, July 21, 2020; Ahlia University, "How Virtual Learning Is Becoming a Key Ingredient in Delivering University Courses," Facebook.com, April 9, 2020.

## CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does Microsoft Teams promote efficient collaboration in universities and colleges?
2. What management, organization, and technology-based issues did Ahlia University address before pivoting its operations to deal with the pandemic?
3. What advantages has using collaboration tools provided for Ahlia University?

*Case contributed by Subhashini Bhaskaran, Ahlia University*

**Cloud Collaboration Services** Google offers many online tools and services, and some are suitable for collaboration. They include Google Drive, Google Docs, G Suite, and Google Sites. Most are free of charge.

Google Drive is a file storage and synchronization service for cloud storage, file sharing, and collaborative editing. Such web-based online file-sharing services allow users to upload files to secure online storage sites from which the files can be shared with others. Microsoft OneDrive and Dropbox are other leading cloud storage services. They feature both free and paid services, depending on the amount of storage space and administration required. Users are able to synchronize their files stored online with their local PCs and other kinds of devices, with options for making the files private or public and for sharing them with designated contacts.

Google Drive and Microsoft OneDrive are integrated with tools for document creation and sharing. OneDrive provides online storage for Microsoft Office documents and other files and works with Microsoft Office apps, both installed and on the web. It can share to Facebook as well. Google Drive is integrated with Google Docs, Sheets, and Slides (often called Google Docs), a suite of productivity applications that offer collaborative editing on documents, spreadsheets, and presentations. Google's cloud-based productivity suite for businesses, called G Suite, also works with Google Drive. Google Sites allows users to quickly create online team-oriented sites where multiple people can collaborate and share files.

**Microsoft SharePoint and IBM Notes** Microsoft SharePoint is a browser-based collaboration and document management platform, combined with a powerful search engine, that is installed on corporate servers. SharePoint has a web-based interface and close integration with productivity tools such as Microsoft Office. SharePoint software makes it possible for employees to share their documents and collaborate on projects using Office documents as the foundation.

SharePoint can be used to host internal websites that organize and store information in one central workspace to enable teams to coordinate work activities, collaborate on and publish documents, maintain task lists, implement workflows, and share information via wikis and blogs. Users are able to control versions of documents and document security. Because SharePoint stores and organizes information in one place, users can find relevant information