# A Blessing or a Curse ─ A Virtualization Study of the Activities of the Confucius Institutes in Latin America and the Caribbean during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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*Abstract:* The disruption caused by the Pandemic of COVID-19 accelerated the virtualization of educational services worldwide. In Latin American and Caribbean countries, higher education institutions have moved, in a very short period of time, from organizing their activities on campus to online or remote provision.

In this scenario we find the Confucius Institutes, international cooperation partnerships between local and Chinese universities, fostered by the Chinese International Education Foundation with the objective of promoting Chinese Language and Culture abroad.

This paper presents the results of a study concerned with the remote activities carried out by the Latin American and Caribbean Confucius Institutes, from January to July 2020, the first semester of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research method was a questionnaire sent to the local directors of the Confucius Institutes in Latin America and the Caribbean. Among the main conclusions of the study, it was found that Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) was the general response of the CIs studied to the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges faced by these institutes to quickly virtualize their activities were the lack of materials in the local language, lack of time to prepare classes properly and access and Internet connection. It is expected to accelerate the virtualization of CIs in the offer of classes and cultural activities because the technology works as a more inclusive tool, while the pandemic state served as a trigger for the development of other forms and teaching methodologies.

*Keywords:* Confucius Institutes, impact of COVID-19 pandemic, remote activities, virtualization of higher education

## 1.      Introduction

In December 2019, the world was surprised by the outbreak of an unknown kind of pneumonia in Wuhan, China. On January 9th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the discovery of a new coronavirus: SARS-Cov2, responsible for the coronavirus disease called COVID-19. On January 13th, 2020 the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed outside China and on March 11th the WHO declared a pandemic.

In an attempt to slow the advancement of COVID-19, governments worldwide have taken radical social distancing and confinement measures that affected the entire society, including higher education institutions (HEIs) which had to move from on campus to remote activities, in a very short period of time.

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), on April 1st, 2020, schools and higher education institutions were closed in 185 countries impacting almost 1,542,412,000 students, 89.4% of total enrollments. In

Latin America and the Caribbean UNESCO IESALC estimated that 23.4 million students (98% of the student population) and 1.4 million professors were affected by the pandemic (UNESCO IESALC, 2020, p. 9). Among the various institutions affected, we find also the Confucius Institutes (CIs), a public educational partnership between colleges and universities in China with institutions in other countries with the aim of promoting the Chinese language and culture and fostered by the Chinese International Education Foundation.

In order to identify the virtualization of the activities of the Confucius Institutes of Latin America and the Caribbean from January to July 2020 (first semester of the pandemic COVID-19), we proposed a survey conducted with the Local Directors and in their absence with the Chinese directors of these organizations.

## 1.1.      Objectives

The main objective of this study is to identify the remote activities developed by Latin American and Caribbean Confucius Institutes (CIs) from January to July 2020, the first semester of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following specific objectives are also addressed:

1) Recognizing the main challenges faced by these CIs, in the provision of educational services, during the studied period.

2) Identifying the technology used to deliver these activities.

3) Detecting the implications of COVID-19 pandemic for CIs in the studied region.

## 1.2.      Research Questions

1) What were the remote activities developed by the CIs from January to July 2020, the first semester of the COVID-19 pandemic?

2) What were the main challenges faced by the CIs in the provision of educational services during the studied period?

3) What technologies were used in the provision of these educational services?

4) What implications does the pandemic of COVID-19 bring to the CIs?

## 2.      Literature Review

## 2.1.      Confucius Institutes – A Brief History

The Confucius Institutes are international non-profit institutions aiming to foster the Chinese language and culture abroad. They were previously (before June 2020) supported by Hanban (Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language), a governmental body, and currently by a Non-Governmental Organization

(NGO) called Chinese International Education Foundation[1], whose main mission is to facilitate Chinese language teaching and learning worldwide, with its headquarters in Beijing.

According to the cooperation model, there are three types of CIs:

a) Those managed by the headquarters.

b) Those managed by the host country and licensed by the headquarters.

c) The most usual arrangement are CIs managed in partnership with a Chinese university (Chey, 2008, p. 41).

Financially, the arrangement is as follows: the Chinese government and Chinese university provide financial resources, didactic materials and professors, whereas the foreign institution provides physical resources and local staff. The norm is to set up a CI inside a higher education institution abroad; however, there are exceptions for the Confucius classrooms (Raggio & Pesce, 2019, pp. 7-8).

The first CI was opened in Seoul, South Korea, in November 2004. By 2020, more than 547 CIs and 1154 Confucius Classrooms have been founded in more than 160 countries. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the first CI was opened in Mexico, in 2008.

In 2014, Hanban (the previous CIs' general administrator) founded *CRICAL-Centro Regional de Institutos Confucio para América Latina (Regional Center for the Latin American CIs),* in Santiago, Chile. The goal of CRICAL is to coordinate the work of the CIs in the region, besides creating and designing lines of actions and common activities.

Currently, in Latin America and the Caribbean region there are 45 Confucius Institutes established in partnership with local higher education institutions and 14 Confucius Classrooms which are in high schools with, some exceptions. Since the beginning of the pandemic period, teaching in Confucius Institutes almost all over the world has been affected to some extent. These institutes, like other HEIs in other parts of the world, had their actions disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and faced many challenges in carrying on their regular activities.

## 2.2.        Studies on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education

Since the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic of renowned international organizations such as the United Nations - UN (2020), UNESCO IESALC (2020), the International Association of Universities - IAU (2020) and the Association of International Educators - NAFSA have endeavored to study its overall impact on education and higher education.

One of the biggest impacts was the abrupt interruption of on-campus activities and transition to remote activities affecting professors and students who had to adapt very quickly to the new conditions.

On April 1st, 2020, schools and higher education institutions were closed in 185 countries impacting almost 1,542,412,000 students, 89.4% of total enrollments. In Latin

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[1] Retrieved 23 Dec. 2020 from https://www.socialworkweekly.cn/news/17759.html

America and the Caribbean UNESCO IESALC estimated that 23.4 million students (98% of the student population) and 1.4 million professors were affected by the pandemic (UNESCO IESALC, 2020, p. 9).

Additionally, international student mobility was totally interrupted, thus delaying students' dreams of studying abroad and financially affecting higher education institutions which counted on international student enrollment. In the fall semester 2020 the United States higher education system is estimated to have suffered a loss of 700 million USD (NASFSA, 2020, p. 1).

Not to mention the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the diverse economies, cutting government budgets, consequently, reducing the investment and subsidy on education, with an expectation of an increase of student desertion.

Besides that, there is an obvious impact on health but also on mental health, since numerous difficulties are being faced by the students and their families.

Among various specific studies we would like to highlight by Baloran (2020), who studied the knowledge, attitudes, anxiety, and coping strategies of students; Motaung and Dube (2020), two South-African scholars who studied WhatsApp Messenger as a Mediating Tool in Times of COVID-19 for Enhancing Student Engagement in e-Tutorials in a rural university; Slimi  (2020) carried out a case study from Oman on online learning and teaching during COVID-19; Lu Jianming (2020) and other scholars in China discussed comprehensively about the challenges of international Chinese teaching and the related counter-measures, to mention a few  examples. One thing in common, found in these studies is that online teaching has become a new normal in this pandemic period, which will last for an uncertain period of time. Thus, teachers and students have to learn how to adapt themselves to this model of teaching; even though its effect is not as good as that of face-to-face, it is a necessary substitute.

### 2.3.        Virtualization of Higher Education and CIs in a Time of COVID-19 Pandemic

Higher education institutions and CIs usually incorporate films, videos, television broadcasts, online learning platforms, internet, etc., in their classes with the goal of enhancing their conventional classrooms. Moreover, in the diverse higher education systems there are numerous universities centered in e-learning, therefore using, systematically, the information and communication technologies (ICT) in education.

The literature describes virtual education as education delivered through internet or another platform by means of information and communication technologies.

Technological virtualization of education occurs when the learning process is mediated by technology (internet, learning platforms, multi-media telecommunication systems, etc.). Virtualization education goes beyond the virtual classroom, and includes knowledge production (online research), knowledge management and storage (virtual libraries, for instance), knowledge diffusion (online teaching) and management of the educational institution in general (Silvio, 1998, p. 29). What characterizes virtual education is planning and the systematic use of the technology, to the contrary of random virtual activities (Willoughby, 2004, pp. 4-5; Silvio, 1998, pp. 28-30).

In recent years, e-learning has been expanded globally, especially with the phenomena of Online Educational Resources (curriculum maps, course materials, textbooks, streaming videos, multimedia applications, podcasts, and any other materials that are openly available for use by educators and students), Massive Open Online

Courses (MOOCs) and Collaborative Online International Learning - COIL (Butcher, 2015).

In Latin American and the Caribbean higher education institutions have experienced important progress by means of expanding the access to education. However, when the subject is virtual education or e-learning there is a digital gap caused by the unequal access to information and communication technologies.

According to a study conducted by the OECD in 2015, face-to-face classes are still the prevalent model in higher education institutions of the region (65%), followed by 16% of a blended model and 19% centered e-learning (OECD, 2015, pp. 18-19).

Although distance learning has been expanded by 73% since 2010, growing from 2.5 million online learners to 4.3 million in almost seven years, the offer has been concentrated in a small group of universities and mainly at the postgraduate level (UNESCO IESALC, 2017).

In March 2020, amid the pandemic of COVID-19 schools, universities and institutes worldwide had to make a transition to a distance or online modality implemented by accident. This Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) has been called Corona-teaching (characterized by an abrupt migration to online learning). This sudden and disruptive shift to remote education varied by size, governance models, and disciplinary differences. It was more difficult for comprehensive institutions and more challenging for practical disciplines such as lab work, practical experience and arts workshops. (IAU, 2020, p. 9).

In general, in Latin America and the Caribbean, like in other regions in the world, the response that has been observed was ERT, consisting of moving to synchronous classes online first and then adding some asynchronous activities. Corona-teachings basically to virtualize the existent classes without introducing a change in the curriculum or in the methodology (Pedró, 2020, p. 5).

Corona-teaching or ERT is not e-learning or online learning. The main difference between these concepts is planning, design, methodology and academic staff training. Almost all these elements are absent in ERT which appears as a temporary solution.

The CIs are also immersed in this scenario and had to move from face-to-face classes to remote activities within a week or two.

In a Seminar organized by CRICAL in June 2020 it was observed that most of the CIs in Latin America and the Caribbean were developing ERT following the general picture of the region, whereas some institutes (only 4) were offering previously structured online courses, having a competitive advantage among others. In the same event, some creative solutions were presented, while it was clear that everyone was facing the same challenges, such as lack of time to prepare proper materials in the local language and lack of Chinese language professors (some of them were stuck in China being unable to travel).

During this seminar it was also observed that research was needed to find out more about the efforts implemented by the CIs in Latin America and the Caribbean.

## 3.        Research Method

The research method used in this study consists of a written questionnaire with closed-ended and open-ended questions sent to 45 local directors of the Latin American and Caribbean Confucius Institutes. The return rate of this survey is 60% (27 replies).

The unit of analysis and study population consists of Confucius Institutes in the Latin American and Caribbean region, while the research subjects are Local Directors and, in their absence, Chinese Directors of the analyzed CIs.

## 4.          Results and Discussion

Twenty-seven CIs directors (60% of the study population) from the following countries answered the questionnaire: Argentina, Bolivia, Bahamas, Brazil, Barbados, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Equator, Guyana, Mexico, Peru, Surinam and Trinidad and Tobago.

Most of these CIs covered the cost of their activities with financial support from the Chinese government and with tuition fees paid by the students (57.69%). Nevertheless, discounts and scholarships are widely offered.

Among the usual activities developed by the units of analysis we find Chinese lessons (delivered in a maximum period of 6 years, 12 levels) and a wide range of cultural events (from Chinese gastronomy to Chinese Traditional Medicine). In 2019, most of the Chinese Language programs were delivered on campus (in 75.83% of CIs), while remote, online and blended courses were developed by almost 10%, 19.53% and 16.57% respectively, as shown in Figure 1.

In general, CIs in Latin America and the Caribbean concentrate their offer at the basic and intermediate levels, although a few reach advanced levels. This is because these institutes are relatively new compared to other parts of the world (the first was founded in 2004), therefore, they are still advancing in offering different levels of the Chinese language. In addition, it is also common to have fewer students at advanced levels due to the higher dropout rate after intermediate levels.
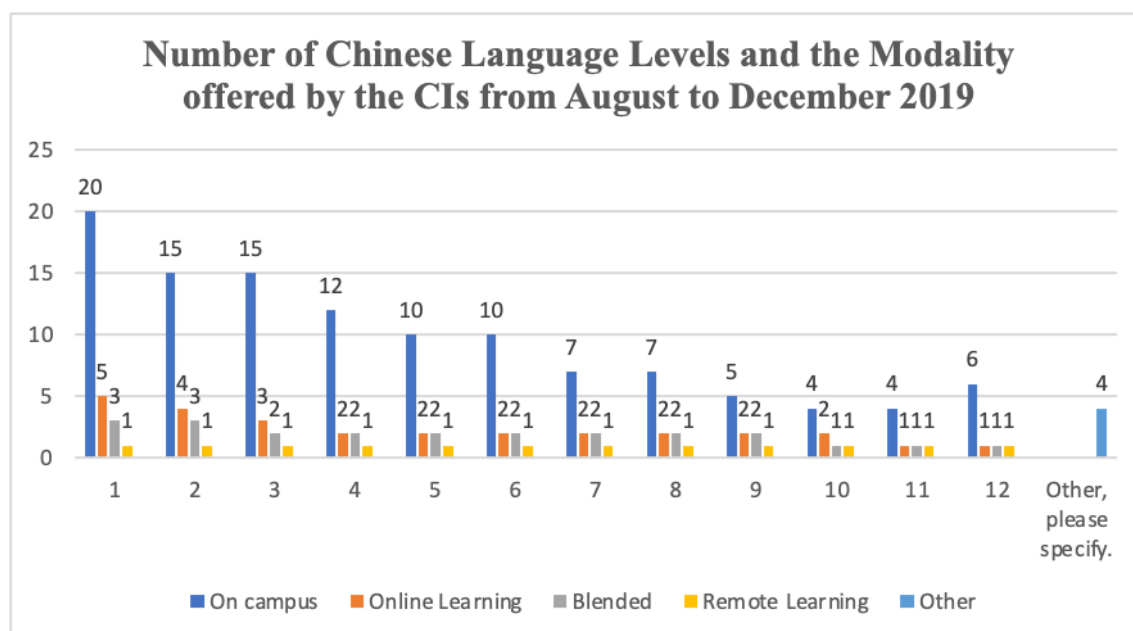


Figure 1. Number of Chinese Language Levels and the Modality Offered by the CIs from August to December 2019.

This scenario changed rapidly in March 2020, when the WHO declared a state of pandemic and governments around the world, in an attempt to stop the advance of

COVID-19, took radical measures of distancing and social confinement, affecting the whole of society.

In Latin America and the Caribbean UNESCO IESALC estimated that 23.4 million students (98% of the student population) and 1.4 million professors were affected. This was also the case of the CIs that had to virtualize their activities in almost one week.

The year of 2020 was planned as usual when the CIs received the news of the outbreak of a new kind of unknown pneumonia in China. Some professors and Chinese CIs directors, who were in China for the celebrations of the Chinese New Year, were unable to come back to their regular activities abroad. With the declaration of the state of pandemic by the WHO, in March 2020, all CIs had to move to online or remote activities (58.85 %, 25.25 % respectively) as shown in Figure 2.
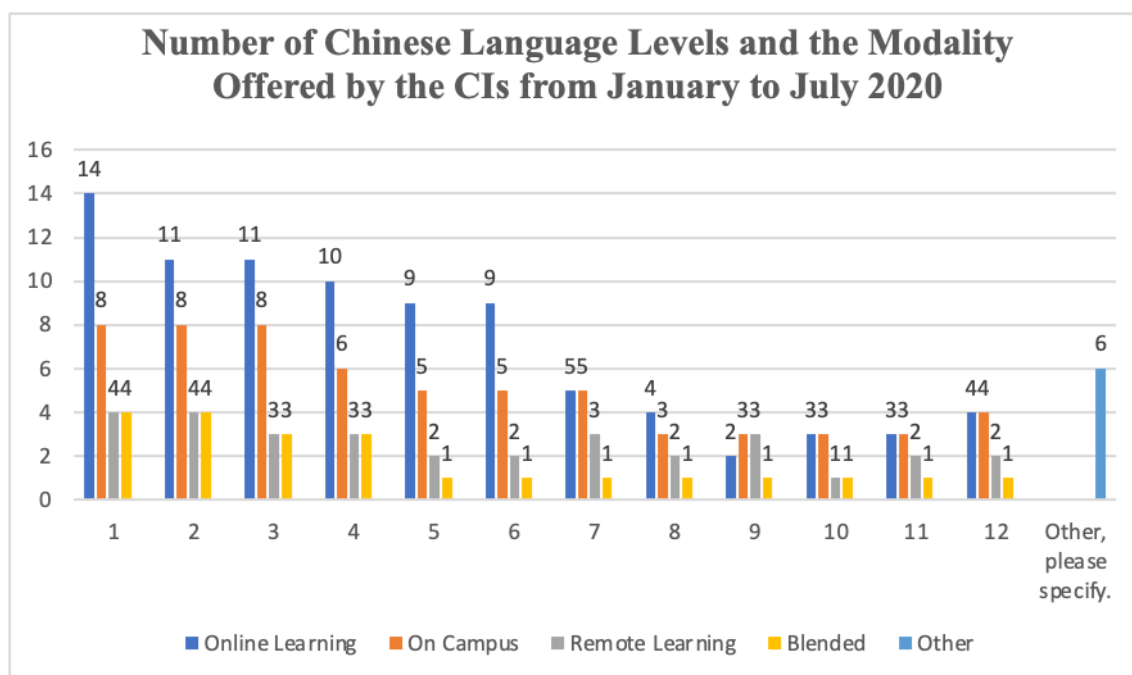


Figure 2. Number of Chinese Language Levels and the Modality Offered from January to July 2020.

When asked about the technology used to offer courses and cultural activities from January to July 2020, 22 CIs declared that they started to use Zoom in 2020, whereas only 2 were using it before. Still, 7 stated they were using YouTube and 10 were also making videos before. Not surprisingly, the majority of the CIs (22) widely used Zoom, in the first semester of COVID-19 pandemic, whereas 7 used Google Classroom, 6 Moodle, 4 Microsoft Teams, 3 Black Board and 1 Canvas. Other technologies were also applied in the provision of educational services such as Edmodo and VooV Meeting. The general picture about the use of the technology in the provision of remote activities is presented in Figure 3.

**Technologies used in the Provision of Remote Activities or Online Learning from January to July 2020**

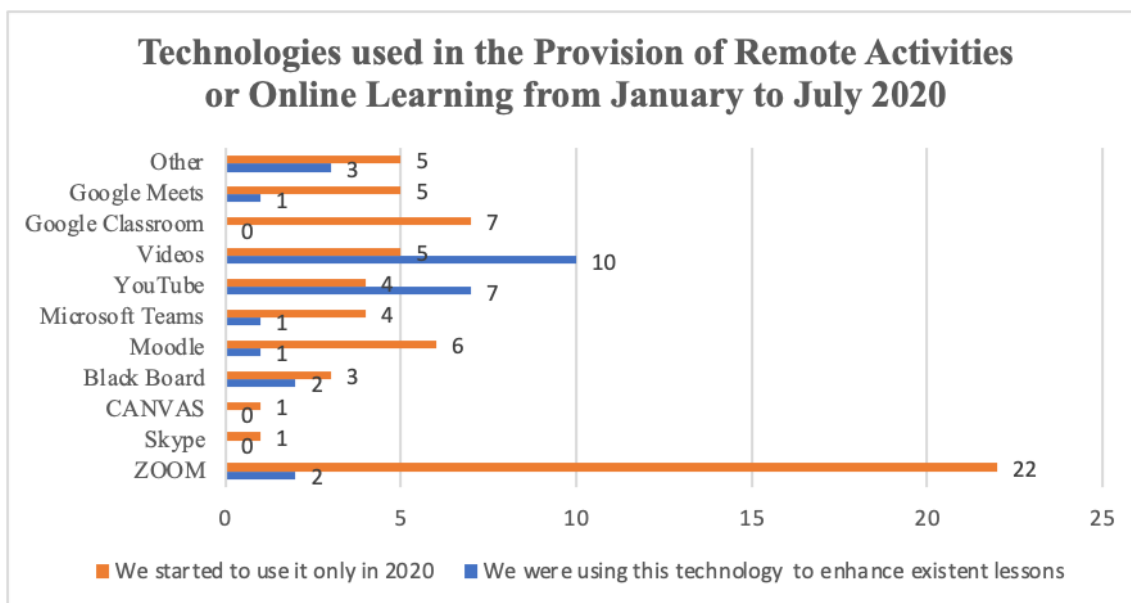| Category | We started to use it only in 2020 | We were using this technology to enhance existent lessons |
|---|---|---|
| Other | 5 | 3 |
| Google Meets | 5 | 1 |
| Google Classroom | 7 | 0 |
| Videos | 5 | 10 |
| YouTube | 4 | 7 |
| Microsoft Teams | 4 | 1 |
| Moodle | 6 | 1 |
| Black Board | 3 | 2 |
| CANVAS | 1 | 0 |
| Skype | 1 | 0 |
| ZOOM | 22 | 2 |

Figure 3. Technologies used in the Provision of Remote Activities or Online Learning from January to July 2020.

Regarding the cultural activities developed by the CIs, there were 80 classes in gastronomy, history, culture, literature and poetry, calligraphy, music, geography and business seminars, in addition to Tai Chi, paper cutting, Chinese clothing, Chinese zodiac, reading, autograph competition, Chinese painting and Chinese philosophy. In providing these activities, CIs mainly used Facebook, webinars and Instagram. More details are shown in Figure 4.

**Cultural Activities, with the Mode of Provision, Developed by the CIs from January to July 2020**

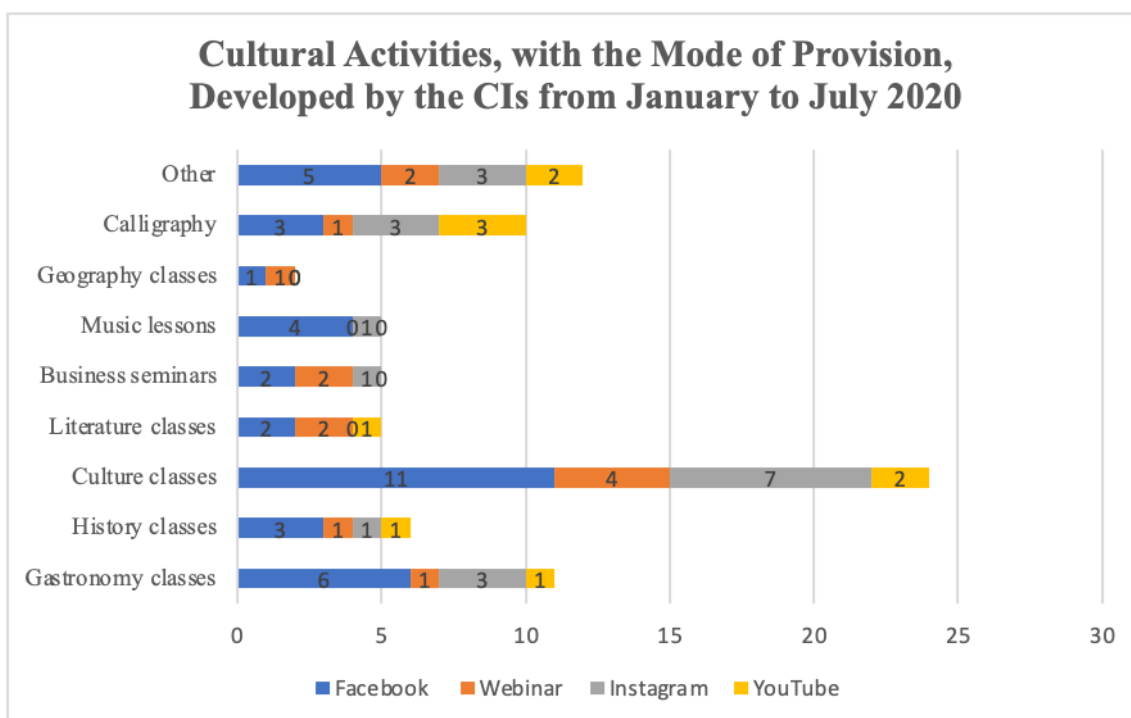| Category | Facebook | Webinar | Instagram | YouTube |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Other | 5 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Calligraphy | 3 | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| Geography classes | 1 | 1 | 0 | |
| Music lessons | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Business seminars | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Literature classes | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Culture classes | 11 | 4 | 7 | 2 |
| History classes | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Gastronomy classes | 6 | 1 | 3 | 1 |

Figure 4. Cultural Activities, with the Mode of Provision, Developed by the CIs from January to July 2020.

In general, it was observed that the disruption caused by the pandemic of COVID-19 rapidly virtualized almost all CIs' activities. Emergency Remote Teaching was the prevalent answer for classes, mainly using existent tools such as Zoom, whereas the cultural activities were carried on by using Zoom, Microsoft teams and social media.

When asked how activities would be organized from August to December 2020, most CIs said they would continue remotely (85%); only 8% were planning something mixed. Some CIs recognized that when the pandemic passes, they will continue to develop remote activities (48.15%), others (40.74%) said they do not know, while 11.11% said they will not continue with remote activities after the pandemic.

The main challenges faced by the CIs in the provision of educational services during the social distancing period are the lack time to prepare the activities, followed by the lack of suitable software to deliver the classes. Other challenges are, poor Internet access, failure to connect to the Internet and lack of Chinese language professors.

These challenges are ranked according to a weighted average scale from 1-4, based on the participants' answers, who classified the challenges as: not really important, more or less important, important and very important. More details are presented in Figure 5.



**Ranking of Challenges Faced by the CIs in the Provision of Courses Remotely or Online**

2.62   2.46   2.26   2.26   2.74   2.26   2.15

- ■ Lack of time to prepare the activities
- ■ Lack of suitable software
- ■ Pour Internet access
- ■ Failure in the Internet connection
- ■ Lack of online materials in the local language
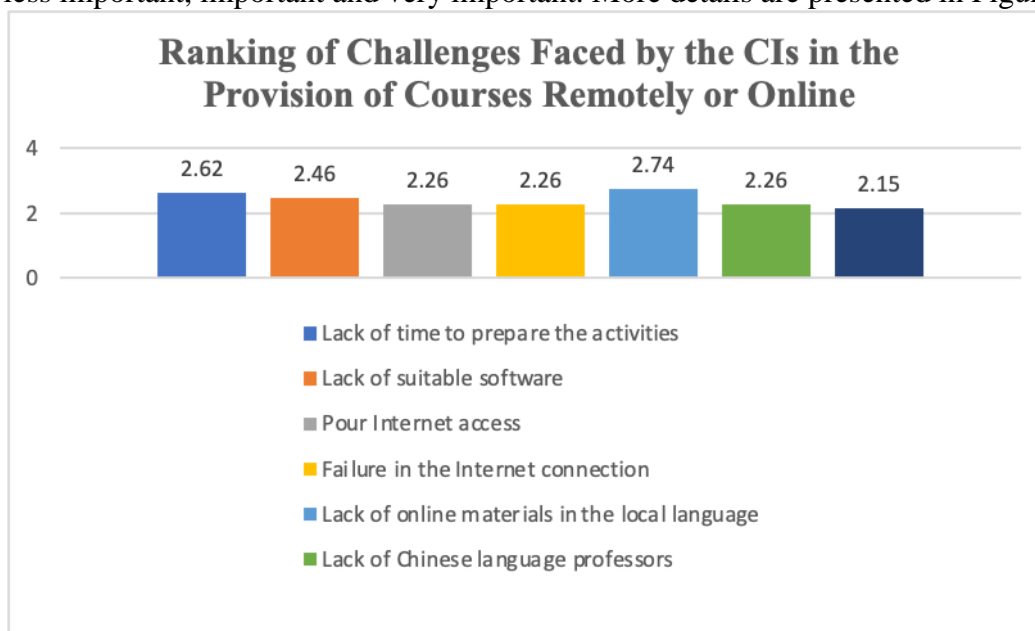- ■ Lack of Chinese language professors

Figure 5. Ranking of Challenges Faced by the CIs in the Provision of Courses Remotely or Online.

Despite the challenges faced during the first semester of the Pandemic of COVID-19, the CIs assessed their activities as Satisfactory (70.37%) and Very Satisfactory (25.93 %). The percentage of satisfaction is shown in the Figure 6.
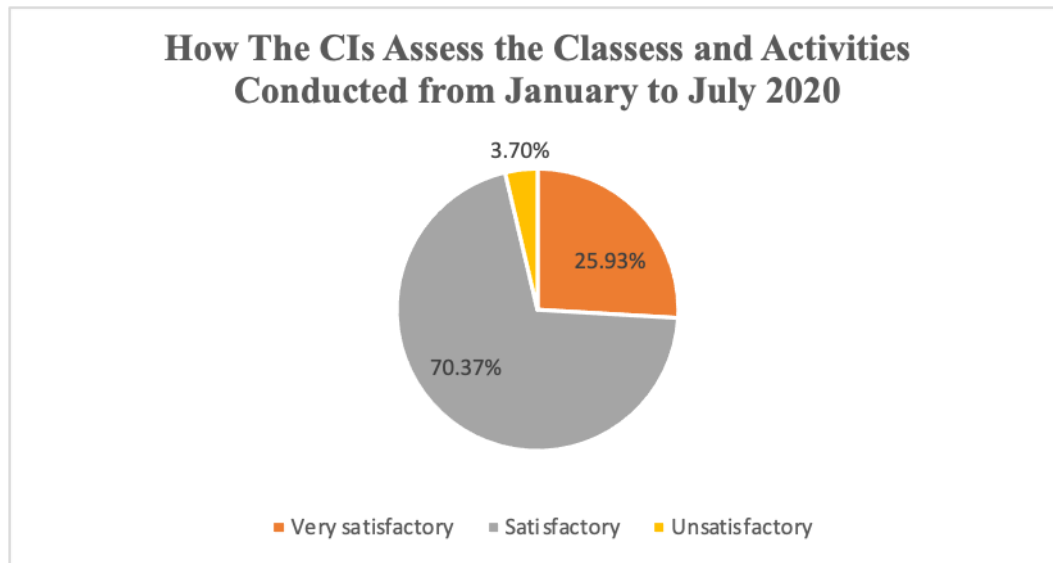
Figure 6. How The CIs Assess the Classes and Activities Conducted from January to July 2020.

## 5.        Implications from the Study

From the results of the present study, the following implications were developed:

1) No matter for CIs in Latin America and the Caribbean region or for higher education institutions in this vast area, virtualization of educational services is a trend that has been accelerated by the disruption caused by the pandemic of COVID-19. Therefore, those in related administrative positions should develop this thinking, whether they like it or not.

2) As stated by Zhang Lifen (2019) before the pandemic, the ideal form of higher education for the future should be a combination of online and on campus teaching. A good starting point for those who are doing ERT would be planning future activities in a blended modality, adding more asynchronous lessons.

3) COVID-19 Pandemic has been one of the most important challenges faced by that humanity faced in the early 21st century yet challenges often mean new opportunities. This is the time to develop new methodologies taking into account new technologies in education.

4) As a good alternative to the current situation, CIs should develop more online Chinese courses, such as the online Business Chinese (Level 1 to Level 5) developed by the Business CI at *Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado* - FAAP, in Brazil.

## 6.        Conclusion

Notwithstanding the lack of time to prepare the activities remotely, in general, the CIs in Latin America and the Caribbean managed to carry on with their activities during the first semester of the pandemic of COVID-19 (January – July 2020).

It was also observed that most of the CIs were used to delivering their activities on campus, while some of them were already using the technology as a complement of their on-campus classes. As stated in a conference organized by *CRICAL* in June 2020, only 4 institutions were offering online courses before the pandemic.

The disruption caused by the pandemic of COVID-19 rapidly virtualized almost all CIs' activities. CIs directors, coordinators and professors had to manage to move to remote activities in a very short period of time. Emergency Remote Teaching - ERT also called Corona-teaching, which is basically to virtualize the existent classes without introducing a change in the curriculum or in the methodology, was the general response given by the CIs to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the challenges faced by these institutes to quickly virtualize their activities, we find the lack of materials in the local language, lack of time to prepare classes properly and access and internet connection. Despite all these challenges, CIs reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the activities carried out in the studied period.

It is also expected to accelerate the virtualization of CIs in the provision of classes and cultural activities, since technology works as a tool for greater inclusion. The pandemic state served as a trigger for the development of other forms and teaching methodologies.

## 6.1.          Limitations of This Study and Recommendations for Future Research

This was an exploratory study about the remote activities conducted by the Latin American and the Caribbean CIs from January to July 2020, the first semester of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study did not include the students' view neither the learning outcomes. More research should be conducted in order to find out how the second semester 2020 (August to December 2020) was organized, whereas a qualitative study organized with interviews with professors and students would be interesting to add a qualitative vision to the preliminary findings of this study.

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