

Resistance to change: Challenges and opportunities in digital higher education

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In the higher education landscape, resistance to change is not a new phenomenon. Anyone involved in change processes at universities inevitably encounters resistance—both on an individual and organisational level. During the ongoing digital transformation of teaching, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, resistance has manifested in new ways. Our study shows how these forms of resistance develop and how universities can learn to better understand and address them.

(Digital) Change in Higher Education: A Complex Undertaking

Change processes in higher education are notorious for their complexity and the multitude of critical reactions they evoke (Sapir & Oliver, 2017; Bristow, Robinson & Ratle, 2017; Kalfa, Wilkinson & Gollan, 2018). In particular, the digitalisation of higher education, which received an unprecedented boost during the COVID-19 pandemic, posed enormous challenges to universities. At the same time, faculty members experienced profound upheavals in their work environment and their conception of teaching (Devkota, 2021; Elsholz et al., 2021).

The inevitable and abrupt transition to digital teaching formats during the pandemic triggered a variety of complex reactions: initially, a wave of solidarity and motivation among educators was observed (Laufer et al., 2021). However, inequalities soon emerged regarding digital skills and access to essential resources like devices and stable internet connections (Simamora et al., 2020; Devkota, 2021). Precarious and uncertain conditions led to increased stress levels among staff (Jojoa et al., 2021) and a sense of being overwhelmed, particularly due to a lack of support from university management (Elsholz et al., 2021). Such situations often lead to various forms of resistance towards the digitalisation of education. But what exactly underpins this resistance to change in the academic system, and how can it be explained?

Recognising and Better Understanding Resistance

Resistance to change is inevitable. At the same time, the success of change processes depends critically on all stakeholders—leaders, faculty, students, and administration—supporting the transition. Without their approval and backing, it is unlikely that change will be implemented sustainably and successfully (Cho, Park & Dahlgaard-Park, 2017; Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006).

Furthermore, resistance to change is diverse. It ranges from open rejection to more subtle forms like delay tactics or withdrawal (Bovey & Hede, 2001). An example of a delay tactic could be faculty

continuously postponing technical training or new teaching methods to delay the introduction of digital tools. These behaviours often result from individual reactions to change and a personal understanding of what change means and how it is experienced (Piderit, 2000). Especially in academic circles, resistance can be deeply rooted. Academic freedom, which grants faculty exceptional autonomy, plays a key role here. Changes initiated externally are often perceived as a threat to this freedom and therefore lead to resistance. Likewise, specific organisational structures and the culture of universities are significant factors. Universities consist of many loosely connected units, such as faculties, institutes, and administrative departments. This decentralised structure makes it difficult to implement coherent and comprehensive changes, as each unit has its own priorities and ways of working.

In summary, resistance to change arises from a complex interplay of individual reactions and organisational structures. Change often provokes intense emotional responses that significantly influence the acceptance or rejection of change. Additionally, organisational factors, such as a lack of support from university management, can reinforce resistance.

Insights from Our Research

As part of the [OrA project \(Organisational Adaptivity in the German Higher Education Context\)](#), a collaboration between the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (HIIG) and the [CATALPA research cluster at the FernUniversität in Hagen](#), we investigated the adaptability and willingness of universities to change during the COVID-19 crisis. Across eight case studies and a total of 86 interviews with university staff in Germany and other European countries, we identified various forms of resistance, ranging from direct rejection of new technologies to a minimisation of engagement. Our research shows that resistance to the digital transformation of teaching is often shaped by individual emotional reactions, but also that organisational practices can effectively counteract these resistances.

Individual Reactions to Change

In our data, resistance and hesitant behaviour can primarily be traced back to three emotional reactions: feeling overwhelmed, experiencing fear, and engaging in ideological conflicts. Feeling overwhelmed refers particularly to the immense workload that instructors experienced due to the sudden shift to digital teaching. Experiencing fear manifests in two forms: first, the fear of unfamiliar technology and the associated concern about failing; second, fear for one's job, along with worries about becoming irrelevant and eventually being replaced by technological advancements. The last individual reaction underlying resistance is engaging in ideological conflicts. These conflicts are often tied to traditional self-images of the institution, such as the understanding of being a campus university that has always taught exclusively on-site, thus perceiving no need for digitalisation. Other narratives describe digital teaching as a threat to the quality of higher education or argue that students expect in-person teaching on campus.

Addressing Resistance through Organisational Practices

As we have found once again, resistance is an inevitable part of any change process. However, there are effective strategies that organisations can adopt to address it. The data from our study highlight two key approaches: recognition and incentives, as well as fostering spaces for critical exchanges. Acknowledging the additional work associated with digital transformation can significantly boost the motivation of lecturers. While many respondents expressed a desire for recognition from their institution, some also mentioned institutions that had already implemented reward systems to acknowledge digital engagement and offer appropriate incentives. These included opportunities to apply for awards recognising digital teaching efforts, financial incentives such as funding for student assistants or new technology, and extensive didactic and advisory support. These institutions reported high acceptance of integrating new educational technologies. Equally important was the creation of spaces for critical discussions about digital teaching methods. These discussions helped alleviate fears and openly address ideological conflicts, enabling a constructive engagement with digital transformation. Such supportive environments, where educators were encouraged to engage with EdTech, were often linked to flat hierarchies and reflected in the investment in organisational structures that foster regular exchange.

Resistance as an Opportunity: Shaping Change Constructively

Resistance is often viewed merely as obstacles that need to be overcome. However, it can also provide valuable insights into deeper emotional and ideological conflicts. Resistance can highlight problematic areas, bring more voices into the conversation, and enable a constructive dialogue if we challenge the negative connotation of the term (Thomas & Hardy, 2011). The research conducted by the HIIG and CATALPA shows that recognising and understanding resistance is crucial for addressing them effectively. By understanding and constructively engaging with these different forms of resistance, universities can manage change more effectively and enhance the quality and acceptance of their digital teaching offerings

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