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Revisiting Emergency Remote Teaching in Higher Education: The Case of Uruguay's University of the Republic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions worldwide to rapidly transition to emergency remote teaching, exposing both structural vulnerabilities and institutional capacities for adaptation. This study examines the case of Uruguay's University of the Republic, the country's largest public and open-access university, through a document-based case study approach. Drawing on secondary sources, including institutional reports and survey data, the analysis explores how educational continuity was maintained during the initial phase of the pandemic through the implementation of emergency remote teaching, and how pre-existing conditions shaped the university's response. The findings show that Udelar's democratic governance structure, extensive digital infrastructure, and prior experience with virtual learning environments enabled a rapid and large-scale transition to virtuality. At the same time, the study identifies significant limitations in the pedagogical use of digital technologies, highlighting a gap between technological capacity and instructional transformation. Faculty members faced increased workloads and limited training opportunities, while students experienced challenges related to engagement, interaction, and well-being, particularly among vulnerable groups. By situating these developments within the broader context of Latin American higher education, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions on the tension between structural conditions and pedagogical transformation.

Keywords: emergency remote teaching, higher education, online learning, COVID-19, Uruguay, Universidad de la República, Latin America, digital education, educational policy, higher education policy

Highlights

What is already known about this topic:

- Emergency remote teaching exposed inequalities in higher education systems worldwide.
- Latin American universities faced major challenges related to digital access and pedagogy.
- Existing research on Uruguay's response has been fragmented, published primarily in Spanish and in local dissemination outlets.

What this paper contributes:

- This paper provides an English-language synthesis of Uruguay's emergency remote teaching response through a document-based case study of the University of the Republic.
- The study links the emergency response to pre-existing digital and governance structures.
- The paper highlights tensions between technological capacity and pedagogical transformation.

Implications for theory, practice and/or policy:

- Digital infrastructure and policy-making alone are insufficient without sustained pedagogical support for faculty.
- Flexible and hybrid modalities may improve territorial access and student retention in open-access higher education systems.



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic marked an unprecedented disruption to higher education (HE) systems worldwide, forcing institutions to rapidly transition to emergency remote teaching (ERT) and exposing a variety of inequalities and institutional challenges (Bozkurt et al., 2022). Unlike distance education, which is a planned and deliberate modality based on specialized pedagogical models, ERT was reactive and implemented under emergency conditions (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020). It lacked the infrastructure, preparation, and technical requirements that typically define distance education (Hodges et al., 2020). While the latter involves a voluntary choice by students, participation in ERT was compulsory, as it was the only available alternative (Irwin, 2021; Bozkurt et al., 2020). Moreover, as noted by Rapanta et al. (2021), ERT overemphasized the “remote” dimension of instruction, prioritizing the elimination of physical contact over the development of structured engagement and interactivity.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, where the socio-economic impact of the crisis was more severe than in any other region (International Monetary Fund, 2020), and disproportionately affected vulnerable groups (OECD, 2020), the shift to ERT posed considerable challenges. As a result, many higher education institutions in the region experienced increased dropout rates and reduced participation (UNESCO-IESALC, 2021; Cadena & Ramos, 2023). Against this background, the Uruguayan case offers a distinctive context for examining institutional responses to ERT. Uruguay entered the pandemic with comparatively developed digital infrastructure and extensive public policies promoting connectivity and digital inclusions, while its main national university, University of the Republic (*Universidad de la República*, Udelar) had accumulated over a decade of experience with virtual learning environments. At the same time, Udelar’s experience with distance education practices remained limited, as the use of digital technologies was predominantly oriented to supporting face-to-face teaching. This combination makes Udelar a relevant case for examining the extent to which pre-existing technological and institutional capacity translated into effective educational adaptation during the emergency.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How did the University of the Republic implement emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how was this response shaped by pre-existing institutional and technological conditions?

Literature

Pedro and Ramos (2022) noted that there is “little literature and even less empirical evidence regarding the transformation of the teaching and learning processes during the pandemic” (p. 296), with essays and qualified opinions being more prevalent in the Latin American context. While Uruguayan literature generally follows this broader regional pattern, the available studies nonetheless offer important insights into Udelar’s institutional response, documenting key dimensions such as pedagogical adaptation, stakeholder experiences, and student outcomes. Collazo et al. (2021) presented one of the first overviews of Udelar’s transition to ERT, outlining institutional measures, guidelines, and initial student and faculty evaluations. The authors argue that Udelar’s measures successfully sustained pedagogical continuity, but that ERT mostly reproduced traditional expository teaching models. Rodés and García (2020) highlighted the central role of Udelar’s virtual platform, emphasizing how their “pedagogy of care” approach and existing digital infrastructure facilitated the emergency transition. Collazo et al. (2023) analyzed Udelar’s curricular and teaching centralized policies throughout 2020-2022, arguing that pre-existing institutional flexibility facilitated pandemic adaptation, but noting a return to decentralized decision-making by 2022, possibly preventing the institution from learning from the crisis. At the broader national level, Capocasale et al. (2021) identified common challenges within the higher education system, such as uneven technological access and inconsistent faculty digital preparedness.

Faculty-level studies further show that earlier experimentation with hybrid modalities in the Faculty of Social Sciences (FCS) and multimodal teaching in Economics facilitates adaptation to ERT (Caneiro & Castillo, 2023; Marrero et al., 2023), while studies from other faculties documented substantial course

redesign across disciplines (González, 2023; Rodríguez & Doninalli, 2021). Institutional support ranged from regional initiatives providing organizational and methodological assistance (Casnati et al., 2020) to centralized faculty development through ProEVA (Rodés et al., 2021), with later initiatives placing greater emphasis on academic learning communities and action-research methodologies to help faculty critically examine and redesign their remote teaching practices (Porta et al., 2022).

Literature on student outcomes includes research conducted by Failache and colleagues. Failache (2023) identified an increased dropout probability for first-year students in 2020, and an enrollment increase in localities without a university campus in 2021. Similarly, Failache et al. (2022) found that first-year students in 2020 had a higher probability of inactivity and enrolled in fewer courses than previous cohorts but were more likely to obtain higher grades. Work-study difficulties, limited teacher-student interaction, and inadequate resources were associated with poorer academic outcome, while the flexibility of remote participation reduced some barriers, particularly those associated with commuting and geographical access (Failache et al., 2022). A differentiated analysis of enrollment and participation rates showed variations by field of study and gender (Failache et al., 2024).

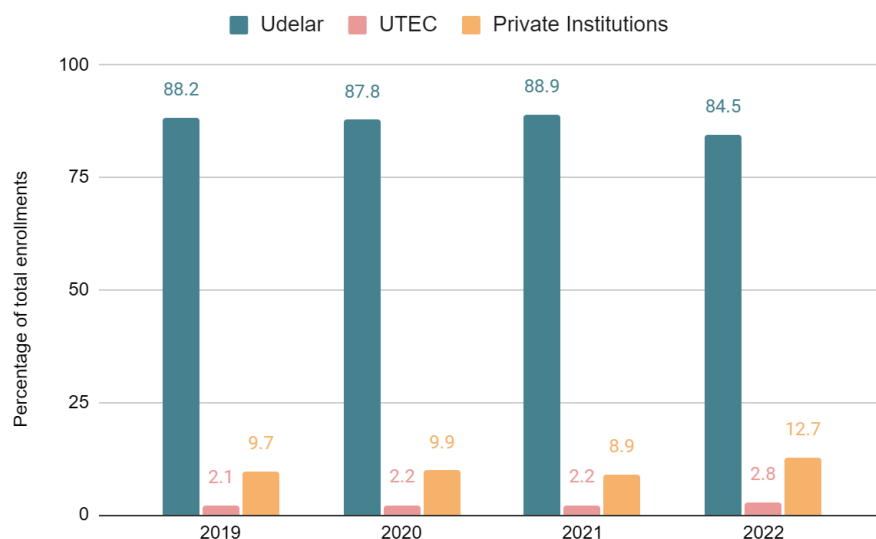
Survey-based studies conducted at individual faculties have also examined student and faculty experiences during the transition to remote teaching, including research at the Faculty of Information and Communication (Temesio et al., 2021) and the Faculty of Psychology (Pequeño et al., 2020). These studies addressed issues including participation, engagement, interaction, communication, and perceptions of virtual teaching.

Existing research therefore documents multiple dimensions of Udelar's pandemic response, including institutional adaptation, faculty practices, and student outcomes. However, these dimensions have largely been examined separately. This study brings them together by examining how Udelar's pre-existing institutional and technological conditions shaped its response to emergency remote teaching. By synthesizing and cross-referencing evidence dispersed across institutional documents, surveys, and academic studies, it provides a comprehensive account of the emergency response. In addition, it addresses a gap in the English-language literature, as most existing research on Uruguay's higher education pandemic experience has been published in Spanish and disseminated locally, potentially limiting its accessibility for comparative regional and international research.

Background

Uruguay's Higher Education Landscape and Udelar's Main Characteristics

Uruguay's higher education (HE) system is founded on the principles of gratuity, secularity, and equality of opportunity (Ministerio de Educación y cultura [MEC] et al., 2019). Education is conceived as both a fundamental right and a public good, with the state guaranteeing free access from primary through tertiary levels. The system is characterized by low institutional diversity: two public and five private universities, ten university institutes, and six non-university tertiary institutes. Overall participation remains modest, with only 44.7% of the population aged 18 to 24 enrolled in higher education (Udelar, 2020b). Most university students enrolled in public institutions (see **Figure 1**), with Uruguay holding the second-highest rate of public university enrollment in Latin America and the Caribbean (OEI & UNESCO, 2020).

Figure 1. *Uruguay's University Enrollments by Type of Institution (2019-2022)*

Note: Elaborated with data from MEC's National Tertiary Education Statistics of each corresponding year (DNE-MEC, 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). Udelar = University of the Republic (*Universidad de la República*). UTEC = Technological University of Uruguay (*Universidad Tecnológica del Uruguay*)

Udelar, the largest and oldest university in the system, is an autonomous entity co-governed by elected representatives from the faculty, student, and graduate bodies. It is categorized as a *macrouniversity*, an institutional model common in Latin America which is characterized as large-scale, complex public universities, with leading roles in national and regional scientific research and significant public funding and custodianship of important historical and cultural heritage (Red de Macrouniversidades de América Latina y el Caribe, 2003). In 2022, Udelar produced 74.6% of the country's total university graduates (Dirección Nacional de Educación [DNE]-MEC, 2023b). Although historically concentrated in the capital, since 2007 the university has engaged in a decentralization process, achieving visible results. In 2019, 76.8% of students lived in the capital city of Montevideo, compared to 61.7% in 2022 (Dirección General de Planeamiento [DGPlan]-Udelar, 2019, 2022). Given its dominant position in the national higher education landscape, a case study of Udelar offers a meaningful window into Uruguay's broader institutional response to the pandemic.

Rooted in Udelar's historical commitment to democratizing access to higher education, its non-selective and tuition-free admissions policy facilitates broad participation but it also presents certain challenges. Udelar faces overall low graduation rates, poor student retention, and delayed completion times, issues that Boado (2011) notes are commonly found in open-access institutions. This challenge occurs within a broader national context of difficulties in educational progression. In 2019, only 30.9% of young people aged 18-19 had completed upper secondary education at the expected age (Instituto de Evaluación Educativa, n.d.), while in 2022, only 11.6% of the population aged 25 to 29 had completed tertiary education (DNE-MEC, 2023b). Uruguay also has one of the highest school life expectancies in Latin America, exceeding the OECD average of 17 years (Arias et al., 2024). At the institutional level, extended times-to-degree reflect a similar pattern: Udelar reported that in 2015, students took on average 1.5 to 2 times longer than expected to complete their degrees (Udelar, 2017).

Udelar's Pre-Pandemic Digital Infrastructure and National Context

Uruguay entered the COVID-19 pandemic with comparatively strong digital infrastructure by regional standards. A comparative study identified Uruguay as the only Latin American country with baseline conditions adequate to support online education (Rieble-Aubourg & Viteri, 2020). This infrastructure was supported by proactive digital governance. Uruguay's Agency for Electronic Government and

Information and Knowledge Society (Agesic), established back in 2005, actively coordinates the national Digital Agenda, an ongoing strategic policy framework promoting state transformation, digital equity, and educational modernization. By 2020, most public services, including education-related platforms, had been digitized. Within the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), key programs such as the Virtual Education Observatory and the Technical Interinstitutional Group facilitated the coordination of digital education policies across higher education institutions (Hernández, 2019). As a result of these digital government initiatives, Uruguay achieved a “very high” score on the 2024 E-Government Development Index, ranking first in South America and 25th globally (United Nations, 2024).

Prior to the pandemic, access to internet connectivity and digital devices had expanded significantly. The National Telecommunications Administration, a state-owned company, had laid multiple fiber-optic submarine cables over the previous decades, and in 2011, it introduced a basic free home internet service, offering up to 1 GB of monthly data for a one-time low-cost installation fee. As a result, by 2019, over 75% of households were connected to high-speed internet (Presidencia de la República, 2019). A national survey revealed that internet connectivity in urban areas had been growing considerably since 2010, reaching 91% in 2022 (Agesic & Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2022). This expansion was complemented by longstanding public initiatives promoting digital inclusion, most notable the “One Laptop Per Child” model and the establishment of Ceibal, a government program aimed at providing devices and connectivity, which resulted in 100% of public schools having Wi-Fi access (Ceibal, 2022). Although Ceibal primarily focuses on K12 education, it also collaborates with Udelar and other higher education institutions.

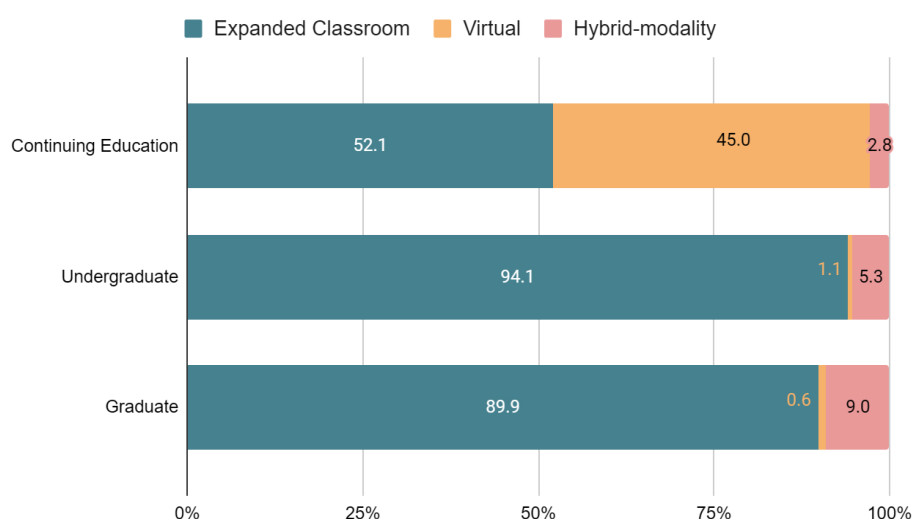
In addition to comparatively strong national infrastructure, Udelar’s technological capacity was shaped by over a decade of progressive integration of digital technologies into its institutional framework. The foundation for this process was laid in 2005 through the *Educational Use of ICT in Undergraduate Teaching* projec (Rodés et al., 2019). This initiative marked the first inclusion of digital technologies in Udelar’s strategic planning and led to increased experimentation with digital tools. In 2008, a second institutional project expanded the university’s commitment to digital equity and inclusion, resulting in the creation of the Technical Academic Support Department (DATA), the (former) Observatory of New Technologies in Higher Education, and most importantly, the development of the university’s own Moodle-based platform, known as the Virtual Learning Environment (EVA). In 2011, EVA was consolidated as an institutional program called ProEVA (Rodés et al., 2019).

By 2019, EVA had developed into a decentralized and robust open-source digital ecosystem. It hosted 13,000 courses and supported over 175,000 unique users (including students, faculty, administrative staff, and guest lecturers) across roughly twenty Moodle installations. The system incorporated a multimedia repository for recorded lessons and polymedia, open educational resources, and additional servers managed by individual academic units (Rodés et al., 2019). Daily usage averaged 25,000 users, with EVA often serving as the primary repository of course materials. Additionally, Udelar developed complementary digital resources to support learning and research. The *Timbó* Portal offered the academic community access to international scientific databases, while Colibri, the university’s open digital repository, archived scholarly publications, theses, and institutional documents.

University-wide survey data from 2019 indicated that 93% of undergraduate students had an EVA account, and 55% identified as frequent or very frequent users of the platform (Pérez & Podetti, 2020). However, usage was uneven across services. For instance, frequent use was reported by 77% of students in the Faculties of Psychology, Engineering, and Nursing, but only 24% in the University School of Music. A separate 2020 survey targeted to curricular unit coordinators revealed that, prior to the pandemic, over 60% of degree programs had only low to moderate use of the platform, and fully generalized use was limited to certain areas (CSE-Udelar, 2020). While the existence of a virtual platform facilitated the transition into ERT, in reality EVA was mainly used as a material repository and a support tool to traditional teaching practices. Beyond possible isolated experiences, in a 2019 publication by the Ministry of Education and Culture, Udelar did not report on any virtual and hybrid

courses (Hernández, 2019). Overall, distance education experiences had been very limited, not only in Udelar but in the higher education system as a whole. **Figure 2** shows that for tertiary education (including private institutions), out of the different virtual course offerings, the vast majority were on the expanded classroom modality, which involves using virtual environments or platforms as a complement or extension to traditional face-to-face classes. Virtual classes for undergraduate and graduate courses represented only 1% or less.

Figure 2. *Distribution of Tertiary Education Virtual Course Offerings by Modality and Educational Level (2019) (%)*



Note: Adapted from Hernández (2019), originally sourced from the Virtual Education Observatory.

Methodology

Research Design

A document-based qualitative case study design was adopted to examine Udelar's response to emergency remote teaching (ERT) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Case study research is particularly suited to investigating complex, real-world phenomena for which contextual conditions are integral to understanding the case (Yin, 2018). This approach also aligns with educational research traditions that emphasize in-depth, context-sensitive analysis of complex social phenomena (Merriam, 1985). The analysis of documents produced during and in relation to the pandemic enabled the reconstruction of Udelar's emergency response while situating it within the institutional and technological conditions that preceded the crisis.

Data Collection

The study relied exclusively on secondary data drawn from a documentary corpus comprising 28 sources (**Table 1**). The corpus primarily covered the period from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 through the end of the 2021 academic year, although earlier and later materials were included when necessary to examine pre-pandemic conditions and subsequent developments. The documentary sources included institutional reports and statistics, published institutional surveys, official communications and resolutions, teaching guidelines, and other institutional records. Sources used exclusively to establish the broader national and higher education context were not considered part of the analytical corpus. In addition, the study included a review of 35 centralized course descriptions from 2015 to 2022, available on Udelar's Teacher Professional Development Program's website (Udelar,

n/d). Courses were included when their descriptions explicitly addressed digital teaching competencies, including training on the use of information and communication technologies.

Table 1. Documental Sources Included in the Analysis

Source category	Sources / Reference	No.
Institutional statistics	DGPlan-Udelar (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2021a, 2022)	6
National statistics	DNE-MEC (2021, 2022, 2023a)	3
Survey reports – Central level	DGPlan-Udelar (2020b, 2020c, 2021c), Collazo & Cabrera (2020)	4
Survey reports – Individual Faculty level	Caneiro et al. (2020); Pequeño et al. (2020); Yelpeo et al. (2021), Temesio et al. (2021)	4
Institutional plans and guidelines	Amaya et al. (2020); Collazo (2020), DATA (n/d)	3
Institutional reports – Central level	Rodés (2020), Pérez & Podetti (2020)	2
Institutional reports – Individual Faculty level	FCS-Udelar (2021)	1
Central institutional resolutions	Udelar (2020, March 16)	1
Faculty union association report	ADUR-FCS (2020)	1
Scholarly articles	Rodés et al. (2021); Collazo et al. (2021); Ramos et al. (2021)	3

Note: The scholarly articles included in the analytical corpus were authored by Udelar's staff members and report institutional data that was used as evidence in the analysis.

Documents were identified primarily through searches of official Udelar and government websites, supplemented by materials obtained through direct contact with Udelar staff. Documents were included when they provided evidence directly relevant to the study's research question, particularly regarding Udelar's emergency response and educational continuity, the use and adaptation of its digital infrastructure, faculty experiences and pedagogical adaptation, and student participation and experiences with remote teaching. Several documents in the corpus reported findings from surveys conducted by Udelar's central administration or individual faculties, as well as published survey studies. These survey results were treated as secondary evidence rather than as a homogeneous survey dataset, given differences in their target populations, sampling procedures, response rates, and representativeness. **Table 2** includes methodological information on the surveys referenced.

Table 2. Characteristics of Survey Data Sources Included in the Analysis

Source	Reference	Year	Target population	Sample (N)	Sampling/ data collection	Response rate (%)	Representativeness and validation
DGPlan-Udelar faculty survey	DGPlan-Udelar (2020c)	2020	All Udelar teaching staff with a contractual relationship in April 2020	2,867	Probabilistic, stratified sample, web survey	80.9	Representative; instrument validation not reported
DGPlan-Udelar student survey	DGPlan-Udelar (2020b)	2020	Udelar undergraduate students enrolled in at least one course during the first semester of 2020	1,305	Probabilistic stratified sampling; web survey	83.2	Representative; instrument validation not reported
DGPlan-Udelar student survey	DGPlan-Udelar (2021c)	2021	Udelar undergraduate students who had completed the FormA- <i>Estudiantes</i> form by October 2021	1,891	Probabilistic stratified sampling; web survey	82.0	Representative; instrument validation not reported
Social Sciences survey	Caneiro et al. (2020)	2020	Social Sciences teaching staff in initial and advanced cycles	101	Intentional sampling; self-administered questionnaire	Not reported	Non-representative; instrument validation not reported

Source	Reference	Year	Target population	Sample (N)	Sampling/ data collection	Response rate (%)	Representativeness and validation
Engineering survey	Yelpo et al. (2021)	2020	Engineering teaching staff	167	Sampling method not reported; survey	Not reported	Representativeness not reported; instrument validation not reported
Psychology survey	Pequeño et al. (2020)	2020	Faculty of Psychology teaching staff during the first semester	55	Online questionnaire; non-probability sampling	29.4	Non-representative; instrument validation not reported
Information and Communication survey	Temesio et al. (2021)	2020	Information and Communication undergraduate students	794	Voluntary sampling; online survey	Not reported	Non-representative; instrument validation not reported
Survey of degree-program directors /coordinators	Collazo & Cabrera (2020)	2020	Directors/ coordinators of Udelar undergraduate and tertiary programs	145	Census invitation; self-administered online questionnaire	78.8	Representativeness not reported; instrument validation not reported

Data Analysis

This study employs elements of thematic qualitative analysis. According to Clarke and Braun (2016), “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (p. 297). The following themes were developed iteratively through repeated reading and contrasting of the data: (1) Rapid deployment of virtual platforms and technological resources, (2) Teaching modality changes and pedagogical adaptations, (3) Faculty challenges and professional development, (4) Student support policies, well-being, and perceptions of virtuality, and (5) Participation, enrollment trends and territorial equity. The combination of heterogeneous sources allowed for the reconstruction and comprehensive analysis of different dimensions of Udelar’s emergency response across different university services. These findings were subsequently synthesized and discussed across three analytical axes highlighting key tensions: technological and institutional readiness vs. pedagogical preparedness; access and continuity vs. participation and engagement; and emergency remote teaching vs. future distance education.

The professional-development course descriptions were examined to identify the extent and orientation of centralized training related to digital teaching. Attention was given to whether courses focused primarily on the technical use of Udelar’s Virtual Learning Environment (EVA) or addressed broader digital competencies and the pedagogical integration of digital technologies. The number of relevant courses offered over time and their reported enrollment capacities were also examined to assess the scope and reach of these training opportunities.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relies on heterogeneous secondary data produced during the pandemic, when emergency conditions constrained data collection and reporting. Sources varied in their populations, sampling procedures, and reporting standards, and some survey reports lacked information such as response rates or instrument validation. These differences limit direct comparisons and require findings to be interpreted according to the scope and methodological characteristics of each source.

Second, as a single-institution case study, the findings are context-specific and are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Rather, the case study approach enables an in-depth examination of Udelar within its particular institutional and technological context. Transferability therefore depends on the extent to which other settings share comparable conditions.

Third, most of the evidence originates from Udelar itself, including institutional surveys and reports, which may introduce institutional bias. This limitation was addressed by comparing evidence across different types of sources and avoiding interpretations beyond the available evidence. Finally, the analysis of teacher professional development was limited to course information available on the official program website and therefore may not capture activities offered independently by individual faculties or academic units.

Findings

Rapid Deployment of Virtual Platforms and Technological Resources

Just three days after the national emergency was declared on March 13, 2020, Udelar's rectorate issued a resolution initiating emergency measures across the university (Udelar, 2020a). The document outlined a broad and coordinated response that addressed multiple aspects of university operations. Central to the resolution was the intention to support national health authorities while also urging the implementation of a contingency plan focused on online teaching design, technical support, and course rescheduling. Following this resolution, Udelar's academic technical support department (DATA) released a contingency plan outlining a comprehensive virtualization strategy for maintaining educational continuity through emergency online teaching, combining pedagogical redesign with the expansion of digital infrastructure and institutional support. It encouraged instructors to reduce and reprioritize course content, adapt teaching schedules and activities to the online environment, promote interaction and asynchronous learning, and work collaboratively with educational technology specialists. These pedagogical measures were accompanied by the expansion of EVA and web-conferencing capacity, the provision of digital resources and support mechanisms for faculty and students, and a centralized communication strategy (DATA, n.d.).

The outlined virtualization strategy resulted in a rapid transition to ERT: within two weeks of the emergency declaration, over 70% of curricular units had moved online, reaching 96% by early April (Collazo et al., 2021). The institution leveraged its existing Moodle platform (EVA) and developed support materials, tutorials, and open-access resources to assist teaching staff and academic units. During the first semester of 2020, Udelar offered 2,720 courses in virtual format, while 120 courses (mostly those requiring in-person practice, such as clinical training) were postponed to the second semester. Among full-degree programs, an average of 73% of curricular units were fully virtualized, 23% were partially virtualized, and 4% could not be delivered and were deferred (Collazo & Cabrera, 2020).

Usage data also reflected this rapid expansion: between November 2019 and July 2020, the number of EVA users increased by 20%, and the number of registered courses by 28% (Pérez & Podetti, 2020). However, supporting virtuality required significant advancement in existing technological capabilities. This effort adopted a dual approach to video conferencing. First, the university acquired 350 Zoom licenses and 180 Webex licenses on a large scale (Udelar, 2021). Second, it enhanced its existing BigBlueButton integration with the EVA platform, which showed a significant increase, from 533 recorded classes in 2019 to 2,219 by July 2020, signifying a 400% increase and requiring the installation of two additional servers (Pérez & Podetti, 2020). In some cases, BigBlueButton was completely replaced by Zoom and Webex due to technical issues with the platform (FCS-Udelar, 2021).

To accommodate the increased system loads, it was essential to reinforce the existing EVA platform, which included migrating faculty programs to new virtual machines (Rodés, 2020). Furthermore, funding was reallocated to university centers for acquiring technological equipment, improving infrastructure, and providing specialized educational resources for virtual teaching. Examples of such resources included tablets for faculty mentoring in architectural design projects, dental equipment for ensuring biosafety in clinics, and tools for nursing simulation practices (Collazo et al., 2021). However, these infrastructural enhancements would not have sufficed without complementary measures, such as the

use of external services and faculty's proactive adoption of tools such as Google Meet and personal accounts for teaching activities.

Teaching Modality Changes and Pedagogical Adaptations

The transition to ERT at Udelar required considerable pedagogical adjustments. Teaching modalities were generally organized into synchronous and asynchronous formats. Synchronous classes used real-time video-conference systems such as Zoom, Webex, and BigBlueButton, while asynchronous teaching involved interacting via the EVA forums and the use of repositories such as EVA and Google Drive to upload recorded lectures and written materials. Generally, large-scale courses favored asynchronous approaches for efficiency, whereas smaller classes relied more on synchronous methods (Collazo et al., 2021). To guide this transition, Udelar's Sectoral Teaching Commission issued technical and pedagogical recommendations for both instruction and evaluation (Collazo, 2020; Amaya et al., 2020). These included the use of breakout rooms, discussion forums, and flexible, transparent assessment methods, such as oral exams, flexibility in allowing second-attempts, and formative evaluations, all designed to maintain academic integrity while addressing technological barriers and student diversity.

Since the different university services function autonomously, the centralized guidelines served primarily as recommendations, and in reality, institutional and teaching adaptations varied across faculties. Udelar's constitutional autonomy and co-governance structures enabled rapid decision-making without requiring external approval. However, the same features also created implementation challenges. For instance, Udelar's decentralized structure with autonomous faculties hindered methodological standardization and the application of common protocols, resulting in unequal outcomes and varying levels of educational quality across services. Furthermore, the emergency nature of the situation led to many courses retaining their original structure, simply shifting from in-person to online delivery. Lectures were often replicated via videoconferencing without adopting online teaching methodologies or fostering interactivity.

The survey report from the Faculty of Information and Communication shows that students attributed their performance to their ability to participate and to difficulties maintaining engagement, including assessment time, activity diversity, opportunities for student–teacher interaction, explicit objectives, and coherent planning. Open-ended responses further indicated dissatisfaction when communication with teaching teams was limited or when feedback was insufficient (Temesio et al., 2021).

Faculty Challenges and Professional Development

Faculty members faced substantial challenges. In 2020, Udelar's centralized internal faculty survey showed that almost 74% of faculty members reported work overload, with somewhat higher levels among mid-ranking faculty (DGPlan-Udelar, 2020c). Overload also showed a modest gender disparity, affecting 77.9% of women compared with 68.7% of men. A document released by the 20th Udelar Teachers' Association (*Asociación de Docentes de la Universidad de la República*, ADUR) Convention echoed these concerns, citing increased screen time, blurred work-life boundaries, and difficulties balancing caregiving responsibilities (ADUR, 2020). Separate independent surveys in the Faculties of Social Sciences (Caneiro et al., 2020), Engineering (Yelpo et al., 2021), and Psychology (Pequeño et al., 2020) confirmed these trends, identifying teaching workload as the top challenge. Open-ended survey responses from the Faculty of Engineering revealed additional concerns around institutional support (e.g. help with remote work costs), work-life balance (e.g. disconnection policies and mental health services), and infrastructure (e.g. improved virtual library access) (Yelpo et al., 2021).

Another challenge concerned the reach of faculty preparation for digital pedagogy prior to the pandemic. In 2020 Udelar developed a MOOC to support teacher training during the emergency response;

however, despite its reported success, it reached fewer than 500 participants (Rodés et al., 2021), among a total faculty of 11,000 (DGPlan-Udelar, 2020a). This study's review of centralized courses offered through Udelar's Teacher Pedagogical Development Program shows that digital-competence training initiatives also existed before the pandemic (**Table 3**), addressing the use of virtual learning environments as well as broader areas such as instructional design, blended learning, digital resources, and the pedagogical integration of ICT. However, these opportunities appear to have remained relatively limited in scale. Enrollment capacity was typically limited to 10–50 participants per course, with places often shared among Udelar faculty, teacher educators from teacher training institutes, and primary and secondary school teachers. In parallel, the review identified five ProEVA training activities related to digital and virtual teaching between 2015 and 2019 (approximately one per year), including training specifically focused on the use of EVA.

Table 3. *Number of Digital Competences-Oriented Courses in the Teacher Pedagogical Development Program Courses at Udelar (2016-2021)*

Year	Total courses in the program n	Selected courses n
2016	20	3
2017	16	7
2018	15	5
2019	13	5
2020	12	4
2021	17	9
2022	9	2

Note: Selected courses are those that explicitly include training in the application of digital skills and tools in teaching. Elaborated with information obtained from the official website: <https://www.cse.udelar.edu.uy/dpd/>

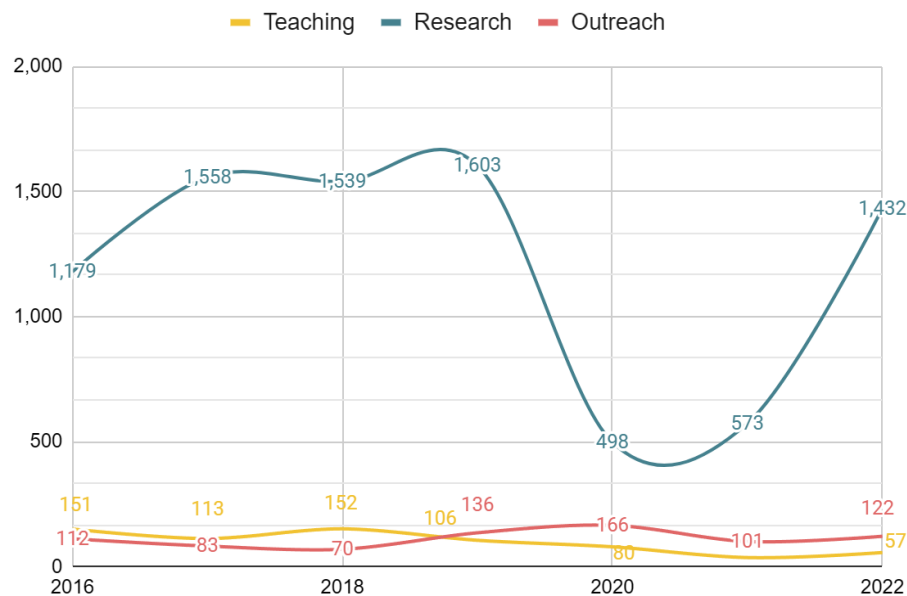
Reach limitations are also reflected in faculty perceptions. The survey conducted at the Faculty of Social Sciences reported satisfaction with most aspects of the virtual modality with the exception of faculty training, which respondents considered to be inadequate for their needs. Furthermore, 58% reported that they had not participated in any pedagogic training activity for virtuality, while half of respondents expressed that they did not feel they had sufficient prior knowledge to adapt their courses to virtual teaching (Caneiro et al., 2020).

In terms of teacher-student relational impacts, only 12.7% of Udelar's surveyed instructors felt that virtual teaching improved student bonding, while over half believed it worsened (DGPlan-Udelar, 2020c). The lack of interactive channels contributed to this perception. Although EVA forum messages rose by 149% in the first semester of 2020, most interaction focused on quizzes and assessments, as evidenced by the sharp increase in question bank usage (Pérez & Podetti, 2020). The Social Sciences faculty survey similarly found that faculty members experienced great difficulty interacting with students in the Advanced Cycles (i.e. advanced stages of the undergraduate program), and that forum utilization was very low across all cycles (Caneiro et al., 2020). In a similar line, at the Faculty of Psychology, 41.8% of surveyed instructors reported that communication with students had worsened, while 34.5% reported a deterioration in their relationships with students (Pequeño et al., 2020). Temesio et al. (2021) also highlighted this issue in the student survey at Udelar's Faculty of Information and Communication, noting dissatisfaction when teacher-student interaction was not fluid, messages went unanswered, or feedback on assignments was lacking.

Udelar's need to reallocate human and financial resources toward public health initiatives and virus research created additional pressures. Faculty members faced two concurrent issues: setting their ongoing research aside to focus on COVID-19 emergency-related studies, and/or reducing their research hours to manage ERT planning and implementation. According to Udelar's 2020 faculty survey, 55.8% of instructors reported dedicating more hours than anticipated to teaching activities (DGPlan-

Udelar, 2020c). Among these, 78.5% reported having no mechanism available to accommodate the increased workload, forcing them to reallocate time originally intended for research and other activities (DGPlan-Udelar, 2020c). The survey administered at the Faculty of Engineering corroborated these findings, showing that 41% of surveyed faculty reduced their research hours (Yelpo et al., 2021). The impact on research productivity is evident in **Figure 3**, which shows funded research projects plummeting in 2020. Despite the challenges described, faculty evaluations of the overall experience remained relatively positive: 75.6% reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the distance-teaching experience, while approximately 70% expressed satisfaction with institutional support (DGPlan-Udelar, 2020c).

Figure 3. Number of Teaching, Research, and Outreach Financed Projects in Udelar (2016-2022)



Note: Elaborated using data from Udelar's Statistical Synthesis of each year (DGPlan-Udelar, 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020a; 2021a; 2022).

Student Support Policies, Well-Being, and Perceptions of Virtuality

While the Solidarity Fund (*Fondo de Solidaridad*) financial scholarships remained active during the pandemic, Udelar introduced medium-term adjustments to its student support programs. One key measure was the "Laptop Scholarship", created through an agreement between the University Wellness Center and Ceibal to provide devices to low-income students, after an internal survey in April 2020 revealed that 10.3% of students lacked a personal computer at home (Udelar, 2021). The program extended beyond the emergency period, with the number of beneficiaries rising from 389 in 2020 to 756 in 2022 (DGPlan-Udelar, 2021a; 2022). Additionally, the closure of campuses forced Udelar to make changes to its existing food scholarship program. After the cafeteria meal service was interrupted, the university switched to delivering lunchboxes, later evolving to prepaid debit cards that provided approximately US\$150 monthly for food expenses (Udelar, 2021).

Udelar's Learning Support Program implemented a comprehensive support strategy during the pandemic, combining academic, psychological, and social initiatives to assist students, particularly newcomers. Key measures included the *#Estoy* campaign, which facilitated peer tutoring through calls for experienced students to mentor incoming peers, alongside resource development and virtual materials on study techniques and stress management. Peer Tutoring courses and prerequisite tutoring sessions were adapted to virtual formats across several faculties, and virtual consultation spaces were created to guide students in navigating academic challenges (Ramos et al., 2021). Psychological

support was offered via the Virtual Psychological Space, with group sessions led by qualified psychologists and thematic workshops addressing issues like exam anxiety, gender, violence, and mental health. Additional initiatives included vocational orientation, cultural activities, and pre-admission workshops, aiming to foster community and support student retention in a remote learning environment (Ramos et al., 2021).

Table 4 shows the difficulties associated with participation in virtual modality. Udelar's student surveys in 2020 and 2021 show that the most frequently reported difficulty was emotional distress, especially among first-year students. Older generations reported lower rates of emotional distress, suggesting that first-year students were particularly vulnerable to these challenges. Lack of contact with classmates and teachers was also frequently reported across both years. Notably, inadequate device or equipment access was consistently among the least cited difficulties, ranging from 8.5% to 15.4%. Connectivity issues, ranging from 22.2% and 38.7%, were also less frequently reported than several emotional, workload, and relational difficulties. A similar pattern emerged in the Faculty of Psychology, where Pequeño et al. (2020) found that communication and relational aspects posed greater difficulties than technical or access-related issues.

Table 4. *Difficulties Associated with Participating in Virtual Courses at Udelar (2020 - 2021)*

Students' perceived difficulties associated with the virtual modality	2021 survey (N=1,891)			2020 survey (N=1,305)	
	Gen 2021 %	Gen 2020 %	Gen 2019 and before %	Gen 2020 %	Gen 2019 and before %
Class schedule conflict	22.0	29.7	25.0	20.3	20.3
Difficulties accessing materials	49.0	47.0	37.5	46.8	41.1
Lack of contact with classmates	49.5	53.8	44.0	43.2	43.3
Lack of contact with teachers	48.1	50.0	39.5	57.2	47.4
Compatibility difficulties between work and study	25.6	28.1	29.0	25.6	32.3
Teaching activity workload	53.8	45.5	36.5	62.1	47.6
Emotional affectation	67.6	74.0	49.8	75.4	64.5
Connectivity difficulties	30.4	25.7	22.2	38.7	29.0
Not having appropriate equipment (computer, notebook, tablet, etc.)	10.2	8.6	8.5	15.4	11.5
Other difficulties	1.6	2.4	4.2	8.4	6.1

Note: Elaborated with data from student surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021, as reported by DGPlan-Udelar (2020b, 2021c). Responses were multiple-choice, allowing participants to select all applicable options without a predefined order. Gen = Generation.

Schedule and work compatibility issues were reported by 26-32% of students across all generations. Work compatibility is a highly relevant issue, since in 2020, nearly half of Udelar undergraduates and 92.7% of graduate students were employed (DGPlan-Udelar, 2021a). This figure is particularly striking because part-time work is uncommon in Uruguay, with most job positions following a full-time 8-hour workday format. Regarding care responsibilities, Udelar's surveys reveal that in 2020, 79% of students with care duties managed to finalize their courses, compared to 85% of those without such responsibilities. This gap persisted in 2021, with similar completion rates of 76% and 84% respectively. The situation was further complicated by the fact that, for the majority of students (76.8%), care responsibilities increased during the pandemic (DGPlan-Udelar, 2020b).

Despite the difficulties associated with ERT, students also identified important advantages of the virtual modality. Across the 2020 and 2021 surveys, more than 80% of respondents identified the possibility of attending classes at any time and avoiding commuting as strengths of virtual courses. Opportunities for self-evaluation were also positively valued, particularly in 2021 (DGPlan-Udelar, 2020b, 2021c). Students' preferences also differed according to the dimension of the educational experience considered. In 2021, virtual modality was preferred for access to study materials (67.8%), digital teaching resources (66.6%), and self-evaluation (69.0%), whereas face-to-face provision was preferred

for relationships with classmates (62.8%) and peer integration and socialization (70.1%) (DGPlan-Udelar, 2021c).

Udelar's 2021 student survey included two concluding modules focused on the future of virtual education at the university. The results showed strong alignment between students' preferences and expectations: 62.1% believed teaching should be hybrid and 60% expected this would be the implemented modality in 2022 (DGPlan-Udelar, 2021c).

Participation, Enrollment Trends, and Territorial Equity

Udelar's survey report states that student participation in virtual courses was relatively high, reaching 84.5% in 2020 and 83% in 2021 (DGPlan-Udelar, 2020b, 2021c). First-year students had slightly higher participation than previous cohorts, while working students showed notably lower participation rates (75%) compared to non-working students (91%). Several reasons were reported for non-participation in virtual courses, as disaggregated in **Table 5**. Among first-year students who did not participate, financial reasons were more frequently reported in 2021 than in 2020, increasing from 14.5% to 28%. Connectivity and device access were also cited, although technological issues were among the less frequently reported reasons for non-participation. Connectivity problems were reported by 25% of non-participating first-year students in 2020, compared with 8% in 2021, while difficulties related to device access showed a smaller reduction. The change to virtual delivery itself was a prominent reason for non-participation in 2020, cited by more than half of non-participating first-year students, but this percentage decreased to 16% in 2021 (DGPlan-Udelar, 2020b, 2021c). Data from Udelar's Faculty of Social Sciences show that while initial EVA course enrollment rates ranged from 90-98% in the initial cycle, the student engagement declined as the semester progressed, with active participation rates dropping to 55-64% in June (FCS-Udelar, 2021). This decline was consistent with pre-pandemic participation trends, suggesting that the virtual modality during ERT reproduced long-standing retention issues in new formats.

Table 5. *Reasons for not Participating in Virtual Courses at Udelar (2020 - 2021)*

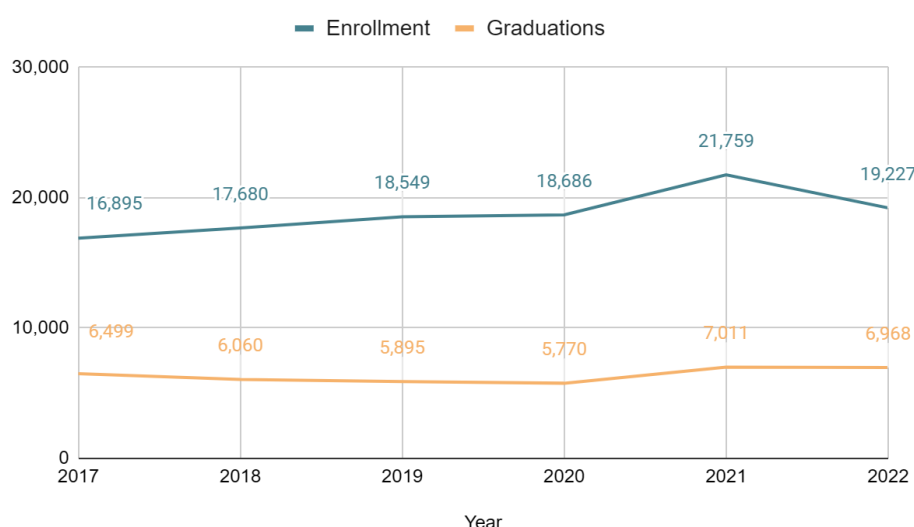
Reasons for not participating in virtual courses	2021 survey			2020 survey	2019 and before
	Gen 2021	Gen 2020	Gen 2019 and before	Gen 2020	Gen 2019 and before
	%	%	%	%	%
Financial reasons	28.0	11.6	4.7	14.5	8.6
Health reasons	8.0	7.0	2.3	2.6	5.7
Problems with/lack of connectivity	8.0	2.3	3.9	25.0	12.4
Not having electronic devices	16.0	14.0	2.3	12.7	6.7
The format change to virtuality	16.0	16.3	5.4	52.6	24.8
By own decision	36.0	27.9	20.9	28.9	29.5
Did not enroll on any other course	12.0	46.5	64.3	N/A	N/A
Other reasons	20.0	20.9	18.6	15.8	34.3

Note: Elaborated with data from the student surveys conducted by Udelar in 2020 and 2021, as reported by DGPlan-Udelar (2020b, 2021c). The data represents responses from students who did not participate in virtual courses during the first semester. Responses were multiple-choice, allowing participants to select all applicable options without a predefined order. Gen = Generation. The survey reports do not provide the number of respondents in this subgroup.

Figure 4 shows stable enrollment at Udelar with a marked increase in 2021. Udelar's enrollment was not an isolated case: its metrics reflect a broader national pattern. Data from the Ministry of Education and Culture's statistical yearbook show similar enrollment increases across both private and public universities (DNE-MEC, 2021; 2022; 2023a). There is an observable correlation between students' expectations regarding teaching modality and enrollment patterns: enrollment increased in 2021, when it was known in advance that instruction would be virtual, but declined again in 2022 with the return to face-to-face classes. At the Faculty of Social Sciences, for example, enrollment increased from 1,255 students in 2020 to a historic high of 1,592 in 2021, before falling sharply to 902 in 2022 (FCS-Udelar,

2023). It should be noted that achieving stable or increased enrollment during emergency conditions does not necessarily indicate an overall positive pandemic effect. Failache et al. (2024) estimated that a counterfactual scenario might have yielded even higher enrollment rates. Nevertheless, the upwards trend suggests that some of the pandemic's negative effects on participation were successfully mitigated. Furthermore, Udelar's graduation rate rose significantly in 2021, but did not maintain that level in the following year, suggesting that the flexibility offered by the virtual modality could have created new avenues for completion. For some students, the flexibility offered by the virtual modality was a necessary condition for continuity, with 41.4% of respondents reported that returning to predominantly face-to-face instruction would compromise their ability to continue studying (DGPlan-Udelar, 2021c). Residential location was an important factor: 27.2% indicated they would need to relocate for in-person classes, and of these, 60.2% reported lacking the means to do so. This challenge disproportionately affected students from outside the capital, who accounted for 66% of those needing to relocate, compared to only 17.2% from the metropolitan area (DGPlan-Udelar, 2021c).

Figure 4. Undergraduate Enrollment and Graduations in Udelar (2017-2022)



Note: Elaborated using data from Udelar's Statistical Synthesis of each year (DGPlan-Udelar, 2017, 2018; 2019; 2020a; 2021a). The graduation data from 2022 was retrieved from DGPlan-Udelar's website (consulted November 2024).

Discussion

Technological and Institutional Readiness vs. Pedagogical Preparedness

The findings highlight an important distinction between technological and institutional preparedness on one hand and pedagogical preparedness on the other. Udelar entered the pandemic with comparatively favorable national connectivity conditions, an established virtual learning environment, and previous experience integrating digital technologies into face-to-face teaching. The fact that device access was consistently among the least frequently cited difficulties among students participating in virtual courses, while connectivity problems were less prominent than several emotional, workload, and relational difficulties, suggests that these pre-existing conditions provided a relatively favorable foundation for the transition to ERT. Similarly, technological barriers were not among the most frequently reported reasons for non-participation. Emergency measures, including the laptop scholarship program and efforts to expand connectivity, further addressed remaining access gaps.

However, technological and institutional capacity does not necessarily imply faculty preparedness for online teaching (Doğan et al., 2025). Beyond the emergency context, research on open and distance

education similarly emphasizes faculty digital competence, including self-efficacy, prior digital experience, and perceptions of distance education, as an important dimension of institutional capacity (Ozan & Özarlan, 2025). At Udelar, González (2023) documents the use of tools such as Genially and Canva for interactive content, Padlet for collaborative activities, Google Sites for course organization, and Kahoot and Mentimeter for engagement and assessment. These practices illustrate how faculty digital competence can support more varied forms of digitally mediated teaching beyond the basic use of the institutional virtual learning environment.

This pattern is consistent with the broader regional analysis of Pedró and Ramos (2022), who argue that although much of the technological infrastructure required for educational continuity was already available in Latin America, institutions and instructors were less prepared to use these technologies effectively for educational purposes. The Udelar case shows that the availability of infrastructure and digital platforms did not necessarily translate into widespread preparedness for online pedagogy. Although centralized professional-development opportunities related to digital teaching existed before the pandemic and expanded during the emergency, their reach remained limited relative to the size of the university's faculty.

Access and Continuity vs. Participation and Engagement

A second important finding concerns the distinction between maintaining access to higher education and enabling sustained participation and academic progression. Udelar's institutional and technological conditions supported substantial educational continuity during the emergency, as shown by participation and enrollment metrics. Notably, the increase in Uruguay's overall higher education enrollment stands in contrast to the steep declines observed in other Latin American countries (UNESCO-IESALC, 2021; Cadena & Ramos, 2023). Nevertheless, the evidence also shows that continuity alone did not eliminate students' difficulties related to engagement, interaction, emotional well-being, workload, and the compatibility of study with employment and care responsibilities. The prominence of interaction- and socially related difficulties during the pandemic is consistent with evidence from other higher education contexts (e.g. Kangwa et al., 2024; Li & Wang, 2024), reinforcing the importance of relational conditions for effective online participation.

At the same time, the transition appears to have reduced some barriers associated with geographical access, a widely recognized benefit of distance education (e.g. Baral et al., 2024). Changes in enrollment and retention during the ERT period were particularly notable outside the capital. Failache (2023) reported a 13% increase in enrollment in localities without a university campus, while Failache et al. (2022) observed lower dropout rates in these areas. These patterns suggest that remote classes may have reduced some of the geographical barriers associated with university attendance, potentially complementing Udelar's broader decentralization efforts. The importance of geographical flexibility is also reflected in Udelar's 2021 student survey, particularly among students who indicated that returning to exclusively face-to-face education would affect their ability to continue studying.

However, flexibility did not remove other barriers to successful participation. The Udelar surveys identified persistent difficulties in combining employment and study, and Failache et al. (2022) found that students experiencing work-study difficulties enrolled in fewer courses, passed fewer courses, and obtained lower average scores. Interaction was similarly consequential: limited interaction with teachers and other students was associated with fewer courses being passed (Failache et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the distinction between providing access to remote education and creating conditions that enable students to participate effectively and progress academically.

Student preferences for maintaining some elements of virtuality after the emergency should be interpreted in the context in which they were reported. Rather than indicating a preference for either fully distance or face-to-face education, they suggest potential value in combining the flexibility of remote

participation with opportunities for in-person socialization, interaction and support. Comparable preferences have been identified in other contexts; for example, in a comparative study of university students in Chile, Venezuela, and Ecuador, Lobos et al. (2023) found a predominant preference for blended approaches after the pandemic. Importantly, these preferences were documented during a period characterized by compulsory remote teaching and broader social isolation and may therefore not reflect students' preferences for distance education under non-emergency conditions.

Emergency Remote Teaching vs. Future Distance Education

The ERT experience should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that the emergency model itself provides an appropriate template for future distance education. Rather, the difficulties documented during the transition illustrate the difference between rapidly transferring teaching activities online and deliberately designing education for distance or blended delivery. Qualitative accounts from Udelar faculty illustrate this distinction. Correa (2022) described practices including disorganized PDF uploads, insufficient study guidance, excessive assignments, limited spaces for student interaction, and overly long online sessions. Her observation that, "with some luck, in EVA there were forums to raise doubts or queries and not much more" (36:06), captures the limitations of using a virtual learning environment without a corresponding redesign of teaching practices.

At the same time, the experience revealed possibilities that extend beyond the emergency itself. Remote teaching offered greater flexibility for students with work and care responsibilities and reduced geographical constraints for students living far from university campuses. These benefits are particularly relevant in a public university that, through its rights-based approach, prioritizes broadening access to higher education while also facing long-standing challenges related to retention and graduation. Future distance or blended modalities could therefore complement the university's existing decentralization and access policies, provided that flexibility is accompanied by adequate support for both students and faculty members (Sümer & Yüner, 2021).

Such development would require sustained investment in faculty capacity. The findings suggest that future professional development should extend beyond operational competence with EVA and other digital tools to encompass the pedagogical dimensions of online and blended education, including course and activity design, assessment, feedback, interaction, and strategies for sustaining student engagement. Therefore, the experience of ERT consequently points toward the need to convert the institutional and technological capacities mobilized during the crisis into more deliberately designed forms of distance and blended education.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study shows how Udelar's pre-existing digital infrastructure, open-access structures and decentralized governance enabled effective and rapid adaptation to the emergency conditions, while simultaneously creating implementation challenges that resulted in uneven outcomes across faculties. The successful deployment of ERT measures (achieving high rates of educational continuity and participation) was facilitated by pre-existing institutional strengths yet highlighted the insufficient integration between technological capacity and pedagogical transformation. The findings corroborate that although access to devices and connectivity was not reported as a major barrier, infrastructural capacity alone could not address the complex pedagogical, social, and emotional dimensions of ERT. Despite robust virtual platforms, faculty experienced significant workload increases and limited training opportunities, while students faced relational challenges and work-study compatibility issues that particularly affected non-traditional students, notably those with work and care responsibilities. These patterns suggest that Udelar's access-focused approach has prioritized securing material conditions — devices, connectivity, and financial scholarships—, without a comparable transformation of the institutional and pedagogical practices required for online teaching.

Udelar's recent 2025–2029 Strategic Development Plan emphasizes diversified teaching modalities, faculty development, and a university-wide digital ecosystem to support educational continuity, inclusion, and graduation. However, distance education is not explicitly identified as a strategic objective or distinct educational modality, and its potential contribution to Udelar's access and decentralization goals is not explicitly addressed (Udelar, 2025). This may reflect a broader post-pandemic tendency to restore face-to-face instruction, driven by challenges in coordinating institutional responses, the desire to rebuild academic communities, and widespread *Zoom fatigue*. In the case of Udelar, Collazo et al. (2023) suggest that this response may have limited the opportunity to critically engage with the ERT experience and to develop sustainable pedagogical innovations. Future research should therefore investigate the long-term policy implications of ERT and the post-pandemic incorporation of hybrid and distance education modalities, particularly their potential to address persistent access inequalities.

Although the pandemic is now behind us, this study offers valuable contributions to ongoing debates on equity, access, technological infrastructure, and faculty pedagogical development in higher education. The COVID-19 crisis revealed pre-existing structural vulnerabilities but also opened avenues for geographic decentralization and more flexible teaching modalities such as blended or distance education. While the institutional conditions that shaped Udelar's response are markedly context-specific, comparative research could examine how the institutional histories and established priorities of large traditional universities facilitate or constrain digital transformation, particularly where longstanding commitments to access and democratization intersect with emerging forms of distance education.

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Notes

1. All translations from Spanish are my own.
2. The institution's broader national emergency response encompassed a wide range of health crisis management measures. Udelar collaborated with several institutions to carry out research and outreach projects and played a leading role in: developing diagnostic kits, analyzing outbreak patterns, conducting genomic research and providing scientific advice to government authorities (Udelar, 2021).
3. It is important to note that the enrollment varies across disciplines, since some university services did not experience an increase, particularly areas that require in-person practices or access to laboratory equipment, such as Health and Natural sciences (Failache et al., 2024).

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Author's Contributions (CRediT)

Maria Victoria Mujica: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, visualization, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study is linked to the following SDG(s): Quality education (SDG 4), Reduced inequalities (SDG 10)

Authors' Disclosures

This paper was proofread for language and style with the assistance of Anthropic's Claude Sonnet 4.6, complementing the human editorial process. The human authors critically assessed and validated the content to maintain academic rigor. The authors also assessed and addressed potential biases inherent in the AI-generated content. The final version of the paper is the sole responsibility of the human authors.

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