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After COVID-19: Can Quality Teaching be Sustained?

by

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Abstract

The arrival of the COVID-19 disease caused by a novel coronavirus created a major upheaval in education worldwide. Higher education turned to emergency remote teaching using whatever means were available. Even when herd immunity is achieved and the pandemic passes, most institutions will retain some capability for operating off campus. As classroom instruction and distance learning converge, using a common quality framework can ensure that students receive excellent education in both modes. Campus institutions and open universities have much to learn from each other.

Crashing into online learning: ...the results are not pretty.
Tony Bates (2020a)

COVID-19 caused a massive upheaval in education worldwide. By April 2020 UNESCO calculated that 1.37 billion students had been sent home as schools and campuses closed. The sudden moves that institutions made from classroom teaching to distance education were challenging but designing higher education post-COVID-19 is equally demanding.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) will find it harder than schools to define their ‘new normal’ after the threat of COVID-19 subsides. Most educationists believe that classroom teaching is the better option for schoolchildren, and K-12 schools attract their pupils mainly from their local region.

Neither factor applies to HEIs. Over 50 distance teaching universities, often called ‘open universities,’ provide higher education to millions of students worldwide, while many campus institutions already operate substantial distance learning operations alongside their classroom teaching. Furthermore, HEIs recruit students internationally. Altbach & De Wit (2020) note that: ‘Some institutions have become dependent on international student tuition fees as an important part of their financial survival. ...COVID-19 shows that this dependence is deeply problematic: it is likely that institutions dependent on this income will face significant problems.’

These problems are already apparent, with new international student enrolments in the US dropping by more than 40% in 2020, although this decrease may be somewhat mitigated if the new US administration adopts more benign visa policies (Marklein, 2020). Australia provides another striking example of this dependence. Monash University, by far Australia's largest, faced a revenue shortfall of AU\$350 million (US\$226 million) in 2020 because fewer students were coming from overseas.

The medical context is also changing. Vaccines are now becoming available to the general public, and therapies for treating COVID-19 have improved steadily since the pandemic began. Nevertheless, until vaccination rates approach those needed for herd immunity, both staff and students will be wary of a full return to pre-2020 classroom teaching. During the fall of 2020 government edicts on group gatherings changed several times in some jurisdictions, placing *de facto* constraints on teaching methods. Faced with this unpredictability, many universities, such as the California State University system and McGill University, Canada, continued their early-2020 emergency online teaching arrangements into 2021. Cambridge University, UK, will hold all lectures online until summer 2021.

How will moving into a new normal after COVID-19 affect the quality of teaching? Emergency remote teaching operations were arranged in great haste when COVID-19 struck, so the quality of teaching and learning left much to be desired. Altbach & De Wit (2020) comment:

‘We are somewhat skeptical that what is being offered is of high quality or that students are very satisfied with the new situation. Most faculty members worldwide are not trained to offer distance courses, ...and have not adapted their curricula to the web’. A survey in Hong Kong 'showed more than 60% of university students polled believed online learning was less beneficial than classroom teaching, while fewer than 30% of respondents said they were satisfied with their online learning experience amid the pandemic' (Chan Ho-Him, 2020).

Various factors will influence the judgments that stakeholders make about the modes of delivery and the quality of teaching and learning in the future. By the time there is sufficient herd immunity for COVID-19 to recede as a determining factor in operations, HEIs will have had the experience of incorporating emergency remote teaching into their work for more than a year. Many will want to retain this capacity, either as insurance against future crises or as part of their ongoing teaching strategy. They will also want to avoid the criticisms levelled at the quality of their earlier approaches.

We need to ask whether the determinants of quality in distance learning differ from those for classroom teaching. If so, how? Answering this question is critical for HEIs intending to offer more distance teaching and learning in future.

Quality in distance education

Partly because distance education is often called 'online education' in wealthier countries, many are unaware that remote teaching and learning long predate the internet. The letters that the Christian apostle Saint Paul wrote to communities around the Mediterranean in the 1st century served as primary teaching material for the members of the emerging churches. This early example of distance education included two key components that are still considered essential: material that can be studied independently and opportunities for interactive discussion. To judge by the steady expansion of the Christian church, the approach was very successful.

Since those early years distance education evolved by adopting and adapting successive new technologies. The invention of printing in the 15th century made it easier to reproduce printed documents. In the 19th century the development of railways speeded up the distribution of material, and once England established a universal postal system in 1840, Isaac Pitman taught shorthand by mailing texts transcribed into shorthand on postcards and receiving back students' transcriptions for him to correct. Pitman's crucial innovation was feedback to individual learners, which remains a vital feature of effective distance education.

The most significant 20th century development in distance education was the creation of the UK Open University (UKOU) in 1969 (Perry, 1977). Created by Royal Charter with the simple slogan: 'open to people, open to places, open to methods, open to ideas', the UKOU quickly became the UK's largest university in student enrollment, and set a new benchmark for quality distance learning. Whereas correspondence education was based on independent study

with cursory individual feedback, the UKOU added a comprehensive student support system that included thousands of tutors.

Harold Wilson, the UK Prime Minister, made the UKOU his personal priority. To protect it from potentially hostile decisions by the University Grants Committee that determined the funding of the UK's older universities, the government funded the UKOU directly. This arrangement continued until the comprehensive reform of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, which placed the UKOU within the same regulatory frameworks as all other HEIs. In negotiating its integration into the provisions of the Act the UKOU argued, successfully, that similar funding mechanisms and quality assurance frameworks should apply to all.

Today, when COVID-19 has stimulated convergence between distance learning and classroom teaching, this common quality framework is of special interest. England's program of teaching quality assessment (universal subject review) ran from 1992 to 2001 and was applied across the country (Jackson and Bohrer, 2010). The quality of teaching in each subject was reviewed at each HEI using the following six criteria. Each was scored on a scale of 1 to 4:

- curriculum design, content and organisation;
- teaching, learning and assessment;
- student progression and achievement;
- student support and guidance;
- learning resources;
- quality management and enhancement.

The final score, with a maximum of 24, was treated as a quantitative measure of the quality of the HEI's teaching of that subject and eagerly reported. After the program wound down in 2001, the press published a table of the aggregated results for every subject in all English HEIs. The UKOU, which by then had 200,000 students, came in 5th--below Cambridge but above Oxford. This shows that the quality of teaching and learning through distance education can match that on the most prestigious campuses, which should encourage HEIs that plan to incorporate more distance learning opportunities into their programs and set their sights high with respect to quality on these dimensions.

Incorporating distance education successfully after COVID-19

We offer this advice to HEIs intending to continue offering some distance learning after the pandemic recedes.

First, accept that the emergency moves into remote teaching sparked by COVID-19 do not provide a sufficient basis for success in the long-term. In his blog, 'Crashing into online learning,' Bates (2020a) reported how HEIs in various countries adopted online learning in response to COVID-19 and concluded that, 'the results are not pretty.' For the future, he

advised, ‘half-measures are not going to work... just moving your lectures online will only work once. What do you do for the next semester, and more importantly long-term?’

Second, campus institutions and open universities have much to learn from each other, because they are moving toward similar goals from opposite directions. The campuses have acquired competence in offering interactive synchronous teaching online and now seek to complete and enrich the student experience by adding material for asynchronous independent study and projecting student support off campus. The open universities, which were already skilled at providing effective means for asynchronous independent study, are now intensifying their use of online and interactive media. The latter is expanding in response to the pandemic, in 2020 the UKOU had 13 million visitors to OpenLearn, its free online course platform, up 50% on the previous year.

Third, decisions about using distance education depend not only on the state of the pandemic, but also on students’ level of study. We already noted that remote learning does not work well with the K-12 grades. At the college level, the effectiveness of distance learning rises with the students’ age and the level of the course. It poses the greatest challenge for first-year students just out of secondary school, who need a rich mix of independent and interactive learning activities. Asking how we improve on the record of COVID-19 learning, Melnyk and Kontowski (2020) urge increasing the intensity and quality of our interactions with students through all available mechanisms. Bates’ (2015) magisterial work, ‘Teaching in a Digital Age’, is a vital resource for designing suitable approaches for various levels and disciplines.

Fourth, the design of post-COVID-19 teaching and learning should take a holistic approach to quality. The six criteria listed earlier for teaching quality assessment do this. That list makes no reference to technology, which was the major preoccupation as HEIs ‘crashed into online learning’ during the first wave of COVID-19. Bates’ advice is to ‘use Zoom lectures sparingly’. Attention to students--their support and guidance, and their progression and achievement--contributes more to quality than the latest technology.

A good way to summarize these quality criteria and recommendations is to think of distance education as a student sitting on a three-legged stool. One leg is learning materials; a second is student support; the third is organisation and logistics. If any of these legs is weak, the student may fall (i.e. underachieve or even fail). HEIs must build stools with three strong legs.

They can do this in several ways, roughly corresponding to the three “legs.” First, they should draw on the rich pool of Open Educational Resources to develop engaging learning materials for students to use either synchronously or asynchronously. Second, if they plan to operate at scale, they should appoint teams of tutors/mentors to support the students. Third, quality distance education demands impeccable organisation and logistics. In face-to-face settings informal contacts among students and staff usually get problems addressed, but remote students are helpless when IT systems fail.

The future challenge

These are tough times for higher education. In early 2020 most institutions had to vacate their campuses, including research facilities, and adapt almost overnight to teaching at a distance. Most HEIs thought that they deserved a passing grade for navigating that transition, even though most students were less than fully satisfied with what they received.

The future presents institutions with equally difficult challenges, but with more time to prepare for them. Against a background of shaky finances, unpredictable student demand, and the imperative of relaunching stalled research, many now expect to incorporate some distance education into their teaching strategy for the long haul. They must ensure that the quality of this component of their academic operations at least matches that of their traditional classroom teaching. We hope that the ideas and experience we have presented will help them face this future successfully and reap new benefits from offering students greater flexibility.

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