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What the Post-Coronavirus University Will Look Like

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What will the post-coronavirus university look like?

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The opportunity of a crisis is that it forces an industry to re-examine its policies and practices. Since the coronavirus pandemic university leadership teams have been forced to re-examine its policies and practices on teaching, learning, research and funding.

Since the lockdown, extraordinary efforts have been made to prepare faculty and students for the online switch. However, emergency methods of teaching and learning is not online learning, which will need a lot more time and support if it is to meet the academic rigour in quality needs of students.

The curriculum may need to be re-constructed to ensure high standards and quality are maintained. For academics, time and support and upfront investment is needed to develop their online learning. It is not just a tech issue. It is teaching in an entirely new way and many lecturers are struggling to understand what online learning involves.

Teething problems are only to be expected given the breakneck speed at which some universities have moved to online teaching. In Hong Kong, social media was awash with anecdotes of the frustrations with online learning when one group of students all changed their usernames to “no sound” when a hapless professor continuously lectured with his microphone switched off.

In a survey conducted by Times Higher Education (THE) in 2018, university leaders across continents showed that there was a general consensus that online education would never match the real thing. It’s like the difference between visiting a new place or watching a video of it.

Third level institutions will struggle to offer sustainable high quality online teaching and a national co-ordinated response among universities should now begin to decide what a post coronavirus university will look like. Organisational structure impediments exist in academia and changing the mode of deliver to online teaching could fail to capture the characteristics that make for successful teaching. There won’t be any shift to online teaching exclusively but some new partnership will emerge between campus and its online equivalent.

According to UNESCO’s assistant director-general for education, a lack of access to technology, unprepared faculty and ethical concerns are the biggest obstacles facing online education worldwide. Globally forty per cent of students do not have access to the internet.

The logistics of group work are more difficult to do online as are practical applications of learning such as lab based classes in engineering, science and medicine.

But for some courses with high student-to-staff ratios, online learning is less problematic. Is taking notes with a subtitled video screen worse than sitting at the back of a 200 seater lecture theatre?

A teacher's job is to put life into an idea but learning how to be an effective teacher in this new world is a formidable task. Students do best from a combination of inspirational lectures, challenging discussions, self-study and a good textbook. Can all these criteria survive the physical distance of online learning?

The task for universities will be to retain the good features of online teaching now being experienced and integrate them with traditional teaching methods once the campuses reopen. Embrace the digital switch and develop new models of blended and online teaching. Once faculty get used to the modality of online education it could be used more.

The assessment bottleneck

While other forms of assessments exist, universities have always relied on getting lots of people into big rooms to sit examinations. With the move online, assessment is an emerging bottleneck. As an emergency response, universities have adopted a pass-fail grading system with the aim of protecting students who are less resourced in off-campus situations. For some academics this crisis-driven policy highlights the view that letter driven grades provide a false sense of objectivity and sends the wrong signals to educators and employers. Perhaps it is time to get rid of letter grades all together.

However, online examinations are already encountering legal obstacles. The coronavirus pandemic has ushered in the use of software, such as Proctorio, used by 500 institutions globally, to stop students cheating while sitting exams. European law makers are investigating whether such software monitoring tools forces students to reveal their personal biometric data. If students can't opt out what does consent mean? The EU commission is investigating whether such software violates the bloc's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

But where assessment has taken place, research, conducted in the midst of the global shift to remote learning, has shown that STEM students' scores were not negatively affected by the switch to online learning, demonstrating that the average student can learn as much on online courses as on campus or blended learning. The co-author of the report, Rene Kizilee of Cornell University, concludes that while students found online learning less satisfying it doesn't mean it is less effective.

Across the globe travel bans have prevented hundreds of thousands of students returning to universities where they were studying. China was on course to educate 500,000 international students this year but its attempt at internationalising its universities has been affected by quarantined cities and shuttered campuses. For universities whose strategy is rooted in global mobility, the global pandemic has universities calling for additional emergency state funding. Co-authors Timothy M. Devinney of the University of Manchester and Graham Dowling of the University of New South Wales, suggest that at a global level foreign students have become the 'crack cocaine' of academia. What was once seen as a short term funding fix has become a long term addiction. When Covid-19 disrupted the supply chain, universities realised they had a problem. The University of New South Wales

now runs a deficit of \$600 million. Individual investment in education, as in all forms of investment, is driven by the economic risk of uncertainty. The pandemic is inflicting a hammer blow to international student mobility. This crisis will force universities to re-evaluate their internationalisation policies.

The pandemic has also highlighted the essential contribution of science to medicine and health and this fact will increase the support for scientific research. However, It would be wise for universities not to isolate the social sciences and humanities in the research required to navigate our way forward. After all, the thinking goes, when fever breaks out in the house, what use is a scholar of the humanities. But this is when humanities are most in need because behind the technical scope of biomedicine lie many facets of the coronavirus pandemic. There is a weakness of thinking in mono-disciplinary terms and whether it is climate change or pandemics the wisdom of the social sciences is needed.

The Germany Federal government recently funded an expert group to advise it on its response to the lockdown. That expert group contained only a minority of natural scientists and a handful of virologists and medical experts. It consisted mostly of philosophers, theologians, historians, and jurists. The government's view was that this was a systemic crisis and needs dissecting from different angles requiring an eclectic mix of disciplines. An interdisciplinary approach is needed where historians, economists, epidemiologists and microbiologists collaborate research on the 'big picture' to understand the drivers of global pandemics and the role social and cultural issues play in virus pandemics.

Universities are now bracing themselves for the lasting impact of the coronavirus outbreak. There was so much to love about the old system but it is not coming back anytime soon. The landscape of higher education may change fundamentally.