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Rapid Response Briefing Paper
Digital Education Options for the 2020/21 Academic Year:
What Do We Do for September in the Light of Covid-19?

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Key messages

- The pivot to online education within weeks shows the incredible ingenuity of the sector. However, in the rush to move online, best practice has not always been followed and the quality of experience has suffered.
- We do not know what social distancing restrictions will be in place in September, but we still need to be planning for the next academic year.
- There are several options for the 2020/21 year: no change, a delayed start, multiple entry dates through the year, complete online education, or a blend of digital education plus on-campus education with social distancing.
- An increased emphasis on digital delivery of education for 2020/21 is inevitable. This will need to be of a higher quality than the experience produced in the first response to the crisis.
- To achieve a higher quality, you need to develop the digital skills of your academic staff, to provide staff with new and enhanced skills they need to deliver strong digital education.
- To improve the student experience, you need to develop the academic study skills of your students by providing them with the techniques and tools they need to work effectively digitally and remotely. Think about how to level the playing field between advantaged and less-advantaged students, e.g. through loaning equipment.
- Recruiting, retaining and resourcing your “key workers” (educational technologists, student study skills advisers and IT infrastructure staff) is essential. Applaud them as we applaud NHS nurses and supermarket workers.
- The wellbeing of all staff is important, many will be under increased pressure at home and at work. Think about what usual activities can be shelved to create capacity.
- Digital provision of education is the better understood part of the digital delivery puzzle. Trickier still is the digital delivery of induction, socialisation and community building activities. The best answers will come through a renewed understanding of why students choose to attend university.
- Covid-19 presents an opportunity to reconnect all staff to the institution’s mission.

Introduction

SUMS Consulting produced this rapid response briefing paper at Easter 2020 following conversations across the sector. After the incredible efforts of recent weeks, the whole sector could do with a break. But demand does not let up, and the implications for HE are still unfolding. Attention has already turned to a looming question: how will universities provide education for the 2020/21 academic year?

The situation is changing rapidly and there is a danger that the information within this paper will be out of date within weeks or months. It may be tempting to wait and see how the national and international situation develops before making firm plans. However, SUMS believes that inaction is the greater danger.

This paper is the first output from a SUMS comparative study of digital education. Further resources will follow to help the sector respond to Covid-19.

If you have any questions about this paper, or about how SUMS can help your institution respond to Covid-19, please contact Nick Skelton, Consultant, or Bernarde Hyde, CEO, at SUMS Consulting. Email: n.skelton@reading.ac.uk or m.b.hyde@reading.ac.uk

A Wicked Problem

There are some hard choices to be made. What to do for the 2020/21 academic year is a wicked problem: we have incomplete information, a rapidly changing context and are trying to find the least-worst option, not the best one. The health and safety of our university communities is of paramount importance, but we must also consider the financial sustainability of our organisations: some options may be simply unaffordable.

It may not be possible to choose one option at this point. You may decide to plan for all contingencies and adapt your strategy as the situation becomes clearer. However, this will put increased strain and workload on both professional services and academic staff. Consider carefully what normal activities can be shelved to increase capacity.

But there are things we can do now to better prepare for the autumn, including building up institutional knowledge of how to deliver digitally. We explore here some of the options for autumn through the digital delivery lens.

Perhaps in September the UK will be bouncing in and out of social distancing restrictions. There's great uncertainty in how long it will take to produce a vaccine, and little clarity in a path out of social distancing.

For most of the sector, SUMS is working on the following assumptions:

- International student numbers this autumn will be sharply down
- Domestic student numbers will also be down, due to a greater than usual number of students choosing to defer if they are not confident that they will receive full value for money and a good experience.
- Student number controls and some form of financial support from government will be used to support institutions. This financial support package is unlikely to replace lost funding like for like, it may benefit some HEIs more than others, and efficiency savings will still be needed.
- Universities need to enrol those students who choose to study this autumn and will provide them with the best education possible in the circumstances
- School leavers will still gain their A levels in August, but some school leavers will opt to take exams and wait upon those results
- Adjustment and Clearing will hold greater sway.

Option 1: Delayed start to the academic year, with blended physical and digital learning

Delaying enrolment until slightly later in the autumn may be an option.

Opening the campus at any time in the autumn will require bimodal learning - a model that blends physical and digital learning, to address potential social distancing issues and to build on the development of digital learning necessitated by Covid -19.

Blended learning can mean many things, but in the Covid-19 context, to reduce demand so that the physical estate can more easily accommodate the modules you still teach traditionally - more rooms in labs, every other seat in lecture theatres taped off and so forth, this could be:

- Students arrive on campus somewhat as normal, perhaps staggered to arrive at different times, and staying for shorter periods than usual
- Provision of a proportion of modules in each course completely online.

Blended learning of this sort will be quite discipline specific. Some learning can only be done physically. Is it possible to redesign the structure of the academic teaching programme completely to minimise the number of students on campus at any one time? For example, if your students currently

have one day of laboratory work each week, an option may be to redesign the programme so that a group of students work intensively on campus in labs for 5 days, followed by several weeks of digital study.

Sophisticated cross-function working will be needed to plan new arrangements, otherwise decisions made in one professional function will have unintended implications for others.

Redesigning courses can't be done without reconfiguration of teaching space, which in turn creates complex logistical issues for timetabling. These pressures will be somewhat eased if enough modules are moved online, or the number of students arriving is substantially lower than normal.

Universities are social communities in close proximity; this is part of the value of the traditional university experience. Our ambition must be to change how we operate to sufficiently mitigate the risks, while still keeping a recognisable university experience and deliver a high-quality education.

A bimodal learning can give students the choice as to how they engage, it will offer greater flexibility and allow those who wish to distance (for multiple reasons) that option.

Option 2: Multiple entry dates

A variation on delaying admission is to introduce multiple start dates for the same course, throughout the year.

For some individual undergraduate applicants, faced with not starting university in September - a delay of a few months may be more attractive than deferring for a whole year.

Multiple entry dates are especially attractive for applicants to postgraduate courses; SUMS saw a growing trend for multiple start dates even before Covid-19. Someone entering education from the workplace does not want to wait around for 11 months before starting a course to suit your convenience but would enrol on a January or April start date.

Short of a coordinated move across the whole sector it is difficult, but not impossible, to see multiple start dates working for undergraduate courses.

Option 3: Fully online delivery

Some universities are already actively planning to deliver their education for the first semester fully online from September. This option will be more attractive for those institutions who are ahead of the pack in digital education. They already have good digital learning as part of their regular courses. They have a strategic vision for digital education, a strong centre of excellence for teaching and learning, and have provided professional development so their academic staff are confident delivering digital education.

Other institutions, already exhausted after the huge efforts of recent weeks, may still be waiting to see. For them fully online is currently in the "too difficult to think about" bucket. Recent weeks have shown that the sector can do incredible things in short order, but educational technologists believe that these emergency efforts are of lower quality than a carefully planned digital programme.

Students will (hopefully) accept disruption and a poorer experience in an emergency. What will a new cohort of tuition fee paying students expect this autumn? They will not see the situation as an emergency. But they will have little experience of online university education and aren't well placed to judge it. Whatever they expect, what can we realistically provide?

We have a few months to prepare, which isn't sufficient to create a best-in-class online experience. We owe it to our students to deliver the best that we can, but our resources are limited.

SUMS have surveyed and interviewed a number of students on their experience of the move online. This indicates that students may accept a digital experience which is rough around the edges in its presentation, as long as other needs are met. Students highlighted that clear communications and

personal interpretation from a friendly face were key. If we communicate clearly with students, support them and engage with them, that will go a long way to meeting their expectations.

Designing a good online experience is quite different to designing a good in-person experience. It will take time and effort and you will need to upskill your staff to produce it. If your institution is not a leader in digital education, now is a good time to learn from others. Sector bodies including Jisc, ALT (the Association for Learning Technology) and ICDE (the International Council on Open & Distance Education) are good places to start, and specific resources are referenced at the end of this paper.

At this point it is not clear what the financial implications of fully online delivery would be: for universities and for students. Discussions on these points are currently ongoing between Finance Directors, government and the Student Loans Company. Financial implications need to be modelled for three or four years, not just 2020/21: impact on recruitment through deferrals is one issue, but if fully online delivery leads to higher dropout rates that will affect income for the length of a course.

Methods to deliver good online learning

Online learning or digital education can cover a wide spectrum of activity, including:

- Taster courses delivered online at scale. These are often available free of charge, and typically fulfil more of a marketing function than an educational one. Many MOOCs: Massive Open Online Courses fall into this bracket.
- Adult education, short courses and various forms of unbundled education
- Full online distance learning, packaged as a traditional course with assessment, leading to a recognised qualification.

Relatively few UK universities have developed significant distance learning programmes leading to qualifications. There may be many reasons for this, including the dominance of the Open University, the current student funding regime, and a perception that developing online education takes resources away from the core activity of campus-based learning. However suddenly in this time of crisis digital learning is the core purpose of the organisation for all of us.

Creating Digital Learning Resources

SUMS has seen people across the sector asking, “how do we create digital learning resources in time for this autumn?” To some extent this is the wrong question to ask; education is a social process, it is more than the delivery of content. However, there is an understandable desire to reach for ready-made solutions. To explore this, consider options: commercially published courseware, online programme management partners, open educational resources, and resources developed in-house.

- Digital courseware

Traditional educational publishers have shifted in response to market pressures: from paper textbooks, to e-textbooks, to digital courseware. There is no single definition of courseware in the UK market, but it refers to interactive, online, digital learning materials. Purchasing courseware from publishers can be expensive and, if adopted without thought, could provide a polished but sterile experience. A good courseware implementation will require individualised implementation in response to the pedagogy of the course. This requires work from the academics involved and quite likely consultancy from the courseware publisher too. Adopting pre-existing digital courseware is not a zero-effort quick fix.

- Online programme management partnerships

Some universities have created distance learning programmes by contracting with Online Programme Management partners (OPMs). These are third-party companies who offer a platform to deliver online education plus services around this. Much of the value from an OPM comes from their expertise in recruitment. OPM's typically operate on a revenue-share model. This is worthwhile for the university if it will substantially widen your market. For the OPM it is worthwhile if they see a long-term strategic relationship. Since much of their costs are upfront, in marketing and recruitment, they are unlikely to be interested in a quick fix for this autumn only. You might consider OPMs as part of a longer-term strategic shift to diversify your income streams.

- Open educational resources

In the 2000s there was a substantial interest in producing Open Educational Resources (OER). The concept was that if every undergraduate Maths course has a module on Introductory Statistics, why don't we just produce that module once, and reshare the content across the whole of the UK? There are still passionate advocates of OER, and fantastic resources available, but the grand vision of OER did not come to pass. Most academics will engage less with someone else's teaching materials than they will with their own. From a practical point of view searching through available open resources, adapting them and curating them can be as time consuming as creating resources yourself. There is a place to reuse existing open educational resources as part of the picture, but they will not provide a complete solution on their own.

Developing resources in-house

Students respond well to lecturers who are passionate about their subjects and connect with their students on a human level. This sense of connection is even more important if education is delivered digitally. You can't take people out of the picture and deliver successful online education.

The most successful digital education programmes are those led by lecturers. For successful, sustainable digital education it is essential to upskill your academic staff, so they have the ability to produce their own digital learning resources and the confidence to lead learning online. The best digital learning programmes use different techniques to campus-based learning programmes, but like anything else these techniques can be taught. Some universities are already running "crash courses", delivered online, to teach lecturers how to teach online.

Lecturers used to teaching on campus may initially think to take that course and deliver it online with as few changes as possible. This can lead to "It's 11am on Tuesday, so we all tune in to Zoom and I lecture live on videocam to three hundred remote students." This can be exhausting for all involved.

When moving online, academics need to think about asynchronous communications as well as live. Things which before may have been taken for granted - establishing a social rapport with students, being sensitive to personal circumstances - need to be explicitly considered and handled differently. None of this is impossible but it all requires consideration. A good online education development programme will equip academics to ask these questions of their own teaching and amend it accordingly.

Digital assessment

Even before Covid-19, conducting high-stakes summative assessments using pen and paper felt archaic. Exams may be the only time in the course and the last time in someone's working life when they cannot use digital tools. SUMS has previously published research on the transition to e-exams. But conducting e-exams in a sports hall on campus is far easier than arranging them for students at home. It is difficult to ensure the equality of the experience for students in different environments,

validate the identity of the student completing the assessment, and ultimately ensure the integrity of the exams.

Some universities have explored remote proctoring systems. These use webcams to remotely monitor students, alongside lockdown software barring web access to unauthorised webpages. However, such systems are intrusive and unpopular with students, and information on how to bypass them is easy to find. SUMS would recommend caution when adopting a technological solution for this problem: despite the promises of vendors, you will likely find immature technologies rather than magic bullets.

A better solution is to redesign assessment so it can be done online using asynchronous “take away exam papers”, where students are permitted to access reference materials, work in their own time, and then submit work for assessment perhaps days later. The exam focuses on how students apply the information and skills they have learnt, rather than testing their recall. Various techniques, such as relating the assessment to something topical, or to the student's specific context or experience, can be used to reduce the likelihood that answers to the question posed are already out there and searchable.

This style of assessment requires a very different approach, but experiences in the current pivot to online suggest it does work, and practical advice on redesigning assessment is available. Even in disciplines which have been historically reluctant to consider new assessment styles, objections have melted away in light of the obvious necessity.

Non-educational activities: building community at a distance

Educational technologist is a recognised profession, with a 25-year history. The professionals in the field do know what works and we all need to learn from that history. There is far less institutional knowledge of how to do online student counselling, online students unions and so forth, but there is good practice in each professional area which can be shared across the sector, along with good sociological research to bring to the table.

An online activity is not a complete analogue of a physical activity. When considering how to provide Fresher's Week in 2020, don't translate it to online by simply repeating what you have done for the last 20 years. First, you need to understand the objectives and outcomes of an activity. For non-educational activities, these objectives may not have been explicitly stated before and, even if they are stated, they probably aren't widely understood.

When designing an online activity, aim for equivalence of outcomes, not identical delivery. The online activity needs to fulfil the objectives of the activity, even if it appears to work in a quite different fashion. This will require some deep thinking about why we do what we do: what is the purpose of a university, why students choose to study at university and what benefits they derive from it.

Recommended Actions

1. Construct a professional development programme for all academics to give them the skills they need to create and manage a digital learning programme. This needs to be done in short order so academics have time to improve teaching programmes ready for the autumn. If you do not already have such a programme, consider using some of the excellent open resources already available in the sector as inspiration (see references) then have it adapted and led by the educational technology professionals and enthusiasts you already have internally.
2. Set out your broad principles and agree a set of common tools the whole institution will use for digital delivery. Then consider the specific disciplinary requirements of each course, as well as the income they provide, and determine which you continue, which you defer until later, and which you replace with online delivery. Put trust and authority in each school and faculty to design and deliver digital education programmes. Different disciplines will require different approaches and you will not have the time for too much centralisation. Simplify your internal accreditation processes where you can and stay in close discussion with any external accreditation bodies. If they understand the situation they are likely to be supportive.
3. Include students in the planning process to ensure their needs are considered. Focus on ensuring your communications with students are good and that lecturers and students engage and interact online, including the use of asynchronous tools such as discussion boards and shared docs. Redesign your support of academic study skills support so that it equips students with specific skills to effectively learn and take assessments remotely. Think about barriers to education and how to level the playing field between advantaged and less-advantaged students: loan of laptops, or mobile broadband dongles for students who do not have devices or online access at home.
4. Think about how to provide remote students with an equivalent of the induction, socialisation and other non-educational opportunities they would receive on campus. This will require prioritised, co-ordinated work across professional services and with the Students Union. Do not just do things the way you have always done them and move them online: start by articulating the purpose and value of the broader university experience, then consider how this translates digitally.
5. Understand who the hidden key workers in your institution are: educational technologists, academic study skill specialists, and underpinning IT infrastructure staff. Give them the recognition they deserve and ensure staff numbers are adequate and skill levels appropriate in these areas.

Further resources

International Council for Open & Distance Education. <https://www.icde.org/corona>

Facilitating Learning Online. Sylvia Currie, Sylvia Riessner, Gina Bennett, and Beth Cougler Blom, January 2019. <https://opentextbc.ca/flofacilitatorguide/>

Teaching in a Digital Age – Second Edition: Guidelines for designing teaching and learning. A.W. (Tony) Bates, October 2019. <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/teachinginadigitalagev2/>

25 years of Ed Tech. Martin Weller, February 2020. <https://www.aupress.ca/books/120290-25-years-of-ed-tech/>

Adapt Builder Beginner's Workshop: A one day crash course in the design of e-learning resources. Karl Gimblett, University of Keele, April 2020. <http://hedigitalpedagogy.org/FHEA/adapt>

Coronavirus Contingency Suggestions for replacing on-site exams. Kay Sambell & Sally Brown, April 2020. <https://sally-brown.net/download/3131/>



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