REGENT COLLEGE LONDON

REGENT DIGITAL

DIGITAL LEARNING:
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

REGENT DIGITAL

Regent College London took the decision to move all courses online immediately at the point when the lockdown was announced in March 2020. Over one weekend staff moved all courses online using mixed mode digital delivery which utilised Microsoft Teams and virtual learning environment (VLE) platforms alongside existing online systems to create our Regent Digital offering.

This experience has led us to seek insights from expert colleagues working across HE and we have collected their responses to identify the approach needed for developing student-centred digital learning approaches. We have also produced a digital learning advice document to accompany this presentation with a view to stimulating a sector-wide debate concerning the standards and benchmarks that could be applied to future digital learning implementation. Whilst the debate in many quarters has focussed on how high quality online teaching can be delivered, we want to consider how digital technology can transform the learning landscape for students to create an 'inside-out' experience where the learner takes ownership of their educational experience. Understanding this distinction is crucial for the future of student- centred learning.

> *The student-centred university is the exception today. In the future, no other kind is likely to succeed.*
>
> Clayton M. Christensen & Henry J. Eyring
> The Disruptive University, (2011)

The Evolution of Education

Teaching has remained the same for higher education in UK since the Cambridge University was established 1209.

In comparison the communication sector has been transformed by innovation since the invention of telephone in 1876.

The Regent Digital strategy is an Ed Tech solution. Handheld Devices are given to our customers/students in a similar way that hardware/software companies now given telephones to their strategy of communication/ telecom companies.

Timeline	Communication	Teaching
1800	Need to meet physically to have a conversation.	Students attended classroom to consume teaching by a human.
1876	Telephone was invented, so conversations started to happen via telephone.	Students attended classroom to consume teaching by a human.
1980	Mobile phones became popular, conversations were not tied to landline.	Students attended classroom to consume teaching by a human.
March 2020	COVID-19 communication world via Digital technology.	Students attended classroom to consume teaching by a human.
March 2020	MST/Zoom has become a norm to do business	REGENT DIGITAL was launched to disrupt the classroom, which needed CHANGE for centuries now.

THE CONTEXT

There is at present no agreed benchmark for the use of digital technologies in the delivery of higher education courses. The nature and scale of the digital learning that is used to support the educational experience for higher education students has been a matter for individual organisations to determine. As a result, terminology such as 'digital learning', 'online learning', 'remote learning' and 'blended learning' are used interchangeably to describe quite different educational experiences.

This can leave students and staff confused by a myriad of terms and result in wide variations in the quality of digital learning experiences within the sector. It is also difficult to identify when digital delivery may fall short of reasonable standards in the absence of any shared criteria for measuring the impact of digital learning on the achievement of student success.

The move to online learning that has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown requires a coordinated response from the sector. Staff and students need advice and support that helps them to understand what to expect from effective digital learning. This enables the sharing of best practice for all those involved in higher education to bring enhancement within the sector.

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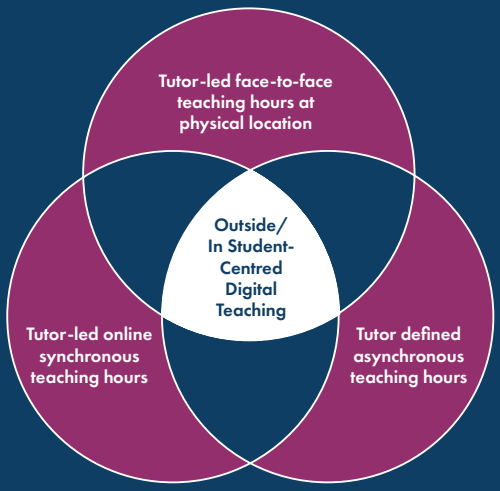
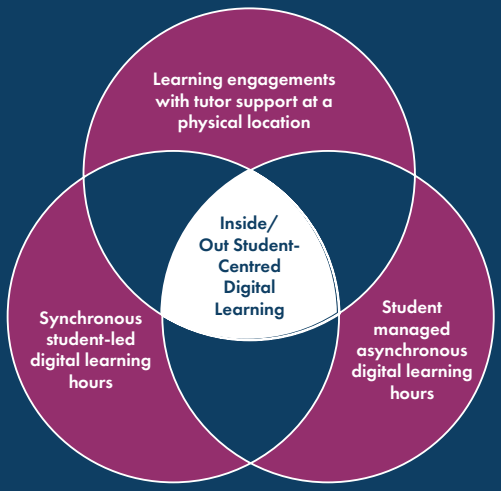
REGENT DIGITAL TEACHING & LEARNING MODEL

The debate about the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on HE organisations and the student learning experience has focused on the future balance between face-to-face engagement at a physical campus/location and online learning facilitated by the internet and modern communication tools, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. This approach is framed within a conventional 'outside-in' model of teaching – concentrating on knowledge delivery to the student within the existing paradigms of teaching, learning and assessment translated into online methods. This reflects the current outside/in dominant teaching model. From the feedback we have received the future of student-centred digital learning will need to consider how institutions can move from this teaching-led approach to a student-centred learning approach – depending on the level, discipline, and nature of the subject under discussion. To achieve this requires a flexible learning approach that is co-designed and co-created between academic teams and students to deliver the best available experience to maximise student success in the context of UKHEI regulations and guidance from the QAA.

Outside/In Student-Centred Digital Teaching Guided Teaching Hours (GTH)



Inside/Out Student-Centred Digital Learning Guided Learning Hours (GLH)



Continuum from Outside/In to Inside/Out Teaching & Learning Model		
Outside-In	Transitional Process	Inside-Out
Tutor-Led Lectures/Seminars Online synchronous lectures	Workshop Based Activity blended learning approach	Student Managed learning engagement Student-led asynchronous learning
Discipline dependent Early levels of study (3/4)	Interdisciplinary working Mid-levels of study (4/5)	Integrated cross-curricula working Advanced levels of study (5/6/7)
Move from current focus on guided teaching hours (GTH) towards self-directed guided learning hours (GLH)		

Appropriate to the subject and level of study, a move towards an Inside-out student-centred digital learning will enable students to determine how they study their academic discipline and work within student-led communities of practice through direct or digital methods. HE institutions need develop a digital ecosystem which prepares staff and students to be empowered to create new forms of course design, teaching methodology and assessments.

A self-directed 'inside-out' approach to student-centred learning requires support and training in self-management, motivation, creative thinking and resilience, underpinned by the development of emotional intelligence. At Regent College all our students participate in the online programme Thinking Into Character (www.tic.uk.com) and are continuously challenged through problem-solving and group engagements to develop these skills.

THE LANDSCAPE

Some organisations had already prioritised online learning over face-to-face teaching prior to the closure of campuses necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It would seem reasonable to suggest however that the majority of HE institutions had maintained a conventional approach of on-campus, room- based, learning delivery in which digital technology most commonly provided a portal for online course materials and assessment submission through a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or similar system.

Those who have utilised digital methods to create interactive learning opportunities have made important strides in harnessing new technologies, but the majority of higher education courses still support or replicate face-to-face engagement in a digital form rather than providing a transformational learning experience. Whilst there have been some excellent examples of students taking ownership of their learning, such cases remain in the minority for higher education. There is very little evidence to suggest that students have been involved in institutional strategic decisions to adopt technical solutions, as one experienced HE expert notes:

> ***One of the things that often surprises me about how universities evaluate their systems is how little qualitative input there is from students – their users. I would always advocate for strong user research to help shape and inform developments. It is vital to conduct in-depth user research – the kind of work that service designers do – to fully understand the needs and experiences of your users.***
>
> Source - Regent Group survey of HE sector view post COVID-19, June 2020

Whilst innovative digital learning and teaching methodologies have been gaining greater prominence over recent years, promoted by such organisations as JISC, the delivery model of the majority of higher education courses continues to be designed for students who are physically present on campus. Even courses that are presented exclusively online rarely offer a transformative learning experience and instead 'digitise' conventional learning and teaching materials and provide online assessment submission. The general impression is that the use of digital technology for online and face-to-face learning has lacked widespread innovation as Universities struggle to implement effective digital ecosystems. As one HE professional observes:

> ***In my experience, most universities suffer from significant technical debt, with legacy systems and lack of consistent upskilling of staff acting as barriers to progress in adopting new technologies in many cases. Commitments to specific systems (sometimes even systems developed in-house that are incompatible with modern technical eco- systems), multiple bolt-on systems, and technical teams who may not have had the opportunity to update their skills are all issues I have come across. There are also issues related to the upskilling of academic staff in some institutions, including resistance from some to adopting new technologies. This can result in inconsistent student experience, quality issues, and in some cases, programmes that are out of date and lacking in their ability to prepare students for employment.***
>
> Source - Regent Group survey of HE sector view post COVID-19, June 2020

THE COVID-19 CHALLENGE

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought sudden and significant changes in the use of digital technology for learning and teaching in higher education. The closure of campuses has led institutions to move much of their teaching and assessment online for the first time. This has created both new opportunities and unforeseen problems which the sector is now grappling to manage. Many have seen the response of organisations as remarkable given the lack of forewarning of the lockdown:

> ***I think the sector has responded remarkably well to the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic. Successful utilisation of technology usually requires change in a range of different areas (processes, data, skills) and, in my experience, it is these other areas that usually generate/source the problems.***
>
> Source - Regent Group survey of HE sector view post COVID-19, June 2020

The prominent concerns which have arisen from these changes can be summarised in the following questions:

01

How can HE organisations transform the student experience through effective digital learning?

02

What is lost from the direct interaction of student and teacher when learning moves entirely online?

03

How can we help students with their wellbeing, support, and access needs through digital learning?

04

How do we ensure students and staff are safeguarded in the digital environment?

05

Will HE funding bodies recognise digital learning as equivalent to face-to-face contact in future models of student engagement and attendance?

Teaching staff have responded flexibly and rapidly to the challenges of the lockdown – with course delivery moved entirely online within a matter of days in several organisations. Students have been able to successfully complete their year and graduate,albeit in online ceremonies with remote celebrations. This has created mixed feelings where a sense of loss mixed with a recognition of the positive impacts of the move to digital learning:

> ***Students I have spoken with have expressed a sense of loss, uncertainty, and worry about the future. In some cases, it has seemed almost like a grieving process. They have, however, also been pleasantly surprised by how much learning they could do using online tools and via remote assessments. Staff I have spoken to have, in general, adapted rapidly and well. The rapid, enforced change, has enabled/ required them to think creatively about their teaching and assessment, and from what I have observed as an external examiner, techniques have been used that are beneficial to students that might otherwise not have been implemented. Online exams, for example, that cannot be controlled in the same way as traditional exams, so have to be designed to allow an 'open book' element, and thus test the ability to apply theory rather than simply testing memory.***
>
> Source - Regent Group survey of HE sector view post COVID-19, June 2020

It may well be the case that the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst clearly causing significant loss and financial devastation for many, has also provided an opportunity for the higher education sector to embrace new technology in a way that, previously, it had been slow and reluctant to adopt.

There will need to be a reframing of how the experiences of students are impacted by a substantial move to digital learning. Some higher education staff have reported that students with poor or no access to broadband could not attend live, synchronous teaching for example. There are also challenges in proving student attendance for both synchronous and asynchronous digital events to organisations such as the SLC or UKVI and there will need to be a flexible approach to providing acceptable evidence of compliance in online attendance.

Although the strategic priority given to digital learning and the supporting IT estate within any organisations is often seen as pivotal to the utilisation of digital learning resources, large-scale investment is not a guarantee that these resources will ensure a quality digital learning experience for students and staff. Key factors such as the capabilities of higher education staff to embrace digital innovation and the availability of sufficient numbers of appropriately trained support staff can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the online learning experience, as one higher education professional surveyed suggested:

> ***It seems that there is still a wide variation in the digital skill levels and confidence across staff teams in some institutions, and if students experience inconsistent use of technology across modules they really notice. Staff need to be supported to develop the digital skills they need, but also the confidence to adapt their teaching where appropriate. Part of this is about culture, building a culture where there is a willingness to develop and grow, where this is encouraged and incentivised.***
>
> Source - Regent Group survey of HE sector view post COVID-19, June 2020

The willingness and ability of academic staff to adopt new technologies is a crucial factor in providing effective digital learning. Staff support requires strategic planning, investment, training, sharing of best practice and reflection on the changing role of the academic and support services provided to students in the move to new forms of digital experience. Given that the relationships between many organisations and their staff was going through a difficult phase prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there will need to be strong advice which comes from sources that academic and support staff respect to develop successful models of digital learning. As one survey respondent has observed:

> ***There has historically been a perception that technology will be used to replace academics and this is a barrier to adoption that is still being encountered; staff need to have a clear understanding from the student voice and from business and industry that digital literacy is critical to student engagement and enjoyment and for future career opportunities.***
>
> Source - Regent Group survey of HE sector view post COVID-19, June 2020

The situation is further complicated by the fact that many HE providers have spent the last ten years investing in physical infrastructure and large system integrations, often taking loans to fund expansion and building 'Innovation' campuses based on future income projections that depend on the physical presence of more students, including international students. These institutions are now having to consider major investments in technical resources to support greater remote delivery at the same time as absorbing the impact of COVID-19 on overseas recruitment, the fee freeze and the cap on student numbers in England.

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Student Experience

The move to online delivery during the COVID-19 disruption has raised new challenges for student success, some of which are outside the full control of HE institutions. These difficulties include the variable access which individual students have to suitable equipment and the lack of available broadband which can have a big impact on the quality of the student experience, particularly for synchronous learning:

> ***One of the key issues is online teaching and learning is often seen as a way of increasing access (and it can) but it can also produce barriers. Some students may not have the hardware or a reliable internet connection. So, it is no good just live streaming all lectures and assuming all students can watch them synchronously, for instance. The sudden move to online teaching may thus have exacerbated barriers. I hope a more considered move to online teaching would lead to most institutions embedding a proper strategy for reaching all students (such as synchronous and asynchronous provision).***
>
> *Source - Regent Group survey of HE sector view post COVID-19, June 2020*

For students who are carers or care-leavers, those living in precarious home circumstances, or without secure accommodation and learners with significant external commitments such as work and apprenticeships, the digital support needs are more complex when engagements are undertaken remotely. There needs to be greater investment in the support services for students who are studying remotely:

> ***There are issues to consider around access to quiet study space, which many students don't have access to in their homes, access to systems for students with disabilities or additional needs, and the impact of isolation and lack of access to on-campus support services for students who have mental health support needs. It is unclear to me how well these issues have been handled by Universities who have, necessarily, had to focus their immediate efforts on providing core teaching and learning. We may see a 'long tail' of issues post-pandemic that stem from inequality of experience during the lockdown.***
>
> *Source - Regent Group survey of HE sector view post COVID-19, June 2020*

More than ever before the sector needs to provide support and guidance for best practice approaches for digital learning delivery alongside course-specific requirements and consider some agreed benchmarks to measure effective implementation. Students and staff need to be reassured that as well as ensuring the physical health and safety of all those within HE through social distancing, the impacts of greater digital and online learning can be managed for a growing student population. As one sector professional suggests:

> ***I see a role for a benchmark, particularly in helping institutions ensure they are delivering in terms of areas like accessibility, support, security, privacy, user experience, and preparation for employment.***
>
> Source - Regent Group survey of HE sector view post COVID-19, June 2020

This will enable all those who have a stake in the sector to see that HE institutions are delivering to a recognised standard whatever the chosen mode of delivery undertaken in the post COVID-19 world. It was this striving for comparable standards across the sector that drove the implementation of the original QAA Quality Code and the experience of the last few months would suggest that a similar drive is needed to create clear thresholds and targets for effective digital learning.

The Proposal for Advice and Guidance for Digital Learning Practice

Given the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden cancellation of face-to-face teaching from March 2020, there has been a loss of confidence in the experience which students will have when they start or return to their courses for the 2020/2021 academic year. Whether an institution plans to deliver courses through online provision only, provide a blended experience which is part campus-based and part online, or a return to an entirely campus-based approach with adjustments for social distancing, all institutions need to review how they implement an engaged digital learning experience where staff and students are fully supported.

The evidence from the feedback of those working within higher education is that the chosen methods for delivering course content can be as important as the subject content and academic rigour of the discipline in question in ensuring student success. The purpose of this review is to provide advice and guidance that can be shared across the sector to seek to ensure that any future benchmarking of digital learning delivery that may be provided by the QAA, OfS, JISC and other leading organisations in this field is working from a shared language within the sector against which the quality of digital learning can be measured and enhanced.

An understanding of how digital technologies impact on the learning relationship should transform the concept of course creation from the outset. To help to achieve this, our accompanying document contains 10 guiding principles:

1.	**Organisations need to ensure that their strategic plan includes a detailed strategy for developing and reviewing the complete student digital journey throughout the lifecycle so that both students and staff benefit from coordinated and integrated planning for the successful implementation of systems to enhance student learning through technology.**
2.	**Effective use of technology to deliver digital learning is underpinned by a focus on student achievement and outcomes.**
3.	**Equivalent digital learning and teaching that makes full use of technology should ensure there is an equivalent high- quality learning experience for all students irrespective of where, how, or by whom it is delivered.**
4.	**Effective digital technologies that are utilised for active teaching and learning should be informed through reflective practice and providers should enable staff to engage in relevant, timely and appropriate professional development that supports students' learning and high-quality teaching.**
5.	**Effective application of technology to deliver an active learning experience for students should be underpinned by a routine evaluation of provision to manage and enhance learning and teaching activities, including the achievement of qualification and award outcomes.**
6.	**Effective digital learning and teaching activities, facilities and resources that use technology as the primary method of engagement should ensure that the learning environment is student-centred.**
7.	**Effective application of technology to deliver learning and teaching ensures that information, and support for, technology-enhanced learning and teaching is clear and accessible to all students and stakeholders.**
8.	**Effective use of technology to deliver learning and teaching should enable students to take responsibility for their own learning and become resilient individuals, equipped for a rewarding career through effective application of skills in technology in the workplace.**
9.	**Providers should encourage and enable students to evaluate and manage their own learning development through the effective implementation of technology and supported by engagements with staff through digital learning techniques.**
10.	**Providers should clearly communicate technology-based learning outcomes and graduate attributes linked to digital learning and digital skills to all current and prospective students, staff, and associated organisations.**

Our accompanying document provides detailed guidance as to how these principles could be achieved. We offer this material to the sector for consideration as a framework for future guidance and we welcome a dialogue within which the contribution of colleagues in the sector, for which we are hugely grateful, can be the catalyst for a new way of providing digital learning. This work is not intended to be a finished product but rather, in the spirit of the QAA advice and guidance, an evolving work which will be revisited and changed to suit the dynamic nature of the digital learning experience.

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