Reimagining Knowledge Acquisition in UK Higher Education in a Post-Pandemic Landscape

Contents

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Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted Higher Education (HE) globally, necessitating a rapid shift from predominantly in-person teaching and learning models, to widespread deployment of synchronous and asynchronous digital delivery.

Although some higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK had already developed digital delivery models pre-pandemic, this was by no means the norm. According to the Office for Students (OfS), by the end of 2020, more than 92% of students in the UK were fully or partly engaged with online learning, compared with only 42% prior to the pandemic.

Whilst the dramatic shift to online teaching and learning in mid-2020 was initially an emergency response to Covid-19, many in the HE sector have since embraced such disruptive change as an opportunity to drive technology-enabled improvements to teaching, learning and assessment, and to substantially reimagine how students access and acquire knowledge in a post-pandemic world.

The past two years have not been without significant challenges for the UK HE sector and those students whose education has been disrupted. In particular, it has been clear that some students do not have equal access to necessary technologies (e.g. laptops, internet, or software) or the digital literacy to progress securely when taking fully online courses.

Nevertheless, research during this period has highlighted notable benefits. The OfS, for example, spotlighted numerous case studies of innovative assessment practices, while the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) found improved collaboration between HEIs and greater involvement of students in the planning and design of online delivery.

Recent research also demonstrates that there is a continuing appetite for digital delivery models post-pandemic. For example, a 2021 survey by the Student Futures Commission found that two thirds of students wanted to continue with blended in-person learning and online teaching, and over a fifth wanted mostly online study. Moreover, a 2022 study by Future Learning, found that online or blended approaches are particularly popular with students from minority ethnic backgrounds and with women. Their report also indicated that many learners value online courses because they offer freedom to learn at a pace that suits them and the opportunity to learn from home, enabling them to juggle other responsibilities.

Regent College London (RCL), a higher education provider offering diverse Business, Allied Health, and Computing programmes in partnership with respected universities, was an early adopter of digital delivery, recognising its potential to transform opportunities for students, particularly those from non-traditional or underrepresented groups. Providing students with access to technology through its free laptop loan scheme, alongside free digital literacy courses, RCL offers a flexible learning and teaching model that incorporates what it terms its three core 'competencies': digital live face-to-face delivery (on campus), digital synchronous delivery (scheduled sessions, accessible via any device), and digital asynchronous delivery (pre-recorded sessions, accessible any time via any device).

This short research briefing summarises recent developments in digital delivery in UK HE, and highlights key lessons learnt from the pandemic. It also suggests how fully, or blended, digital delivery of teaching and learning is likely to play a vital role in widening access to higher education locally and internationally, supporting the government's upskilling and lifelong learning agendas, and underpinning the growth of short courses and micro-credentials.

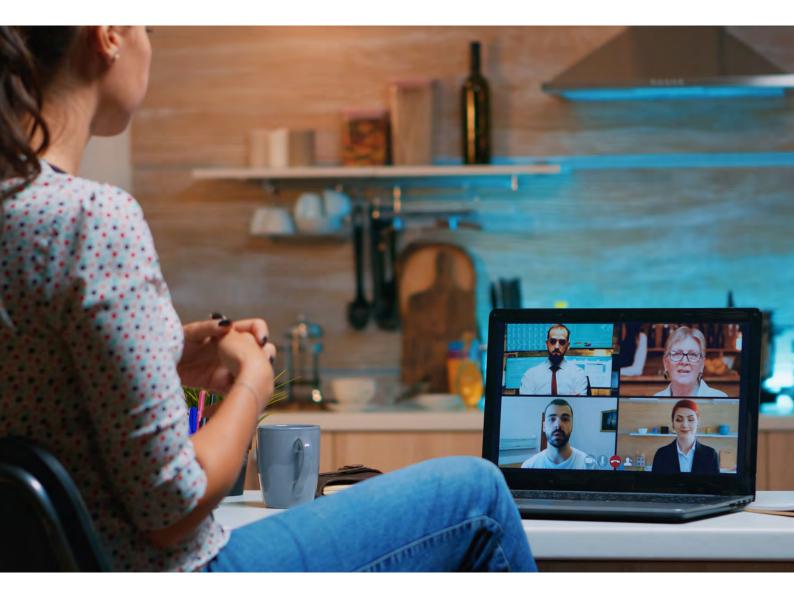# Disruption and opportunity in the Higher Education sector

1. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted Higher Education (HE) globally and necessitated a rapid shift from predominantly in-person teaching and learning models, to widespread deployment of synchronous and asynchronous digital delivery.

2. In the UK, the migration to 'digital campuses' forced many HE providers to re-examine their structures and question their role in society. According to Eleanor Shaw, Associate Principal at the University of Strathclyde, 'The whole sector was ripe for disruption, and the pandemic came along and disrupted it.'[1]

3. A February 2021 report by the Office for Students (OfS), 'Gravity assist: propelling higher education towards a brighter future,' noted that before the pandemic 58% of students and 47% of teaching staff polled had not previously engaged with online teaching and learning. By the end of 2020, more than 92% of students were fully or partly engaged with online learning.[2]

4. Although some HEIs had developed, or were developing, successful digital delivery models pre-pandemic, this was by no means the norm. This recently enhanced engagement indicates not only a significant shift for the sector, but also a significant opportunity to drive technology-enabled improvements to teaching, learning and assessment, and to substantially reimagine how students access and acquire knowledge in a post-pandemic world.

5. The 2021 OfS report highlighted case studies of successful approaches across wide-ranging disciplines. These included: 'digitally simulated scenarios for paramedic training, science experiments conducted with remote controlled lab equipment, online master classes for music students, digital exhibitions connecting final-year portfolio students with industry experts and employers, and virtual writing cafés.' The authors note that 'the speed and scope of adaption was extraordinary.'[3]

6. Similarly, a December 2020 report by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 'How UK Higher Education Providers Managed the Shift to Digital Delivery During the COVID-19 Pandemic,' noted increased levels of collaboration amongst HE institutions (HEIs) at the time, and highlighted that many HE providers were involving students in planning and design of online delivery.[4] In this respect, UK HE providers recognised an imperative to develop approaches that were better tailored to their students' needs.

7. The 2020 QAA report also identified substantial challenges during the pandemic around digital literacy and access. They noted that not all students had equal access to necessary technologies such as laptops or the digital literacy to successfully utilise laptops and various software and programmes. The extent to which HEIs addressed these challenges varied, depending on how agile they were in adapting to the new educational landscape, and how quickly they could mobilise resources for students.[5]

8. At Regent College London (RCL), the shift to digital learning was made successfully, and overnight, so that there was no loss in learning for students on its diverse HND and degree-level programmes. To support its students in accessing lessons digitally, it also took the decision to make laptops freely available to all students who needed them, as part of an institution-wide laptop loan scheme.

9. In addition, RCL also quickly commissioned a leading academic to carry out a two-part survey of students looking at how they had adapted to digital learning.[6][7] The findings from the subsequent 'Student Engagement in Digital Learning' phase 1 and phase 2 reports have been used to develop digital strategy, improve digital learning and teaching approaches, and to support the rationale for introducing free courses for students needing to develop their digital literacy (European Computer Driving Licence).

10. Whilst this move to digital learning was challenging – technically, pedagogically, and culturally – the lessons learned from almost two years of digital educational delivery, indicate that for many of RCL's students (particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds) there have been tangible benefits, especially in terms of their preferences for synchronous digital delivery and knowledge acquisition.

11. As a consequence, and with an ongoing commitment to providing its students with opportunities to access higher education in a way that meets their needs and preferences, RCL has developed and implemented a coherent learning and teaching delivery model (which it terms 'competencies'), that incorporates:

    i. Digital Live face-to-face delivery (on campus),

    ii. Digital Synchronous (scheduled sessions, accessible via any device),

    iii. Digital Asynchronous (pre-recorded sessions, accessible any time via any device).

12. In a September 2021 article, Higher Education Partners UK conclude that the disruption to learning models, and associated business models, are likely to have a lasting impact on higher education and the sector itself.

13. Pointing to research that indicates students retain up to 60% of material when learning online compared with up to 10% when learning face to face, (and in 40-60% less time than in traditional classrooms), the authors argue that online education can provide students with 'access to world-class teaching from the comfort of their own homes and greater flexibility in their education. Learning institutions, in turn, gain access to a broader range of global students.'[8]

14. Whilst the threat of Covid-19 may now be receding, albeit not yet gone, many in the HE sector worldwide, and in the UK, acknowledge that some form of blended or hybrid digital learning is here to stay.

The future of blended learning and technology-enabled Higher Education

15. As UK HE begins to exit the Covid-19 pandemic, there are important lessons about blended learning and technology-enabled delivery that can, and should, be taken forward into the post-pandemic era. In particular, research suggests that there has been a shift in the way many students wish to learn, acquire new knowledge, and pursue higher education programmes. For example, a 2021 survey by the Student Futures Commission found that going forward two thirds of students want some form of blended in-person learning and online teaching, whilst just over a fifth want mostly online study, with in-person activities once or twice a week.[9]

16. During the pandemic, many higher education institutions reported increased student engagement in lectures as online and blended learning allowed students to participate more actively during lectures using discussion boards or chat features. Such approaches enabled them to gain real time clarification about learning and increased opportunities to ask questions. Additionally, without room size restrictions online, more students have been able to audit classes and expand their learning.[10]

17. Blended learning approaches that combine in-person, synchronous digital and asynchronous delivery can offer increased flexibility, allowing students to make choices about how they learn, consume content, and acquire knowledge. Such an approach can also widen access and support students with diverse needs, such as neurodiverse students or hearing disabled students, allowing them to access content in a way that benefits them at times that suit them or even to re-watch recorded lectures. A September 2021 article from the QAA concludes that whether educational models are online, blended, hybrid, or hyflex, the common element in all of these is 'learning' and making that experience a high-quality, meaningful, and fulfilling one for students remains the central priority.[11]

18. Mature students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, who are juggling work and study, or have caring responsibilities, are more likely to desire, choose and benefit from courses offered online or through a form of blended delivery. Research by TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education),

published in April 2021, found that mature students prefer courses with shorter commutes and HEIs that offer additional support such as supplemental academic support, a particular staff member assigned to them, and out-of-hours classes.[12] With its mission to widen access and participation, and a clear understanding of its students' needs and preferences, Regent College London already offers a blended three competency delivery model, flexible timetables and personalised support structures, and is committed to adapting its approaches to best meet the needs of diverse student bodies, in the UK and globally.

19. In addition to the benefits seen in widening access to learning, there have been other notable benefits in terms of the way assessments are organised and delivered. A March 2022 article by Universities UK, for example, notes that teaching staff have reported 'being able to focus more on supporting students' learning, designing assessments with real-world and workplace scenarios and tasks, instead of exercises in memory as traditional exams often have been.' The article also highlights a January 2021 survey from Birkbeck, University of London that found 92% of respondents would prefer online or a combination of online and in-person examinations in the future.[13]

20. More widely, research undertaken during the pandemic has led to notable progress in our understanding of the online teaching and learning experience for both students and teachers. Topics have included, for example, developing an inclusive approach to encouraging students to turn on their cameras,[14] facilitating open online discussions[15] and promoting engagement online using an adapted fishbowl strategy.[16]

21. Whilst there have been clear and tangible benefits, digital online and blended delivery in higher education comes with challenges that the sector will need to respond to. One of those challenges is that of digital poverty and need for greater student support.[17] Another challenge is that of limited face-to-face interaction resulting in loneliness and other mental health issues, and in weaker development of soft skills, which remain critical in the job market.[18]

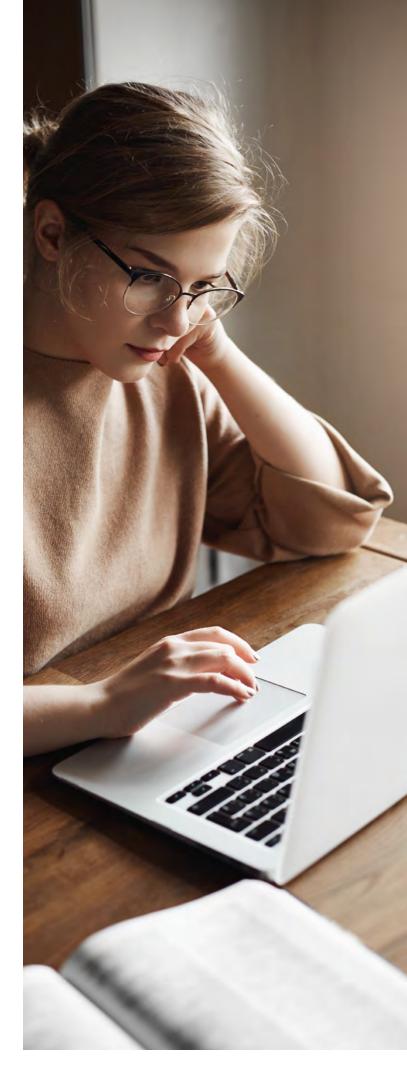# Upskilling and lifelong learning through digitally enabled Higher Education

22. The post-pandemic world presents numerous opportunities to reimagine and reshape UK HE in ways that meet diverse students' needs and enables UK higher education to retain its relevance, impact, and world-leading status.[19] For centuries, universities have been the physical places to acquire higher knowledge and learning. The internet, digital technology, and a consumer preference for on-demand content, is transforming how people acquire knowledge and skills, and higher education must adapt in order to better serve a changing world.

23. The UK government's Lifelong Learning Entitlement recognises that formal learning isn't just for young people as it seeks to support access to higher education for mature students.[20] Set to roll out in 2025, the entitlement will provide a loan entitlement that is equal to four years of post-18 education, which can be used over an individual's lifetime. It can be used at both colleges and universities for either full time or modular study.[21]

24. Hundreds of thousands of people in the UK lost their jobs due to Covid-19 and are now seeking to upskill and reskill in order to re-enter the workforce.[22] This is the time for UK HE to step up and embrace the change and flexibility necessary to meet these learning needs. There is a need to reconsider whether the norm of three-year degrees is truly necessary and whether all or certain modules within a programme truly fit together.

25. It is clear that digital delivery models (fully online or blended) are likely to be at the heart of any successful drive to deliver meaningful lifelong learning and upskilling programmes. Such approaches will need to be sensitive to the needs, availability, and competing responsibilities of a mature, non-traditional demographic.

26. A 2022 research report by Future Learning, for example, found that 81% of respondents reported that completing an online course had helped them to change career paths. They note that (with the exception of over 55s) other age groups show a positive preference for online or blended approaches, which are additionally popular with students from minority ethnic backgrounds and with women. In addition, the report indicates that learners prefer online courses to other ways of learning for several reasons. Among these reasons are the freedom to learn at a pace that suits them, the ability to learn from home and overall flexibility.[23]

Short courses and micro-credentials are perfectly positioned for digital delivery

27. While the pandemic forced higher education providers to move online initially as an emergency measure, the overall successful shift to an online delivery model revealed that there is enormous potential to exploit the flexibility of such delivery for a more flexible learning experience.

28. Shorter courses delivered as a subscription-based model (e.g. the Netflix-Style Tuition Model at Boise State University)[24] or as micro-credentials (such as those delivered by the Open University in the UK)[25] are an early glimpse at models of the future of learning in which students can more flexibly attain specific skills and competencies to suit their specific needs, in particular in relation to their career goals and ambitions.[26] These are particularly well-suited to fully digital or blended delivery models.

29. Micro-credentials, in particular, offer an alternative to traditional qualifications, allowing people to target certain areas of learning without spending years on a degree. These short courses are a key avenue for upskilling and reskilling and keeping up to date with emerging and best practices in a particular field.[27] Moreover, given their flexibility, micro-credentials can be designed and delivered by a variety of providers in many different formal, non-formal and informal learning settings (and through digital or blended channels).[28]

30. In the UK, there is an increasing understanding of the value of such short courses and the need to deliver flexible education programmes, alongside work and other responsibilities, that provide an avenue to develop the skills and knowledge that the economy needs. To this end, the OfS ran a challenge competition in mid-2021 to fund projects delivering short courses in HE aimed to support the UK government's Lifelong Learning Entitlement.[29]

Balancing supply, demand and changing preferences for learning in Higher Education

31. Despite the global pandemic, the demand for UK HE has remained strong.[30] Data from UCAS (the UK-based organisation whose main role is to operate the application process for British universities) highlight an increase in applications to HE institutions from 2020 to 2021. A record high 20.9% of students who were eligible for Free School Meals entered HE in 2021 and more than 67,000 mature students aged 25 and older obtained a place in an HE institution.

32. Going forward, the sector will face questions and challenges as a result of the pandemic, such as ongoing discussions around charging full fees against more limited in-person delivery, as many universities make the decision to keep lectures online permanently.[31] In response to lessons learnt from the pandemic, and economic pressures, some higher education providers are already making the shift from spending on physical facilities to spending on digital infrastructure and e-resources.[32]

33. In spite of sometimes seismic changes over the last two years, the HE sector remains essential to local and national economic recovery post pandemic. By recovery, we do not 'mean a return to old ways, but making the UK more equal, more sustainable and healthier.'[33] UK HE has an opportunity to be a key player in this respect, through increasing collaboration and forging new and improved partnerships with local businesses and industry.

34. As the world enters a post-pandemic era, the UK also has a golden opportunity to reinforce its reputation as a world-leader in higher education. As global markets and learning re-open to international students, it is well-placed to create delivery models based on digital and blended learning, sustainability and internationalisation.[34]

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