After COVID-19: Can Quality Teaching be Sustained?

by

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

In Short

- COVID-19 forced higher education to convert to distance operations at short notice. Establishing a 'new normal' during successive pandemic waves will be equally challenging.
- Institutions will continue to offer face-to-teaching and distance learning. They need strategies for ensuring quality instruction in both modes.
- Think of distance and online learning as a three-legged stool. One leg is good learning material, both synchronous and asynchronous; another is student support and guidance; the third is organisation and logistics. If any leg breaks the student falls (fails).

Introduction

COVID-19 has 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 will be even more demanding.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) will find it harder than than schools to define their 'new normal'. Most educationists believe that classroom teaching is the better option for schoolchildren and schools attract their pupils mainly from their local region.

Neither factor applies to HEIs. Over 50 distance teaching universities, often called 'open universities', already provide quality higher education to millions of students worldwide, while many campuses operate substantial distance learning operations alongside their classroom teaching. Furthermore, HEIs recruit their 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'.

We cannot forecast what HE's new normal will be. Until there are therapies and/or vaccines for COVID-19, both staff and students will be wary of a full return to pre-2020 classroom teaching.

Indeed, by limiting the numbers that can assemble in the same room, some governments are setting *de facto* constraints on teaching methods. Faced with this uncertainty, many universities will continue their emergency online teaching arrangements of early 2020 into the later months of 2020. Such are the decisions of the California State University system and McGill University, Canada, to cite just two North American HEIs. The UK's Cambridge University will hold all lectures online until summer 2021.

Our purpose here is to examine how evolving into a new normal will affect the quality of higher education. Emergency distance teaching operations had to be arranged in 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'.

Various threads will weave together into the judgments that stakeholders will make about the quality of HE in future. To disentangle these we outline three possible scenarios. The two most likely include ongoing recourse to online and/or distance learning (ODL), so we ask whether the determinants of quality in ODL are the same as for classroom teaching. If not, how do they differ? We conclude by offering advice to HEIs that will be using ODL more than they have previously.

<u>Three scenarios</u>

HEIs are grappling with difficult decisions about their futures in uncertain times. Three scenarios are prominent.

The first – and least plausible – scenario is that the pandemic subsides, or is neutralised by a widely available cure/vaccine, before the end of 2020. Most HEIs would then return, with relief, to organising teaching for the rest of 2020-21 on their pre-2020 model. Classroom teaching would be the main vehicle for instruction, although the more successful ODL initiatives stimulated by the pandemic might continue in some form.

The second scenario assumes that the restrictions imposed by public health authorities to cope with COVID-19 will preclude a return to full classroom teaching before the end of the 2020-21 academic year.

The third scenario sees a more uncertain future. With no sure cure or vaccine in prospect, COVID-19 returns in new waves at different times across the world. Assuming that governments manage these waves by imposing restrictions on movements and gatherings, HEIs will require flexible arrangements that allow them to switch from classroom teaching to ODL solutions and back again at short notice.

These latter scenarios would present HEIs with two challenges. First, students gave a mixed reception to the emergency ODL teaching that they were offered during the early pandemic. Typical is a survey in Hong Kong, which '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).

HEIs that rely heavily on international students and those studying outside their own region within their own country face a second challenge. Australia provides a striking example. Monash University, by far Australia's largest, faces a revenue shortfall of AU$350 million (US$226 million) in 2020 because fewer students are coming from overseas. In large countries like the United States more students may elect to enrol in their local universities. State-funded universities try to keep the best local students in the state, knowing that many who leave will never return. Now, as the pandemic devastates the economy of a divided nation, the efforts of these colleges to reverse years of brain drain are seeing some success.

In the post-COVID-19 world students will ask more insistent questions about the quality of the teaching they receive and the job prospects their programs offer. Although most students were less than satisfied with their experience during the pandemic, many HEIs assume that a hybrid of ODL and classroom teaching will continue into the future.

We give a brief summary of the history of ODL as background to assessing its quality.

Quality in ODL

Distance education is often called 'online education' in the rich world; many there are thus 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 priests and congregations of the new churches. To judge by the subsequent expansion of the Christian church, this use of distance education has been very successful.

Since Saint Paul's time distance education has evolved by adopting successive new technologies, often rather promptly. 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 student feedback, which remains a vital feature of quality distance education. In the 20th century, correspondence education began to be offered in public school systems and 1938 saw the founding conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE), now the International Council for Open and Distance Education.

Starting in the 19th century, a few HEIs also offered correspondence courses. The University of London (1858), Queen's University, Canada (1889), and the University of New England (1950), Australia, were the first HEIs to offer ODL on their respective continents. For most of the 20th century, however, correspondence education was provided primarily by commercial

organisations. Although the ICCE provided some professional support to its members, their offerings were largely unregulated. This changed after Mitford (1970) published a devastating exposé of a large US correspondence school. She later described entertainingly how it stimulated a flurry of regulation of the correspondence education industry (Mitford, 1979).

Meanwhile, the most significant 20th century development in ODL occurred in 1969 with the creation of the UK Open University (UKOU) (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 by student enrolment, and set a new benchmark for quality in ODL. Some 50 jurisdictions followed the UK's lead and established their own open universities.

For Harold Wilson, UK Prime Minister from 1964-70 and from 1974-76, the creation of the UKOU was a personal priority. To guard it from damaging decisions by the University Grants Committee, which determined the funding of the UK's older universities and might have liked to strangle this radical innovation at birth, the Wilson government funded the UKOU directly. This arrangement continued until the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, which was a comprehensive reform of UK higher education. The Act abolished the existing 'binary system', allowing polytechnics to assume the title of university, and introduced the Higher Education Funding Council for England, with separate councils to fund higher education in Scotland and Wales.

This Act had a major impact on the UKOU. As well as setting it in the same legislative framework as all other UK HEIs, it became effectively the UK's only 'national' university, able to receive funds from each of the new funding councils. Other HEIs received funds from only one of these councils: England, Scotland or Wales.

I was involved in the implementation of the 1992 Act, having joined the UKOU as vice-chancellor in 1990. The UKOU had the country's largest student body and, because it operated exclusively through distance education, its economic structure was different from that of the other HEIs. During negotiations about its integration into the provisions of the Act, the UKOU argued, successfully, that the new councils should create funding mechanisms and quality assurance frameworks that could apply in the same way to all HEIs.

The UKOU developed rapidly during the 1990s, growing its student numbers from 100,000 to 200,000 and achieving excellent ratings in the many quality audits and assessments conducted during the decade. A program of teaching quality assessment (universal subject review) that ran from 1992 to 2002 is of particular interest (Jackson & Bohrer, 2010).

Six areas were considered by the review teams and the outcome in each subject was scored on a scale from 1 to 4. The same system applied to the campus universities and the UKOU:

• 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 total of 24, was treated as a quantitative measure of the quality of the HEI's teaching of that subject and eagerly reported by the press. The comments of Jackson & Bohrer are relevant to ensuring the quality of ODL post-COVID-19: 'the subject review …raised awareness about quality and standards and provided a stimulus for enhancement activity. Preparation for a review visit was a good opportunity to raise awareness of institutional and subject level policies for teaching, learning and assessment. For the academic staff involved it was also a chance to learn about academic practice in other institutions'.

This program of subject-by-subject teaching quality review ended in 2001, following the completion of a full cycle of all academic disciplines. Its termination was hastened by 'complaints from influential institutions concerned about the cost of the review process and the relatively limited value of the outcomes'. My own observation was that these 'complaints from influential institutions' (code for research-intensive universities) had little to do with cost. These HEIs saw 'relatively limited value' in reviews of teaching quality by subject because the results did not correlate with the research quality assessments on which they preferred to base their reputations.

After the program finished in 2001, the press published a table of the aggregated results for all subjects in nearly 100 English HEIs. The UKOU placed 5th, coming after Cambridge, Loughborough, the London School of Economics and York, but above Oxford, Imperial College and University College London. In this same period, when the UK authorities took an intense interest in HE quality assessment on many dimensions, the UKOU also came top in national surveys of student satisfaction several years running. The UKOU is a purely distance-teaching institution, so these results demonstrated that ODL can deliver high quality teaching and great student satisfaction. What can other HEIs learn from this as they prepare for more use of ODL post-COVID-19?

Making a success of ODL after COVID-19

We offer five recommendations to HEIs planning to continue using ODL as the COVID-19 pandemic tails off.

First, accept that the emergency move into ODL sparked by COVID-19 does not provide a sufficient basis for success in its long-term use. In his blog, 'Crashing into online learning', Bates (2020a) reported on how HEIs in various countries moved to ODL in response to COVID-19, concluding that, 'the results are not pretty'. For the future, he advises, '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, most HEI staff know less about ODL than they think, which nourishes skepticism. They should inform themselves about it properly.

Third, decisions about using ODL depend not only on the state of the pandemic, but also on students' level of study. One size does not fit all and Bates (2020b) provides advice on choices.

Fourth, the design of post-COVID ODL programs should take a holistic approach to quality. The six headings used in England's teaching quality assessment program do this: 1. Curriculum design, content and organisation; 2. Teaching, learning and assessment; 3. Student progression and achievement; 4. Student support and guidance; 5. Learning resources; and 6. Quality management and enhancement.

This list makes no reference to technology, although that was the major preoccupation for many HEIs that '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.

Bates' (2015) magisterial work, 'Teaching in a Digital Age', is a vital resource. Also helpful, for some technical aspects of online teaching and learning, are two guides to quality in online learning (Butcher & Wilson-Strydom, 2013) and in post-traditional online learning (MOOCs, etc.) (Butcher & Hoosen, 2014).

Finally, think of quality ODL as a student sitting on a three-legged stool. The first leg is learning materials; the second is student support; the third is organisation and logistics. If any of these legs breaks, the student will fall (fail). During the early emergency period of COVID-19, most HEIs tried to provide all three functions through synchronous communication on platforms like Zoom. This is neither effective nor sustainable. HEIs intending to continue with ODL must build stools with three strong legs.

First, they should develop learning materials, drawing on the rich pool of Open Educational Resources, for students to work with either synchronously or asynchronously.

Second, any HEI using ODL at scale must appoint numerous tutors/mentors to support the students. The planners of the Open University of Nigeria, for example, were advised to spend at least 30% of the institution's recurrent budget on tutoring of various kinds.

Third, quality ODL demands impeccable organisation and logistics. In face-to-face settings informal contacts among students and staff usually get problems addressed. Where such contacts rely on IT systems, HEIs must ensure that the systems are always in working order with back-ups.

Conclusion

These are tough times for HEIs. In early 2020 most 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 the education that resulted.

The future presents HEIs with starker challenges, but with more time to prepare for them. Against a background of shaky finances, unpredictable student demand, and the imperative of re-launching stalled research, many HEIs now expect to use ODL in their teaching for the long haul. We trust that the ideas and experience presented here will help them face successfully a future that many find unwelcome and for which most are unprepared.

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