

Brave new world - what could higher education look like 5 years on from the coronavirus?

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This pandemic crisis is a watershed moment in higher education and could very well be the 'switch' which leads to change in how we function in HE. The decisions made last week to close schools, colleges and universities and cancel exams will require us to rethink, act and deliver what we do in a much more flexible way. It also provides the opportunity to change out of date practices no longer fit for 21 century education.

We have a whole generation of secondary and tertiary students who will not be obtaining their qualifications through the traditional qualification process, one which has been drilled into them is all important and critical to their future success. In one understandable announcement by Government their long term comfort rug of expectation was pulled from beneath their feet. Below are some thoughts on what change could occur within our sector in the coming years by jumping to March 2025 and reflecting on how we (could) move forward.

March 2025

It is five years to the month that the coronavirus became a pandemic, and we were globally thrown into chaos. Most schools and colleges were closed with only 2 days notice. Some remained open to enable children of frontline workers to be looked after. GCSEs, A-levels, and university examinations were cancelled leaving an entire generation with uncertainty about their future. Students felt lost, let down and angry because they could not complete their studies, experience their educational rite of passage, and obtain the all-important qualifications for which they have worked so hard. Although a 'fair' process of triangulating a range of results to provide GCSE, A-level and BTEC students with grades was implemented, many felt cheated.

Universities stopped face to face teaching although did not close entirely. However, if ever there was a time to highlight how slow moving higher education could be in adapting and having effective communication systems in place (<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-should-providers-be-communicating-about-covid-19/>), it was in the first few days and weeks after the Government's announcement. It also challenged HE to think about assumptions we made about our new and current students.

As soon as the announcement to stop face to face teaching in universities was made, thoughts immediately moved to how we could deliver teaching online. However, this was harder than expected and problematic for many academics as traditional teaching methods such as face to face teaching had been the focus. Staff were frustrated in not being able to support their students and although many had the skills to move quickly to online teaching, many did not so could not. Assumptions that all students could afford to access the VLE off campus soon became apparent was not the case. There was also recognition that there were insufficient licences for staff and students to access desktop apps from home. And assumptions that students were confident with technology and had ability to engage with lecture capture without problems proved to be inaccurate (<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/delivering-teaching-using-live-streaming-and-lecture-capture/>).

Almost immediately, many universities converted conditionals into unconditional offers fueling further the debate about the admissions system in the UK. Although each student in higher education had a proportion of their fees refunded for the year by Government, it did not reduce their discontent or anger.

However, out of adversity and a passion by educators for their students and their learning, came creativity and a genuine desire to change how things were done in our education systems. In higher education this was very noticeable, and importantly, a closer working relationship between secondary and tertiary education occurred resulting in greater awareness of the study behavior, experience, and expectations of one another on their students. This enabled better bridging of the study experience for students between the different sectors.

Five years on from the coronavirus, secondary but especially higher education has dramatically evolved and moved forward our delivery. Below are some examples of where notable changes have occurred.

Entry qualifications

A-levels, which 3 years prior to 2020 had moved from coursework and exams to primarily exams, reverted to a mix. Other entry qualifications also increased their diversity of assessment. The mixed method has proven to be fairer to all students because whether a student does better with coursework or exams, a level playing field across all students is achieved. Removal of the exam being the primary method of qualification award has removed the cliff edge from many capable students who do not perform as well under examination conditions. If we find ourselves in a similar situation to 2020, the mixed assessment approach has also enabled a fairer prediction of results.

Other changes to GCSE and A-level included the adoption of university processes such as examinations being double marked, all boundary grades reviewed, and the scale of grades reduced.

(<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/07/16/students-will-be-given-more-than-1-5-million-wrong-gcse-as-and-a-level-grades-this-summer-here-are-some-potential-solutions-which-do-you-prefer/>). This resulted in less appeals and reduced the stress of students whose appeal would impact on their progression to university.

UK admissions process

The UK admission system was being reviewed at the time of the crisis due to the increase in institutions using unconditional offers. It included consideration of adopting a post qualification admission (PQA) system as used in other countries. Following the closure of all secondary educational establishments, many universities immediately started converting conditional offers to unconditional drawing huge criticism. However, a PQA system was not recommended by the Review Panel but the requirement for all applications to have a contextual offer was introduced. This required every application to be read and where there were borderline applications, interviews and portfolio review had to be undertaken.

In order to deal with this approach, many universities started to move away from the semesterised modular structure to a year-long one enabling staff to have enough time between January and March, when the bulk of the applications hit most universities, to fully be able to review them. Also, with the increasing number of applications due to the rise in the 18 year old population, admissions processes which had been previously centralised to save time in getting offers out and money, were decentralised back to faculty/school level. This enabled more effective review of applications, a faster turnaround of contextual offers and a reduction in 'land grab' unconditional offers. There was more adoption of digital open days providing applicants who could not travel to the university (whether due to distance or cost) the chance to engage in a meaningful manner and widen their options. This was particularly helpful to widening participation applicants.

Pre-arrival, arrival and orientation and induction to study

There was the realisation that the bulk of university entrants whose examinations were cancelled, had limited experience in revising for and sitting examinations (<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/coronavirus-confirmation-and-clearing/>). They also had been out of the education system for over 6 months before they started their studies resulting in a loss of routine, a loss of undertaking the discipline of study, and the non-utilisation of the skills they had acquired. It was also acknowledged that many schools did not have VLEs so although student maybe 'social' digital natives, they were not necessarily 'learning' digital natives.

As a result, the first 6 months of level 4 study was heavily scaffolded and students were given experience of the main assessment methods they would undertake formally (<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/hung-up-on-experience-expectations-entry/>). For those students entering directly into level 5 and 6, a month long orientation to the university which included an introduction to their relevant level of study was undertaken by many universities to help them adjust and settle into their studies quickly. All were given one to one peer support and a personal tutor. The move to year-long courses with a mix of assessment had many benefits for both students and staff. The most notable being able to revisit difficult subjects instead of having to jam the teaching into a 12-week period which could be problematic with semesterised modularisation.

University assessment and use of VLEs

Within days of universities announcing that they would be stopping face to face teaching and assessments, a wealth of advice, support and materials was provided free by leading experts including Brown and Sambell (<https://sally-brown.net/>) on rapid alternatives to face-to-face assessment, and via national forums such as the Spinnaker Jiscmail group. The crisis led to a burst of online creativity and activity (<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/we-are-all-precarious-now-can-technology-help-us/>).

As a result of assessments needing to be changed, there was a requirement for all university courses in future to include online learning and assessment components throughout the course, and action plans for alternative assessments in the event of an incident like a pandemic occurring again became part of the validation process. All academic staff were provided with the relevant training to develop and adapt assessments. Tech such as Panopto for lecture capture and zoom for virtual seminars became common place. No longer was the lecture seen as pivotal in recording student 'engagement' in their learning, but the focus became monitoring attendance and engagement in seminars and workshops where it has long been acknowledged the real learning takes place. These changes enabled the participation of more part-time students, who often study alongside fulltime, as they could choose when they watched the lectures. It provided them with much more flexibility to undertake study. The benefits for all students are that they can revisit the lecture before the small group learning session.

Staged learning qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate taught level

Covid19 led the introduction of transition qualifications at undergraduate and Postgraduate level. It had been argued for a while at PGT level (<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/time-to-remaster-postgraduate-masters-study/>) and it was raised in the Auger Review for UGs. Instead of qualifications such as HNC's, HND's, PG Certificates and Diplomas only awarded as exit qualifications when a student was unable to proceed, they became a transition qualification. The fear that students would withdraw after completing one or two years instead of continuing onto the final year did not happen. In fact, it improved retention across all levels of study as it boosted student confidence and provided them with a choice on whether to continue.

NSS/PTES national surveys

The NSS was not cancelled or set aside in 2020 so it was not a surprise that after weeks of strikes followed by university closure due to Coronavirus, that the anger and frustration of students came through in the results. Many demanded that the full year of fees be refunded. The review of NSS and PTES university surveys that was taking place when the pandemic happened, recommended a change to the collection period. NSS finally changed to post study and was collected in July and August which was soon after the results were published. This provided time for final year students to reflect on their experience post study rather than being harassed during the climax of their course. PTES was collected in the October and November for the previous September/October starters. Previously, PGT students had to complete the survey 5-6 months into their studies and often January starters were often overlooked.

The result was metrics across the board improved boosting the morale of course teams. This enabled them to be more creative in their delivery without fear of the metrics dictating their approach and them being forced to take the safe approach. Although initially NSS completion rates were lower, university alumni teams became central to the collection process and the added benefit was that it dramatically improved engagement with graduating students.

Mental health and wellbeing

The University Mental Health Charter (<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-university-mental-health-charter-is-here/>) which was a sector wide creation launched 3 months prior to the shutdown (December 2019) proved to be a fortuitous initiative. It provided a framework on which institutions were able to develop effective, institutional joined up approaches on support, advice, and guidance in dealing with mental health and wellbeing amongst students and staff. It was invaluable in helping put together a communication strategy to deal with the anxiety, stress, and concern as a result of the coronavirus.

A crisis brings out the best and worst of human behavior as well evolve or retrench thinking. Thankfully, higher education not only put its best foot forward but chose to embrace change.