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Pandemic and its impact on teaching and learning: What are the UK universities holding on to?

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought profound changes to teaching and learning in higher education with an abrupt shift from face-to-face teaching to emergency online learning. To minimise the impact on the student experience, universities responded with a set of emergency e-learning protocols and guidance, including temporary regulatory changes. Our study examines the web-based response statements of ten UK universities to understand the short- and long-term implications of the COVID-19 forced changes. Conventional content analysis was used to achieve a descriptive qualitative presentation of the arrangements for teaching and learning. The findings highlight the different authority positions adopted by institutions and characterise the apportioning of the responsibility for teaching and learning to the different stakeholders with responsibility for student learning. The study emphasises the short- and long-term impact of emergency online learning on academic integrity, practice and quality. Implications for institutional policy and academic development are explored.

Full paper

Introduction: The impact of COVID-19 on the quality of teaching

and learning in the higher education (HE) sector has been significant (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2020). Globally, Multirank (2020) reports that before the pandemic only a third of the universities around the world provided fully online courses and the rest were engaged in digital catch-up (Watermeyer et al., 2020). In this paper, we examine the student-facing teaching and learning protocols and guidance that document the responses to online learning of ten traditionally campus-based UK universities, as they transitioned in the two months following the COVID-19 outbreak. The paper explores the universities positioned themselves as online providers, and how this move may contribute to the rethinking of distance online education in UK universities.

Method: Ten UK universities which were positioned within the top 50 universities in the Times Higher Education Student survey were chosen. One practical advantage of using the ranking was that it measured institutions' teaching and learning environments and was underlain by 14 individual performance metrics. Conventional content analysis was used, taking an inductive approach to identify patterns in universities' web-based COVID-19 emergency protocols and guidance for online learning in the Spring/Summer of 2020 following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in the UK (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Hsieh & Shannon, 2015).

Results: Three themes emerged which characterised the universities authority positions and the underlying representations of academic quality in emergency remote education, as follows:

Perceived academic quality –The positioning of universities in the immediate distance education phase was heavily anchored in statements about their preparedness for emergency remote teaching and learning and sustained quality, value and integrity of their courses.

Alternative assessments – Transition forced changes to assessment formats which included adaptations of current assessments. At the programme level, models of assessment appeared to be suitable for online learning to varying degrees, with institutions favouring changing specific assessment formats for planned assignments.

Axis of responsibility – Responsibility was apportioned to either the

university or learner for certain elements of the teaching and learning progress. Universally, teaching was identified as the responsibility of the university, and responsibility for decision-making regarding modules and programmes was communicated. Universities took responsibility for providing a teaching offering which met the needs of learners and safeguarded their well-being during the emergency remote education period. In contrast, learning was the responsibility of the student with an active and interactive element threaded through statements.

Discussion: The imposition of lockdown in the UK which left HEIs with no clear timeframe for reinstating face-to-face teaching, highlighted a critical need for institutions to reassure students and the sector of sustained academic quality and the legitimacy of their degrees during times of transition and crisis. Educational value appeared strongly dependent on positive perceptions about the maintenance of academic quality and its relationship to employability. Following the transition to online learning, rather than assure the continuation of a research-intensive learning environment and teaching process, institutions' focus shifted to the outcome of the research-intensive learning model and employability, and the use of knowledge, rather than its production.

In a quest for legitimacy in the field of research-intensive universities, institutions' actions tended to rest within socially accepted boundaries of practice, upholding established processes and avoiding deviation. Institutions effectively strengthened their positions as an effective strategy to shield them from competition from more the distinctive approaches taken by post-1992 universities (Fumasoli et al., 2020). There were notable exceptions to this with one institution stating that teaching would remain online the following academic year (2020-21) and that the teaching would remain the same i.e. not innovate, simply transition online.   Given the institution's strong reputation, this supported the distinctive direction. Further, the findings indicate that academic quality was foregrounded by institutions following lockdown. Mashadi et al. (2008) assert that quality in higher education has a strategic role in the positioning of an institution. It is evident that in times of crisis, the validation of academic quality is best achieved through a focus on quality assurance of assessment procedures rather than quality

enhancement of teaching.

Concluding thoughts: Aside from highlighting the long-term implications of the COVID-19 for teaching and learning, assessment processes and maintenance of academic quality, the central concern of all universities in times of emergencies appears to be the students and their learning as opposed to research, which is indeed a welcome conclusion considering the literature is fraught with evidence which indicates teaching is often considered less important compared to research in higher education.

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