

The Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education

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Image: FSB Marketing/Microsoft Designer with prompts for COVID and higher education

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In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise and although the worst is over – the legacy of the pandemic is not. This has caused an extraordinary interruption of activities across all sectors on a global scale. The closure of academic face-to-face life led to a transition to online classes. This in turn had an impact on student engagement and created ongoing habitual changes. This blog examines how COVID-19 has affected student

engagement in higher education for both students and institutions.

Considering the shift towards a virtual and distance learning mode, the most crucial aspect to contemplate is the transformation in the learning environment. This change has led to reduced social interaction and habits that have had a considerable impact on the health and social well-being of individuals. However, it is essential to determine the severity and duration of these impacts.

Moreover, the impact of increased screen time on physical and cognitive abilities could not be ignored. The significant impact on student engagement due to the contrasting access and affordability of technology cannot be ignored. Recent research has shed light on the complexity of factors that affect student engagement (see Mosleh et al., 2022). As student engagement is impacted, it is equally important to adapt the policies and strategies to engage. This is significant in student engagement enhancement and improvement of the outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected learning – on a global scale.

The transition to distance learning was swift and exceptional, as we moved from conventional methods to online and remote learning. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, this pandemic has motivated organisations to adopt innovative approaches to education, including the integration of technology. These approaches have long-term advantages for learning and for the future of higher education:

Transition to Online Learning

In addition to all of the measures in place to control the spreading of the virus, all education campuses had to close doors. All activities were shifted to online/ remote learning. As much of the population was not customers per se of the virtual world, the transition was challenging for both

educators and students. This adaptation required transferable skills, which had to be provided through additional training. Across the world, lecturers had to be trained to use new technologies, including software and programs. Moreover, students had to change their lifestyles in order to adapt to remote learning (Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, and Sethi, 2020).

The interaction between lecturers and students needed strong additional socio-ecological adaptation in addition to the ongoing financial austerity. The livelihood at work and at home was impacted because of the unprecedented circumstances. The changes imposed on students had an impact on the education experience. It is important to acknowledge the burden on different aspects of life including emotional wellbeing, health in general, and private life as well. It was thus important to consider inclusive teaching and learning approaches that address both internal and external stressors.

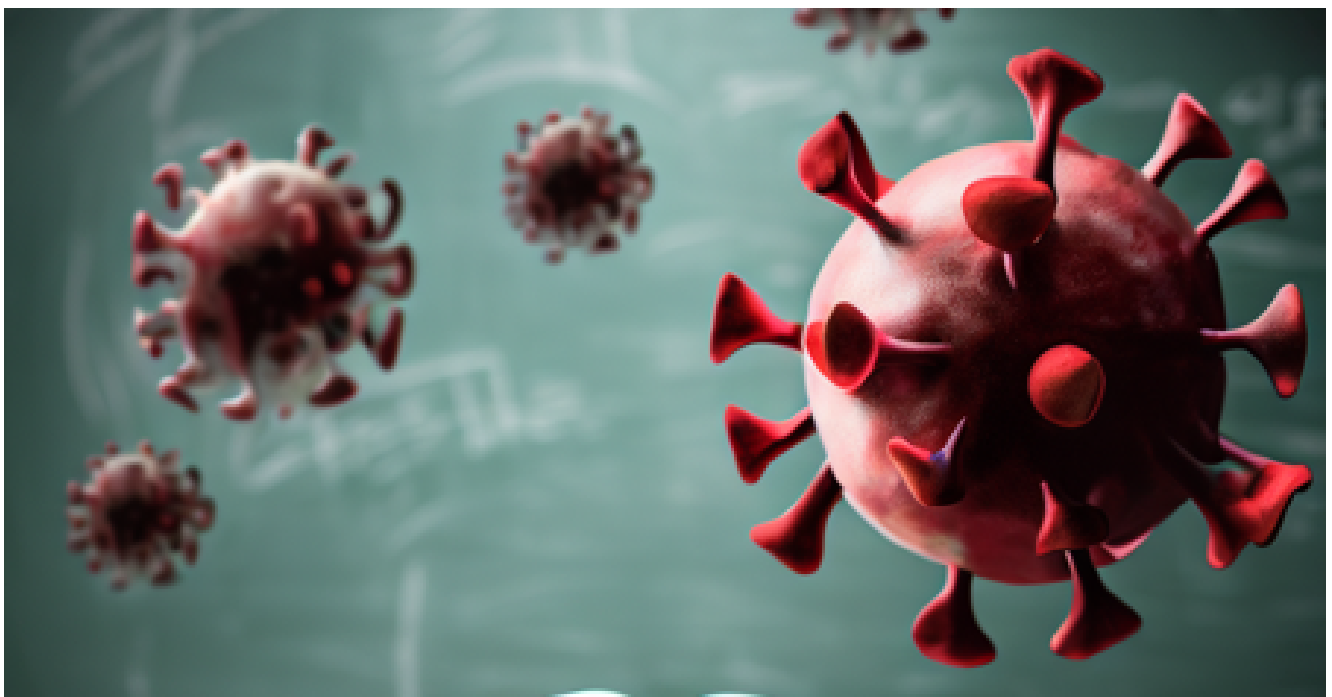


Image: FSB Marketing/Microsoft Designer with prompts for COVID and higher education

Digital Divide and Access to Technology

COVID-19 emphasised some of the disparities in access to technology. As we moved to online lessons, it was quickly evident that some students did not have easy access to needed technology such as computers, access to the internet, poor internet connections, or even other devices such as tablets or smartphones – and sometimes, even when they could manage to have one, they couldn't afford the software. This significantly prevented them from engaging fully in online learning.

Reduced Campus Life and Social Interaction

When students enrol on a course they engage in a journey that embraces all aspects of life – including social interaction. The campus per se is supposed to provide opportunities for social interactions to people from all different backgrounds and demographic diversities. However, the restrictions imposed by the pandemic have limited face-to-face interactions, extracurricular activities, and campus events. This in turn has affected students' sense of community and belonging. Moreover, it led to isolation and loneliness and the impacts and ripples are still felt today.

Mental Health and Well-being

The uncertainty of this crisis was overwhelming for many. The majority of the most vulnerable were isolated and all of the above took a toll on students' mental health and well-being. In addition to managing academic pressure, students had to deal with health concerns on their own and adapt to changes in daily routines (Chu and Li, 2022). Significant impact on

social isolation, virtual learning fatigue, and increase in stress and anxiety. Findings provide mixed reactions from students with different abilities (Mosleh et al., 2022). Several negative views on the impact on physical and mental health (Chu and Li, 2022 and Pelucio et al., 2022).

Numerous findings suggest that virtual classes were positive due to the flexibility and access to digital content (Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj and Sethi, 2020). In contrast, there were other significant drawbacks such as a lack of social interaction, and missing campus life with the benefit of resources which are otherwise freely accessible on the campus. Moreover, there was a lack of on-campus style support from the teaching staff due to technical challenges or student lack of engagement – it is easy to be hidden behind a screen. It is critical to highlight that despite the benefit of studying from home, attendance was still an issue for a number of reasons including poor connectivity, lack of resources or other home environment factors. Interestingly, a heightened number of absence rates were recorded although people were studying from their own homes (Shibu, 2021).

Enrolment and Financial Impact

The financial impact was unprecedented. As many organisations were forced to close their doors, especially in the hospitality sector, the majority of people lost jobs as some aspects of the jobs could not adapt to a remote working system. The financial implications for both institutions and students were significant. Some colleges and universities experienced a decline in enrolment due to uncertainties and economic hardships faced by families. And students struggled to keep up with the cost of studying.

Impact on International Students

The movement of people was restricted on a national and international scale. The immigration process was at a standstill, no one could get a visa let alone a student visa to travel, restrictions and visa uncertainties significantly affected international students. However, those who were already studying overseas could continue with their course using an online learning system. The same could not apply to new recruits. Many faced difficulties in returning to their home countries and new recruits could not join their chosen institutions.

Assessment and Evaluation

Changing from traditional assessment methods such as in-class exams and presentations, there was a need for imagination for online learning environments and assessment methods. This in turn had an impact on evaluation and grading procedures including student outcomes (Kwok, 2021). Although online assessments provide flexibility and instant feedback, the objectivity can be questionable as some of the software criteria can be less objective. Moreover, some of the disadvantages are interlinked with the same issues cited above including poor access to technology, inequality in the exam conditions, technical issues or connectivity of the internet, and the context of the students can also be incompatible with students' special needs.

Student engagement during pandemic

Student engagement in the UK is not a new issue. This concern has increased with the onset of COVID-19. As students and teachers had to adapt to the new norms of remote learning (Allen & Seaman 2020), a number of students were at risk of being left behind as e-learning continued. Despite different

strategies including a blended learning system, social distancing and quarantines did now help. By the end of 2020, findings suggest that student engagement was a major issue. During online lessons, students did not focus, it is highlighted that engagement by the teacher crossed the line with some incidence to do with student privacy in their home. To keep students engaged, some lecturers had to incorporate digital games in their lessons and this increased engagement.

Student engagement after the pandemic

Wu and Teets (2021) found that student engagement declined for underprivileged and minority students, with notable decreases in participation, motivation, and self-regulation. After the pandemic, certain habits were installed in student behaviours. Issues of logging in virtual classes mirrored with physical attendance on campuses. The pandemic has had a clear impact on mental health, as students have had limited exposure to their peers and academic social groups. The passion for waking up in the morning and catching public transport or commuting to campuses has not been ignited, according to the Ministry of Education in 2020.

As the pandemic continues to impact the world, it is becoming increasingly important to examine its long-term effects on higher education. The past few years have been marked by unprecedented challenges for educational institutions, forcing them to think outside the box and implement creative solutions to ensure the safety and well-being of students and staff.

From remote learning and hybrid models to increased emphasis on mental health services and safety protocols, colleges and universities have had to adapt quickly and effectively to the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic. While these changes have been necessary in the short term, it is critical to understand their potential long-term impact on higher

education.

As we look to the future, it is clear that the pandemic will continue to shape the way we approach higher education. It is therefore essential for institutions to continue refining their approaches and strategies to ensure that they are prepared to address any future disruptions that may arise. By doing so, we can ensure that all students receive the education they need and deserve, even in the face of unprecedented challenges – and their consequences.

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