Online teaching in Higher Education post-Covid

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Chair: The Rt Hon. the Lord Willetts FRS
                              Chair, The Foundation for Science and Technology

Speakers: Michelle Donelan MP
                              Minister of State for Universities

                              Dr Paul Feldman
                              Chief Executive, JISC

                              Professor Sarah Speight
                              Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Education and Student Expereience,
                              University of Nottingham

Audio/Video Files: www.foundation.org.uk/Events
Hash tag: # fstonlineteach .   Twitter Handle: @FoundSciTech .

MICHELLE DONELAN MP, began by recognising the very real challenges faced by universities, but also reflected that the technology of today had allowed universities to introduce online and blended learning in a way that would not have been possible 15 years ago. These innovations showed how flexible universities can be, and thanks to their hard work, that teaching and learning at the same or even higher quality was possible even in the pandemic. Universities had told her that they had made advancements in their use of technology which otherwise might have taken 10 years. A significant number of international students had not been able to travel to their UK universities yet due to Covid, but technology meant that there was no gap in their provision.

This use of technology would not end with the pandemic, with technology being increasingly used to enhance educational courses.

The Minister took the opportunity to thank the HE sector for their enormous efforts during the pandemic to preserve university teaching. The Government was committed to continuing education through the pandemic, and asked universities to continue to prioritise the student experience. Government has supported the sector via a stabilisation package and other funding. She hoped that the Higher Education Taskforce, established during the pandemic, would continue after it, with Government and the HE sector collaborating together.

Some of the new skills students and universities have learnt during the pandemic are themselves useful in business and the wider community, and she hoped that universities would continue to support businesses in their local communities. Skills were a key Government priority, hence the Lifetime Skills Guarantee and investments such as in creating Institutes of Technology.

The Minister noted that the forthcoming review of online teaching provision by Sir Michael Barber was likely to have important findings in taking this work forward.

PAUL FELDMAN introduced recent work JISC had carried out with the HE & FE sectors on the evolution of teaching. This fell into a timeline comprising dealing with the current academic year, preparing for 2021/22, building a vision for 2030, and planning for the future beyond then. The slides presented with the talk set out these in more detail.

In the current year, both lecturers and students identified advantages and disadvantages to online teaching, beyond the necessity brought about by

Covid. Advantages for students included convenience, ease of access and avoiding the need to travel, but isolation and lack of sociability were major negatives. The issue of digital poverty is also key to ensure all students can access their learning. Digital confidence amongst lecturers to use this technology has risen from 49% to 74% between March and October 2020.

For 2021/22, there were 4 key recommendations. Individual institutions needed to strategically plan the digital transformation of learning and teaching. The HE sector should develop new economic models for developing digital teaching materials. Universities should move to blended learning, with students co-designing curricula. And lastly, Government, universities and funders should combine to tackle digital poverty.

Thinking about 2030, the vision was a world class HE system attractive to students and spanning the virtual and physical worlds. There would by then have been a shift from lecturer led to student led learning, much more personalised.

Beyond 2030, AI technologies will transform how we teach, with personalised AI supporting students on an individual level. It could also see a move away from high-stakes exams to micro-credentials and lifelong learning. Online and on-campus education will work seamlessly together. Getting to this point, the Government could invest in a National Centre for AI in Tertiary Education.

PROFESSOR SARAH SPEIGHT began by describing some of the confusion in the terminology and debate about online education, confusion which has been picked up by the media, who represent online education as second class, easy and cheap. By contrast, blended learning involved purposeful pedagogy. It was neither better nor worse than in person teaching; what was needed was the best tools for the task. Well designed, it could address concerns such as student well-being, mental health, and motivation.

Learning and change are in the DNA of universities. They introduced virtual learning environments in the 1990s, and since then have adapted teaching to make use of new technologies. The value of video and audio in teaching was demonstrated by the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) from 2008, which fed back into mainstream teaching. The issue in 2020 has been the pace of change, with technologies and systems introduced quickly with no time for reflection or discussion. This has been hard for students too – they need more support learning how to learn in a blended environment – and the evidence is they feel they have more work than in face to face learning. The students of 2020 have shown rapid personal and professional growth in dealing with this situation.

Professor Speight went on to emphasise that collaboration, support and partnership were needed, as "we're all in this together". Students need space and time to become social learners, and they need to be able to engage with their tutors and peers as well as course content. Universities need to help them build online academic relationships. Social learning was compromised for staff too, who knew far fewer of their students by name than in face to face teaching. It was essential to tackle digital poverty (for both students and staff), and focus on wellbeing. This would need a partnership approach bringing together the HE sector, public sector research bodies and the Government. The upcoming review of the National Student Survey was an early opportunity to work together.

IN THE Q&A SESSION, the panel discussed the environment for online learning in universities. A strong baseline of technology-supported learning would develop, but all agreed that the campus experience would stay, not just for social interaction but also for learning. The lack of study space and a conducive environment for learning for some students ("study poverty") sat alongside access to digital tools and networks ("digital poverty"), and both needed addressing – space in campus can help with this even if teaching is online. The quality of education was determined primarily by the quality of the lecturers, supplemented by the quality of the technology used to support their teaching. From the Government's perspective, what was important was the quality, quantity and accessibility of teaching, not whether it was online or not. Universities had to give students as much information as possible about what they could expect, but realising the exceptional circumstances of 2020, including government decisions on lockdowns.

The panel also discussed where we might be in 5-10 years' time, whether the technology could lead to the disintermediation of universities. The view was that technology would help deliver learning that was better done at a students' own pace, allowing better use of contact time, where lecturers can build and challenge the critical thinking of students. High quality recorded teaching could be used multiple times for multiple purposes (e.g. for both undergraduate courses and life-long learning opportunities and CPD). Whilst not replacing the campus, opportunities could arise, for example, for some international students to take some of their courses in their home countries, or for students who were ill or unable to travel to have educational opportunities they might otherwise miss.

There was a question about the ethics of data, with universities potentially having extensive information about the online learning patterns of students. It was

noted that JISC and the National Union of Students had jointly developed a code of practice for learning analytics. The key was that students knew how such data would be used – having a conversation with them if it appeared that they were falling behind, for example, rather than policing them.

In conclusion, the panel said that the UK HE sector had risen to the challenges of 2020. Utilising these new technologies, and with more time to reflect and build once out of the immediate crisis, the UK can become a world leader in blended learning and deliver great outcomes for students.

Gavin Costigan

Further Reading:

JISC – Learning and Teaching Reimagined Initiative – Details, report and webinar
https://www.jisc.ac.uk/learning-and-teaching-reimagined

Code of Practice for Learning Analytics
https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/code-of-practice-for-learning-analytics