How e-learning has developed in the UK during 2020, and where it might go in the Future

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Overview of Talk

1. The story so far
2. Planning for 2020-21
3. Lasting impact

(Will include sector context and examples from Abertay)
The Story So Far....
• Friday March 13\textsuperscript{th} – we knew lockdown was coming but most universities hoped to teach for another week

• Situation seemed to explode over that weekend

• At Abertay, by Monday 16\textsuperscript{th} some staff were understandably reluctant to come to work and began teaching online

• No choice – everything went online Tuesday 17\textsuperscript{th} March

• Most universities went online that week at some point
  • Saw the writing on the wall
  • Immense pressure from staff and students

• Lockdown 23\textsuperscript{rd} March
Teaching

• Most institutions had a few weeks of teaching left

• Transition was to “Emergency remote teaching” – classroom pedagogy put online

• Not the best approach, but for the most part, it worked!

• Every institution had a VLE through which staff and students could continue to communicate yet stories emerged of students not hearing from their lecturers for weeks

• Overnight we told staff how to record to their PowerPoint presentations and it happened!

• Some staff even reported increased engagement (captive lockdown audience and no need to travel to campus were two reasons)
Great – so could everything carry on as normal?

- No!
- Immense amount to sort out
- Every part of University and home life changed overnight
- Mechanisms to ensure every member of staff is kept in touch with
- More of a challenge to track and support students
- Closing a campus is complex e.g. research experiments half way through which were lost, contents of fridges...

- PhD student experiments, and research staff experiments died overnight, sometimes losing months of work
- Ensuring staff and students had the right equipment to go online (could not help every student)
- Some students in dire circumstances – relatives with covid, lost jobs, childcare / home schooling… but most ok!
- Mental health issues - some students unable to find a private place to talk from home so had to phone during their one exercise per day but some hanging on for F2F
At the start – it felt like a dramatic change daily – new information to respond to, new problems - now slowed a bit but still rapid

• Everything you knew had gone upside down!
• The situation led to double the emails and workload – for all!
• For the most part video conferencing worked – internet glitches continue but in general, ok
• Etiquette developed e.g. mute when not talking.
Help and Surveys

• Overwhelmed by offers of help and surveys

• Government, Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, AdvanceHE, JISC, University groups e.g. UUK, MillionPlus and sub-groups etc. wanted to understand the challenges – some wanted to prove their value...

• Many meetings, repeated conversations on same issues in different fora

• Suppliers opened up their teaching platforms and applications for free to try and hook you in....

• Capacity less than normal to respond – had to be strategic – delete button was hit!
No Detriment Policy – Swept the Sector

• Concept is that students can’t achieve worse than they have done to-date in assessments

• Sector trends can provide immense pressure – once one University crumbles...

• But:
  • Universities at different points in their semesters with different amounts of completed assessment to fall back on
  • Many universities declared they had a no detriment policy but most did not, it was half way there – real sector variability, no consistent definition
  • Use of the words “No Detriment” probably helped keep students and the media on board
Abertay and No Detriment

- We held our ground – a full ND policy is a license for students, happy with their current grades, to put their feet up and do nothing
- Whilst the QAA were supportive of ND policies, they were also reaffirming we had to maintain standards and students must achieve the learning outcomes
- Under pressure from the Students Association and the Media, we introduced some leniency in our regs e.g. students could have a marginal fail

- Regulation reviews would normally be done over a period of months however:
  - Monday – brainstormed new regs with team of Deans
  - Tuesday – consulted senior staff and finalised proposal
  - Wednesday – Approval through committees – Chair’s action
  - Thursday – wrote the communications to staff and students
  - Friday – sent the comms and waited for the backlash 😊

- June – one hiccup realised the day before the first exam board......
- Student results look at least as good as normal!
Some academics relishing the saved commute time and churning out many research papers.

Others have time but are lacking motivation isolated at home.

Disaster for women 😞

Proportion of research papers accepted where the first author is female, by month of submission over past five years (THE)
Planning for 2020-21
Financial Impact – Students

- Scary predictions due to potential loss of international students
- Home numbers seem to be holding up in the sector but not evenly distributed
- Loss of accommodation income 2019-20 and 2020-21, plus conference income etc.
- Some universities facing a cliff edge

- Loans available
- Impact of international students – can they start teaching online if they need to? Will quarantine still be in place? Free quarantine accommodation?
- Bailouts will come with conditions e.g. mergers
- Some university accounts may not be signed off by auditors
Financial Impact - staff

• Temporary pay freezes
• Promotion freezes (or can have status but no money)
• Pay cuts by senior staff
• Pay cuts for all staff bar the lowest paid
• Almost immediate loss of hourly paid, zero hours contracts etc.

• Potential loss of a generation of researchers but new research loan money might help temporarily
• REF delay and damage to impact case studies
• Ability to cope is variable
• Classroom pedagogy put online was acceptable in an emergency but not for long!

• Need to do better but recognise can’t do top quality by end of the summer

• And staff still need to take annual leave during the summer!

• Staff need more time to develop materials for online – inevitably impact research and knowledge exchange activities

• Everyone issuing guidance how to teach online and training sessions
The Teaching Challenge

- Some resistance – want to keep what they know and deliver one hour online synchronous lectures – bad idea!
- Many staff apprehensive, scared of getting it wrong – encouraging team approach
- Lots of time spent online with groups of staff – reassuring, explaining, debating....
- IP policy, use of unapproved cloud technology, performance rights etc. all come to the fore
Traffic flow around campus and in classrooms

Masks, cleaning classrooms between use, sanitisers, air flow in rooms etc.

Breaks between classes to allow SD in lifts, toilets etc.

2 metres social distancing = ~15-25% capacity

1 metre social distancing = ~40-50+% capacity

Need an online version of everything for vulnerable students, carers etc.

Keeping students in the same room and in “Student Bubbles” – can only be done for core subjects
At 2m SD, Abertay can get 10% of its students on campus at any one time plus specialist computer labs and wet labs.

So every student can have half a day per week on campus (lots of duplication due to room sizes, staff and students shielding etc.) rest has to be online – challenge to make this a good experience with SD!

Schedule by (cognate) programme group and stage – given a morning or afternoon in a room.

What do you teach? Large classes will need multiple deliveries and this requires duplicate staff expertise or a challenging timetable for one person – risk!

Modules taught to more than one group e.g. electives have to be online

Identified the “essential” on campus teaching i.e. the stuff that can’t be done online – will need to prioritise if go into lockdown during the year.
Lasting Impact
Potential Benefits of Covid-19

• Staff have more confidence and more skills for online – maybe would have taken 10 years to achieve the same under normal circumstances

• More online programmes in general – some universities already announced it

• Hope the flipped lecture / flipped classroom remains to maximise campus use for interactive sessions

• You can teach online in ways you can’t in the classroom and vice versa e.g. simulations, personalisation, learning at your own pace.....

• Hope for a more blended approach to on campus teaching – enhanced by online – best of online and best of F2F

• But one size never fits all and you have to take the people with you!
The Future

• More flexible modes of study but can universities compete with existing quality online providers?

• How will the market change for learners now they have had this experience? Clearly relished by some, unpopular with others.

• What does it mean for partnerships, franchises, use of technology, including AI, going forward?

• How will people study in future? More JIT, upskilling / reskilling direct to workplace, stackable qualifications, will funding for credit accumulation happen? how support economic recovery / needs of businesses, increased competition

• Challenges of Brexit e.g. reduced EU students, increasing home competition, unlikely to participate in Horizon Europe impact of research on teaching....
Questions and Comments?

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