

Submission to the review of digital teaching and learning in English higher education during the coronavirus pandemic

About University Alliance

University Alliance (UA) is the voice of professional and technical universities. We represent large to mid-sized universities working at the heart of their communities. Alliance Universities work with industry and the professions to deliver the workforce of today and tomorrow through practical, skills-based teaching and learning and applied research.

Our members are:

- Anglia Ruskin University
- Kingston University
- Birmingham City University
- Leeds Beckett University
- University of Brighton
- Oxford Brookes University
- Coventry University
- Teesside University
- University of Greenwich
- University of South Wales
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of the West of England (Bristol)

What follows is a high-level submission to the Office for Students' review of digital teaching and learning which pulls together feedback from our members and collective reflection on the part of the UA Teaching and Learning Network in particular.¹ Our submission focuses on four areas:

- Key lessons learned from the shift to fully digital teaching and learning
- Effective practice and opportunities
- The future of digital teaching and learning
- Recommendations.

¹ The Teaching and Learning Network is a group of senior teaching and learning leaders from UA member universities who come together regularly to share best practice and innovate in the teaching and learning space.

Key lessons learned

The experience of delivering both fully and blended digital teaching and learning during the coronavirus pandemic has been transformative for higher education, and institutions have learned a great deal in a short amount of time. It is not uncommon to hear universities remark that they made more progress accelerating their digital strategies in the two weeks at the start of lockdown than they did in the previous two years. Seven months on, Alliance universities have a significantly better understanding of the cost, benefits, and barriers to delivering effective digital teaching and learning.

The resource implications of delivering a wide range of digital teaching and learning models include not just the appropriate hardware and software, but training for both staff and students. Increasing digital fluency has required a significant amount of support, with perhaps more training needed for academic staff than anticipated. The pace of change has posed significant challenges for everyone involved, from academics to professional services to students. It is important to note that universities have not received any additional investment from government during this period to support this digital transformation.

Over the past several months, universities have amassed a wealth of evidence about the benefits of blended learning, and notably the role it can play in addressing differential outcomes for certain groups of students, including commuter students, disabled students, international students, and student parents. Alliance universities have found that many of their students are *more* engaged by the digital experience than traditional face to face delivery, with some feeling more comfortable engaging online. Digital delivery also makes it easier for staff to engage with students on placement. In addition, student engagement with support services has increased considerably. That said, some services such as counselling can be difficult to deliver digitally if students do not have sufficient privacy at home.

Alliance universities now also have a good understanding of the key barriers to effective digital teaching and learning. The OfS review call for evidence highlights the issue of digital poverty – this is by far the biggest barrier, particularly the access to appropriate study space. We are pleased to see this issue given prominence in the review and agree with the proposed definition. However, we are concerned that the ‘poverty’ label has a potential to stigmatise affected students. Universities have found some students are reluctant to seek support from ‘hardship’ funds. We therefore prefer the term ‘digital inclusion’. Alliance universities have invested significant resources to provide a digitally inclusive environment for their students, for example by delivering laptops to students’ homes and providing designated socially distanced space on campus for commuter students to study. Despite this, they are still not able to meet all students’ needs. More support from central government is needed.

Another notable barrier is technology that is not fit for purpose. For example, most teaching is done via MS Teams, but this platform was not designed with teaching and learning in mind. The inflexibility of university processes and systems as well as Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) are major barriers, as are cyber-attacks, which have risen exponentially during this period.

A final barrier is public opinion, and the prevailing view that digital and/or blended models are not as effective or valuable as face to face teaching and learning. They are also falsely assumed to be cheaper. These assumptions are underpinned by a traditional model of a student studying full time and living in halls. In many Alliance universities, more than half of students commute from home, with many balancing studying with work and other responsibilities. For many non-traditional students, digital teaching and learning is working well and some even prefer it.

Effective practice and opportunities

The pandemic has acted as a catalyst to enable universities to engage critically in teaching and learning practice and pedagogy. It has offered a highly unique opportunity to rethink courses and challenge outdated systems and academic practice more generally. For example, there has been much greater engagement in learning design than in the past, and a long overdue re-evaluation of assessment practices (e.g. time-constrained exams in large halls) and a shift away from the lecture as the heart of learning towards student interaction. Online learning festivals have engaged many more students and staff than previously and have brought together multiple campuses in a way that is not possible in-person. The move to blended learning in the autumn term has allowed for a reimagining of the role of campus space in student experience, and how to deploy this for best effect, with a focus on inclusion, collaboration, and co-working with tutors and peers.

The overwhelming majority of staff have risen to the challenge and adapted rapidly and innovatively to the situation. People are working in new ways, with a noticeably more collegiate approach to the interactions between academics, professional service staff and student unions. There is a focus on partnership working and co-creating creative solutions with students in an agile and speedy way. It is important to note that progress has been built on work that has been in train for many years. Alliance universities had already made considerable investment in data management and digital tools to improve the student experience (e.g. learner analytics software), as well as CPD for staff, prior to the pandemic.

Alliance universities are perhaps more managerial than other parts of the higher education sector, with an ability to exercise relatively central control over staff and implement a uniform strategy across an institution. This has enabled them to address digital inclusion at an institutional level and roll out mandatory development programmes for all staff. With their

strong emphasis on teaching and practice-based learning, Alliance universities are also perhaps more invested in learning technologies which include a blended approach to placement learning that has worked remarkably well during the pandemic.

The future of digital teaching and learning

Digital delivery is likely to remain a core feature of teaching and learning well beyond the pandemic. That said, it will be important to get the balance right, and recognise that face to face interaction and a strong sense of place and community are also vital for physical and mental health. Going forward, Alliance universities will aim to employ digital delivery where it is most appropriate. They will need to carefully consider the views of students and staff and get the mix right. This is not always predictable. For example, some institutions have been surprised to find that students still overwhelmingly prefer physical books to digital versions.

In the future, more sophisticated models of blended learning will be needed for a wide range of disciplines, for example intra- and inter-module and hi-flex (simultaneously supporting students in person and online). Universities will increasingly make use of new technologies, for example Artificial Intelligence (AI) and augmented/virtual reality. There is still a lot of thinking to be done on how to best incorporate the soft skills which are so highly valued by employers into digital curricula.

Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted students of colour and exacerbated awarding gaps between black and white students. It is crucial that every opportunity is taken now and in the coming years to find creative solutions to narrow these gaps.

The pandemic is likely to accelerate changes to higher education that have been in track for some time, for example multiple entry points and expanding apprenticeships and higher technical education. In the future, students may opt to take some semesters online and others on campus. 'Credentialling' will become increasingly important, and the sector will need different models to recognise experience and allow accelerated start points. The combination of digital and more flexible models of delivery present exciting opportunities to expand access to higher education to those who might not have thought it was accessible to them in the past, notably mature and part-time students.

Recommendations

The OfS's review of digital and teaching and learning has provided Alliance universities with a valuable opportunity to take collective stock of the lessons learned during the coronavirus pandemic, identify effective practice, and plan for the future. Through this process we have also identified a number of barriers currently standing in the way of effective digital teaching and learning. Below we make a series of recommendations aimed at dismantling these.

1. Government should guarantee universal free access to the internet for all students (e.g. through the expansion of Eduroam), as well as access to affordable laptops (e.g. harnessing the power of government purchasing power through a central purchasing/rental scheme).
2. Government and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (including Office for Students, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, the Competition and Markets Authority and many others) should ensure that the measures used for regulating, monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning incentivise high quality digital delivery.
3. The higher education sector should review its internal processes and systems to ensure they are fully compatible with (and not a hindrance to) digital teaching and learning.
4. Technology companies should work with the higher education sector to improve existing technologies and ensure they are fit for the purpose of digital teaching and learning.
5. Government, local authorities, schools, colleges, and universities should work together to build the digital fluency of students of all ages and ensure they are receiving a fully digitally inclusive education from primary school onwards.
6. Government and the higher education sector should work together to promote the benefits of digital teaching and learning to employers, students, and their families.