

COVID-19 Challenges for Universities and Post-COVID Education

BULLSMITH, Christofer

(Atomi University)

1. Interrelated COVID-19 challenges for universities

The effect of COVID-19 directly on the ability to run and attend classes is receiving a lot of attention at the moment. However, running classes is not all that universities do: for example, they also facilitate international travel, do research, and are governed by committees following certain rules. These areas are all interrelated, and one result is that the educator in the classroom cannot overcome the challenges of COVID-19 alone.

1.1 Reduced international mobility

Reduced physical mobility, particularly across national borders, means fewer incoming international students. For many universities, this means not only a drop in income from international fees, but also a harder to quantify loss in the richness of campus life as diversity drops. Foreign classmates become rarer, and some courses that rely on a diverse or non-local student profile (for example, intercultural discussion, modern Japanese culture) may no longer be viable. The loss of incoming overseas academics likewise changes the character of courses, conferences, and symposia. At the same time, local students are losing the opportunity to study abroad to seek those same intercultural or foreign-language experiences.

In response, universities need to explore virtual/online options, perhaps for all of incoming students, incoming teachers, and outgoing students. There are obvious opportunities for successful online offerings to add value to universities post-COVID, as cheaper and more convenient than physically visiting, even if missing some aspects of the actual travel or study-aboard experience.

1.2 Research

COVID has impacted getting funding, collecting data, collaborating with others, and accessing facilities. Researchers who depend on physical access to laboratories, for example, are likely finding this year frustrating. While some individuals may benefit from a year reduced to running thought experiments or reviewing old data, a general upside from a year of lost lab access seems unlikely. Library databases and other

digital resources may become easier to access (24-7, from off-site, and so on); improved familiarity with online collaborative tools and methods may enable wider collaboration in the future without the need for actual travel.

For me personally, though, working on language education and interested in digital learning, there are more positives than negatives. Live classes are recorded, nominally for review or for students who were unable to attend, and can be a trove of data when reexamined. On-demand classes can yield a lot of data: even basic LMS functions can track which students do what, when, for how long, and what is produced, or what scores gained. Running online versions of courses previously offered in the classroom yields data enabling comparative studies. It looks likely that online and in-person strands will be running concurrently for some time, yielding yet more comparative data on different learning modalities.

1.3 Governance

In order to continue to fulfil some version of their usual educational functions while the physical mobility of staff and students is limited, universities need to move rapidly to alter policies and rules. Unfortunately, the processes required to alter those policies and rules – meeting, drafting and reviewing official documents, passing and recording resolutions through a series of committees – likely depend on in-person meetings and having plenty of time. Further, the priorities of some universities may need to change during the pandemic, for example, to focus on non-educational social roles the institution usually fulfils (providing counselling, healthcare, cheap meals, opportunities to develop social skills or avoid depression through peer contact, and so on). Success at continuing to provide educational services will be empty if students are dropping out or worse.

Having witnessed university responses both in New Zealand after an earthquake rendered the campus largely inaccessible, and now in Japan during a pandemic, my impression is that governance in a time of crisis is a particular problem in Japan. People and institutions here are careful and risk-averse, un-used to taking responsibility for proposing dramatic novel solutions or to the adversarial style of argument required to evaluate such a proposal in a single session. Documents are usually on paper, with decisions requiring multiple staff to physically stamp the original document. It is proving difficult to overcome this bureaucratic inertia while largely unable to meet or ratify official documents.

While painful this year, the changes (towards allowing virtual meetings, electronic

documents, electronic signing, use of collaborative drafting tools, and so on) should be positive going forward, in terms of productivity in normal years, in terms of ecological impact, and in terms of the resilience of governance in times of natural disaster or crisis.

1.4 Classes

For many teachers, and society at large, the shift to distance education has meant a crash course in the methods, tools, formats and terminology of the field. Classes can be synchronous (run like a virtual live class using Zoom, Teams, etc.) or asynchronous (on-demand) delivering media (video, text, audio) to students, who respond through online tests and forms or by sending in their own video, text, or audio. While one method to achieve this is correspondence education, sometimes with radio or television broadcasts to deliver media, online methods offer a quicker, richer, and more interactive experience.

2. What changes to education will (or 'should') remain post-COVID?

2.1 Online classes are here to stay: convenience, resilience

In line with my comments on international mobility, research, and governance, being able to do some things online – remotely, instantly, without travel – is surely too convenient to give up entirely. Even where the in-person classroom is the central educational paradigm, a remote visiting lecturer on screen or a remote student (perhaps given some classroom presence through a screen) will surely be more common going forward. Maintaining these options as common (if exceptional) options increases the accessibility of education, not just in the face of pandemics and major natural disasters, but also individual disasters like a student breaking a leg or a lecturer being stuck in Hawaii for a week-long conference. Indeed, corporate workers who have tasted the convenience of working from home (and companies willing to let them, given the saving on office space, and provided productivity is maintained) will drive the continued development and increasing social acceptability of these as options, meaning in turn that universities will be obliged to ensure students are familiar with them.

2.2 Online classes are here to stay: pedagogical effect

Convenience, accessibility, and resilience are not the only reasons some distance education methods will likely remain post-COVID. Put simply, sometimes distance learning modalities are pedagogically preferable. To take examples from language learning, some students may find it easier to participate in remote discussions because text chat is familiar and low-stress, or because the option to not look at other people

while speaking reduces their anxiety. Students who cannot reliably understand a lecture in English in real-time can re-watch on-demand video, and even play it back more slowly or check automatically created subtitles. Recording and submitting a short presentation is less stressful than giving it live, and encourages repeated rehearsal, which is a learning opportunity. Students studying alone are forced to gain more autonomy in their study and time-management habits, and so on. Overall, having a well-executed online component in a course is likely to be a pedagogical positive, and growing appreciation of this will lead to an increase in 'blended' classes. Indeed, the benefits of having students study preparatory material in their own time before a live class, so the class can center on discussion, output, directed case studies and so on is clear. Indeed, against a background of the usual class style being an in-person lecture followed by solitary homework, having an on-demand online lecture completed at home followed by active classroom activities has for some time been called a 'flipped' or 'inverted' classroom; but as the pedagogical benefits of this kind of blended modality are more widely accepted, these labels are often being dropped. That is, a blended class where output and discussion class activities follow online self-study is the new normal and no longer feels like the reversal of a usual pattern.

The spread of this kind of blended system naturally means that in-person classes will change: if the lecture is taken care of before the class, the class can be shorter, more interactive, centered on students using and extending the knowledge gained in the lecture (more like a tutorial). However, even in courses where there is no online component post-COVID, we might hope to see some changes. That is, a period of being unable to have in-person classes and then contrasting in-person and online classes might drive teachers to recognize the strengths of in-person classes afresh. More pedagogical options, and more reflection on the topic, may result in better teaching.

2.3 Online classes are here to stay: examples overseas

The percentage of university students in the US taking one or more online courses has increased steadily from over 21% in 2008, to over 48% in 2018.¹ The number of university students in Oregon taking only online courses increased over the same period from 6.2% to 14.2%.² Interest in remote work technologies and learning during the COVID pandemic, a variety of maturing and likely disruptive technologies including virtual assistants and virtual reality, and the gradual entry of teaching staff more familiar with relevant technologies into university-level positions (for example, Gmail was released in 2004 and iPhones in 2007, so some lecturers today will have used Gmail in primary school, and then used an iPhone all through high school, still with time to finish a PhD before COVID hit) seems likely to allow this growth to

continue. Now that students and other stakeholders in Japan, hitherto somewhat isolated from developments in educational technology by the language barrier, have tasted the convenience, resilience, and pedagogical possibilities of online education, Japan will have to follow suit.

¹ College Board figures, <https://research.collegeboard.org/>

² Wallis, L. (2020). 'Growth in Distance Learning Outpaces Total Enrollment Growth'. Oregon Employment Department. <https://www.qualityinfo.org/>