

Universities After the Pandemic

What will change
and what will
remain the same?



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The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged universities as never before. This article reflects on the university experience of dealing with the pandemic, and considers what the permanent impact on the higher education sector might be.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has pressure-tested our modern global society in ways it has never been tested before. While the world has experienced pandemics throughout human history, society is now more globalised and interconnected than it has ever been. That globalisation and interconnectedness is evident in global universities like University College Dublin. This article considers the impact that the pandemic is having and will have on global universities.

Impact on teaching and learning

Lockdowns associated with the pandemic forced universities around the world to suddenly start teaching their students at distance through digital technology. Some universities were already primarily online institutions, serving a particular niche in the market, while many also offer some academic programmes online. But most university students elect to take programmes which are usually delivered to a significant extent through face-to-face teaching. In normal times, the majority of academics also prefer to deliver their teaching face to face, and many have been resistant to moving their material online.

The involuntary move to teaching and learning online provided an opportunity to explore just how much can be accomplished by teaching at distance, and which aspects of the face-to-face campus experience are the most important. Various surveys show that students have by and large been satisfied with their online learning experiences, and examination results suggest that student outcomes have largely been preserved. A UCD survey of students' experience during the lockdown showed that the areas they found much more challenging are the human factors: motivation, sustaining concentration, lack of structure to the day, and missing friends. Despite their online experience being generally positive, and 52% of students reporting they were more comfortable with online learning after having this experience, 62% still said they would not undertake learning at distance by choice.

A UCD survey of employees showed that lack of structure to the working day was also a significant challenge for faculty and staff, as they found themselves working long and irregular hours and finding it difficult to take leave. Many reported that sustaining motivation was a challenge, that interactions with colleagues were more difficult, and that they missed the social interaction with colleagues. Nevertheless, 65% felt their overall productivity was the same or higher working from home. Many appreciated the benefits of working from home, including the saving on commuting time and costs, the flexibility, and the ability to spend more time with family. In fact, 76% said they would like to have the possibility to work part-time from home after the pandemic is over.

These survey results show that key benefits of a campus-based university do not lie in the teaching and learning of the formal curriculum, but rather in being part of a scholarly community which provides a structure to activities, together with motivation and social reward to those who are part of that community. Within this community students develop many 'soft' or generic skills which are not usually formally assessed, including communication, teamworking, leadership, and relationship skills. Without physical interaction with others in both formal and informal learning environments and social environments, these skills are unlikely to be developed to the same level.

Financial impact

For many leading universities, particularly in Western countries, higher education is a business, reliant to a significant extent on the attendance of international students who pay premium fees. The Covid-19 pandemic has considerably reduced and in some cases halted the attendance of these students, impacting on the finances of universities who have come to rely on this income. Providers of student accommodation have been similarly hit, and in many cases universities are the provider and have suffered a further financial loss.

In many respects the planning challenge for universities is the same as for other businesses. The key questions are: Will Covid-19 have a long-term impact on international student numbers, and how long will it take for those numbers to re-stabilise? These questions are difficult to answer, particularly given that the pandemic is not the only variable involved. International relations and diplomacy, perhaps aggravated by the pandemic, are at a low not seen for perhaps thirty years. Geopolitical forces are increasingly impacting on the ability of countries to attract international students.

Ireland is well positioned geopolitically. As a historically neutral country with a tradition of making visitors feel welcome, it remains an attractive destination for international students. Ireland has the advantage of widespread use of the English language as the primary means of communication, and a high-quality, reputable third-level education system.

Although Ireland does not have the same profile as the US, the UK, or Australia, once international students have experienced what Ireland has to offer and convey this experience back to family and friends and post it on social media, other students from the same country then start to

consider Ireland as a study destination. There is a clear snowball effect in international student recruitment, provided students are given a good experience. Conversely, a bad experience or a change in geopolitics can have a negative impact on this recruitment.

There is reason to believe that the international student market will recover rapidly from this setback. Most universities have found that applications from international students for recruitment in the current cycle are at or above 2019 levels. However, travel restrictions, lack of availability of flights and accommodation, and doubt over how much teaching will be delivered face to face have all contributed to an expectation that the final numbers will be down. Nonetheless, this demand is a good indication that, once the virus is under control, teaching arrangements are back to 'normal', and flights and accommodation become readily available, student numbers should return rapidly to or above pre-Covid-19 levels.

Longer-term changes

Another question to be considered is whether teaching arrangements will or should go back to the pre-Covid-19 normal. The relevance of the traditional lecture approach has been questioned in recent times, and some academics and programmes have adopted the so-called flipped classroom model, where course content is placed online for pre-reading, and face-to-face time with instruction is used for discussion or problem-solving. Now that more academics have had experience with the technology required to deliver programmes in this mode, we may well see the approach adopted more widely. In addition, more group work, one-on-one tutorials, and small group tutorials may be done through video conferencing, now that academics and students have seen how well it can work.

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Nevertheless, it would be premature to pronounce the demise of traditional 'chalk and talk' university teaching in its entirety. Lectures are a lived experience. Much as people still attend live theatre and live sports, despite technically better productions being available in their homes through technology, attending a live lecture as part of a group and participating in the interaction between a good lecturer and their class is something which still cannot be completely captured with technology. In addition, graduates need to have developed the skill to be able to sit in an audience, listen to a public address, and correctly assimilate the important information contained in it.

The challenge for universities will be one of balance. If too much material can be done at distance, the number of students who will physically attend teaching activities on campus will decrease. If the proportion of a class attending teaching activities falls below a critical level, the atmosphere and informal learning opportunities are largely lost, and even the few students attending may stop coming. If this happens, the advantages of a campus-based education are lost for the whole group of students.

Universities need to ensure that there are sufficient engaging and valuable teaching and learning activities taking place on campus, together with

appropriate social activities, that the campus is a vibrant place where students wish to spend their time.

Changing societal demands

The pandemic has also accelerated a wave of change in jobs that was already well under way. The rise of artificial intelligence and new techniques of data processing is changing the nature of employment in many companies. Some skill sets are becoming obsolete, particularly those involved in processing of a repetitive nature, while others, notably in technology, machine learning, and data processing, are in high demand. The financial challenge of the pandemic has forced (and permitted) companies to lay off large numbers of workers. Many of those jobs will not return, or not return in their previous form. There will be a need for re-skilling and upskilling of people whose jobs do not return.

Traditional degree programmes are not appropriate for these students and often take a long time to set up through university processes. These students need concise 'micro-credential' programmes which will provide them with the knowledge and skills they need for the evolving job market, perhaps taught in part by professional trainers rather than academics. Universities have the brand, infrastructure, and quality processes which position them well for success in this domain.

Those students undertaking traditional degree programmes will also need a set of enhanced skills. As artificial intelligence reduces the level of human input required for many routine tasks, more and more graduates will be working in areas which require creativity and significant interaction with people, including people from very different backgrounds to their own. Universities will need to rise to the challenge of developing these skills sets.

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Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the world in many ways. It has accelerated changes that were already in process, removing businesses that no longer had robust operating models and jobs that were already under threat. It has furloughed businesses in other sectors, such as entertainment, dining, and travel, that will re-emerge stronger and leaner after the pandemic subsides. For universities it has provided both a logistical and a financial challenge. In overcoming the logistical challenge of moving students to online working, academics have been upskilled in their use of distance learning techniques, and this will lead to longer-term changes in how programmes are delivered.

Like the entertainment sector, the international student sector is likely to return to normal relatively quickly once the pandemic is over. However, the temporary financial challenge may well force universities to look carefully at the way they are doing business and to make better use of the digital technology which is now available. Universities must also look carefully at providing all graduates with the skill sets they will need to be successful in a changed future, and at providing micro-credentialled programmes for the upskilling or re-skilling of those who have been made redundant by the evolving technology.