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Making online higher education work: Opportunities, challenges and policy imperatives under COVID-19

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*How to make online higher education work? **Yifei Yan** (LSE) explores the opportunities, challenges, and policy imperatives regarding online higher education under COVID-19.*

Never in the history of higher education has online education been of greater importance than it is now. With the COVID-19-forced closure of universities, an unprecedented number of university teachers and students are pushed to embrace online teaching and learning for the first time. Even for those who had prior experience, the increased

frequency, regularity and intensity of it as the new norm still represents a quite unchartered territory.

With this new reality, some remain clueless and ill-prepared; some hope for a silver bullet or "magic button" for getting online education done, while others are keen to reimagine the future of higher education. Diverse as these reactions and attitudes may seem, what they suggest is that COVID-19 is, in fact, creating both promises and pitfalls for online teaching and learning in the higher education sector.

Coexistence of opportunities and challenges

While COVID-19 looks like a perfect storm to all those affected, its impact on the higher education sector can be considered relatively light in many ways. Rarely are university students and staff suffering from extreme adversity or survival challenges due to the current pandemic. While furlough and other forms of job insecurity remain a threat, the scale of its impact may still be much smaller than what is experienced in other service sectors. Overall, online education remains a robust alternative in which one of the main activities of the sector, namely teaching and learning, can be resumed. Even for those who have not experienced it until recently, online education may not be a completely strange concept. Given the wide penetration of the internet and other technological advancements, surfing "online" has largely been

embedded into everyday life for university students and teachers in many parts of the world. The maturity and availability of a variety of web-based tools and resources, be it meeting software, discussion forums, course material storage platforms or collaborative worksheets, is indeed the foundational stone for making this alternative viable.

While these features offer great potentials for online higher education to rise above the turbulent tide of COVID-19, all is far from well so far. Student dissatisfaction is increasingly reported that their online learning experience has been disappointing, with reactions ranging from demanding refund of tuition fees through petition to organized strikes.

Calling for better understanding and action

This coexistence of opportunities and challenges has essentially put the effectiveness of online engagement to the forefront of policy design and practice of the higher education sector, so as to truly harness the opportunities and mitigate the undesirable tension and disappointment.

Whereas existing research on effectiveness of online or distant education may provide some guidance to the current situation, it is far from adequate. Notably, existing prescriptions largely focus on the pedagogical aspects, such as the role of online instructors and the learning community. Despite its importance, this focus leaves two important and interrelated policy inquiries under-explored, which the sector and its participants can nevertheless ill-afford in the current scenario. The first is the factors that facilitate or prevent effective participant engagement, such as their e-readiness, work style and work-life balance. The second is, accordingly, what higher education institutions and policymakers can do to support the participants.

In examining these two aspects, one needs to be mindful that they are not only about technology. While technical support from university IT departments is indispensable and has been well appreciated, its contribution is necessary but insufficient.

Above all, online education as it is being experienced now entails an intense blurry of previous boundaries between work/study and life, where the "life" part may further involve caring responsibilities, especially for those living with children and elderly. Not only would this imply the sharing of working space with these family members, but the time for teaching, preparation and working in general may also be more fragmented than "business-as-usual". Even for those without heavy caring responsibilities, the challenges of effective engagement remain, which range from resisting distractions, coordinating teaching/ studying with other survival necessities to fighting solitude and anxiety.

Capturing a broader picture of what affects effective online engagement has great policy implications in the current COVID-19 episode. Essentially, it highlights that policy support in this regard should look beyond technical assistance and include, for instance, due acknowledgement of the difficulties in students' and staff's work-life balance and visible efforts in maintaining their wellbeing. Yet for such support to materialize, many more questions need to be investigated with greater depth: whether and to what extent does prior experience/ exposure to online education contribute to effective online engagement currently? How do caring responsibilities add to the difficulty of effective online engagement? How do the challenges of effective online engagement compare with those in traditional classroom teaching? What are the good practices of institutional support that have emerged?

Like it or not, not only does online education appear to be "the only game in town" for the moment, but it is likely to stay in the foreseeable future. Effective online engagement is thus no longer the exclusive concern for the few scholars or early adopters of education technology but has become a high-stake priority that deserves the attention of students, educators, university management as well as policymakers. The lopsided focus on either students or staff from previous research and action should also be rectified, as policies that facilitate effective

online engagement should understand and cater to a wide range of situations and concerns of teachers and students, as well as other stakeholders. This, in turn, is the key to realize the promises and address the pitfalls of online higher education, which is not only relevant to today's epidemic-stricken situation, but the lessons explored and learned will also be valuable long afterwards.

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