WILL COVID DISRUPT THE SECTOR?

Place your bets: Transformation? Interruption?

| H2 | | ACT | PLAN | TRACK | PARK | | OPP | THR | NEU |

Claims that Covid will fundamentally transform our universities may be overstated.

Covid has challenged many of our assumptions. The West's dominance has been brought into question as the UK and US have struggled to contain the virus while countries in the Global South have been more effective. Shutting borders in free-movement zones such as the EU has been unprecedented but has met with little resistance. Restrictions on civil liberties to fight the virus have been accepted in a way that would have been unimaginable before the pandemic.

In HE, the lockdown has forced students and staff to study and work remotely, challenging assumptions about how teaching is delivered and the ways staff work. It seems impossible to imagine this experience will have no impact on the future.

And yet… As global vaccination continues apace, it is conceivable that, by the 2021-22 academic year, universities could go back to old way of working. Some changes could remain - staff could work from home, more lectures could be recorded and made accessible online, for example - but it it is entirely possible that fundamental university functions, the delivery of education or offers to students will not be transformed due to COVID-19 alone.

This is, in part, because universities have been largely immune to disruption. No UK university has collapsed or been fundamentally restructured due to the pandemic and student numbers have remained buoyant. Universities continued teaching in September 2020, most with some in-person teaching.

The question, then, is whether universities will revert to business as usual or use the pandemic as a stimulus for big shifts in policy and practice - much needed and essential for survival and fulfilling civic duties, some say. But business as usual seems both an easy and a likely scenario. So leaders need to seize this opportunity to think more deeply about how universities can adapt to meet the challenges facing our world. Failing to do so might just put the long-term future of the sector at risk.

NAVIGATING CHANGE

Or…adaptation?

| H2 | | ACT | PLAN | TRACK | PARK | | OPP | THR | NEU |

Change in higher education post-Covid will need to follow a path of adaptation rather than radical reinvention. Institutions will need to think carefully about how to adapt to a digital learning environment while maintaining the fundamental and foundational strengths of the in-person experience. Three key lessons from the first year of COVID-19 need to be taken into account:
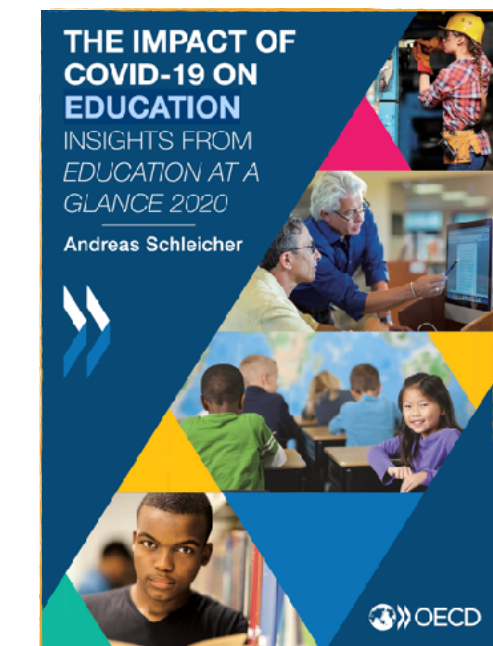
- The essential core of every college and university is teaching and learning. Almost everything else in HE either stopped or was circumscribed in 2020. COVID-19 has taught us that the one thing that colleges and universities do that cannot be interrupted or sacrificed is teaching and learning.
- The growing institutional focus on restructuring in response to new knowledge about how individuals learn now urgently requires greater attention.
- Some institutions are not, however, sufficiently prioritising teaching and learning and learning infrastructures are unevenly distributed across the sector. As a result, students with the least resources and the most significant barriers to learning have been disproportionately disadvantaged by the pivot to remote instruction.

Professors have been called upon to not only transition (sometimes instantly) their courses but also to provide their students with emotional and social supports that were previously distributed across campus entities and professionals. Well-understood and accepted pedagogical practices, such as universal course design and a system of delivery that is flexible and resilient, have been shown to be - at best - unequally present within and across universities.

Many tertiary educators are not entirely comfortable with online teaching. Only 9% of academics prefer to teach in a mostly online environment, according to a 2019 study from Educause. And while 51% are comfortable with blended learning environments, most of these (30%) prefer a mostly face-to-face teaching environment. No less than 43% of survey respondents preferred an exclusively face-to-face teaching environment.

This online shift will come as a shock to the system, then. But there is no escape from the necessities engendered by social distancing.

FURTHER READING

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION
INSIGHTS FROM EDUCATION AT A GLANCE 2020
Andreas Schleicher
OECD

◀ HE HOME PAGE