

Transformation Experiences During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Higher Education Institute (HEI) Case Study

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Abstract

The development of the mode of learning and teaching for our College to match the need to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, is an extraordinary story. Traditionally, we have welcomed students to a face-to-face learning experience, supported by virtual learning environments, and now, through a number of iterative stages, we find the online mode of teaching and learning is highly preferred by students of all ages. Data figures evidence increased key performance indicators of students' attendance, retention, assessment submissions, pass rates, progression and awards, as well as student satisfaction of provisions and resources emplaced by the College. All despite real changes in the learning environments involving separation of students from a collegiate environment, losing the advantages of peer interaction and constant contact with College academic staff. The threat of loneliness for the individual student is ever present and remains a direct concern of all staff.

Key Words: Covid-19 Pandemic; Blended Learning; Loneliness; Online Learning

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Introduction

*'Necessitate est ingenii mater'*¹¹

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to have a profound effect of the lives of a wide population as a whole and stakeholders in Higher Education Institutes in particular. Coagulations with identified foci and outcomes will continue to find ways to contain the virus whilst immunisation is sought. This is a worldwide challenge and phenomenon, which will be addressed beyond the sole interests of nation states and indeed HEIs. Universities are asked to act as arbiters and purveyors of research, bridging the gap between scientific research '*...and actionable findings that can deliver a positive impact across societies...*' (Blom et al, 2020:257). Inter alia, this would not be restricted to universities but include more generally, all HEIs including private Colleges.

Contiguously, the role of the private College through the pandemic is to maintain an equilibrium and remain steadfast in its support of its students and staff, perhaps eschewing the higher academic advantages of applying research to find immunity. However, its drive must be to mitigate the impact of the pandemic for and on behalf of its stakeholders: in particular, the interests of students.

The College is identified as a medium-sized enterprise, with a history of successfully delivering Higher National Diploma courses in Business Management, Health & Social Care and Hospitality Management. Students are UK/EU qualified, mainly with origins in South East Asia, Africa and East Europe. Courses run for 2 years, and students attend on a full-time basis. Traditionally education has been campus-based with support from Virtual Learning Environments. For this study, responses are captured over two academic semesters (comprising 18 teaching weeks) using electronic quantitative survey questionnaires with 674 students (358 and 316 in April and September 2020 semester respectively).

So, what could we do, as a College?

It did not take the Directors and Management long to decide that we had to adapt to different circumstances. In March 2020, there was an overwhelming understanding that immediately, we had to produce an educational plan in this threatened time, driven by Management, to provide an experience which would be

¹¹ '*Necessity is the Mother of Invention*'; the true author of the exact phrase, necessity is unknown, but it is credited to Benjamin Jowett, an administrator in the University of Oxford. In his translation of 1871 Plato's Republic, there comes a phrase – 'The true creator is necessity, who is the mother of our invention.' The phrase is strikingly similar to the proverb 'necessity is the mother of invention' and has a similar meaning. Prior to the translations by Jowett, the phrase was still popular in England, but in Latin. Earliest known use of the Latin phrase is documented to be by William Horman, who used the Latin phrase "Mater atrium necessitas" meaning in English "The mother of invention is necessity."

valued mainly by students, but also importantly by regulators, that would secure the educational journey resulting in increased opportunities for employment and/or developing skill sets to drive self-employment for each and every individual.

The plan evolved addressing strict criteria. Firstly, the teaching model had to enhance the students' experience, not its detriment. Secondly no major decision would be taken without full recourse to all stakeholders, including students. Thirdly all staff, particularly academic staff, would have to be consulted meaningfully about any changes to the way we delivered education. Fourthly regulatory issues needed to be addressed. We recognised that we must stay within the parameters of regulations and consult widely where appropriate.

To implement steps to deliver the outcomes of any changes, we considered our structure and whether this was robust enough to withstand the demands of a changing scenario. After wide consultation, the College agreed to form the Covid-19 Action Working Party (CAW) as a sub-group of and reporting to the Principal's Executive Group (PEG). CAW would meet weekly and function to agree operational decisions regarding the daily running of the College during the period of the pandemic. CAW membership included Heads of Departments and other members of staff on an occasional basis as appropriate. Chaired by the Principal, regular reports were to be submitted to senior boards for oversight. Within CAW there would be three further sub-groups: CAWLearn with responsibility for recommending educational arrangements; CAWGov with responsibility for ensuring the updating of public information, including governance documentation; and CAWQual with responsibility for updating policies, procedures and processes as well as meeting outcomes of regulatory requests and/or recommendations.

Educational Offering

The first focus was to address the challenge presented by the pandemic in March 2020. After considerable debate, the College took the primary decision, approved by the Academic Board, to move from campus-based learning to virtual learning and from 01 April 2020 all learning and teaching would be online. This was a major departure from the traditional experience of delivering campus-based learning, and the College was very aware of the need to offer a student experience that could in some way replicate the advantages of social interaction enjoyed on a campus. The need for this was College-driven, and subsequent experience has

suggested that students seem not to value campus attendance for peripheral activities as much as previously thought.

In July 2020, as the pandemic developed and requirements for social distancing in organisations was introduced, a further stage was discussed and approved, again by the Academic Board. There was the added necessity to cater for reduced numbers physically, allowing students on campus densities of 30-50% only and resulting in detailed planning and room allocations.

For the September 2020 semester, we introduced a blended learning model, which included online learning and teaching for all traditional classroom

activities and campus-based learning for resource acquisition, administrative and academic support. However, even then, ever mindful of our values in involving students in decision-making, all campus-based activities were made available as an option for students to decide on face-to-face or online access. The method of implementing these stages became the responsibility of CAW under the authority of PEG and approval of the Academic Board. In many ways, blended learning was a more 'comfortable' fit for the College, as a substantial part of the curriculum had been delivered over the years via a highly popular and interactive Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

From Campus to Online Learning

The axiom 'online learning' seems to be used interchangeably with virtual learning, as if somehow it is a lesser form. This seems a misunderstanding of the definition of virtual, not to be confused with ersatz, predicted on false representation.

For students studying in an online environment, social interaction with peers and educators can often be an exercise in exasperation. If such frustration is to be minimised, much thought must be given to the methods of communication that will be utilised, so that the online environment fulfils the human desire for social interaction. McInerney & Roberts (2004) posit:

...asynchronous communication may not give the immediacy that is required for successful social interaction. The lapsed time that can occur between question and answer may not assuage the tyrannies of distance, time zones,

and isolation from which learners may suffer...' (2004: 73).

The inability to intermingle freely with other students may exacerbate feelings of loneliness and not provide an ideal environment for successful study. The College has emplaced a number of procedures, both at management and programme levels. These include the incorporation of protocols and guidelines for social interaction into the learning concepts of the online environment (Curry, 2000) and can be utilised to minimise the feelings of 'aloneness' that can disturb many students.

From Online to Blended Learning

Several definitions of blended learning exist. One frequently cited definition is the mix of traditional and interactive-rich forms of classroom instruction with learning technologies (Bielawski & Metcalf, 2003). Other authors offer the definition of an integrated approach utilising strategically planned instructional or non-instructional approaches for fostering learning and performance (Rossett, *et al*, 2003). For this study and indeed for the College, blended learning is defined as the appropriate mix and use of face-to-face instructional methods and various learning technologies to support planned learning and foster subsequent learning outcomes.

The blended learning model has the potential to house a gradual modification of understanding in the theory and practice of mobile learning from a techno-centric perspective, focused on the characteristics of the technology, to a learner-centered perspective focused on the mobility of the learner (not just space and time, but also

access to people and resources) and settings (Kukulska-Hulme *et al*, 2018). This model informs our uptake and delivery as well as resourcing.

The Experience

The first area of concern in deciding to move to blended learning was the College's capability for encouraging students to attend online teaching sessions. The overall College attendance captured in April 2020 was 80.03%, followed by 72.91% in September 2020 semester. In both instances the College experienced significantly higher attendance rates, compared to attendance rates in traditional teaching semesters. Survey results conducted with students over the two terms complements these results. An exceptional 99% and 100% students in the final teaching week of April 2020 and September 2020 semesters respectively, responded that they found it easy to join the online classes. The lowest response of 91% in this regard was captured in the first teaching week of the April 2020 semester.

When the students were asked to register their overall experience in attending online teaching sessions, the satisfaction rates captured were also at exceptionally high levels (99% in April and 100% in September).

The second and third areas of concern that the College had to address carefully related to assessment: in particular, how to encourage students to submit assignments on time and to achieve a satisfactory pass mark, when opportunities for face-to-face tutoring were limited. In both categories the College found that

performance results improved significantly when compared with results obtained in the College's traditional mode of teaching.

Conclusion

The data is conclusive. The learning is centered around feedback from students studying from remote locations. The online model is extraordinarily popular with students, allowing virtual contact with College academic staff. Certainly, staff are supportive and have adapted well to a regime of working from home.

The future of the College looks strong, albeit utilising a greater reliance on online teaching and learning, much to the pleasure of our main stakeholder, the student.

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