

An inclusive approach to the 'virtual campus' – keeping student experiences in focus

Institutional responses to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have necessarily prompted a sharp and sudden change in learning and teaching as both staff and students move to what we're calling 'a virtual campus'. In the context of self-isolation and social distancing, this reflects a wider trend across the sector. The cancellation of face-to-face provision has resulted in a shift to online learning and teaching, or what some have labelled as the 'pivot to online'.

That the design of a single online module by the leading distance learning provider in the UK takes up to two years and draws on a team of varied expertise, should be caution enough to avoid describing what is currently happening in UK higher education as a shift to online or distance learning – recognising these as specific fields of education. Instead, changes to our teaching are driven by urgent necessity and in many cases by the technology available to staff sanctioned for use within the University. In repeated conversations last week these are the key push factors teaching colleagues report to be navigating, as they work intensely to move their teaching online. Both points are problematic and, along with many other sector peers who support academics to develop their teaching practice, myself and colleagues at Greenwich Learning and Teaching are emphasising the pedagogy – focusing primarily on *what* we are trying to achieve with our students and then *how* we may best do that?

Having taught for The Open University since 2009, there's much I can share about 'teaching online'. But there is so much more that I've learned about supporting a diverse student body comprising a mix of adult-returners to education and school leavers, namely widening participation students, at a distance. It is imperative that we continue to keep inclusivity at the front of our minds as we make considered decisions about our teaching over the coming days, weeks and months. Indeed, as we make changes to the way we support all dimensions of student experiences, we all need to be mindful of the diversity of our student body, and the very real additional barriers posed by the removal of a key potential leveller – our *physical campus* – when making decisions about how best to support our student body.

Stay with me for some thoughts on this but, before we turn to our students, I want you to think about how it has been for you to prepare a different style of teaching but also for you to move to homeworking: the physical space in which you work and the access to files, systems, software and potentially equipment that you need. Perhaps you also have caring responsibilities that are necessitating flexibility in how and when you work. On top of everything, you may be finding it difficult to concentrate on work due to concerns about family members, your own health, and buying food.

Turning to our students, they repeatedly show us that they can be adaptable, ingenious, creative and impressive in their use of digital tools. However, if enrolled on a face-to-face module, there can be no assumption that our students are prepared to learn online / at a distance. That our students may use digital technology does not mean that they have developed digital learning literacies. Furthermore, expecting our students to adapt to a different way of engaging with their learning, towards the end of the academic term, is even more challenging.

- Our students may be accessing their learning in difficult circumstances at home: unexpected childcare and/or other caring responsibilities; accompanied at home by others whilst trying to study; having no dedicated space to study; having concerns about the cost of using more heating and electricity; and having no access to broadband at home.
- Our students may be accessing their learning on mobile phones and tablets with reduced functionality to access online sessions and challenges in reading from a small screen. Indeed, multiple family members may be attempting to make use of one device.
- They may be using their mobile data, making it difficult to access high bandwidth activities like live video sessions and lengthy recorded videos. A recent [Wonkhe blog](#) pointed to this issue specifically.
- They may have existing additional support or accessibility requirements.
- Our students may be international students or students who don't have support from a family network, feeling isolated in halls and finding it difficult to focus on their studies.
- Our students may be worried about their own health, experiencing difficulties accessing medical appointments and prescriptions, and there may be heightened worry, anxiety and flaring of new or existing mental health issues due to the developing COVID-19 context and the changes they are experiencing in multiple facets of their lives.
- Our students may be experiencing negative feelings due to feeling removed from their face-to-face support networks.

None of this is part of a deficit approach, but rather a reminder to be sensitive and empathetic to the lived experiences of our students. Keeping this in focus should act as a lens through which we consider our priorities over the coming weeks. Particularly so, when making decisions about the nature of online teaching, learning and assessment. We have great heterogeneity at Greenwich, and we are proud of our commitment to supporting diverse groups of students in a widening participation context. Some students will adapt and flex easily but, as we move to a 'virtual campus', we have to keep these considerations in

focus and really think about how such developments could serve to disadvantage students. What may this mean for your teaching? Our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Jane Harrington has recommended to 'keep it simple' and I couldn't echo this more strongly. Rather than producing perfect live streamed sessions to see you through to the end of term, focus on what is essential. Don't overload students with lots of different activities either synchronously or asynchronously. And remember that the main thing they probably need right now is reassurance and some form of connection with you, their teacher, and their peers. This last point will be the most fundamental thing you can do to support your students right now.

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