

Institutional Responses to COVID-19

The fifth webinar in the popular series organised by the Centre for Distance Education, Goldsmith's College in London and the University of London Institute in Paris took place on Thursday, 5 May 2021. It took a broad perspective at how higher education institutions have responded to the challenges of the pandemic and the rapid switch to online learning.

As ever, the session was ably chaired by **Dr Linda Amrane-Cooper**, head of the Centre for Distance Education. The three speakers were chosen to give a variety of perspectives on institutions' responses to the last year: **Dr Jon Baldwin**, Managing Director (Higher Education) at Jisc; **Professor Stephanie Marshall**, from Queen Mary, University of London, and **Professor Elisabeth Hill** from Goldsmith's.

Jisc – until 2012, the Joint Information Systems Committee – is a membership organisation that provides digital infrastructure and services to the whole of the UK's HE and FE sectors. Much of **Jon Baldwin's** talk was based on its far-reaching report, *Learning and Teaching Reimagined*, which was published last November. This focused equally on the lessons of 2020 and (at the date of publication) immediate plans for 2021, and on a vision of how the sector might look in 2030. In taking this decade-long perspective, he set three challenges: how do we ensure that 'joy and serendipity' remains possible for learners in an online or blended environment; how do we relate to the different experiences across the sector; and how do we develop a model of HE that is compelling but still affordable.

Jon drew on the reported experiences of about 22,000 students – who, perhaps surprisingly, almost universally confessed to 'missing lectures' – to suggest some positive and negative features of their experience of digital learning. They appreciated

- Being able to rewind, re-watch and revisit lecture material often, and to ask questions asynchronously
- Learning at their individual pace, which is different for different students
- Being able to slow down and catch up (which was particularly valued by students with English as a second or subsequent language)
- Online lectures often being more easily audible than those in large lecture theatres
- Online sessions delivered live in real time, which are often more engaging than pre-records

They also appreciated how much effort their lecturers had gone into developing quality material in a short time, but were concerned about maintaining this in the longer term.

The negative features highlighted by the students included

- The digital divide – unequal access to devices and Internet connectivity
- Too much screen time
- Online lectures going on too long, with insufficient breaks
- Insufficient communication with lecturing staff
- Isolation and loneliness arising from the loss of informal social contacts

Some of these problems are easier for lecturers and managers to address than others. It should be possible to encourage lecturing staff to shorten lectures and to introduce more interaction into their

sessions, providing students with plenty of time for questions and discussion. Prompt, good-quality feedback can help students feel less isolated from their teaching staff.

A lively discussion focused, largely on those features of student life and learning that are hardest to re-create online: social interaction and serendipity. There are no easy answers, but if, as many hope, blended learning becomes the norm, it should be possible to address these problems by mixing course elements appropriately.

The pointers Jon has provided will help with planning for the academic year 2021-22. To find out what JISC hopes that the sector will aim for by 2030, you are recommended to read the full report: it is available on the Jisc website at <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/learning-and-teaching-reimagined-change-and-challenge>.

Stephanie Marshall is Vice-Principal (Education) at Queen Mary, University of London, which she described as ‘a Russell Group institution with a difference’. Unlike most of this group of research-intensive universities, 90% of its 28,000 students come from state schools and 75% are BAME. It is not surprising that digital inclusion is a key strategic issue. An institution that aspires to be ‘world class’ has to give education as high priority as research in its strategy. Queen Mary’s also offers work experience or an internship to every student, and this practice has continued throughout the pandemic.

Before the first lockdown, Queen Mary’s leadership had been beginning to develop a ‘community of education excellence’, meeting frequently with programme directors and directors of education. From March 2020 teaching staff were offered one-to-one support in taking their teaching materials online, which led to even some staff who had started off ‘just dropping their PowerPoints into the VLE’ becoming expert advocates of e-learning. This learning process has been facilitated by the [Queen Mary Academy](#), set up, fortuitously, in January 2020 to develop staff and students’ skills in teaching, learning and research. This supports students in ‘learning how to learn’ (including remotely) and staff in developing a culture of learning design that promotes interaction and sociability. So far, online classes have expanded with more opportunities for students to interact with lecturers online, 100% of lectures are recorded and alumni mentoring has been introduced. The challenge of digital poverty is hard to address, however, particularly when students are unable to access facilities on campus.

The interesting discussion began with Linda commenting that she had been impressed by how student-centred the planning at Queen Mary’s had continued to be throughout the crisis. Stephanie explained that much of this had been driven by the new Academy.

Goldsmith’s College, a co-sponsor of this webinar series, is another University of London institution with a mixed and not particularly privileged intake. **Elisabeth Hill**, who is currently the college’s Deputy Warden, began her presentation by commenting on the relevance of Stephanie’s experience to her own. She focused on work to engage students in digital learning before, during and (as planned for) after the pandemic; work that owed much to the college’s Teaching and Learning Innovation Centre ([TALIC](#)).

Elisabeth remembered standing up in front of the assembled Heads of Department on March 16, 2020 and explaining that they would all be moving everything online immediately. Like all institutions, some Goldsmith’s teaching staff were already very experienced in, for example, using

[Panopto](#) for lecture capture, and these readily became 'champions' who were willing and able to help their peers. TALIC created a vast set of resources to help staff develop online teaching techniques, and the college has created learning communities for both staff and students.

One particular difficulty at Goldsmith's is that a majority of students are on practice-based programmes that require some practical work or the equivalent. During the 'pandemic normal' year of 2020-21, as much as this as possible has been delivered online using a wide range of pedagogies and technologies. As we begin to emerge from the crisis the focus is moving towards a more flexible and blended approach, with more students back on campus for more of the time. Next year, in particular, will have to be particularly flexible, with the possibility of further viral outbreaks and even lockdowns. However, even when the pandemic has completely passed, much online learning and the practices that we have learned over the last 18 months will remain.

A lively discussion included contributions from a wide range of perspectives, but one that was missing was that of students themselves. That will change in the sixth webinar in the series; this was originally planned to run in June but will now be held in October as the first webinar of the 2021-22 academic year. Watch this space.

- *Dr Clare Sansom, 28 May 2021*