Supporting multidisciplinary transitions to the blended environment:

Innovations and challenges for lecturers

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of an already testing Higher Education (HE) environment that was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the research sought to explore how educators approached the changes required to deliver teaching, assessment, and student support. Adopting a longitudinal case study design, the research focused on one of the largest higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom (UK) and involved interviews with lecturers over the course of the academic year 2020-21. Through examining the innovative approaches they took and the challenges they faced in making their transitions to the blended environment, the chapter identifies opportunities for future research in this area, and makes recommendations for the benefit of future curriculum and resource planning within HE.

Introduction

Within the context of an already diverse and challenging Higher Education (HE) environment (see, for example, Dickinson et al. 2020), educators with little or no previous experience of blended teaching, assessment, and student support were required to make precipitous changes within a short space of time due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic (Bryson and Andres 2020; Parkin and Brown 2020). Previous studies have noted a number of challenges for educators switching to online delivery including: absorption of the expanding

pedagogical scholarship (Kebritchi et al. 2017); technological resistance or anxiety (Kilgour et al. 2019); and concerns about increased workloads (Downing and Dyment 2012). All of these studies were conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore fail to account for factors pertinent to the remote working that were necessitated by the pandemic; including, for example, the impact of personal responsibilities, health anxiety, and access to technological resources at home.

Against this backdrop, the authors sought to explore how educators approached the changes required to deliver teaching, assessment, and student support safely during the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst managing pressure to preserve a dynamic student experience. Adopting a case study approach to generate the requisite depth of understanding, the researchers focused on one of the largest higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom. One of the HEI's key strategic aims is to be a leading applied university which engenders a continuing focus on external engagement, including with local and national employers and the local community. This emphasis on partnership working presented significant challenges considering the regulations around social distancing, and the potential impact of shifting priorities within external organisations. Central guidance from the institutional leadership prioritised health and safety and protecting the broader student experience. The minutiae of operational matters related to teaching, assessment, and student support were decided at a local level, in accordance with subject-specific requirements.

Following receipt of ethics approval from the HEI, the research team recruited participants from a multi-disciplinary pool of lecturers across the HEI for this qualitative, longitudinal case study during the academic year 2020-2021. The participants were all experienced academics involved with teaching, assessment, and student support at either undergraduate and/or postgraduate levels, and they specialised in the following disciplines: natural and built environment, health and wellbeing, and education. Each participant took part in two semi-

structured interviews using a video conferencing platform. The first interview captured data early in the academic year around participants' views on their transitions to the blended environment. The same participants were invited to reflect on their experiences during the second semester. Building on their previous experience of using creative research methods (see, for example, Dickinson et al. 2020; Kellock 2012), the researchers invited each participant to share a photograph of their home working space in each interview to stimulate discussion around their experiences of making the transitions to the new environment, including their perceptions of their working environment. The data was thematically and iteratively analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006).

This chapter will explore two broad areas around participants' experiences of their transitions to the new blended environment: examples of the innovative approaches that they took and some of the challenges that they faced. Each of these will be considered in turn before the authors draw on the findings to identify opportunities for future research in this area and suggest recommendations for the benefit of future curriculum and resource planning.

Innovative approaches

Despite trepidations about making successful transitions to the blended environment, all the participants were focussed on a quality student experience. The participants reported how they had identified and made use of a variety of opportunities available for developing new approaches to their work, which included self-exploration of new technologies and collegial working. This section will detail key innovations around: communication tools, creating interactive teaching resources, and delivering remote alternatives to practical pedagogies.

Communication tools

All three participants recognised the benefits of peer support in easing the transition to the blended environment, and proactively utilised a wide range of communications tools to help

facilitate this. Participant 2 notably focused on utilising additional tools to promote communication amongst both their students and their staff group. They created a chat group using a widely used messaging service and a collaborative newsletter delivered regularly via email.

The weekly newsletter, or Digest as it was named, was circulated to all students across an undergraduate cohort. It provided clear detail on teaching and learning activities, and also included other materials to promote engagement; including a cartoon, a link to current affairs (for example, International Women's Day), and book or podcast recommendations. Illustrating how maintaining regular communication can be a critical component for encouraging student engagement and developing a shared sense of belonging, (Kebritchi et al. 2017; Bryson and Andres 2020), Participant 2 reflected on the co-production of the Digest with the students and its success.

> We're sending them weekly newsletters ... we do that across all three BSc cohorts, there is a bit of an update about the modules that they're currently studying and what's expected in the next week. There's some fun bits that students attach, there's fun bits that we stick in now and again. So, it seems to have been ...received really, really well. [It] seems to work really well in terms of maintaining contact and keeping students engaged. [Participant 2]

The co-creation of the newsletter may address the need for social interaction with a learning community to promote belonging (Kebritchi et al. 2017). Participant 2 further promoted student interaction through the use of a messaging service.

> The apprentices all have their own WhatsApp group as well, and there's a lot of traffic on there. And I have access to that via my work mobile, so I do monitor that. They know I don't work on a Monday and I don't look over the weekend. So, I've been

really clear, but I do monitor that. […] sometimes they share really good tips, they're really supporting each other. Sometimes I ask questions as well, sort of, 'What's happening with this? [Participant 2]

They also reported using the group to manage any issues and identify any oversights related to the virtual learning environment (VLE) and the availability of resources.

I had a couple of queries today, like 'Where are the placement handbooks […]?'. … that's been really useful to be able to pick up those kinds of conversations. [Participant 2]

In this way, Participant 2 is utilising the group chat as an alternative to those informal on-campus discussions which are not possible in the remote environment.

Interactive teaching resources

All participants reported utilising new tools in the switch to blended delivery, including the chat function in online sessions and various platforms outside of the VLE, such as Padlet, for facilitating interactive activities. Participant 1 reported a particularly creative approach to designing interactive teaching materials. They had utilised their daily walk, during the national lockdown in March 2020, to capture video clips that they could incorporate into their teaching and learning materials.

I went through all my lectures and sort of listed everything that I talk about. And I've gone out over the lockdown […] with a video camera, and I've done one-minute slots for all of those and created a massive […] database. So, the idea is when I'm talking to the students, since I'm not face to face with them, I could maybe actually show them what I would normally have to verbally describe at the front of the class. [Participant 1]

Although they acknowledge that they are considering how to manage not being 'face-to-face' when designing their online materials, it is important to note that this innovation can be considered an example of best practice by using technology as an 'integral element rather than a bolt-on consideration' (JISC 2020, 15).

Participant 1 also reported purchasing a green screen which they used to encourage student engagement by changing their background, and creating a physical display which they could make visible on camera when teaching. The display included module related images and materials as well as recommended texts that could be changed and updated as the academic year progressed.

> […] hopefully the students will ask questions when they see the backdrop and it will all kick off some sort of interesting discussions and debates. [Participant 1]

They disclosed their belief that their display reflected their professional identity, 'It exemplifies me [and] what drives me', which they had 'put quite a bit of time into'.

Participant 1's ability to engage with this type of innovation also evolved as the academic year progressed. When asked if they were still creating clips, they noted:

> Not as much because I've not had time and over the winter it was much more challenging. [Participant 1]

Although time was a barrier to the continuation of this innovation, Participant 1 had a 'massive amount of material now'. They explained how this would become a repository of materials that they could edit and reuse in future. This implies that the time taken to make these creative adjustments for blended delivery may support them in preparing resources in the future.

Remote alternatives to practical pedagogies

The third innovative example centred around the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic for continued engagement with practical activities. All of the participants referred to concerns regarding placement activity; the necessity of such activity ranged from required to recommended between the courses in this case study. For some courses, preparing students for placement seemed to be entwined with the physical spaces they occupied on-campus. Participant 3 expressed how the materiality of campus was important to their subject because of the resources required in their teaching.

> […] normally we have a room […] which is set up as the kind of play and creativity space. All the back cupboards are labelled up with boxes of, you know, like play therapy stuff, art therapy. [Participant 3]

Participant 3 sought to replicate some of their valued on-campus approaches within the online classroom by creating and posting 'packs' of learning materials to students to enhance engagement with online practical workshops. In this example, Participant 3 acknowledges that they 'like things to be ordinary' and that they were purposefully 'going to teach how we used to teach to kind of go back to habits and routine'. This could relate to the wider context of delivering teaching during a pandemic where educators and students alike may derive comfort from familiarity (see, for example, Jandric et al 2020).

Participant 3 also reported how their students were prevented from attending placements due to Covid-19 restrictions. This led to the creation of '20 placement tasks that [students] could do remotely'. These simulation tasks included: making use of information freely available online to create a case study; reading assigned texts; observation via video recordings; and engaging with tasks to encourage reflection. Participant 3 reported concerns that their students might view these activities negatively and experience a reduction in their motivation as a result.

So, you had to remotely encourage them to do that, because if they were clearly

thinking, well, this isn't placement, […] why [are] we doing this task. [Participant 3]

Evidence suggests that this anxiety may be misplaced, simulations are a well-established

classroom-based substitute for placement and are generally well-received by students (see,

for example, Davies 2002). However, when comparing the two, participant 3 may be aware

that their students may view simulation as an inferior alternative to placements.

Challenges

Despite their enthusiasm for these innovative approaches, participants also reported

challenges which impeded their ability to design, develop, and implement their innovations to

meet their own standards. This section will discuss three key issues around technology and

access to resources, time pressures, and loss of networks.

Technology and access to resources

A key concern reported by all three participants was the necessity of utilising new

technologies. These concerns spanned across both basic functions and optimum use to

facilitate new ways of working.

Despite being experienced lecturers, participants reported feelings of uncertainty related to

their changed status as blended educators. Kilgour et al. note that educators can find the

adjustment to the online environment 'deeply unsettling because they can run counter to the

habits, conviction and experience gained in a non-online environment' (2018, 1418). For

example, Participant 3 lamented the inability to 'read the room' in virtual settings and this

fostered a belief that the experience was more 'complicated' as a result. Bryson and Andres

note the inability to read social cues as a particular challenge for online educators (2020).

There was evidence that participants started from a perspective of trying to replicate in-class

activities, despite recognition that attempting this approach is often unsuccessful (Kebritchi et

al. 2017) and encountered frustration when this revealed limitations of the technology. This had an impact on participants who had to rethink module content and learning activities of previously successful face to face sessions.

> Can't do that over Zoom. Can't do that over any platform because, you can't you can't provide them with that many resources. [Participant 3]

The literature notes the need for staff training to support educators in navigating the 'sea of platforms and online educational tools' (Pokherel and Chetri 2021, 135). Whilst none of the participants reported taking part in formal training sessions, they did acknowledge the resources which had been made available to them for self-taught development.

> One of the things that we have worked on as a staff team […] is to make things more accessible, so we are making sure that we are subtitling, that we're looking at colour schemes [for accessibility]. [Participant 2]

There were also reflections about available equipment.

> We have looked at some of the disability resources that are available through the university. It did end up me making a big fuss to get an updated laptop because I was still working on an old Windows 7 machine where in PowerPoint you couldn't have automated captions. [Participant 1]

The fact that the participant reports making 'a big fuss' suggests that there were temporal issues with resource availability. Participant 2 also disclosed how they had bought a range of other office implements, including a screen raiser, before the HEI subsequently went on to make such equipment freely available to all its staff.

Time pressures

All participants reported concerns about the time pressures they were under to enable innovation. Examples included developing pedagogy, increased support of students, and an unsatisfactory work/life balance. This reflects the literature about the inherent issues of an 'always on' culture (McDowall 2017) and how preparing online materials is more time consuming than preparing face to face sessions (Kebritchi et al. 2017; Bryson and Andres, 2020). One participant, who was a part-time member of staff, regularly exceeded her contracted hours. The other participants reported apportioning more of their time to planning teaching ['I spent an entire summer thinking about precisely what I'm going to deliver. And I've never done that before.' Participant 1]. The fact that time pressures can hinder the ability to develop the blended offer was directly addressed too:

'What I would have liked to do, but just haven't had the time to explore, is to have a play around with Panopto.': Participant 2.

The language used by Participant 2, 'have a play around', when talking about using online tools was replicated in some way by all the participants. This seemed to signify that participants desired some time to be able to explore the options available at their own pace, as well as enthusiasm for continued professional development in this area.

Loss of networks

As participants made their transitions to the blended environment, they reported the importance of peer networks for mutual support. Participant 3 explained, that despite work-planning restrictions, they had collaborated to team teach a Zoom session in order to support their 'nervous' colleague.

Participants lamented the loss of 'real world' opportunities [Participant 3] for impromptu, conversations and problem-solving that would have previously taken place on-campus 'in corridors and next to coffee machines' [Participant 2] to help them 'stay connected'

[Participant 1]. They disclosed the potential for these informal chats to cover a range of topics including specific questions or to generate broader support, for example in respect of their wellbeing or with career progression.

> I think some of the people I've made contact with, I don't think they've been coping as well as I have. And I didn't realise. [Participant 1]

Participant 2 reported missing 'being able to knock on somebody's door and sort of say, do you know the answer to that?'. There were also concerns that physical distance and increased workloads were impeding access to wider support and making solving issues more complicated.

> […] when I rang [IT support] the first message is basically, you know, if it's not an emergency, go away because […] we are experiencing a high level of calls. [Participant 3]

In connection to the findings from the Office for Students (2021), the general approach that some students take by keeping their cameras off caused some anxiety.

> There's no interaction, so I have to be absolutely certain they've got everything they need on that topic. [Participant 1].

Participants discussed understanding students' potential rationale for keeping their cameras turned off including 'digital inequality' (JISC 2020), privacy and/or confidence. Participant 2 noted that they were 'very aware' of these issues but that, considering the practical nature of their course, the tendency for cameras off 'continues to be a challenge'. There were also concerns about encouraging the development of a culture of student disengagement through miscommunication of expectations. Participant 3 noted how some disability adjustments were not always helpful for encouraging student participation with online sessions.

Discussion – Lessons learned

The Covid-19 pandemic has stimulated a 'time of immense and continual change' (JISC 2020, 3). It is evident that this uncertainty will persist beyond the crisis as institutional leaders contend with the impact of this period on their long-term strategies (Parkin and Brown 2020). Any resultant policies and procedures need to consider the perspectives of stakeholders from all institutional levels to encourage cooperation and trust. The findings from this case study have illustrated the experiences and viewpoints from one such stakeholder group within an HEI.

Acknowledging the limitations presented by the case study's focus on an individual HEI; the small number of participants involved; and the fact that they were all part of the same stakeholder group of lecturers, the authors make calls for future research to explore the voices of all key stakeholder groups and across the sector. Whilst the case study has drawn on a number of key, recent and sector-wide reports (Office for Students 2021; Parkin and Brown 2020; JISC 2020), the acceleration of the pace of change necessitated by the pandemic means that further research is needed to ensure that knowledge remains current.

Within this context, the case study demonstrates how lecturers have adopted a spectrum of responses to this turbulent environment by proactively developing innovative approaches despite facing considerable challenges. Their creativity ranged from surmounting barriers to replicating on-campus teaching practices remotely to the development of completely new materials and methods. Regardless of such differences, the innovative approaches taken by all the lecturers in this case study signified a strong sense that they were focussed on delivering quality teaching and maintaining effective relationships with their students in this unfamiliar environment.

The case study demonstrates that these lecturers were mindful of the impact of remote delivery on student interactions, with both tutors and peers, and indicates how their awareness of this issue may have been compounded by their own experiences of losing networks during their move to the blended environment. It also illustrates examples of the steps that they took to mitigate the changes; for example, adjusting their methods of communication. As students from across the HE sector have reported a desire for increased 'interactivity and collaboration' (JISC 2020, 11), there is also evidence to demonstrate the positive impact of developing learning communities for student engagement and retention (Chrysikos and Catterall 2020) and the importance of adopting appropriate communications tools (Adams and Wilson 2020).

It is evident from the case study that the development of such innovative approaches to increase the potential for quality provision requires prior experience of, and confidence in, technology. Reflecting the distinct pedagogies centred around online delivery (Rapanta et al. 2020; Bryson and Andres 2020), the case study indicates a new emphasis on teaching design; suggesting the importance of specific knowledge around planning blended teaching sessions (as distinct from customary face to face sessions) and an understanding of the supporting technologies available. From a practical perspective, educators need to have access to appropriate resources, including office equipment, software, internet access, and training. They may also need additional time to build relevant and engaging teaching materials suitable for the online platforms, become accustomed to the new technologies, and 'play around' with available resources to develop their confidence in delivery. As HEIs develop their future strategic and operational approaches, any policy, procedural and/or practice development that encourages educators to explore new or adapted approaches needs to take into account the inherent impact on workloads. Notwithstanding the aforementioned pressure to be 'always on' (McDowall 2017), and the resultant impact on wellbeing, rising workloads

are a subject of ongoing dispute across the post-16 education sector in the UK (University and College Union 2021).

The reflections in this case study demonstrate that the innovations necessitated by the pandemic could inform preferable delivery options that may not have otherwise been identified. However, it is important to recognise the limitations of the blended environment. Those leading courses with specialist, technical and practical elements will wish to retain on-campus activities in order to preserve the student experience (Parkin and Brown 2020). Lecturers in these subjects may also have concerns about the extent to which they will be able to both use their expertise and keep their knowledge current if on-campus activities are reduced. The Covid-19 pandemic presents significant challenges to ambitions for increased external engagement, including placement opportunities. Although this case study has demonstrated the creative ways in which lecturers have managed these, there remain concerns about both student and provider engagement should such challenges continue (McLaughlin et al. 2020).

Such operational level factors are being compounded by wider contextual elements, such as the lack of Covid-19 guidance for the HE sector from the central Government, which has fostered a culture of isolationist approaches within a competitive HE landscape. Financial challenges will undoubtably factor into strategies given the ever-present threat of budgetary limitations, for example the drop in overseas student registrations (Rapanta et al. 2020). There is some concern that the resultant financial implications of Covid-19 could be used for implementing 'pre-existing plans for cost-cutting' (Watermeyer et al. 2020, 635). Any future decisions must incorporate the potential for ongoing change (Parkin and Brown 2020). The uncertainties presented by this environment necessitate the development of a comprehensive underpinning system of support for both educators and the student body.

This is a pivotal time for HEIs as they evaluate their various responses to the Covid-19 pandemic to identify best practice that they can draw on in their attempts to future-proof themselves within an already challenging HE environment. Within this context, the authors make two principal recommendations for all HEIs across the sector. First, they should ensure that they engage in meaningful consultation with all key stakeholder groups regarding the development of new strategic and operational directions, policies, and practice. Considering the context of the global pandemic, strategic directions should have a focus on fostering wellbeing amongst staff and students. Second, they should provide timely and accessible training to both educators and students, that is appropriately tailored according to existing levels of experience, to help build skills, knowledge, and confidence in using the available technologies within the blended environment going forwards. The authors hope that the learnings presented by this case study will encourage the development of a wider discourse around the changes needed to underpin the delivery of quality provision within the new landscape for the benefit of all stakeholders involved.

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