

Alternative Modes of Delivery

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As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic (now an almost forgotten event) there has been an involuntary shift to online learning – in its many manifestations. In turn, this has highlighted and facilitated a range of alternative modes of delivery for international students. These are sometimes referred to as flexible modes of delivery and at other times as alternative modes of delivery. The traditional face-to-face mode was overtaken (certainly for a period of time) by a range of alternative arrangements that catered for lockdowns and community restrictions. Arguably, the most challenging part of those restrictions had been their unpredictability, making planning and strategy difficult. The option of having alternatives to face-to-face delivery ready and available was a most-valued commodity at the time.

Prior to the pandemic, international education (onshore in Australia) was in face-to-face mode, with strict regulations around - the percentage of classes allowed to be completed online by international students; attendance at face-to-face classes; the extent of employment hours permitted on a student visa; and progression rates (mostly 50 percent) needed to maintain a student visa. Much of this was dictated by the Australian ESOS Act 2000 and the supporting National Code. *Then, of course, everything changed!*

In truth, there had been a slow and determined movement in the regulations over a period of time. Matters such as attendance have been downplayed for a number of years, for example. Working hours have been redefined (quite significantly in recent times and now returning to pre-COVID arrangements) and even matters of progression were either suspended or made more flexible to provide the support and compassion required when dealing with students under duress.

The so-called alternative modes of delivery

The so-called alternative (flexible) modes of delivery – Blended Learning (bLearning) as described by West (2021), Online Learning (eLearning) as outlined by Chanda (2021), Hybrid Learning (hLearning) as illuminated by Whateley (2021) and Mobile Learning (mLearning) were viewed previously as essentially domestic options with little if any application for international students studying in Australia – certainly those onshore. International students were provided with some of these options at the more progressive institutions – but usually under conditions and other restrictions. The rapid shift to online learning in 2020 created a precedent (some say a lightning rod) that is likely to stay with us for some time. The prediction is that even with a return to face-to-face learning in the years ahead the percentage of study permitted online for international students will grow to 50 percent of the load (currently 30%). This represents a significant shift in thinking and would be consistent with developments in other countries around the world.

Tertiary institutions were required to move rapidly into eLearning – it was a matter of survival during the pandemic. Some of the better-prepared organisations (and many had been dabbling in alternative/flexible options for some time) managed to deviate even further and utilise the other modes with varying degrees of success. Sector reports suggest that the more flexibly inclined have fared best during the so-called international student crisis. There are several reasons for this. When the Australian Government regulations softened on the number of paid hours that international students can work in country, for example – from 40 hours per fortnight to unlimited – the demand for flexibility increased significantly. This will be a very difficult situation to reverse in the coming years. It is highly likely that this flexibility will remain a constant feature as we move forward.

The perils of enforced eLearning

The sudden switch to online (eLearning) caused a considerable amount of distress for many institutions and in particular - for academic staff. For many, this was the 'end of the world' as they knew it. Understandably, for those who had been teaching international students for many years in the traditional face-to-face mode, this was indeed a precarious and uninvited demand – they were in fact 'digital convicts' (Whateley, 2020). For others, it was an opportunity to put in place a variety of modes that could still maintain high levels of student engagement. Learner engagement (coupled with the student experience) – remember - is perceived as the end game.

My own institution at the time fared well, with Student Feedback on Units (July 2021) scoring 4.4/5 (the highest score since record-keeping commenced in T1, 2016); Staff Satisfaction scoring 4.3/5; and 92 percent of students stating that they would prefer to stay online for the duration of their studies. Sector feedback suggests that the aggregate was lower than this.

Given the commitment made to technology upgrades and capital investment in lecture studios, these indicators were satisfying and to some degree a relief. Classrooms were quickly converted to lecture studios with roaming cameras, monitors, an upgraded learning management system, and a 'live' studio look and feel – *all at considerable cost*.

Staff training also became a priority. The notion of simply throwing staff online (and from remote locations) was not seen as either appropriate or viable. The key issue was a focus on learner engagement, and this was best achieved with high quality delivery from a familiar environment. This again came with a cost – but the dividend was worth it.

This approach was by no means the standard approach. Many institutions were thrown into chaos from the outset, struggled with home delivery, and reaped significant disapproval from students throughout the country. The notion of recycling low-end presentations was also met with considerable criticism and disappointment across the sector.

The pitfalls associated with returning to face-to-face classes on campus

The return-to-campus movement took quite a few hits with flash lockdowns across the country. Some of the enforced lockdowns (Victoria had six) varied in length from 10 days to four months. The key issue was the unpredictability of closures (and durations), especially in some States with hair-trigger border closures accompanied by circuit-breaker lockdowns – both with very short fuses – and very little time to prepare. In this context, face-to-face options seemed dim - in truth doomed for the short term at least.

The very notion of opening-up to face-to-face operations and then having to do an about-turn several weeks later in response to restrictions made the task at best stressful, and at worst unmanageable. The process also created unnecessary uncertainty for students. This was less of an issue with business students than it was for applied science/performing arts students.

Several providers formally announced that they will continue online learning for the duration. The news was not well received in many quarters. What the decision did though, was to provide a degree of certainty and consistency – which was not a bad development in itself. It would appear that online learning - and its associated variations - were here for some time. Some have predicted that they will endure well into the future.

The future of hybrid learning

Hybrid Learning (hLearning) appears to be the future - or certainly the mode for the next couple of years. The model is based on delivering live sessions online with the option for students to attend face-to-face by choice. It is not unlike the concept of 'live-to-air' television. Drawing from the analogy of the hybrid car – the driver makes the decision on the mode, and this can change as required along the journey.

The enormous advantage of the hLearning mode was the quick (and relatively easy) response mechanism to future lockdowns and restrictions. The acceptance of the notion of high-end hygiene and COVID safety were also well accommodated in this mode. The worst-case scenario was that the option of sitting in a classroom during a live delivery is suspended for a given period – but teaching and learning continue online without interruption. It is important to remember that the author's own institution has gauged through student survey that currently only 8 per cent of students were even interested in physically returning to campus.

The mode also provided students with the all-important option of on-campus/off-campus delivery. This was well received by students. For staff, it required delivery on site throughout the trimester/semester. This was less well received by staff – but for many, it was regarded as a necessary evil. The issue of staff teaching onsite was all about ensuring a quality output complete with the necessary technology standard and IT support. This standard and consistency of delivery are difficult (if not impossible) to replicate in the home-studio environment.

The impact on multiple site/campus delivery is now up for debate. In the face-to-face environment international students at multiple locations would receive dedicated, campus-bound delivery. This has changed significantly with a more centralised online delivery plus additional campus support required (face-to-face) as needed. This provides an extra swing on the notion of hybrid learning.

Staff and student perceptions

At the heart of the COVID-19 scenario was the impact that the changes have had on the international student experience. There was a mixed response to online learning – and this is not surprising. At the same time, there had been considerable acceptance of the mode not only in Australia but internationally (Klebs et al, 2021). This has been accompanied by an acknowledgement of the validity and currency of online learning (along with its variations).

There has been a considerable focus on student and staff response to online learning and teaching – and the outcomes vary from institution to institution. Mechanisms such as student feedback on unit surveys; staff satisfaction surveys; student satisfaction with online learning surveys; national QILT surveys relating to the overall student experience (the 2021 data collection commenced in July 2021 and will be published in early 2022); industry group surveys; and a plethora of research surveys (both private and public) are all useful tools for gathering intelligence on and around student/staff satisfaction.

The essential issue is gathering the data – and most importantly using the findings to improve delivery. Keeping abreast of state and national trends is important. The best source of meaningful feedback though is - internal survey. It is essential that all providers have a clear understanding of their own student/staff needs and respond quickly and appropriately to the needs expressed. Acting on national feedback can be useful, but nothing beats

listening carefully to your own cohorts and acting quickly and decisively. If supported appropriately, the outcomes and levels of satisfaction can be highly credible and satisfying for all stakeholders.

Using the ongoing data collected provides a genuine opportunity to enhance both the student experience and learner engagement. The author's School was an independent business school. It appears that even now onsite activities are currently not a high priority for students. Lecturer engagement and eResourcing, on the other hand, have become vital elements in the learning and teaching effort. This may not be the case with other institutions – but the important fact is that it is the key to an Institution's success.

What does international student learning and teaching look like moving forward?

Online learning will be with us for some time. With the opening of international borders in mid-2022 there has been a significant return of student numbers – some say a tsunami-like event. Others are more conservative, but most agree the return has been in solid numbers.

The suggestion, though, is not a return to the 'way things were' but rather to a more mixed-mode approach to learning and teaching. This mix will likely include up to 30-50 percent online, a partial return to face-to-face (as it was) and alternative options (blended, hybrid and mobile) changing the international (and certainly the domestic) education landscape for the better.

This may impact significantly on the notion of completing the full degree onshore. Students may opt for the online option offshore (for example) with only partial completion onshore. This will require a rethink in terms of visa regulations – but may in fact be a viable approach. A number of institutions – forced by the pandemic conditions – have significant numbers of students currently offshore studying online. To some degree this has changed the thinking around the issue.

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