

Digitalisation today: Benefits and risks for teaching and learning **Digitalisation Webinar One, 29 October 2020**

The OECD Higher Education Policy programme is organising a series of webinars focusing on the impact that digital technologies are having on higher education learners and institutions, and on ways in which public authorities are responding to support the effective use of digital technologies. The first webinar took place on 29 October 2020, and it was attended by 155 participants from 22 OECD countries, including administrators, educators and students from universities across the globe, as well as Higher Education Agencies and Ministries, the European Commission, UNESCO and TUAC.

The webinar began with a brief overview of risks and opportunities that may accompany the adoption of digital technologies in higher education, and potential areas of focus for future webinars. Participants heard from an international education technology firm providing higher education learning management systems, and a national co-operative of education and research institutions who collaborate to support the adoption and effective use of digitalisation. Representatives of higher education instructor and student unions shared their experiences, concerns and advice about the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning. They were joined as well by the representative of a national teaching and learning council for higher education.

Some of the key messages shared in the webinar include:

1. **The adoption of digital technologies in higher education commenced decades ago, and has varied widely** among (and within) higher education systems, evidence of which can be seen, for example, in sharply dissimilar rates of online enrolment across OECD higher education systems. **When digital technologies were adopted, their use was often limited.** For example, instructors in many higher education institutions made modest use of learning management systems (LMS), most often employing them to post syllabi, distribute course materials and assignments, and keep gradebooks, while students used them principally to retrieve course materials, announcements, or grades.
2. **The COVID-19 pandemic has had a wide and immediate impact on digitalisation higher education**, forcing higher education institutions to make an urgent transition to emergency online teaching. LMS providers experienced a dramatic change in the instructor and learner demands. The use of virtual classrooms (e.g. *Blackboard Collaborate*) increased by 3600% in March 2020, and by 9000% by the end of September 2020. Much of this was driven by universities moving their courses online, but there was also an unprecedented growth in the use of LMS (*Blackboard Learn*) and students' use of alternative content formats. The pandemic also sparked a huge spike in interest of provision offered by massive online open courses (MOOCs). Coursera, for example, experienced an increase of more than 18 million registered users between March and August 2020. It is widely expected that **higher education systems will experience a sustained intensification of digitalisation** in course design, instruction, assessment, learning analytics and credentialing, among other aspects teaching and learning.
3. **Seen from the vantage point of an educational technology provider**, *Juan Alegret of Blackboard*, successfully responding to demands for wider and more effective use of digital technologies will require higher education institutions to commit to the development of a **next-generation learning environment**. In this vision, the digital environment experienced by **learners** will be adapted to mobile devices, offer improved opportunities for student collaboration, and support interactive digital classrooms. **Instructors** will have fuller access to learning analytics to identify at-risk students and supports they need for learning success; improved capacities for assessment (including proctoring and

plagiarism detection); and enhanced opportunities continuing professional development in the use of their digital learning environment.

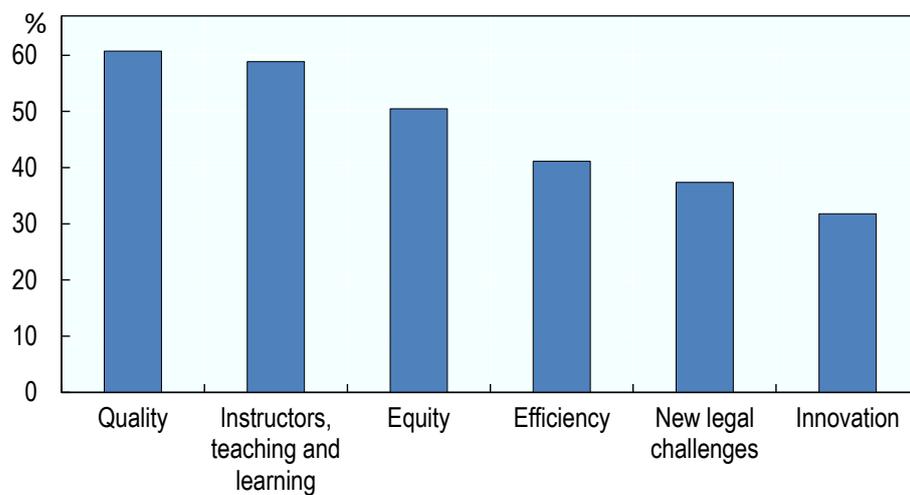
4. The views of a national **consortium education and research institutions that has joined together to address their shared IT and learning needs**, were shared by *Johanna de Groot, of SURF*, who noted that the effective digitalisation of higher education faces barriers that include the need for large-scale **investments** in hardware and software and sufficient **time and training for teaching staff**, who are often bottlenecks in the adoption of new technologies. Institutions also differ widely in their ability to take full advantage of ICT to create a richer and more flexible learning experience. Higher education and research institutions should steer the digitalisation process to ensure that the services offered by educational technology providers are responsive to the needs of faculty and students, and grounded in educational research. The system-wide collaboration of HEIs can be a means to **safeguard public interests** in the introduction of ICT and can alleviate concerns over the role of private firms in constructing the digital learning environment.
5. Canadian university instructors, *David Robinson of Canadian Association of University Teachers* noted, are almost fully unionised, and through their collective agreement they have the capacity to determine what and how to teach. As in other OECD countries, the emergency shift to virtual teaching was adopted with patience and flexibility on the part of students and instructors, though neither found the experience to be fully satisfactory. **Instructors were dissatisfied** with lack of management consultation during the shift to emergency remote learning. They also found it necessary to take on an increased workload, both to revise courses for online provision, and to respond to greater demands for student support. **Online instruction has also generated new or heightened challenges**, including newly-recognised learner mental health needs, and challenges to academic freedom when instruction is provided to learners in jurisdictions where there are restriction on the exchange of ideas.
6. The European Students' Union surveyed members, the results of which revealed a **clear preference for face-to-face teacher-student interaction**. *Gohar Hovhannisyian, ESU President*, observed that emergency remote instruction provided what many students viewed as an **incomplete and insufficient learning experience**. Lectures and practical classes were not always replaced by an online equivalent. **Learning support** was mostly provided by a close family member, a friend, and/or a classmate, rather than teaching staff. Online study created new challenges. For most respondents, their workload has significantly increased during online learning. Some report difficulty obtaining sufficient **internet access**, a suitable **study space** and adequate course materials. Based upon the survey and student experiences, the European Student Union has offered 14 recommendations to higher education institutions and policy makers to support a higher-quality learning experience for students.
7. Those who are responsible for the support of teaching and learning across a nation's higher education system focus on the development of a **learning ecosystem** that is linked to, but different from, a digital technology ecosystem. *Terry Maguire, Director of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Ireland*, observed that, like any ecosystem in the natural world, a learning ecosystem is made up of multiple elements and that this ecosystem needs to be balanced for sustainability. She expressed concern that the **pandemic has shifted the balance recently to a high level of focus on the digital technologies behind online/remote learning with less attention being focused on the people and pedagogies they support**. Stating that data and technologies are tools, rather than magic wands, Terry pointed out that it is what is done with these tools and how they are interpreted that matters. Considering the opportunities presented by all that has been learned through the shift to online/remote learning, she also commented that if we limit our use of technology to the

replication of traditional pedagogical and assessment approaches will be doing our students a disservice.

The webinar concluded with a brief poll of meeting participants, in which they were asked to select the three topics of highest priority for future webinars on digitalisation in higher education among six listed topics. The results show quality (61%); instructors, teaching and learning (59%); and equity (50%) as the three highest priorities among respondents.

Topics of highest priority for future webinars on digitalisation in higher education

% of participants including this topic among their three of highest priority



Source: Responses of participants in the *Digitalisation today* webinar (N=107)