Higher education during COVID-19:

A snapshot of digital engagement in Commonwealth universities

The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) is an international organisation dedicated to building a better world through higher education. With over 500 member universities across 50 countries, our international network spans more than 10 million students and over a million academic and professional staff.

In May 2020, the ACU undertook a survey of digital engagement across its network. The survey sought to gain a snapshot of digital connectivity and engagement in Commonwealth universities, as well as the pandemic's impact on teaching, learning, and research.

This policy brief summarises the survey's findings and offers a series of recommendations for governments and institutions. The full results are available at www.acu.ac.uk/news/higher-education-during-covid-19-a-snapshot-of-digital-engagement-in-commonwealth-universities

Headline findings

- The continuing digital divide poses a major threat to equitable access to higher education and lifelong learning globally.

- Gaps in digital engagement at different levels *within* universities highlight a 'double digital divide' in higher education.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the challenges and disparities in accessing education online, but also presents a window of opportunity to build resilience and widen access.

- Since the start of the pandemic, the shift online as a result of COVID-19 may have boosted perceptions of the quality of online teaching and learning and looks set to lead to lasting change.

Overview

Higher education makes a vital contribution to society and is integral to meeting all 17 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. As the world reels from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities will be crucial to global economic and social recovery.

Yet universities everywhere have faced enormous disruption as a result of the pandemic, with those that can forced to move their activities online.

This rapid shift has particular significance in a Commonwealth context, where stark disparities in internet connectivity and infrastructure persist – and for ACU member universities, two thirds of which are in low and middle income countries. These divides, laid bare by COVID-19, are a major obstacle in the drive for inclusive and equitable access to higher education by 2030 – a target of Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The results of the ACU's digital engagement survey highlight this stubborn digital divide and its impact on universities' current capacity to deliver teaching and research. They also point to further disparities at different levels *within* universities, and between students, academics, and professional staff.

More encouragingly, the findings suggest that the rapid switch online may have boosted perceptions of the quality of online teaching and learning, and looks set to lead to lasting change.

The expansion of online learning in response to the pandemic, and the huge challenges that came with it, present a window of opportunity – not only to use the lessons learned to build stronger, more resilient institutions, but also to widen access to higher education. However, the survey confirms that this potential will only be realised if governments and institutions take swift action to ensure no one is left behind in the shift online.

Recommendations for governments and policymakers

- Prioritise funding for higher education, in recognition of its vital contribution to society and to post-COVID recovery worldwide

- Invest in tackling the digital divide in higher education through funding, financing and public-private partnerships

- Widen access to higher education and lifelong learning by supporting digital transformation initiatives in universities

- Bring university leaders, telecommunications companies, global employers, and students together to develop a common agenda for the future of digital higher education

- Provide a platform for institutions to share knowledge at different stages of their digital transformation journeys and to discuss common challenges

Recommendations for universities

- Provide financial and technical support to improve access to data, devices, and broadband

- Identify and develop targeted policies to address the digital divides within universities to ensure no one is left behind

- Mainstream digital transformation across every element of institutional strategy and planning

- Recognise that the ability to move research activities online varies considerably according to discipline, putting research in particular areas at risk

About the survey

The impact of COVID-19 has been felt all over the world, in every sector of society. As of 8 April 2020, universities and other tertiary education institutions were closed in 175 countries and communities. The World Bank estimate that over 220 million post-secondary students have had their studies stopped or significantly disrupted due to the pandemic.

As the ACU's Higher Education Together campaign has shown, universities across the Commonwealth reacted quickly to ensure continuity in teaching and learning, support research and innovation, and inform community responses. These actions have

largely relied on moving education, research and administration activities online.

Given disparities in internet access and connectivity across the Commonwealth, this shift poses both immediate and longer-term challenges for equity and inclusion.

In response, the ACU's digital engagement survey sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the current picture of digital connectivity and engagement among university staff and students across Commonwealth countries?

- What has the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic been on online and distance learning, and how might this evolve in the future? How have attitudes changed? What opportunities and challenges does this bring?

- How has research been affected by campus closures and lockdowns? What are the implications for researchers now, and in the near future?

- What does the segmented analysis tell us about digital equality and how this intersects with national contexts or other inequalities?

The survey, conducted in May 2020, drew 258 respondents from 33 countries. 44% of respondents were academics, 25% were professional services staff, 17% were students and 10% were senior deans. The regional split was as follows: Africa 66%, Asia 21%, Europe 4%, Pacific 4%, and Caribbean and Americas 4%.

Survey statistics – summary findings (May 2020)

1. **The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on universities across the Commonwealth and triggered a rapid move online across education, research and administration.**

   - **Campus closure:** 52% of respondents said that their campus had fully closed in response to COVID-19, with 45% reporting partial closure.

   - **Online teaching and learning:** 80% of respondents reported some, most, or all teaching and learning had moved online.

   - **Research:** 78% of respondents agreed that the pandemic had affected their ability to undertake research, with 69% of respondents reporting they been able to take research activities online.

2. **A digital divide continues to exist between high income countries (with generally high connectivity) and lower income countries (with poor connectivity)**

   - **Access to broadband**: While 83% of respondents from high income countries have access to broadband, this figure is 63% for respondents from upper middle income countries, 38% for respondents from lower middle income countries, and only 19% for respondents from low income countries.

   - **Online teaching and learning**: Respondents reporting that their institutions have not been able to move any teaching and learning online are based exclusively in low (24%) and lower middle (19%) income countries.

   - **Online research**: 43% of respondents without a broadband connection strongly agreed that the pandemic had affected their ability to undertake research, compared to 33% of those with broadband access.

3. **Gaps in digital engagement at different levels *within* the university highlight a 'double digital divide' in higher education**

   - **Access to broadband**: Senior leaders were most likely to have access to broadband (74%), followed by professional services (52%), academics (38%), and students (30%).

   - **Online working:** Students were less likely than other professional/status groups to report always having worked online prior to the pandemic, while senior leaders were more likely than their counterparts to say they would work online frequently after the pandemic.

   - **Institutional support for remote working**: Senior leaders and professional services staff (both 82%) were more likely than students (45%) and academics (40%) to report institutional contributions toward devices or data.

4. **The switch online as a result of COVID-19 is perceived to have improved the quality of online teaching and learning, and looks set to lead to lasting change**

   - **Perceptions of quality in online teaching and learning:** 81% of respondents agreed that the quality of online learning and teaching has improved since the start of the pandemic.

   - **There is a clear preference for blended learning over degrees studied solely online:** 90% of respondents agreed that a blended degree, involving a combination of online and face-to-face learning, is equivalent to a degree earned only through face-to-face learning. By contrast, 53% felt a degree studied solely online is equivalent to a degree earned through face-to-face learning.

   - **Online working:** 65% of respondents said they foresee working online frequently after the pandemic, while only 1% said they never would. 19% said they foresee working online 'all of the time', 16% said 'rarely', and 1% said 'never'. This suggests the pandemic may lead to lasting change in behaviours.

   - **Online teaching and learning**: 53% of respondents said they thought all (26%) or most (28%) departments would continue to use online teaching and learning after the pandemic. Only 4% said that no departments would do so.

   - **Institutional capacity and will:** 89% of respondents agreed that their institution has the *will* to develop high-quality online teaching and learning, while 82% of respondents agreed that their institution has the *capacity* to do so.

A Class of 2020 student attends her online graduation from home

5. **Universities face a range of challenges in migrating their activities online, which vary according to context**

    - **Remote working:** The most frequently cited challenges for remote working across all respondents were internet speed (69%), data costs (61%), internet reliability (56%), and time zones (38%). Respondents from low and lower middle income countries were most likely to cite data costs and internet speed as challenges. By contrast, respondents from high income were less likely to cite challenges overall and their top-cited challenge was time zones (53%). Senior leaders are less likely than academics to cite data costs (48% compared to 68%) and internet speed (63% compared to 74%) as challenges.

    - **Online teaching and learning**: The most frequently cited challenges across all respondents were accessibility for students (81%), staff training and confidence (79%), connectivity costs (76%), and student engagement (71%). Connectivity costs were the most frequently reported challenges for respondents from low and lower middle income countries. High income countries, with higher levels of connectivity, were more likely to cite challenges relating to student perceptions of quality.

    - **Online research**: While the impact of the pandemic has required urgent, rapid transformation of both education and research activities, research-active staff have been able to pivot to activities which can be done online, in the short-term. However, responses also suggest a variable impact by discipline, with 92% academics in the natural, environmental and earth sciences reporting being affected, compared to 61% of those in the arts, social sciences and humanities.

6. **Universities are providing support for remote working, but with variations between countries and professional role**

    - **Institutional support:** 37% of respondents said their university makes a contribution towards data costs. 31% said their university provides device(s) and only 7% said the university contributes towards device costs. Respondents also highlighted support through digital advice and training, university internet connections, and online learning, tools and software.

    - **Support by national income level and professional role/status:** Institutional support is greatest in high income countries (87%) followed by upper middle income countries (70%), lower middle income countries (51%) and low income countries (52%). Senior leaders and professional services staff (both 82%) were more likely than students (45%) and academics (40%) to report institutional contributions toward devices or data.

    - **Effectiveness of support:** Responses suggest that university support for data and device costs/provision are effective, insofar as they correlate with a higher likelihood of broadband access, a lower likelihood of never having worked online pre-pandemic, and a higher predicted likelihood of frequent online working post-pandemic.

The survey was conducted by Martin Hamilton and report writing and analysis was led by Lucy Shackleton and Rosanna Mann, on behalf of the ACU.