

The digitalisation of higher education: Risks, benefits and opportunities for improvement

Webinar: Thursday 29 October 2020, 1:30 – 3:00 p.m. CET

This document provides information on the 29 October 2020 webinar - *Digitalisation today: Benefits and risks for teaching and learning*, the first in a series of webinars on digitalisation organised by the OECD Higher Education Policy programme.

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The digitalisation of higher education

COVID-19 has caused substantial short-term disruption to higher education, but the long-term impacts are uncertain

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a deeply disruptive impact on higher education, as it has on virtually every aspect of life. Emergency transitions from in-person to remote instruction have been hurriedly forced on educators and students across the world. International flows of students and researchers have been heavily disrupted. Precarious or diminished family finances have led to student hardship, spurring many countries to provide emergency financial support to students, or, in some, to postpone loan repayment among graduates. In some higher education systems, the budgets of higher education institutions have been (or will be) hard hit, prompting cuts among academic and non-academic staff, and extraordinary short-term government support to institutions. The latest cohort of higher education graduates are finding that economic activity and hiring in some economic sectors has collapsed (and in others, surged), disrupting career plans, and forcing some to seek new skills and credentials. In time, many effects of COVID-19 are likely to diminish or disappear. Economic activity will rebound, easing institutional and household budgets. Staff retrenchments may cease and hiring may recover. International student flows may return to previous levels, though with some changes in study destinations. However, some of the disruption provoked by COVID-19 is spurring innovation in higher education systems, and may lead to lasting changes in how they operate.

One enduring COVID-19 impact appears to be intensified digitalisation. Fully realising the benefits of this will require new thinking and policy choices.

One change likely to remain after the pandemic ends is the intensified use of digital technologies in the delivery and management of higher education. Higher education institutions have been adopting digital technologies for decades, albeit unevenly, and sometimes slowly, across a wide range of their administrative, educational and research activities. COVID-19 is spurring an acceleration and intensification of digitalisation in course design, instruction, assessment, learning analytics and credentialing, among other aspects teaching and learning.

The digitalisation of higher education holds great promise, including in terms of widening access to non-traditional learners, reducing instructional costs, expanding individualised and adaptive instruction, and opening opportunities for technology firms to stimulate innovation. However, it carries with it risks. These may include risks to the confidentiality of learners' personal information, and to academic integrity in assessment. There are also concerns about the loss of important developmental experiences outside of the classroom, including peer learning and work-based learning opportunities; about widening inequalities resulting from unequal access to digital technologies; and about disparities in the capacity of instructors and students to make full use of its potential. Policy makers increasingly recognise that realising the potential of digitalisation will require an extended re-examination and revision of the policies for which they may bear responsibility, including the funding of institutions and students; the ways in which instructional staff are supported and rewarded; the monitoring and assurance of quality; and the ways in which learning is credentialed and verified. This recognition is increasingly reflected in [national](#)

[digitalisation strategies for education](#), and in the European Commission's new [Digital Education Action Plan](#).

A series of webinars will examine the benefits, costs and risks of digitalisation in higher education

The OECD Higher Education Policy programme plans to organise a series of webinars on higher education digitalisation. We will begin with a brief overview of how instructors are using digital teaching technologies today, and reflect on some of the risks and rewards of teaching and learning in an increasingly digitalised higher education environment. Following this broad overview, subsequent webinars will look closer at topics identified during the conclusion of our first webinar. To illustrate, these topics might include, among others:

- a. **Equity:** *How can we create and/or ensure consistent, meaningful, technology-enhanced learner experiences, especially in places where quality broadband access remains variable or unreliable? What are the unique challenges of supporting vulnerable and underrepresented learners, such as low-income learners or those with disabilities, presented by a digital environment? Should financial support to learners be adapted to a digital learning environment?*
- b. **Efficiency:** *What opportunities and challenges are there for digital technology in pooling resources and finding efficiencies across higher education institutions, including through open educational resources, economies of scale in course delivery, and targeted outsourcing?*
- c. **Instructors and effective teaching:** *How do academic career and workload policies shape the adoption or effective use of digitalisation? Are instructors willing and able to make effective use of digitalisation in teaching? Should public authorities help institutions and instructors make effective use of digital technologies, and if so, how?*
- d. **Ownership, Academic Freedom, and Student Privacy:** *Who owns the digital courses that instructors develop? If the ownership of course content and materials does not reside with instructors, what does this mean for academic freedom? Who has access to and ownership of student information when instruction, advising, and assessment are digital, and how can learner privacy be protected?*
- e. **Quality and its assurance:** *Is the wider use of digitalisation in some higher education systems hampered by the criteria and methods employed by quality assurance bodies? Are there models of quality assurance well adapted to hybrid and fully online models of instruction? To what extent have higher education institutions developed effective means of monitoring and improving the quality of their digitalised offer?*
- f. **Innovation:** *Digitalisation facilitates new models of learner progression (e.g. competency-based learning), new credentials for the recognition of learning (e.g. microcredentials), and new ways of curating credentials (blockchain technologies). What are the potential benefits and risks of these innovations, and how should public authorities respond to them?*

29 October 2020 webinar - *Digitalisation today: Benefits and risks for teaching and learning*

Our first webinar sets out to provide some answers to the following questions:

1. How is the landscape of digitalisation in teaching and learning in higher education changing?
2. How can higher education institutions, instructors and students be supported to make the most of digital learning?
3. What are the concerns and hopes of instructors and students about digitalisation and its impact on teaching and learning?

In this webinar, we will hear from:

- A prominent provider of learning management systems, [Blackboard](#), who will provide an overview of key developments in the use of digital technologies in learning in higher education;
- [SURF](#), a Netherlands co-operative of education and research institutions – who will tell us about efforts in their country to [accelerate digitalisation](#) and make it more effective;
- Higher education instructors, represented by the [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#); and
- Students, represented by the [European Students' Union](#).

Following initial interventions, there will be a moderated discussion among the panellists, followed by an opportunity for meeting participants to pose questions. The event will conclude with a brief poll, in which we will invite meeting participants to prioritise areas of focus for future digitalisation webinars, including, the topics (a-f) listed above.

Draft agenda

Thursday 29 October 2020, 13:30 – 15:00 CET

Welcome and presentations (13:30 – 14:05)

Welcome and introductions – Chair, GNE on Higher Education, *Ruaidhri Neavyn*

The scope of digitalisation in higher education – OECD Secretariat

The landscape of digitalisation in teaching and learning – Blackboard, *Juan Alegret*

System-wide collaboration to advance digitalisation – SURF, *Johanna de Groot*

Moderated panel discussion: How to improve the balance of risk and reward? (14:05 – 14:30)

Moderator – Chair, GNE on Higher Education, *Ruaidhri Neavyn*

The experience of instructors – Canadian Association of University Teachers, *David Robinson*

The experience of students – European Students' Union, *Gohar Hovhannisyan*

Blackboard, *Juan Alegret*

SURF, *Johanna de Groot*

Questions to panel members from the audience (14:30-14:55)

Conclusion – Priorities for future webinars – Poll (14:55-15:00)
