

Chapter 10

Enhancing Student Engagement in Online Learning Environments Post–COVID–19: A Case of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected all sectors of human endeavour worldwide. This has forced a paradigm shift by disrupting ‘normal’ human life, introducing what is now seen as a ‘new normal’, which can also be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat. HEIs have equally been affected by this situation, which has forced conventional delivery of teaching and learning to be replaced by distance, online, or blended learning styles. Prior to the pandemic, only slightly over 25% of all students in UK HEIs received teaching and learning online. This statistic has now grown to 85%. This concerns learners’ engagement with online learning. Unlike traditional classroom teaching/learning, online learning faces challenges of ensuring the engagement of learners. This chapter aims to explore and discuss measures to enhance student engagement in online learning settings within HEIs. The main objectives are two-fold. First, the study describes what measures exist to enhance student engagement and, second, presents an enhanced framework in online learning in HEIs.

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic, caused by the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19), has impacted all facets of the economy, the world over. Consequently, a unique approach to pedagogy has emerged as a global norm in the first quarter of the year 2020. Online learning and teaching, distance education, blended learning and teaching are not novel teaching styles or approaches to curriculum design, but they have taken on renewed adoption. There are already many arguments and discussions about whether to classify these recent practices (forced by the emergence of the pandemic) as ‘emergency education’, within the confines that recognize the extraordinary circumstances in which they have been developed and deployed. These ‘pandemic pedagogies’ have also become the focus for the education technology industry.

The advent of the world wide web (www) over two decades now has resulted in a rapid increase in online education across secondary and tertiary institutions all over the world (Allen and Seaman, 2017). Recently, many studies have shown the promise of online learning in HEIs (Stone, 2017; de Wit, 2018), as well as demonstrating that learning outcomes in online settings are comparable to face-to-face learning (Bernard *et al.*, 2004; Means *et al.*, 2009). Research has also shown that the majority of academic faculty members hold a skepticism towards new teaching and learning paradigms, with many expressing concerns about the possibility of maintaining student engagement in online learning settings, which are less rigorous and (arguably) effective than traditional/conventional teaching and learning (Shea, Bidjerano and Vickers, 2016; Lederman, 2018).

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, just over 25% of the total number of students in HEIs received their course lectures or teaching instruction online, in line with the increasing number of student enrolment. However, the post Covid-19 statistic shows a massive 60% increase, resulting in over 85% of courses in HEIs being delivered using online, distance, or blended learning styles (Sandars *et al.*, 2020). As a direct consequence of this, higher education institutions (HEIs) have constantly and continually attempted to identify the factors that may improve or enrich the experience provided to students via eloquent online learning. This means that there will be modifications by tutors and executives to assist in realising positive outcomes. For instance, tutors or course content developers must improve their content to migrate from existing content to be leaning towards enhanced content (online) delivery thereby creating a learning environment the meets students’ learning requirements.

To give an example, the Times Higher Education, which is the recognized spearhead in university rankings, recently published an article discussing the potential benefit – to the economy of the UK – of switching to online teaching and learning (Grove, 2020). According to the article, the coronavirus pandemic can be leveraged to benefit UK universities long-term, by offering expanded borderless learning measures, including online, blended, and distant learning. The authors added that the pandemic has forced the university management to prepare and deliver courses remotely. In other words, universities that leverage on technology to deliver their courses remotely will thrive in and post Covid-19 pandemic. The direct result of this is that, many universities are currently expanding their offerings about potential online teaching and learning in terms of the provision of advice and feedback based on the student scores (Wladis, Conway and Hachey, 2016). This is typically achieved using surveys, which are widely used by HEIs (for instance, the times, guardian, etc.) to get an indication about the performance of the university, lecturers, location.

A critical component that affects the dissemination of information about online learning is that, despite the many studies that have articulated the benefits of successful online learning (Wang and Newlin, 2002; Kerr, Rynearson and Kerr, 2006; Abbitt, 2007; Wang, 2007; Kauffman, 2015), there has, nevertheless,

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