EDITORIAL

Virtually the same?: Online higher education in the post Covid-19 era

OVERVIEW OF THE SPECIAL SECTION

For this special section for the British Journal of Education Technology on the future of online higher education in the post-covid-19 era, we called for research papers to analyse and reflect on the lessons and experiences universities, East and West, have gained over the period of the ongoing pandemic. We intended that the special section would also explore the implications for the future of online university education. The research is, therefore, particularly timely, and provides a good complement to a previous BJET special section: online and blended learning: contexts and conditions for education in an emergency (Greenhow & Lewin, 2021), which emphasizes the ‘transition into’ and ‘transition through’ experiences. Since it was issued in June 2021, the call for the special section attracted great interest. Of those published here, seven are original research papers and two are review papers (bibliometric analysis and systematic review). There is a wide range of fascinating and important research from the global north and global south represented, but in trying to draw out the implications of the pandemic for future higher education policy, it would be tempting to say that although everything has changed, everything has stayed much the same: plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose, as the French say. Is this fair?

Digital transformation in learning and teaching has for many years been high on the agenda in higher education. However, pre-pandemic, many regarded eLearning as an optional supplement to face-to-face teaching, and educational software and systems were mainly used as productivity tools, without being integrated into pedagogies. The pandemic triggered an unexpected growth in eLearning and there was, worldwide, a speeding up of universities’ digital transformation. And the pandemic changed the ways university students were supported since studying entirely online became the only option for the majority of the subjects during the lockdown period. Consequently, universities were forced to invest in new technologies and update their existing IT infrastructure to support the change. Students and academic staff were forced to learn new technologies and to adjust quickly to the new approaches to learning and teaching.

The digital disruption generated many unforeseen technical and pedagogical challenges and difficulties, as well as well-being and mental health issues for academic staff and students. Whilst these challenges were already being documented in recent research, we argue that the pandemic-imposed online learning was a unique opportunity for moving teaching and learning practices forward. Since online learning has enabled universities to experiment with different technology-enriched pedagogical approaches on a large scale, for different subject areas, for different levels of education, and for a prolonged period of time, it has been a timely opportunity to engage with innovative pedagogy.

We were interested in whether the experience of and response to pandemic-related online learning varied between eastern and western, Global North and Global South, countries, and between domestic and international students.

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The articles in this special section all involve a significant amount of high-quality empirical research, often using mixed methods. It indicates many changes and many other things that did not seem to change. Reading them carefully, it is difficult to find patterns in the West distinct from patterns in the East, or distinctions between the Global North and Global South; it is also difficult to find evidence of significant sustainable pedagogic or policy changes, or, in most cases, any deep changes other than the move online. Some of the major hopes for online learning (and online life more generally) have included the hope for an increasing democratisation of educational encounters (prefigured already in the writings of Ivan Illich in the early 1970s, Illich, 1971), greater access to higher education from a wider range of as yet underrepresented groups, more flexible accreditation structures, and more collaboration across institutions and between countries. National and international emergencies such as wars and pandemics have in the past often led to rapid transformation in educational systems and practices, but it is difficult, from the articles represented here, to find much evidence for such a transformation taking place.

The special section starts with seven original research papers. Three of them focus on universities in Asia, such as Mainland China and Hong Kong, India, and South Korea. The other four focus on western universities in Canada, the UK and the USA. These papers explore the coping mechanisms among the Eastern and Western universities for emergency remote teaching (ERT) during the pandemic, the impact of ERT on students and staff, and also some of the implications for post-pandemic improvement.

**HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EAST**

Ng (2022) analyses the effectiveness of a month-long online aviation programme implemented in Mainland China and Hong Kong universities for undergraduate aviation and tourism students. He argues that even though students were motivated to learn online, and appreciated the collaborative and ‘hands-on’ opportunities offered by online learning, they prefer blended learning, since face to face teaching enables them to have a proper contact and social interactions with their peers, and also industry professionals in a physical environment. The research carried out by Lee and Fanguy (2022) focuses on online exam proctoring technologies. The researchers examine the impact and effectiveness of the technology in a South Korean context on three areas, namely student subjectivities, pedagogical relationships, and educational outcomes. Data on students studying in a top tier South Korean university suggest that online exam proctoring systems currently do not produce positive educational outcomes, and do not encourage students to further develop their high order thinking skills. This is mainly due to tutors’ perceived stereotypical view of students as cheaters and the associated unethical consequences. It has been reported in the existing research that university students found it very difficult to study effectively during the ERT (Besser et al., 2020; Greenhow & Lewin, 2021). Gupta et al. (2022) investigate the effectiveness of Embodied Conversational Agents (ECAs)—a type of AI chatbot in managing students’ academic stress in an Indian context. The ECAs are web-based and designed to have human-like conversations with students. The intention is to provide, in an Indian context, personalized and timely answers and support to students who suffer academic stress.

**HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE WEST**

During the pandemic, adjusting to the increase in online learning seems to have been just as challenging for academic staff as for students, as staff often needed to overcome their
digital skills gap and reconfigure their pedagogical approaches for online learning environments. Chen et al. (2022) report the perceived views and attitudes of both staff and students in a Canadian university towards ERT. Whilst both groups were being resilient and adapted quickly to the disruption, the researchers indicate that the long-term effectiveness of online learning and teaching needs to be evaluated in a continuous manner. Also situated in the context of Canadian higher education, the paper by Caron et al. (2022) describes online learning effectiveness mostly from students' perspectives. This research, however, focuses on the negative impacts, namely learning difficulties, and the authors reiterate the importance of developing and implementing dedicated digital pedagogies for the online environments because simply duplicating learning materials from face to face to online teaching can have some serious negative effects on students' motivation, engagement and academic achievement. The digital disruption of the pandemic generated many unforeseen technical and pedagogical challenges and difficulties, and also well-being and mental health issues for academic staff and students, which have begun to be documented in recent research (Besser et al., 2020; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the pandemic-imposed online learning also provided some opportunities and flexibility for international collaboration between universities and students globally. The next two papers emphasize virtual learning networks. McGregor et al. (2022) report their successful experience in transforming a UK-based face-to-face doctoral summer school to an online event. The researchers emphasize the importance of providing preparatory work (e.g., providing appropriate contextual background information prior to the start of the summer school) and also quality communication (e.g., discussions relating to their doctoral research, and regular social interactions) for student researchers. Similarly, Logemann et al. (2022) investigate the effectiveness of a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project. The project, in 2020, contained over 500 students from 17 universities in seven countries. The authors suggest the need for building and developing emotional belonging in this international collaborative context. They argue that the community feeling can be achieved by using technologies to maintain connections with each other, and also by tutors providing hands-on and ad hoc coaching style support to students.

HOLISTIC VIEWS OF ERT IN A LATIN AMERICAN AND A GLOBAL CONTEXT

In addition to the seven original research papers, the special section includes two review papers. Salas-Pilco et al. (2022) conduct a systematic review of literature on online student engagement in Latin American higher education. Student engagement is examined in three dimensions: behavioural, cognitive and affective. To help move the digital transformation of Latin American universities forward, the authors recommend improvements in internet connectivity, technology training for academics and emotional support for students. A second review paper, by Zhang et al. (2022), is a bibliometric analysis of literature on the global higher education sector regarding pandemic-imposed online learning. The review explores a wide range of topics in a global context, including the use of technologies, pedagogical approaches, student perceptions and the psychological impact of ERT. The discussion section of the paper highlights a major gap in the literature, that is, the lack of attention paid to students with disabilities. The researchers also argue that technologies on their own do not properly address the educational challenges students and staff face in an online learning environment. They must be used to enable and support innovative digital pedagogies.
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REFLECTIONS ON THIS SPECIAL SECTION

The special section addresses two key BJET themes—internationalization, and innovation. Research reports and analyses how universities in the East and West have been responding to emergency remote learning. Some of the important findings include:

- Students and staff favour hybrid learning (a combination of face-to-face and online learning) over either wholly face-to-face or wholly online learning. However, the effectiveness of online learning, in the long run, is not yet clear and needs to be monitored and evaluated consciously.
- In order to engage students better, it is important to provide a combination of teaching that is both synchronous (eg, pre-recorded lectures) and asynchronous (eg, live teaching sessions).
- Simply moving teaching content and activities from face-to-face to online environments will not work. They need to be redesigned to suit online learning.
- Technology is critical. Students and staff are recommended to receive training to develop and enhance their digital skills.
- However, technology on its own will not address the educational needs and the challenges staff and students face in online environments. To maximize the effectiveness of learning technologies and platforms, they need to be implemented to support pedagogical approaches.
- The quality of communication and social interactions are particularly important to build an inclusive online learning environment.
- Students need to enhance soft skills such as self-efficacy and digital skills.

Our first conclusion is that the papers will help readers gain a better understanding of online learning and teaching in a global context during the pandemic. However, they have not yet reported anything strikingly new, or anything previously unknown to academia. Second, the research focus and related recommendations seem to be mainly on the micro-level (programme and modules), with less attention paid to the meso level (institutional and intra-institutional) or the macro-level (national and intranational). For example, no paper has reported changes to policies and strategic plans at the university- or country-level. Third, although the special section includes research on both the Eastern and Western, Global North and Global South, education systems, there did not appear to be any significant differences in dealing with the digital disruption. In other words, universities all seem to have experienced similar challenges, and adopted similar approaches in teaching and supporting students in an online environment, regardless of their cultural, economic and educational contexts. This surprised us. Perhaps the global tech companies that supply most university systems meant that quickly-implemented increases in online learning were guided by a small number of multinational companies, thus smoothing out local differences? Our fourth conclusion is that the articles indicate how little is known about less ‘mainstream’ student groups, such as international students (onshore and offshore), students with disabilities, and mature students.

Is it fair to say that, although everything has changed, everything has really stayed much the same? On balance, this does seem fair, with pandemic-stimulated online learning seeming to have rather predictable advantages and challenges, and few big changes to policy or practice. Of course, time will tell, and there may be more substantial post-pandemic changes to online university education to come in the next few years. But if previous major national and international disruptions are considered, such as the world wars of the twentieth century, then transformative educational policy changes were enacted even as the wars were continuing—in the UK, with major educational legislation
(along with other transformative policy changes) enacted in 1918 and 1944, both prior to the ends of those two wars. On the whole, this special section suggests that online university education has increased dramatically during the pandemic, but also that it is, virtually (as it were), much the same.

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