

Economics Education in the Covid-19 Pandemic: what was done and what should be done?

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Project Team



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Introduction

- There is no doubt that Covid-19 changed the HE Learning, Teaching and Assessment landscape worldwide.
- From *unprecedented times* (Spring 2020) to the *new normal* (Academic Year 2020-21), the debate is now moving to **transformed and sustainable LTA practices** as well as **hybrid/hyflex teaching**.
- We are debating:
 - whether the pandemic was a challenge or an opportunity;
 - what is the pedagogical underpinning of the transformation;
 - the perception of the transformation within/outside HE.

Hypothesis

- The investigation covers two distinct periods:
 - Wave 1 – from March 2020 to September 2021
 - Wave 2 – from September 2021 to July 2021 (and beyond).
- Our expectation is that education policies, strategies and practices should have become more sophisticated from Wave 1 to Wave 2
 - from reaction-mode to pedagogical underpinning
 - reflections on sustainability in the long-term.

Research Questions

- What was the degree of **autonomy/initiative** of Economics departments over the process of adaptation of their teaching practices in response to the pandemic?
- Was/is there a **tension between process-driven and pedagogy-driven** approaches to teaching transformation?
- What were/are the **barriers and enablers** for the implementation of the desired response?

Research Questions

- What are the elements of innovative practice that will be **retained** for the future?
- To which extent desired/implemented **interventions are specific** to Economics Education?

Methodology

- Qualitative approach based on thematic analysis
- Semi-structured interviews – 45mins
- Data collection
 - aim to interview 20 colleagues – depending on saturation
 - awareness/active role in managing/leading teaching processes
 - ensure broad representation of different pedagogical expertise
 - ensure representation of different institutions.

Interview script

- Positioning of participants
- Relationship between department ↔ institution – decisional power
- Intervention in Wave 1 and Wave 2 – similarities/differences
- Student voice and consultation
- Inclusivity considerations
- Tension between technical ↔ discursive aspects of Economics
- Plans for the future and sustainability of practices.

Research plan

- Stage 1 preliminary inspection of data – basic themes
- Stage 2 grounded phase – what happened?
- Stage 3 theory-based phase – what should have happened?
- Stage 4 reflections and recommendations.

Sample & analysis

- Sample
 - n=9 interviews to date, 8 reviewed & used here
 - Highly experienced teachers of Economics (min 9 years, several 20+ years); various roles
 - Variety of institutional types inc. post-92, pre-92, Russell Group; England & Scotland
- Analysis
 - Very rich data → preliminary thematic coding (from video); confirmatory second reviewer
 - To come – additional interviews (see later); transcription & formal ‘template analysis’ (King, 1998)

Wave 1 – ‘crisis’

- All teaching & assessment moved online; reduced number & changed nature of assessment
 - Typically mandated; some school/department/unit autonomy (re the ‘how’)
 - *“[It] was more like the panic reaction, making sure the students are not disadvantaged” [EN-OL8]*
- Practical cf pedagogical drivers
- ‘Essential’ innovation only
- Various student support mechanisms/policies (& terminology)
 - ‘Safety net’, ‘no detriment’, automatic extensions, deferred assessment, automatic progression etc.
- Little/no student consultation (but lots of communication)
 - *“I don’t think last year we were at the point where we could ask yet because we didn’t know what we were doing ourselves” [EN-OL4]*
- Generally minimal staff support

Wave 2 – ‘do/undo’

- Opportunity for more considered response; most planned for ‘blended learning’ with pre-recorded or live online and/or ‘hybrid’ lectures plus (some) F2F tutorials/classes
 - *“I think that, uh, the University and the School was, at the outset, was very fixated with some sort of live delivery and face-to-face delivery. So I think they delivered a model of delivery which, while, on the face of it looked quite good... in terms of... students were getting face-to-face contact once every four weeks [it] was quite problematic to deliver” [EN-OL15]*
- Evidence of greater reflection but still largely practical drivers of pedagogy (at least beyond individuals)
 - Search for ‘resilience’
 - Senior leadership proscription/guidance (e.g. re contact hours/type) described as reflecting ‘risk aversion’ & concern about (assumed) student demand/response, fees (in England), recruitment positioning/competition etc.

Wave 2 – ‘do/undo’

- Plans undermined by COVID: pivots & uncertainty (S1 vs S2)
 - *“... every two months you were expecting a different type of teaching and assessment and then it bounced back again” [EN-OL8]*
- Further innovation cf Wave 1, but arguably mostly incremental
 - E.g. ‘bite size’ lectures, Q&A sessions, video/reports/poster assessments, 24 hour assessment ‘windows’
 - The ‘maverick turn’?
 - *“So from that point of view I’m really having to work within what the institution wants at any point in time... I’ve been sometimes taking freedoms within what I thought the system can do” [EN-OL8]*
- Student support focused on wellbeing cf progression/classification
- Mixed but generally modest institutional staff support, focused on ‘how to’ (Network)
 - *“A lot of the skills in designing and tutoring an online course are exactly the things you’d do for pivoting an existing course to an online environment” [EN-OL5]*

Teaching & assessment

- Technical vs discursive subjects
 - Challenges of migrating former to online/24 hour/open book format
 - Some reported shift to assessing understanding cf knowledge/problem-solving
 - Assessment now more 'authentic' (cf 3 hour exam)?
 - Need for graphics tablets for technical subjects
- Student performance
 - Generally described as good but noted may reflect adjustments & grade inflation, but also claims of improved student engagement & performance
 - Some concerns re academic integrity & need to design it out
 - *"... a lot of cheating has occurred" [EN-OL14]*

Innovation

- Beyond move online, mostly small-scale/incremental (as noted)
 - ‘Bolt on’ vs ‘holistic’ adaptations?
- COVID as an enabler, accelerating (some) existing trends
 - *“It pushed people out of their comfort zones to do things that they just wouldn’t have done; that inertia would not have permitted” [EN-OL5]*
 - *“we knew it [flipped learning] was good but we never had the courage to do it fully” [EN-OL4]*
- Many reported success & wanted to keep changes (e.g. video presentations, bite size pre-recorded material, quizzes, etc., plus also notion of scaffolding student learning journey)
 - *“almost every change I made in that course [due to COVID] has improved it” [EN-OL3]*

Student satisfaction, voice & wellbeing

- Generally high levels of communication with students
 - *“Between badly and very badly... in the communication” [EN-OL14]*
 - *“... the University did throw an awful lot of information at them [students]... perhaps too much” [EN-OL7]*
- Limited consultation, formal reps/channels, ex post; students mostly described as “not unhappy”
 - *“we’re doing this in real time with students who are expecting us to be [pause] thinking about these problems, but have been very tolerant of some of the obvious gaps that have emerged... [but they] have been very grateful for the care and effort that my colleagues have put into designing appropriate assessments” [EN-OL3]*
- Inclusivity
 - Move online benefited some (e.g. ability to replay/review material), not others (e.g. time differences, slow connections, home circumstances)
 - *“students felt they have a voice; and many who felt that they would not have said anything in an open [face-to-face] forum, this time typed things in” [EN-OL8]*

Staff support & wellbeing

- Strong collegiality, inc. local technical support
 - *“when you share an experience under adversity it really does bring you together” [EN-OL5]*
- Staff exhaustion & wellbeing a common concern
 - Working beyond normal & at peak levels for extended periods
 - *“last summer, I think people [pause] colleagues, responded to the crisis, as we all did, by doing much more than we [pause] you know, people worked all summer, creating videos and... changing their assessments. And then... they did all the same thing again for the second semester courses. But I do detect now that people are getting jaded...” [EN-OL5]*
 - *“... the fact that changes were ongoing and uncertainly, and again sort of reshuffling and rethinking over the entire last year was extremely draining” [EN-OL8]*
 - *“... morale collapsing all over the place” [EN-OL7]*
 - Impact of uncertainty
 - *“... the one thing we’re desperate to get rid of is uncertainty” [EN-OL14]*
 - ‘Change fatigue’/‘initiative fatigue’

Wave 3 – ‘reversion to mean’?

- Planned response (2021-22)
 - Still mainly practical/policy (inc. government) cf pedagogical drivers
 - Mixed plans for teaching & assessment online (blended vs F2F)
 - “[institution decisions for 2021-22 are] trying to catch too many rabbits at the same time” [EN-OL14]
 - Some colleagues reported as being keen for a return to status quo ante (exams?)
- COVID changing the sector more permanently?
 - The ‘undead’ lecture whose *“corpse still walks”* [EN-OL3]
- Two missed opportunities ‘not to waste a crisis’?

Feedback from the Audience

- What are your suggestions for the development of the project?
- Should we target more/fewer research questions?
- Are there particular areas/questions you think we should focus on?
- What would you like to see as the output of this research?
- Which theoretical framework(s) should we use to analyse the data?
- What are the pedagogical principles underpinning a successful LTA transformation post-Covid?

Your Reflections

- Can you 'see' yourself in the emerging themes and experiences?
- Are there particular areas/questions you think we should focus on?
- What are your feelings ahead of the 21/22 academic year – hopes/worries?

Please feel free to use the mic, or contribute to the following (anonymous) Padlet:

<https://padlet.com/pdcowell/dee2021>

Please get in touch with us if you would like to participate with the ongoing interviews.