

IT Contemporary

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Transforming IT delivery



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Articles that Connect Ideas, Share Best Practice and Transform IT Delivery.

In July, we hosted a roundtable discussion between chief information officers (CIOs) from universities across Europe. Facilitated by ucisa, the professional body for digital practitioners within education, and supported by Amazon Web Services (AWS), discussion centred on challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis. At the helm of the public sector's response to the pandemic, these IT leaders are well placed to consider the issues we currently face, as well as potential silver linings that provide a welcome boost in these demanding times.

Blended and flexible learning

One of the themes that emerged was blended learning, a phrase that has become synonymous with the return to campus. Due to social distancing, some universities will have only 20 percent or less of their student population on campus at any one time, with the rest learning remotely. This proportion may be higher for institutions with less viable teaching space. However, practical sessions are still necessary for a number of lab-based courses.

Even though institutions made headway in virtual learning, some students need hands-on experience in some areas like healthcare.

CIOs acknowledged that there are significant challenges associated with providing remote and face-to-face learning simultaneously, as both need to accommodate two very different audiences. Associated with this partial return to campus is the possibility that some lecturers will revert to their old ways of teaching to the detriment of students who continue to learn remotely. Many educators picked up the skills to teach as effectively online as they can in-person and will likely make an easy transition to blending the two approaches. For less versatile colleagues, however, the use of digital ambassadors who can showcase the appropriate technology and introduce its effective use to peers has shown promise in smoothing the transition to blended learning.

Returning students may find themselves in unfamiliar or novel learning spaces, with many institutions looking into ways to move lectures and tutorials into higher capacity rooms,

repurposed offices, and even outdoors. Amidst all this change, CIOs highlighted the need to establish consistency in the student experience in terms of standardised teaching methods, technology and programmes to facilitate an easy transition from one module to the next.

Similarly, by taking quick decisions to make sure all teaching content will be made available online for the next academic year, some universities have imposed control on the situation and enforced a consistent approach across their institutions.

Of course, recording content such as lectures or seminars raises digital rights management issues. Naturally, the sudden need to move teaching online took priority over these concerns. However, the group felt that as we move away from that emergency response, the question of ownership of digital content will become more prominent.

CIOs recognised that one opportunity stemming from virtual education is accessibility, sweeping away numerous barriers that a predominantly face-to-face education poses to students with disabilities. However, institutions need to make sure that all digital learning content is accessible. 'Captions available' simply won't cut it.

Furthermore, the CIOs discussed how the pandemic has exposed the full extent of digital poverty amongst students, a ubiquitous yet largely unmeasured problem in institutions. Numerous students are dependent on universities for IT equipment and internet access. All agreed that the implementation of lockdown policies at short notice isolated many digitally impoverished learners from the resources that would allow them to continue their studies—and in extreme cases, ostracising them from their education entirely. Most institutions have risen to this challenge by rationing limited resources, prioritising the distribution of equipment to those most in need and working with partners to send equipment to students directly if required. Some institutions also saw the full impact of lockdown on countries such as Italy and placed large orders of IT equipment.

Going forward, institutions must be mindful that digital poverty is often linked to challenging financial and domestic circumstances – issues exacerbated by lockdown measures and economic uncertainty. Students have also been deprived of campus-based

welfare support service and facilitating effective pastoral care remotely has therefore been a priority for many institutions during lockdown.

The feeling among the CIOs is that the technology to help us adapt to these changes is still evolving, and suites of products will arise that bring together many standalone solutions to address common educational needs. Universities have become much more willing to experiment with technology solutions since the onset of the pandemic, partly necessitated by the need to resolve significant issues swiftly. This enabled a huge amount of progress in a very short period of time. Indeed, many universities implemented several years' worth of IT strategy into the space of a few weeks or months. Of course, because the full panoply of quality controls was not initially deployed, there is now plenty of retrospective work to be done to consolidate those changes. Nevertheless, all recognised the importance of pausing and recognising the huge scale of work that has been carried out by their skilled and dedicated team members in drastically reduced timeframes.

The resilience and dedication of staff is just one of the silver linings that the COVID-19 crisis illuminated. Those present acknowledged that it has swept away many barriers that had until now seemed insurmountable, bringing significant opportunities to the education sector, including widening pool of teaching talent available to more remote universities through home working. Many reported greater efficiency and productivity in the workforce and highlighted the surge in creativity and innovation that emerged to meet the challenges that their institutions faced. It was agreed that the propensity for innovation coupled with resilience will prove invaluable as institutions tackle the challenges that lie ahead.

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ucisa

30 St Giles, Oxford OX1 3LE

Email: admin@ucisa.ac.uk

www.ucisa.ac.uk

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