

Covid-19 has driven digital transformation in higher education

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Despite the initial challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic on higher education, the industry rallied to find solutions and keep educational opportunities up and running.



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Industry leaders fast-tracked digital transformation to provide online learning, seamless communication, and integration across institutions. And not only did this prove successful in navigating pandemic disruption but it continues to provide a platform for education to progress and thrive post-pandemic.

So, how can we expect to see these once short-term solutions continue to shape the world of academia?

Unexpected challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges in every industry but arguably no more so than higher education – especially in regions almost entirely dependent on face-to-face learning opportunities.

As resulting social distancing restrictions hit continents like Africa, the industry faced a range of unforeseen challenges. In-person lectures were no longer permitted in areas that had limited digital infrastructure and connectivity and, as economies began to shrink due to restrictions, this translated into budget cuts and fewer individuals enrolling on courses.



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Unlike some industries, higher education simply cannot afford to stand still, with global markets demanding qualified individuals to fulfil positions and the risk of a pause in learning threatening to dramatically impact global economies.

Research suggests the equivalent of just one-third of a year of schooling missed could cost a country 1.5% of its GDP for the rest of the century. With higher education institutions (HEIs) and national economies on the brink, it was critical the industry found immediate solutions.

Turning to technology

With social restrictions creating challenges in face-to-face meetings and travel opportunities, it was inevitable technology would play a role in the solution. However, this digital transformation had to be implemented at speed to limit costly disruption.

The obvious first step was to make lectures and learning resources available online – allowing students to access key course materials instantly and avoid missing key information.

Unicaf is one such organisation, with pan-African, independent, accredited universities in the UK and Africa that combine the best elements of international education and offer high-quality academic qualifications completely online and for a fraction of the cost, to give underprivileged students the opportunity to obtain a tertiary education.

Unicaf University is accredited by the British Accreditation Council (BAC) as an Independent Higher Education Provider, as well as local accreditation councils in Malawi, Uganda, and Zambia.

Organisations and institutions like this allowed HEIs to resume courses at the earliest opportunity to avoid postponing deadlines and creating a backlog for stressed students and future cohorts. However, this short-term solution offered its own benefits in allowing students to rewatch materials and revisit key modules at any time.



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And when this digital transformation battled its own challenges in developing markets – namely in insufficient telecommunications infrastructure and issues with connectivity and reliability, with fewer than one-third of Africans having broadband connection access – these were swiftly addressed, too.

In many cases, plans to introduce digitised curricula were fast-tracked, while a combination of government and tech industry investment saw tech hubs and data centres produced to facilitate online learning.

In tandem with affordable alternatives such as SMS-based learning systems – offering offline remote learning opportunities – this made materials available to those in remote areas and with the lowest incomes.

There were also moves to address the roadblocks preventing students from accessing live lectures and participating in collaborative seminars or group projects.

Zero-data and zero-rated schemes were introduced by network providers and funded by governments in low-income areas to make video conferencing technologies and key education applications available to all.

Reflecting on a successful transformation

While many of these solutions were initially developed to address short-term emergencies, the industry has since continued to enjoy the benefits as we return to pre-pandemic normality.

Perhaps the most obvious advantage is the increase in equal learning opportunities afforded to students – firstly, in the flexibility delivered by digitised learning and also in affordability.

Where online learning has often been seen as a luxury supplementary material for those from high-income backgrounds, digital opportunities are now becoming more widely available to all learners.

Similarly, students now can enrol on courses offered by nationwide or even global institutions without having to cover costly travel or accommodation fees. And in addition to the educational benefits for students, institutions are also benefitting from tapping into a diverse knowledge pool – enriching discussions and widening perspectives.

Another benefit is the potential for collaborations with other worldwide institutions. Not only does this strengthen relationships among learning establishments – now able to access and share resources between specialist departments – but it also promotes sustainability among universities during a turbulent period with enrolments still below normal levels.

Looking forward to online learning

As global HEIs continue to welcome students back for in-person learning, the experiences of the last two years are set to shape a more efficient and valuable educational environment.

With 90 percent of African higher education students agreeing that a blend of online and face-to-face learning is of equal value to a fully in-person experience, many will be looking to embrace the benefits of digital learning in flexibility, affordability, permanence and convenience to keep students engaged.

So, it's important our institutions continue to develop and provide the facilities needed to accommodate a 'hybrid' learning culture, even as we return to the campus. This means HEI leaders cannot afford to neglect digital learning in favour of traditional learning approaches and must instead focus on integrating online opportunities into the curricula.

For example, recording live, in-person lectures for broadcast to remote students not only makes learning materials accessible to those unable to attend but also improves the learning experience for those able to revisit key themes and topics, post-lecture.



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However, it is important that relevant infrastructure is also in place to support long-term hybrid learning. Many of the schemes and investments rolled out during the pandemic were designed to help the current cohort navigate short-term disruption and are not suitable for optimal learning going forward.

This means not only providing the learning material but the resources and infrastructure to access it – including mobile capabilities and the storage space to deliver the comprehensive spectrum of learning materials, applications and more,

across the lifecycle of a degree.

The possibilities are endless when it comes to embracing digital learning. For example, the emergence of virtual reality classrooms offers the benefits of collaborative learning for those unable to attend sessions. And those willing to invest in the facilities to provide these opportunities will reap the rewards of a wider pool of engaged students – as well as the financial benefits that come with fuller classrooms – and the reputational benefits of championing a diverse and equal alumnus.

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