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Distance Learning: What will remain of university education after the pandemic?

Are universities more than MOOCs-offering platforms and can we make the case that our diplomas stand for unique knowledge and skills?

Opinion Piece written by the members of the [Data Research Centre, University of Groningen/Campus Fryslân](#).

The emergence of an unknown virus is a turning point, and the university system will not simply return to its former state of pre-outbreak equilibrium.

The mission of the university is to connect students, knowledge, and recognition. At the university, students and teachers come together to form a community. Within this community, we foster interactions around knowledge, and skills and expertise are shared and tested. Thanks to this dynamic, students can develop and prove their knowledge of a coherent curriculum and their capacity for analysis and synthesis, thereby gaining a valuable degree.

The past few months have shown that these connections are difficult to establish, even in great danger, if we can no longer come together. So, we now face a major challenge: how can the university fulfil its mission in a way that relies little, sometimes not at all, on physical co-presence, and that makes maximum use of the enriching potential of digitisation?

The university's prerogatives: knowledge and certification

Education as a whole, and not only teaching, has undergone a huge change as a result of the anti-pandemic measures. Educational material is being distributed more widely, sometimes to the frustration of universities who see lectures appear on YouTube, and learning no longer takes place in a central location. These changes challenge the traditional central role of the university and the authority of universities in providing academic education and awarding diplomas.

The dominant mindset of the VSNU and many of our universities seems to be that the current situation is a far-reaching but temporary emergency measure. At least, that suggests the slogan: [On campus, if possible | Online, because we can](#).

From our viewpoint at the Data Research Centre, we see this crisis as a game-changer. Technological shifts are interwoven with adjustments in the

circulation, valuation and governance of digital knowledge. Time and again, processes of digitisation in other sectors have led to profound changes - the current crisis is a dramatic intensification of this. The view that we go with business as usual, but online ([and perhaps at a much lower cost](#)), is untenable.

Learning Everywhere

By digitising education and excluding physical presence in learning, institutions lose their central position. They are no longer a hive of activity where students fly in and out, no longer the place to study together or attend a lecture. Students can no longer show what they are capable of, with their hands in the lab or through a presentation in front of the group.

The online lectures, given by dedicated instructors working in a mode of emergency, now stand alongside didactically sound and polished MOOCs. MOOCs have been growing for years, but despite the great hype that surrounded them, they have long been regarded as marginal in relation to the places where the real learning took place. Now these different types of learning material are seen as different - but no longer diametrically opposed - contributions in a global educational playing field.

To what extent can the university still claim to grant access to exclusive content, and a community, for which high tuition fees have to be paid? Although MOOCs are not nearly as free as they seem - the production costs are high, and these platforms perform extensive data extraction from their users - their price is disproportionately lower than tuition fees.

For students from abroad, the international prestige of a knowledge institution may not be sufficiently attractive for them to opt for it in times of limited mobility. Will the proposition of study-in-Netherlands-online remain attractive enough for students if they take into account the risks of travel and quarantine, of borders that can be closed at an unpredictable moment, and the obstacles of visas and health certificates?

Much is lost in terms of interaction if we portray education as a large series of modular, online lectures that can be viewed on their own. Education becomes linear, one-way traffic: production by lecturers, bundling on university platforms, followed by consumption by students.

Granting Degrees

Not only learning but also testing and assessing students relies heavily on the ability to interact. The right of universities to grant degrees, on the one hand, and the advantages that students and employers attach to these degrees, on the other, are both at risk.

Where it has been possible to test students 'en masse' by physically isolating them at a table with a long series of multiple-choice questions, this form of testing becomes very problematic if it has to be done remotely. Students are already talking about "[corona diplomas](#)" through changes in testing and [fraud](#) via Google and WhatsApp.

However, universities cannot fulfil their current role of granting degrees and guaranteeing their quality without testing and assessment. In order to maintain their gatekeeping function, universities will have to take a very hard look at how they want to test students' relationship to the material. Ironically, smaller programmes (precisely those that have been threatened or culled by recent budget cuts) appear to be much less vulnerable to fraud. Partly because of their assessment methods and the interaction with lecturers in the course of assessments, these programmes are now setting a good example. Thanks to the contacts that arise in the course of the learning process, the integrity of learning and the acquisition of knowledge and competences by students is safeguarded.

It is therefore not only a matter of offering learning materials via online lectures, but also a question of how to provide rich interactions between members of the academic community. Digital media need not stand in the way of this. However, there must be room for iterative and interactive forms of education. This also alleviates the remote assessment problems, because the learning process of students is not tested at a single moment, via questions to which Google knows the answer. The way forward lies in two-way traffic, instead of scaling up the broadcasting of mass education.

Postcorona university education

Our conviction is that education based on openness and interaction, rather than exclusivity based on physical co-presence, will breathe new life into the mission of the university. These values are compatible with distance education, but also require that we invest in open and public platforms. If we want to stay away from the production-consumption relationship between universities and students, this also means paying attention to the platforms we use. The commercial logic of the Big Tech companies is built into the tools, and these also partly determine which forms of education are possible. To illustrate just one aspect: an important value of university education is pluriformity. Big Tech platforms are to place and keep users within a single environment, with only a small number of standardized forms of expression and interaction on offer. This promotes uniformity and conformity. If we find that [PowerPoint has impoverished academic discourse](#), what will be the effect if we get deliver all education through the template offered by Blackboard or 'G suite for education'? The current situation makes the [recent joint call by the rectors of Dutch universities](#) to invest in public infrastructure very urgent.

The added value of university education lies in the ability to access knowledge, but above all in the ability to question, connect, transform and expand knowledge. Learning these skills requires an interactive form of education, supported by a setting that is open, diverse, and non-commercial. This requires a higher level of ambition than putting lectures online.