

In Global Conversation

Online Learning – Paradigm Shift?

The COVID-19 pandemic has led universities around the world to change their teaching and learning delivery overnight. We ask university leaders in the US, UK and Australia what they have learned and how that will influence the future in their markets. This month, we are *In Global Conversation* with Professor Nicola Phillips, Professor Merlin Crossley and Dr Lev Gonick.

UK



Professor Nicola Phillips, Vice-President Education at King's College London

Nicola Phillips is Vice President & Vice Principal (Education) at King's College London, where she also holds an academic position as Professor of Political Economy in the Department of Political Economy. She leads on all aspects of King's strategy for excellence and innovation in education and the student experience. Nicola was the Chair of the British International Studies Association (BISA) in 2015, 2016, and a member of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) sub-panel for Politics and International Studies. She has been an editor of both the Review of International Political Economy and New Political Economy.

Australia



Professor Merlin Crossley, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education at the University of New South Wales

Merlin Crossley is Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at UNSW and Professor of Molecular Biology. He has also worked or studied at the Universities of Melbourne, Oxford, Harvard and Sydney. He has been recognized by numerous awards, including a Rhodes Scholarship and the Australian Academy of Science's Gottschalk Medal. He has made significant contributions to academic administration, serving as Dean at UNSW since 2010, and previously having been Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research at the University of Sydney from 2006 to 2008.

USA



Dr Lev Gonick, Chief Information Officer at Arizona State University

Lev Gonick is Chief Information Officer at Arizona State University. He is an educator, technologist, and smart city architect. For more than 25 years he has been teaching, working, and living on the Net. He was also co-founder and CEO of DigitalC, the award-winning non-profit organization enabling and celebrating innovation, collaboration, and productivity through next generation broadband networks, big open data solutions, and IoT for public benefit. Gonick was CIO at Case Western Reserve University from 2001-2013 and in 2015, Inside Business Magazine named him one of their Power 100 in 2015.



How has your institution found the transition to online and digital delivery? How are staff and students responding?

Nicola Phillips: At King's we were well-placed to make the transition as we have already put a huge amount of effort and investment into digital education over the years and have considerable expertise in the university. But that is not to say it's been easy. Like other universities, this transition was at a previously unimagined scale and pace, and we had to move an enormous university onto a completely different footing essentially overnight. I've been really inspired by the way people have come together to face this crisis – whoever said that universities were slow to change have certainly been proved wrong! Even as a university well-placed to make the transition, we still felt there was a huge job to be done at King's. It wasn't perfect and there are always things to improve, but in those early stages we met the challenge and we kept teaching, learning and assessment going. The way our colleagues responded has been fantastic and impressive. All you can ask is that they try their very best to adapt, support the students and keep them in touch with the university. For many, this was deeply unfamiliar territory, but in the context of considerable dislocation and very different home situations, everyone has responded very well. We are certainly asking a lot more of our colleagues in education at the present time, and we need to think positively looking forward to the future, now moving our emergency crisis response to a more sustained long-term response.

Merlin Crossley: We were at week five of a ten-week term when we first signalled to staff and students that it may be necessary to suspend face to face teaching. By the end of the week, the last in-person lectures, tutorials and lab practicals had been held and we've been online ever since. In week five, a few students and staff had expressed anxiety about being on campus. With the move online, obviously those concerns vanished. There was then a period where internet conductivity became the issue and our IT department leant out equipment, but things quickly settled. We ran the student survey as normal near the end of term one. We wanted the data and we wanted to gain insights from students. Some staff were apprehensive, but they needn't have been. The response on the quality of teaching was as good or better than normal. That said, some of the individual units worked better than others and we keep learning. Overall, the best parts of human nature shone through – none of us wanted this and the only sensible response was for everyone to do their best. The staff were extraordinary and the students were understanding.

Lev Gonick: The recent conversations on this topic have been unfortunately binary, discussing the outdated framing of 'online vs not-online'. This is not how we have experienced it at ASU. Twelve years ago, we started ASU Online with 400 students, taking a run at a market that was undeveloped in big public American universities. We were looking to diversify and take a risk. Fast forward to this year, where we now run 230 different degree programmes for 60,000 students, who often never set foot on campus, but still have a strong affinity and identity tied to the University. It was in this context that we pivoted our wider teaching online on March 16th due to coronavirus. ASU Online grew by more than 20%, and in parallel we were looking to deliver the in-person classroom experience in a digital forum. In an unbelievably short timescale, we managed to pull it off without a hitch. The University delivered over 25,000 classes, involving 18,000 faculty, and finished the semester with high scores for engagement and experience. The staff responded well. We had solid delivery programmes for learning and collaboration. We engaged faculty members with software toolboxes and peer-to-peer support to help teachers learn how to teach in a new environment. Our new model of ANU Sync, a live remote platform for education, has received a very positive response from staff and students, who find it both engaging and highly flexible. A values-driven university, we are hugely committed to inclusion, being relevant to our community and having an entrepreneurial spirit that threads everything together. So we were well-placed for the pivot, having already gone through a culture shift earlier in our history, which meant that we hugely value online learning as an opportunity to enable access and opportunity for all learners. Coupled with the right incentives and focussed early engagement, the faculty and its outstanding leadership have been able to deliver on all fronts, growing the offering even further with sometimes more demand than there was capacity to deliver!



What has been the biggest challenge in moving to a platform of online course delivery at this time, while maintaining quality of teaching?

Nicola: I think that it is important to recognise the challenge is twofold – the technical side but also for people themselves. This is a fundamental shift in how we all work, how people approach their teaching, how they work as academics or professional services, even right down to where they are trying to do all that. The biggest challenge is not in fact a technical one, Of course, there are the IT capacity considerations or how to design the right curriculum infrastructure, but it is the emotional element which is equally important right now. How do we create a feeling of community for students studying remotely, and how do you create a sense of cohort for each individual? How it feels to be part of the university is an enormously important part of the student experience. We need to extend that social experience as well as the sense of connection to academic staff, no matter where in the world our students are. For the next academic year, we are looking to achieve a flexible hybrid model where everyone receives the same education and sense of connection wherever they are. This aims to maintain the quality of teaching and parity of cohort experience as much as possible. There are huge complexities around the variety of subjects and the breadth of requirements, but we see this as an essential part of teaching and learning at King's for the next period.

Merlin: We made an early decision not to postpone things but to either run them online or to run substitutes. This meant that laboratory practicals moved to demonstrations and discussions. Tutorials continued but the dynamic was different. That said, the classes felt more unified. For several years now we have been investing in 'digital support'. This ensured everything was available online for students who were sick, working at part-time jobs, or needed to watch things twice to catch the nuances of the language. So, in reality, our lecture halls were never full. But now, few students are sick, or working, so we have fuller classes assembling online. We're also learning that some of the shyer students participate more in online sessions. Yes, things have been challenging but many things are going well. I think our biggest concern has been assessment. We felt that the playing field was not level, so many courses have moved to pass/fail grading just for term 1. I think that reduced the pressure on everyone a bit.

Lev: Many of my peers in other institutions have told me they can't wait to go back to the way things were, essentially holding their breath throughout this dislocation in wait for a return. From the very beginning, ASU has had no interest in going back. We see ASU Sync as a future permanent feature in a growing menu of choices for a student learner. COVID-19 will be with us for a long time, it is a new reality that we need to engage with and develop ourselves for what will be a changed marketplace. It has given rise to new innovations in flexible delivery and a greater recognition of individual student need and preference, which play strongly into ASU's strategy and values. A big challenge of this new asynchronous mode was for our international students, for whom this is a critical offering. We have developed ASU Local in order to deliver real-time teaching in the right time-zone for a student, wherever they are in the world. Another challenge has been in aiding the staff from a technology perspective. This has meant developing tools to support traditional teachers to deliver in a brand-new mode. A highly-distributed instructional design model has helped us support each other to take that step. They have done an amazing job, speaking to the culture of the organisation. We will continue to learn into the summer, with series of 'train-the-trainer' courses that we are launching. While the move to online was not as radical a change for us as some other institutions (my team might disagree given they had to do it within four days!), we see this as a critical step in the evolution of the ASU model. This Sync mode is one more essential part of that development, as is looking to a more blended model.

What interesting innovations are you seeing in the wider Higher Education sector in the context of digital delivery and technology?

Nicola: We've had a positive experience at King's, as there are so many who are energized by the nature of the challenges and the opportunities. They want to find ways to move things forward and engage in open discussions about the way in which we do things. Educational technology has been around for a long time but hasn't yet been fully exploited by many universities. This crisis has prompted people to think creatively and have interesting conversations about what education is about and how we deliver it. There are exciting new academic innovations appearing across the disciplines. These range from how we use simulation and virtual reality, to thinking about trends in tele-health. We've unfortunately had to take the



decision not to send any students on study abroad for the rest of this calendar year. This, in turn, has facilitated interesting discussions about how to recreate some of that international experience using telecoms technology, possibilities we have not experimented with before. Within the realms of technological development, our new focus has been how technology can help us innovate and enhance our teaching as well as open up opportunities and widen access for all students. I think we have a very exciting opportunity for the next academic year.

Merlin: I'm a biologist and consider that change occurs via gradual evolution more often than via revolution. I've watched digital support building up for many years and my university, UNSW Sydney, has invested very heavily in what we call 'digital uplift'. We are now seeing the value in full. Students were beginning to ask that all resources be available online. Now they absolutely expect it. Of course, MOOCs and other digital information has been out there for a while too. The most interesting thing to me is how the enthusiasts and the sceptics have gone online together in step. The tools (for us Teams and Zoom are very useful, as well as Moodle of course) are relatively intuitive so people have adapted very well. It really is a tribute to the IT designers how 'user friendly' and reliable software can be these days. One tends to remember the frustrations – and there are some – but overall computers work better than biology!

Lev: We are always trying to work with leading thinkers and doers in the sector. For example, engaging with leading technologies and educators, at our *LearningMan* summer camp. I am intrigued by the use of blockchain technologies to address fundamental challenges in learning. To this day, we are still an industry focused on a model where students leave a university with a piece of paper degree as a sum total of years of effort and experience. This doesn't say anything more about who that student really is. Blockchain is being innovated as a way for learners to share evidence and accomplishments in more technological and digital portfolios, changing the assessment model and offering a new perspective on how to measure student success. It's a long transformational effort, that will run into all types of resistance as it displaces traditional core functions. There's also some interesting work in XR extended reality learning, with new modes of teaching based on experiential learning. Pedagogies are being developed around augmented reality, and methods to combine them with traditional class learning.

Looking ahead, what will these changes will mean for how your university will deliver its courses in 2021? What changes do you think are likely to endure in a post-COVID world?

Nicola: I don't think that these changes should be seen as radical temporary adjustments – at no point should we lose our ability to learn, adapt and embrace changes to be genuinely valuable to people and education. As a result, there will be a huge amount that persists, and I don't believe that any learning will ultimately go out of the window. At the same time, there are intrinsically important aspects about being in a campus community and collaborating face-to-face, and we all miss it intensely. We can't lose what is valuable about what we already do. At King's we are making sure that every aspect of our current approach is consistent with our existing overarching education strategy. This acts an anchor for building on the crisis response and guiding the developments we are investing in. For example, expanding digital education options is an important pillar of that existing strategy, and allows us to see this time as an opportunity to move forward in a direction we wanted to take anyway. The current context is enabling innovation by encouraging people to think differently about what they do. For example, how we can use new digital content much more systematically to complement courses, innovate in assessment processes, and enhance interdisciplinary work with virtual classrooms. It would be great to see all that, and more, stick around, because not only would it be a loss for such time and energy to be wasted, but it is also a real opportunity to have a lasting impact on the future of university education. People have become much more open to experimentation, and we are seeing much less of the sector's traditional risk aversion. We're all learning that trial and error is a positive thing, having that licence to experiment will be invaluable for the future development of education and the Higher Education sector.

Merlin: In Australia the travel bans will have major impacts. We have always felt isolated and now more than ever. On the plus side we are in the 'Asian time zone'. Many students come to us from China, India and South East Asia. The crisis began just before our first term intake, our major start point. This meant our enrolments fell by about 20%. Pipeline effects mean that we'll be smaller for a few years yet. Obviously, this is challenging. That said, while we have fewer commencing students, our existing students are staying with us, and they seem to be doing well. We expect some new students will begin online this term and then come to us when travel resumes, which could work well. There is also the idea that we will



then market our degrees across the entire world, as all our courses are available online now. I think that will be an interesting experiment that every university in the world may wish to consider. Others say that we will stay online in the future and everything will become more flexible and the campus will never be the same. I'm not so sure of that. To me the modern world doesn't involve successions, with one mode replacing another – it's more like music. It wasn't that rock was replaced by pop, then by disco, then by new wave, dream pop, goths and acid house and rap. It was that each new mode had its fans and today they all co-exist. I think in the future all the different modes of delivery will exist. Some people will move between modes and others will stick primarily with one mode of learning. The younger students will still want to come to campus – as they went to high school. Chemistry labs will always be on campus. My lab does genome editing, and you can't do that online. Older students are more likely to rely increasingly on online learning with on-campus intensives. There will be variety and we'll soon find out what works. Or, as they say these days, what sells.

Lev: In the short term, I expect that our ASU Online offering will grow robustly in response to people wanting to continue learning in a downturned market. They'll use the opportunity for a return to education through the easiest method of online learning. On the other hand, our international student marketplace is the most vulnerable at the moment. This is due to government policy on visas, which is proving to be a huge challenge for the whole Higher Education marketplace. We're responding by working on ASU Local, trying to make it as viable as possible. I think our 'combination model' of traditional on-campus experience blended with ASU Sync mode will probably grow further, as our Online work did twelve years ago. While we can expect to see some modest growth to start, it will continue to develop and respond to external conditions, becoming more innovative and permanent. In the wider marketplace, there will be those reluctant to venture too far from their comfort zone, but the future of the sector will thrive on the introduction of new concepts, new partnerships and new interesting ideas. With that in mind, there will be more robust growth going forward as the story grows and evolves to address changing market needs, of which there are still so many unknowns in a post-COVID world.

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