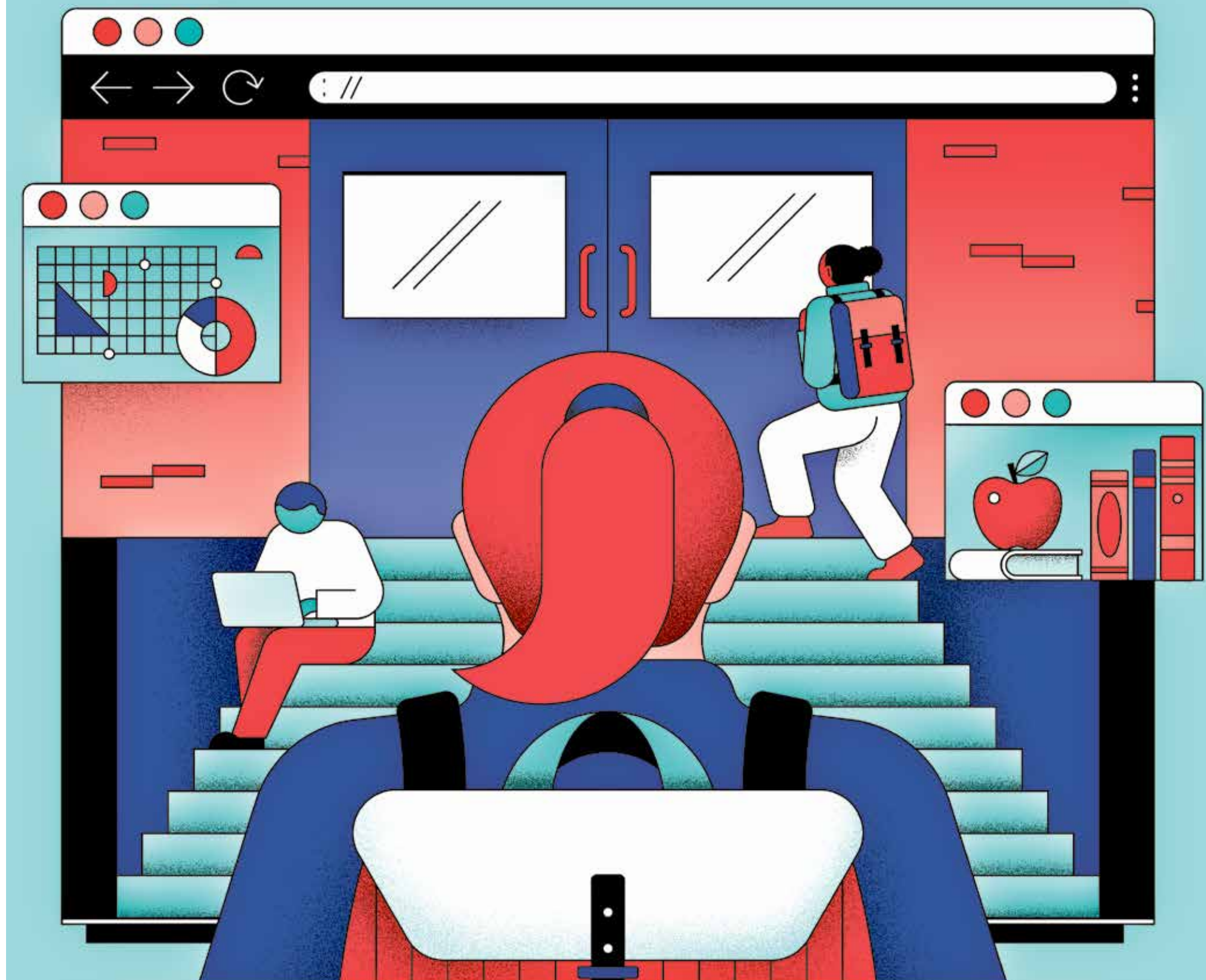


DIGITAL LEARNING

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Contributors

Sophie Benson

Writer focusing on sustainability and consumerism, with work published in *The Guardian*, *Dazed* and *Refinery29*.

Virginia Matthews

Award-winning journalist specialising in business, education and people management, writing for national newspapers and specialist business titles.

Chris Stokel-Walker

Technology and culture journalist and author, with bylines in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Wired*.

MaryLou Costa

Business writer and editor specialising in marketing, tech and startups, with work published in *The Guardian*, *The Observer* and *Marketing Week*.

Oliver Pickup

Award-winning journalist, specialising in technology, business and sport, and contributing to a wide range of publications.

Hugh Wilson

Journalist specialising in business and technology, with work published in *The Daily Telegraph*, *Retail Week*, *Currency.com*, *BBC* and *Huffington Post*.

Raconteur reports

Publishing manager
Ben Bruce

Associate editor
Peter Archer

Deputy editor
Francesca Cassidy

Managing editor
Benjamin Chiou

Digital content executive
Taryn Brickner

Head of production
Hannah Smallman

Design
Sara Gelfgren
Kellie Jerrard
Harry Lewis-Irlam
Celina Lucey
Colm McDermott
Samuele Motta
Jack Woolrich

Art director
Joanna Bird

Design director
Tim Whitlock

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ADOPTION

Long-term change or short-term fix?

Digital learning has a long history, but take-up in schools and colleges has been erratic; the coronavirus may have changed all that

Hugh Wilson

Six months ago millions of people around the world were already using digital learning platforms to master new languages, brush up on health and safety laws or enhance IT skills. More than 300 million people had downloaded language app Duolingo. The already sizeable corporate elearning market was growing at a rate of knots.

But despite this enthusiasm from individuals and corporations, the take-up of education technology (edtech) has often been more piecemeal in schools and colleges. Schools have limited resources and countless priorities. Educators already struggling with heavy workloads lack the time to innovate. Fears persist around security, privacy and the dilution of the primacy of the face-to-face student-teacher relationship.

But that was before the coronavirus pandemic. Almost overnight, educational establishments around the world were forced to adopt digital learning and quickly came to rely on edtech platforms whether they wanted to or not.

"The pandemic hasn't so much boosted educational technology, as highlighted just how important it is as a toolkit for teachers to learn to use," says Dr Steve Wheeler, visiting research fellow at Plymouth Institute of Education. "The pandemic has simply highlighted the need for teachers to become more versatile in their pedagogy."

Certainly, there's a sense that lockdown has accelerated something that was already happening. Wheeler notes that, long before COVID-19, seven million undergraduate students were studying exclusively online in America alone.

Jacqueline Daniell, chief executive of Wey Education, which runs online school InterHigh, believes the pandemic has accelerated global adoption of edtech in schools and colleges by about five years. And, having been forced to embrace digital learning, many educators have come to appreciate it. "The pandemic has proved the benefits and opportunities of virtual learning," she says. "It has also shown parents and children alternative ways of learning beyond bricks-and-mortar classrooms."

Wheeler agrees: "What this has highlighted is learning can take place anywhere, anytime and that teaching methods must adapt to meet the new normal."

But what will the new normal look like? Scores of edtech providers have



Max Mumby/Indigo/Getty Images

grasped the COVID opportunity by offering services for free. They filled an urgent need in exceptional circumstances. But as schools and colleges reopen this autumn, might the great global experiment in digital learning start to fizzle out? When COVID restrictions are lifted entirely, will the wide-scale edtech adoption of 2020 seem like a passing fad?

It seems unlikely and not only because the pandemic accelerated trends already in play. Educational technology encompasses a growing spectrum of tools and methods, many of which were adopted to cover pandemic restrictions, but have since been found to meet existing challenges too.

Research mathematician Dr Junaid Mubeen, director of education at virtual maths tutor solution Whizz Education, agrees edtech has experienced many "false dawns",

but thinks COVID-19 may signal a fundamental shift.

"The pandemic has exposed the inflexibility of our education system," he says. "Students face countless threats to learning: illness, poverty, the passing of loved ones and indeed pandemics; let's not assume COVID is the last. Flexibility must be ingrained in education systems. Learning must be resilient to the inevitable disruptions faced by students in an increasingly volatile world."

This has to include a wider use of technology. Rory Nath, an investment manager at private equity firm ECI Partners, specialising in the education sector, says COVID-19 has made it clear that our education system needs a better technology strategy. "A key concern during the pandemic was a widening of the attainment gap for disadvantaged

pupils due to a disparity in access to technology," he says.

So COVID not only exposed the limitations of traditional education systems during a once-in-a-century crisis, it has highlighted systemic inequalities that proponents believe digital learning can help address. In this interpretation, the wider use of technology in education becomes a moral imperative.

At the same time, nobody is under any illusion that the return of face-to-face teaching won't dampen the edtech surge. But much will remain. Schools and colleges are likely to implement more blended learning regimes, which mix mutually reinforcing off and online learning models and allow teachers to maximise time with students. A simple example is a maths app that automatically marks student work, giving teachers time to plan better lessons along with the data to target them more effectively.

"Blended learning has been a staple for many years in schools and universities around the world, but many more will now follow suit," says Graham Glass, chief executive of learning platform provider Cypher Learning. "Teachers can personalise lessons through individual learning paths and by measuring competencies accurately. Students are always connected so they can enjoy gamification and learn through conducting research or participating in projects."

In fact, edtech solutions are now so wide-ranging that it becomes hard to imagine post-pandemic learning environments without them. As well as direct learning apps, edtech can facilitate the easy sharing of resources. It can set and mark revision quizzes. It can help with homework. Nath at ECI Partners points out investors are particularly excited about solutions that remove some of the administrative burden from teachers, such as safeguarding children, which frees up more time for teaching.

Edtech has long been seen as something of the poor relation of health-tech and fintech, hamstrung by inadequate funding and the need to adhere to national curriculums. COVID-19 may be about to change all that. "When the dust settles, digital education will have advanced years in months," says Dr David Lefevre, director of the Edtech Lab at Imperial College Business School. "Working practice has already changed and many temporary solutions will become permanent. A growth in digital education is inevitable." ●

ACCESSING LEARNING RESOURCES

Survey of parents with children aged 11 to 15 taken between May and June

72% said schools had provided digital resources via online learning platforms

28% said schools had provided real-time interactive online learning

5% said schools had provided devices

Office for National Statistics 2020

TEACHING

What it's like to teach online

A journalism lecturer and technology writer looks back at the last few months of delivering a Masters course online, sharing his and others' insights from an unprecedented time for universities

Chris Stokel-Walker

When the world changed this spring, so did universities. In a matter of days, campuses closed down, students settled in for a future of remote teaching and lecturers rapidly redrew their planned teaching to take place on digital learning platforms. It was a struggle and over the summer many staff have had the ability to collect their thoughts before heading into the 2020-21 academic year, which promises to be centred around online learning.

Many people will be remote teaching for the first time in the next

month. The idea of adapting their teaching and learning to a world of interactive platforms is giving some pause for thought. While they may be better prepared than they were in March and April, they're picking it up for the first time.

Dr Mark Ritson, a lecturer with 25 years' experience of physical teaching, who developed an online programme around four years ago, concurs: "What universities have is talented teachers with good experience of teaching, but it's in the physical classroom."

For the last several months, while most students have been working on dissertations, I've been teaching a cohort of 80 Masters students from around the world, digitally. Online learning is different, but no worse than face-to-face teaching. In fact, in many instances, it's better. But it requires different rules and a new skillset.

Students know what to expect from tuition at university. Bustling lecture theatres and small group seminars poring over texts and putting the world to rights are a common cultural trope passed down from one generation to the next. That makes it difficult to break out of stereotypes and try something new.

But in replacing face-to-face teaching with online learning, it's possible to reinvent what teaching and learning looks like. "Everyone's trying to recreate the classroom experience, which is not how this works," says Ritson.

The programme I've taught on for the last three years has always been more practical than most. As journalism trainers, we threw out reading aloud PowerPoint slides and replaced them with interactive press conferences and cross-city treasure hunts through which students could

“

One of the earliest challenges was soliciting feedback or asking questions and being met with 20 seconds of deafening silence

learn their trade in as realistic a manner as possible.

Social distancing, local lockdowns and self-isolation, plus a global cohort, many of whom made their way back to their home countries, meant that wasn't possible this year. But just because you're teaching through a webcam, it doesn't mean you can't make teaching interactive, fun or live.

The promise of digital learning means students and teachers can create interactive learning experiences, even with students in different parts of the world. Rather than sending them off to write the introduction to a news story, we instead brought them into a collaborative Microsoft Word document, where they could see how their peers were pulling together their stories.

Many feared that going online would result in a loss of real-time feedback, but I've learnt that's far from the truth. Screen-sharing means providing real-time feedback is possible: you can see how a student fine-tuned their work, and to pick up and praise them for doing so after the fact. I created interactive quizzes that test students' knowledge and gamify learning to check they understand what's being taught.

That's important because the ability to read the room is much harder. Students are reticent to turn on their webcams, particularly if they're in a time zone that means it's late at night or early in the morning. Timetables have also shifted to allow every student the chance to have a real-time session; we repeated seminars at 9am for students in China and 4pm for students in the United States, with many watching back recordings at a later date.

As anyone dealing with Zoom meetings knows, soliciting feedback or engaging in conversation is tricky online. We've been trained not to talk over each other and students use non-verbal cues to know when it's safe for them to contribute. On a digital learning platform, this disappears.

One of the earliest challenges we had was soliciting feedback or asking questions and being met with 20 seconds of deafening silence. Internet lag, coupled with less-confident students typing responses into chat windows rather than unmuting their microphones to talk, means



Chris Stokel-Walker

every interactive element we developed takes longer than it would face to face. In response, we cut the number of interactive discussions or practical exercises by a third from offline teaching.

We discovered workarounds to keep things moving: asking questions that require one or two-word answers typed into the chat box rather than long dissertations, then encouraging students to expand on answers by unmuting their laptops and talking a little more about their thoughts.

Repeating any questions asked in full took some getting used to. Those watching a recorded version of the video often won't have access to the accompanying text chat and so wouldn't know what I was answering "Yes, absolutely, make sure you do that" to.

Students know this year is going to be like no other. While many are angry about A-level results, irked about fees and fearful about contracting the coronavirus during their on-campus teaching, they are also forgiving.

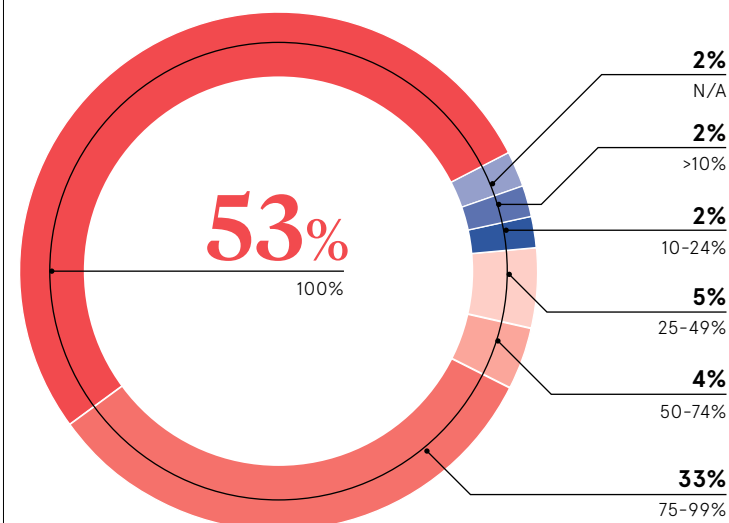
They know the challenges of getting a video chat to work better than most and they understand that one person running an online learning session isn't going to be as slick as a traditional television programme. By being honest and upfront about what my teaching would do, and what it wouldn't, I found students were appreciative of my efforts. ●

Chris Stokel-Walker is a lecturer in journalism on the undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Newcastle University's School of Media, Culture and Heritage.



MOVING UNI COURSES ONLINE

Global university leaders were asked in May about how much of their university's teaching had moved online



OPINION

‘Universal internet connectivity and access to technology are the backbone to ensuring every child’s right to education’

Our family had a good transition to online learning when schools closed in March. My 15 year old moved seamlessly to online learning via Microsoft Teams with a school-issued iPad and a full timetable. My 11 year old, having dodged the SATs, moved to Google Classroom and spent an hour a day on schoolwork with his Dad’s old work laptop and several hours honing his Fortnite computer game skills. None of it was ideal, but it was straightforward and manageable.

However, our experience was far from commonplace. Inequality of access to online learning provision is widespread. The Department for Education estimates that 25 per cent of children have not engaged in any learning during the lockdown and the National Union of Students say one in five students do not have access to online learning.

I have been told of teachers spending their own money to buy dongles for students to enable connectivity, schools pleading for donations of old computers from the local community, families sharing access to one device and heads delivering paper study packs and food parcels by bicycle.

How did we get caught short? It’s 2020. We’ve had leading digital and tech experts at the centre of government for years. But the first edtech strategy was only announced in April 2019 and the £10-million fund is a drop in the ocean if we are to build a future-fit education system. Why has it taken so long to realise what an amazing opportunity technology offers for students and teachers?

When the Bett Show started in 1985, it was an event for pioneers stocking the computer room. Some 36 years later, Bett is the global meeting place for the education ecosystem from minister to teacher to hardware company and app innovator. And yet, it has taken a pandemic and school closures for Bett to mobilise their community digitally, creating an online hub of best practice and resources as edtech becomes an absolute necessity.

Bett’s Global Education Council has set out a manifesto for the future of education. They believe universal internet connectivity and access to technology are the

backbone to ensuring every child’s right to education.

I agree with them. The UK needs world-class digital infrastructure and basic access to the internet should be free for everyone. We will never close the gap or breach the digital divide until we have a level playing field.

We must also revisit how we are teaching and what knowledge and skills we want learners to acquire.

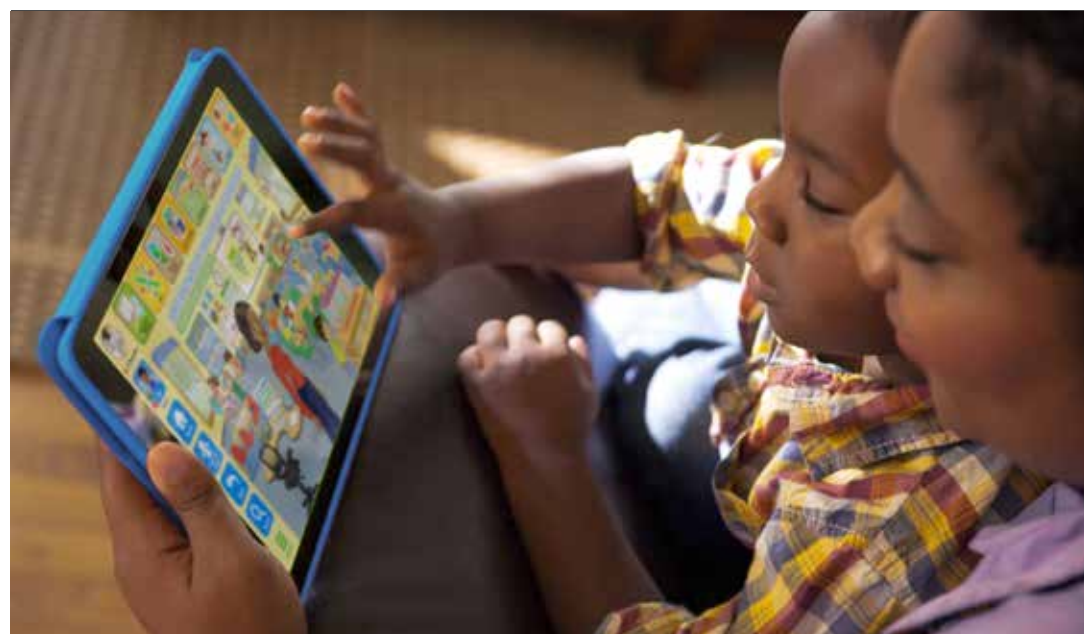
One of the great promises of edtech, and indeed all tech, has been that it would make life easier. That may well be true for the school office where management information systems and parent communication apps have positively shifted the dynamic, but it is a much more complex challenge for teaching and learning.

Rare is the school with a well-thought-through digital strategy where tech, infrastructure and teachers work in perfect symbiosis and students have a personalised learning journey. Through heeding the lessons of lockdown, the time is now for all schools to implement a long-term, strategic digital plan to provide the education our young people need and deserve.

As for knowledge and skills, it’s time to rethink what we teach in school. When we all have Google in our pockets, rote learning becomes obsolete. We must teach critical thinking, analytical skills and creativity so children can thrive in this complex, evolving world. We owe this not just to our students, but to the estimated 7 per cent unemployed who want to reskill and contribute as we build our post-COVID and post-Brexit economy. Let’s teach back better. ●



Sarah Marshall
Global head of content
Bett Show



How digital learning can ease the impact of COVID on a child’s education

Helping children learn remotely in the pandemic has been a key challenge, but parents and educators are embracing research-proven digital learning tools to help children get back on track

Last spring, remote learning became part of everyday life for millions of families in the UK and around the globe. Parents suddenly faced juggling the demands of work while trying to educate their children at home.

Many children fell behind with school closures, often described as the “COVID slide”, and are now entering the new school year with a greater need than ever for learning support. As a result, parents and educators are increasingly looking to new, flexible solutions to help children catch up and get ahead.

With more than a decade of providing research-proven digital learning solutions for children, Age of Learning, creator of award-winning ABCmouse, has a deep understanding of how digital learning can help.

“Our approach is designed entirely around learning outcomes and helping children develop a lifelong love of learning,” says Rob Gilby, executive

vice president and managing director, international, at Age of Learning.

“We focus on three core strengths: curriculum, creativity and enabling technology. Our team of learning experts, dedicated to delivering measurable improvements for kids, is at the heart of all our products. Our flagship product ABCmouse is a comprehensive digital learning program for young children, which includes 850 lessons with more than 10,000 standards-based activities that build fundamental skills in literacy, maths, science, social studies, art and music.”

ABCMouse inspires confidence in children to learn, to grow, to excel. “Our second principle is that learning is more effective when the child is excited about learning and develops a curiosity and passion,” says Gilby. “We use video, animation, music and gamification techniques to build interest in learning and deliver measurable outcomes. It may feel like play to the child, yet it’s delivering real outcomes.”

A recent example of this is the launch of WordPlay, Age of Learning’s new video series in its Adventure Academy learning game for children aged 8 to 13. WordPlay was created and hosted by award-winning children’s author Kwame Alexander to inspire and teach children to write short stories.

“Our third principle is to enable adaptive learning, personalised for every child and measured to best support effective learning outcomes,” says Gilby. “We believe every child is unique and that learning should be too. We do this through extensive investment and research to build custom-designed, patented technology platforms.”

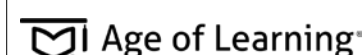
“Our learning solutions are available on multiple digital platforms and offline, allowing greater access during remote learning and flexibility for teachers. We know it’s key to support parents and educators with tools that make the learning journey fun and effective, whether kids are learning in the classroom or at home.

“We believe in the huge potential of our young learners and we hope to instil a lifelong love of learning in children through our products. While these are unsettling times, we appreciate the commitment and resourcefulness of parents and educators, and the valuable contribution digital learning brings to the educational community.”



ABCMouse is a comprehensive digital learning program for young children, which includes 850 lessons with more than 10,000 standards-based activities that build fundamental skills in literacy, maths, science, social studies, art and music

For more information please visit
www.ageoflearning.com



Digital learning for the future of work



As the coronavirus pandemic continues to transform business and education alike, online learning is crucial to powering the UK and global economies with the digital skills they need to thrive

The coronavirus pandemic fundamentally shifted how people of all ages view work and skills. Emerging technologies will generate 133 million new jobs by 2022 in place of the 75 million that will be displaced, the World Economic Forum estimates. Yet even before COVID-19 rapidly accelerated digital trends, the UK was suffering from a skills gap that will mean many of these jobs will be left unfilled. Last year, nine in ten organisations admitted in a study by the Open University that they have a shortage of digital talent.

In August, Pearson released its second annual *Global Learner Survey*, which quizzed more than 7,000 learners. The findings show COVID-19 is a major turning point for learning, with online schooling and the need for more digital skills leaving a lasting mark. Nine in ten UK respondents said they believe online learning will remain a permanent part of primary, secondary and higher education, and workers are responding to economic uncertainty by seeking to bolster their digital skills through vocational training.

The pace of innovation means work was already changing at unprecedented speed, but the pandemic has added a truly palpable urgency to the need for digital skills. In the UK, 87 per cent of respondents said the economic disruption means people now need to be comfortable working remotely and in highly digital environments, and 77 per cent said it has taught them that

digital work requires new skillsets. Traditional education programmes won't be enough, with 88 per cent saying skills such as virtual collaboration and data analysis are required to move forward in this economy.

"People believe education is more important than it's ever been," says Rod Bristow, UK president at Pearson, which equips learners with the skills they need to succeed in the changing world of work. "Education's purpose as a means to a better life is in sharper focus and better access through technology is critical. These changes in consumer perspectives will change what's learnt and how it's delivered. There is no going back."

The pressure is growing to deliver the digital skills that will sustain people through the pandemic and beyond, and with half of the employed respondents to Pearson's study in need of education because their job status has changed, upskilling and reskilling is vital. Through online learning, adults can not only get back to work, but also become more economically resilient as the global business landscape continues to transform digitally.

The urgency to build skills for employment includes a new breed of digital soft skills as well as an emphasis on English language skills. In a difficult economy, people tend to embrace the practical path, and trade and vocational education often render better results than a university degree. In Pearson's research,

learners believed universities have the opportunity to help drive economic recovery, but 87 per cent said they should offer shorter courses or lower-cost options to help the unemployed upskill or reskill.

"Digital skills are no longer optional," says Bristow. "There has been a fundamental shift in the skills and knowledge that are vital to deliver through our national education system. The 'Three Rs' – reading, writing and arithmetic – are critical career skills of the future, but people now care deeply about the digital fluency that underpins creativity, problem-solving and social skills in a world that's gone online."

Pearson's study found tech skills, teamwork and communications skills are now seen as important as the Three Rs to learn at school. There was widespread agreement that primary and secondary education should teach practical life skills alongside the fundamentals, particularly in the UK where respondents gave the lowest mean age (11 years) at which young people should learn basic skills to support future careers.

"It's time to put digital fluency at the heart of the system," says Bristow. "The future of work demands better digital skills with online learning a critical means of acquiring them. Access to that technology is foundational to a

fairer society and opening opportunity to all. It is becoming as important as providing inclusive access to good school and university buildings."

The sudden upheaval of COVID-19 disruption, which pushed many into full-time online teaching and learning for the first time, saw increased usage of Pearson's digital learning materials and the heightened demand continues despite lockdown restrictions being eased. Since the emergence of the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of secondary school-students have used Pearson's digital learning space ActiveLearn, which includes resources, ebooks and courseware supporting GCSE, A level and BTEC curriculums.

As the shift to online learning accelerated in the wake of the virus, Pearson also acted quickly to launch new initiatives. UK Learns is an online portal that curates a selection of online courses to help workers who are furloughed or out of work to learn new skills and earn qualifications or accreditations that could improve their career prospects. Meanwhile, more than 350,000 primary school parents requested access to Carol Vorderman's online learning site *The Maths Factor* after Pearson offered free lessons.

Such efforts will prove particularly important as the pandemic drives an even greater chasm in the digital divide. Although respondents in the *Global Learner Survey* agreed education delivers opportunity, 73 per cent of UK learners felt the pandemic will deepen education inequality, especially among young students. And 88 per cent said they'd like to see schools doing more to address economic and digital inequalities.

"As the world's learning company, we have had a special responsibility to listen and address all these issues for learners," says John Fallon, chief

90%

say online learning will be a part of primary, secondary and higher education moving forward

11 years old

the age at which young people should learn basic skills to support future careers

executive of Pearson. "Education has the potential to improve lives and enable economic mobility. It is the single biggest force for change in our world. During this time of such uncertainty, we must ensure it can continue to deliver the hope and opportunity that is needed now more than ever."

"We are in the midst of a moment in which we can rewrite the future of education to make it more accessible and equitable. We don't know what the future holds. But what is clear is that all of us – employers, educators, parents and students – have a role to play in helping to adapt and thrive in a post-pandemic world."

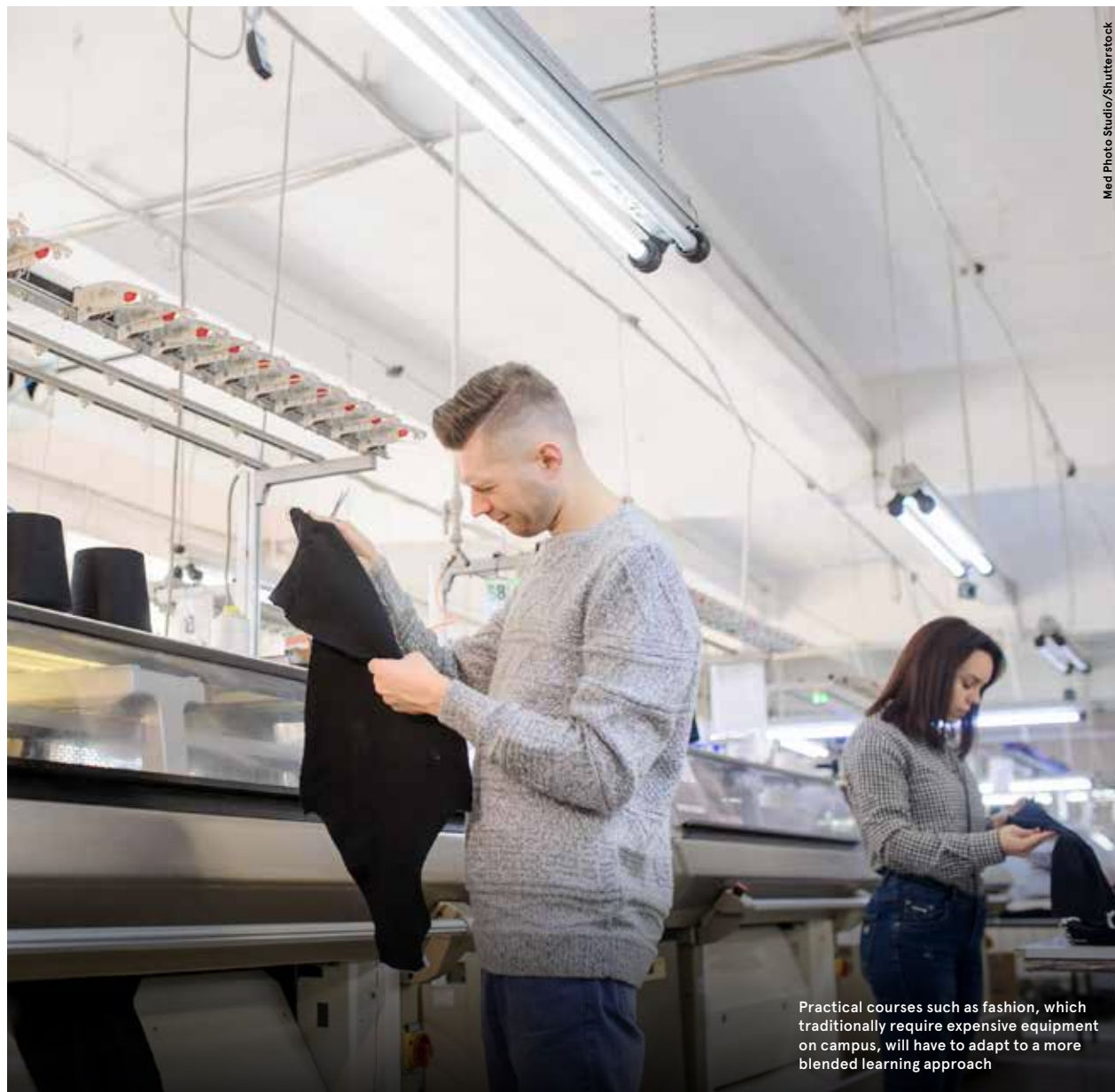
For more info on UK Learns please visit uklearns.pearson.com

For more survey info please visit go.pearson.com/global-learner-survey

 **Pearson**

“

There has been a fundamental shift in the skills and knowledge that are vital to deliver through our national education system



Med Photo Studio/Shutterstock

Practical courses such as fashion, which traditionally require expensive equipment on campus, will have to adapt to a more blended learning approach

FASHION

COVID crisis forces practical courses to adapt

Are students of more practical and hands-on courses in higher education missing out as a result of college and university closures, and what effect will this have on future skillsets?

Sophie Benson

Student and lecturers are preparing to break new ground in higher education. Social-distancing rules have necessitated a refreshed approach to teaching and learning, with practical courses such as fashion and textiles challenged as they make the transition from on-campus to online.

“The making side of fashion is pretty difficult to deliver,” says Andrew Ibi, course leader of the fashion degree at Liverpool John Moores University. “And it’s worrying because it’s ultimately the platform for any good designers that understand any kind of craft or manufacture process.”

But Ibi isn’t content to focus on what higher education students are missing. Long days in crowded

sewing rooms, art studios and design suites might be out, but he’s joining a host of peers and institutions in pursuing a blended approach that will overhaul the student experience.

At the University of Northampton, it’s business as usual. Having adopted active blended learning in 2014, staff are already familiar with the teaching methods it engenders. Senior lecturer in fashion Jane Mills has long been videoing feedback, workshops and how-to sessions, allowing students to digest, research and prepare on their own terms.

“The time they come into the workshop is quality contact time rather than having to go over every detail,” says Mills. “Long gone are the days when students listened to lectures and PowerPoints. It’s so dull for them.”

Ibi agrees it’s time to leave outdated teaching methods behind. “A lot of what higher education currently does in the studio, I was doing the same thing in 1996. Rolling in, the tutor making their way around the room until they got to me and then leaving,” he says. “I think there’s an opportunity for a richer and far more modern university approach that improves efficiency.”

Rather than emphasising face-to-face learning, a blended learning strategy places value on flexibility, accessibility and collaboration. Instead of using online learning environments like Moodle as

a place to “dump” reading lists, notes and briefs, they’re utilised as a platform for independent, interactive learning opportunities, such as forum discussions, peer-to-peer feedback and demonstrations, with sense-making activities that bring the concepts and skills to life.

Autonomy is key. Students are provided with the necessary digital tools and learning skills, and allowed to explore and develop ideas either independently, with peers, in classroom sessions with tutors or with the support of accessible, resource-rich online channels.

“When it actually came to teaching online, I was surprised how well it went,” says Isabella Coraça, lecturer in fashion history at Central Saint Martins, of her experience of trialling blended learning. “I had classes where I had the full 60 students. My participation was 100 per cent, which had never happened before.”

Worries of students missing out are valid and, without proper planning, gaps may well appear in students’ skill and experience. However, increasing living costs and rising mental health issues mean higher levels of absences and drop-outs, and blended learning can offer more flexibility for 21st-century students’ complex lives.

Commuter students, who are more likely to be first-in-family students, or to come from low-income households or have an ethnic-minority background, can have lower levels of engagement and satisfaction, resulting in poorer outcomes. Sophie Johnson, lecturer in fashion business and promotion at Birmingham City University, believes blended learning could help improve their experience.

“I believe we’ll see more commuters. We’ve learnt important lessons about time and how we can use it better. Now we can offer students tutorials in their own home. It takes away the cost of transport and they can log off and apply feedback straightaway.”

Frederica Brooksworth at the London College of Fashion, meanwhile, sees benefits for students with disabilities or learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, affording students more time to “summarise, work together and share notes”, with lecturers adding subtitles to recorded sessions to broaden accessibility.

It’s important, however, for flexibility to be built in, rather than a happy side-effect. “What happens within the week, and when, can make or break a successful learning experience,” says Matt Jenner, head of learning at FutureLearn, an online learning platform which partners with higher education institutes, companies and industry professionals to offer short courses, qualifications and degrees.

“Flexibility shouldn’t just be more of anywhere, anytime. It comes to life when the learning has been properly designed for it.”

Whether learning to drape, model build or conduct experiments, time on-campus learning practical skills must remain a part of the blended learning experience

“I had classes where I had the full 60 students. My participation was 100 per cent, which had never happened before

within higher education. Rather than one-way delivery to large classes, a blended approach should focus on interactive workshops with smaller groups.

As overall access to equipment may be reduced, practical sessions must be stimulating and engaging says Mills. Jenner recommends sharing methodologies, analyses and reflections before and after the session online to maximise studio time, while Ibi notes that the focus should be on relevant skills and activities. “If the physical fashion show disappears, should we still have students planning them?” he asks.

With the opportunity for reflection on which skills should be prioritised, so too comes the chance to mould blended learning around the realities of the working world. Peer feedback, online conferencing, independent development and focused workshops echo the intricacies of modern working life more closely than instant feedback and constant on-hand support.

“The industry’s changing; we need to future-proof our students,” Mills concludes. ●

79%

of global adults believe colleges and universities will fundamentally change because of the COVID-19 pandemic

88%

say online learning will be part of the university experience moving forward

65%

think fewer people will seek out traditional university degrees as a result of COVID-19

UNLOCKING ELEARNING

Elearning has offered a lifeline to students hit by school and college closures, but more must be done to make digital learning accessible to all learners

DIGITAL LEARNING RESOURCES HAVE BEEN VITAL IN ENABLING HOME LEARNING DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Learning resources used by children in Great Britain from May-June 2020

5 to 10 years

11 to 15 years

16 to 18 years

(A) Devices provided by yourself

(B) School provided digital resources accessed via online learning platforms

(C) School provided digital online learning resources

(D) Digital online learning resources that you have found

(E) Non-digital resources that you have found

(F) School provided non-digital resources

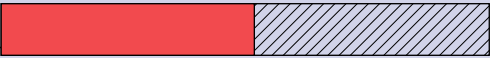
(G) School provided real-time interactive online learning

(H) School provided devices

(I) Other

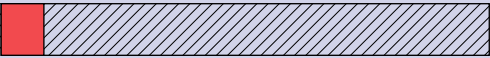


52%



of parents with school-aged children said a child in their household was struggling to continue their education while at home during the coronavirus pandemic

9%

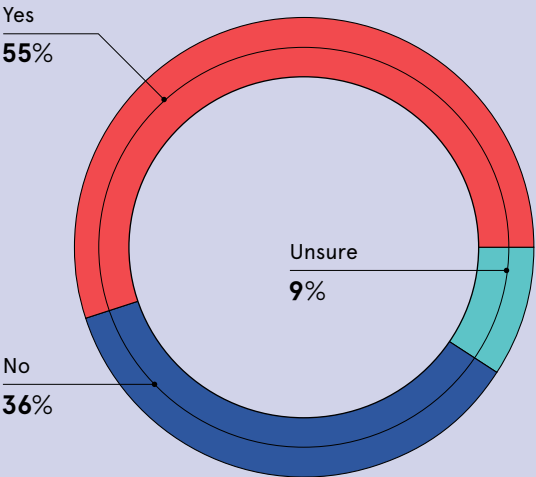


of parents said their child was struggling because of a lack of devices

ONS 2020

A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF PARENTS ARE UNABLE TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S ONLINE LEARNING

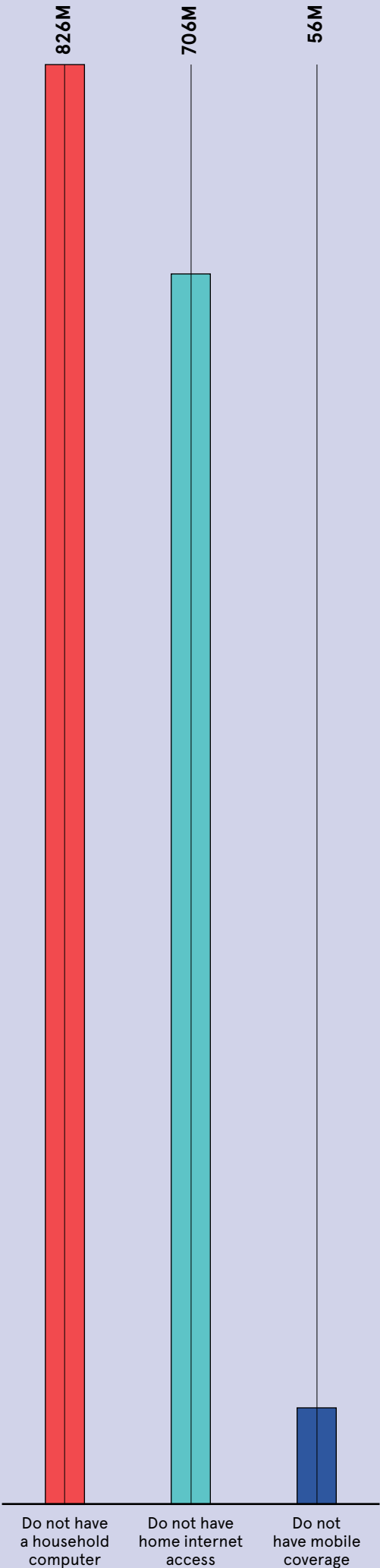
Parents who have the time and resources needed to supervise their children's online learning experience



YouGov 2020

FOR MILLIONS OF STUDENTS, LACK OF CONNECTIVITY IS HOLDING THEM BACK FROM ELEARNING

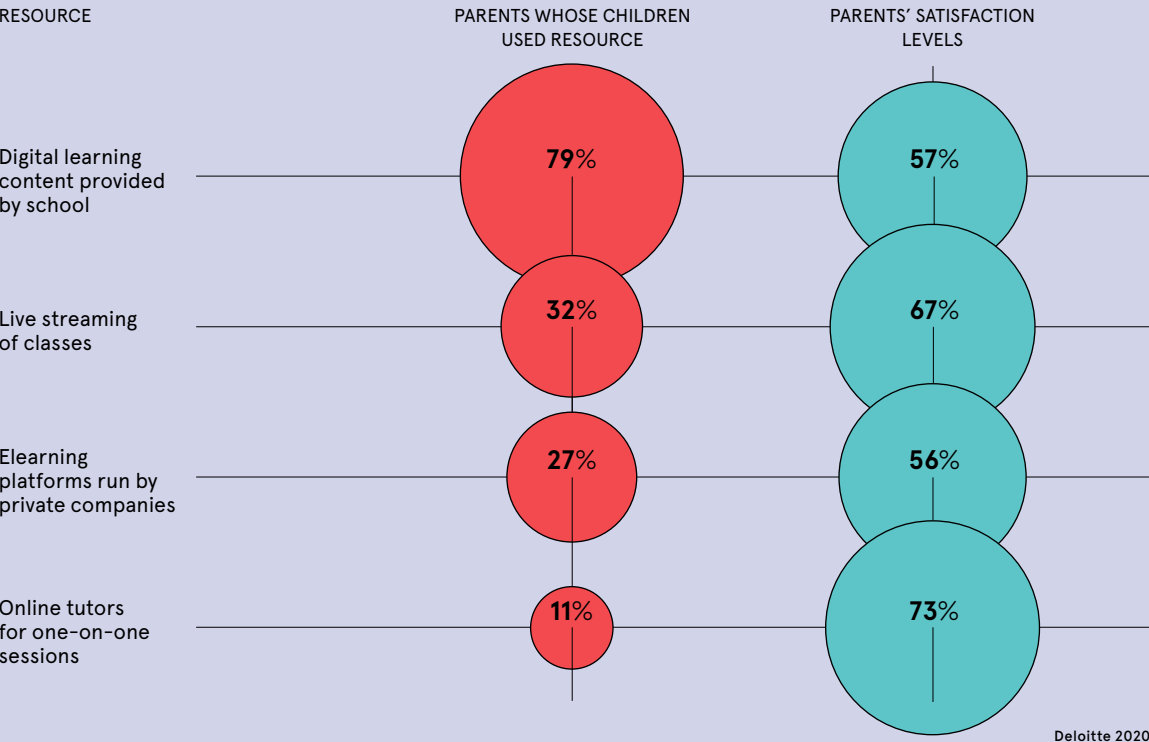
Barriers to elearning for students worldwide



Unesco 2020

WITH MULTIPLE ELEARNING TOOLS ON OFFER, LEVELS OF SUCCESS VARY

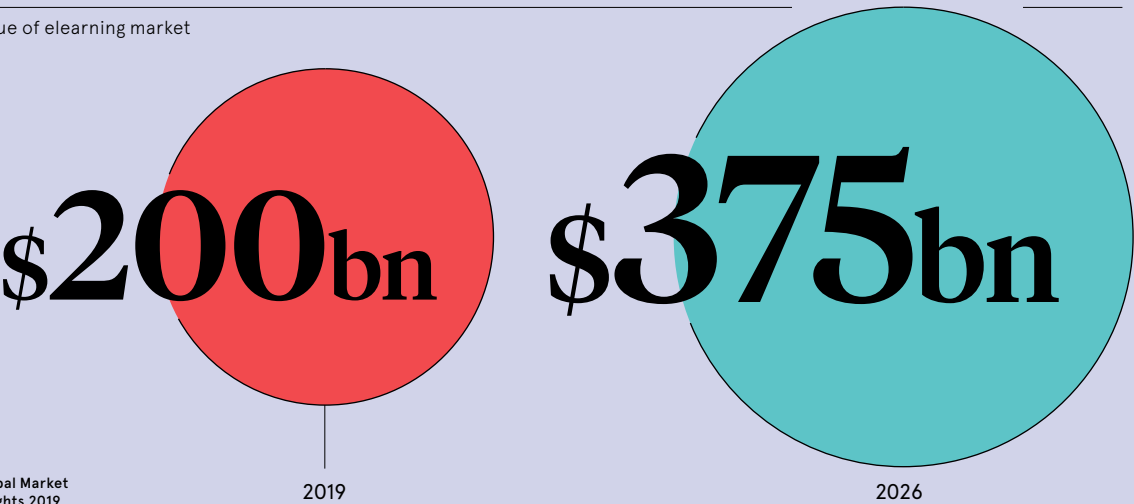
Parents' level of usage of learning resources compared with their level of satisfaction with resources



Deloitte 2020

THE VALUE OF THE ELEARNING MARKET CONTINUES TO SKYROCKET

Value of elearning market



Global Market Insights 2019

2019

2026



EQUALITY

Fighting digital exclusion with innovation

Large swathes of children in the UK do not have adequate access to smart devices or even internet connectivity, but concerned organisations are trying to ensure nobody is left behind

MaryLou Costa

Preventing digital exclusion appears high on the government's agenda. Some £100 million has been poured into remote digital learning, including delivery of more than 200,000 devices for disadvantaged children, plus £1 billion invested in a COVID catch-up fund.

Yet according to the Education Policy Institute (EPI), more than 450,000 devices are needed, with 20 per cent of children eligible for free school meals having no access to a computer at home.

According to the Department for Education (DfE), initiatives such as the Oak National Academy online classroom and EdTech Demonstrator Programme best-practice network play a pivotal role in ensuring technology has a positive impact. But industry practitioners argue a lack of innovation, co-ordination, oversight and forward-thinking.

"The laptop distribution scheme has taken far longer than planned for devices to reach their end-users, which means many students

have been without access to digital resources for the duration of the school closures. The eligibility criteria were also quite narrow, so many students will have missed out," says the EPI's director of communications and external engagement Rhys Spence.

Charities such as the Access Project, which helps disadvantaged students gain access to top universities, have turned increasingly to corporate partners. For example, a recent £23,000 donation covered 60 laptops and relevant software.

"Next summer you're potentially going to see A-level and GCSE grades really dipping because there hasn't been enough time for students to catch up. Corporate partners stepping up to bridge the gap is vital," says Access Project programme and volunteering director Lucy Ball.

More than £32 million in free resources was provided to schools between March and May, according to the British Education Suppliers Association. The likes of BT have partnered with the DfE to provide

six months' free wi-fi to families in need, as well as launching its Skills for Tomorrow online learning hub, Barefoot Computing programme to support teacher training and collaborations with charities, such as Barnardo's, School-Home Support and KidsOut, with digital exclusion initiatives.

With the longevity of such initiatives called into question, BT responds that it's in talks with the DfE to expand its work to tackle digital exclusion.

"We've already helped 2.8 million children and our goal is to help five million by 2025," says Professor Kerensa Jennings, BT group director of digital impact. "It's critical to keep up momentum and make sure the progress we're making continues to drive impact as lockdown eases and we move into the future."

Collaborations between industry, government and schools, are critical to provide resilience to education systems, according to the EPI. This is echoed by Sharon Davies, chief executive of Young Enterprise, which

teaches young people financial savviness and entrepreneurship. Davies advocates for a greater leveraging of community resources to house lessons within spaces like youth clubs, and capitalise on support from local mentors and champions.

"We have to accept young people need to learn digital skills and new ways of communicating and getting jobs. We have to find a way round this lack of access or it will compound existing disparities," she says.

Whatever the approach, the EPI is calling on government to ensure the strategy is centralised and coherent, to avoid deepening inequality of access between schools that are able to foster high-level partnerships and those that are not, says Spence, who points to pilot initiatives underway to support pupils with digital learning centrally.

The Eduu.School, for example, is a partnership between edtech platform Gluu, the Shireland Collegiate Academy in the West Midlands, Birmingham and Black Country local authorities, and the Trauma Response Network to help disadvantaged learners working remotely.

"The findings from these and other innovative trials should be considered centrally to determine possible applications in the school system," the EPI recommends. Indeed, Gluu chief executive Christine Major is buoyed by the high engagement levels across Eduu.School, from live lessons to wellbeing, virtual field trips, coding, languages and prizes.

"We set out with the intent of reaching 1,000 students, but once the word was out, the doors were opened much wider. We have 3,000 students across 15 schools in Eduu. School and are being asked to take on more. We're really happy with how it's going, now it's a matter of the evaluation piece," says Major.

With Gluu co-founder Sean Gardner, she will present to government, with the intention of making Eduu.School available to all UK students, containing downloadable content optimised for mobile.

Gluu's core work has been to scale edtech solutions from individual schools by matching them with big-ticket partners, then commercialising finished products back within the system. While it has been a piecemeal approach, the Gluu team are now seeing barriers fall.

"There's been a real shift in terms of a collaborative coalition approach. We're pulling together partners to deliver Eduu.School who previously might not have worked together," says Gardner.

"There's a realisation our children are in a difficult place. I don't think any teacher is looking to put hurdles in place, so things have changed definitely. We've invited a number of stakeholders to be part of the Eduu.School evaluation and if that doesn't prompt them into action, we can't do any more."

One of the biggest shifts also to have an impact on digital exclusion is how the future of learning is mirroring the future of work.

"The lockdown has made us consider what attendance is: no longer 9am to 3.30pm. That puts the onus for learning more on the student than the teacher. That's a good thing," says John Galloway, veteran teacher, consultant and advisory board member for edtech trade show Bett.

Galloway indicates it's not just a lack of devices and bandwidth at the core of digital exclusion, but the ability to work independently. This must also be considered and supported in the rollout of digital learning programmes, from adapting student mindsets to how, and what, teachers teach.

"Working from home with materials sent to you means you have more control over what you're learning and when. You have to set aside time and make decisions. It may be Monday morning at 9am isn't the best time for you to learn French. So do art instead. If we are going to be working from home so much more, then this shift is going to be preparing students for that," says Galloway.

"It may mean someone's future success is dependent on the ability to create structure around the task required. That is going to create a divide between those able to do that and those less able."

Young Enterprise's Davies agrees the recovery will need to focus beyond academic learning, incorporating opportunities through partnerships to learn and work collaboratively. "If we can get it right with social mobility, access to role models, access to aspirations, we could make things better," she concludes. ●



Next summer you may see A-level and GCSE grades dipping because there hasn't been enough time for students to catch up

Skilled for life

With the economy experiencing one of its biggest changes in living memory, filling the digital skills gap will rely on a new approach to expertise driven by social, lifelong learning

Digital disruption has swept through nearly every sector causing seismic change not just to business processes and customer expectations, but also the skills required by employers to adapt successfully. The speed at which technology has advanced, however, has created a shortage of suitably skilled talent, which Accenture predicts could cost the UK economy as much as £141 billion of GDP growth by 2028.

That figure was calculated before the coronavirus crisis, but the pandemic has only accelerated the need to transform and therefore exacerbated the digital skills gap. People who hadn't already embraced online shopping or banking apps have had little choice and even the likes of GP consultations have had to adopt online alternatives. Businesses, meanwhile, have been forced to pivot to digital models to survive.

"We've seen this huge acceleration towards digital applications, and the skills supporting their use and delivery, both in terms of work and daily life," says Justin Cooke, chief content and partnerships officer at FutureLearn, a pioneer of social learning and a digital education platform that connects people with the world's best free online courses.

"Add the wider impacts of COVID-19, including the rise of unemployment, and the significant digital skills shortage that already existed is sure to widen even more.

"That's the supply side. On the demand side, every organisation in the world has been through the effects of COVID and knows that adapting to the new normal requires new skills and a basic sense of how to continue business as usual in a distributed, remote-working environment. Many companies have had to adjust to being fully online, rapidly developing skills they never had beforehand to make that happen, purely out of need."

A huge wave of upskilling and reskilling, particularly in high-demand areas like artificial intelligence, data science and cybersecurity, is required to address the skills gap before the wounds to the UK's productivity and overall economy cut too deep.

According to the World Economic Forum, more than 1 billion jobs, over a third of all jobs globally, are likely to be transformed in some way by technology in the next decade. This means digitalisation is not only driving the creation of new jobs, but new skills for existing jobs.

To achieve the necessary upskilling and reskilling, government, industry and academia must actively work together to embrace edtech solutions and transform learning experiences across the country, with a strong emphasis on lifelong learning.

The traditional notion of an "education" – nursery, primary and secondary, possibly followed by higher education or an apprenticeship, then stopping – is increasingly archaic in a digital age where the pace of innovation and change continues to accelerate.

"Learning is just a complete misnomer now," says Cooke. "There is an urgent need to reskill or upskill hundreds of millions of people around the world, whether that's due to economic change or industrial automation, or simply to get them out of poverty, and that need will continue as technology evolves even faster.

"Going into COVID we saw the demand for adult education was rising significantly, with 14 million new students expected every year from now until 2030, which would require an additional 13 new universities every week. That's just not going to happen. Ultimately, the future is digital.

"We really see this need for learning to be accessible, which means it must be flexible. It needs to fit into our lives, delivered through whatever device we want to use, whenever we want it, bite sized to fit around our life

or work style. And it needs to be really focused on career and progression. That skills element should be front and centre."

Employees and jobseekers alike require an essential digital toolkit to adapt and develop their skills successfully. FutureLearn, which was founded by the Open University in 2012, has been working with government and industry to build a digital skills stack to fulfil this need. Its courses, supported by the Institute of Coding, were included in a skills toolkit of online resources launched by the Department for Education in response to the pandemic.

Working with Accenture, the organisation has also helped prepare more than 400,000 young people for the job market with digital training ranging from understanding what artificial

intelligence means in the workplace, to digital marketing and web analytics.

FutureLearn is particularly keen to challenge the assumption that all young people are naturally ingrained with the digital skills that businesses want and need. Somebody who uses social media extensively doesn't necessarily know how to apply those skills in the workplace. Since the start of the lockdown in March, FutureLearn has seen traffic to its platform increase threefold, with the majority of individuals who are interacting with its online resources, many of which are free, already in employment.

"Education is ripe for digital transformation and right now edtech is having its Spotify moment," says Cooke. "Education has reached a tipping point, a moment of great disaggregation. Supported by partnerships with government and industry, digital platforms can assist students and employees in learning new skills, and help employers urgently tackle their digital skills shortages.

"FutureLearn is leading the charge, breaking down traditional models of education into much more flexible and targeted offers and products to learners, which can be delivered not just at a national but a global scale.

"As the leader in social learning, we've built this incredible pedagogy that fits the way people want to learn. The way

£141bn

of potential UK GDP growth could be lost as a result of the shortage of suitably skilled talent by 2028

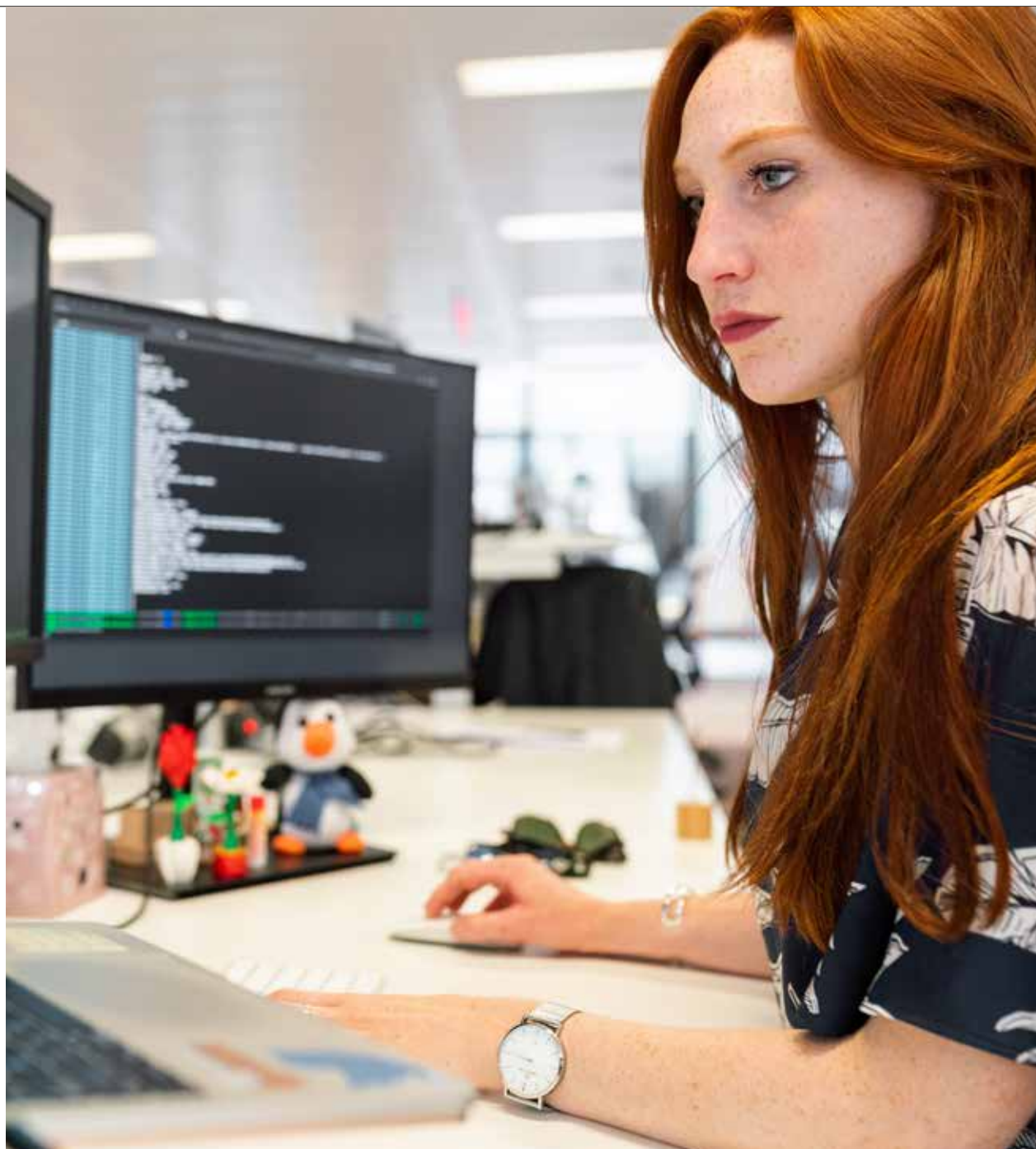
Accenture

they consume media, the same principles apply to learning and we combine that with really high-quality content. We have more than 25 per cent of the world's top universities as partners and some of the biggest brands in the world working with us to create this really engaging education.

"We are one of the fastest-growing, most exciting edtech startups in Europe, and we're working with governments around the world, as well as businesses, universities and even job seekers, to ensure tech is integrated in the way they approach teaching and upskilling."

Think skills, Think FutureLearn.
futurelearn.com

**Future
Learn**



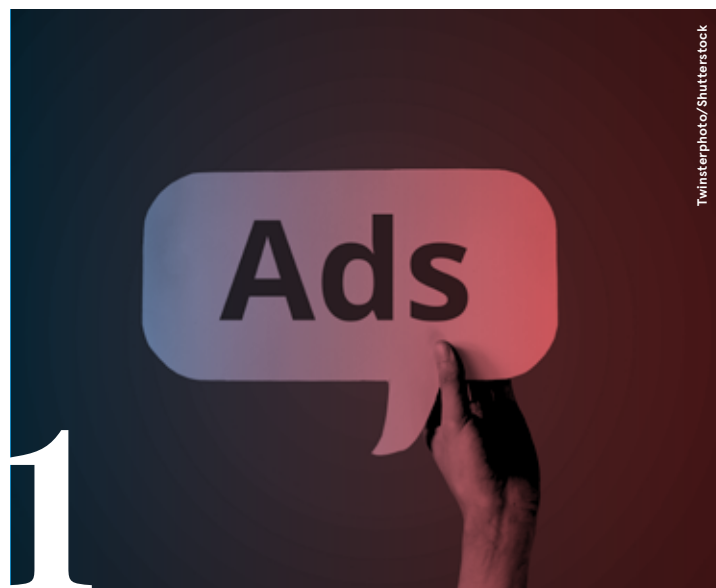
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Education is ripe for digital transformation and right now edtech is having its Spotify moment

ONLINE LEARNING

Seven elearning scams to watch out for

While online learning is booming, charlatans and scammers are looking to take advantage. Cowboy coaches are flooding the market making official accreditation or authenticity essential for individual students and businesses. Here are seven online scams to beware

Oliver Pickup



Cloak-and-dagger sales presentations

Online learning can be a crook's cloak, where the course has little educational content and value and is instead a sales presentation full of commercial advertising. Through advertising and regular email communications, the course is a guise to persuade you to buy a sometimes unrelated product or service.

One anonymous respondent to a CPD (continuing professional development) Standards Office survey says: "I paid to attend a training

conference that I thought would genuinely give me some training in beauty and aesthetics for my practice. However, it was a sell, sell, sell session for buying botox and chemical peel products."

Amanda Rosewarne, chief executive of the CPD Standards Office, advises: "To avoid online scams like this, people should look for training courses listed with many learning objectives and seek out independent review sites such as Trustpilot."



Promises of employment

"There are several 'professional coaching organisations' we have encountered that promise on completion of their, usually very expensive, coaching 'qualification' they will forward clients to you," says Rosewarne at the CPD Standards Office.

"In this case, the course is not the problem, it's just that the clients, business development opportunities or guaranteed financial guarantees given at the point of sale, do not materialise, leaving people at a loss of how to make a living, or develop a business, from their new skillset."

Performing due diligence is critical. Robert Clarke, the managing editor of *Learning News*, says: "In these times of change and uncertainty, unscrupulous providers are on the make. Recognised training and CPD helps buyers avoid the tricksters and scams, and buy with greater confidence."

Fake qualifications

It is easy to fall foul of scammers who promise professional qualifications. They hook you in by selling a course, but then fail to provide the correct certificate or licence.

Dr Emma Woodward, a New Zealand-based educational psychologist, says: "I'm concerned by the number of online courses offering training in areas that cross over into fields that are highly regulated, such as 'diploma in child development' or 'diploma in cognitive behavioural therapy'."

"These courses allude to having more gravitas than what they offer, which is both unethical and dangerous as the application to real people is a skill that needs more than a few PDFs online."



Non-existent colleges and academies

"The words 'college' and 'academy' are unprotected when registering an organisation at Companies House," Rosewarne points out. Therefore, anyone can set up an online learning course linked to a fake education centre. There are two typical online scams. Firstly, the scammers charge for an expensive and prestigious course before liquidating the organisation. Alternatively, buyers are duped into long-term membership commitments that are impossible to cancel and the content is often freely available elsewhere.

"Make sure it is a well-known provider and check it with a phone call," says Hilarie Owen, chief



executive of the Leaders' Institute. "Don't part with any money until you have checked."



Rogue conferences

Scamming global conference providers offer fake event agendas by using the names of top academics,

business leaders and talking heads to advertise and sell tickets. Supposed keynote speakers will have "cancelled at the last minute" only to be replaced by lower-grade alternatives.

A Trustpilot *ConferenceSeries Review* provides an example of this dubious practice. "Attended the fifth International CAM Conference in Vancouver in October 2019. Only a few speakers showed up and the rest apparently had their visas rejected or had health issues. Total fabrication." There were 44 names advertised originally, but only four speakers attended and there was no one from the organisation present. "I wish I had checked before registering," the reviewer adds.

Poor-quality online learning courses

"This online scam involves a concise overview course for a minimal fee, usually £50 or less, which offers what we call 'skimpy content'," says Rosewarne. "Buyers will encounter heavy promotion and sophisticated digital marketing tricks for purchasing a further, more expensive, course, which might be £1,000 or more. Sometimes these courses also lack engagement and are 'chalk-and-talk' presentations with little practical application."

Simon de Cintra, director of Act Naturally, agrees. "Professional



training providers know that reputation is key to long-term success and actively encourage well-informed purchasing at every stage," he says, warning that users should always read reviews before buying.



Free online learning

Not only are numerous free online learning courses, peddled by charlatans, a waste of time, but the purported expertise they provide is also substandard and therefore

potentially harmful. "This learning often focuses on a specific topic, such as beauty aesthetics, child mental health support, or IT engineering technical training," says Rosewarne. "Most of the time, the authors have had a single fluke success online and are not at all experts in the topic."

This chimes with Jo Cook, founder and director of Lightbulb Moment. "A lot of people are jumping on the COVID-19 bandwagon, either as a scam or with little expertise in how to provide quality remote courses and live online sessions," she says. "Make sure to go to a company with years of experience behind them." ●

OPINION

‘Teachers have supported our nation's children throughout the crisis and it is now the time to support them’

Teachers have worked tirelessly to educate pupils during lockdown, both in schools and at a distance. School-leaders are now rising to the next challenge: welcoming pupils and students back to school this month.

The British Educational Suppliers Association's (BESA) quality-assured suppliers are helping schools to prepare and adapt their existing classrooms, technologies and remote-education platforms so students can access learning in as safe a manner as possible, whether in school or from home.

Over recent months, school-leaders have highlighted key challenges that will become priority issues for schools when their doors reopen. Headteachers will first and foremost focus on supporting the mental health and wellbeing of those children who have suffered trauma or bereavement during the lockdown period.

Leaders will also look to assess the extent of students' lost learning and identify targeted interventions to support catch-up. This will be all the more important given the Royal Society's DELVE group's finding that England's student population is now one tenth of a standard deviation behind where it should be in terms of outcomes.

If this sounds trivial in nature, the consequences it will produce are not. On the economic front, the coronavirus-cohort's future earnings are projected to be permanently reduced by 2 to 3 per cent a year, at a cost of £3 billion a year to the economy.

On a societal level, COVID-19 risks disadvantaging the already disadvantaged. Those with lower levels of educational attainment are already five times more likely to live in poverty than others. In light of reports that the attainment gap has increased by between 36 and 52 per cent over lockdown, COVID-19 risks exacting a generational cost.

This makes it even more important that schools are provided with sufficient resources now. Edtech solutions can prove effective in boosting attainment, using adaptive-learning technology to focus on specific areas where students need extra help and support, providing bespoke feedback and insights to classroom teachers on progress.

Educators working in schools have adapted to working from home during lockdown, but unlike business environments where “connectivity is king”, many schools do not have the

digital infrastructure built in to enable large-scale use of technology. In BESA's pre-COVID survey, 33 per cent of primary and 11 per cent of secondary schools reported that their digital connectivity was poor. Schools will need additional funding and support to ensure their digital infrastructure is future-proof.

Our teaching workforce has made a Herculean effort to embrace technologies for the benefit of their learners. We need to ensure our teachers are provided with the ongoing training and support they need to embed and further develop their digital skills using free continuing professional development support from the Department for Education's Edtech Demonstrator Programme, the Chartered College of Teaching and BESA's www.LearnED.org.uk conferences.

Finally, schools are rightly sourcing and developing rich curriculum plans that are adaptable to a blended learning environment, ensuring lessons and curriculum resources are available in formats that can be accessible both in school and remotely. Many schools already work with curriculum publishers to adapt content for their own specific circumstances and UK educational publishers provided more than £36 million of free curriculum resources to schools during the first three months of lockdown alone.

Investment in, and effective use of, edtech is essential to help the UK's nine million learners catch up the learning time lost during COVID-19. Our teaching workforce has supported our nation's children throughout the coronavirus crisis and it is now the time to support them. Government must provide them with the technological infrastructure, tools and training to take their newfound digital confidence to the next level to ensure every child receives access to the education they deserve, in the classroom and beyond. ●



Caroline Wright
Director general
British Educational Suppliers Association

How can universities ensure integrity when assessing remotely?

Integrity is at the heart of education and educators need to trust student work is original to ensure grades are truly earned

With more educational institutions moving to online instruction and assessment, which has been accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, the challenge teachers, administrators and leadership teams now face is finding ways to uphold academic integrity and trust. This is where technology can help.

Tackling misconduct in the digital age

As many as one in seven students across the world could be involved in contract cheating, according to research from Swansea University. In response, the Quality Assurance Agency has published new guidance for higher education providers around protecting academic integrity and tackling the use of essay mills, urging institutions to design assessment systems in a way that reduces opportunities for contract cheating.

Cees Poortman, regional vice president, Europe, Middle East and Africa, at the global education technology provider Turnitin, is passionate about giving education institutions the tools they need in the modern learning environment.

“Today's schools, colleges and universities are operating in a world that's almost unrecognisable from the time Turnitin was established over 20 years ago. The explosion in online essay mills and other advanced methods of cheating, and the incredible pressure students experience to succeed, has forced institutions to evolve accordingly,” he says.

“That's where online learning tools as offered by Turnitin have a crucial role for students, educators and institutions as a whole, protecting the highest standards of academic integrity and supporting a fair and efficient assessment journey in the modern learning environment.”



The challenge teachers, administrators and leadership teams face now is finding ways to uphold academic integrity and trust



Using online tools to uphold academic integrity

Turnitin's online learning tools are specifically designed to support institutions in upholding academic integrity. This August saw the launch of Turnitin Originality, which offers more detailed and in-depth data than ever before, giving students, educators and institutions the insight they need to uphold academic integrity, prevent contract cheating and support the entire learning journey.

“From speaking with schools, colleges and universities, we knew there was a need to go beyond mere plagiarism checking, and provide a whole suite of comprehensive tools to support teaching students the value of original thinking skills,” says Poortman, explaining the development process behind Turnitin Originality.

“Especially as more institutions move to online instruction, they will unfortunately face an increase in academic misconduct. This requires the ability to identify the full range of potential misconduct, providing feedback in one tool so discussions around academic integrity become teachable moments, rather than punitive ones.”

Moving from preventative to proactive

To counteract the threat of academic misconduct, Turnitin Originality equips institutions with formative learning tools that provide the opportunity to check for similarity and grammar, and find missing citations before submission, ensuring content is refined and ideas and concepts are original and fully thought out.

Through other new features, such as computer code plagiarism detection, text manipulation identification and forensic authorship reporting, Turnitin Originality is ideally placed to help institutions directly address issues such as code similarity and contract cheating.

With Gradescope, Turnitin is also taking an innovative approach to enhance the formative assessment process in science, technology, engineering and maths, or STEM, subjects. By digitising paper-based assignments, Gradescope provides detailed data to identify student trends and uses artificial intelligence-assisted grading to provide both a fair evaluation as well as the most efficient assessment and grading process.

By using Turnitin, educators can feel confident that students are truly engaging with their learning, upholding academic integrity and developing original thinking skills. Integrating academic integrity across the entire learning journey has become more important than ever; Turnitin is ready to help universities rise to the challenge in the most effective and efficient way.

Institutions seeking to learn more about the role of education technology in assessing student success, upholding academic integrity and supporting original thinking should visit www.turnitin.com for more information. Try Gradescope for free until the end of 2020 by visiting www.gradescope.com



Tuition fees in focus as students revolt

The pandemic forced university campuses to close and teaching to move online. But it also shone a spotlight on what many feel is an unsustainable business model...

Virginia Matthews

Student outrage at the refusal of universities to offer automatic refunds for no-go lecture halls underscores the bitter debate on the fundamental aim of university education and return on investment for the fees-burdened coronavirus generation.

While Boris Johnson's government is currently holding the line on the existing university business model, which has triggered close to £50,000 in average student debt and unanswered questions around value for money, calls for reform have come from some unlikely bedfellows.

Former prime minister Theresa May has made no secret of her desire to see both a cut in tuition fees and a return to maintenance grants for the poorest students. Her disquiet is shared by Labour peer Lord Adonis who, despite having helped design the current methodology, described the universal £9,250 fees levy as a "cartel".

While support for an Australian-style, differential system based on subject has grown, the potential downgrading of any course to second best could jeopardise graduate employability.

"It is inevitable that students see themselves as consumers and



Ross Smedley/Unsplash

therefore feel short-changed by the limiting of face-to-face contact time, but to treat higher education as just another marketplace is to miss the point," says Jo Grady, general secretary of the University and College Union (UCU).

"To create a sustainable university business model and preserve the aim of university education for learners and society as a whole, we need a more progressive approach to all forms of taxation and a closer look at corporation tax. And yes, we are totally in favour of the abolition of tuition fees."

With the Open University celebrating more than 50 years of successful remote teaching, cheaper, online-only degrees would seem an obvious way for bricks-and-mortar

providers to quash damaging claims of misselling.

Yet to Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) director Nick Hillman, such a move in the current economic climate would be damaging to the higher education sector as a whole. "Back in July, the Institute for Fiscal Studies suggested that around a dozen UK universities would face serious financial hardship without an emergency government bailout," he says.

"The prospect of reducing fees by £2,000 or £3,000 this autumn to reflect student disquiet over online learning would threaten the ability of these institutions to continue as going concerns."

When the coalition government, led by David Cameron, tripled

tuition fees to £9,000 in 2010, universities waxed lyrical about the "all-round university experience" which boosted social, personal and intellectual growth as well as earning potential.

Yet to the 350,000 students who unsuccessfully petitioned the government for a full 2019-20 refund to reflect cancelled lectures, labs and field trips, along with prolonged strikes and unused accommodation, the aim of university education post-pandemic is less clear.

Many students may this autumn decide to take their chances in the job market rather than shell out £9,250 a year for what some fear will be a succession of pre-recorded lectures and follow-up Zoom calls.

But the notion that person-to-person teaching via live seminars and tutorials, or students hanging out socially, is now a thing of the past is laughably wide of the mark, says Professor Tansy Jessop, pro vice-chancellor for education at the University of Bristol.

"It's already been said that 2020 will be the best time to start a degree and having seen the levels of student engagement being achieved with blended learning, I can only agree," she says. "At its best, online learning is more personalised and inclusive, and promotes a feeling of community that is impossible in a crowded lecture theatre where social interaction is nil."

The move away from passive listening to a "more active and two-way learning experience" must, she says, be factored into any discussion around value for money. As always though, the best costs.

"To preserve the aim of university education, we are applying a rigour to online teaching which quite possibly costs as much if not more than the traditional lectures and seminars model," says Jessop. "While I agree that compound interest rates on student loans are unethical, I think it's fair higher education 'consumers' should pay something towards a life-changing rite of passage which only around half the population will ever get to experience."

Regardless of the edict that refunds cannot be automatic, a growing number of universities have already, albeit quietly, compensated learners for disruption. While Hillman at HEPI says he fully supports reimbursements for students who feel "promises have not been kept", he cautions against making claims based solely on person-to-person contact hours.

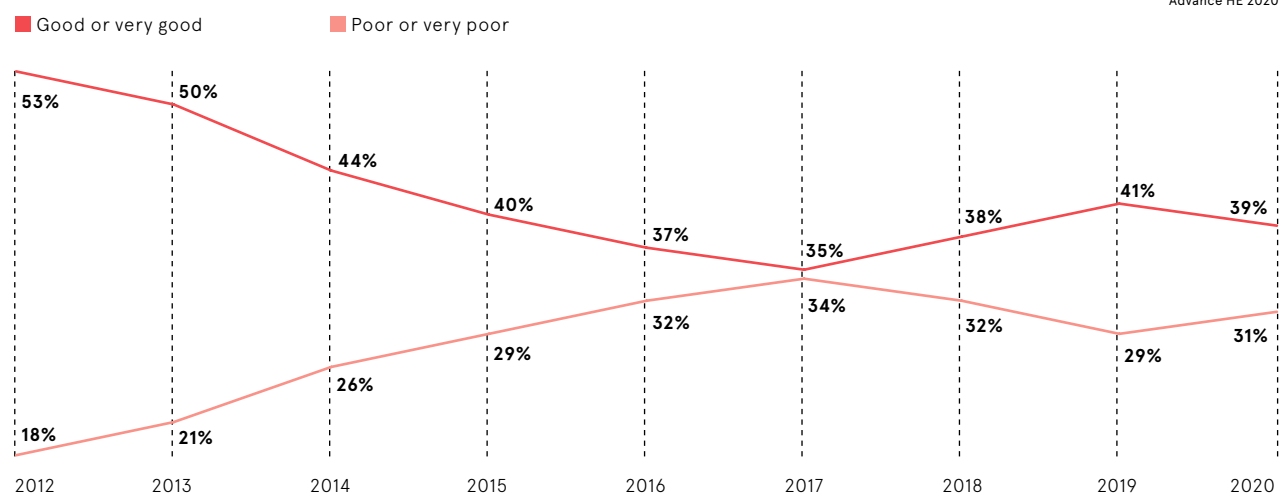
"When lectures have been cancelled, many students have accessed other facilities such as the library or sports halls and it's important to recognise too that the wages bill for higher education, which amounts to some 59 per cent of total cost, isn't reduced by limited contact time," says Hillman.

Yet in the period since April, UCU's Grady estimates that some 30,000 to 40,000 university staff on fixed-term contracts have been shed and she fears that without them the fresher experience of 2020 can only be downgraded further.

Professor Steven Jones at the University of Manchester believes

PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE HAVE CHANGED

Percentage of UK students who think university courses are good or poor value for money; 10,000 students surveyed





Restoring public faith

As Whitehall farces go, this summer’s biased algorithms and belated Ofqual (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation) u-turns have scored top marks. But for further education as a whole, the task now is to calm jitters and restore public faith in a badly mauled assessment system.

Calls for A-level coursework to be restored to its formerly pivotal position in learning for 16 to 18 year olds, as remains the case with the more-vocational BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) courses, are firmly on the table, as is live discussion around the consistency of teacher assessment and this year’s unwelcome, but notable, grade inflation.

Yet any rush to reorganise in the light of this year’s fiasco would be a mistake, argues Bill Watkin, chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association. “The A-level system has been significantly reformed in the past few years and I don’t believe there would be any appetite for further change among teachers already

working flat out to deliver the new, more robust curriculum,” he says.

It was the 2010 to 2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government that introduced widespread changes to the A-level system, sweeping away the old modular learning model in favour of a linear, exam-led approach.

Yet the then-education secretary Michael Gove’s determination to restore one major test at the end of the course has significantly benefited affluent students, Watkin believes, with well-heeled parents able to invest in top-dollar tutors and cramming courses at exam time.

The “knock-on for disadvantaged pupils” in terms of reduced access to high grades, good-quality university courses and overall social mobility has, he says, been equally marked.

With schools now wrestling with an entirely new set of circumstances this academic year however, Watkin believes the arguments for more change, restoring coursework, introducing termly assessments or even abandoning the A-level exam altogether, should be shelved for the time being.

“Once we have thought more deeply about what went wrong with this year’s A-level algorithm and learnt lessons from the episode, it could be that reform will come,” he says.

While it is possible that reform will lean “more towards a blend of where we are today in terms of rigour and where we want to be, that is equality of opportunity”, that’s a question for the future.

“All I can say with any degree of certainty right now is we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility there will be other disrupted academic years to come and that means balancing both traditional and new online forms of teaching,” Watkin concludes.

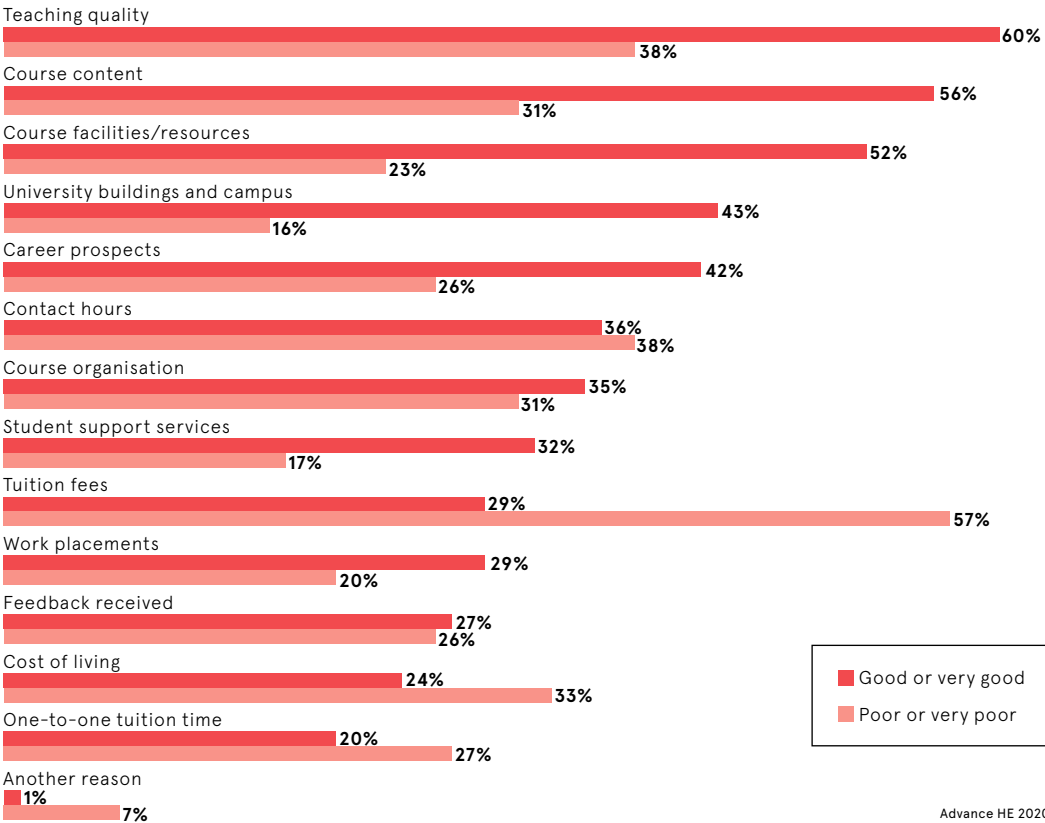
the current, market-led university business model does little to support the aim of university education overall. Speaking in a personal capacity, he says: “Defenders of the current market system will point out that the number of disadvantaged students accessing higher education has gone up, as has demand overall, and they’ll also say most graduates will never repay their loans in full.”

While he notes that all of this is true and universities need to be funded in some way, he calls for a new system based around “public good, with universities acting collaboratively and in the best interests of all young people”.

With the current situation of “high learner fees and high interest rates” now untenable, in his view, there is “an opportunity for government to rethink the entire role of universities and their value to society as a whole”, Jones concludes. ●

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE

For students who rated university as good or poor value for money, they were asked what factors influenced their decision



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