

# Reflecting on the future: universities post-COVID

## LEARNING TRANS- FORMING

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**In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, what challenges do universities face? How should the role of higher education evolve? What difficulties will our new scenario bring? How will we overcome them? How does adapting to digital transformation fit in? What should our research model be?**

**Universities must change, and spokespeople, faculty members and researchers from the UOC have been sharing their reflections on where a roadmap for the coming years should take us.**

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# The evolution of higher education cannot be halted



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Without a doubt, the education sector has been one of the hardest hit by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. According to UNESCO, last April around 1.6 billion children and young people worldwide did not attend school or university due to lockdowns. At all levels of education, efforts have been made to compensate for closures by setting up teaching alternatives using digital technologies, thus giving rise to so-called 'emergency remote teaching'. Taking stock of the experiences of recent months, we have seen mixed results. For some, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to explore the full potential of ICT in education and accelerate transformation projects that had previously been on the back burner. For others, however, the experience has served to highlight deficiencies in online education, leading to calls for a rapid return to traditional on-site classes as the only way to ensure education is provided properly.

First of all, it should be stressed that recent experiences in replacing on-site education cannot be compared to true, high-quality online learning, as most schools have not had the resources, training or time to implement it as such. Even so, many experiences have been successful and allowed students at all levels to keep on track with their education under reasonable conditions.

But let us try to look beyond the pandemic. The role and scope of online education had already been a matter of debate for some time. In general, there is a tendency to contrast or compare – somewhat dualistically – on-site and online education. They are two different methodologies, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, aimed at different publics. While schools were closed, the tendency to try to imitate on-site classes in online environments proved tiring, in the same way as teleworking systems adopted during lockdown proved to be more rigid and exhausting than daily attendance at the office. Bad practices in very difficult times.

Nevertheless, it is possible to use digital technologies to implement a wide variety of learning ecosystems, in which appropriate combinations of face-to-face and online interactions and oral, written and audiovisual communication can enrich teaching and learning in and outside schools – in homes, the community and wherever an internet connection is available. You could say that on-site and online systems represent each end of a continuum, on which the ratio between the two produces ecosystems of varying suitability in relation to the educational aim.

There has been criticism of moves made to take basic education on-

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line over recent months, but such criticism has ignored the absence of alternatives. True, at stages of life when socialization, learning through experience and discovery of the physical world are so important, it makes no sense for schooling to be mostly online. All the same, even in those stages, digital technologies could have benefited children and young people much more if they had already gained a stronger foothold in classrooms and, above all, if they were already being used by teachers with greater regularity. A price has been paid for teachers' low levels of digital competencies training and the lack of resources among students and schools.

The situation is different in higher education. In the 2018/19 academic year already some 15% of Spain's university population were at online universities. Most of these students were able to deal with lockdown with a much greater degree of normality. Now for the coming academic year all on-site universities are producing contingency plans for classrooms closures in the event of new outbreaks. Meanwhile, they are also looking out for opportunities that the sudden move online could bring.

Adopting blended learning models could benefit universities and their future, depending on how well they work out which aspects are best conducted face-to-face, which aspects are more convenient and productive based in online learning environments, and how it should all be organized and managed. This is a difficult task, further complicated by opposition from sections of the academic community who see online education as a threat to certain university values. Some argue that university institutions should remain entirely on-site as their infor-

mal spaces are breeding grounds for reflection and sociability among the university community, and face-to-face communication is the essence of teaching and comprehensive learning; they say that online education opens the door to crowded, for-profit universities, conceived as production lines to distribute certificates.

I do not deny the benefits of on-site universities; when there is plenty of time and the conditions are right, they can enable students to benefit from enriching relationships. But I fear these conditions are not the norm at on-site universities, or at least the conditions vary. In reality we see crowded universities, in which students rarely interact with teachers, and where most classes are one-way lectures, using one single approach for highly diverse groups of students, who take notes as best they can and then prepare their papers or study for exams without much support.

We could only envisage a future where higher education was exclusively on-site if we accepted that universities should continue to be available to just a select minority. But Sustainable Development Goal 4 in the United Nations 2030 Agenda advocates for something very different: to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This means extending higher education to a majority of the population and continuing their training and development over the course of their lives. Such a task will require all available university resources and much more. And, of course, it will require a reorganization of the university system, with each institution having to define its strategy and establish its position.

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Clearly, education is also an economic activity, in which corporations and investment funds seek new sources of profit. This must be tackled. Nevertheless, for-profit institutions do not only focus on online learning, they operate in all types of education. The difference is not in the type of delivery but in the intention. Is the motive profit or service? What takes precedence, quality standards or other goals? Is the aim to make an impact right across society or just to cater to an elite? Do students gain well-rounded university experiences or simply low-cost degrees? It is true that online education permits greater scalability and that this can be particularly attractive for businesses looking to make a quick profit. At the same time, however, online education offers greater coverage, and this is particularly relevant when the aim is to provide university education to parts of society where, until recently, there were few such opportunities.

In Spain, for instance, in terms of inclusion, it is universities such as the UNED and the UOC that have the highest percentages of students with disabilities. There is now a highly diverse public receiving online education: people who did not have the chance to start or finish their studies at a younger age, people living a long way from on-site universities and, in particular, working adults with families who require ongoing training and development. For people such as these who already have extensive experience of on-site education, high-quality online training is a wonderful alternative offering the flexibility they need for compatibility with their other commitments. Many of them are not seeking qualifications, which they already have. What they want is to keep on learning. Many

have high-level jobs and are very demanding regarding the training they receive. To add to all this variety, in recent years there has been growing interest among younger students, some of whom see digital education as more attractive than on-site education. This might seem incomprehensible to the teachers of my generation, but without a full-scale review of what on-site education now represents, we may see more empty classrooms.

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