

Universities don't need to go digital – they need a new kind of learning

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Since the start of the pandemic, students have been forced to study from home. That works well in many cases, but it shouldn't be a model for the future. A discussion of what we need to change after the pandemic.

Half a million students have never lost their way on campus. They've never had vegan meatloaf in the canteen or tried to eat an apple as quietly as possible in the library reading room. That's due to the fact that the 500,000 or so young people who began their degrees in 2020 found themselves being taught wholly online. For these students, their laptop is their lecture theatre and their fellow students are two-dimensional heads on a screen.

WILL THE TREND FOR DIGITAL TUITION CONTINUE AFTER THE PANDEMIC?

Some educational experts claim that the trend for digital tuition will continue after the pandemic, and see it as a positive. Yes, it is indeed nice to be able to paint your toenails during lectures and to do exams in your dressing gown. Studying over Zoom is convenient. But there's a dangerous side to it, too.

'University isn't just supposed to make you smarter, but also ideally to develop your critical thinking and social skills. It should be a place where young people grow up, discover new interests and sometimes fundamentally change.'

Online tuition reduces studying to dry facts that students absorb from a few PowerPoint presentations and then regurgitate in the exam. Even before the pandemic, 'bulimic learning' was a staple of every exam period and there were professors who would disinterestedly read out their PowerPoint slides instead of giving a lecture. Online study has simply highlighted existing deficiencies that need to be urgently addressed after the crisis.

Learning is about far more than cramming facts and passing exams. Learning is the discussion that takes place between two seminars, the political speech, the party in the evening. You can learn from professors but also from other students.

NOT ONLY THE SCHOOL EDUCATION BUT ALSO THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SHOULD BE TRANSFORMED

We need more debate, more creativity, more freedom. We need to change the format of exams, moving away from mere knowledge recall and instead focusing on the application of skills and understanding in new contexts. It's something we've been discussing in the context of school education for years, so why not for university education too? We need more seminars that involve real-world tasks instead of simply repeating the content of lectures. We need lecturers who genuinely enjoy sharing knowledge. We need to make regular talks by leading thinkers from around the world compulsory viewing. We need to think up new teaching formats: a Chinese choir for sinologists, industry visits for business students, a night in a prison for budding lawyers.

THE UNIVERSITY STANDS FOR MUCH MORE THAN THE MERE TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE

Universities used to be places where revolutions were planned. Online study is like YouTube, except more boring and less well designed. University isn't just supposed to make you smarter, but also ideally to develop your critical thinking and social skills. It should be a place where young people grow up, discover new interests and sometimes fundamentally change. We definitely shouldn't move it permanently online. Instead, we should take advantage of the crisis – and turn universities into new sites of learning.



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