# Guest editorial: Profound digital Pedagogies: global perspectives



It was not that long ago when, if you asked most university and higher education leaders how long it would take to move the entirety of their institution's teaching and learning operations online, their answers would range from several years to, possibly, a decade or more. And yet, in March 2020, the higher education (HE) sector globally moved metaphorical mountains in a matter of just a few weeks. This rapid response showed that, faced with an urgent and immediate need, university staff will work together effectively to adopt new technologies, modes, resources and ways of working at a real pace. Where previously leaders used to ask, "*Is this possible?*" when faced with a decision about digital, they now know, "*yes, it absolutely is*".

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) accelerated an already existing, albeit in part, a slow trend towards online and digital methods to support higher education delivery including technical, apprenticeship and work-based/integrated learning (Jandrić *et al.*, 2020). Since 2020, a clear movement can be seen from initial "emergency online teaching and learning" to better thought out and more pedagogically effective use of technology. A blended approach has appeared post-COVID-19, with the learning and logistical benefits from digital methods, ensuring that many of the changes implemented are adopted permanently (Pozdeeva *et al.*, 2021). Progress is, however, uneven. There is still a need for improved practice in online digital methods and address issues of learner difficulties and appropriate adjustments (Laurillard, 2013).

The aim is to directly influence practitioner competencies and ongoing professional development in digital pedagogy and showcase, through research and case studies, how we are building back better in relation to digital pedagogy and vocational, education and training, including apprenticeships and work-based, work-integrated learning. This special issue is concerned with the identification of frameworks for teaching effectiveness and their associated key success characteristics, with research conducted internationally that examines how inclusiveness in the virtual classroom is fostered as a major shift to more sustainable futures.

*HESWBL* has already published seminal work on "global perspectives on profound pedagogies" in 2015 (Vol 5, 4) issued at a time of intense internationalisation and globalisation of education. Then the emphasis was on how to move beyond a student stereotype described as "passive, rote learners, lacking in critical thinking and independent learning skills" (Ryan, 2011, p. 637) and contextualise this move within workplace and vocationally oriented forms. It is against this context that the aim of this special issue becomes critical by bringing both practitioner and research interests up to date following what has been first, a global health emergency but secondly, a period of resilience for higher education institutions. Indeed, with the acceleration of new technologies, changes in demography and the labour market and a rapidly shifting policy landscape, higher education is operating in what is described as the "VUCA world" – volatile, uncertain, changing and ambiguous. The COVID-19 crisis is just one example of the challenges the sector will face.

As was the case in 2015, much of the scholarly activity on digital pedagogic practices today, with learners studying geographically distanced from the academy, is rarely situated within work-based, work-integrated settings, which is this journal's central and unique focus.

Universities and higher education institutions globally have the opportunity and responsibility to showcase and share what constitutes best pedagogical practice in the use of

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digital technology and set standards and benchmarks that will raise expectations amongst institutional leaders, practitioners and policy makers.

This special issue has collated and reported best practice and new insights, covering a variety of angles. It brings new perspectives to and recognition of the value of "using digital" by viewing best and emerging practice using several reference points to identify "success and quality characteristics": from pedagogical practice and support to enhance and inform delivery, to encouragement of new reflections on high level teaching and assessment and revised approached to staff digital competencies. It also contributes to the growing need for aligning educational curriculums with the changing needs and skills needed for business workplaces in different fields such as marketing, management information systems and data analytics along with other business applications of artificial intelligence (AI) alongside augmented, virtual and mixed reality experiences.

Digitally supported, fully online and remote teaching and learning were common in the higher education sector before the pandemic. However, the pandemic led to what Barber (2021) referred to as a "gravity assist" – a metaphor that describes the ways in which digital and online learning and teaching practices were propelled forward, extending their reach across the whole educational community and not just in higher education – and others described as an initial "panic-gogy" (Dean and Campbell, 2020) of simple technological substitution for classroom based or blended delivery.

In recent academic literature, there has been a growing recognition of the need to move beyond emergency online teaching and learning to more sustained and effective use of digital technology in higher education (Kirkwood and Price, 2021). This includes a shift towards more pedagogically-informed approaches to digital learning and teaching that prioritise student engagement and active learning, as well as the use of digital tools to support more personalised and inclusive learning experiences (Eynon *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, there is a growing emphasis on the importance of developing digital literacies and skills amongst both students and educators, in order to support effective use of digital tools and technology in teaching and learning contexts (Beetham and Sharpe, 2019). Together, these recent developments point to a need for higher education institutions to embrace a more intentional and strategic approach to digital technology in teaching and learning, in order to create more effective and equitable educational experiences for all learners.

Back in 2020, emergency measures for online education were generally seen as "good enough" and decisions were made very quickly and under pressure. Now, in this emergent post-COVID-19 context, as higher education moves away from their emergency pivot to online delivery and simply reacting to emergency circumstances to consider their long-term learning and teaching strategies, there is an opportunity to build on those developments and shape the future. However, if that is to happen, digital must become a core and intentional part of learning and teaching. Now is the time to stop thinking about how individual technological or digital tools can enable teaching and instead consider how a holistic digital outlook can enhance learning wherever it takes place and whatever the context.

A series of deep and coordinated culture, workforce and technology shifts must happen to enable new educational and operating models and transform an institution's operations, strategic directions and value proposition and view technology as an integral part of the student and staff experience and not an add-on. What difference might digital make to the learning and student journey if designed in from the outset rather than added as an afterthought? How can digital tools support a great on-campus experience for full-time students whilst also making learning more flexible, inclusive and personalised for students who are learning off-campus including those learning in and through work? Furthermore, how can institutions ensure inclusive digital education for all learners in higher education delivery and how can senior leaders of those institutions be supported to develop greater clarity around the role of digital in the delivery of institutional strategy. We hope this special

issue will help them realise the following benefits. Of a long-term strategic approach to digital technology that moves their institutions from being reactive organisations, i.e. those that deliver emergency technology enabled learning, teaching and assessment, to becoming better at identifying strategic opportunities that support becoming integrated and inclusive universities and higher education institutions that embed digital technology and profound digital pedagogy far more effectively and strategically, at scale and in a sustainable way. The manuscripts in this issue show that over the last three years, digital has been introduced into many aspects of life in higher education and the student experience. For leaders, it touches every area of strategic importance, from investment, IT and estate to staff recruitment and development.

We think it is a fair observation to make that as a sector, higher education has probably under-invested in digital for years. It has not seen technology as the key to strategic advantage. When it comes to "bricks versus clicks", investment in educational technology has lagged. The past decade has seen campus expansions with institutions spending billions on buildings, but only millions on digital equivalents in the instructional environment. From reading these articles, you too will conclude that digitally enhanced learning and teaching, materials and the learning process going forward is a much more nuanced offer than the "online learning" of the pandemic or the post-pandemic return to talking heads in large lecture halls. In order to improve the combined use of computer hardware, software and educational theory and practice in facilitating improvements in teaching and learning, a seamless mix of face-to-face components, digital elements, the physical and the virtual, must merge to form the best of what has been learnt about these different environments.

To offer something that is greater than the sum of its historic parts, there is now an opportunity to build on the lessons learnt from the emergency measures of the pandemic and to shape the future. Digitally enhanced learning and teaching (DELT) (Emerge and Jisc, 2022) – another recent concept and acronym – suggests institutions should now integrate digital tools and technology seamlessly into the learning journey but in a pedagogically-informed way to improve and augment it and, as a result, achieve better inclusion, engagement, accessibility attainment and outcomes. The environmental and sustainability agenda is an additional major consideration: universities are setting out their strategies for achieving net carbon zero including how estates are used, how much travel is required of staff, students and guest speakers when there are virtual alternatives and the impact on carbon emissions targets.

The variety of the higher education sector internationally is arguably one of strength and makes a "one-size-fits-all" approach to adoption or implementation impractical. Stages of readiness will vary from one institution to another, from one country to another, but we hope that in the process of exploring these research and concept papers and case studies, ideas and strategies will emerge that put digital at the forefront of thinking about how to deliver an overall long-term vision and strategy for delivery in HE. "Digital transformation" may feel like a trending buzzword, so institutions and practitioners may wish to pause along their journey and reflect on definitions and context. What it is not is primarily about technology adoption. It is first and foremost about transforming the mindset and culture of an organisation to ensure that technology can be deployed as a multiplier of impact.

As universities, colleges and higher education institutions negotiate a further shift in their digital capacity, they do so against a backdrop of continued and varied pressures. Nevertheless, there is a huge opportunity to bring digital seamlessly into the teaching, learning and assessment journey and for digitally enhanced learning to contribute to better inclusion, engagement, accessibility, attainment and outcomes for students, whatever their context. It is hoped that doing this will require bringing people, practice, pedagogy, space and technology together in dialogue. It also means serious thought being given to how we design teaching, learning and assessment in the digital age.

This special issue is an opportunity to take stock, share insights and use the lessons learnt from the emergency measures of COVID-19 to shape the future of higher education, skills and work-based learning together. The goal is to help senior leaders and practitioner-researchers in higher education realise the benefits of a long-term strategic approach to digital technology. Thinking strategically about digital technology will allow HE to make the most of its potential to create a step change in the way students and staff interact with each other. Digital needs to be recognised and valued as a strategic asset and as a way to help deliver any higher education institution's mission. It must be given the care, consideration, recognition and resources this implies.

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