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Editorial – special edition – ‘Lessons from digital spaces: opportunities and challenges for widening participation through online learning’

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Introduction

We are living through a truly disruptive era. While the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been felt differently around the world, educators were united in our shared experience of a rapid and challenging pivot to online delivery. While institutions willed academics and practitioners to maintain quality student learning outcomes, there was often little clarity around how best to do so, alongside additional challenges of limited support, resources and time. Rather than undertaking a carefully planned transition to online, educational institutions were largely forced to react and hurriedly digitise learning. As the digital divide widened, and issues of digital inclusion and digital poverty came to the fore, many educators were poignantly aware that students from widening participation backgrounds were especially vulnerable to the challenges of online engagement.

The past two years have provided a crash-course in online design and delivery, with many lessons emerging from digital spaces and virtual frontiers. In this timely Special Edition, research insights lead to a better understanding of the factors which limit student access to digital learning, as well as showcasing creative and innovative strategies used to straddle the digital divide and provide quality learning experiences to widen participation in this new context. This discussion was extended through insightful presentations on these topics at The Open University, UK’s Access, Participation and Success

Symposium 'Lessons from Digital Spaces: Inclusion and Support for Student Success' in May 2022.

Documenting lessons from digital spaces

While digital formats present challenges in the educational space, they also offer opportunities and are clearly here to stay. So how do we enact digital learning inclusively? This Special Edition provides a range of thought-provoking answers and reflections on lessons from digital spaces. As these articles from around the world highlight, our shared commitment to fostering connection, digital equity and inclusion offers hope for planned and sustainable approaches, which capitalise on the benefits of hybrid modes to widen university participation both on and offline.

The edition commences with Kara Johnson's philosophical Research Article, which offers insight into the identity development of adult online learners who occupy liminal spaces between worlds of home and university. Through Skype interviews and online reflective journals, fifteen adults reflected on their journey through the first module of a part-time, undergraduate degree. The blurred boundaries of these hybrid spaces meant that students needed to negotiate identity in ways outside of the on-campus experience. Identity is forged through collaboration with peers, which mitigates isolation, and supports the learners in 'becoming' university students.

In their informative Research Article, Nicole Crawford, Sherridan Emery and Cathy Stone explore the challenges faced by mature-aged university students studying online at distance in Australia. Individual stories are shared via three vignettes, which are analysed using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1995), offering insight into systemic and structural factors. Intersectional disadvantage, digital poverty, and lack of peer and university support present significant challenges. This research article identifies that higher education policy and institutional approaches can act to address these gaps and better support student success.

Observing that the COVID-19 pandemic will extend income inequality and digital poverty, Nathaniel Pickering and Alan Donnelly investigate ways in which online approaches to widening

participation can move from a reactive approach toward being better integrated into planned delivery. In this thoughtful Research Article, the authors employ Rainford's Framework (2021) to consider pedagogy, technology and humanistic aspects when adapting delivery online, as captured through individual and group interviews conducted over Zoom. Research findings identified advantages, such as the ability to reach a greater audience, rendering some activities accessible and affordable; alongside challenges, such as building collective learning online and reflections upon the role of the shared experience in the university environment. This research highlights the importance of trust and collaborative relationships in the online environment, while generating recommendations for planned and sustainable online delivery.

Jennifer van Krieken Robson and Francesca Zanatta explore authentic pedagogy in online learning in England in their Innovative Practice article. The pandemic dictated that their Early Childhood Education final undergraduate module be moved to online delivery. This presented an opportunity to redesign content with a renewed focus on authentic approaches that valued student experience. Through synchronous online teaching, they were able to maintain connections and encourage student agency thereby building a community of learners.

Carl Sherwood's Innovative Practice article explores the use of storytelling in Microeconomics. To reduce barriers to mathematical concepts, research was undertaken with 122 undergraduate and postgraduate students at an Australian university. Through an assessment task which draws upon students' own stories, they were better supported to identify the relevance and application of key concepts in their lived experience. This approach provides powerful learning experiences and offers benefits for students from widening participation backgrounds.

Karen Campbell and Farah McAdam consider how to effectively deliver university transition activities in virtual spaces. Their Innovative Practice article focuses on redesigning the nine-week, on-campus transition programme at Glasgow Caledonian University into asynchronous learning across six independent modules. They evaluated the redesign using Zepke and Leach's

Ten Proposals for Action (2010) to analyse student survey responses. Despite some challenges, the focus on interactive, flexible, virtual content led to increased engagement and benefits for students articulating from college to university.

In their Innovative Practice article, Marta Almeida Hill, Francesca Plom and Shauna-Aine O'Brien explore the opportunities and challenges presented by debating as an outreach activity in virtual environments. This approach allows students to access the critical thinking and public-speaking opportunities debate provides, while supporting students to build ongoing relationships with university ambassadors and staff. Developing the virtual debating programme required an attention to pedagogy and technology, which proved beneficial in minimising pandemic challenges and connecting students from widening participation backgrounds with university.

The pandemic has led to the emergence of innovative solutions in a range of educational areas. In their Innovative Practice article, Aneka Patel, Jack Whiting and Charlotte Smyrk present an exciting development in work experience from home. The Virtual Work Experience (VWX) developed by Brighton and Sussex Medical School offers an interactive means for students to explore six medical specialities, gain understanding of medical careers, and attain course completion through a reflective task. The free tool has attracted interest from over 55 000 users globally, highlighting the demand for accessible work experience in medicine.

Nick Mapletoft, Olga Mapletoft, Tara Henderson and Kelly Pattison reflect upon technological issues, digital poverty, digital equity and digital inclusion in their Research Note. COVID-19 necessitated a rapid pivot to online learning; data illustrates enrolment shifts occurred for different student cohorts as a result. The authors discuss opportunities identified for Further and Higher Education providers, including 24/7 access, savings in commuting time and travel expenditure, and other benefits of hybrid and flexible working for staff and learners. They also outline challenges, including digital literacy, access to technology, remote invigilation, and issues of student engagement and motivation, as well as staff willingness, technical competency, and ability to setting up for working from home. Recognising the

challenges and context, they identify broader lessons which can be utilised to strengthen widening participation through online learning, including redesigning curriculum to appeal to learners, and opportunities to embrace technological adoption and innovation.

In a thought-provoking Research Note, Lauren Bellaera, Lottie Norton and Hannah Thomson consider the impact of online delivery on a bounded widening participation intervention. The Brilliant Club, UK, is a university access charity, which connects PhD students with less advantaged students between the ages of 8-18. As teaching moved to synchronous digital delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors investigated whether engagement and outcomes were affected by this shift. Interestingly, there was no significant difference between modes and attendance rates; however, there was a significant difference for virtual tutorials if the baseline assignment was not submitted. Early engagement and scaffolding were critical to student success, alongside ensuring tutors understood online pedagogies. Two factors were clearly linked to better outcomes: working together with schools to solve problems and becoming more familiar with the new mode of delivery over time.

In the final Research Note, John Butcher and George Curry provide comprehensive observations of the ways in which digital poverty acts as a barrier to educational access in an access module at The Open University, UK. This module scaffolds digital participation, introducing students to the course through printed content, then gradually transitioning to online learning. Reports from key tutors were analysed to identify barriers to participation, alongside strategies to address barriers. Key recommendations include that the cost of technology be mitigated by institutional support in the form of accessible bursaries, and a lack of competence and confidence with digital technologies needs to be recognised and addressed.

Conclusion

A clear lesson from this collected work is the importance of the human commitment and connection in supporting students from widening participation backgrounds to continue educational engagement through disruptive global circumstances. Early and

meaningful connection is critical in digital spaces, as is fostering relationships and supporting student identity work, in order to build a sense of belonging across distance. While many challenges are presented, there are also new opportunities to support a wide range of students, including those who prefer online or hybrid learning.

We are excited to present this timely collection of insightful and prescient research articles, innovative practice pieces and research notes. We thank all the contributors to this edition and the Symposium participants for continuing to progress the horizon of thought on online learning and widening participation. We also wish to recognise the guidance and expertise generously shared by our peer reviewers and editorial board, as well as Annette Hayton as Innovative Practices Editor. We hope that you find this inspiring reading, bolstering our shared global efforts to support widening participation online and encouraging you to reflect upon the wealth of digital tools available.