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Remaining 'open' during a crisis: Managing academic continuity at The Open University, UK

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Helen Cooke was leading on the management and development of multi- and interdisciplinary curriculum at The Open University. Prior to that, Helen worked in a variety of professional services roles including the Faculty of Business and Law and Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students). This broad experience of research and enterprise, teaching and learning, scholarship and student experience/success, is what led to Helen joining the Academic Strategy and Planning Team in November 2020, just as the UK went back into a second COVID-19 lockdown. Helen's current role involves supporting the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in identifying and monitoring key academic risks across the institution and reporting on mitigation and progress. This includes ensuring that academic continuity is recognised as a specific element of crisis planning and that there is a robust framework in place to assure academic quality and standards in the event of a crisis. Helen is a Senior Fellow of AdvanceHE and an active member of the Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP) and Higher Education Strategy and Planning Association (HESPA).

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Helen Barton has held a variety of operational and strategic roles during her time at The Open University, including management of operational registration and funding processes; writing and implementing student facing policy, including the University's fee strategy; and numerous projects relating to student registration, student experience and improvements to technology. As a Senior Manager in the University Secretary's Office during the COVID-19 pandemic, Helen supported the University's Academic Implications Group (AIG), which was established to consider and approve temporary changes to academic policy and processes affected by the disruption. More recently — and using the experienced gained in supporting this group — Helen has taken a more specific role in the Assessment, Credit and Qualifications team, leading on the development and implementation of remote exams. Following The Open University's swift move from traditional 'in-person' exams to remote exams during the pandemic, Helen is now working to improve processes, student experience and opportunities to enhance the use of remote exams to ensure they are robust, trusted and contribute to the University's vision and performance objectives.

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Klaus-Dieter Rossade is Executive Dean (interim) for the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS) at The Open University, UK. The faculty has over 35,000 students, studying modules in the faculty's three Schools of Health, Wellbeing and Social Work, Education, Childhood and Youth Studies and Languages and Applied Linguistics, as well as on the University's Access Programme and on modules from the Institute for Educational Technology. From 2019–23, Klaus-Dieter was also Director of the Assessment Programme in the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students), which brings together academic colleagues across the University to improve and innovate assessment practice, including

design, marking, feedback, academic integrity and assessment policy. He has led several change programmes related to assessment and student qualification outcomes. He has also chaired many governance committees, internal quality reviews and validation panels for Open University validated partners such as the Arab Open University. Klaus-Dieter's latest research interests are in assessment and change leadership in higher education. For the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), he recently chaired a Special Interest Group on Online Assessment. He brings to all his work more than 30 years of studying, researching and teaching literature, culture, language and ideology in higher education in Germany (Freiburg University) and the UK (University College London and, since 1999, The Open University). He is also a coach and leadership communication consultant.

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Abstract When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world faced an unprecedented amount of complexity and uncertainty, regardless of their mode of delivering teaching, learning and assessment activities to their students. Despite already having robust policies and processes in place for delivering such activities online, distance learning institutions around the world were far from being exempt from this disruption. This paper highlights that the continuity of academic decision making during a crisis affects all institutions and needs to be managed carefully to maintain the expected quality of academic standards and student experience, while protecting the health and well-being of students and staff. By evaluating the effectiveness of The Open University's approach to considering academic issues during the COVID-19 pandemic and considering longer-term implications for the institution, this paper presents a modified version of an academic continuity model to assist other institutions in managing academic continuity during crisis situations. This revised model takes into account the cyclical and ongoing nature of The Open University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that prolonged uncertainty can have on applying such a model in practice.

KEYWORDS: continuity, emergency, planning, crisis, quality, decision making

INTRODUCTION

Regehr *et al.*¹ suggest that institutional planning in response to any crisis should include three components: (1) procedures for addressing the immediate situation, generally referred to as 'emergency planning'; (2) procedures for ensuring ongoing business and administrative operations, generally referred to as 'business continuity management'; and (3) procedures for ensuring the academic integrity of all academic programmes, which the authors refer to as 'academic continuity'.

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic required higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world to adapt and change at great speed to ensure continuity of academic decision making,

even though the term 'academic continuity' was rarely used in higher education until that point. The origins of what would now be considered as academic continuity planning in higher education dates back to the establishment of the National Center for Distance Education (CNED) in 1939, which was set up to provide correspondence courses and allow students to continue studying during the Second World War.² In the event of a crisis or disaster affecting campus-based institutions, discussions around academic continuity have historically focused on physical safety and the replacement of in-person activities with technology-enhanced education and online teaching.³

In contrast, it might be reasonable to assume that well-established, supported distance learning institutions were perfectly positioned to adapt to the challenges of delivering a fully online model of teaching and assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic. In practice, however, this assumption was far too simplistic for The Open University which, at the time, had over 200,000 students studying taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and some modules that had previously required some element of face-to-face tuition and/or assessment.

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

The Open University has accumulated over 50 years' experience in delivering widely recognised excellence in supported distance learning since it was established in 1969. It is a unique university based in, and funded across, all four nations of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), each with their own devolved governments and education policies that required nuanced responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like many HEIs, March to July is a crucial time for assessment operations and awarding processes at The Open University, including the delivery of face-to-face exams and manual processing of exam results. So, when the government announced the first UK-wide lockdown on 23rd March, 2020, academic and professional services colleagues across the institution had to quickly find a solution to ensure that almost 3,500 Open University students (across 76 different undergraduate and postgraduate modules) were able to complete their final module assessment before the middle of April, many at an exam venue somewhere in the UK.

By September that year, a further 111,000 students (across 242 different modules) were due to complete their final module assessment which, for many, would also mean the completion of their qualification. Many had to do this while juggling

employment, home schooling children and other caring responsibilities, while also fighting a COVID-19 infection themselves or dealing with consequences of a loved one contracting the virus. Supporting students to pass their module assessments therefore continued to be a non-negotiable priority for the University, as did supporting staff to enable them to support students, while managing their own well-being at such a challenging time.

FRAMEWORKS FOR MODELLING ACADEMIC CONTINUITY

In 2020, a model of academic continuity was created at the University of Toronto⁴ and further updated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic by Regehr and McCahan⁵ (see Figure 1). This updated model addresses the specific challenges associated with the scale of the pandemic in terms of its global reach and unpredictably prolonged nature.

The five stages and accompanying descriptors identified by Regehr and McCahan⁷ provide a valuable framework for considering all elements of academic continuity in higher education. Mapping The Open University's experience of managing and maintaining academic continuity during COVID-19 to Regehr and McCahan's model provided a useful structure to reflect on the approach taken and plan for the future. This reflection also led to the creation of a further modified version of the original model, which the authors have used to structure the following discussion (see Figure 2). This revised model not only recognises the cyclical nature of ongoing academic continuity planning, but also the iterative response to prolonged uncertainty in the recovery and adaptation stages. To recognise the speed at which some crises present themselves, a separate 'evaluation' stage has been added to capture lessons learned, seek feedback from key stakeholders and share best practice.



Figure 1: Maintaining academic continuity during COVID-19⁶

(Pre) planning

Policy on academic continuity

From a crisis management perspective, The Open University has had a formal Business Continuity Management Policy in place since 2009. This policy establishes the basic framework and structure for the management of effective planning, emergency response and the continuity and recovery of the University's business critical activities in relation to a major incident or business interruption event, across all four UK Nations.

In addition, The Open University prides itself on having robust principles and processes in place for the management of academic quality and standards for the production and delivery of curriculum and

the student learning experience, which have been in place since its inception in 1969.

Like most HEIs, however, this commitment to maintaining such a high standard of academic quality and standards can mean that policy development and decision making often follows a slow process. Minor amendments to policy or regulations may take a few months of repeated consultation loops, while more substantial change proposals can take years to be approved and implemented successfully through formal academic governance processes. To add further complexity, academic regulations can differ from one discipline to another and, specifically within the four nations context at The Open University, from one national quality standards framework to another.

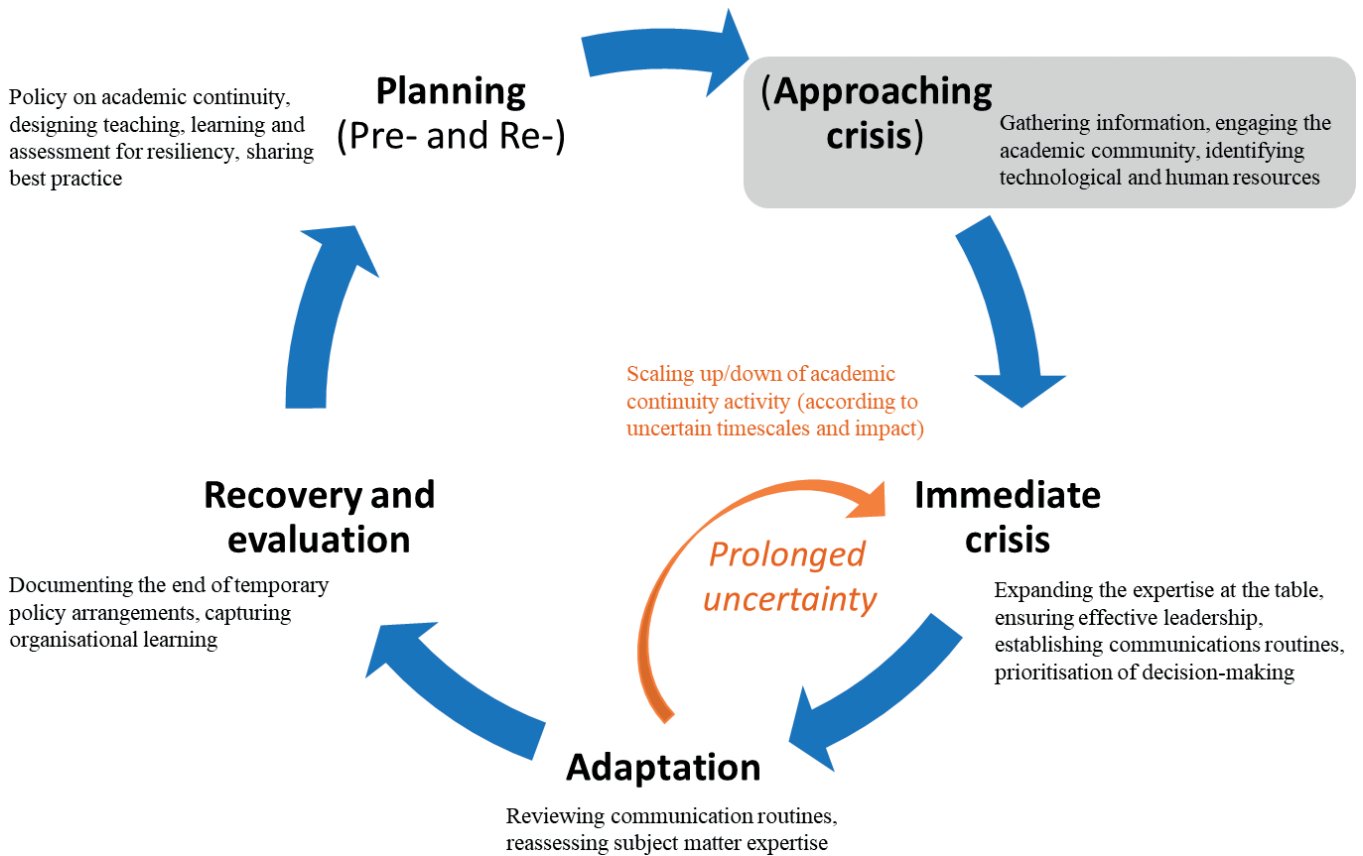


Figure 2: Revised model for managing and maintaining academic continuity during a crisis

This historically cautious and considered approach would have been wholly impractical to address the urgent challenges created by the pandemic in March 2020. Instead, maintaining the balance between enabling students to complete their studies and assuring robust and appropriately adjusted quality standards at speed and scale required a more practical and proportionate approach.

(Approaching crisis)/immediate crisis

In some crisis situations there may be sufficient time to gather information, engage the academic community and identify resources, as described in the ‘approaching crisis’ stage of the Regehr and McCahan model. The pace at which institutions were required to respond to government decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, meant that there was

very little time to ‘approach’ the situation in a planned way. This was further compounded by the differential risk appetite across the devolved UK governments, to which The Open University’s response was always to consider the worst-case scenario and apply an appropriate and consistent approach for all students. Consequently, this paper suggests there is little distinction between the ‘approaching crisis’ and ‘immediate crisis’ stages of the Regehr and McCahan model. The ‘approaching crisis’ stage has therefore been greyed out in Figure 2 and combined with the ‘immediate crisis’ stage in the description that follows.

Engaging and expanding the expertise at the table

Recognising the importance of maintaining academic quality and standards at the onset

of the COVID-19 pandemic, the University's Crisis Management Team immediately set up an 'Academic Implications Group' (AIG) to work through any academic issues, chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. The formation, structure and ways of working in this group were key to the effectiveness of the University's academic response to the pandemic.

From the outset, the group agreed a series of key principles to enable them to work flexibly and adapt as processes were developed and decisions made. These included:

1. A core purpose of student success;
2. An institutional approach to ensure consistency and fairness;
3. A principle of 'no detriment' to students;
4. Maintaining academic standards;
5. A programmatic approach to governance approval through Chair's action;
6. Using current policy and process wherever possible to keep communication and delivery simple;
7. Consideration of operational delivery in terms of capacity and capability.

Rather than focusing on a formulaic representation of members from every unit, as would be the usual approach, a core group of colleagues were identified to ensure that AIG operated effectively, including a Chair, Secretary and representation from an operational and academic perspective. In addition, a wider group of 'subject-matter experts' were identified to provide valuable contributions to specific discussions or issues. This included representatives of the student and tutor communities as well as experts in assessment and student support. Members prioritised attendance and actively participated in meetings, allowing rich discussion and fast-paced outcomes. It was crucially important for members to understand their responsibility as part of the group, generating a shared understanding of purpose and aims as well as accountability for action.

Despite the exceptional and challenging circumstances, there was generally a positive and collaborative atmosphere at each virtual meeting of the AIG. Although the group had not been set up with a specific framework in mind, its success can be attributed to the fact that it demonstrated many of the qualities of 'high-impact teams':^{8,9} shared team goals, appropriate team size and composition, role clarity, collaborative leadership, use of effective technology, a logical approach to identifying tasks and clear, transparent communication. These qualities are demonstrated in the description of each of the remaining stages of the revised academic continuity model that follows.

Ensuring effective leadership

The Chair's collaborative approach and inclusive leadership style empowered all members to contribute to the discussions, resulting in a less hierarchical approach than would usually be the case, while also fostering a culture of trust and transparency. The Chair also demonstrated the effective use of emotional intelligence to allow discussions to evolve and decisions to be reached without unnecessarily restrictive and directive conversation management. In contrast, there was a noticeable difference when the group was chaired by a delegate, resulting in more structured meetings that did not provide the same opportunity to surface and explore important issues or concerns.

Establishing communications routines

The group chose to utilise Microsoft Teams, a technology that was not in regular use by The Open University prior to the pandemic and required the commitment of members to quickly adapt. This approach enabled the creation of a central, cloud-based repository for all meeting documentation and adoption of the conversation functionality in Teams, allowing the group to continue collaboration

and consultation outside of meetings and progress discussion and urgent actions, which was not commonly the case in business-as-usual activity.

A logically structured agenda, with simple notes and papers, meant that the group dealt with these decisions on an informal but effective level. Advanced notice of paper deadlines, circulation and meeting schedules meant that members knew what to expect and when. Papers were kept concise (often no more than two or three pages), with basic background information and options clearly presented along with any decision requested. Papers were commonly joint authored by operational and academic colleagues, increasing the group's confidence that multiple aspects had been considered ahead of discussion. A decision log was maintained and later developed into a module-focused search tool that the wider university could use to identify and understand decisions relating to specific curriculum. This also provided a trusted source of information for retrospective scrutiny and approval through governance, where necessary.

Prioritisation of decision making

Due to the wide variety of tuition and assessment strategies across all modules, the number and range of decisions the group needed to consider expanded, with every proposal needing to be carefully checked against existing policy and processes and the latest regulatory advice. To give an example: one such decision was prompted by both the Office for Students (OfS), the regulator for higher education in England, and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which proposed high-level, acceptable ways to deal with the crisis across all four nations of the UK. Both recommended that institutions should consider the cancellation of assessment where sufficient evidence was available to determine fair and appropriate results for students.^{10,11} Most modules at The Open University had sufficient continuous

assessment, for example, tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) submitted throughout the course, to determine student results. This made it possible to cancel the final assessment for over 60 per cent of all modules between April and June 2020, with the remaining modules offering some form of remote assessment. Where the final assessment was cancelled, extensive and complex analysis led to revised algorithms to reach fair and standardised student results, along with detailed and targeted communication to students and staff — and, for professional and accredited programmes, also to employers and accreditation bodies and regulators.

Other considerations included:

- How to move in-person exams online in the least disruptive way, while maintaining academic integrity?;
- How should marking, result calculation and awarding practices take account of the impact of the pandemic on students?;
- How should students tell us about special circumstances affecting their study and what evidence should they provide?;
- How can assessment and tuition delivery be adapted to ensure that the needs of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies are met?

Although these issues would usually be considered through extended formal academic governance, the needs of all students had to be met within the space of a few weeks during the pandemic, while also considering staff capacity and well-being when proposing any changes to standard policies and processes.

Adaptation

Reviewing communication routines

Communication was arguably the most challenging aspect that required considerable improvement over the duration of the group's operation and, with the benefit of hindsight, the function which could have

been substantially improved. As already identified, the clear articulation and tracking of decisions, along with the timely circulation of notes and regular summary updates to the wider university, was essential. In addition, the unpredictable pace and scale at which decisions needed to be made, documented and actioned, required the expertise of communications specialists to help compile and disseminate information clearly to appropriate audiences, both internally and externally.

Reassessing subject matter expertise

Another key adaptation to university decision making identified during the operation of the group was the increased integration of the student voice. Before the pandemic, involving students in these discussions at an early stage might have been perceived as an afterthought. From the outset, however, the AIG treated students as a core stakeholder and close attention was paid to the valuable insight provided by the representatives of the Open University Students Association. As a result, the importance of designing student involvement from the start and working in partnership to plan and deliver future academic continuity is now being considered more broadly across the institution.

Prolonged uncertainty

Scaling up/down of academic continuity activity

Prolonged uncertainty increases the risk of either adapting too much, or for too long, or entering the recovery stage too early and then needing to re-engage with adaptation as the situation evolves. The proposed model reflects this through the addition of a smaller feedback loop within the overall circular model, between the stages of 'immediate crisis' and 'adaptation' (see Figure 2).

For example, due to continued uncertainty around new variants of the COVID-19

virus, a small group of key stakeholders was reconvened in January 2022 to assess the emerging situation, again, ensuring that staff and student well-being was at the forefront of any considerations. This group's objective was to prepare for any potential decision making or additional support requirements to ensure that students continued to be supported to achieve their module and/or qualification aims, while protecting the academic integrity and quality assurance of the University. Student deferral and withdrawal data, along with the impact on assessment submission and marking, was used to support these discussions. Following further scrutiny, it was felt that sufficient flexibility for staff and students is already built into The Open University's standard policies and processes, and no further changes were implemented. Shortly after this, the UK government announced its plans to end all legal COVID-19 restrictions in England, while restrictions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland continued for slightly longer.

Recovery and evaluation

Documenting the end of temporary policy arrangements

As the University started to transition from a state of emergency into a period of 'recovery' in early 2021, the AIG began to consider topics less directly relevant to the pandemic, as it had become a helpful and effective space to discuss more general academic issues. For this reason, there was clear interest in continuing with a cross-university group, but it was decided that AIG had achieved its original purpose of providing a crisis-focused response during the height of the pandemic. As a result, the group was formally disbanded in March 2021 and all decisions made by the group were reviewed to ensure that the relevant area of the business would take responsibility for transitioning activity back to business-as-usual. Where further approval and oversight was needed, the broader remit of the University's Recovery Group was

consulted to ensure that the situation across all four UK nations was considered.

Capturing organisational learning

Many operational lessons were learned from the COVID-19 pandemic at The Open University, including the consideration of working arrangements for staff, the continuation of online/remote exams, and online versus face-to-face tuition in some disciplines. In addition, the experience has also prompted the University to develop its business continuity practices further, particularly in relation to maintaining the integrity of academic matters and quality assurance. For example, to ensure that academic continuity is fully considered in the event of a future emergency, agreement about whether an academic response group needs to be instigated has been factored into the University's Crisis Management Plan at an early stage. In addition, a crisis response template for academic implications has been drafted to support this decision-making process, including questions for the academic response group to consider, such as:

- Does the disruption disproportionately affect students with protected characteristics?;
- Are students and tutors able to travel to face-to-face tuition events and/or access online tutorials?;
- Does the disruption have more impact on staff and students in certain disciplines (eg front-line healthcare workers and teachers in the case of COVID-19)?;
- Are there any expectations and/or requirements from accreditation or regulatory bodies that need to be considered?;
- Could the disruption have any impact on the student's final award and classification?;
- How will decisions made by this group be communicated to students and the wider university?

The answers to these questions (and others) will obviously be dependent on the specific circumstances associated with each crisis. Providing a more defined framework, however, will ensure that academic decision making, including the approval of any temporary changes required to academic policies, are managed, resourced and communicated effectively.

(Re) planning

Reflecting on the approach taken during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that more work is needed to fully understand and document the university's approach to maintaining academic continuity during a crisis, which falls somewhere between these well-established policies and principles (see Figure 3).

This understanding and enhanced framework are now being used to inform institutional level conversations around how to maintain academic quality and standards during any future disruption. This includes planning for, and testing, how academic and professional services units need to work together to not only respond appropriately in a crisis, but also to adapt and design teaching, learning and assessment for longer-term resiliency.

In addition, the reflections described in this paper and the revised Regehr and McCann model (see Figure 2) are being used to share best practice with the business continuity community at The Open University and wider higher education sector to promote the importance of considering academic implications during a crisis.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a reflection on how The Open University maintained academic continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, focusing specifically on the creation of a dedicated academic response group to respond to the crisis. This group



Figure 3: Consideration of academic continuity at the Open University

enabled The Open University to navigate the immediate needs of students and staff, the business requirements related to assessment and the relevant academic regulatory standards across the four nations of the UK. Speed of action was essential to ensure that nearly 115,000 part-time students were able to complete their modules while living through the first few months of a global health crisis, and beyond.

The Regehr and McCahan model has enabled the authors to reflect on the negotiations and operational actions experienced by The Open University in response to the pandemic. As part of this process, some modifications to the original model have been proposed, including a more circular flow of stages and the introduction of an additional feedback loop to better express the impact of 'prolonged uncertainty' on how the 'immediate crisis' is perceived and addressed through the 'adaptation' and 'recovery and evaluation' stages. The paper also suggests that some crisis situations may not allow an institution enough time to 'approach' the situation, which means that many of the activities identified by Regehr and McCahan during this stage should be addressed during the 'planning' or 'immediate crisis' phases.

In demonstrating the effective and collaborative way that the AIG helped The Open University respond to the COVID-19

pandemic, the qualities of 'high-impact teams' have been used to help identify, evaluate and emphasise the benefits of academic continuity planning and response. For example, shared team goals, team size and composition, role clarity, leadership, task composition and communication are all key contributing factors to the success of such a group and will help to enhance frameworks to plan for, and respond to, any future crises.

The University's immediate response to the crisis is only part of the story, however, and two developments that are likely to remain well into the future have been identified. Most importantly, perhaps, is that the University has a better understanding of the importance of establishing academic continuity as a specific part of any crisis response, alongside the requirements for business continuity and the ongoing maintenance of academic standards. This will ensure that the University can maintain its high-quality standards of teaching and learning and contributions to further research in higher education, while drawing on previous experience and well-developed plans from the outset.

Secondly, the pragmatism that was needed by the AIG during the crisis is arguably now shaping how other decisions are being considered by the University, including academic governance and the delivery of tuition and assessment. This

pragmatism will not only have long-term benefits for the University's ability to carry out its business in a principled and agile manner but has also influenced the way students are involved in university decision making, which is now often more akin to a partnership rather than straightforward stakeholder consultation.

Despite the devastating impact of the pandemic on staff and students since March 2020, there is clear evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive impact on The Open University's understanding of managing academic continuity during a crisis. Taking on board these lessons learned will ensure that The Open University can remain committed to delivering its mission of being open to people, places, methods and ideas, regardless of any crisis it might face in the future.

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