



CCEM Policy Brief 3: Redefining learning spaces: multiple pathways and flexible approaches

Recommendations

Following a consultation of Commonwealth higher education stakeholders, the following recommendations are made to Commonwealth Education Ministers:

1. **Support higher education institutions to develop and maintain partnerships, pedagogy, and scale up to transition to blended learning** through investing in initiatives such as The Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) - enabling quality, accessible and affordable teaching at scale.
2. **Commit to expanding opportunities to access international mobility**, in recognition of the economic and social value of capable, culturally agile, and internationally connected change-makers. This could include through increased investment in capacity building, such as split-site and distance PhD and doctoral scholarships and fellowships; through philanthropy; and investing in and enabling new forms of virtual mobility.
3. Learning from the pandemic, bring university leaders, telecommunications companies, and global employers together to **create innovative solutions to widen access to higher education through digital and blended higher education.**

Summary

Distance education and blended learning have become increasingly relevant aspects of higher education due to the impact of Covid-19 which has seen universities switch to online teaching at unprecedented pace and scale. Hybrid models of teaching are becoming more prevalent with aspects such as recorded lectures, online fora, chat rooms and flipped classrooms now commonplace. While many of these innovations had started before the pandemic, all can be improved in the light of recent experience. By engaging constructively with the higher education sector, Commonwealth governments have an opportunity to realise a significant digital dividend as a result of these changes.

However, distance and blended learning approaches come with a set of challenges, most prominently the need to implement new and innovative pedagogy approaches and the challenges of maintaining the overall quality of teaching in blended mode. Even in those countries which have been at the forefront of digital learning, many still lack the specialist skills and confidence to use technology effectively.

A recent JISC survey¹ found that only 13% of respondents teaching in UK universities felt they had the time and support to innovate with digital technologies. Given the pressures on some higher education systems in the Commonwealth – in Kenya, for example, where student enrolment increased eleven-fold in 12 years – staff are less likely to have that time and support.

Blended learning

Also known as hybrid learning, blended learning integrates technology and digital media with traditional instructor led classroom activities. The impacts of the pandemic have accelerated the move towards a more blended approach to delivery significantly.

The ACU's Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) programme, has been working with 23 universities in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda to increase university capacity to deliver high quality blended learning. It is a unique partnership designed to rapidly, and sustainably, scale up capacity for hybrid learning design and delivery. The project supported participating universities to develop, deliver, and share content - and enhanced the expertise of academic staff to successfully implement the blended learning models.

¹ <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/teaching-staff-digital-experience-insights-survey-2021-uk-higher-education>

Blended courses developed by newly trained academics in the PEBL network are now being used by over 12,000 students across the region.

The project represents an important example of Commonwealth collaboration with implementing partners including ACU member universities, the Commonwealth of Learning, and the Commission for University Education in Kenya.

Although PEBL was designed prior to the pandemic it has been instrumental in supporting its partner universities to respond to the changes enforced by the pandemic (see Policy Brief 1). Demand for blended learning is likely to increase rapidly and programmes such as PEBL are well placed to support Commonwealth governments as they grapple with this change. The PEBL model has been successful in attracting new funding from the Government of Australia and is now being rolled out across 10 Universities in Ghana and Nigeria. The programme is drawing on the learnings, expertise and resources developed in the PEBL East Africa project. PEBL West Africa is set to be officially launched at this year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

Virtual mobility

For students and young learners, international mobility is a chance to gain from the wealth of expertise and ideas found in institutions around the world. It's an opportunity to sharpen skills, expand knowledge, and broaden horizons. When students return, they do so with new skills, networks, and cross-cultural competencies – from language skills to problem-solving and resilience. These 'soft' skills are increasingly valued in a jobs market where companies operate in ever more global and collaborative ways. These skilled, culturally agile, and globally connected individuals are an asset to communities, economies, and societies.

Although the pandemic halted many in-person exchange programmes, virtual mobility programmes were developed at pace and have the potential to provide an effective exchange programme even when travel becomes viable again. Through virtual mobility and exchange, we have the potential to engage many more students than through physical mobility, while providing opportunities for students to develop the skills and competencies described above. High-quality virtual mobility programmes can augment in-person immersion experiences, and enhance approaches to internationalisation at home, leading to a more holistic approach to internationalisation

By focusing on digital access, as opposed to in-person, virtual mobility offers improved accessibility, helping to ensure the benefits of an international experience are open to a more diverse group. It also helps develop culturally agile, digitally competent, and internationally connected graduates, establishing an even wider network of international students with an affinity for another country, increasing the relevance of the Commonwealth for a new generation.

The ACU in collaboration with ten of its member institutions is planning a virtual student exchange pilot, to launch in October 2022. Through virtual sessions, delivered between October and November, students will work collaboratively on a project linked to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designed to enhance entrepreneurship and intercultural competencies of the participants.

In 2020, the ACU, in partnership with the University of Durban, launched the Toolkit for Virtual Engagement for International Student Exchange². The toolkit is the first in a series of member-led resources designed to support peer to peer learning, and the development of new virtual student exchange collaborations, drawing on DUT's longstanding experience.

Distance learning scholarships

For nearly two decades, the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has offered distance learning scholarships. As well as providing training for skilled and qualified professionals in key development areas, the scholarships support courses offered by UK-based institutions in partnership with local providers in African countries, creating long-lasting institutional relationships that offer ways for UK universities to engage with scholars from local communities within these countries.

The CSC also offers split-site PhD scholarships, enabling students registered on PhD programmes at institutions in low and middle-income Commonwealth countries to study in the UK for 12 months (either in one block or as two six-month periods), while still ultimately receiving a degree from their home institution. Split-site PhDs offer the prospect of more manageable mobility periods, while also providing an effective vehicle to build strong institutional linkages.

² <https://www.acu.ac.uk/news/acu-launches-virtual-engagement-toolkit-with-durban-university-of-technology/>