

Russell Group response to the OfS digital teaching and learning consultation

1. Summary

- We welcome the opportunity to respond to this review by the OfS into digital teaching and learning. This response builds on our engagement with Sir Michael Barber and his team as they have undertaken their research in this area. Our submission to this review focuses on a selection of the questions posed by the OfS, although we would be very willing to engage with the regulator further on any of the other areas where helpful.
- Our members are fully committed to safeguarding the quality of their offer to students. In response to Covid-19, Russell Group universities adapted their approaches to teaching and learning and in the spring, members moved at pace to ensure students could access digital course materials and undertake virtual assessments.
- In preparation for the current academic year, our universities have been steadfast in their commitment to maintaining quality while delivering a blended model of education. This has involved embedding a number of interactive tools to ensure the learning experience both stimulates engagement and encourages participation.
- Moving to a blended model has not been without its challenges, some of which are outlined in this response. Our institutions are working to overcome these and we would welcome further engagement with the OfS, the Department for Education and others in the sector to share best practice and identify areas where we can work in collaboration for the benefit of students.

2. How remote delivery has presented new barriers and how these have shaped approaches to digital teaching and learning

- 2.1 Russell Group universities have identified a series of challenges associated with digital modes of delivery for teaching and learning and have been working tirelessly to address these. They have introduced a range of initiatives and are making a series of investments in response, for example:

Facilitating inclusion

- 2.2 To maximise student engagement in online learning, Russell Group universities are combining synchronous with asynchronous study sessions to draw on the merits of both forms of learning. The asynchronous element of this approach provides learners with the opportunity to study in a flexible manner, enabling engagement with course materials while also supporting accessibility. Meanwhile synchronous methods have the advantage of building a sense of community and belonging, offering opportunities for discussion, debate and instant feedback, by facilitating direct interaction between academics and their peers in live scheduled sessions. As a number of members are now delivering large group lectures virtually, they are also working to provide transcripts and video recordings of these sessions online, which are often available for the duration of the academic year, enabling students to revisit subject content.
- 2.3 Members fully recognise the barriers this model may present to those with disabilities and are responding to these by ensuring students have access to a range of support. For example, members are using captioning services for online video content. The University of

Manchester¹ has also produced guidance to assist students to lipread during zoom study sessions and has enabled interpreters to join online lectures and seminars.

- 2.4 Members also acknowledge the importance of establishing a set of principles to underpin how both staff and students interact with one another online to ensure an inclusive environment which encourages participation and engagement. For example, inviting and encouraging students to participate with their cameras on during virtual study sessions while not making this obligatory to ensure those who feel uncomfortable with these practices can continue to participate. The University of Bristol has published guidelines for studying safely online which they require students to behave in accordance with². This includes guidance on how students can safeguard their digital wellbeing and stipulates the need for students to engage with one another with respect online.

Cultivating a sense of community

- 2.5 Russell Group universities are also seeking to cultivate a sense of community across the student body and between students and their academic tutors. This is intended to ensure that learners remain engaged with their studies and enjoy the benefits of peer-to-peer learning. To help foster this sense of community online, members are establishing small study groups and using breakout rooms within online platforms to facilitate discussion. They are also designing specific activities such as team challenges and introducing student-led reading and learning groups to stimulate interaction between students³. These approaches aim to ensure that all students, and especially those studying remotely, feel immersed in the academic experience and remain engaged with their peers and tutors.

Developing digital skills among students

- 2.6 Members are aware of the support they need to provide to incoming and returning students to ensure they have the knowledge and confidence to effectively engage with their online learning. To address this, Russell Group universities are offering a range of opportunities for students to develop their understanding of how to interact with online learning tools and the ways in which they can develop their virtual study skills, through digital hubs, webinars and online lectures.
- 2.7 For example, The London School of Economics Digital Skills Lab⁴ is providing digital skills training for students across a range of areas including Microsoft Office, web design, and data science. As well as offering practical workshops and online courses, this platform also enables students to undertake professional certifications to validate their IT skills proficiency.

Upskilling staff to engage with and deliver online teaching and learning

- 2.8 Members also recognise the need to invest in training and development to equip their staff with the skills and competencies to adapt their course material to the new modes of delivery and ensure it is both engaging and inclusive for students. A number of members have invested in their digital teams who are engaging with academics to promote awareness of the range of tools available to enhance the online academic experience. These teams are also advising departments on the appropriateness of different platforms depending on the learning aims of each individual course.
- 2.9 For example, the University of Cambridge is providing training to their academic and professional services staff to support them to develop flexible and inclusive approaches to

¹ <http://www.dso.manchester.ac.uk/what-support-can-i-get/>

² <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/secretary/documents/student-rules-and-regs/online-code-of-conduct.pdf>

³ <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/digital-learning-hub/online-classroom/communities/>

⁴ <https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/digital-skills-lab>

teaching and has produced a series of guides to online teaching, including an introduction to specific educational technologies⁵. The university has also worked with an external educational consultancy service to provide workshops for their academics which have addressed a range of pedagogical and technological issues associated with online delivery. Having undertaken consultations and course evaluations with staff and students, the university is now seeking to build on the lessons they learn from the approaches adopted.

- 2.10 The University of Bristol has also introduced a network of digital champions to facilitate the move to online learning. These champions are sharing their discipline-specific expertise on the types of teaching different schools can undertake and the challenges to consider.

3. How digital technology has supported the move to remote delivery

- 3.1 As well as utilising virtual learning environments such as Moodle, members are also weaving tools such as Padlet and Mentimeter into their delivery models. These aim to facilitate greater engagement in live sessions through, for example, the use of word clouds which capture the range of student responses to the topics under discussion. These tools also facilitate student collaborations by providing discussion boards, group exercises and group portfolios where students can post their work for peer review including in audio and video form. These approaches aim to support further peer-to-peer interaction by enabling students to share resources with one another in a highly visual and flexible manner.
- 3.2 Imperial College London has also introduced an Immersive Technology initiative which is enabling academics to use and test a range of interactive tools in their teaching and learning, so they are able to identify the appropriate technology to support the pedagogical aims of their course⁶. They are also building networks of staff and students which will provide opportunities for students to work in partnership with academics to identify innovations in the way teaching and learning is delivered.
- 3.3 Russell Group universities are also working to develop models which enable students to engage virtually with practical elements of their courses and are expanding their range of theoretical exercises which can be carried out remotely. For example, one of the resources the University of Exeter has incorporated into their courses is Labster⁷. This provides access to a lab experience, enabling students to perform experiments, practice their skills in an engaging virtual learning environment and providing opportunities for them to contribute to the design and development of new bespoke simulations.

4. The impact of digital poverty on high-quality digital teaching and learning

- 4.1 Russell Group universities fully recognise the challenges presented by digital poverty and have sought to remedy the barriers that a digital teaching and learning experience can present. For example, at the outset of the pandemic members introduced loans and grant schemes which provided students with access to laptops and broadband connection. Russell Group universities have since built on the initiatives introduced earlier in the year to address digital poverty. For example, many have established digital equity funds. These funds are providing grants or loaned electronic devices and dongles to students that either lack or have limited access to these key tools.
- 4.2 Members have also undertaken student surveys to understand the issues students faced as they sought to engage with their studies remotely. This enabled them to identify challenges and respond accordingly. For example, in August the University of Cambridge introduced a

⁵ <https://www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/teaching-2020-21/guides>

⁶ <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/immersive-technology-initiative/about/>

⁷ <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/teaching-excellence/learningenvironment/>

new digital gateway grant scheme which has provided £250,000 of funding to ensure care-leavers, those who qualified for free school meals and mature students from low income backgrounds can access laptops, noise-reduction headphones, microphones and webcams⁸.

5. Strategic opportunities arising from the shift in delivery mode

- 5.1 Members are fully committed to harnessing the opportunities that blended models of teaching and learning present to enhance their offer to students and will continue to explore the ways in which existing and emerging technologies can support them to improve the academic experience. Members are also working to engage students in these conversations. For example, the University of Bristol has committed to a consultation and a series of co-design activities with students during autumn 2020 to better understand how they have experienced the new blended models of delivery and will work with students to devise solutions to the issues identified.
- 5.2 While it is important to reflect on the merits of virtual teaching and learning and further embed the positive elements of this, it is important to consider how this combines with and complements in-person delivery. Having surveyed students to understand their reflections on provision since the pandemic, one of the key priorities for students is the resumption of in-person teaching. In harnessing the merits of virtual teaching and learning, we should therefore not lose sight of the importance of in-person teaching to ensure a rounded academic experience and meet student expectations.
- 5.3 Russell Group universities are also using technology to develop their academic and pastoral support networks. This is enabling our universities to adapt their existing approaches and, in some cases, also enhance the way in which academic support services are delivered to students. Members are using this time to reflect on how traditional approaches, such as the personal tutoring system are working and how these mechanisms could better support students. For example, the University of Nottingham has introduced new guidelines for academic personal tutors to assist them to develop supportive relationships with their students and is providing staff with training to equip them with the tools to support students in the context of Covid-19 and the changing learning environment⁹.
- 5.4 This academic year, the University of Birmingham has also introduced a new system of personal tutoring groups. This builds on the university's existing model by linking academic personal tutors to a small collection of students, thereby encouraging greater levels of peer-to-peer engagement and enabling more interactions, which take place online between the academic and their tutor group.

6. Remaining challenges and the ways in which other stakeholders can support digital teaching and learning across the sector

Recognising the value and cost of digital delivery

- 6.1 It is important to recognise the enormous efforts and significant investments that universities have made to ensure their campuses are Covid-secure and that new blended models of provision are high quality. Developing and delivering digital forms of teaching and learning has been an expensive transition. For example, beyond the investments required to make digital learning materials available to students and staff, resource has been needed to ensure that teaching spaces are able to deliver high-quality recordings for those engaging remotely. Shifting student-facing services such as pastoral support, counselling and careers advice online has also required additional upfront costs. **We would encourage the OfS to**

⁸ <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/study-us/undergraduates/offer-holders/offer-holders-updates/2020/aug/9/digital-gateway-grants/>

⁹ <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/qualitymanual/2-documents/covid-19-unuk/covid-exceptional-regulations-personal-tutoring.pdf>

consider how, through communications to students and other stakeholders, they can convey the value of digital forms of delivery and the costs associated.

Acknowledging the need for collaboration

- 6.2 Many of the challenges outlined in this response cannot be addressed effectively by universities alone. It will be important for a range of actors to work in partnership to overcome these, including internet companies, publishers, other education providers, teaching and learning software developers and government. **We encourage the regulator to consider what role they could play in supporting these partnerships.**
- 6.3 For example, university facilities and support staff are playing an instrumental role in ensuring that library resources and a range of other support services are both available and accessible online. However, there are some outstanding challenges surrounding access to certain texts which are not yet available as e-resources and there are also significant costs attached to accessing certain resources in digital form. **Engagement between universities, publishing companies, DfE and the OfS could help enable the sector to have greater access to e-resources.**

Addressing digital poverty and non-conducive learning environments

- 6.4 Members have identified a range of challenges in respect of students living environments, which may be more prevalent among those living off campus, either due to internet connectivity or a lack of quiet study spaces. Overcoming these challenges places a strong onus on the availability of on-campus study spaces. While members are expanding the spaces available on campus for independent study and introducing booking systems to reserve study spaces, universities will need to continue to monitor the challenges these circumstances may present to some students.
- 6.5 **Ensuring that every home in the UK has access to high speed broadband would enable more students to engage in online learning. We would encourage the Government to deliver on its ambition to achieve this by 2025.**
- 6.6 The provision of free school meals data has enabled members to identify a number of students who may require additional support and benefit from access to digital equity funds. **We encourage the Department for Education to ensure that free school data continues to be provided to universities in future years to support these efforts and we welcome the regulators support to achieve this.**

Supporting diversity

- 6.7 While there are a number of shared challenges, the diversity of the sector illustrates the importance of avoiding a one size fits all approach to digital teaching and learning. The policies and principles adopted by each university should reflect the challenges their own institution faces given their student demographic, the collection of subjects on offer and the scope they have to deliver socially distanced in-person academic and pastoral support services in the context of evolving public health guidance by geographic region. **We would encourage the regulator to consider the role they can play to showcase the positive efforts the sector is making to ensure students continue to receive a high-quality teaching and learning experience, while also recognising this diversity and avoiding calls for a one size fits all approach.**

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