Responding to the Challenges of Moving an On-Campus Pre-Sessional Course Online During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter reports on how the challenge of transforming an on-campus pre-sessional into a fully online assessed format during the COVID-19 pandemic was addressed in the context of a leading UK university (Imperial College London). The chapter explains the core principles behind the transformational approach that was adopted and provides examples of practices that had unexpected affordances for teachers and learners. It is hoped these principles and practices can inform others considering a similar transition.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been widely perceived as having changed education irreversibly (Li & Lalani, 2020). In the context of higher education in the United

Kingdom, the rapid switch from on-campus to fully remote online learning and teaching in March 2020 necessitated a choice between a temporary 'emergency' approach of simply transplanting a course (Inglesias-Pradas et al., 2020; Bruce & Stakounis, 2021), and a careful but resource-intensive transformation of course design to maintain a quality learner experience. At the forefront of this rapid switch, because of their position in the academic calendar (in July and August), were pre-sessional courses. Pre-sessional courses are high stakes, intensive preparatory language and study courses for prospective international students – high stakes because students' entry to their chosen degree programme depends on successful completion of the course. Pre-sessional courses are recognised as having a 'double duty' (Seviour, 2015). While they are a means for students to meet the university's language entry requirement and be admitted on to their degree courses, they also enable students to acquire study and academic language and communication competency to ensure a smooth transition to degree-level study. Because pre-sessional students' entry onto their degree programmes depends on successful completion of these courses, the quality of the learning experience in fully online pre-sessional courses in 2020 needed to at least match that of the on-campus version. This chapter will explore how this challenge of shifting to a fully online assessed format was addressed in the context of a leading UK university (Imperial College London) by explaining the principles behind the transformational approach and examples of practice that were adopted. It is hoped these principles and practices can inform others considering a similar transition.

CONTEXT

In the last five years, Imperial College London has been implementing a wide-scale pedagogy-focused review of its curriculum. Part of this pedagogical review has involved a repurposing of physical teaching spaces to move towards more flexible learning spaces, with more personalised digital resources replacing the traditional in-person cohort lecture. The rationale is to make space for more interactive small-group and problem-based learning. However, because of the scope of the reconceptualisation of teaching and learning across the university and the workload this necessitated, the pedagogical changes implemented up until the COVID-19 pandemic had been gradual and incremental rather than immediate and wholesale. To align with these institution-wide shifts towards more active, task-based live learning alongside flipped digital learning, prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, incremental changes had already been made to the design of the on-campus pre-sessional course year on year. Language and content that was previously delivered by teachers in classrooms had been converted into flipped digital learning content

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