

**Abstract**

Universities around the world responded to COVID-19 in different ways. Hong Kong, located close to the origin, was fast to react. Teaching and learning quickly migrated online and universities engaged with challenges in maintaining the quality of instructional delivery. Alongside inevitable downsides generated by real-time re-engineering of higher education, unexpected upsides were also registered. Drawing out the lessons from this most unusual semester will be a key task when campuses are again able to function properly.

## Hong Kong Higher Education and the 2020 Outbreak: We've Been Here Before

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Universities around the world are responding to COVID-19 in different ways. Hong Kong, located close to the origin, was fast to react. It learned useful lessons in 2003, when it was at the epicenter of the SARS epidemic, and again in late 2019, when anti-government protests engulfed university campuses and classes moved online. Globally, it has been one of the more effective jurisdictions in limiting COVID-19 cases and fatalities.

**On the Heels of a Storm**

Hong Kong's fall protest movement meant that universities ended the first semester online. That initial experience was rough-and-ready. Professors scrambled to complete their courses through lecture capture, uploaded materials, virtual seminars, and chat rooms. Still more challenging was the switch to online assessment with a lead time of only two to three weeks. Nobody could claim that everything went smoothly in those turbulent weeks.

Handling COVID-19 was also enormously complicated. The virus emergency flared in the second half of January, just days or at most weeks into the new semester. The Chinese Lunar New Year holiday, in the final week of the month, was both a help and a hindrance. It gave universities limited breathing space. It also meant many students had left Hong Kong, either to return to the Chinese mainland or to other countries. When the holiday ended and the virus arrived, some students did not, or could not, return. Before the government closed the borders to many nonlocals, universities arranged quarantine facilities for returning students.

**Expertise, Autonomy, and Action**

Some universities quickly became influential in controlling the spread of the virus. The Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine at the University of Hong Kong developed rapid tests for COVID-19 that have been adopted worldwide. In shaping wider responses, Hong Kong universities were largely unencumbered by government bureaucracy because of their high degree of institutional autonomy. They could therefore act quickly to sustain instruction, research, and knowledge exchange. Nevertheless, the government did create a shadow policy framework. In particular, decisions taken to close all schools initially for a few weeks and latterly for three months from mid-January to mid-April created a policy context that universities simply had to respect.

Within each of the major public universities, a task force typically composed of senior management and reaching out to deans for major issues was originally set up to address the student protests of late 2019. In early 2020, no more than minor personnel

changes were required for these core teams to go into action to address daily challenges of COVID-19.

### The Greatest Challenge

From the outset, the greatest challenge was to maintain the quality of instructional delivery. The University of Hong Kong had to sustain course offerings for 30,000 students from 100 jurisdictions. It had to manage pressing issues of online access in many parts of the world. It had to respond to basic issues of internet penetration, especially when asking students to view and download quite large files of course materials.

As in most major universities, only a small proportion of academic staff had previously run online courses. Those few faculty who had created a MOOC were better placed, but they were a minority. Most faculty had experience conducting face-to-face classes supported by a website that stores course materials, videos, and PowerPoint presentations (PPTs), offers a chat room, and enables assignments to be submitted. The virus led to a rapid uptick in faculty engaging fully in online education, either grudgingly or enthusiastically. There was some resistance, and even enthusiasts found that an entire semester of online teaching bereft of face-to-face teaching generated quite a challenge. Indications are that class attendance is the same for online as for face-to-face courses. However, teaching online requires more planning and follow-up.

To support faculty taking their classes online, the University of Hong Kong ran an ongoing series of webinars. It also offered on-demand trouble-shooting services, with in-house experts reachable first through WhatsApp and then through Zoom. It made short videos covering an array of basic issues. It sent out bulk e-mails to all teachers on a regular basis to keep them abreast of developments. To support students, it issued regular bulk e-mails and maintained e-mail accounts through which students could receive real-time responses to issues and concerns. Maintaining good lines of communication has been essential throughout the crisis.

Some universities in Hong Kong retained some campus teaching, provided it did not undermine the core objective of a low-density environment. The University of Hong Kong identified components of its undergraduate programs that simply had to be taught on campus through laboratory, studio, and other sessions, and drew up schedules for final-year students to return in small groups, take these components, and graduate on time.

A challenge yet to be fully confronted is assessment. Short-term fixes adopted at the end of the first semester in Hong Kong were not entirely successful, and both teachers and students lost confidence in the assessment system. In the second semester, universities are somewhat better positioned, but still not fully prepared. Oral exams will replace many written exams, and assessment tasks will be substantially diversified.

Asking questions in a real classroom carries more social pressure than asking a question online or with a text message. Many faculty and students reported an increase in participation through Zoom tutorials, one of a small number of positives to emerge. Trust matters because teachers have to trust that students are actually online beyond the electronic indication that they are attending, though parallel issues also arise in face-to-face teaching.

With the worldwide cancellation of academic conferences, keynotes, and other overseas meetings, blocks of work time were reallocated. Staff meetings were conducted online. Academics and students saved commuting time. But working at home in Hong Kong is a different matter, as most local students share small accommodations without a separate study space. For this reason, universities kept libraries and learning commons open throughout the emergency, advising entering students on health and hygiene protocols.

### Inevitable Downsides, Unexpected Upsides

Undoubtedly, there have been downsides to this semester of online teaching and learning. Students have had only a partial university life, and have often felt lonely, demotivated, and cut off. Clinical placements and internships have fallen away. Exchange programs have been curtailed. Even proponents of online learning yearn to see the return of campus activity and vibrancy. Maintaining research projects has been hard, especially when reliant on fieldwork. Links with the community, with other institutions, and with the wider world have all suffered.

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Upsides, probably less visible but nevertheless tangible, have been registered above all in the fresh engagement with teaching and learning that has taken place in this most unusual semester. This is not to argue that tertiary education will be transformed. It will not. However, a platform for dialogue about new ways forward for teaching and learning now exists on many campuses, and senior managers have the opportunity to work with that.

Similarly, at a time when governments are giving subsidies of all kinds to business, they might consider funding universities to explore new forms of educational experience for students. While there is no escaping the fact the global pandemic has hurt universities everywhere, it has also diversified the educational experience. Drawing out the lessons from that will be a key task when campuses are again able to function properly.▲