Returning to lectures in 2021

An ACODE Whitepaper – 28 January 2021

Professor Michael Sankey
Griffith University
President of the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and eLearning (ACODE)

With a grateful acknowledgement to Professor Shelley Kinash from USQ for her support

About this study

With the advent of COVID-19 in 2020 and the ensuing social distancing measures adopted in relation to large gatherings, universities in the Australasian higher education sector found themselves unable to run traditional face to face lectures, or large tutorials. This necessarily meant that all institutions had to adopt alternate approaches to providing the key information to students that would normally be done in a lecture format. In many cases institutions pivoted quickly and implemented a range of online strategies, while others changed the forms of delivery altogether, replacing their traditional lectures with other forms of information sharing. But now, as we move into 2021, and the social distancing restrictions that most jurisdictions put in place have been relaxed somewhat, it is important to understand what institutions are intending to do in relation to returning to face-to-face lectures.

One of the antecedents for this study was seeded from the feedback received during the recent ACODE 82 Workshop 'Not Wasting a Crisis', that was held in late November 2020. In this Workshop it was suggested that some universities may not necessarily go back to face-to-face lecturing in the same way they had done so before, finding that some of the options they had adopted during 2020 were suiting them quite nicely. These options included, lecturers holding regular Zoom or O365 Teams sessions with their students, pre-recording shorter more focused forms of delivery through various lecture capture systems, or recording sessions in dedicated do-it-yourself studios. In some cases some lecturers simply used their mobile phones to record content and shared that through the learning management system or Teams. It was seen during the ACODE 82 Workshop that this time offered a great opportunity for universities to review their current practices, to understand if teaching approaches that had been used prior to the pandemic would still be suitable moving into the future.

To try and understand how universities in the Australia and New Zealand are dealing with this and to further distil some 'lessons learned' from pivoting quickly to implement online solutions, the Australasian Council on Open Distance and eLearning (ACODE), ran a survey designed to provide all institutions a sector-wide perspective on this. This survey contained the following eight questions:

1. Will your university have on-campus lectures in 2021?
2. Is it likely that your university will to return to on-campus lectures post-2021?
3. Is COVID-19 the primary reasons your university is discontinuing on-campus lectures (if this is the case), or are there other drivers?
4. Is sound Pedagogy (quality learning and teaching approaches) one of the primary reasons your university is discontinuing on-campus lectures (if this is the case)?
5. To what extent is your university promoting and/or supporting chunking recorded lectures into shorter segments as a replacement for lectures?
6. Is your university discussing changing timetabling terminology, to suspend and/or change the use of the term "lecture"?
7. What other alternatives to providing lectures is your university actively promoting?

8. Any other comments you would like to make to help us understand the approach your university is taking?

The invitation to participate was sent to 47 universities in Australia and New Zealand. Of these 43 Institutions (91%) responded (36 Australia, 7 New Zealand). Given the time of year this survey was run (mid-January), this is a particularly pleasing response rate. Those responding to this survey were either the institution's nominated ACODE representative, the Director of the Learning and Teaching Unit (or equivalent), the PVC Learning and Teaching (or equivalent), or DVC (Education or Academic).

Results and discussion

Question 1. Returning to lectures in 2021

Out of the 43 Institutions, 14 (32%) indicated they would be returning to on-campus lectures this year. With a further 8 (18.6%) returning, but with a reduced model. However, 17 Institutions (39.5%) will not be returning to Lectures in Semester 1. Of these 8 (18.6%) may return to lecturing in Semester 2.
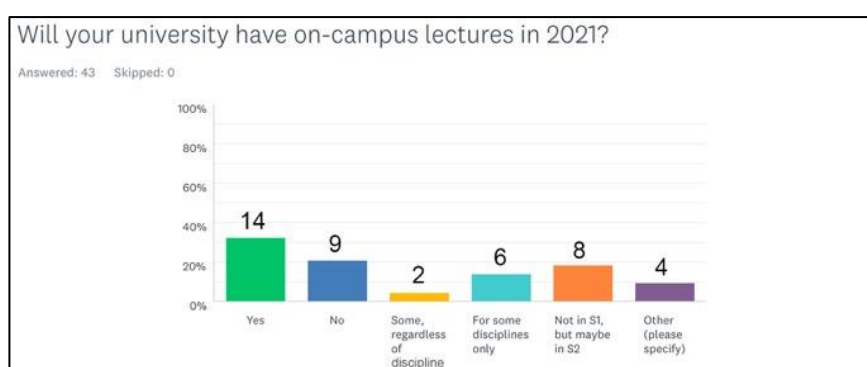

1

Figure 1. Data for Question 1

For the 4 institutions responding 'Other', their responses can be summarised as:

- Attendance caps are going to be enforced to maintain safe social distancing.
- Moving to a mix of on-campus/blended learning/dual mode/fully online. Lectures will follow these options, with social distancing for S1. Disciplines will respond as suits their pedagogical preferences.
- Preference is for an active learning strategy without on-campus lectures. There is a process for disciplines to seek exemption on a unit-by-unit basis. A proportion of teaching staff objected to this proposal; this was subsequently discussed at Academic Board/Council. However, the model was approved and is currently be implemented.

Question 2. Returning to lectures post 2021

The above question was then extended to understand what the longer terms plans were, post 2021. Interestingly, less institutions said 'Yes' to the longer-term prospect of returning to full lecturing. Where previously 14 (32%) had responded to an immediate return, only 10 (23%) responded to this longer-term prospect. However, in this particular case 18 institutions (42%) would probably be returning, but with a reduced model, either by discipline or regardless of discipline.

Six Institutions (14%) would not be returning to lectures at all, with a further 7 (16%) indicating they were not sure at this point.

It is clear that there is a definite swing away from offering as many lectures as has been the case in the past, with institutions indicating, in their qualitative responses, that their preferences are moving

towards more blended models of delivery, to provide more flexibility for students. A fuller explanation of these points will be returned to later, when Questions 7 and 8 are analysed in more detail.
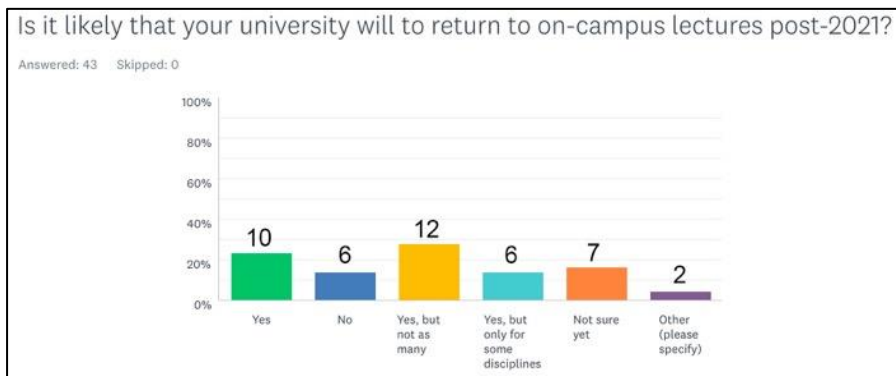

Figure 2. Data for Question 2

For the 2 institutions responding 'Other', one institution said that, for the vast majority, they would not return to lecturing as they knew it, other than for "special events" such as visiting speakers. The other institution was deliberately moving to a more blended strategy.

Question 3. Reasons for discontinuing lectures
Although 7 institutions (16%) nominated that the COVID-19 Pandemic as the main reason why they were discontinuing on-campus lectures, there were other drivers for a further 9 institutions (21%). However, 13 institutions (30%) nominated that it was a 'bit of both'. With those choosing 'Other' and nominating specific reasons for stopping lectures, some 33 institutions (77%) had discontinued lectures up to this point. Ten (23%) had not (that is the 9 responding 'not applicable' plus one in the 'other' category).
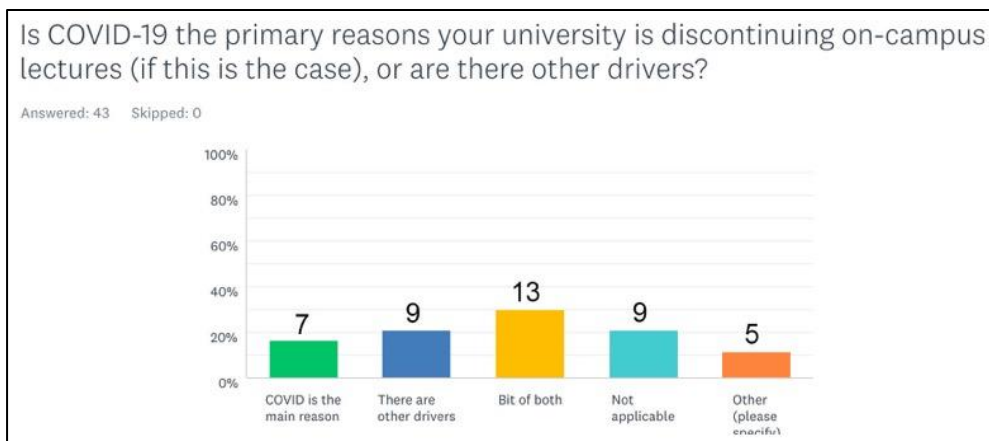

Figure 3. Data for Question 3

For the 5 institutions responding 'Other', their responses can be summarised as:

- The situation is that many lecturers have realised that the learning they used to seek through lectures can be actually supported in different ways that don't require on-campus lectures. Some are [finally]convinced that maximising the flexibility of engagement…is better than requiring attendance. This is partly the result of COVID enforced innovation, partly the result of other efforts…but mostly, it's been brought about by COVID forcing them to try different approaches and them discovering that they work, and sometimes better.

- COVID is the main reason but this has only accelerated a general shift away from face-to-face lectures
- Two institution had moved away from lectures anyway, one with the introduction of a different teaching model. And another by introducing a new Flipped Learning model.
- One institution was adamant that they were not discontinuing on-campus.

Question 4. What role does good Pedagogy play

There is an obvious and unashamed bias presented in Question 4, that is based on a recognised shift that is occurring in higher education across the globe, but more so in western countries. That is, that universities are moving away from a 'Teacher-Centred Pedagogy', to a more 'Learner-Centred Pedagogy' (UNESCO, 2021). This is clearly supported in the results of this question and in this survey.

Ten institutions (23%) indicate that good pedagogy is the primary reason they are discontinuing on-campus lectures, but a further 20 institutions (46.5%) indicate there are a range of reasons why they are doing this (this may include pedagogy). Three institutions (7%) indicated that sound pedagogy had very little to do with this, while a further 3 simply indicted this was not the reason.
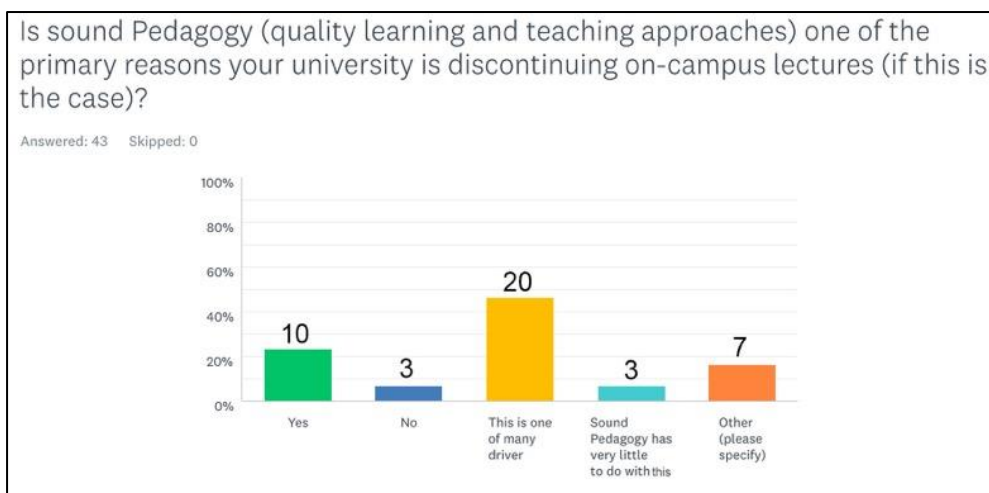

Figure 4. Data for Question 4

Out of the 7 institutions choosing 'Other', only one made comment, with the remainder indicating that the question was not applicable to them. The single response indicated that there was an emerging strategy at their institution to encourage alternatives to lectures, such as partial replacement with pre-recorded video content, and using more in-class time for alternatives, e.g., more clinical, more maker spaces activity, more time for dedicated project linked with authentic drivers, etc.

Question 5. Chunking lectures

A strategy that many institutions have adopted over time is to provide more pre-recorded (shorter, more topic focused chunks of) content for students, rather than providing 1 to 2 hour face-to-face lectures. Fifteen institutions (35%) either did this 'a great deal' or have been doing this 'for quite some time'. A further 17 institutions (40%) indicated that this was happening, but not as much as they would like.

For four Institutions (9%) this was either not happening or not happening so much.

The qualitative comments provided by those choosing 'Other' indicate that 4 institutions would fall into the affirmative, with the remaining three falling into a dissenting category.
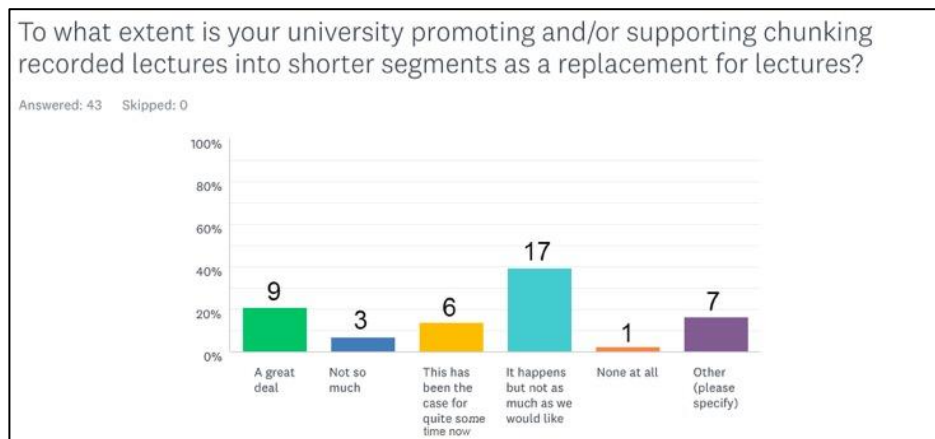
Figure 5. Data for Question 5

For the 7 institutions responding 'Other', their responses can be summarised as:

- Notionally, there could be a reduction in lecturing, and an increase in the use of other technology enhanced learning approaches integrated in an overall learning strategy. Among those, video vignettes is but one approach.
- 2020 saw a measurable shift to chunking up delivery, with a shift of lectures to asynchronous and more topic focused recordings. Our systems fully support this. Promotion of this is highly recommended for online and blended mode of delivery, and will soon be encompassed in an emerging strategy push for more options and diversity for in-class time.
- Teaching staff have begun doing this naturally and to a large extent, as they make recordings separate from the f2f lecture delivery mode.
- We have a major blended learning initiative for off-shore teaching that emphasised the generation of digital "content" to augment active f2f teaching and learning. Promoting production of chunked recorded lectures was part of that, and has been for some time, however actual practice has been modest in that area. In the our 2021 plan we are promoting a range of different approaches as alternatives to face-to-face lectures, including chunking recorded lectures. We are discouraging use of existing lecture recordings.
- We have never 'recorded lectures' - I have always been of the view that if a (live) lecture can be replaced by a video (or series of) then it should be.
- We provide support, but that support is relatively limited when compared to the number of lectures. And each faculty may be different in their needs and approach...
- The COVID lockdown in 2020 has pushed the university to consider and pilot content recording software (like Panapto/Echo360/Instructure's Studio) for the first time.

Question 6. Changes to timetabling systems

One of the strategies that has been discussed at some universities, in relation to discouraging large face-to-face lectures, has been to change the timetabling system that allows staff to books teaching spaces, and more importantly lecture halls, particularly in relation to adjusting the class sizes that can be accommodated in those spaces.

Nine institutions (20.5%) have been actively having these discussions, while a further 12 (27%) are currently considering this option, while one institution (in 'Other') indicates that there are some 'mumbling in dark corners' about this. Eighteen institutions (43%) are not considering this as an option at this point.
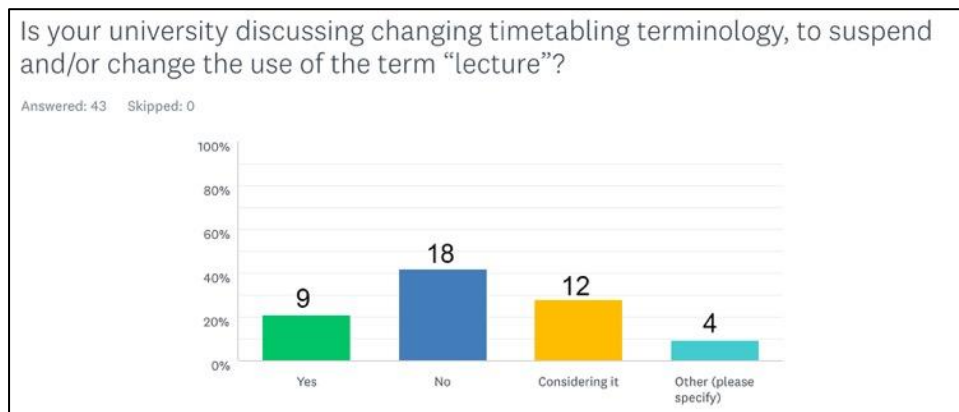
Figure 6. Question 6

A summary of the remaining two comments in the 'Other' category indicates that one institution is thinking about the timetabling system in relation to both on- and off-campus scheduling, that will inevitably bring the issue of terminology to a head. The other institution had been considering the language used and activities for face-to-face teaching in their systems prior to COVID-19, and that this has now been incorporated into their 2021 plan, along with the consideration of new academic workload management.

Question 7. Other alternatives to lectures
Respondents were then asked to nominate what they had been actively promoting in relation to providing alternatives to face-to-face lectures. Forty (40) of the 43 institution provided examples, and these can be summarised in the following ways:

- The notion of a 'Flipped' and 'Blended' style of delivery was explicitly described by 15 institutions (35%). That is, provided chunking of pre-recorded content (video and sometimes podcasts) online, and following this up with smaller f2f, or online tutorials and workshops / intensives. Noting, in some cases, that practical labs did need to continue in f2f mode for obvious reasons.
- There was a clear preference for a focus on 'active' and 'collaborative' learning strategies by 11 institutions (25%), incorporating interactive live and predetermined components. These included using just-in-time features such as quizzes, polls, H5P, online synchronous activities, interactive learning artefacts, workshops and experiential project work, interactive online tutorials (as distinct from presentations)
- Online interactive classroom activities using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Blackboard Collaborate, were explicitly mentioned by 6 institutions (14%)
- Five institutions nominated that lectures would be maintained for foreseeable future in most cases. Reasons for this included, 'the lecture is so cheap', 'many of our academics are very old fashioned', 'size of the cohorts' 'the physical environment of the lecture theatre engages students'.
- Four institutions nominated that they were recording, or livestreaming live sessions in scheduled timeslot.
- Three institutions explained that each discipline was supported to establish suitable models and approaches that fit within their wider University frameworks for learning and teaching.

Question 8. Final thoughts

Twentynine institutions (67%) took the final opportunity to provide further comments to help us understand the approach they are taking. Many of the following comments have been left as is (some paraphrased to preserve anonymity), rather than clustering them. This is to provide an accurate sense of the diversity of practices that currently exists in the sector:

- Our multifaceted, strategic (pedagogically/entrepreneurially) and most definitely aligned mission is based in our education strategy. The issue of the use of lectures is only one part of a bigger story - not to be considered on its own, rather is a necessary part of the whole. (there is a continuing place for lectures).
- We still see face-to-face learning being an important part of our teaching but with content delivery shifting online.
- Biggest issue is fighting the inertia of the University and its tendency to return to old practices if there is no active work preventing it.
- Many decisions around online delivery and moving away from the on-campus lecture, are based on pushing an agenda about being digital first. Very little attention is given to pedagogical affordances of the different approaches or what students respond positively to.
- We have moved to developing some online programs during the pandemic as the Federal Govt offered free fee courses. This push to online has begun to flow through to on-campus courses with more electronic-based resources. This is further necessitated by the potential threat of readiness of another lockdown and move to emergency remote teaching.
- Desire to move away from lecture/tutorial format, but will take time. Mixed messages from students about online/virtual learning vs on-campus experience. More work needs to be done to improve dynamic/interactivity of the online experience...use of the LMS and other platforms and tools. Staff have more appetite for change and understanding of the potential need for more virtual/remote/blended and hybrid forms of delivery and teaching approaches due to COVID. For now, all classes except those few requiring mandatory on-campus practical components or clinical placements etc are offered to online and f2f student concurrently - using multiple modes of delivery - most synchronous online using LMS.
- We are implementing a wider strategy linking online, pedagogy, curriculum and course architecture, into which the details of delivery will ultimately fit.
- One of the key factors influencing such a shift is workload, and we have just done a major shift of our workload model which is yet to be bedded down. The sense currently is that once it has settled, we'll be better placed to consider changes to our approach.
- Face to face lectures will remain, however it may not be in the same form.
- We have moved-on from the concept of 'lecture' a long time ago. Each discipline determines fit for purpose teaching to meet the learning outcomes. Over a semester this might include a whole cohort learning experience in a large space or it might not. We focus on fit for purpose learning environments not a 'lecture' per se. The impact of COVID in WA on f2f teaching has been minimal...we have taken a determined approach to build a sense of belonging on campus for those electing that mode (as distinct to those completely online).
- Lectures to be shorter and provide a roadmap rather than delivering content. Content delivered in short videos.
- In some academic areas a classic flipped classroom model was been popular before COVID. Others have moved this year to this model of self-paced access to chunked lecture materials to be accessed before the interactive classes. But this is not appropriate for all courses.
- Currently transitioning to new lecture capture system and signature pedagogy in 2021.

- Students have come to expect flexibility and we will need to continue being agile in our mode of delivery...We see the best option being on leveraging the new skills and knowledge staff have developed by making the most of the need to maintain our online capability while enabling f2f experiences and campus reactivation as far as we can, by focusing on developing our blended synchronous capability.
- All lectures are 'online' - either recorded or live. On campus activities will still occur within physical distancing guidelines for workshops, seminars, tutorials.
- The impact of COVID on f2f teaching and lectures is not as apparent at our Uni as others.
- Lectures need to be a value add, not default. There needs to be good reason to hold a lecture
- Our VC has expressed a firm commitment to "on campus education".
- Sticking doggedly to the "we are not an online university" message, while acknowledging there are formally approved distance learning courses already in place and some units of study that are on-campus units, but have been opened-up "online" due to COVID-19. In these cases, individual lecturers have volunteered to take it "online".
- We're currently undergoing a major restructure, so the Learning and Teaching Plan for the new era hasn't really been formulated yet, it was more of a firefighting approach last year.
- We in Aotearoa New Zealand have been running in person lectures since mid 2020. Our approach was to embed flexibility and resilience. All sessions need to be available on Zoom as well as f2f. The Uni wanted anyone (staff & students) with cold or flu symptoms to stay off campus. We also had vulnerable students who were unable to return to campus because of their circumstances. This is continuing this year in order to be able to respond rapidly to any new lockdown that might take place.
- To suggest that there is one approach is an oversimplification...as with any university with a decentralized power structure, there are many approaches.
- Asking teaching staff to make shorter videos does not seem to be a very successful approach without serious strategy behind it. Carrot and stick are both required.
- We are moving to clearer distinctions between delivery modes with courses identified in the course catalogue as either 1) primarily F2F, 2) blended or 3) online. Degree programmes will have to decide by 2022 which of these delivery modes will be how they market themselves from that point. 2021 will allow staff and Faculties to pilot and understand the distinctions, build capacity and allow the institution to invest in the needed infrastructure.
- We are providing academic PD to intersperse interactive elements between lecture 'chunks'.
- It's our brand and signature to offer students high value f2f and on campus experiences.
- Content delivery, will remain online - engagement with that content and application of learning in say a practical will be f2f.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided institutions with both opportunities and threats in relation to the how they can support their students around core teaching activities, such as lectures. Many have taking this opportunity to reposition their approach to lecturing, in light of the fact that they may be forced to return to a lock-down situation in the future. Others have tried to hold firm to their traditional approach to lecturing, as they have seen this as an essential part of their brand.

What is clear from the results of this survey is that many institutions have found new ways of providing information to their students, that would have been traditionally conveyed through a formal face-to-face lecture. Many of these institutions have also taken a stance that they will now not return to that mode of delivery in the future. Having said that, there is no presumption in this that the

lecture, as we have known it, will cease to exist and nor should it, rather that instructions will now be far more judicious as to how many and how often they may choose to use this form of delivery.

This survey was administered by ACODE as part of their ongoing support to their member institutions and to the sector more broadly. ACODE is truly grateful to all those who participated in the survey and hope that it will be of use to your institution, as we all navigate this new and emerging space together.

It is anticipated that over time additional information will surface as member institutions seek to further clarify their positions. As we do so, ACODE will continue to use our online forums and workshops to provide a environment to share this information with our member institutions.

References

UNESCO (2021). *Effective and appropriate pedagogy*. UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning, Learning Portal. (11 January). Available at: https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/issue-briefs/improve-learning/teachers-and-pedagogy/effective-and-appropriate-pedagogy

Any queries related to this paper should, in the first instance, be addressed to the ACODE Secretariat at: secretariat@acode.edu.au