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## Online learning during COVID-19: 8 ways universities can improve equity and access

By Nadia Naffi, Université Laval; Ann-Louise Davidson, Concordia University; Azeneth Patino, Université Laval; Brian Beatty, San Francisco State University; Edem Gbetoglo, Université Laval, and Nathalie Duponsel, Concordia University

This summer, universities around the world planned for an unprecedented back-to-school in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In most universities, centres of teaching and learning are responsible for supporting faculty members' teaching for more effective student learning and a high quality of education.

Our collaborative research group, based at Université Laval, Concordia University, Florida State University, University of Southern California and San Francisco State University, sought to better understand how universities planned to make sure all students would have access to online learning and be able to participate as courses moved online. Our team met remotely with staff from 19 centres in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Lebanon.

We analyzed publicly shared resources from 78 centres in 23 countries about about how instructors could transform online learning during COVID-19. We also compiled publicly available resources from these centres about ways to address educational equity in relationship to online learning.

We identified emerging best practices that many universities are recommending for improving students' equitable access online during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. We also heard from staff at centres of teaching and learning that universities have a distance to go in understanding how to address racism online.

### Educational equity

We used the Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development's definition of educational equity to guide our questions. We also relied on a working definition of equity in higher education:

- All students are able to achieve equal learning outcomes as they are supported by institutions, faculty and other systems to engage in the learning process.
- All students are able to receive the financial, social and academic support and guidance they need to succeed in the institutional programs, thus enabling lifelong success as well.

- All students are given access to appropriate and effective learning opportunities, and instructional resources, activities, interactions and evaluative assessment — which are differentiated according to their unique sets of characteristics and needs.

### **COVID-19 & student vulnerability**

Staff who participated in our study identified many problems students were facing in accessing online learning. Students were working from home; some international students had returned to their home countries. Many students lacked access to a computer, the internet or adequate bandwidth to support synchronous video conferencing.

According to both publicly shared resources from centres for teaching and learning and information relayed by directors, factors accentuating student vulnerability at the onset of the pandemic included: physical and/or learning disabilities; sickness or stress due to the pandemic; issues related to technology access; students' existing information communication competencies; official language proficiency; whether students had caregiving duties; socio-economic and immigration status; time zones; and students' racialization or ethnicity, gender, culture and religion.

Many factors accentuated students' need for personalized accommodation and support to achieve academically during rapid transitions online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Systemic racism**

Systemic racism was brought to the forefront, particularly after the death of George Floyd in the U.S., which catalyzed global anti-racist protests and calls for systemic change. University staff from centres for teaching and learning said addressing systemic racism was a priority. Many reported they were asked to produce guidelines and recommendations to address systemic racism and inclusion in online learning environments as quickly as possible.

However, they were being cautious not to rush this process as their goal was to develop effective measures that would result in positive change, a task that many also acknowledged requires careful consideration. They had unanswered questions such as such as: How can centres for teaching and learning provide support to students experiencing racism in the classroom? How can centres help reduce systemic racism in their centres and in teaching and learning contexts? How can they spread awareness of issues of systemic racism in online contexts?

### **An equitable future**

Our analysis of online resources and discussions with staff in centres for teaching and learning revealed eight priorities from these centres to ensure an equitable and accessible online learning experience for students during the COVID-19 pandemic and into the future.

**1. Create accessible materials:** Ensure that documents can be easily shared and printed; share documents and materials that are compatible with assistive technologies; adopt inclusive writing, respectful and sensitive to students from different backgrounds; provide descriptions in hyperlinks and images for students with visual impairments and using screen readers; format text in easily readable colours and fonts; provide course content materials in multiple formats.

**2. Choose adequate digital technologies:** Use university and institutional IT department-supported digital technologies; use digital technologies available for students in different time zones and international contexts; choose tools that include accessibility features, such as text-to-speech, high-contrast themes, enlarged cursors, closed-captioning, keyboard shortcuts and alternative text.

**3. Record lectures, and caption videos and audio content:** Ensure the asynchronous availability of lectures; facilitate the accessibility of these lectures or any other video or audio content through captioning.

**4. Adopt inclusive culturally responsive teaching:** Instill equity as a value in designing learning experiences; avoid one-size-fits-all instructional designs; be aware of the risks of a “colour blind” approach as claiming not to see race may mean ignoring racism or discrimination; explicitly value all students’ experiences; design courses to activate students’ cultural capital; make sure that all students are seen, heard, respected and valued for who they are.

**5. Adopt a flexible approach to student participation:** Prepare for flexible timing for student assessment; discontinue traditional three-hour lectures; opt for asynchronous activities; give priority to project-based assignments in order to promote asynchronous participation; provide additional time for completing exams and other evaluations when necessary.

**6. Ensure financial support and equipment:** Facilitate students’ access to financial aid and technological equipment, or provide this when possible during the pandemic to students facing financial constraints, no questions asked.

**7. Understand student needs:** Host panels with student organizations, identity-based equity centres, LGBTQ resource centres and multicultural centres, and other student-led groups where student panellists talk about their new reality and what they want faculty to know; administer ongoing surveys to monitor students’ situations; pause and ask students about their needs, their expectations and how things are going with them — because they know best about their own situation.

**8. Address systemic racism:** Staff noted that as resource centres charged with supporting faculty in providing quality learning experiences and providing safe and equitable experiences for racialized students, there is more work to be done.

Our research group’s work on this subject continues. On Oct. 2 we are holding an online symposium called “Leading the Future of Higher Ed — Planning for Sustainability”.