# Chapter 11
# The Transition to Online Teaching and Learning:
## 'Like Ducks to Water'

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## ABSTRACT

*The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 provided both a need and an opportunity for educational institutions in Sydney to explore new ways of providing teaching and learning for their students. UBSS was able to respond quickly because it had already prepared to introduce online learning. In mid-2019, the institution had decided to offer an online option and a senior staff member and support staff had been working since then to convert existing product into suitable online format. By the time the demand for online teaching and learning arrived, the institution was already well placed for the conversion.*

## INTRODUCTION

Group Colleges Australia (GCA) is the umbrella organisation for a set educational and training institutions that host close to 5,000 students, both Australian and international. It employs about 100 staff and contractors. GCA's higher education division - Universal Business School Sydney (UBSS) - provides undergraduate degrees in Accounting and Business as well as a multi-streamed postgraduate degree in Business Administration (MBA). Its undergraduate business school is ranked #1 for teaching quality among the more than 60 business schools in Sydney.

GCA's paramount goal is to ensure that its students receive the highest-quality academic experience. It recognises that new technologies can make an important contribution to improving educational outcomes, monitors closely the development of new technologies, and is pro-active in identifying and exploiting the latest and best technologies. This focus has provided GCA with a significant advantage

in the COVID-19 environment where face to face teaching has had to be replaced by online teaching and at the same time maintain student engagement.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 provided both a need and an opportunity for educational institutions in Sydney to explore new ways of providing teaching and learning for their students (Bolton, 2020). UBSS was able to respond quickly because it had already prepared to introduce online learning. In mid-2019, the institution had decided to introduce an online option and a senior staff member and support staff had been working since then to convert existing product into suitable online format. By the time the demand for online teaching and learning arrived, the institution was already well placed for the conversion (Nerlich, 2020). Higher education in Australia is regulated by an independent national body, the Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA). Approval must be obtained from this Agency for any "material change" in a provider's offering to students. GCA believed that its planned move to online delivery was a material change, and in October 2019 had applied to TEQSA for approval to convert to online delivery. The submission was detailed and comprehensive and demonstrated both a willingness and a propensity for a part conversion to online learning and teaching.

In March 2020, when TEQSA gave notice that all courses were to be delivered online in response to COVID-19, UBSS simply accelerated implementation of the plan it had been developing prior to submitting the request for a Material Change. Some in the industry said that UBSS took to online delivery '*like ducks to water'.* They were correct; the institution had done so because the "ducks" had studied the mechanics of swimming carefully, had ensured the access to the water was disciplined and appropriate, and had made thorough preparations before getting into the water.

## The Introduction of Online Education

The transition from on-campus to online teaching occurred in Trimester 1, 2020. The speed and agility (given the foresight) with which UBSS made the transition is shown in the following sequence of events:

- In Week 8, UBSS delivered its final week of on-campus teaching to students in its undergraduate and postgraduate programs.
- In Week 9, it provided intensive training to staff using Microsoft's TEAMS platform – the training was thorough and extensive throughout the week.
- In Week 10, UBSS commenced online teaching with staff onsite. The decision to have staff deliver their subjects in the UBSS classrooms rather than in their homes was made with the quality of the student experience in mind. Staff were required to dress professionally, and tracking cameras were installed so they could move around the classroom, providing students with the feeling that they were sitting in their normal classrooms.
- In Weeks 13 and 14, end-of-trimester examinations were held online.

This focus required an enormous focus and commitment by several very skilled personnel. It is important to remember that none of the lecturing staff at UBSS had signed up for online delivery – it was imposed upon them and done rather quickly and with some urgency. In many ways their response to the challenge was magnificent.

## Initial Impacts of The Shift to Online Education

Despite the sudden shift in delivery and assessment modes, the initial outcomes were pleasing. Examination submissions increased from 81% in Trimester 3, 2019 (the last full trimester of on-campus delivery and assessment) to 84% in Trimester 1, 2020 (the first trimester that included online delivery and assessment). It might be expected that the more highly motivated and capable students would participate in the assessment process whatever the mode, and that the increase in participation with online assessment would capture less motivated and/or less capable students. However, grade distributions were the same in Trimester 1, 2020 (online) as in Trimester 3, 2019 (on-campus). The aggregated progression rate was also the same in both trimesters (79%).

*Table 1. Grade Distribution in Trimester 1, 2020 (% shares)*

| Grade | BACC | BBUS | MBA | UBSS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High Distinction | 16 | 2 | 9 | 6 |
| Distinction | 16 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| Credit | 25 | 24 | 24 | 24 |
| Pass | 37 | 40 | 31 | 36 |
| Fail | 16 | 22 | 23 | 20 |
| Total | 110 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

## Further Improvements

While the initial move to online education went smoothly, it soon became apparent to UBSS Management that some immediate changes to practice were required, including the formal adoption of a new assessment model, a move to more robust platform, and investment in (and enhancement of) classrooms settings. It was also recognised that some of these changes needed to be made more quickly than was provided for in the normal operating schedule.

In Week 15, Trimester 1, the Chair of the UBSS Academic Senate executive approved the change to an assessment model better suited to online delivery. The three on-campus invigilated examinations regime (which had operated and worked effectively with regard to face to face teaching and learning) was replaced by a 40% assignment and 60% final examination model. This decision was ratified by the full UBSS Academic Senate at its next meeting.

Initially, UBSS used Microsoft TEAMS as its delivery platform since time was important and the platform was already in place. TEAMS is designed primarily for online meetings and it has many strengths in this area. It can also be used to deliver online learning; however, it does not support some of the software packages that are purpose-designed to improve the educational experience. During Weeks 1-3, Trimester 2, 2020 UBSS substituted Blackboard Collaborate, a platform designed specifically for online education. Blackboard Collaborate provides two-way audio, multi-point video, an interactive whiteboard, application and desktop sharing, breakout sharing and session recording as well as an attractive environment

for hosting club meetings and creating a collaborative workspace for students. In general, staff took to Blackboard Collaborate quite quickly and efficiently given it was teaching/learning specific software.

The investment in technology and the focus on sustaining a high standard of teaching and learning was evidenced in the conversion of classrooms into lecture studios. With the likelihood that online teaching would continue throughout 2020 and beyond, GCA started to invest heavily in converting classrooms into lecture studios (not unlike television studios) from the beginning of Trimester 2, 2020.

## First Survey of Student Attitudes toward On-Campus and Online Learning Modes

In Week 5, Trimester 2 a survey was conducted to gain a better understanding of student response to the sudden shift from traditional on-campus face to face delivery to an online operation and to ascertain their attitude toward returning to campus for their learning. The students were made aware that any proposed on-campus delivery would be part of a hybrid model (both on-campus and online classes) with regulated class numbers, and that on-campus delivery would be conducted in a manner that observed the workplace regulations and conditions set by Safe Work Australia to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Incidentally, GCA and UBSS had worked quickly and efficiently towards achieving NSW COVID Safe Certification. The survey was sent to all of UBSS' active 1,380 students and 495 students (36%) responded, with 72% indicating a preference for remaining wholly with online learning and 28% indicating a desire to return, at least partly, to on-campus learning.

With the latter group in mind, UBSS sent a memo to staff and students in Week 6, Trimester 2 advising them that it intended to introduce a hybrid model, with online classes continuing to be provided and a small number of students being invited to on-campus classes in a setting that strictly observed COVID19 protocols. It also planned to hold invigilated examinations at a designated examination centre for units accredited by peak accounting bodies. UBSS sought and received NSW Government COVID19 Safe certification to ensure that the processes in place were appropriate and of a standard required for maximum health and safety.

In Week 9, the hybrid model was introduced. However, attendance was exceedingly low, with evidence that some of the students who had indicated a desire to return to campus had either misinterpreted or mis-stated their feelings. Circumstances in NSW also changed, with the threat of a second wave of COVID-19 becoming more likely, and UBSS cancelled the on-campus classes after only one week of delivery.

## Student Feedback on Units

At the end of every trimester, UBSS conducts a survey of the students' evaluation of each subject in every discipline. The survey comprises 11 questions focusing on teaching quality and the learning needs of students. Students give a score to each question, ranging from 1 (extremely bad) to 5 (extremely good). Individual subject scores are made available to staff on their Moodle sites as well as to the three Program Directors who then meet with individual staff to analyse the scores and explore ways of improving performance.

The overall aggregated score during the 11 preceding teaching periods (T2, 2016 – T3, 2019) was 4.2 out of a possible 5. Because of the sudden introduction of online teaching and the many other problems faced by students due to COVID-19, UBSS had set a target of 4.0 for Trimester 2. However, as is

shown in Table 2, the overall score was 4.2, above the target score and in line with historical scores. It supported the conclusion from the earlier survey that the transition from on-campus to online learning had been successful.

*Table 2. Student Feedback on Units, Term 2, 2020*

| | **Survey Questions** | **BBus** | **BAcc** | **MBA** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q1 | The subject provided useful knowledge and skills | 4.30 | 4.13 | 4.23 |
| Q2 | The learning outcomes were achievable | 4.18 | 4.03 | 4.13 |
| Q3 | The subject workload was manageable | 4.13 | 4.07 | 4.03 |
| Q4 | The subject helped to develop relevant professional skills such as problem solving and critical thinking | 4.17 | 4.17 | 4.14 |
| Q5 | The lecturer was well prepared for each class | 4.31 | 4.24 | 4.30 |
| Q6 | The lecturer provided useful feedback | 4.25 | 4.21 | 4.18 |
| Q7 | The lecturer had a good knowledge of the subject matter | 4.32 | 4.32 | 4.33 |
| Q8 | The lecturer used e-learning resources eg smartboard Moodle in a way that aided learning in the subject | 4.20 | 4.20 | 4.26 |
| Q9 | The lecturer was available to discuss learning problems outside of class time | 4.12 | 3.99 | 4.02 |
| Q10 | The assessment requirements were clearly explained | 4.26 | 4.09 | 4.20 |
| Q11 | Overall, the teaching in the subject was of a high quality | 4.26 | 4.13 | 4.16 |
| | **Average** | **4.23** | **4.14** | **4.18** |

## Internal Audit

UBSS has a two-pronged approach to online learning: it focuses, first, on the factors that directly influence the students' learning experience; and second, on ensuring that this experience is in line with or exceeds accepted industry practice.

UBSS has invested heavily in IT resources to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by the transition to online learning. It believes that its position as a market leader in the industry is due to its combination of state-of-the-art resources and passionate lecturers. The Executive Dean publishes daily updates for all staff on the particular nuances and experiences of online delivery. In addition, UBSS remains one of the few providers to insist that lecturers deliver their subjects from campus rather than their homes. This ensures that lectures are delivered in a scholastic manner and in an environment with which students are familiar. It also ensures transmission is of a high standard and technology glitches are minimised. Limited bandwidth, local peak usage issues, and inferior equipment are no longer considerations nor hurdles to overcome.

The Executive Management Team ensures that the student online experience is in line with accepted industry practice in the following manner. Firstly, the IT Director provides ongoing IT updates to the Board of Directors on the state of resources. Secondly, UBSS conducts internal audits with reporting lines back to Senior Management and the Academic Senate on the progress of online delivery. These updates and reports are comprehensive and detailed.

The institution's audit tool is derived from TEQSA's Online delivery key considerations for Providers (April 2020) https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/online-delivery-key-considerations-providers. It also conducts a watching brief on the TEQSA website to alert Management when the resources are updated or changed. The outcomes are best captured in the following traffic light report that is reported regularly to the UBSS Academic Senate:

*Table 3. Traffic Light Report*

| Criteria | TEQSA Reference Guide | Action | Status | Responsible Officer |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A set of questions is provided before class | | Lecturers provide homework and questions for students before class | | Lecturers |
| Glossary of terms is used for online learning (in class) | | Glossary is provided in the unit outline | | Lecturers |
| Students have access to technology (tablet, phone, laptop) | | Students have access to computers. Learning material is also accessible on phones | | Student Services |
| Online readings available | | Readings are available in Moodle | | Lecturers |
| Attendance is recorded promptly | | Attendance is recorded in Moodle via the login page | | Lecturers |
| FAQ, YouTube, Ted Talk links, tables are used | | These are included in the Moodle page for each unit | | IT/Lecturers |
| Warm Up activities are used for students to get to know each other | | Students are put into small groups and given meet-and-greet activities | | Lecturers |
| Students are provided information on support services | | Support services are available on Moodle and the UBSS website. Students also provided information during orientation | | Lecturers |
| Lecturers are available to students after the structured learning | | Lecturers use the Chat forum and queries are addressed at the end of the class | | Lecturers |

In Week 12, Trimester 2 UBSS conducted an internal review of its online resources, practice, and experience against the TEQSA good practice guidelines (Table 3). The findings indicated that UBSS met fully all the TEQSA criteria.

## External Benchmarking

In May 2020, approximately 2 months after the COVID 19 restrictions on education delivery were put in place, UBSS participated in a benchmarking project with members of the Higher Education Private Providers Quality Network (HEPP-QN) to assess the responses of independent higher education providers to COVID19. HEPP-QN is a consortium of 35 higher educational institutions that aims to strengthen the status of private providers in the higher education industry by encouraging and supporting cooperation with each other in developing and implementing quality assurance frameworks. Benchmarking, then, is an important aspect of the work.

The HEPP-QN project involved two focus groups. One group comprised *business schools* and included the following 5 providers - Australian Institute of Business, Polytechnic Institute Australia, Russo Busi-

ness School, Universal Business School Sydney, and Western Sydney International College. The main topics covered by this group were:

- Governance and decision making to facilitate the required changes
- Support provided to students
- Support provided to staff
- Measures to ensure that quality is maintained

UBSS compared its responses to those of the four other members of the group in the areas of decision-making, staff and student support and measures implemented for quality assurance. It noted that one of the measures that had been introduced by UBSS but not by the other providers was the provision of practice online exams for students. It believed that this measure may have had a positive impact on the academic performance of students in Trimesters 1 and 2. It may also account for the increase in examination completions.

## Ongoing Monitoring

In Week 15 of Trimester 2, UBSS commenced a study of options for invigiliatating online assessments. In the same week, the results of student performance in Trimester 2 became available. The distribution of grades was similar to that of Trimester 1, and there was a slight increase in the overall pass rate, to 81% (Table 4). The ability of UBSS to not only sustain the improvement in progression achieved in Trimester 1 but to increase it further in Trimester 2 suggests that the institutions' early planning for online delivery, generous provision of online resources, extensive staff training and flexible response to challenges and opportunities achieved the institution's overarching goal of providing a quality teaching and learning environment for its students.

*Table 4. Grade Distribution in Term 2, 2020 (% shares)*

| Grade | BACC | BBUS | MBA | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High Distinction | 5 | 2 | 4 | 4 |
| Distinction | 15 | 12 | 14 | 14 |
| Credit | 24 | 24 | 26 | 26 |
| Pass | 38 | 40 | 37 | 37 |
| Fail | 18 | 22 | 19 | 19 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

## Second Survey of Student Attitudes Towards On-Campus and Online Learning Modes

In Week 3, Trimester 3 UBSS conducted a second survey of the attitudes of students toward online delivery and of their enthusiasm for a return to on-campus learning albeit it in a hybrid mode. The survey separated postgraduate students (who comprise 60% of UBSS' student population) from undergraduate

students to elicit a more refined, granular set of responses. The survey was sent to 1,380 students, of whom 455 (33%) replied.

The key result was that 93% of postgraduate students and 86% of undergraduate students reported that they 'prefer to continue studying remotely from home'. The overall preference for online learning, of 90%, was 18 percentage points higher than for the survey conducted in Trimester 2. This came as no great surprise given the qualitative feedback received throughout the online teaching and learning period and the T2 Student Feedback on Units (SFU) data suggesting high levels of satisfaction.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusions that can be drawn from the UBSS experience with online learning include:

1.  Careful planning for the introduction of online education, provision of adequate resources to support online delivery and assessment, and appropriate training of staff in online teaching methods and use of online resources can contribute to the successful transition from on-campus to online learning.
2.  Though experience with the new mode of education is limited, students prefer quality online learning to similar-quality on-campus learning (Kidd, 2020).
3.  The large jump in preference for online learning in only its second trimester of delivery suggests that the preference will increase more, perhaps to nearly 100%, as delivery and assessment methods improve and become more student-friendly and as students become more accustomed to the online mode of delivery (Nott, 2020).
4.  The preference for online learning is stronger for postgraduate than undergraduate students. This may be due to postgraduate students having clearer goals for their careers and greater need for efficiency in their learning activities. It may also reflect a greater focus among undergraduate students, especially first-year students, on building a social network.
5.  The student experience is central to success. If onlin opportunities can faciliatate a postive and enriching experience for student at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels online learning could be here to stay – or at least a blended model (Rogers, 2020).

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