

The future of online education

Preface

This report is based on three main sources of student input. First, input of the LUS members themselves is one of the aspects taken into account within the process of input gathering. The LUS is a group consisting of eight students, one from each faculty and a chairperson. The second source was an online input session organized in December 2021. Unfortunately, there was only one attendee besides the LUS members, the rector magnificus and two staff members. However, the session still led to fruitful conversations on the subject at hand. The third method of gathering student input was a survey conducted through Qualtrics and Instagram.

As the number of students reached by our efforts has been limited, this report can by no means be seen as entirely representative. The process of writing this report was further complicated by another lockdown, which impeded the start of education and activities on campus. Fortunately, some general trends and directions have been gathered and will be discussed.

Should you have any remarks or questions about the report, please contact lus@sea.leidenuniv.nl

The future of online education



Privacy

- Active exchange on privacy issues
- Exchange between all involved parties



Offline

- Teaching and learning of difficult content
- Certain skills, e.g. labwork and presenting
- Socialization of student to create a supportive network



Blended learning

- Future of education
- Should be designed in collaboration, constant conversation between teachers and student



Inclusion

- Keep the developments that have been made for students with special needs
- Need for further progress in blended learning environment

Online education

With all of us having much experience with online education these past years, it can be noticed that some elements work fairly well in an online setting. Lectures and exams are prime examples, as neither of these activities require much social interaction. Advantages of online education that students experience are flexible planning, higher efficiency and less time spent on travelling.

However, to make online education successful it is important to be especially clear in communication about students' data, activities that are measured and pre-cautionary measures that are taken for data protection. There should be an interactive discourse on privacy related issues, involving the university staff, students and other stakeholders. Furthermore, digital skills have demonstrated vital in a pleasurable online experience, for both lecturers and students. Education through different online platforms has sparked a learning curve that requires adequate support, as these abilities will remain essential for the future.

Offline education

In general, students emphasize that they prefer small-scale education, such as workgroups, to take place on campus. Considering the more challenging and difficult courses, offline interaction and collaboration remain a particularly important element in the process of acquiring new knowledge.

Furthermore, these teaching events enable students to establish and maintain social relations with their peers as well as professors. Particularly during the pandemic, in person experiences have shown important to encourage and enthuse students for the world of academia. With student well-being in mind, it should not be overlooked that a thrilling and supportive environment can more easily be established on campus among fellow students than through online platforms.

With regard to their future career and life, students also mention – in our questionnaire – the importance of skill development within their educational programs. Activities such as lab work and giving presentations should, ideally, take place in-person as much as possible. An online alternative would, in their opinion, potentially compromise the quality of education.

Exams

In terms of taking exams, opinions vary considerably, depending on personal circumstances and the approach within the various faculties. While some students find taking exams at home convenient, as they are in their known and secure environment, others experience increased levels of tension when being proctored. Thus, the suggestion of hybrid or adapted exams has been brought up on several occasions.

Within a predefined framework, students would appreciate to have the liberty to choose whether they make their exam at home or on campus. Additionally, proposals have been made for day-long exams that put emphasis on applying and understanding the study material, rather than reproducing facts.

Blended learning

In a post-pandemic world the way to go seems to be blended learning. The university defines blended learning as:

“Blended Learning is a combination of face-to-face and online learning. In Blended Learning we look at how ICT applications can be used alongside traditional teaching methods to stimulate students to engage more actively with the learning materials.”

In such a blended learning environment, the LUS thinks it is important to closely work together with students and see what they need and want. It is difficult to give specific recommendations on the design of blended learning, as it is very context specific and can significantly vary between different studies and faculties. However, in general, the active exchange between students and teachers will be crucial.

Another aspect to be considered is inclusivity. The online learning environment has been a great chance for students with special needs to be able to *actively* participate and be part of the learning community. For some students with special needs, having the chance to follow education remotely meant that they could more easily participate. This for example applies to students with chronic illnesses. Other students with special needs, however, have also experienced this new situation as extra stressful and challenging.

In assisting this group of students, it is especially important to provide the opportunity to choose whether they would prefer to join online or on campus. For the long term, institutionalized solutions would be desirable. For example, rooms being equipped with technology that allows students to not only follow a class online, but to also actively participate. The aspect of inclusiveness shows one of the great strengths of blended learning.

As seen for online teaching and privacy related issues, clear communication between teachers, students and other important actors is necessary in order to make blended learning a success. While it is a luxury that there are a lot of platforms (Brightspace, Teams, Kaltura, Zoom, email and more) through which teachers can stay in touch with their students, it can become problematic when too many of them are in-use at the same time. As students can get confused about the location of specific information, leading to increased stress, it would be valuable to establish guidelines.

The LUS report on well-being has shown before and this report highlights again the significance of communication in many parts of a student’s university experience. Thus, this subject will be further investigated by the LUS in the upcoming months.