# COVID-19 and the Adelaide Law School, Australia

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In this short article, we examine how the University of Adelaide's Law School responded in its approach to teaching during the challenges of COVID-19, the opportunities revealed, and the immediate and longer-term implications of such responses.

## ABOUT THE ADELAIDE LAW SCHOOL

The Adelaide Law School has approximately 1,800 students enrolled in their undergraduate law degree, known as a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) (the Australian LLB is the equivalent of the U.S. or Canadian Juris Doctor, or JD). The clear majority of these students are Australian citizens. We also teach introductory law courses that are offered by other schools such as commercial and tax law, both of which tend to have a much higher degree of international students, primarily from China, India, and South East Asia. The Adelaide Law School also operates a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD), Master of Laws (LLM), and a Graduate Program of Legal Practice (GLDP) program.

## RESPONDING TO COVID-19

Semester one began the first week of March 2020. For the first two weeks of semester, we were able to hold face-to-face (F2F) classes. However as COVID-19 spread into our community, the Australian federal government stopped incoming flights from China. By March 19th, the Australian government had suspended all international flights and everyone entering the country was required to undergo two weeks of quarantine.

The first issue we faced was how to support international students enrolled in our LLB program and courses that we service teach for the business school. In total, this was approximately 80 students, the majority of whom were still in China. To support these international students, the University established information guides and financial support to assist with travel and expenses incurred during quarantine. As a School, we then developed a list of courses that we could offer online (OL) and sent individualized degree plans to students that indicated the courses that we could support remotely. Most of our international students made their way to Adelaide and joined their classmates in the classroom. Those who could not, were able to watch their lectures live or later via a video recording. Special seminars were set up on Zoom with the course coordinator.

In week three we received early data that COVID-19 was spreading through community transmission. At this stage, 80% of our courses immediately went OL for lectures and seminars. Only classes that could guarantee social distancing were delivered in a F2f format. By week six, all our classes (lectures and seminars) had moved OL.

As classes moved OL there were corresponding changes to course assessment. For example, class participation was scrapped and substituted with a comparable assessment. Courses with exams have also either had to develop an alternative assessment or provide an OL exam.

## CHALLENGES

The major challenges we faced were emotional, technical, and financial. First and foremost, the COVID-19 pandemic caused heightened stress in our student cohort and for staff. One of the most important things we did first was send clear information to our students and told them that we were going to support them and help them get through their courses. Our students needed us to take that anxiety off the table so that they could concentrate on their work and other important things related to their personal circumstances. We have made sensible amendments to our extension policies and sought to accommodate requests for modified assessment.

Our staff has also undergone an emotionally difficult experience. The shift to OL teaching was required without a break or pause, and this caused a noticeable rise in stress (University of Adelaide, 2020). In response, we communicated with staff that they were not going to become OL teachers overnight. They were responding to an international crisis and they had to be gentle with their expectations and what they planned to achieve in the classroom. Alongside this, we also set out some clear standards for what our approach to OL teaching should look like. For example, we did not increase seminar sizes even though that would have been easy on Zoom. Moreover, except in extreme cases, we asked staff to give live lectures rather than reuse lecture material from past years.

The most significant technical challenge we faced concerned access to technology and technological literacy. While most of our existing staff computers were fully set up and functional for OL teaching, others were not. Very quickly in the pandemic, computer equipment was hard to obtain and our suppliers took weeks to deliver computer cameras and laptops to staff. Once the staff was equipped, we had to overcome a significant gap in skills since the Adelaide Law School does not offer an OL program. To overcome this, our school and University ran regular seminars on OL teaching and workshops to familiarize staff with programs such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

Once these issues were addressed there were other rolling challenges. For example, to avoid overloading programs and internet bandwidth, we held meetings on Microsoft Teams, lectures on Myuni Canvass, and seminars on Zoom. Working across these three platforms helped us avoid overloading one system. Another problem that we encountered is the practice of "Zoom Bombing" where a student (or member of the public) comes into a class and shares inappropriate material. We have countered this by tightening the security on Zoom and requiring participants

to sign-in using their university username and password. These steps have completely eradicated this type of misbehavior.

Finally, COVID-19 has placed considerable financial pressure on the University of Adelaide. We have budgeted for an AUD$100 million (approximately US$738,454) shortfall for the year 2020 and that has meant that spending has been tightened. We have had a freeze on new hiring, and it has been hard to employ casual academics or sessional teachers for grading. In the Australian system of labor regulation, a casual employee is one who is employed on a short-term basis, receives no leave entitlements (benefits), and is outside standard employment protection such as unfair dismissal regulations (Burgess, Campbell, & May, 2008). The Australian casual academic is the equivalent of a U.S. lecturer, an academic hired to teach on a full- or part-time basis with little to no tenure or research rights or responsibilities. The immediate consequence of this has been that permanent staff have seen a steep rise in their grading responsibilities and students have had to wait longer for their grades. In the longer term, there is uncertainty about whether we will be able to hire casual teachers in semester two and going forward into 2021.

## OPPORTUNITIES

The teaching we are currently providing at the Adelaide Law School is an emergency response to a pandemic. It can take years to develop an OL curriculum and pedagogical practice that maximizes student learning. However, as a result of our response to COVID-19, all of our staff are now familiar with OL teaching tools and technologies. While there has been no resistance from staff, the transition has been incredibly stressful and forced us to focus almost exclusively on teaching at the expense of research and our administrative responsibilities.

In week seven, our University administered a survey to students to ask how they were finding the transition to OL and what adjustments could be made for the future. The results were very positive, and all of our subjects received an overall satisfaction rate of between 66% and 100% (University of Adelaide, 2020).

Another key opportunity that has emerged has been OL exams. Traditionally we have maintained a practice of long open-book exams with pen and paper. This has been useful from an academic integrity perspective but limited as a tool for testing critical thinking and creative reasoning. If our first trial of OL exams is successful, they may become a regular part of our assessment scheme. For this to happen, we would need clear feedback from our students that they have found it a positive experience and a clear medium for transmitting their learning. We will also need to investigate options for OL invigilation and navigate the privacy concerns that have been raised with services like Proctorio and ProctorU (Naaman, 2020).

## PLANNING FOR THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE

In the Southern hemisphere, we are making plans for Winter 2020. All our Winter courses will be offered exclusively OL. We have made that decision despite having no evidence of community transmission in Adelaide because we are not currently able to guarantee appropriate social distancing in large classrooms.

Although the state government of South Australia released a roadmap to recovery on May 8, 2020, which called for return to F2F tutorials for state universities as of May 11 (Government of South Australia, 2020), the University of Adelaide has not decided about whether to return to F2F teaching in semester two. The major considerations are rates of community transmission and the requirement of social distancing.

On the first point, we are fortunate in South Australia to have no evidence of community transmission. Social distancing is harder. Our seminar classes tend to be between 20-25 students and our teaching spaces do not allow students to keep 1.5 meters apart. The same is true for large lectures. Thus, so long as social distancing is a requirement, it is difficult to envision that the Adelaide Law School returns to F2F teaching in semester two. If, however, we continue to have no rate of community transmission and social distancing requirements are relaxed, then we will be able to return to business as usual.

## CONCLUSION & LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

It is important to understand that while many refer to the current teaching arrangements in response to COVID-19 as OL learning, what is happening is in fact a form of "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020). Nonetheless, some important conclusions can be drawn for longer-term outcomes from the present arrangements. Student feedback gathered as part of the "Student Feedback response: Report of the Rapid Student Feedback Survey Regarding the Transition to Remote Teaching" process suggests that there are a number of immediate changes that could be made to improve the student experience of OL teaching (The University of Adelaide, 2020). These changes might include:

- publishing weekly announcements or videos summarizing what is coming up, where to find key resources, and important dates and links to Zoom meetings
- organizing everything that students need and post as early as possible
- clearing away any clutter in the course OL site
- running live Q&A sessions each week.
- adding OL office hours and having instructors respond as quickly as possible to individual student questions and queries
- providing prompt feedback on assignments
- using Zoom to allow synchronous interactions between students and instructors, combined with Echo360 recordings. Allow a 10-minute break between Zoom sessions.
- recording all Echo360 sessions and making the recordings available the same day, and logically ordering the recordings.

In many cases, though, many instructors may already be making use of these innovations. As such, rather than large-scale, long-term change, it may be the case that only minor adjustments are currently necessary and may make for more effective use of OL teaching beyond the current effects of COVID-19.

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