

COVID-19 : crisis, lessons and opportunities

Business education worldwide has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. **Martin Lockett** looks at the challenges faced by business schools and the opportunities that are now emerging

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No one imagined that 2020 would be a year of massive disruption in business schools. But as the year started, the first cases of COVID-19 were becoming public in Wuhan but attracted little attention. In under three months, though, most business schools had shut down for face-to-face teaching and were looked forward an uncertain time ahead.

At Nottingham University Business School China (NUBS China), part of the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), we were one of the first international business schools to face this crisis. Now, we hope, NUBS China is coming out the other side as our students return to campus. Our experience may be a guide for others in learning the lessons from the COVID-19 crisis and looking for opportunities that it has created.

Meeting the COVID-19 challenge

It first became clear that China faced a public health emergency just after almost all our students and many faculty members had left for their Chinese New Year vacation. Virus cases were growing fast and were being reported more accurately after an initial “cover-up” by local officials in Wuhan. And there was a growing realisation that the mass annual migration of Chinese people to their hometowns and other locations at New Year had created an incredibly effective way of spreading a virus.

At first, measures such as shutting cinemas seemed like an over-reaction but they were not. It soon became clear that much more action was needed and, alongside wider government-imposed restrictions, a university virus prevention and control team were set up.

Plans were prepared including converting the on-campus hotel to an isolation centre for staff or students with virus-like symptoms as well as their close contacts. Students were not allowed to return while international students staying on campus in the vacation remained on-site.

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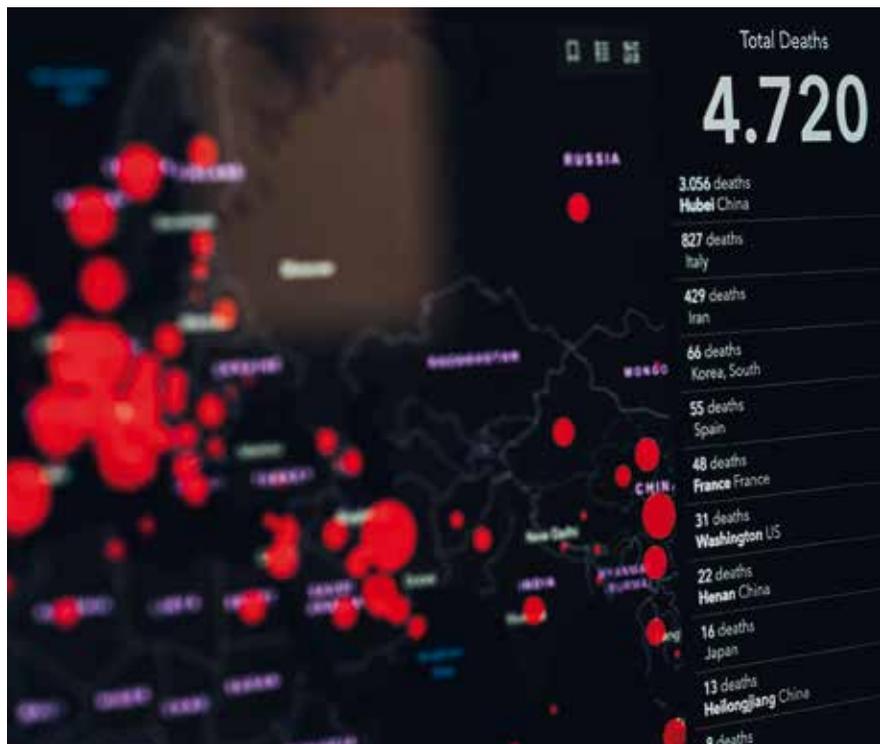
After an initial postponement of the new semester for a week, it became clear that life would not be back to normal soon, so a clear decision was made to go online for at least a month after a two-week delay to the semester to give time to prepare. Planning was based on “prepare for the worst, hope for the best” rather than assuming that everything would go well. Scenarios ranged from a re-opening in a few weeks through to staff and students being unable to return at all.

So a first lesson is not only to be prepared for a wide range of scenarios but also to make fast decisions that make sense in best and worst cases

A second lesson is the need to develop specific plans rapidly and test whether they work in practice, especially for international online learning

Anticipated travel restrictions meant that it was unlikely that many students or staff could return to campus. It was obvious that we had to assess if online learning was feasible at a scale we had never attempted before.

As it was Chinese New Year, students were distributed across China and the world, as were faculty members. In the business school we had 3,000 students ranging from undergraduates through master’s students to a doctoral programme for 100 students. An internal



team rapidly reviewed our existing platforms and whether they could work at full scale.

In parallel we worked on teaching patterns for up to a semester of online teaching as well as for a full or partial return to campus. These prioritised our final year undergraduates so that we maximised their chances of continuing to postgraduate study and employment without disruption.

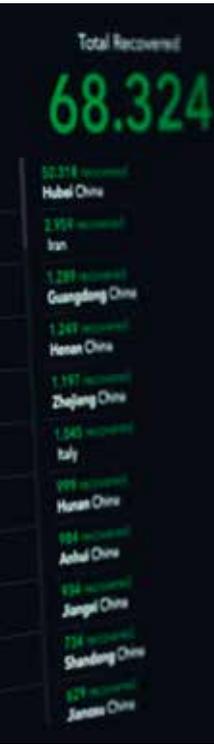
The EFMD Deans Conference in Milan, Italy, was an opportunity to share experience with other business schools just as the virus began to spread into Europe and emphasising how flexibility in admissions would be vital to both students and recruiters.

It turned out that we would need to have online learning for at least most international students for the full semester. Other important plans needed to be developed for our international exchange students, initially allowing those from overseas to transfer to study in China but then, as business schools outside China went online, recommending them to stay with their international exchange school even if they had returned to China.

In China, we had to work in an environment of government-controlled access to many internet resources which are taken for granted elsewhere in the world.

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In addition, some solutions that had been developed in the UK did not work reliably in China. We also had solutions that we thought would work well, which were launched to all faculty members within two weeks and students within a month. Day one of full use revealed further problems in our virtual learning environment that were rapidly solved by a dedicated IT team. We also shifted rapidly from one video recording platform to another that required less international bandwidth.

So a third lesson is that business schools delivering online learning need to pay attention to both accessibility and performance of underlying IT platforms for students located anywhere in the world, especially in China

Once we were reasonably confident that online learning would work, the next challenge was to get our faculty members up to speed. A majority were not familiar with either online learning or specific platforms they would need to use. Hence, in addition to the normal teaching leadership group, NUBS China appointed a junior faculty member as digital learning lead and encouraged others with past virtual learning experience to share tips and techniques with their colleagues.

Together they produced a series of videos on what to do, as well as live training using the Zoom platform, which is being used for a wide range of interactive learning as well as internal meetings.

Our approach was to make it clear what was expected of faculty members to ensure delivery to students and then to allow them freedom to innovate in their own courses rather than dictate a single way of doing things. This is important especially when delivering interactive teaching online.

While the process of rapid learning and live delivery was not always smooth, every course went online on time with very few student complaints. Without the COVID-19 crisis, there would have been long debate about online learning and a lack of belief that it could be done within a few years, let alone a few weeks.

The fourth lesson is therefore that change within business school faculty is possible much faster than is normally imagined, though in this case it took the COVID-19 to prove it.



A fifth lesson is the critical role of effective two-way communication

Often too much focus is on broadcasting general messages about policies and decisions and not enough on answering the questions that are most important for staff and students.

An early and effective mechanism was to establish a staff email address to which questions could be addressed. Two examples of such questions were whether staff could access their offices on campus and the preventative measures being taken on campus including supply of face masks to staff.

This gave deans and other leaders the opportunity to know what staff were asking and to reply to their questions. This turned into a "Staff Q&A", which was updated every two to three days with advice and information targeted at concerns raised by staff, with a similar "Student Q&A". These complemented a more formal university update once a week.

One major challenge was to decide when to ask faculty to return to China and how to communicate this. Those in Ningbo could see the rapid progress in tackling the spread of COVID-19, with new cases inside the city down to a handful and then to zero. However, this was not clear to those still overseas, especially as strict measures were still in place.

For a time, those living in off-campus apartments were only able to leave their home once every two days to get food and could not enter the campus due to "lockdown" regulations. In this context, quite a few staff who were overseas reacted negatively to a general university message that they should return to China in mid-March. They felt that such communication did not recognise their concerns or clearly explain the logic of the decision to ask them to return.

Deans took the lead in explaining that Ningbo was now relatively safer than Europe and other countries, working with each faculty member to get them back. Personally, I stressed that our number one priority was always staff and student safety; number two was student learning; and number three was everything else that we would normally do as a business school.

We ensured that all returning staff members would get a direct car transfer from local airports

to their home rather than using public transport; financial assistance if flight prices had increased; and support if they needed to enter government quarantine or self-isolation. As a result, 90% of business school faculty were able to return safely to Ningbo by the end of March 2020 when China imposed a temporary ban on returning foreigners.

From crisis management to opportunities

While the future is still unclear, as of early May 2020, NUBS China is prepared for an ongoing combination of online and face-to-face teaching. To date, we have no known virus cases among staff or students though, of course, the risk remains. Now our attention is also shifting towards looking at the opportunities that the COVID-19 crisis and our response have made possible.

A first opportunity is extending the use of digital learning

With faculty members much more confident and capable in online learning, more teaching innovation is possible. This includes the benefits for students of having pre-recorded lectures that they can view again and use for exam revision. It opens the door to "flipped classrooms" and other forms of blended learning as well as the potential for greater cross-campus collaboration between Nottingham campuses in the UK and China and Malaysia.

A second opportunity is innovation in assessment

Handwritten exams are increasingly anachronistic as few people sit down for two to three hours handwriting under time pressure. Online exams are being introduced as well as other assessment methods. These will be more resilient to disruption and bring other benefits, for example monitoring of students individually via webcams and the ability to mark papers offsite.

A third opportunity is in research and external engagement

Some faculty members have been using time in greater isolation to finish or revise research articles more quickly. Others have been undertaking research around business response to the COVID-19 pandemic. And others have been analysing developments to provide insights to business and government.

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They have found that relevant articles have been easy to publish in top national media outlets on topics such as virtual working, how the tourism industry will change, and strategies for small and medium enterprises.

A fourth opportunity is to review the use of resources

As part of a UNNC-wide initiative, we realised that reduced spending on areas such as travel and research fieldwork gave us the opportunity to undertake one-off projects that had not been prioritised but had significant benefits. At the same time, we switched marketing resources to be completely online with new initiatives: a university online open day featuring NUBS China attracted 14,000 visitors compared with the 4,000 at a typical physical open day!

Last but my no means least is ***the opportunity to challenge bureaucratic internal processes***. I wrote internal flexible working deadlines for the business school in one day when in the UK and by the next morning they had been accepted by the whole university during the day in China and published to all academic staff. I wonder how long such far-reaching-agreement would have taken in normal circumstances.

Conclusion

The faculty members as well as professional and support staff in NUBS China have done amazing work in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. We have focused on staff and student safety as our top priority, then found new ways to enable student learning with staff and students distributed across the world in a school that has been centred on face-to-face learning. Hopefully the lessons learned are of use to others. And we encourage others to start thinking about future opportunities while tackling today's urgent challenges.



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About the Author

Martin Lockett is Dean and Professor in Strategic Management at Nottingham University Business School (China).