# *Going online: R(e)imagining teaching and learning* webinar series

## Responses to webinar questions

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## Introduction

This paper provides some responses to audience questions which weren’t able to be answered by panelists during the TEQSA/RMIT webinar series, *Going online: R(e)imagining teaching and learning.*

A number of topics were raised repeatedly, including

* the characteristics of an excellent online class
* managing specific technological issues
* advantages of different ways of delivering content
* assessment and assessment integrity
* student engagement in online classes
* practical and hands-on learning.

In this paper, participant questions have been grouped together and answered under six headings.

## 1. Characteristics of excellent online learning

An excellent online learning experience is distinguished from a mediocre or depressing one because students:

* are excited about the offerings
* feel they understand what they are being asked to do
* find it meaningful for them
* have a sense of the presence and commitment from the academic staff
* feel they belong and are part of a significant learning community.

In that sense it resembles any good learning experience.

To build this in an online learning context, academic staff must be appropriately trained in the use of the technologies they will use. This includes the affordances of the Learning Management System they will be working with as well as access, copyright and equity issues and other primary considerations. Academic staff must also have ready access to a network of professionals to help them both with technological obstacles and with learning design issues.

Students must also be supported. A comprehensive system of technological, academic and wellbeing student support must be readily available in distance mode, and it must be obvious how to access this support. It’s useful to have a ‘belts-and-braces’ system, where students can access help in several different ways: for example, one page PDF guides, short how-to videos, and help lines for phone-in. There is much said about how tech-savvy students are, but that is not true for all students. In addition, large numbers of students use technology in ways that is not much help with formal learning. Students may need training in what is acceptable in Higher Education in terms of research, citations and netiquette. It can be convenient for students to have an in-unit link to library services to help with some of these issues.

In terms of the unit itself, a major distinguishing feature of excellence is interactivity. The unit coordinators must have skin in the game and they must care about the student experience just as in face-to-face teaching. A unit that consists of nothing but PDFs and assessment tasks can be a lonely experience for students. Unit staff should be ‘present’ in the course as friendly and responsive instructors who have important things to say and who communicate in a range of ways (see Delivery below). The unit should provide space for social learning, where students can interact and learn from each other. It should have moments for fun, maybe links to interesting or surprising ‘fun facts’ sites, and even bespoke games, if there is budget, or if you can find something appropriate to link to. There should be scope for frequent feedback, maybe on a discussion board, to allow academic staff to identify and respond to problems, confusion and glitches.

Resources should be interesting, varied in format and content, and appropriate to online study (see more in Delivery below). Links to virtual exhibitions, experiments or lively debates will support bespoke unit materials. It can be fun for the coordinator to post interviews of visitors (other staff, external experts, students) in brief weekly features. A combination of video, audio and written materials and synchronous and asynchronous delivery is ideal. You can’t overestimate the usefulness of very simple materials: the early MOOC providers found that students loved watching short videos of the instructor writing equations on a white board (in an engineering subject) much more than just getting the final set of equations on a PDF . They reported that they loved the immediacy. Likewise, simple handouts or short videos (the teacher’s helpful tips, pet hates, and teacher’s basic guide to foundational principles) which are not much trouble for a subject expert to produce, can be surprisingly popular.

## 2. Technology

Twenty-first century learning is becoming blended learning by default. Even before the pandemic, students were much less likely to spend all day on a campus waiting for their lectures, studying and socialising than earlier generations. Students multi-task in many ways, including work and personal commitments, and they expect to have access to learning resources without having to cross town to find them. Contemporary students make study choices which may surprise academic staff, for example preferring a recorded lecture to a live one, because they can discuss it with friends, pause, repeat, watch it from home, and even play at double speed to save time. The COVID-19 lockdowns and teaching restructures have thrown these developments into high relief. How do academic staff succeed in this space?

The work of organising up the LMS, putting protocols in place, unlocking features, etc, is undertaken at the provider level. There are, however, a number of issues that unit co-ordinators should consider when making a quick pivot to online learning.

It’s likely that your institution will have considered optimising for phones and tablets as well as desktop computers. Students work on mobile devices a lot more than academic staff tend to do and there are a range of associated issues. For example, PDFs may require annoying horizontal scrolling to be read on a phone. Ask for student feedback about what is causing problems for them. It is likely you’ll have learning designers who can help you solve the difficulties, and sometimes students can make useful suggestions. You can help by ensuring that big files are broken into manageable chunks, that you don’t strain students’ data budgets with too much synchronous work. You could consider modelling good practice: record some short videos on your computer while sitting where you normally work. Don’t do retakes— if the cat walks across the key board, let students see that you keep calm and carry on. Try to model a not too crazy workspace, though, and discuss setting up a work corner with students perhaps on a discussion board.

### Support for staff and students

As noted above, both staff and students must have resources and training available. These would be provided at the institutional level, but you can link to them on your unit home page. Library resources should be linked to the units. Some librarians are delighted to provide a presence in the unit, and they can provide much advice, including how to manage virtual or sometimes hard-copy loans.

In addition, some students may not have adequate private access to technology. Institutions address this in different ways, for example by establishing a system of equipment or financial loans; but it is something for academic staff to be aware of.

### Staff development

Institutions must ensure that all units conform to TEQSA’s minimum online delivery standards, and that all academic staff have access to skills development and to learning design assistance.

Continuing professional development for academic staff should encompass necessary technological and pedagogical skills and should ideally be offered in a mix of face-to-face, fully online and blended formats. It might be helpful if professional development activities were to be developed so that they function as ‘stackable’ micro-credentials that would help the staff member progress towards a Graduate Certificate or Diploma.

It can be useful to have minimum standards templates available to guide online unit development.

That said, it is inevitable that some academics will not be interested in developing cutting edge or innovative online units, and it is perhaps not a good use of energy to try to bring more resistant colleagues along for the more ambitious parts of the journey. All staff, however, must ensure minimum online delivery standards.

## 3. Delivery

In an ideal world, students would have a suite of options to allow them to choose between synchronous and asynchronous learning as the learning task, their preferences and their circumstances require. It’s important not to simply deliver, say, a three hour face-to-face lecture online; it won’t work well for both technical and pedagogical reasons. Try to move away from a time-bounded conception of the class, and think instead of focusing on the Intended Learning Outcomes and the appropriate learning materials. Several mini lectures of say 10 minutes each might cover the major points you want to make, and could be supplemented with readings introduced by a paragraph or two explaining why they are useful, weblinks, interactive materials, a discussion board, and perhaps a synchronous discussion. It would be useful to consult a learning designer when putting the materials together.

*Asynchronous learning* means that staff and students may all work at different times, as is the case with email and much social media. It uses platforms such as email, discussion boards, blogs, downloadable readings and recorded resources such as short video and audio talks. Asynchronous learning is relatively easy on bandwidth, which may be useful for students with data issues, including remote and international students. As students and staff do not need to be online at the same time, asynchronous learning has the advantage of convenience and flexibility and allows students time to refine contributions and think about complex issues without the pressure of real-time interaction. It also means that students can revisit material they find challenging. The size of the group doesn’t make much difference to the experience. Teaching staff announce set online ‘office hours’, which trains students to learn to wait for a response, rather than expecting immediate answers, and might make dealing with student concerns less overwhelming for the academics. Similarly, all questions, except for confidential matters, can be posted to discussion boards, allowing responses to be shared between teaching staff if there are more than one. This also gives students an opportunity to respond to other students’ simpler problems, such as questions about what chapter to read. It can be useful to have a specific discussion board for glitches and queries.

Asynchronous teaching is, however, *teaching*. You need to actively teach the materials you post, and not simply use online space as a file repository. If you post an article, video, image or link, be sure to introduce it with a sentence or two to explain why it’s there. Small and frequent reminders of the teacher’s presence are gold to students: they can be audio, video or text based, and very casual. A two minute video talk shot with your phone and posted as an introduction to an article can make a real difference to a students. Even a chatty paragraph of introduction (‘This is difficult, but I think you will find it useful because…’) can make a big difference to the reader. Using PowerPoint slides is fine if that’s your usual practice but you should record some commentary to explain what’s going on.

*Synchronous learning* allows social interaction in real time and is often more technologically demanding (for example of bandwidth). Examples include videoconferencing, chat and live-streaming of lectures. It can be difficult to manage from home, if participants forget to mute microphones and various interferences can occur. Sometimes these interferences are enjoyable and lead to laughter and group bonding, but they can be stressful for the presenter, such as when [Professor Robert Kelly’s small children interrupted a live interview with the BBC in 2017](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/dec/20/robert-kelly-south-korea-bbc-kids-gatecrash-viral-storm). Class size is relevant, in that large synchronous classes can be harder to manage.

Good practice is to provide options. If a lecture is live-streamed, it can also be put up as a recorded version, and even ‘chunked’ for student convenience if your systems allow. Discussion groups in real time can be supplemented by (for example) a moderated discussion board. As well as making the unit more interesting, this allows individuals to learn in a variety of ways and also maximises student convenience.

[TEQSA provides links to a large number of good practice guides and checklists](https://www.teqsa.gov.au/online-learning-good-practice) to help with the transition to online delivery and to develop a highly engaging online learning environment, including:

* [10 strategies for online learning during a coronavirus outbreak](https://www.iste.org/explore/learning-during-covid-19/10-strategies-online-learning-during-coronavirus-outbreak)
* [9 Tips for successfully moving your face-to-face course online](https://elearnmag.acm.org/archive.cfm?aid=2509419)
* [What is student engagement in online learning and how do I know when it is there?](https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/3362125/student-engagement-online-learning_final.pdf)
* [Seven ways to improve students’ online learning experiences in your subject](https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/3357164/improving-online-learning_final.pdf)

### Class sizes and participation

The size of online classes is limited mostly by assessment logistics and the number of staff involved. While large and static online units are not popular with students and often have a high drop-out rate, many students report great satisfaction with huge (i.e. thousands of students) but well-designed and well-run online classes. In fact, students may report a more intimate experience in well-managed online courses than in some traditional very-large-lecture halls, where the lecturer is a tiny figure on a distant stage.

Again, the key difference is that successful online units are interactive, well-designed and provide a sense of community. Size is less significant.

To manage large virtual classrooms requires having resources to help students learn to use the technology, setting clear ground rules for synchronous participation (for example, ‘raising a hand’ to speak, muting of the microphone) and exercises to help students with the technology, for example small tasks involving the use of the web cam, recording and posting a contribution and so on. Again, training in the use of the technology is crucial for staff and students.

### Assessment

As in all teaching, assessment in online units must clearly align with the learning goals and accord to the Higher Education Standards Framework and the Course Learning outcomes. When redesigning assessment for an online environment, staff should check to ensure that constructive alignment is maintained, where ‘We start with the outcomes we intend students to learn, and align teaching and assessment to those outcomes.’ ([John Biggs](https://www.johnbiggs.com.au/academic/constructive-alignment/)).

### Tools for formative assessment

Learning Management Systems will have their own applications. You might consider weekly ungraded quizzes, word clouds, interactive whiteboards, polling, and so on. These have a game-like quality and students often enjoy them.

[Geoffrey Crisp’s Teacher’s Handbook on E-Assessment](http://transformingassessment.com/sites/default/files/files/Handbook_for_teachers.pdf) provides a useful overview of approaches.

## 4. Disciplinary issues

### Practical learning

Essential practical and hands-on skill development can be handled in a range of ways. It would be useful to contact a learning designer for help in designing these activities. There are a number of high-quality remote and virtual laboratories available in the physical and health sciences. Simulations, game-based or virtual scenarios and workplace projects can also be useful for building practical skills. Students might watch a simulation or video and then submit a short video of themselves performing the task: grafting a vine, tossing a pancake, welding, taking blood pressure and so on. A workplace project might be taken on as part of the unit. It may also be possible to watch some activities via Zoom.

While it may seem intuitive that the hands-on task is a better learning experience, some students report considerable satisfaction with virtual labs, because there are excellent materials, usually less waiting around and often personalised instruction. Some skills may be easier to learn from videos as they can be stopped and replayed until mastered.

## 5. Learning communities

Students are usually more successful when they feel part of a learning community and there are many ways of producing this effect in online classes.

Firstly, make sure your unit housekeeping is in place. This is especially important when there are no chance meetings where students can follow-up on confusions and problems. Be clear about when recordings might be posted, when assignments are due, when you will be online to answer queries and so on. Ask for feedback on the discussion board and you may find out many small problems that can be easily fixed (broken links, sound quality and so on). If you are taking questions in a live lecture which will be recorded, make sure you repeat them for the recording. Acknowledge the asynchronicity of contributions.

Secondly, try to have at least one synchronous event, even if a short one. At the start of the unit, it might be a short welcome and interactive introduction to the unit. In the pandemic, you might like to acknowledge that you’re working from home, and some of the advantages (coffee?) and disadvantages (interruptions?). Consider a synchronous question and answer (Q & A) session.

Thirdly, be a familiar and friendly presence in your subject. Make a weekly 5-10 minute video where you talk about what will happen in the week’s work. Students often appreciate the unscripted and informal nature of these videos. Include a space for feedback and questions, audio or text based. Post regularly to the discussion board, acknowledge student contributions, refer back to other parts of the online offering. Make sure you keep your online office hours.

It’s important for students to feel free to talk to each other, not only to the teacher/s. Make sure you hand out some simple house rules on Netiquette before this starts. You might like to set up virtual chat rooms where students can work privately in small teams, perhaps linked to an assessment task.

You should definitely make use of the analytics in your online learning platform to monitor student engagement and contribution. Gentle follow-up of students who have not logged on or contributed often helps.

And finally, try to have a good send-off in the last class, where you acknowledge the work the class has done together. Talk about some of the high points. This is rewarding for everyone.

## 6. Assessment integrity

It is important to approach assessment integrity in a sympathetic and developmental way by striking a balance between supportive and punitive approaches, with an emphasis on the supportive, ‘a bit more carrot than stick’ (Professor Belinda Tynan, RMIT). Some useful principles:

* Do not try to cheat-proof every last task. Concentrate on the major tasks.
* Let your students know that you will be on the lookout for plagiarism and contract cheating, which is surprisingly widespread. Use your experience of the unit as taught and your disciplinary knowledge, as well as text-matching software like Turnitin, to pick up suspicious work. Evidence shows academic staff are very good at this.
* Acknowledge that students frequently have major time management problems which might cause them to respond in desperation to approaches from suppliers of contract cheating. Be sympathetic.
* Ensure that students are aware of the very serious penalties that may apply if they are found to have cheated. Inform them of possible work-arounds they could choose instead of cheating (eg negotiating a grade penalty for an extension).

### Contract cheating

Contract cheating refers to a student getting someone to do their assessment tasks, often for pay. As well as personal contacts, these days there is a huge online ‘essay mill’ industry which pitches to students.

Academic staff should use some discipline-specific knowledge about what contract cheating might look like (for example very general work, work not well-related to the task or topics covered in the unit, work with sections missing, etc).

TEQSA provides some useful resources:

* [Addressing contract cheating to safeguard academic integrity](https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/good-practice-note-addressing-contract-cheating-safeguard-academic)
* [The prevention of contract cheating in an online environment](https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/prevention-contract-cheating-in-online-environment-web.pdf?v=1587691121)
* [Contract cheating and assessment design](https://cheatingandassessment.edu.au/)

It’s a good idea to have a conversation with students about the institution’s position on academic integrity, why it is valued, and what it means for a student’s post-graduation life. Ensure students have paid attention to the discussion, perhaps by including an academic integrity agreement to be signed with all tasks. Some institutions might choose to provide a micro-credential in academic integrity (perhaps not-for-credit) which can be included in first year studies. Try to make the conversation a positive discussion about the value of integrity, rather than an attempt to frighten students. It’s important, however, that it is understood that the institution takes cheating very seriously and that severe penalties can be incurred if cheating is established.

Encourage students to think about possible difficulties involved in making deadlines (illnesses, financial problems, work deadlines, domestic difficulties etc). Ensure that they understand that a first step is to contact staff and discuss the problem. Consider allowing adjustments to be made if institutional rules permit (for example, a system of small penalties for late submission) which might encourage students to approach staff for help, rather than resorting to the risk of paying for a contract essay which might result in a major penalty.

### Cheating and assessment design

* Get to know your students and provide in-class formative assessment so that you have an idea of where they are educationally
* Provide detailed instructions or templates
* Design tasks which build on work done throughout the course. Build on previously submitted assignments
* Avoid very general questions which can easily be found on essay mill sites. Consider tasks which bring together two specific aspects of the unit in an unusual way
* Don’t use the same topics every year
* Consider vivas for major tasks, including 5-10 minute zoom interviews
* Consider proctored assessments for major tasks, including exams.

## Future developments

These might include wide adoption of online proctoring services, and biometrics to identify users.