

# Higher e-duc@tion and the future of homework

Marion Laboure

There is nothing new about a pandemic closing schools. In 1665, Cambridge University closed because of the plague. Isaac Newton decided to work from home. He formulated calculus and discovered the laws of motion. More recently, when the SARS virus hit the world, many governments, including Hong Kong and Singapore, closed all schools. Ebola caused the same response in Africa

However, the covid-19 pandemic of 2020 will do more than cause temporary school closures. It will likely lead to dramatic long-term changes in how nations deliver education. This pandemic, unlike others in the past, is coinciding with two factors affecting education: extremely high costs and disruptive instructional technologies.

## The impact of covid-19 on education

Governments have implemented a widespread shutdown of education systems in 193 countries, affecting more than 1bn learners, mainly children.

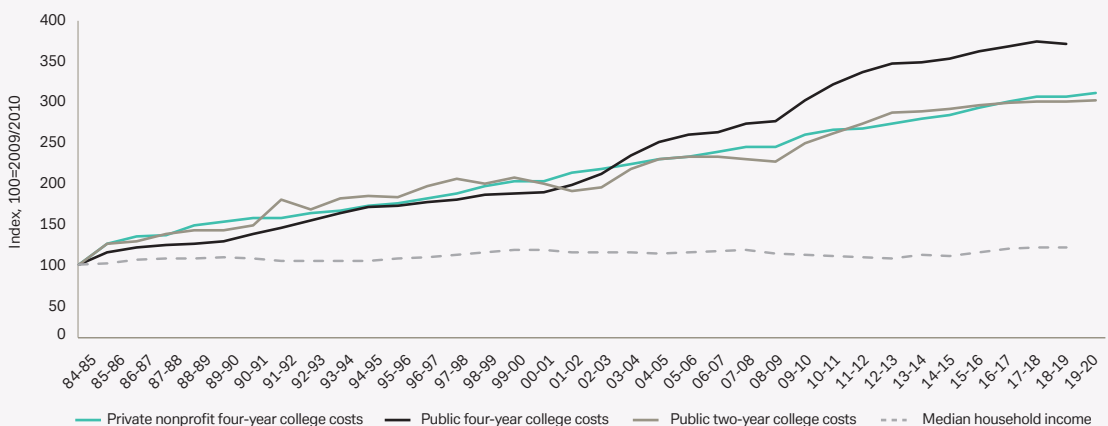
At the recent peak, 90 per cent of the world's students were not learning in physical classrooms. If we see a second or third wave of infections, the pandemic could catalyse the world's reliance on, and familiarity with, online education.

## The rising cost of education

This shift to online education systems is occurring at a time when tuition costs have grown at great speed. In less than four decades, the cost of attending a public four-year college in the US has quadrupled. Meanwhile, the median US household income has remained relatively stable. As a result, student loan debt in the US has grown rapidly since 2008, reaching \$1.6tn in 2019, or 7.5 per cent of GDP. Many educators believe that online education could be a solution.

The price rises reflect the increased demand to education in a global market. In particular, Anglo-Saxon universities have used this to increase their geographical reach and revenue. For example,

College costs and median family income in the United States, 1984 to 2020



Source: Fred.

New York University has opened a campus in Abu Dhabi and the London School of Economics has opened a campus in Beijing.

Schools and universities in many countries recognise they can increase revenue by offering online degrees to any qualified student in the world. In turn, the income generated from foreign students frequently subsidises local students who pay lower fees. But in a post covid-19 world, one question remains: Will students and professors adapt to online education platforms?

### Online education will become mainstream

The popularity of online education has been slowly increasing in recent years. First introduced in 2008, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have emerged as a popular method of learning. They provide affordable quality instruction from top institutions and a flexible learning schedule. These new platforms have allowed professionals to complete degree and certificate programs while continuing to work.

Nevertheless, there are barriers to the widespread acceptance of online education. First, many employers have been slow to recognise MOOC certificates as legitimate credentials for employment. Second, most undergraduate students have preferred to attend physical schools, where they enjoy campus social life and extra-curricular experiences, as well as in-person contact with professors. Third, students, particularly in MBA and executive education classes, benefit from on-campus networking opportunities that are hard to replicate online. Indeed, when the pandemic forced the Wharton Business School to move classes online, many students complained about remote learning and filed petitions for partial tuition reimbursements.<sup>1</sup>

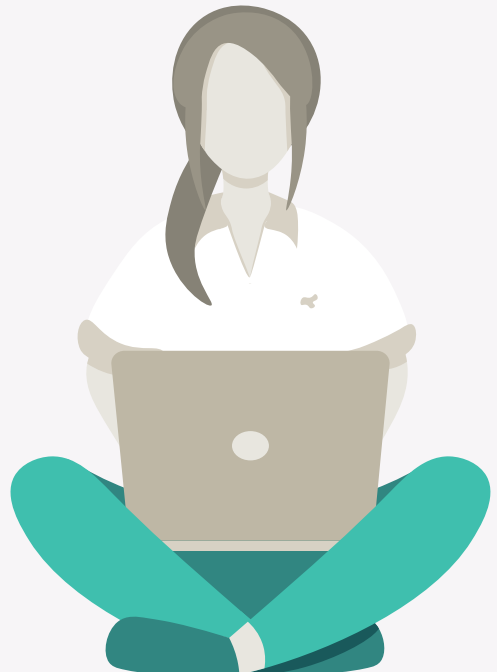
To cope with the barriers to online education, most top universities are developing the next generation of remote learning platforms. It is now possible to earn a bachelor of science degree remotely from the Harvard Extension School, or to earn a micromaster degree online from MIT. All Harvard summer school courses will be taught online, including the MPA summer program at the Kennedy School. Even professors can find there are benefits to online instruction, as it enables them to better combine career and teaching commitments.

### The impact of digital instruction on global education

Collectively, these disruptive trends – the pandemic, high education costs, and new instructional technologies – are already changing the global education market. The best schools will do the best. They will continue to attract endowment contributions from wealthy alumni. Government funding will continue to flow due to the quality of their research.

The disruptive forces, however, will likely be problematic for those with fewer financial resources and weaker reputations. As technology enables the best universities to reach more students and hire the best professors—without concern for geographical limitations—elite colleges will be able to compete with colleges in other geographical regions. Already, there is talk of several countries allowing weaker universities to fail. In a post-covid world, education will become more and more a winner-take-all market. One in which many schools and colleges will have to quickly change or disappear altogether.

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<sup>1</sup> At Stanford and Wharton, more than 80 per cent of MBA students has signed a petition to demand that tuition be cut back substantially for the 2020 spring term, saying that an online education is a "subpar classroom experience."