

Perceptions of success for part-time and flexible learners during emergency remote teaching

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Abstract

This topic engages with questions around the ways in which close up higher education research reflects, integrates and advances higher education as a critical endeavour. The pivot online in March 2020 has the potential to transform delivery of part time and flexible learning in higher education for the future. Put simply, we will never go back to pre-Covid times for part time and flexible delivery. Thus, this study provides the impetus for part time and flexible learning units/departments/schools to engage in a reimagining of its provision, as the benefits for remote and hybrid models become apparent. A wide range of literature has already emerged which assesses the sudden closure of Higher Education Institutions during the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020, when many academic institutions turned to ERT (emergency remote teaching) in order to maintain teaching and learning. The Faculty of Lifelong Learning at SETU, Carlow Campus (South East Technological University Ireland), one of the largest providers of part-time learning in the Irish sector, undertook a study of its learners in January 2021, to ascertain their experiences of the online pivot. This research takes a qualitative approach to the findings of this study and it highlights the importance of acknowledging the lived experiences of our learners. We acknowledge that it is necessary to engage with our learners' opinions on the challenges and affordances of online and remote learning, and that the experiences of our learners are key to the future of our faculty and to part-time learning in Ireland. We focus on the normative expectations of learners, and their experiences of learning in the remote context, using a self-selected sample where N = 401 learners.

Our findings mirror large bodies of emergent research, which suggest that 'online teaching and learning may proffer certain added benefits that could even lead to better course outcomes, notwithstanding technological and socio-economic issues faced by disenfranchised and marginalised social groups that limit equitable access to education' (Lemay et al., 2021). This research puts a focus on critical research on the student experience of the pivot and gives an opportunity to engage in a debate on close-up research and critical approaches more generally.

Keywords

Lifelong Learning, part-time learning, emergency remote teaching