

Best Practices During Covid-19 With A Significant Focus On Online Teaching: A Case Of Private HEI

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to explore the best practices of online teaching during the Pandemic in a private higher education institution in England.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to education systems worldwide. The fast switch to online learning was a monumental task for higher education institutions (HEIs), especially for private HEIs with limited resources compared to public HEIs. Therefore, the HEIs made tremendous efforts to make the transition to online or remote learning as good as possible.

Although Oxford Business college (OBC) quickly adapted to online teaching despite some challenges but also demonstrated some best practices. The research presents some of the good practices OBC adopted to make online learning effective during the pandemic. For almost two years (2020-21), the researchers were part of the composition of the OBC team to plan, implement online strategy and train staff and students to make online teaching effective during the global pandemic.

This gave the researchers a unique opportunity to observe and understand lived experiences of staff and conduct interviews for more in-depth understanding by divisions (leadership, management). As a result, the goal was achieved by bringing out the good practices used during the pandemic.

Findings from this study revealed the best practices in strategic planning and business growth, successful transition to online teaching, the establishment of a research profile, recruitment of highly qualified and experienced academic staff, excellent student attendance and pass rates and lowest student dropouts.

Keywords: Best Practices, Online Teaching, Covid-19, Oxford Business College

Introduction To COVID-19

A novel coronavirus (CoV) named ‘2019-nCoV’, ‘2019 novel coronavirus’ or ‘COVID-19’ by the World Health Organization (WHO) was behind the current pneumonia outbreak at the beginning of December 2019 near Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. COVID-19 is a pathogenic virus (Sun, Xu, Liu, Karuppiah, Kumar, He, 2020). On 30 January 2020, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), WHO's the highest level of alarm. At that time, 98 cases and no deaths in 18 countries outside China had been reported. However, on 11 March 2020, the rapid increase in cases outside China led the WHO Director-General to announce that the outbreak could be characterised as a pandemic (UNESCO, 2020).

By then, more than 118 000 cases had been reported in 114 countries, and 4291 deaths had been recorded. By mid-March 2020, the WHO European Region had become the epicentre of the epidemic, reporting over 40% of globally confirmed cases. As of 28 April 2020, the region accounted for 63% of global mortality due to the virus (UNESCO, 2020). Covid-19 later expanded throughout the world in 2020.

Challenges To Educational Institutions

Consequently, COVID-19 created severe challenges for all industries globally, including higher education (Qureshi et al., 2020). Some challenges included sustaining the pace of learning and teaching, switching to online or remote learning, and closing educational facilities. Over 1.6 billion students in more than 190 nations were not attending school at the height of the crisis (UNICEF, 2021). The circumstances were similar to higher education, with 220 million students affected by the closure of higher education providers worldwide (UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank, 2021). Additionally, many English-speaking nations have relied on overseas students as a source of income (cash cows); therefore, COVID-19 also affected them (Qureshi and Khawaja 2021).

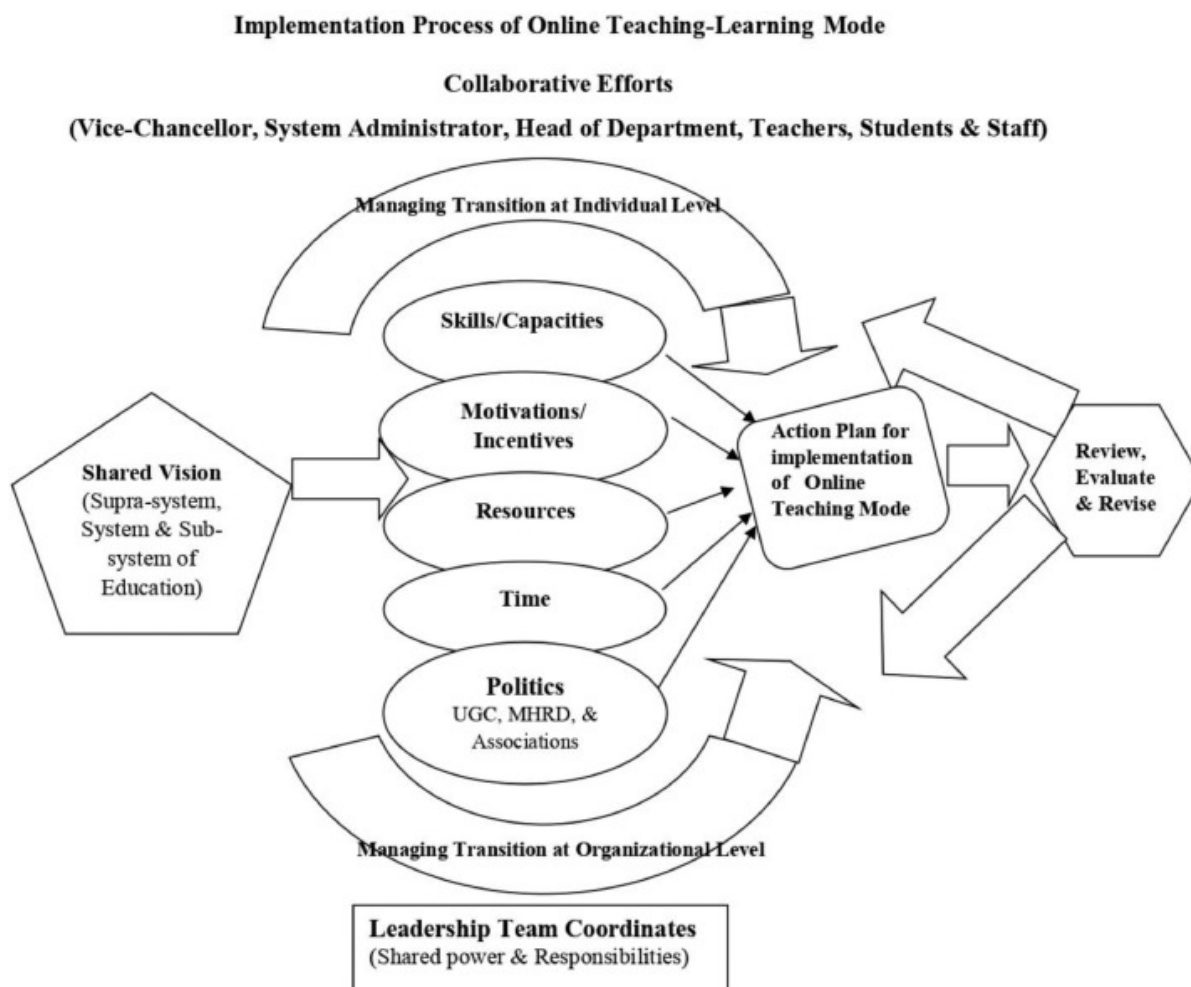
As online or remote learning became the predominant model for education delivery, teachers, educational leaders, and managers had to adapt to ensure the best outcomes for students through online or remote learning. This study also provided a quick summary of best practices during the crises.

Challenges To The UK Private Higher Education Institutions

The UK prime minister announced the first lockdown in the UK on March 23, and he advised everyone to "remain at home" (Institute for Government analysis, 2021). The UK government decided to close educational institutions but desired to continue teaching online. Campus closures thus forced HEIs to reinforce their online learning (UNESCO, 2020). The first challenge was a smooth transition from face-to-face to online learning. So, in a short time, HEIs had to start online teaching. Comparing private higher education institutions to public higher education institutions, the former is nascent, smaller and with limited resources (Qureshi et al., 2020). Therefore, as a good practice, Private HEIs are left with the option to start online teaching with readily available resources. Another challenge was the lack of adequate training for academic staff in delivering online teaching made the effective development and implementation of course deliveries difficult for the academic staff and students. Most students at Private HEIs are mature with a lack of information communication technology (ICT) knowledge. In addition to that, some lecturers have a rudimentary understanding of ICT.

Last but not least, the challenge was successfully implementing online teaching. How to execute online teaching is shown in Figure 01. The shared vision that supports online teaching serves as the foundation for implementation. In light of COVID-19, higher education providers realised that during pandemics, teachers and students are driven to use online teaching tools to meet their educational needs during crises.

Figure 01: Implementation Process of Online Teaching – Learning Mode



Source: Implementation process of online teaching model (Mishra, Gupta, Shree, 2020)

The transition process consists of individual, departmental and organisational levels and supports continuous learning during a challenging time by helping students and educators adapt to their new learning environment. The idea of the transition was to offer and recognise the support needed and consider the anxieties caused by transition (Dalton, 2009). The College first shared the new vision of online teaching and provided the necessary resources to achieve it successfully.

Methods

This study is a micro case study of Oxford Business College using senior managers as a sample of study.

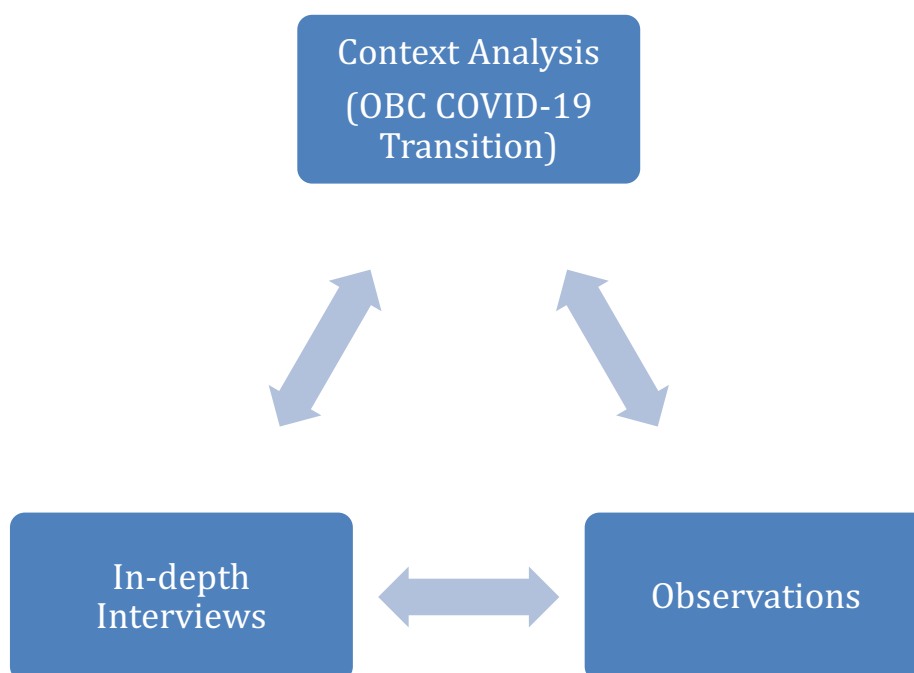
The methods used in this study required obtaining data, through observations and in-depth interviews. For over two years, the authors were part of the OBC team and had the opportunity to carry out this study based on the following single research question.

What best practices have OBC adopted during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

The study included observation of lived experiences and in-depth interviews with seven academic and non-academic staff (Managing Director, Principal, Head of programmes and departments) from OBC.

The participants were interviewed about their general experience with the transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown, expressing their interest, best practices and experience in driving online teaching. These participants were included in the study by their titles. We also did not disclose the identity of the participants. Therefore, their personal names were excluded and only their titles included.

The framework of this study has shown as **Figure 02** below.



Triangulation in this study starts from the content analysis of the COVID-19 transition for online teaching to in-depth interviews and finally the observations.

Triangulation in this study starts from the content analysis of the COVID-19 transition for online teaching to in-depth interviews and, finally, the observations. The study examined the transition to online teaching and the best practices during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Method triangulation involves using multiple methods of data collection about the same phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2012). Sampling is purposive, and seven senior managers were involved in this study.

All members of the management, administrative and teaching departments were observed. Therefore, the sample for the in-depth interviews is representative and sufficient.

The unexpected events imposed by the pandemic have required quick and adequate solutions regarding online teaching; therefore, observations of lived experiences of the College staff were justifiable.

Findings And Discussion

The Managing Director said that in 2020, the College changed its strategic direction to target more non-traditional (mature) students. At the same time, however, the College wanted to focus on a new vision of helping under-represented people in the UK overcome barriers to participation in tertiary education. As a result, the College further revised its mission and strategic goals. Finally, the College aims to offer affordable higher education to non-traditional mature student communities in and outside Oxford. The stated mission of the new direction was "to make a difference in the world by empowering students from all backgrounds to transform their lives and the lives of others" (OBC, Mission). At the same time, OBC adopted its revised vision: "To be a leader in the field of personalised business education by providing each student with the most supportive learning experience to achieve a wider societal impact" (OBC Vision). With its new mission and vision, the College formulated a strategic plan to widen its reach to non-traditional students in low participation areas by establishing university partnerships with franchise arrangements and opening campuses in the UK cities with a high concentration of its target demographic. A strategic plan enabled the College to track progress toward strategic goals.

As a result, College each department understood strategy and their relevant SMART objectives, and their performance progress directly impacted the College's success, creating a top-down approach to tracking key performance indicators related to SMART objectives. As a result, the College Strategic planning developed strategies that contributed to performance (Tapinos, et.al, 2005).

In line with its Strategic Planning and plan, the College opened campuses in West London, Slough, Coventry and Nottingham. In fact, COVID-19, primarily the lockdown, provided ample time for senior management to reset the College's direction and concentrate on strategy and business growth.

Table 01: Summary of Findings

Participant	What worked best
Managing Director	Ample time for strategic planning, which resulted in fast growth of the College.
Principal	The successful transition to online teaching was as good as possible, recognised, and greatly appreciated by staff and students. Teamwork and proactive involvement of staff made online teaching successful during the pandemic.
Head of Research	Established the research profile of the College Involvement of academic staff in research as they did not to travel due to lockdown and they used that time for research
Head of Quality	Recruited highly qualified and experienced academic staff such as more PhDs Mature students became ICT literate.
Head of Programme	100% availability of academic staff and ICT Training- Cancellations of holidays, Low academic staff turnover Excellent Punctuality and Student Attendance
Head of Assessments	Excellent Pass Rate, Staff and students' productivity was higher than expectations.
Head of Registry	Positive Academic Outcomes, Higher Retention Rate

The College Principal said that, switching to online teaching was not easy, nor was it simple to navigate and manage. On the contrary, it was complex and required expert direction to ensure that those delivering the information were comfortable and secure. He further said that early in the pandemic, many academic and non-academic staff members initially feared the failure to move to online teaching.

Instead, the transition demanded highly effective planning and implementing strategies that the College introduced and shared across the campuses and staff proactively participated; of course, teamwork and commitment eventually also made the transition and online teaching successful.

In a nutshell, the college successfully implemented the transition. Our experts, especially from the research department, explained a few transition implementation processes and helped us successfully complete the transition.

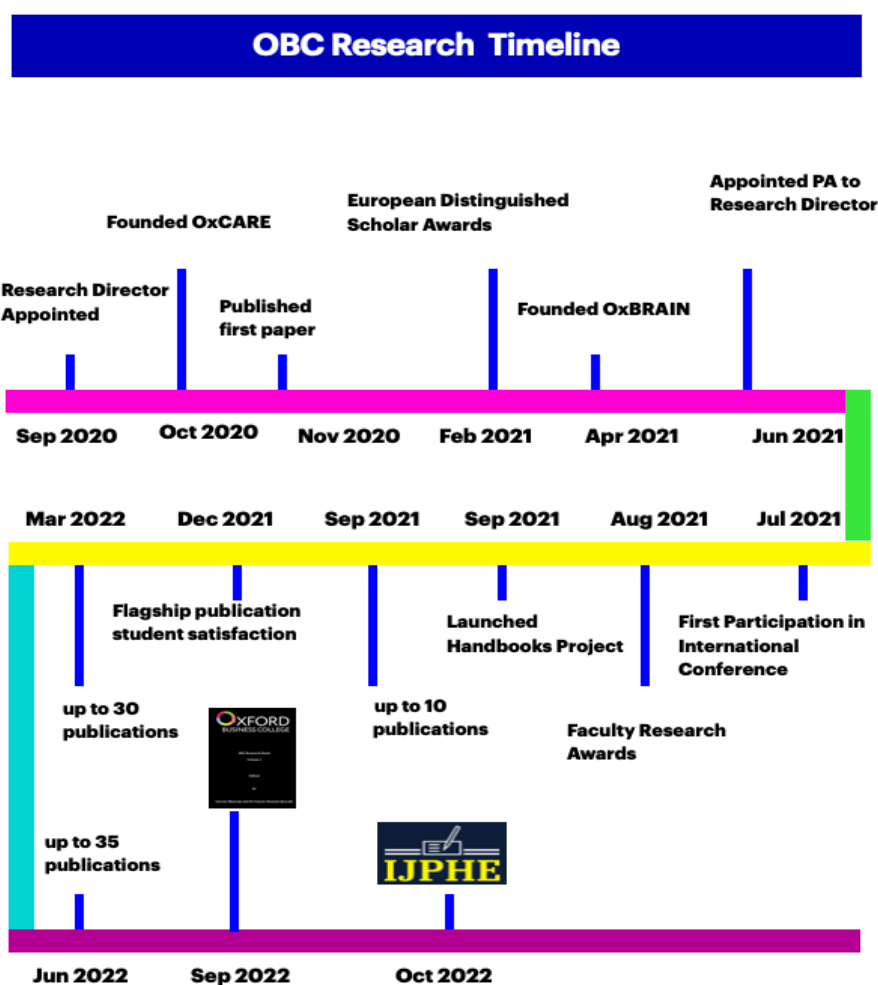
The Head of Research said that the research profile did not exist in the College prior to the Pandemic. He said one of his first initiatives as Head of Research was to create a new Research Department with a mission to make it fully functional and successful. Although he made it fully functional, he also established two fully functioning research centres- the Oxford Centre of Research and Entrepreneurship (OxCARE) and the Oxford Business Research and Innovation Network (OxBRAIN).

The academic staff could not manage or allocate their time for research as they had to travel to deliver face-to-face teaching. An average travel time was more than one hour to come to the College and the same for returning to their homes. The saved travelling time and lockdown forced academic staff to stay home, and the initiation of the College with some financial incentives motivated them to involve in research activities. In addition to that research, guidance was available for them especially for new first-time authors. The College published its first paper in the late 2020s during the lockdown.

He further said that I feel proud to say that the research department, not only in the College but also in the UK private higher education sector, is the fastest growing department and has made remarkable achievements within two years. The two years research progress can be seen in the following timeline.

He also briefly mentioned about the Oxford Business Research and Innovation Network (OxBRAIN) is a newly established (2021) platform with the primary purpose of providing a stimulating and congenial research environment, collaboration and the exchange of ideas both within the College and across the world. The OxBRAIN aims to develop a network offering opportunities for international researchers and scholars to participate in research activities. He also shared that one of the lecturers and research associates at the College was a co-author in our first research paper. She was invited to participate in a virtual international conference on the Challenges and Prospects of Business Education in a Post Covid-19 World. Initially, she was reluctant to participate, but as it was only virtual participation, with our motivations and her enthusiasm, she developed confidence and eventually successfully read the research paper at the conference. She plans to participate physically in the forthcoming international conferences as she has written a few research papers.

Figure 03: OBC Research Timeline (2020-2022)



Strength in *research* helps define a higher education institution's "brand" in the national and international marketplace, influencing everything from student recruitment to faculty retention to attracting new partners and investments (Rosowsky, 2022).

The Head of Quality said that the College has built a highly qualified and experienced academic team including staff with industry experience. In addition to a traditional theory-based lecture format, the students also discuss business problems with their lecturers who have real business experience.

The Head of Quality further said that the College quickly recruited highly qualified and experienced lecturing staff during the lockdown, as the teaching provision was online. Therefore, the doctoral candidates applied, even those living far away from the College and its campuses.

In addition, some PhDs lecturers applied for online teaching positions outside the UK. So, the College could have excellent academic staff from Europe. Pre-COVID-19, the College had ten PhDs; this number doubled in two months and exceeded forty within a year. So, the College was fortunate to recruit academic staff with higher qualifications and experiences during the lockdown. Highly qualified and experienced staff, in addition to training, can improve the efficiency of the HEI (Odilovich et al., 2020).

He further said that technology is essential to learning and teaching in the 21st century. However, the majority of OBC students are mature, and they are novices in Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Digital inclusion is a beneficial approach that strives to understand the significance of ensuring that less privileged groups, such as mature students, gain access not only to ICT but also to the means of learning how to use them (Ragnedda et al., 2018).

During the pandemic, online teaching provided the opportunity to enhance their ICT-related skills. Therefore, the College offered essential online learning resources along with training, eventually making them ICT literate and easily accessible resources. During the COVID-19 crisis, the College provided laptops to disadvantaged students in addition to hardship funds.

ICT's evolution and rapid expansion have caused people to continuously train themselves and acquire digital skills, as they have become essential tools in their everyday lives (Yu et al., 2017).

The COVID-19 Pandemic situation also revealed that emerging digital technologies are excellent supporters against the pandemic, offering a vast array of opportunities, such as better services, greater productivity and ease of communication (Faraj et al., 2021). However, it is essential to acknowledge that they also conceal challenges that, if not addressed timely, rightly and urgently as a top priority, can yield further imbalances and problems for the College.

Therefore, the College wanted to enhance the digital skills of both staff and students.

The Head of Programme said that the ICT training of academic staff was essential to deliver online courses effectively and raise the quality of online learning. A few lecturers were required ICT training to equip them with the skills to shift traditional face-to-face teaching to online delivery.

Student attendance usually reflects students' level of engagement with their course and is critical to their success; despite the significance of attendance, it has not been exceptional in traditional face-to-face teaching sessions. Student attendance increased surprisingly during the first online teaching phase.

The College clearly conveyed the message to all lecturers that online lectures should be exciting and attract students not to miss any online lecture. However, much evidence suggests that students' interest's role in lecture attendance is essential. For example, Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) discovered that only 57% of students stated their reason for attendance as being interested in the course content. Similarly, Van Schalkwyk, Menkveld and Ruiters (2010) encountered that just half of the respondents conveyed exciting content to be an element in lecture attendance.

Attendance has been 100% for a few courses during the lockdown. Student punctuality and attendance have been a concern before COVID-19. Generally, there are many reasons for absenteeism, such as personal illness, doctor appointments, family emergencies and death in the family; none of these were recorded during the lockdown.

The Head of Assessment said that the overall average pass rate for those that completed the academic year 2019/20 was 94%, and two programmes (International Foundation and the University of Creative Arts (UCA) Top-Up) achieved 100% pass rates. Of the International Foundation students, 27% achieved Grade A and 64% Grade B.

In the UCA Top-Up, 40% attained a 1st or 2:1 class degree. Overall, student achievement in all academic programmes has been excellent, despite the COVID-19 crisis.

The Head of Registry said the retention and success of students in their studies is the primary concern in private higher institutions worldwide. Covid-19 has affected all programmes in the College. However, with excellent planning and implementation of online teaching, the College successfully experienced a higher retention rate. This happened because the College offered, in addition to regular online teaching sessions, also started extra online support for students who were struggling in their studies. Furthermore, the College categorically conveyed to students to use their time productively and concentrate on their studies. The message reminded this is the best time for them to achieve academic targets since their outdoor activities are banned due to the crisis.

Conclusion

In response to the emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic, private HEIs took appropriate actions to swiftly complete the transition from face-to-face teaching to online without disturbing students' participation and academic progress. The study showed that a significant deal of effort was employed to make the transition to online teaching as good as possible and recognised and greatly appreciated by staff and students.

The OBC has taken extensive and appropriate actions about the transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study's findings confirmed that the College took rigorous actions during the transition period, demonstrating good practice in online teaching and across the College. For example, pragmatic strategic planning resulted in rapid business growth of the College. The establishment of a research profile of the College, which made remarkable progress within two years. However, there were some challenges that the College faced but was not part of this study.

The OBC academic staff with substantial knowledge and experience in their subject, especially the newly recruited highly qualified (PhDs) and experienced academic staff in addition to ICT training, performed better with excellent attendance, higher pass rate and lowest dropout rate.

As such, the crisis provided a robust test of the potential of online learning. However, it has also publicised its fundamental limitations, including the prerequisite of adequate ICT skills, computer equipment and an internet connection to undertake online learning, the problem of delivering traditional face-to-face learning, and the drudgery of teachers using classroom instruction.

Limitations

While this study has several strengths, some limitations could be considered. First, the study was based on Oxford Business College with a small sample size of seven participants. Therefore, findings cannot be generalised. Second, this study was started during the lockdown, and the research team could not visit other HEIs. Finally, this study became possible because the research Team was part of the College and got the opportunity to observe and participate in the transition activities of the College.

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