

Higher education has a unique opportunity to expand accepted practices for teaching and learning despite the challenges presented by new models of distance and hybrid learning.

Higher Education Redefined: Meeting the Challenges of Distance and Hybrid Learning

October 2020

Written by: Amy Loomis, Research Director, Future of Work, and Ruthbea Yesner, Vice President, IDC Government Insights and Education

Introduction

The global shift to online learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of digital learning tools that has been decades in the making. While many parents, students, and universities have a strong preference for in-person learning, concerns around health and safety are forcing higher education institutions to adopt a hybrid approach to learning that uses both in-person and online education. The shift has exposed gaps in technology access and support. Students, faculty, and administrators must address discrepancies in technology fluency, environmental challenges, and pedagogical difficulties adapting to hybrid learning practices.

This is a unique opportunity for higher education to expand accepted practices for teaching and learning despite the challenges. Unlike other industries that have opted to extend remote work models into 2021, the education sector is under unique pressure to reopen schools, colleges, and universities in 2020 so that institutions can offer in-person learning experiences where possible. For higher education, the dramatic shift to online education in the spring of 2020 translated to a big financial hit as many institutions refunded tens of thousands of dollars to students and their families. At a time when students are questioning the cost and value of higher education and deferring enrollment, higher education institutions need to offer compelling new services that can be accessed remotely as well as upgrade their online learning capabilities so that students are engaged and satisfied with remote and hybrid models.

AT A GLANCE

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » The future of higher education will be a mix of onsite and distance learning, using tools that support both models.
- » With COVID-19, the possibility of multiple phases of campus closing and reopening means that institutions will have to be much more agile in switching between in-person and remote teaching modes.
- » Cloud services, secure communication and collaboration tools, and quality audio/video technology will be essential to helping institutions switch between in-person and remote teaching modes.

Like all organizations exploring the return to the workplace, colleges and universities are focused on safety, security, and the ability to quickly pivot between remote and in-person experiences. The short-term and long-term future of digital higher education will be built on the same principles of resiliency and agility that many work environments are adopting today:

- » Ensuring parity in the experience and in technology access across all locations and delivering a rich learning experience whether in person or remote
- » Deploying space planning and device management to ensure rooms are not overcrowded
- » Refining the integration and use of hardware and software to enable a focus on engagement over technology

Key Challenges for Digital and Hybrid Learning Models

IDC defines hybrid learning as combining in-person and remote teaching/learning experiences for students and faculty. The hallmark of hybrid learning is that it enables a continuity of experience regardless of the physical location of either the professors or the students. Hybrid learning is designed to facilitate both distributed learning and the rapid transition between in-person and remote learning by individuals, whole classes, or institutions.

Higher education institutions face the following technology-related and pedagogical challenges:

- » Technology related
 - Access to core technologies for faculty and students: Networking, computers, peripheral devices (cameras, microphones, printers, electronic whiteboards, etc.), and learning software
 - Ease of use of hardware and software: Interoperability between hardware (such as cameras and headsets) and computer operating systems and software versions for easy setup and maintenance
 - Skills gaps: Knowledge deficiency using necessary hardware and collaboration tools for teaching and learning
 - IT support for users: New technologies that increase help desk tickets, requiring additional IT support staff, self-service, and/or automation of support
- » Pedagogical
 - Developing and adapting HR and technology policies for remote, online learning
 - Adapting curricula using instructional design approaches for online learning
 - Managing environmental distractions for remote learners

Essential Actions for Colleges and Universities Developing Hybrid Learning

- » Move from reactive recovery mode to proactive and inclusive strategic planning.
- » Plan for key technical capabilities to enable successful hybrid learning.
 - Continuity of experience — enabled by the right technologies (audio, visual, data access) and artificial intelligence (AI) to replicate key elements of in-person participation and content sharing regardless of location
 - Security and identity management — to ensure only authorized participants can join web conferences, online classes, and meetings
 - Ease of engagement — "plug-and-play capability" to ensure teaching and learning are not compromised by technical difficulties and distractions
- » Use current circumstances as an opportunity to develop and deploy updated HR policies, a unified IT strategy, and universitywide digital platforms.
- » Be strategic about technology investments; consider the long-term value of the technologies, from collaboration and video platforms to online content and service desks. All can provide competitive advantage from improved faculty and student experiences.
- » Use technology features that deliver best user experiences such as one-touch call entry, full control of the device by the presenter, and AI-enabled automation to improve speaker tracking, passive and active noise reduction, and other learning experience-related functions.
- » Collect data on hybrid learning experiences for analysis and measurement against goals to iteratively improve remote and classroom education.

How to Maximize the Benefits of Digital and Hybrid Learning

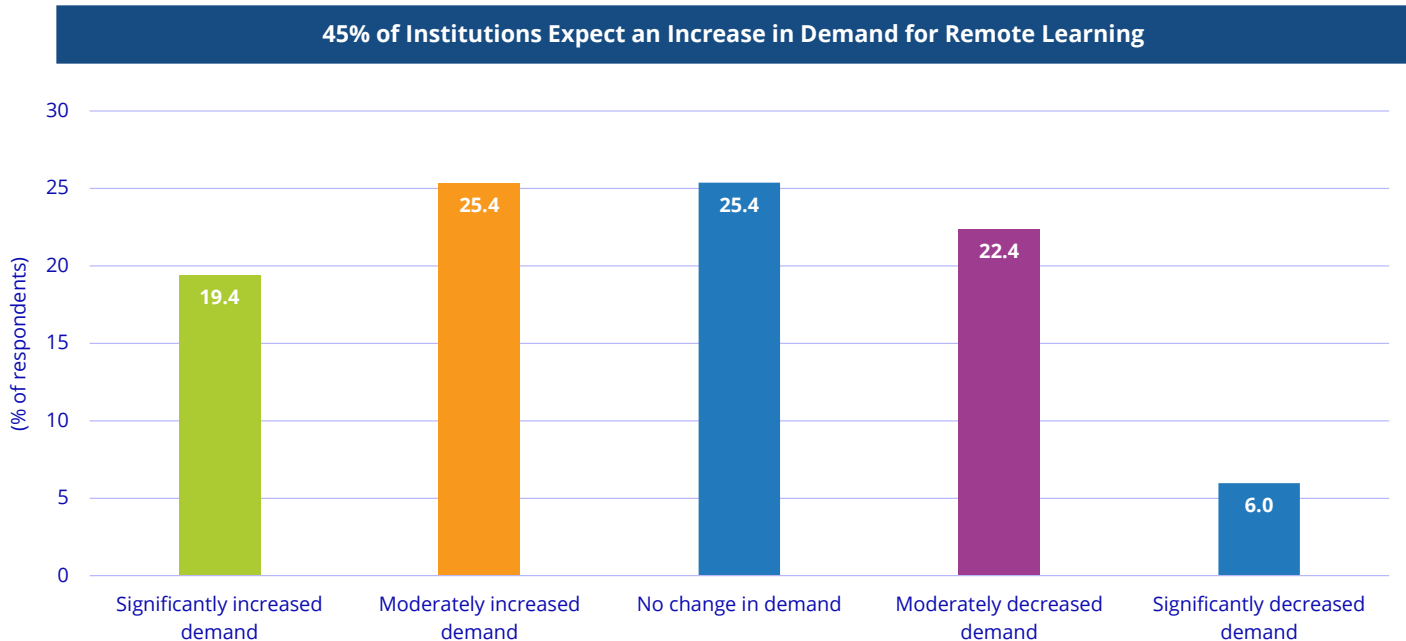
- » Adopt, integrate, and standardize technology and infrastructure upgrades.
- » Develop formal technology policies for digital education.
- » Upskill faculty and reimagine curricula and programs to adapt to digital reality.
- » Maintain continuity of learning, mitigating disruption to traditional in-person models.
- » Focus on core learning over concern about the mode of learning.
- » Use the opportunity to introduce new modes of learning that attract new students and retain existing students.

Key Trends

Higher education institutions expect to see increased demand for remote learning, as shown in Figure 1, and a resulting demand for supporting technologies; 55% expect an increase in demand for videoconferencing and virtual workplaces, and 35% expect an increase in demand for secure and remote access tools. Remote learning is shifting technology investment priorities as well. In IDC's latest global *COVID-19 Impact on IT Spending Survey* (conducted August 26–September 6, 2020), one-third of education respondents indicated that 31% of the budget for contactless experiences will be allocated to voice-based interfaces and video.

FIGURE 1: **Increased Demand for Remote Learning**

Q Due to COVID-19, there will be a need for new technology and changes to the working model of some organizations. For remote learning/training technology investments, do you think demand will change, and in which direction?



n = 66 technology decision makers in education

Source: IDC's *COVID-19 Impact on IT Spending Survey* (conducted May 7–14, 2020)

COVID-19 is impacting the higher education market in the following additional ways:

- » **Hybrid learning models are here to stay.** With COVID-19, the possibility of multiple phases of closing and reopening means that schools will have to be much more agile in switching from one mode to another. Cloud services will be essential to enable this switching.
- » **Agile digital learning is an iterative process.** Institutions must take time to collect data on the recent experiences of staff, faculty, parents, students, and alumni to assess successes and challenges and to refine and redefine the right path forward. What needs to be changed to content as it goes from in person to online? What infrastructure upgrades will be essential for moving from recovery to a more resilient future? How have student expectations changed? What tools do students and faculty need to be successful?
- » **Remote and hybrid learning must be secure.** Institutions must implement best practices for use of collaborative tools and technologies to ensure that uninvited guests do not disrupt remote learning experiences. They must also ensure strong network safety to not expose sensitive student data because of expanded online learning.
- » **Technology investments are essential for the future.** Institutions must maintain or invest in funding for IT services and technology in the context of budget and revenue declines. Technology is not only the enabler of the agility to respond to the pandemic but also the foundation for a new set of learning pathways that will define colleges and universities in the future.
- » **Transformation today will translate to resilience tomorrow.** Digital innovation not only will support the "new normal" (e.g., apps that help with class scheduling or AI for online proctoring tools) but also will help schools differentiate themselves. This will be key for higher education to attract and retain students and enable new processes for the entire student life cycle from recruitment to alumni relations.

Considering Poly and Microsoft Solutions for Hybrid Learning

The broad adoption of hybrid and blended learning requires flexibility in how professors and students communicate from the school or home — the more naturally the better. Successful hybrid learning is enabled by the right tools and technology to ensure an experience that is engaging and clear for all participants — regardless of location.

Poly's Microsoft Teams solutions are designed to make virtual classroom experiences feel like students and teachers are in the same room. Poly's Microsoft Teams–certified audio and video devices complement Microsoft's conferencing and collaboration platform to offer more natural and fluid content sharing and more natural student-teacher interactions in the classroom and the home and any space where learning happens. Low-touch, intuitive technologies such as HD video, speaker tracking, and automatic noise cancellation provide a richer and more distraction-free experience for both students and educators.

Poly's Microsoft Teams solutions for higher education offer:

- » **A wide selection of headsets, video devices, and speakerphones** to meet the needs of a broad range of learning styles and spaces, whether they are used at home or needed for full-room or lecture halls.
- » **Easy setup and use** with limited cabling and consistent user experience.
- » **Proven security and interoperability** of devices based on Microsoft Teams certification testing for security, functionality, and usability.
- » **Remote device tracking and management** capabilities that offer a more consistent experience for end users, with centralized IT management and audio/video inventory management that can track which devices are active as well as where they are located and whether they need service.
- » **Active noise cancellation to minimize background noise and distractions** on headsets, desktop phones, and video solutions using advanced audio algorithms.
- » **Freedom to move about the room while presenting** using auto-framing and speaker tracking on video devices, which gives educators more freedom of movement while the camera follows them naturally from a sitting position to walking around and then automatically switches to students asking questions, thus avoiding the need to fumble with a remote control.
- » **U.S. grant assistance** through the Poly Grant Assistance program, which includes complimentary grant consulting services; free educational webinars on grant resources, requirements, and new funding announcements; access to an extensive network of grant writers; and tips and tools for grant management and reporting.
- » **Global support** offered by Poly through various support packages to meet the needs of educational institutions.

Addressing Higher Education Challenges

Even before the pandemic, traditional four-year colleges and universities were struggling with declining enrollment. Current fears around safety have resulted in diminished or deferred student enrollments, which means funds for technology investments may be in short supply for institutions that are struggling. Poly and Microsoft will need to demonstrate how their joint offerings are essential for growth and competitive learning experiences and key to recruiting and maintaining student enrollment.

There is competition in the market as other device suppliers are also partnering with collaboration and communication vendors to deliver turnkey solutions that simplify remote learning and work. As laptops and cell phones improve in the sophistication of their audio and visual fidelity, Poly will have to demonstrate how its products are competitively differentiated for industry-specific tasks such as teaching, learning, and administrative collaboration.

Conclusion

IDC believes that remote and hybrid learning in higher education will continue to evolve and improve as colleges and universities become more adept at navigating the initial health, policy, and technical hurdles. These institutions will continue to need technologies that support the specific requirements of higher education teaching and learning in a

hybrid setting, and the delivery of an easy-to-navigate and seamless learning experience regardless of whether students and professors are in a classroom or in their homes will only increase in importance during this academic school year. Poly's partnership with software vendors such as Microsoft enables Poly to offer a significant opportunity for success to higher education institutions in the quest for effective distance and hybrid learning.

About the Analysts



Amy W. Loomis, Ph.D., Research Director, Future of Work

Amy Loomis is Research Director for IDC's worldwide Future of Work market research service. In this role, Ms. Loomis covers the growing influence of technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, robotics, augmented and virtual reality, and intelligent process automation in changing the nature of work. Her research looks at how these technologies influence workers' skills and behaviors, organizational culture, and worker experience as well as how the workspace itself is enabling the future enterprise.



Ruthbea Yesner, Vice President, IDC Government Insights and Education

Ruthbea Yesner is the Vice President of IDC Government Insights. In this practice, Ms. Yesner manages the U.S. Federal Government, Education, and Worldwide Smart Cities and Communities Global practices. Ms. Yesner's research discusses the strategies and execution of relevant technologies and best practice areas, such as governance, innovation, partnerships, and business models, essential for government and education transformation. Ms. Yesner's research includes analytics, artificial intelligence, open data and data exchanges, digital twins, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, cloud computing, and mobile solutions in the areas of economic development and civic engagement, urban planning and administration, smart campus, transportation, and energy and infrastructure.

MESSAGE FROM THE SPONSOR

Poly + Microsoft Solutions Enrich Learning

Today, many colleges and universities are deploying a "hybrid" or "blended" approach to teaching and learning, with educators addressing a mix of students in the classroom and students at home. To be successful, professors, students and administrators must have the right tools to ensure that these hybrid experiences are engaging and informative for all participants—regardless of their location. Poly + Microsoft Teams solutions are supporting educators and students globally, bringing professional quality audio, video, and content sharing into the classroom, the home, and any space where learning happens. Built-in features like HD video, speaker tracking, and automatic noise cancelation provide a richer, and more distraction-free, experience for students and educators. Whether teaching is taking place in the classroom or from home, IT manageability software allows organizations to manage devices remotely, monitor system health, make updates, track usage, and even tally virtual room participants.

Contact a Poly + Microsoft Education Expert



The content in this paper was adapted from existing IDC research published on www.idc.com.

This publication was produced by IDC Custom Solutions. The opinion, analysis, and research results presented herein are drawn from more detailed research and analysis independently conducted and published by IDC, unless specific vendor sponsorship is noted. IDC Custom Solutions makes IDC content available in a wide range of formats for distribution by various companies. A license to distribute IDC content does not imply endorsement of or opinion about the licensee.

External Publication of IDC Information and Data — Any IDC information that is to be used in advertising, press releases, or promotional materials requires prior written approval from the appropriate IDC Vice President or Country Manager. A draft of the proposed document should accompany any such request. IDC reserves the right to deny approval of external usage for any reason.

Copyright 2020 IDC. Reproduction without written permission is completely forbidden.

IDC Research, Inc.

5 Speen Street
Framingham, MA 01701, USA

T 508.872.8200

F 508.935.4015

Twitter @IDC

idc-insights-community.com

www.idc.com