When does online learning work?

Incorporating online learning in your programme for students or creating something open to the public can enhance the student experience, engage the public with your research and help showcase your teaching excellence.

The development period for an online course is usually around seven months and the commitment to this development should be carefully considered by everyone involved in the programme to which it relates.

What to consider first

Online courses should be developed and planned with learning and teaching as the focus. All courses are designed to be constructively aligned with assessment, with the programme as a whole and with a clear set of learning learning outcomes. The first consideration should always be:

What is the overall learning objective for the course?

Other important considerations

- Could an online course be used with your students and connected to a current programme?

- Would it also be beneficial to publish it openly to showcase teaching and attract recruitment to your programme?

- What are your aims and needs?
  Do you need to increase engagement or attendance within a programme? Are there large cohorts of students on different programmes that all need to know the same thing, could online learning work across programmes to consolidate teaching needs?

- Can you consider giving staff time and space to develop resources over the next few months?
When it works

Below, we set out some of the aims and needs which drive University of Sheffield staff to create online courses.

Introduce, prepare and supplement

Online learning has worked well as introductory, preparatory and supplementary material within programmes.

Incorporating online learning into the curriculum can have a positive effect on students achieving their learning outcomes.

We have used online courses to prepare students for interactive face-to-face time. It can enable students to learn basic concepts at their own pace ahead of coming to class to discover higher levels of learning and put what they have learned into practice.

Students have used online courses to prepare them for modules, providing them with introductory materials to work through enabling them to begin their modules better informed.

Online course content can be accessed at any time, so it helps students in preparing for assessments and has been successfully used as a supplement alongside other learning materials.

What the Learning and Teaching strategy 2016-2021 says:

Modes of study

We will continue to explore a variety of new and different ways of delivering our programmes building on our prior experience including online, blended and flipped learning. Whilst recognising that face-to-face provision remains our primary educational approach, it is anticipated that there are still further evolutions for how we view and prioritise development of our online and on campus provision, including the parity and differences across the spectrum of delivery and offering an equivalent high quality student experience regardless of the mode of study.

Online Learning in Action: School of Law

The school of law incorporate their online course materials for blended and flipped programme design. Complete weeks from the open online Crime Justice & Society course developed with the School of Law have been built into learning modules in MOLE across their range of undergraduate courses. They are used by students as
introductory and background material, revision material and additional learning material.

Open Online Course on FutureLearn

Duplicated online course for student access only in a MOLEC module area
Student feedback for the MOLE material:
“found it very useful”

“good introduction to certain topics which I could cover quickly before the lectures & follow-up with the recommended readings”

“listening to practitioners talk about policing, as well as watching them work, helped get to grips with key concepts in the literature”

Accessibility
Online learning can be helpful to student cohorts with a diverse range of learning needs. It gives students access to online material which has been segmented clearly into topics. They can then work through these materials outside of a scheduled slot in a lecture theatre and can pause, rewatch, rewind, re-read and explore materials online at their own pace. This can be valuable to those with different learning styles in helping them reach the required level of knowledge and come to class better prepared.

Video in online courses is always transcripted and subtitled and alt-text is always provided for images, helping those for whom English is their second language and those with learning difficulties who benefit from additional guidance and tools.

What the Learning and Teaching Strategy 2016-2021 says:

Students as self-directed learners
We want all our students to have the opportunity to develop academically and personally, recognising the multiple environments from which our students come, and the personal characteristics they bring. Our teaching aims to inspire our students, challenge them, develop their curiosity and encourage them to take greater ownership of their learning, avoiding being passive recipients of knowledge.

Communities of learning within an inclusive environment
We want to ensure students feel part of an inclusive and welcoming academic community - whether organically or purposely developed - during their time at Sheffield, and to build on existing staff communities of practice based around the concepts of co-production, collegiality, cohesion, accessibility, and support. The University has a wide vision of inclusive learning, which is to enable all our students to achieve their full potential.

Open Access: Public Engagement
In developing an online course, you can choose to make the course, or some of the materials, open-access.
This can help you to showcase your teaching excellence and engage wide audiences with your research. It can also help engage your students with research-led learning.

**What the Learning and Teaching Strategy 2016-2021 says:**

*research-led teaching and learning*

We have a clear commitment to producing new knowledge in our field, and integrating this within the design and delivery of programmes. We understand that the relationship between teaching and research differs by subject, and we now want to think in more depth about the different ways in which this relationship can be strengthened.

**Online Learning in action: Successful public engagement**

*This blog*, written by an educator on an open, online course published by ScHARR, reflects on how the researchers in their course had a chance to share their expertise and relevance in relation to real-world healthcare decisions.

**Open Access: Recruitment**

Designing a course to introduce learners to further study options at Sheffield can offer a flexible route into Higher Education and can open up possibilities to a greater number of potential students.
Offering free, introductory courses can give potential students a taste of our learning and teaching excellence and prepare them for more advanced study within the institution.

**What the Learning and Teaching Strategy 2016-2021 says:**

*New routes to Higher Education*

We will continue to strengthen and diversify the ways in which prospective students can join our community, including addressing issues around transition, against a backdrop of evolving government targets, and major changes to the landscape of pre-HE qualifications.

**Online Learning in Action: Recruitment**

Since the launch of two open online courses from ScHARR: HTA and Measuring and Valuing Health, 11% of new PGT students stated that they had used open online courses as a source of information about the School, 19% of those signing up for online open days have done a ScHARR open online course and ScHARR have seen an increase on visits to their recruitment web pages. In particular, their PGR page views increased from 371 to 2936 the year following the launch.

**Open Access: Widening Participation**

Publishing an open access course can help the University to reach a more diverse cohort of learners and help those who are looking for a stepping-stone into Higher Education.
The School of Clinical Dentistry have run a highly successful face-to-face widening participation scheme, ADOPT, for over a decade. While it has had an extremely positive impact in helping students from widening participation backgrounds to enter the dental professions, there were limitations on the numbers who can take part in this face-to-face programme. In 2013 it was decided that the content of this nationally-recognised programme could be made available openly through an open online course to bring benefit to anyone wishing to study the dental professions. The course, ‘Discover Dentistry’ also seeks to provide learners with informal information WP candidates often don’t receive from their schools.

Research by the School shows that 10% of applicants for entry in 2015/16 to the Bachelor of Dental Science (BDS) course mentioned having done DD in their UCAS personal statement, this rose to 16% for the 2016/17 entry. Even more applicants mentioned Discover Dentistry in their interview. The School of Dentistry as a whole reported an increase in applicant numbers for 2016/17. Of the learners on the online course who provided a valid postcode in the pre-course survey, we could ascertain a high percentage of learners with an Index of Multiple Deprivation score of less than 13,000 as well as learners from POLAR 3 (wards of participation) 1st and 2nd lowest quintiles.