

Final Project

Online by default: Teaching in times of COVID-19 – a new normal?

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Abstract

The 2020-2023 strategy plan of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Copenhagen outlines the aim of an increased digitalization of the teaching in all degree programs. The aim is to strengthen the competences of online teaching of both students and teachers. The COVID-19 crisis accelerated this process by demanding the implementation of online teaching within weeks, if not days. We are at a critical juncture concerning the future of the implementation of online teaching. We ask if the crisis encouraged or discouraged the change towards more online teaching both among teachers and students; how are teachers and students coping with this rapid transition; and which techniques and technologies are most promising for different teaching scenarios? Exploring these questions, we aim to provide the first set of answers to the Dean of the Faculty's 'Dekanens Dagbog' where he reflected on March 13, 2020: "*Jeg håber, at vi får nogle erfaringer, som giver en langt bedre ide om, hvordan vi bedst kan bruge e-læring, når SAMF åbner fysisk igen. For selvfølgelig kan mødet på Absalon ikke erstatte mødet i seminarrummet eller auditoriet, eller i studenterforeninger og studentercafeer, for den sags skyld. Men dette kunne jo være, at vi også blev bedre til at se værdien i de møder og få læring ud af det, hvis vi kunne supplere med e-læring.*" Our results are based on feedback from students at the Department of Political Science (DPS) as well as lecturers at the Faculty of Social Sciences. The findings suggest that we are facing more discouragement than encouragement for the further integration of online teaching. However, some also see positive aspects in the integration of online teaching tools such as the possibility to re-visit content or hearing a larger number of (course-external) voices.

Introduction – Why online teaching?

While e-learning is highly supported by the research on higher education (among others, King and Cerrone Arnold 2012; Tang and Byrne 2007; Welker and Beradino 2005) as well as the University leadership at the University of Copenhagen (e.g. SAMF Digital strategy), lecturers often fear it. First, because moving to online instruction means ‘changing a winning team’ and, secondly, due to increased transition costs. However, there is clear evidence that amending one’s teaching with online tools, such as short videos, may result in more effective and efficient learning experiences on the students’ side (Garrison and Kanuka 2004; Twigg 2003). Usually, there is a gradual implementation of online elements as displayed by Figure 1 on the continuum of e-learning. However, the COVID-19 crisis forced almost all lecturers to transfer their teaching to a solely online environment within weeks, if not days.

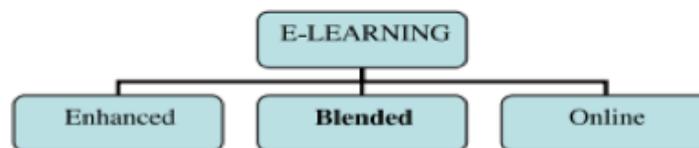


Figure 1: A continuum of e-learning
Garrison and Kanuka 2004, 97

We take this as a starting point of our TLHE-project by asking how this forced move online was perceived by both students and teachers, and how it may impact the future implementation of online teaching. Interpreted as a ‘silver lining’ of the COVID-crisis by the university leadership, the rapid change towards online teaching is seen as an important step towards reaching KU’s strategic goal of more online teaching. However, it is questionable if this forced change on the e-learning continuum encouraged or discouraged both lecturers and students to implement and engage in more online teaching in the future. Our overarching goal, thus, is to evaluate the willingness to integrate online teaching in the future from the teachers’ side. We are, however, also interested in the acceptance and evaluation of online teaching from the students’ side. To establish effective online teaching it is important to integrate both the students’ and the teachers’ side and to understand the difficulties and chances both parts see in this.

To unpack these questions, our project report proceeds in five parts. First, we retrace the move online and summarize the distinction between ‘crisis remote teaching’ and ‘deliberate online teaching’ through an expert interview. Second, we analyse what happens to interaction during online teaching through gathering feedback from students in an elective MA course. Third, we

evaluate the use of synchronous versus asynchronous teaching methods in a large-scale lecture. Fourth, we present the experiences of our colleagues at DPS. Finally, we tie these sections together and consider ways forward.

3...2...1: online!

In March 2020, we experienced a rapid change to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From March 12th onwards, all teaching was moved online with very little or even no preparation time at all. We teach online in response to a crisis - we do not do online teaching. Remote teaching via the internet in times of crisis is not the same thing as deliberate online teaching. With increased access to the internet, the general growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and changing work structures that encourage 'life-long learning', recent years have seen a rise in online education, especially online higher education. Overall, these developments are encouraging and positive, as they democratize and widen access to expert knowledge and tertiary education. Good examples are the development of so called 'MOOCs' (Massive Open Online Courses; <https://www.mooc.org>), or the professionalization of remote and 'flexible learning' through institutions like the Open University (OU, <http://www.openuniversity.edu/welcome>).

While it is possible and advisable to draw on these precedents to manage the move to online teaching in the spring of 2020, it is crucial to remember that deliberate online teaching from the outset demands different course designs, teaching strategies and alignment between learning objectives, assessments and student activities. For this project, we spoke with Olaf Corry, Associate Professor at DPS and long-term member of the academic teaching staff at the OU, to get a better sense of the difference between deliberate online teaching and remote crisis teaching under Covid-19. *The OU has decades of experiences of what works online and what does not, Dr Corry stressed, based on the collection of large amounts of data on course enrolments, time spent on the designated websites, and especially, completion rates. The latter are generally very low - for example, of 100,000 people starting a MOOC only about 4% complete it - which made the OU adapt its teaching strategies and always, also, include in-person meetings in regional centres where students meet their tutor two to three times a term. What is crucial to know, Dr Corry explained, is that the whole course needs to be designed differently from the beginning and in conversation with designated teaching materials. OU courses work with their own textbooks, for example, where every two or three pages a question is posed to the students to apply or reflect on what they have just read. The online lectures are then basically going through the answers to these questions. Otherwise, Dr Corry tells us, people drop off. You need shorter parts,, moments to reflect and reinforce, and summaries along the way. All of this is much*

more deliberate than what you would do - or improvise - in a physical classroom. Dr Corry summarizes the core characteristics of online teaching as follows: *The variation of what you do needs to be bigger and the sizes of the bites in which you present your material needs to be smaller.* Content and form, in other words, relate differently in online and analogous teaching environments. In addition, (online) teachers need to learn how to work with the affordances of the platform they are using (for example chat windows on Zoom). What is needed is *professional education on the infrastructure of the different platforms and online learning environments*, according to Dr Corry. *It does not work just to take your module and put it online, at least not in the experience of the OU.* As we also try to teach our students in social science courses, context matters for how things mean and how they are understood.

Example 1 - Interaction in online teaching

How does the quality of teaching interactions compare between virtual online meetings and physical face-to-face meetings?

This question goes to the heart of pedagogical engagement and speaks directly to key concerns in the study of teaching and learning such as ‘collaborative’ and ‘active learning’ (Rummel and Deiglmeier 2018). Collaborative (peer to peer) and active learning are concepts that underline the value of having students engage in some activity that forces them to think about and comment on the information presented by their instructor(s) or peer(s). Following Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson (1987 cited in Stanford University Newsletter on Teaching 1993), they center on the idea that “learning is not a spectator sport” and that in order for students to have a positive and lasting learning experience, “[t]hey must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves” (ibid). Teaching and learning are thus relational activities that rely on interactions to fulfil their potential. Yet, in online teaching situations, instructions are easily transformed into spectacles in which the students watch their lecturers speak on (synchronous) screens, videos or to a power-point presentation. How can interaction levels be kept engaging and what do students think about the quality of online interactions?

Master-level instruction at the Department of Political Science (DPS) generally happens through a mixture of compulsory and elective courses that, depending on size, are taught through a mix of lectures and seminar-style discussions. While some courses are mandatory to the department’s different MA degree requirements, others are specialized courses offering students ‘deep dives’ into specific policy issues, historical or empirical contexts, or methodological approaches. Our

example resembles the latter, an advanced MA-level course on 'Political Ethnography'. The question of the quality of interaction is especially salient here, as the approach relies on direct engagement through immersion as an epistemological strategy.

Gathering Feedback on Online Implementation

From mid-March onwards, teaching for the *Political Ethnography* module happened in three formats: synchronous lectures, screen and sound recordings of talking the students through explanations of specific texts or tasks, and purpose-made videos for the students like a recorded interview with a senior scholar in the field. The move online was both abrupt and disruptive and online activities that were previously considered part of a 'blended' approach became the only possible teaching environment.

To assess the students' view of the different online teaching formats, they were asked to answer three open-ended questions in the form of an Absalon Quiz. Six (out of 12) students answered the questions. The first questions asked, which of the different teaching formats (recorded screen; synchronous meetings; purpose-made videos), the students liked the best and which they liked the least and why.

I personally liked the pre-recorded video interview which was shared. This suits my learning style as I find it hard to sit still and concentrate for too long and I often learn a lot by listening whilst doing other activities, and making notes when important points are made. I also thought the break out meeting we did in the last session worked really well, as it was nice to be able to work in small groups. Something which I feel doesn't work so well is when each of us individually talk about something for 5-10 minutes in a turn (e.g. the readings, or when we did the ethical review). Sometimes the majority of the class can consist of each of us individually talking for a prolonged amount of time, and I feel that I personally gain more from a back and forth.

I like the synchronous meetings the best followed by the recorded meetings (though I have not seen them all). Though I often feel guilty when I haven't read it all for the synchronous meeting, I like this type of close-to-the-real-deal-teachings..

I like the Zoom meeting format best, since this format is the one that comes closest to physical class meetings, which means that I can interact with the other students, yet still to a very limited extent.

I think a mix of videos and synchronous meetings worked really well. I think it should be just that: a mix, just like regular teaching should be a mix of activities and lectures.

Synchronous meetings definitely work best because we can discuss and interact with each other. But, the purpose-made videos are also fine for some new info, and then this can be discussed at the meetings.

I like the synchronous meetings best, because they are the most engaging (helps keep my attention) and because you're able to pose questions and get the answers right away. But if the teacher has to convey very much and dense information in a short amount of time, I actually prefer the purpose-made-videos, because the teacher's words are often more deliberate and I have the option to pause the video to make longer notes.

In sum, the students show a preference for the synchronous meetings as the interaction comes closest to the usual 'in-classroom' situation. They are, in general, very approving of all the different methods and appreciate the work that was put into them. Apart from the general assessment of the different teaching forms, the students were also asked to evaluate the change in interaction between the in-class sessions (pre-COVID 19) and the online teaching sessions.

It's not easy to replicate in-person interactions at all, but the zoom chats have worked incredibly well. It has also meant that we were able to have conversations that otherwise may not have happened, such as [Professor's name] two appearances in class.

I really prefer face-to-face interactions since it is an intimate little size for this team, and I feel there is a free atmosphere to speak openly and curiously - but this is harder when not being able to interpret facial reactions. It becomes more intimidating to speak up and more often I feel I have said something irrelevant/uninteresting compared to before.

In my opinion, the remote meetings do not in any way come close to having the same quality as the face-to-face meetings. I see this not as caused by the lecturer or students, but because the actual interactions are totally different online. I especially miss the discussions, which is difficult to get going in the same way online. I feel there is a barrier to speak in the online format that I cannot exactly point to where comes from. Maybe it is the self-awareness and awkwardness of speaking into my own screen.

I far prefer face-to-face meetings. More natural discussions. It would be catastrophic to have online teaching only, as the establishment of social relations is so important to my experience of a course AND the outcome.

I got the most out of our face-to-face meetings because I find it much easier to engage with others and discuss when we sit in the same room. It is difficult to discuss over remote meetings because you can't see and hear everyone at the same time. But at the same time I am surprised how well the remote meetings actually work now that we have practiced, and the quality does improve a bit each time.

I have only attended two physical classes, but I think, you (Kristin) are doing a great job of maintaining the same kind of energy/spirit online, as I experienced in class, which was very inviting and engaging. I take another class, where I enjoyed the physical classes much more than I enjoy the synchronous meeting on zoom. I think it has to do with size - we are like 40 student, so it is very difficult for the teacher to maintain a real level of interactivity.

Finally, and especially interesting for the overall research question of this project, the students were asked to reflect on whether they think remote/online teaching presents a real, long-term, sustainable alternative to meeting in person.

I don't think you can replicate the physical classroom. Obviously if the situation with COVID-19 carries on and it is unsafe for us to meet in person then it does provide a sense of routine and this experience has shown that we can still learn through online classrooms. However, it is a shame as I feel that there's a lot of people in this class who I really get along with, but without meeting them in person those relationships can't develop in a natural way. Online learning takes away a lot of the 'student experience' and I find it quite demotivating to not actually be in the presence of others doing this course.

No, not for me. I get highly motivated by knowing we will meet face to face and have these interactions about the texts, dilemmas and subjects of the course - this motivation is VERY reduced. It works out OK, but maybe it is also just less motivating having classes in your own room. My room is not fit for a learning atmosphere.

Short answer: No, and it never will be. You do not learn as much, and I feel that this way of having classes is more tiring. The social interactions are very important for me to discuss the literature, and for this particular course to learn and engage with ethnography as a method.

Good alternative as long as in-person meetings are ill-advised. Not a good long term solution.

I think it can be a long-term alternative if it is combined with meeting in person. Some meetings can surely be held remote, whilst others, such as workshops, feedback, long exercises etc., are just better suited for meeting in person.

No, I don't think it would be wise to make all teaching online. I think it is especially important to have in person teaching in the beginning of a new class, to establish a level of trust and "comfortability" between teacher and students and students and students. In my experience, it is much easier to collaborate online, if you have already met each other in person. In addition, school is a big part of many students' social life, and if it goes totally online, I fear, we will see a lot more lonely and unhappy young people who are underperforming and maybe even dropping out.

While students are appreciative of continuing teaching online, they are sceptical about whether online teaching could replace face to face interactions. What we can conclude from the above

feedback is that preparing and presenting content online works for some course content but not for all. For instance, students like having recordings talking through specific texts or tasks because they can go back through them on their own time. However, virtually all surveyed students agree that meeting in class is about more than listening to and taking in academic knowledge. In the end, (physically) being at the university campus is also part of the students' social life and an indispensable part of the student experience.

From the position of providing online teaching, we agree. While the quality of interaction improved from week to week, our conversations were still more rocky and disconnected than they would have been in class. Partly this is linked to technical issues (bad internet connections), unsuitable study environments (many students share a room in their student dorm which is distracting when taking part in a synchronous lecture), or unfamiliarity with online platforms affordances (various minutes were spent in almost every session on people trying to 'share their screen'). Above all, the shock experience of moving online has led us to reassess the value of direct interactions and the immediacy of having a conversation face-to-face. Moving forward, we can use these experiences when designing learning activities for future online teaching scenarios, and when thinking about how to ensure active student engagement.

Example 2 - Synchronous or asynchronous lectures?

The first question to ask when moving to online teaching is whether the lectures should be held live (synchronous) or whether they should be recorded (asynchronous). In the literature, there is a clear preference towards asynchronous lectures due to their flexibility: students can decide themselves when to listen to the lecture, recorded lectures do not suffer from technical issues as live lectures, there is no limit to the number of participants, etc.. Yet in the COVID-19 period, most lecturers transferred to live lectures as they needed less additional preparation. Others, however, decided to change to asynchronous lectures that are assisted by online quizzes as well as discussion fora on Absalon.

Our example is based on full-year Bachelor-level lectures. In the spring semester 2020, two methods lectures took place: methods 1 (1st-year students) and Methods 3 (2nd-year students). At DPS the Methods lectures are conducted by teaching teams meaning that lecturers change between lectures and therewith also the mode of teaching: Some lectures were held live while others were pre-recorded. Based on this set-up we could directly ask students about their preferences concerning the teaching mode. In detail, we asked them whether they prefer synchronous or

asynchronous lectures and why they prefer a specific form. Students from the Methods 1 lecture were asked to answer these questions anonymously on slido.com. There are 330 students registered in the lecture of which roughly 40 posted their answers. Posts are in Danish and in English. Here are some exemplary quotes:

"Recorded! Fordi man til forelæsning er så mange, så formatet alligevel er, at man bare skal lytte efter og ikke interagere. Når man sidder derhjemme på sin egen computer er det i øvrigt meget svært at tage noter, hvis man også skal holde øje med forelæsningen og chat-funktionen i f.eks. Zoom. Når forelæsningen er optaget på forhånd kan man til gengæld sætte den på pause eller gå tilbage, hvis der var noget, man ikke forstod eller ikke hørte."

Jeg synes, at det er ret godt, når undervisningen foregår live, for så har man mulighed for at stille spørgsmål direkte, hvis der er noget, man går glip af eller missede en pointe. Jeg ved godt, at med de online videoer kan man altid gå tilbage, men det er sjældent, at man får det gjort.

Definitely recorded lectures! 1. You can turn back and rematch them if you didn't understand something, 2. You can watch them when you want to, which is very useful because online lectures takes more time than normal ones. That means that we have to spend more time than normally on all of our courses and then it is nice to be able to plan for that, when you can watch them when you have the time.

The live lectures are not working very well, since its really distracting.

Asynchronous one's: You can watch them where- and whenever you want Live one's: I stay more focused when the teaching takes place on zoom, because I have the feeling that I'm only going to be able to watch it once. But: It's generally much harder to stay focused than when you're attending a lecture physically/ in person.

Optagede videoer for forelæsninger, fordi man alligevel sjældent stiller spørgsmål til en forelæsning.

Overall, the students tend to prefer recorded lectures. They name similar reasons for this as the literature suggests: they can listen to and pause them whenever they like. However, students seem to suffer from a lack of structure due to this increased flexibility in their schedule; this is, in particular, true for first-year students. Hence, the clear advantage of online lectures is that the schedule stays the same. On the downside, some mention that following live lectures is more difficult due to both attention and internet connection issues. On the other hand, many state the possibility to ask questions during live lectures as a clear advantage of these compared to the recorded ones. Certainly, the overall interaction is reduced by recorded lectures, whereas some point to the fact that there never is a lot of interaction in lectures per se.

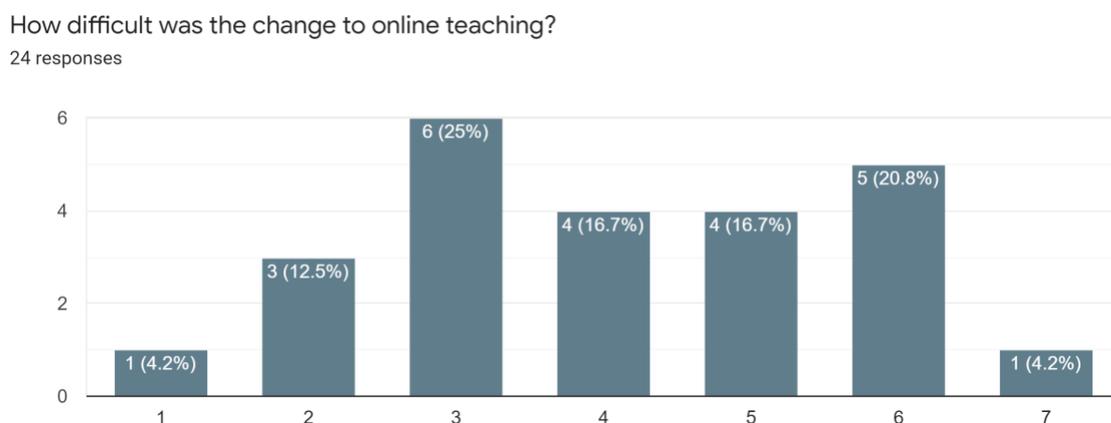
Moreover, it has to be mentioned that the students had the possibility to ask questions in a discussion forum on Absalon when the lectures were recorded. No one made use of this. A potential explanation could be that discussion forum posts are not anonymous or that they can ask their questions in the *boldundervisning*, which was synchronous.

The analytics on Absalon further confirm that students are more reluctant to watch the videos: About one-third of the students watched the recorded lectures until a week after the lecture, whereby roughly 50 percent attended live lectures. The participation rate is, however, even lower for students from higher semesters. Similarly, less than 50 percent of the students did engage in the quizzes, which were in-between different lecture videos or at the end of videos. For example, only 77 students out of 330 answered the latest quiz.

Example 3 - The lecturers' side

To get an idea of how the lecturers at the Faculty felt about the rapid change towards online teaching, we asked persons from the DPS as well as the Faculty to answer a short questionnaire. The questions were mainly concerned about their personal perceptions and the challenges they faced at this time. Overall, we see that most of our respondents look forward to teaching in the classroom again and that, on average, the majority had difficulties with the change.

Figure 2: The difficulty of the change [1 - not at all difficult, 7 - very difficult]



In more detailed, the lecturer that respondent struggled with the following exemplary challenges:

Making sure the students still attend the lectures

Keeping up proper contact with students and ensuring that no one feels left behind in this.

Changing my teaching style

Teaching labs without being able to help students in person

Losing a sense of connection to student

In general, time as well as keeping students engaged were the main challenges from the lecturers' perspective. Overall, lecturers seem to have a more negative view of online teaching than students and list following exemplary:

It is hard to cover the same amount of material. I feel time passes quickly, especially getting student responses takes time. I also really miss the feedback you get from students' faces and body language. In normal classes I use this a lot to gauge whether they understand and which parts I need to spend more time on.

Instructor time spent on managing additional software, media, discussion threads, etc. takes away from preparation time, discovery of new teaching resources, and feedback on student assignments.

No interaction due to pre-recorded lectures, technical issues, some students do not have a good internet connection, i.e. they participate less. In general, lower presence of students

Difficult to get to know the interests of students; less feedback on teaching material; re-recording lectures; many more emails, which are more difficult to answer than in person

Most of the students disappeared, so there are very few students left in the groups for the Active Learning preparation.

Besides these challenges and the overwhelmingly negative views, the lecturers also mentioned some positive aspects of the online teaching:

Easier to divide students in smaller groups (in seminar); recording lectures, in particular, those that use a statistical programme

I realized that I can travel during the semester and teach from somewhere else (once that is again feasible). So the benefits are mostly for me, not so much for the students.

The asynchronous possibilities have advantages, as does the ability to review my lectures since they are recorded. At times, I think I have been forced to be more pedagogically precise because of the shift to online.

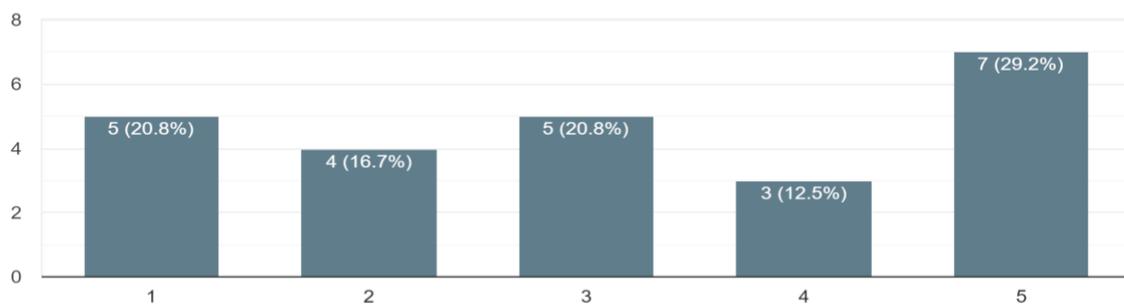
Strictly speaking, I could upload the same lectures next year again without any additional effort.

Lecturers appreciate the increased flexibility of teaching, for example, not having to be present in the classroom to teach or re-using recorded lectures. In sum, however, they mainly see negative aspects of the online teaching. Accordingly, a majority of our respondents are rather sceptical about using online teaching tools on their future teaching. Or, they want to use mainly those tools that worked the best. Of course, we moved to online teaching during the COVID-19 crisis, but it was not for fun or to try this out in an otherwise controlled, ‘normal’ environment, but in a situation of profound crisis. For students, online lectures take more time due to stopping and listening again. For lecturers, they take more time to prepare and potentially increase the amount of email from students. The question, thus, is how this extra time on both sides might be compensated.

Figure 3: Likelihood to keep online teaching elements after COVID-19 [1 - not likely at all, 5 - very likely]

How likely is it that you keep some online teaching elements in your future teaching? (i.e. make use of online and blended teaching methods)

24 responses



After COVID-19 – Going back to the status quo?

As the coronavirus pandemic evolves and consolidates, it is increasingly likely that we will have to learn how to live with the virus for the foreseeable future. In a moment of black humour, Dr Benjamin Morgan, Associate Professor of English Literature and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Chicago, posted the following tweet on May 19th 2020:



From how we have been interacting with students and colleagues, we wonder, what can we (KU, DPS) do to plan ahead in times of considerable uncertainty? What can we learn from our own experiences and that of our colleagues, as well as insights from other institutions such as the OU? Based on the information gathered for this project, KU and the political science department could start by pooling experiences, gathering expertise, and working on a catalogue of best practices for online teaching.

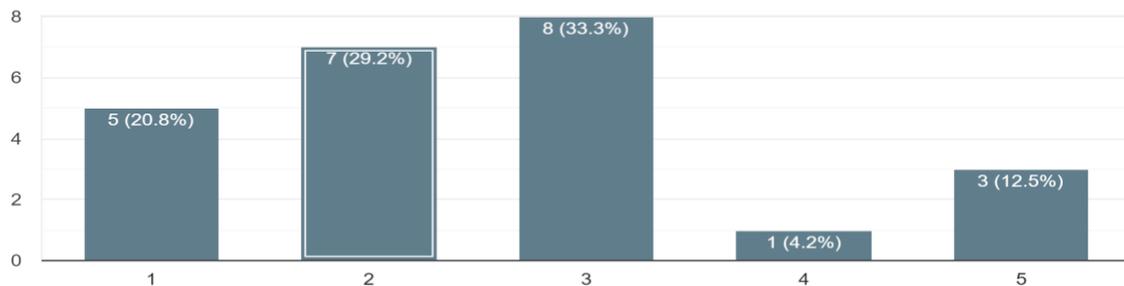
Beyond coping with the current crisis, this work will also help the department and university to live up to its long-term strategy of increased digitalization. What we need to remember is that during the rapid change from analogue or blended teaching at the CSS campus to complete online teaching, lecturers did not have the time to prepare for this change. Usually, transferring to online teaching demands a different kind of preparation than simply recording lectures and moving entire courses online. Even though the Teaching and Learning Unit at KU offered support and set up a webpage with the most important recommendations concerning online teaching, there might have been some didactic shortcomings in this transitional period.

It is not surprising that the support for the Faculty's strategy to increase online teaching is considerably low among our respondents (see Figure 4). What can the Faculty and the Departments do to increase the support for online teaching after COVID-19? First, there needs to be a better information flow between the leadership and those doing the online teaching. A possibility would be to establish a platform - at each of the Departments - that collect experiences and offer a forum for exchange. Second, clear guidelines are needed to establish best practices. While there is information readily available at the Online and Blended Learning Platform (www.obl.ku.dk), many do not make use of this. A solution could be to offer more Department specific information or have a stronger involvement of course coordinators. Lastly, and with regard to the upcoming fall semester, the quality of the online teaching should be increased. To some

extent, this may only be achieved with a better time compensation from the departmental side. Online teaching preparation needs more time to make it successful.

Figure 4: Support for the Faculty strategy [1 - no support at all, 5 - full support]

Do you support the faculty's strategy (2020-2023) to increase the amount of online teaching in all programs?
24 responses



However, not only the lecturers need more support, the students are also in need for help to better cope with online teaching. Our analysis shows that students struggle with the organisation of their time schedule when faced with increased online teaching. Some forms demand more preparation before the seminars or lectures, for example watching a video. Students, in particular those in earlier semesters, need better guidance on how to structure their time. Some complained that the online teaching takes more time because of the possibility to stop and repeat videos. However, they may learn more in the end. In the end, we may conclude that both students and the staff are struggling with online teaching and learning, which calls for more pedagogical and practical training with blended and online teaching tools and strategies as well as a better top-down and bottom-up communication.

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