

Campus or platform – What shape will the post-COVID university take?

*Online learning is fragmenting the traditional model of the university as a single site for both education and research. **Jon Treadway** and **Daniel W Hook**, discuss how this digital transition is reshaping universities and how altmetrics might enable higher education institutions to redefine themselves in an increasingly aspatial academic environment.*

2020 was a tough year for higher education, particularly for ‘destination countries’ – that is, those that rely on a high volume of international students such as the US, UK and Australia. In the short-term, these historic, respected and established educational nexuses have become essentially unreachable to the foreign students on which they have come to rely. In the long-term, a shift in the geopolitical climate is seeing moves toward home tuition of students – a move that may reduce the level of international research collaboration in coming decades.

It is not a surprise that the business-model diversification that led universities to become dependent on overseas students as a revenue stream has been encouraged by free-market-oriented governments in these countries. It is equally unsurprising that free-market thinking comes with increased risk – after all, even diversified companies fail. The UK regulator has made it clear that the price of university “autonomy” is that there will be no bailouts – a strong message that universities in the UK may indeed be allowed to fail, which has been echoed in the US and Australia.

Faced with these challenges, higher education institutions might reflect on how this situation impacts their two highly interdependent core activities: teaching students and producing research. COVID has been an accelerant of recent trends for both research and education. One major shift has been toward online learning. While this has been beneficial in terms of increasing access to education, it may also serve to further separate out teaching from research activities and so lower interest in research careers.

universities are no longer competing locally, or even globally for students, but more directly against the online platform than ever before

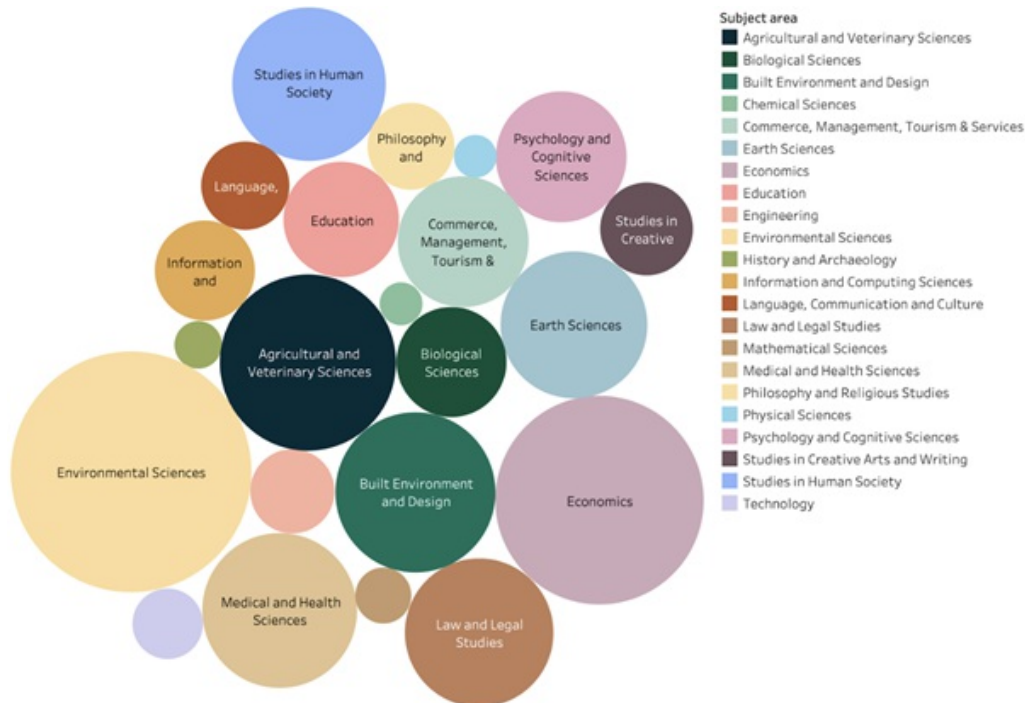
This trend adds another dimension to an old debate over the economic and intrinsic value of higher education. The rise of the ‘destination university’ created a market where students have unprecedented power in determining how courses should look in order to appeal to them – it is a buyers’ market. The COVID-necessitated shift to online delivery has increased its legitimacy, thereby further undermining the value of the destination. In a student-buyers market, courses are customised, delivery times (and, with the most recent technologies, even delivery language) may be chosen.

As a consequence, universities are no longer competing locally, or even globally for students, but more directly against the online platform than ever before. At the same time employer expectations of post-university “products” are shifting and it is not clear that courses that are designed to fit employer expectations are any better aligned to dovetail into a research career.

In light of these significant changes to the higher education landscape farsighted institutions are bringing their research and education strategies closer together. Changes in how research is carried out in STEM fields have necessitated deeper partnerships with industry and employers, and these will likely grow increasingly important to education beyond STEM, as partners in attracting students, delivering teaching, and accreditation.

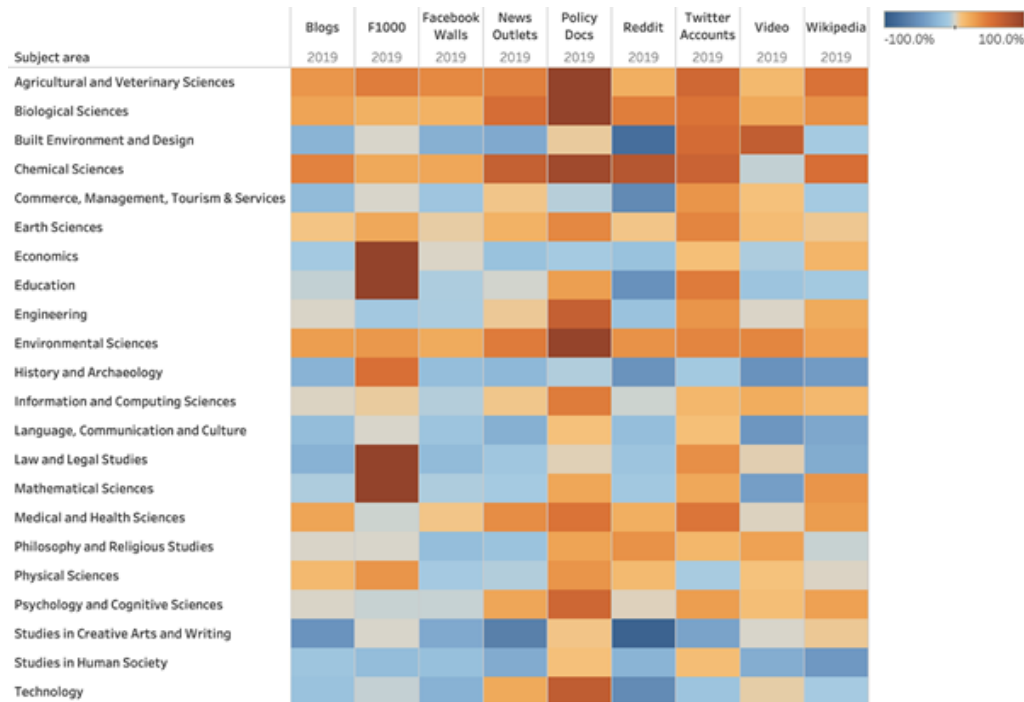
The “research brand” of an institution plays a critical role in attracting not just postgraduate, but also undergraduate students. The demography of international students and how they encounter and interact with higher education is to a large extent determined by news and social media. Institutions have long been talking to the media about their research, as part of their mission to deliver societal impact, but many have not yet considered how this may affect their wider higher education strategy. Unwittingly, they have been building this brand amongst those who notice research – potential students at all levels.

Increasingly this activity is leaving measurable traces. A recent analysis, undertaken by one of the authors working with Skilled Education, using data from Altmetric, reveals opportunities where targeted investment by higher education institutions might nurture these engagements. Fig.1 shows how much online and news attention was generated in 2019-published UK-based research by field. At this level, this is a blunt tool, but one that gives an instant insight into the fields that have an online presence and significant audiences that could be developed.



Altmetrics can be useful in this respect, as they are highly responsive, with new trends being identified in just days to weeks. Like channel marketing for big brands, it is possible to examine how an entity fares by channel and by subject area, and using a benchmark chosen by the analyst.

Fig.2 gives us a subtler report to think about: research attention, again by field, but now with a breakdown by channel and benchmarked against a G20 average. We instantly see how UK research in environmental science performs well, not only in policy, but across social and traditional media too. It is also easy to pick out subjects and media that could benefit from investment, such as Creative Arts and Reddit.



Finer granularity is also possible – by institution or research group, using different research categorisations, by specific social media channels, using different benchmarks, or tracking over different timescales.

understanding who is engaging with research in real time gives universities the tools to better understand their global and local opportunities

As with alternative lifestyles, music, or even comedy, alternative metrics have entered the mainstream to such a degree that the descriptor becomes a little tired. It is a decade since the publication of *Altmetrics: A manifesto*. Much of the early discourse around altmetrics mistakenly argued that they were some kind of quality proxy antagonistic to citations. However, we would argue that neither journal of publication nor the number of citations accrued by an article have similarly ever been a proxy for quality. In fact, none of these measures is about quality, rather they are measures and signals of attention. In the case of citations – scholarly attention. In the case of altmetrics – broader societal, public or industrial attention. And – in an age where context matters more than ever – subtle, diverse and timely signals, such as altmetrics, have a distinct value.

However, understanding who is engaging with research in real time gives universities the tools to better understand their global and local opportunities. By using their brands, aligning their strategies across research and education, and developing meaningful connections with their audiences and potential partners, smart institutions will differentiate themselves. They need not be defined by a sterile debate between being a platform or a 'destination', when the future will be determined by two questions: "what are we teaching?" and "to whom are we teaching it?". In any case, the answers to both questions come from the audience.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

Image Credit: [Nick Fewings](#) via Unsplash.