

RESEARCH PAPER – Investigation into the extent of continuing online teaching at Universities and compliance with CMA guidelines that contact hours and teaching delivery methods should be published to enable an informed consumer choice.

Published by Paul Wiltshire. A Parent campaigner concerned about online teaching at Universities

Date Published : Sept 2023

### Introduction & Current Situation regarding online teaching

Though the enforced online teaching at University during the Lockdowns ended two years ago, various data sources (newspaper articles, my previous research, HEPI surveys etc.) indicate that online teaching remains embedded in the University system to varying levels. E.g. The annual HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey 2023 published in June reported that 75% of students stated that between 10% & 100% of their lectures were online & 60% reported that between 10% & 100% of their seminars were online.

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2023.pdf>

-The CMA places a requirement on Universities to publish details of the number of contact hours and delivery method (whether online or in-person, seminar or lecture etc.) for each course. This was stated in the 2015 guidance and remains in the recently updated guidance of 2023.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6475b2f95f7bb7000c7fa14a/Consumer\\_law\\_advice\\_for\\_higher\\_education\\_providers\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6475b2f95f7bb7000c7fa14a/Consumer_law_advice_for_higher_education_providers_.pdf)

-The Office for Students role is to encourage compliance with the CMA guidelines, yet despite this (and the numerous political statements from Ministers and MP's in support of transparency around levels of online teaching) there is little evidence that this OfS approach is working.

Reference - Wonkhe Article - <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/isnt-ofs-supposed-to-support-students-to-make-good-choices/>

### Scope and Methodology of Research

153 Undergraduate full time courses across 52 Universities in the UK were randomly selected for investigation. – Appendix 1.

The University websites, prospectuses, course handbooks & UCAS were scrutinised to see if there was sufficient information about contact hours and teaching delivery methods being made available for public inspection in accordance with CMA Guidelines.

If not, then the admissions departments of the Universities (and in turn the individual departments) were contacted requesting the information. Enquiries

were made as if I were a parent of a prospective student. The initial request was made on or around 30<sup>th</sup> July 2023, followed up by weekly emails if no response or an insufficient response was received. The research was terminated after a 4-week period on 29<sup>th</sup> Aug 23.

## Results

**Imposed Online Teaching** - The research indicates that around 30%\* of courses have moved to models involving significant (or some even all) online teaching whilst 70%\* have returned to fully/nearly fully in-person teaching. - See Appendix 2

**Self-Imposed Online Teaching** – The true extent of online teaching is likely to be far higher because even though 70% of the courses may be fully/nearly fully in-person, there is now a growing significant \* trend where the lectures are recorded as well, and the student can then choose to watch online instead rather than physically attend. Some Universities appear to be completely relaxed about students choosing to rarely attend campus and watch online instead, whereas others claim that they have physical attendance monitoring in place. So it is not at all clear to what extent students may still end up consuming all their teaching online even though the University may ‘legitimately’ claim to have gone back to fully in-person teaching– See Appendix 3

*\* NB. Given that the general findings of this paper (see below results) is that data is not readily available nor in a verifiable understandable standard format, then it is not possible for anybody (as far as I am aware there is no other definitive research data) to state with precision the exact extent to which online teaching (either imposed or self-imposed) remains across the whole sector; hence the results are stated as indicative.*

**Lack of publically available transparent data** - In all cases, the exact data regarding contact hours & teaching delivery methods, as required by the CMA guidelines (in particular whether online or in-person) was not publically available for any of the 153 courses investigated. Though most university courses sampled did have a certain amount of data about contact hours available (if you were prepared to search for it in the details of course hand-books for example), it was not nearly sufficient.

**Widespread reluctance to divulge detailed specific online vs. in-person contact hours data** - Even after the 4-week period of contacting the Universities asking them repeatedly to disclose this data, approximately half of the courses investigated still did not disclose the information in anything close to the required CMA format and either refused altogether or were only willing or able to give general vague data – See Appendix 4

**Evidence of language and phrases that confuse whether teaching is online.** Universities often used language carefully with phrases such as :-  
“We have returned to in-person teaching”

*“Our courses are in-person”*

*“All our students are expected to attend in-person”*

*“Lectures and seminars are held in-person”*

*“All of the courses are Full-time programmes with mandatory on-campus attendance”*

These statements are can be meaningless unless they are supported by actual quantum numbers of contact hours broken down into lectures / seminars etc. & in-person / online. This need for quantum contact hours can be demonstrated by the below two examples:-

#### Example 1

*“In general, all our programmes require 120 credits per year, which on average means 4 modules per term. Most modules have 1 hr in person lectures and 1 hr in person tutorial per week. In addition, some modules may have additional online material and recordings that one needs to engage with. “ – SOAS, Economics*

This appears to state that there will be 4 hours or lectures and 4 hours tutorials per week giving a total of 8 per week (which is slightly below average). However, it mentions ‘additional online material and recordings’ and you simply can’t tell if these are in fact online lectures or not. So in order for an informed consumer choice to be made then the consumer will need to compare this 8 hours in-person contact hours to other courses that may offer say 12 hours in-person contact hours, even though both may claim that all teaching is in-person.

#### Example 2

*“Overall, our courses are in-person, with some use online tools/sessions to support our students' learning. In terms of contact hours, I won't be able to give you the exact contact hours” – Bradford , Accounting & Finance*

This may seem at first glance that this course is in-person, but in fact, unless you are provided with the actual quantum contact hours per week broken down into lectures and seminars etc. , then you really have no way of telling whether the ‘online tools/sessions’ are in fact online lectures.

#### Recommendations

The Office for Students needs to carry out their enforcement role and insist that Universities comply with the CMA guidelines to clearly publish data on contact teaching hours and delivery methods.

A standard simple method of stating average weekly structured teaching contact hours and delivery methods needs to be devised that is easy to interpret by prospective students and their parents and prominently published by the

Universities. It would be preferable if this were available on UCAS as a 'sort' field to enable easy comparison between courses.

Consideration needs to be given as to whether a course that has all / nearly all of its lectures only online should continue to be treated in the same way as a 'normal' course requiring physical attendance (with regards to fee structures, availability of living away from home maintenance grants, how it can be advertised, degree status, separate UCAS listing etc.).

Urgent consideration needs to be given to whether the practice of allowing students to choose to watch Lectures online and attend Seminars on Zoom/Teams instead of physically attending should be banned altogether or at least more tightly controlled (such as physical attendance reporting being made openly available to parents and OfS, level of attendance possibly linked to course fees, disclosure of contact hours that can either be online or in-person dependent on student choice etc.). In these instances, the Universities may state that they have returned to fully in-person teaching; yet the reality is that many Students will still be choosing to consume their teaching online instead. This amounts to be an under the radar mechanism whereby seemingly normal courses that apparently offer and require full physical attendance; in fact don't require it at all and end up being consumed by the student just like an Open University course. The need for this is best illustrated by the examples below. The first is a strong statement in support of fully in-person teaching, yet the lectures are recorded. Though this particular university appears to have attendance monitoring in place, others may not; and even so, how can you really rely on this being enforced? Particularly if when pressed the individual student claims that online works better for them. The second example shows that some Universities are more relaxed about allowing the student to routinely watch all online instead as their own free choice.

### Example 1

*"we strongly believe that the most equitable mode of delivery of our courses is to have all our students in the classrooms rather than having a mixture of platforms or a lack of guarantee around contact hours. So to confirm, all of the contact hours listed on our courses are in-person..... To answer your other question, most lectures are recorded (technology permitting) so that students can make-up for any lost learning through illness/absence and the recordings also become a revision resource for students when preparing for assessments.....We have attendance and engagement monitoring throughout the academic year. During teaching weeks we expect 80% physical attendance which is monitored by swipe-card entry. We routinely contact students who fall below this threshold, and if they continue to fail to meet it we can withdraw them on that basis."*

Brighton, Accounting & Finance

### Example 2

*"Yes, recordings are normally made in lectures but as a face to face teaching university generally not the seminars . . . . ."*

*A brief answer to your question is that as students have personally chosen to be there and are adults, it is entirely up to them how they best utilise the services we provide.*

*The university do make contact with students whose attendance starts to become poor to assist them where required and ensure they are OK.” Greenwich , Accounting & Finance*

The UCAS application process for entry in Sept 2024 (which opens on 5<sup>th</sup> Sept 23) should be suspended so that changes as suggested above can be made before students start to apply for courses.

### Concluding Summary and Comment

Though the amount of online teaching has certainly reduced since academic year 21-22 immediately after the end of the Lockdowns, it has clearly still taken root in the system, and if left unchecked by effective legislation and enforcement then it will now only continue to grow.

So far, legislators & administrators (the Office for Students in particular & UCAS) have failed to deal with the challenge of the emergence of widespread online teaching in Universities and it can only be described as a free-for-all with each University course involving as much or as little online teaching as suits them; and the consumer (Students and their parents) having little or no ability to differentiate between courses with regards to the extent of online teaching as the information is being hidden from them at the point at which they choose their course.

This paper demonstrates that 18-year-old students may end up abruptly entering an educational environment devoid of anything like sufficient and reasonable levels of societal and on-going parental controls over how they consume their education. Compare this to the societal and parental controls around 16-17-year-olds completing their A-levels which involve strict Dept of Education enforcement with regard to the amount of physical contact hours delivered per pupil and the enforcement and record-keeping of physical attendance of the pupils. Yet when they choose their University course, they (and crucially their parents) won't know whether they are going to be consuming their education in a structured physical environment surrounded by their peers and supported by their institutions, or whether they are going to end up in an imposed or self-imposed screen isolation (if there are options to watch online instead).

This lack of structure and control for young impressionable adults should be of great concern with regards to educational outcomes, mental well-being and the loss of the full life-experience opportunity that University is supposed to deliver.

These concerns are shared by many of the Universities themselves e.g.

*“We are unlikely to record lectures as this may encourage some students to not attend classes in-person.” Imperial College, Economics, Finance & Data Science*

After all, what really is the point of sending our young adults hundreds of miles away from home to their University town, paying out huge sums for maintenance support and course fees, if they are going to be allowed and/or compelled by their University to consume their teaching from their bedrooms rather than physically going to campus? They may as well stay at home and enroll on a properly structured Open University course.

## Appendix 1 – List of full time undergraduate degree courses investigated

Bristol – History, Accounting & Finance, Geography, Psychology  
West of Scotland – Psychology, Accounting, Maths  
Greenwich – Law, Accounting & Finance, Psychology  
Bath Spa – Law, Geography Human, Business & Management  
SOAS – Economics, History, Law  
East London – Psychology, Accounting & Finance, Computer Science  
Bath- Mathematics, Psychology, Accounting & Finance  
South Wales – Law, Psychology, Accounting & Finance  
Wales, Trinity St Davids – History, Psychology, Accounting  
Bolton – Psychology, Accountancy, Computer Science  
London Met – Economics, Accounting & Finance, Psychology  
Sunderland – Psychology, Accounting & Finance  
Solent – Accounting & Finance, Psychology  
Queen Margaret University - Business Management, Media & Communications, Psychology  
Huddersfield – Psychology, History, Accounting & Finance  
UWE Bristol – Psychology, History, Accounting & Finance  
Bradford College – Law, Social Care, Software Engineering  
Aston – Law, Accounting & Finance, History & Politics  
Plymouth Marjon – Psychology, English, Business  
Birkbeck – Accounting, History  
Northampton – Law, Psychology, Accounting & Finance  
Abertay – Psychology, Accounting & Finance  
Leeds Beckett – Business Accounting, Marketing Management  
Imperial College – Economics Finance & Data Science, Mathematics, Geophysics  
Brighton – Accounting & Finance, History, Literature & Culture  
Colchester - Counselling and Psychotherapy, Business & Management, Construction Management  
Glasgow Caledonian – Law, Applied Psychology, Accounting  
University College Birmingham – Finance & Accounting, Marketing Management, Computer Science  
Loughborough – Accounting & Business, Psychology, History  
Herriot-Watt - Actuarial Science, Computer Science, Psychology  
Bradford – Economics, Psychology, Accounting & Finance  
Bishop Grosseteste - Business, History, Psychology  
Edinburgh Napier – Psychology, Business Management, Accounting & Finance  
London South Bank – Politics (Social Policy), Psychology, Economics  
Kingston - Accounting & Finance, Economics, Psychology  
Falmouth – Business & Digital Marketing, Journalism & Creative Writing, Media Production  
East Anglia – Accounting & Finance, Psychology, Law  
Hertfordshire – Psychology, Accounting & Finance, Business & Management  
Glasgow - Accounting & Finance, Economics, Psychology  
St Andrews – Computer Science, Economics, Psychology  
Ravensbourne - Business Management, Computer Science, Advertising and Brand Design

Dundee – Psychology, Accounting, Mathematics  
Plymouth – History, Psychology, Accounting & Finance  
Richmond American University - Accounting & Finance, Computer Science,  
Economics  
Westminster – Accounting, History, Psychology  
Chester – Accounting & Finance, Psychology  
Harper Adams – Business, Applied Zoology, Animal Health & Welfare  
Staffordshire – Psychology, Accounting & Finance  
Anglia Ruskin - Accounting & Finance, History, Psychology  
Exeter – Psychology, Accounting & Finance, Law  
Regents - Business & Management, International Relations, Psychology  
Coventry - Accounting & Finance, History, Psychology  
Reading – Law, Accounting & Finance, Psychology

## Appendix 2 – Examples of email responses to enquires made demonstrating University with imposed online teaching

NB – All these excerpts are from email exchanges in response to enquiries made as if I were a parent of a perspective candidate

“There will be no in-person lectures in Psychology”. – West of Scotland, Psychology

“Firstly, you won’t have any lectures in person. All lectures are held online and account for 1 hour per week per module. Secondly, your seminars could be in person or online depending on which teaching group you are placed in” – Birkbeck - Accounting

“The university has learned from the Covid closure periods that some delivery, e.g. large lectures, work as well, if not better as online delivery. On this basis there is some variation between the pre and post pandemic methods of delivery that do reduce face to face delivery in some cases. . . . . there are a couple of the larger lectures that the students prefer us to keep online. This is mainly because they feel that it is better value for them than spending money on bus fares, petrol etc. to come in to a one hour lecture” – Bath Spa , Business and Management

“Typical Weekly contact hours	Online	In-person
Lectures/Seminars	2 to 4	12”

University of Wales - Trinity St Davids, History

“yes, just under 20% (online contact hours) overall” – Northampton , Psychology

“No more than 30% of the content will be delivered online” – Bolton , Psychology

“Each module has three hours of contact – one of the hours is online and the other are f2f and on campus. There is also a further one hour of guided learning which is directed by the tutor for online research/reading” – Solent University, Accounting & Finance

“The below courses will have a mix of in-person and online lectures and seminars” – Queen Margaret’s - Business Management, Media & Communications, Psychology

“In terms of the amount of face to face teaching we tend to see more than 80% face to face and then the remaining amount will be synchronised seminars which are online” Huddersfield - Accounting & Finance, History, Psychology

“He confirmed that across the degree, it is about a third taught online” – Bath, Psychology

“we have 2hrs15 mins on campus and 45 mins online for each module” – Bolton Accountancy

“Weeks 1-6: 11 hours in person/3 hours online  
Weeks 8-12: 6 in person/6 online  
Weeks 15-24: 8 in person/8 online

The in person teaching is a mix of seminars, workshops and tutorial group meetings with their Personal Tutor, whilst the online consists of pre-recorded lectures and interactive webinars.” Aston – Law

Accounting and Finance and History and Politics are a bit more straight-forward and students will typically study 4 modules each term featuring a 1-hour in person lecture, a 1-hour seminar and a 1 hour pre-recorded lecture each week. Although there will be some variations.” Aston Accounting & Finance , History

“contact time/hours includes face-to-face (36 hrs) and online (12 hrs) contact time, making a total of 48 hours” – Northampton -Law

Qn “so am I correct then that all lectures are online , but all seminars are in person?”

Ans “Yes. that is correct. Some guided learning may take the form of an in person lecture but the main weekly content will be pre-recorded online content”

Solent - Psychology

“We usually run 1hr lectures (which will mostly be online/recorded) and 2hr tutorials (on campus).” – Abertay – Accounting & Finance

“We don’t do any live online teaching, but most modules have pre-recorded elements to watch before the live lectures.

Contact Hours	Online	In-person
Lectures	4	4
Seminars	0	4

This in-person total increases in later years”

Greenwich, Psychology

### Appendix 3 – Self Imposed Online teaching - Examples of teaching made available online as well as in-person.

NB – All these excerpts are from email exchanges in response to enquiries made as if I were a parent of a perspective candidate

“ Whether a student attends a lecture or seminar has to be the responsibility of the student. If a student wants to only attend a lecture online or watch a recording (all lectures are recorded under the accessibility law) then this is the responsibility of the student . . . . . Watching a recorded lecture is not attendance, joining a 'live' stream is counted as attendance (as you name appears on the Teams session) but students will have to be given permission to do this”– Greenwich, Law

“Yes, all lectures are recorded live to help for revision etc. when they do assignments. ....

We can't control them but we talk to them and encourage attendance but aside from the social interaction – watching online after the event can be as equally rewarding or beneficial. It depends how particular students learn.” Bath Spa , Law

“Many lectures are recorded and made available to students . . . . .

We look at a range of data to build a picture of a student's engagement. Low attendance in person might trigger us to look at online engagement and submissions to see if we need to be concerned about a student” – Bristol , History

“Practice varies for recording of lectures; some staff do, others don't. . . . .

..... ..Our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) allows students to access the online resources (including lecture slideshow, reading lists and any recorded sessions) for viewing wherever they wish. The expectation is that students attend all timetabled sessions rather than relying on just accessing from home. ....In all other cases the expectation is that students will attend all classes; the VLE resources and recordings of teaching are not considered a substitute for regular attendance. The University monitor in-person and online attendance and have protocols for supporting non-attending students (ranging from non-attendance warning letters to offering bespoke support as appropriate)” Bath Spa , Geography Human

“All lectures are delivered in the classroom. Each one is video-taped and uploaded immediately afterwards onto the virtual learning environment (currently called Moodle). It suits some of our students, depending on their external work requirements and the timing of the lectures, to catch up with their lectures a day or two subsequent to actual delivery. Some of the seminars may be held on line. We are constantly trying to come up with the best balance of delivery to suit the student cohorts; they have representation in the decision-making process.” – East London, Psychology

“Yes, recordings are normally made in lectures but as a face to face teaching university generally not the seminars . . . . .

A brief answer to your question is that as students have personally chosen to be there and are adults, it is entirely up to them how they best utilise the services we provide. The university do make contact with students whose attendance starts to

become poor to assist them where required and ensure they are OK.” Greenwich , Accounting & Finance

“Lectures are recorded by default, tutorials are not recorded.” – Bristol , Accounting & Finance

“We do provide lecture recordings to our students for accessibility reasons as we have a number of students with disabilities. Students are required to meet at least two in-person contact points per month in order to comply with our engagement policy (if they do not they could be withdrawn from their course), but outside of that we recognise that our students are adults partaking in independent learning and so, whilst we do check in with students with low attendance as a wellbeing check, we do not apply any punitive measures for not turning up to lectures.” – Bristol , Geography

“All lectures, both online and in-person are recorded and available for students to watch online. . . . . Ideally, students attend because they are interested in the subject and want to discuss the ideas. However, if a student's attendance falls below an acceptable level, then it is possible that they can be exited from the programme for poor engagement.” Trinity St Davids, History

“most lectures are recorded (technology permitting) so that students can make-up for any lost learning through illness/absence and the recordings also become a revision resource for students when preparing for assessments.” Brighton , Accounting & Finance

“We record lectures but the attendance in-person is **COMPULSORY** at all timetabled classes. The module leader mark attendance register in the class to ensure the students are physically present in the class.” University College Birmingham, Finance & Accounting

“I wouldn't say that recording is routine, but, as I said, it does depend on the lecturer. Attendance is monitored by our admin teams on site, and by lecturers themselves. We do put the trust in our students, as it is their learning.” Bishop Grosseteste , general comment

“the introduction of the attendance monitoring policy in the last couple of years has meant that attendance has actually increased despite lectures now being available online.. ..... We don't guarantee that lectures will actually be recorded as this does depend on participating students' consent, the topic of content being discussed, and technology working correctly, so students are aware that they can't always rely on lectures being uploaded. We also have an attendance policy in place for lectures and seminars which means students are expected to attend at least 80% of all taught sessions.” Brighton, Psychology

“University policy is that lectures are recorded to act as a resource and there is an expectation that students physically attend all classes. The University has a lack of engagement process which deals with attendance concerns.” South Wales - Law

Appendix 4 – Examples of reluctance / inability to release exact data about online vs. in-person contact hours as required by CMA guidance.

NB – All these excerpts are from email exchanges in response to enquiries made as if I were a parent of a perspective candidate. The below are after multiple email questions attempting to obtain the exact contact hours information

**Research Question:** “I have asked for the following breakdown of typical weekly contact teaching hours that a student can expect : -

Typical Weekly Contact Hours	In-person	Online
Lectures	X	X
Seminars	X	X”

**Answer:** “We do not have this information “ *Exeter , Accounting & Finance*

“The day(s) and frequency of classes are subject to change, also the schedule of the course will be confirmed and published after successful enrolment. “ University of East London,

“Most lectures are on campus but I cannot state an exact number as it could change” South Wales, Law

“The balance of online and in-person learning is individual to each course and the mix is subject to change each year therefore I am afraid I cannot give you accurate information on how each course splits it.” – Queen Mary , General comment

“I can't say conclusively one way or the other ..... This is because we have a large number of academics teaching across modules on the Course, and what they use online / in person is their choice. Every year we reflect on the taught content, online content, teaching methods etc. and make changes based on good practice.” South Wales , Psychology

“We are still working on the timetable but for year 1 students I think it may stay the same which is Monday online and Tuesday all day in college . . . . .You are in at least 3 days for each year of study” – Bradford College , Law

“It is usually around 12 hours a week for a full time course with majority of sessions held onsite and maybe some online lectures. However, please note that timetables for new students will not be confirmed until week commencing 18<sup>th</sup> September. . . . . Unfortunately I cannot give you any further information, the timetables will be confirmed week commencing 18<sup>th</sup> September. “ Leeds Beckett , Business Accounting