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Education on the screen

By Claudia Wanner

Lectures at Cambridge University will only be held online until mid-2021. However, there is no complete change to studying online

Sun Laying hesitates. The Hong Kong native, who has worked as a press officer for years, actually wanted to start a master’s degree in “International Relations” at King’s College in London from autumn. However, the announcement by the University of Cambridge to offer lectures online throughout the entire academic year 2020/2021 makes them rethink their plans.

"I will definitely postpone my studies if the university only offers all lectures online," she says. It's not just about graduation. "Living in London, discovering the city and its culture and meeting people I don't meet in my job is also part of it." Whether this is possible depends on the organization of the university as well as on the organization general corona restrictions in the UK.

How the next semester at King’s College will look is still open. But with Cambridge, one of the elite universities has advanced and has set a surprisingly extensive schedule. Other universities first set themselves for the winter semester.

For example, the California State University System, which teaches approximately 500,000 students in the US state, has decided that lectures for the academic semester will mainly take place online from October. The University of Manchester also gives lectures in autumn and winter virtually. In Germany, it has so far only been decided that the winter semester will start one month later than usual, at the beginning of November.

"Since the rules on distance keeping are likely to continue to apply, the university has decided that there will be no face-to-face lectures in the coming academic year," the university said. The events would instead be made available online. Since March, classes have been held exclusively online. Tests are also carried out virtually.

The question now is whether higher education will permanently migrate to the Internet, whether classic university cities could soon be a thing of the past. If work from home is becoming more and more natural, this could also apply to studying. Distance learning universities, which so far have been considered the second best solution for many students, could become the norm.

Maia Chankseliani, professor of international higher education at Oxford University, considers such a step “unlikely”. This has long been true not only in Great Britain, but also elsewhere.

She expects that lectures for large groups will continue to be broadcast online for the time being, but that the majority of universities will not immediately commit themselves to the whole academic year to come. In contrast, tutorials in small groups, which are important at Anglo-Saxon universities, will soon take place on site again.

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Bruce Macfarlane, professor of higher education at the University of Bristol, also considers the “hype about the shift to online learning” to be exaggerated. "The virus does not make academics models for student-oriented learning," he says. At many universities, virtual learning is at best a place to store manuals and lecture notes, interactive events remain the exception.

"Face-to-face teaching will continue to be valued higher," he is convinced. As evidence, he refers to the example of Hong Kong. Because of the sometimes violent protests in the Chinese special administrative zone, universities there already moved their lessons to the Internet in autumn.

The corona virus then led to the fact that this rule still applies today. However, many students are not satisfied with the model, feel that they are not getting the education they are paying for, and at least request a partial reimbursement of tuition fees.

Anglo-Saxon university models have an advantage in the current environment because training in small groups, in which physical distance regulations are easier to maintain, traditionally has a particularly high priority. However, seminars in small groups in the social sciences are easier to implement with distance specifications than, for example, in the science laboratories, explains Nicholas Guyatt, historian and lecturer in Cambridge.

On the other hand, the educational institutions in Great Britain and the USA are particularly dependent on the students and their fees to finance the higher education systems, which have been privatized for years. The uncertain situation makes many freshmen consider postponing their studies, consider higher semesters to take a break.

It is not just about the social dimension of the course. Music students worry that ensemble and orchestra rehearsals will not be possible. Medical students wonder whether practical experience will be possible. For students who finance their training with part-time jobs, earning opportunities such as working in pubs or cafés are eliminated. Chankseliani is convinced that the most renowned universities do not have to worry about this. "I expect the UK's most prestigious universities to remain attractive to the vast majority of undergraduate students, regardless of what others offer online."

She believes it is highly unlikely that new students from home and abroad will do without a place in Oxbridge in order to complete a face-to-face training in Australia, Greece or elsewhere or to take up a distance learning course.

The situation is different for master's programs. Like Hong Kong's Sun Laying, significantly more prospective students are likely to consider continuing with their current job until the situation has been resolved

Anyone who speculates that in the current situation will pay lower fees for a largely online degree in the UK is likely to be disappointed. Britons and foreigners from the European Union currently pay £ 9,250 tuition fees per year, for non-EU foreigners the universities can set fees independently.

The preparation of the material for online lessons ultimately requires the same work from lecturers and administration, in many cases even more effort is required to prepare the material, explains Chankseliani.

Many British university cities have an additional incentive to lure students into the city and not to make all events available on the Internet. A large part of the living space for students belongs to the universities, the renting represents an important source of income, which should be disappointing in many places in the coming year.

It is precisely the cost of accommodation that makes it likely that Sun Laying will postpone the start of studies. "It doesn't make sense to me to live in one of the most expensive cities in the world and then sit at home all the time, except to go to tutoring sessions."