

20 COVID-19 and the Autonomous University of Barcelona: current trends on language teaching and learning strategies

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Abstract

When COVID-19 emerged, it meant many changes as to health specific measures for prevention as well as social, political, and educational considerations to cope with a completely new situation which necessitated very quick responses. In this sense, this worldwide pandemic implied challenges in terms of decision-making at the highest level, the key involvement of universities' technical support (taking into account pedagogical and logistics considerations) and very specific training for teaching staff to design materials and facilitate both remote tuition and students' assignments delivery and feedback. In this chapter, I will describe the design and development of a new interactive scenario where lecturers and students keep their teaching and learning practices working under very exceptional circumstances as it is the case of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). This institution has shown a very effective plan based on constant technical support and training, staff's full commitment to their new remote online language teaching and students' flexibility and willingness to learn within their English Studies degree despite an unfavourable context *a priori*.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, decision-making, support and training, Spain.

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How to cite: Oliver del Olmo, S. (2021). COVID-19 and the Autonomous University of Barcelona: current trends on language teaching and learning strategies. In N. Radić, A. Atabekova, M. Freddi & J. Schmied (Eds), *The world universities' response to COVID-19: remote online language teaching* (pp. 321-336). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.52.1281>

1. Introduction

The Royal Decree 463/2020 of March 14th, declaring the state of alarm for the management of the health crisis in Spain, caused by COVID-19, urged the educational system to cope with exceptional circumstances. In response to that, the UAB² had to fix criteria for the application of restrictions collected in ongoing official Resolutions by which new public health measures were, and still are, adopted to contain the pandemic in Catalonia. This unexpected situation implied challenges in terms of decision-making at the highest level, the key involvement of the institutional technical support for pedagogical ongoing academic activities and very specific training for the teaching staff to design materials to facilitate remote tuition, effective delivery of students' assignments, and efficient feedback.

This chapter will describe the design and explain the development of this new interactive scenario where teachers and students had, and still have, to keep their learning and teaching practices working under very exceptional circumstances.

First, I will provide details of the institutional context of the UAB to later deal with the technical support provided and the specific training offered to teachers, researchers, and administrative staff. In addition, I include specific recommendations for teachers and students and their respective training courses to aid pedagogical and logistics challenges posed by the pandemic.

Furthermore, I will depict the new learning scenario where issues such as student's participation and their assignments' delivery, teacher's feedback, and student's self-assessment are key.

Finally, some conclusions as to the efficiency of the institutional emergency plan and a possible further line of research on the topic are included.

2. <https://www.uab.cat/web/universitat-autonoma-de-barcelona-1345467954774.html>

2. Institutional context and emergency response

The UAB is a state university in Spain which was founded in 1968. Most of its teaching and extracurricular services are located in Bellaterra Campus, in Cerdanyola del Vallès, Barcelona. The UAB has 37,166 students, 3,262 lecturers, 107 Bachelor of Arts (BA)'s degrees, 328 postgraduate programmes and 90 PhD programmes. Now more than 50 years old, the UAB has already consolidated itself among the main university rankings. Furthermore, and as mentioned by [Fessenden \(n.d.\)](#), in recent years, this university has seen recognition for its efforts in promoting quality in teaching, attracting international talent, and obtaining a growing impact in research. In fact, the UAB has steadily shown an obvious improvement in its classifications in the most prestigious and influential international rankings, occupying an outstanding position among Spanish universities in world rankings, such as the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities.

The UAB had to reorganise teaching and assessment practically from one day to the next in March 2019, in other words, immediately after the state of alarm declaration, our institution steadily developed a specific website: *Information for COVID-19 (UAB, 2020)* to keep students, teachers, research, and administrative staff constantly updated.

This institutional website (see [Figure 1](#) below) includes key issues, such as a communication protocol for cases affecting members of the university community (students, teachers, or administrative staff developing symptoms of COVID-19), the UAB's contingency plan and organisation protocol to contain the epidemic outbreak in the territory of Catalonia, considerations related to teaching and assessment practices, such as field practices and outings, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) teaching resources available.

More specific information was also provided as to each academic centre or division, our libraries' service, international mobility, and possible Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) within this exceptional context, as shown in [Figure 2](#).

Figure 1. Information about COVID-19 website (UAB, 2020)

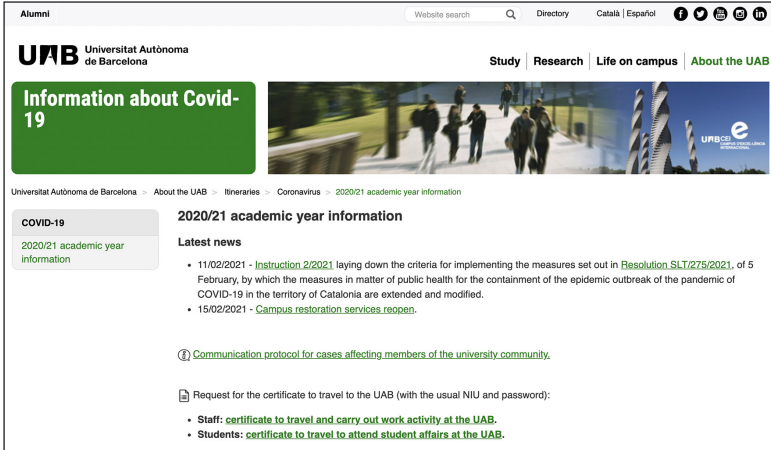


Figure 2. Coronavirus 2020/2021 academic year information (UAB, 2020)



In addition, the *Information about COVID-19* website includes links to web channels, such as *Canal Salut*³ (Health Channel in English), the latest news

3. <https://canalsalut.gencat.cat/ca/salut-a-z/c/coronavirus-2019-ncov/>

from the Spanish Ministry for health, consumption, and social welfare⁴, and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention updated measures⁵.

The COVID-19 website also displays statements from university and government institutions, namely *Generalitat de Catalunya* (the Catalan government) and the coordination with the Ministry of Universities in Spain. There are also reports on the regulatory impact of online assessment procedures: data protection and guaranteeing the rights of students (see [supplementary materials](#) Appendix 1 UAB data protection regulation), remote evaluation procedures, and external internships. Lastly, the website includes the final degree and Master of Arts (MA) theses academic calendars and has a section on universities and research with UAB's university sector plan, specifying the end of lockdown and transition from phase 0 to phase 1 in the universities' sector and research centres (where labs and animal farms were open despite the total lockdown of the campus).

The specific information provided in the UAB's *Information about COVID-19* website also includes selected guides on good communication practices in the Moodle classroom, the use of face masks, home management of waste in positive homes or in quarantine by the COVID-19 and the Official College of Psychology of Catalonia's recommendations for psychological management during confinement. Last but not least, there is a FAQ section dealing with queries about restrictions of activities due to the pandemic in Catalonia and questions and answers about COVID-19 in the university setting⁶.

3. ICT support and specific technical training

In this section, I will focus on the technical instructions that were regularly given to the teaching and research staff in the UAB and the institutional

4. <https://www.msbs.gob.es/profesionales/saludPublica/ccayes/alertasActual/nCov/home.htm>

5. <https://www.cdc.gov/>

6. See a selection of these specific questions in [supplementary materials](#) Appendix 3.1 Questions addressed to the lecturing staff and Appendix 3.2 Questions for students.

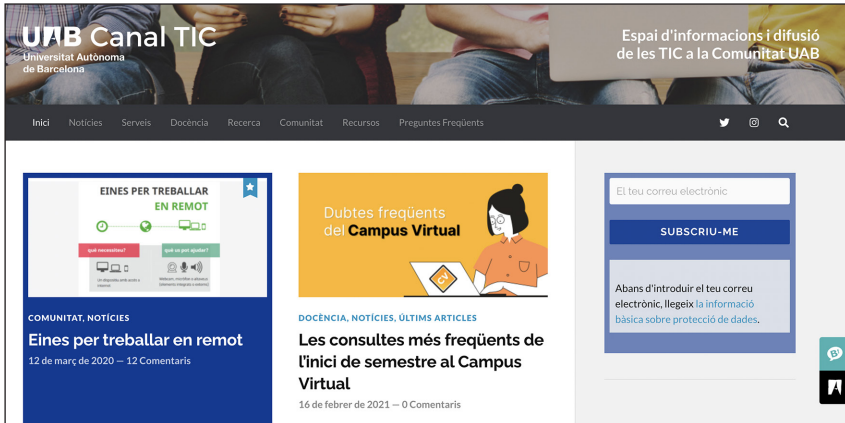
recommendations as to the use and management of ICT by teachers and students during the academic year 2019-2020 immediately after the pandemic set in.

Right from the beginning of the COVID-19 health crisis, the *Centre d'Assistència i Suport* (CAS), which is the central Computer Service support in the UAB, issued key recommendations to the teaching and research staff within the institution. First of all, they warned us to be careful with the use of passwords, to keep the operating systems updated and to install and keep our Personal Computer (PC)'s antivirus updated, too. The technicians reminded us to have a personal firewall and keeping back-up copies at all times, not to download files from unknown sources or open suspicious emails. In this sense, CAS showed great concern as to UAB staff's suitable usage of spam filters and avoiding suspicious websites whenever possible. Furthermore, the CAS experts highlighted the importance of not providing personal or financial details online nor leaving applications or documents open after usage. Finally, our technicians recommended that we turn off our PCs when not in use and to call their CAS service in case of any doubt or possible technical problem.

The UAB technical support created a specific *Canal TIC* blog (ICT blog) with relevant updates on equipment maintenance, regulations, and a series of useful advice for teachers and students as soon as we went teaching online in March 2020, immediately after Spain was declared in state of emergency. The ICT blog was designed to fit teachers and research staff's needs. There is also a News section, where the UAB university community can check periodic updates, in particular safety tips and recommendations to work remotely, the instruction 8/2020 on the protection of data in the field of virtual working meetings, and a series of videos of Teams' webinars on virtual teaching as shown in [Figure 3](#).

Thanks to the UAB rector's resolution, it established an exceptional criterion for the use of electronic identification and signature during the state of emergency period and instructions regarding the organisation of services including Sports Service (SAF), which did not charge any membership fee and provided a whole range of home training and exercises through their SAF application.

Figure 3. ICT blog (UAB, 2020)



On the one hand, teachers were recommended to check the infographic about *La universitat en línia, una oportunitat per innovar* (Online university, an opportunity to innovate) and provided a compilation of useful tools for teaching remotely. For those ‘new’ to the online teaching environment they urged to review *First Steps in Moodle* documents with tips to record sessions and tools to carry out online evaluation. Regarding assessment, the institution reminded us to always keep in mind the data protection regulation, to use software for comparing and detecting similar works (plagiarism), and to prevent teleworking risks. Regarding the latter, the experts advised us to follow UAB’s security specific recommendations and insisted on using the link to Online Help and Support within the virtual campus environment of our university.

On the other hand, the UAB’s Technical Support recommended to our students suitable tools to work remotely, software only for students, instructions on how to record a video, and to do a presentation, as well as information on online assessment tools. Besides encouraging students to follow the security tips and reminding them that there was a specific Help section in the virtual campus homepage, CAS experts strongly advised students to approach online learning positively.

4. ICT training courses for remote teaching

The UAB saw in online teaching an opportunity to innovate. In this vein, some general advice was given to the university community on the proper use of technologies and tools. Therefore, in this section I will include both the instructions given to the teaching staff when they started remote online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic early in 2020 and the specific institutional ICT training courses. The official instructions that our institution provided when we started with our online teaching and learning processes are reproduced below. The key points are accessibility and need for simplification, internet security, and privacy as regards recording of online classes.

“Do not forget that not everyone has the latest computer equipment or a high-speed internet connection and that at moments of maximum usage the system works slower than usual: simplify the processes as much as possible and add additional time for students to download and upload documents from and to the system, if necessary. Try to avoid having students upload photos or scanned documents (this can be complicated on mobile devices).

Whenever possible, always use ‘corporate tools’ such as Office365 (Teams, Forms, OneDrive, etc.) and Campus Virtual-Moodle. Avoid using free software such as Gmail, Zoom, Houseparty, etc., since the majority of these do not offer enough guarantees in terms of data protection and security. In addition, use of differing tools can create confusion for students.

Always be explicit when alerting students that the online session will be recorded, offering the possibility of disconnecting the camera to those who wish to do so. You must alert them before commencing the recording (proof that the procedure is being followed correctly)” (UAB, 2020).

At the start of the second semester (Spring 2020) the area of personal development and technical support at UAB organised a series of training courses in office

automation and quality for this extraordinary period of virtual teaching and remote working. During the first months after the Royal Decree declaring the state of emergency in Spain, our institution mainly focused on delivering specific courses on computer applications and programmes. ICT resources were provided for the optimisation and improvement of learning and teaching processes, for creating materials, learning strategies and assessment tools, communication and connectivity in a remote working environment (virtual), and the organisation of tuition and meetings using Teams to support teaching practices. In this regard, it was key to know how to use the institutional official platform (Teams) chosen for teaching during the pandemic, accessing its calendar, their live sessions/meetings, dealing with the waiting room, and recording a lecture (if required).

Later on, UAB's courses were more oriented towards personal skills development, in other words targeting personal excellence and professional effectiveness (see Bates, 2000; O'Sullivan et al., 2020), enhancing critical thinking and ethical commitment as cross-curricular skills of university students (e.g. Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2009), and dealing with committed teaching: strengthening the link between the university and the social environment (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

Eventually, we started the current academic year 2020/2021 with a wider range of specific training courses for administration, teachers, and research staff⁷. In this vein, the training courses, designed and developed by the UAB personal development and technical support (see Figure 4), were organised around the six following areas:

- computer tools and applications/programmes;
- personal skills;
- regulations;
- courses for teaching and research staff (*Personal Docent i Investigador*);
- prevention; and
- resources.

7. See the link: <https://infogram.com/1p12v0nllknr97fmvkj5107j30u6r5w92e3?live>

In *computer tools and applications/programmes*, lecturers can apply and learn about how to work in the Cloud with Microsoft Office 365 and One Note virtual, how to use Teams to support university teaching, good practice in remote Teamwork Management, and collaboration functionality using Teams as well as communication and connectivity in a remote working environment. In *personal skills*, the courses available deal with resilience (how to manage changes positively), virtual work by objectives, interpersonal communication while working remotely, stress management, uncertainty, fear and self-management, transforming insecurity and fears into tools for professional success, and helping ourselves and others with our communication. In *regulations*, staff become aware of the institutional norms on data protection of personal nature and the specificities of the remote working environment (virtual); *courses for teaching and research staff* include management by objectives, learning to learn, project management remotely, team management, participative and creative techniques, professional efficiency 4.0, and hybrid team management; *prevention* offers courses on prevention at work and safety in a remote working environment, capacitation on collecting liquid nitrogen for research, and oral communication using a mask. Finally, *resources* display a series of ICT recommendations, the ICT channel for News in Teams, and the specific Stream Channel where lecturers and research staff can find videos on how to use Teams for university teaching and learning.

Figure 4. Specific training courses for teaching staff and researchers (UAB, 2020)

The screenshot shows the UAB website interface. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Estudients', 'Personal UAB', and 'Alumni', along with a search bar and social media icons. The main header includes 'UAB Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona' and navigation options for 'Estudiar', 'Investigar', 'Viure el campus', and 'Coneix la UAB'. The main content area features a large image of a modern office with people working at computers. Below the image, the text reads 'Personal UAB Personal acadèmic i investigador'. A breadcrumb trail indicates the current page is 'Formació del personal acadèmic i investigador'. On the left, there is a 'Serveis' menu with options like 'Nomenament de col·laboradors' and 'Sol·licitud de dades de RRHH'. The main content area highlights 'Formació que ofereix l'Àrea de Desenvolupament de Persones i Suport Tècnic per al PDI' and 'Formació en habilitats instrumentals, prevenció i seguretat'. A right-hand sidebar contains an 'INTRANET UAB' section with a person icon and the text 'Accedeix al teu espai personal'. The footer of the page shows the number '330'.

5. Pedagogical and logistics considerations

This section will deal with pedagogical and logistics considerations as to recommendations for teachers and online teaching challenges. These concern student's participation, assignments' delivery, and feedback and student's self-assessment.

5.1. Recommendations for teachers

As previously stated, the UAB recommended using Teams as the institutional tool since it is very comprehensive and is integrated with the rest of Microsoft tools. However, there is also the possibility of using Zoom, Meet, Hangouts, Skype, or Jitsi. The latter, with open code and without having to register or download anything. Once lecturers received training on how to create materials, online teaching management, a wide range of tools and gadgets, and methodological resources, they were also instructed as to their daily teaching practice. In other words, the institution suggested planning communication with students to facilitate and enhance participation, and explain to them how virtual teaching would work in the following months. They also recommended publishing a working plan in PDF, using a short video and the Forum tool to allow for public tutorials where students could share doubts and learn from each other's issues. All this was combined with using Teams to have a live session, a synchronous chat with students, the instant messaging application in Moodle, or the UAB Webmail for individual tutorials to provide students with feedback.

Throughout the end of the academic year 2019-2020 it was shown that planning a calendar so that students can see key dates at first sight and announce news or upcoming events through the Moodle classroom is key. Moreover, explaining a topic using a PPT, for example, and recording it has become a very popular practice among the teaching staff. Once recorded, teaching materials can be published and uploaded to the virtual campus, and online assessment tools such as questionnaires are used both by students and teachers. On the other hand, Teams is constantly used for assignment delivery, work presentations, and public

defences of university students' work, namely, a subject's oral presentation, BA papers, MA theses, or even doctoral dissertations.

5.2. Online teaching challenges

Even though remote tuition has opened new possibilities for university students and teaching and research staff, it has also posed many challenges, especially as regards encouraging and keeping student motivation and participation, sending/receiving teacher feedback, and dealing with student assessment online, among other issues.

Teachers were trained to enhance student participation through the use of Socrative or Mentimeter online computer applications. These questionnaires allow for anonymous responses but the teacher can also ask to identify the student by including their names or UAB's identification code which are also very useful in keeping a register of group's participation and check the subject's attendance list.

As far as student assignment delivery and feedback are concerned, computer applications, such as *Additio o IDoceo*, allow both for student assignment delivery and sending teacher's personal reports. However, Moodle enables the university community to edit work (underline, write...), mark it, and add comments to it. Teachers can even send a message to students informing them that the assessment results are available through Google or Microsoft, i.e. combining correspondence (Morodo, 2020).

As for student self-assessment for practice, Google Forms and Microsoft Forms permit users to create forms and self-correct questionnaires quite easily. There is also the possibility to set up messages to explain why an answer is correct or incorrect. The Questionnaire tool in Moodle performs this function too, but it is rather more complex. However, teachers can design answers with negative scores and make sure that the one who is answering is the student himself/herself. In fact, the creation of rubrics was one of the main concerns among the teaching staff at the beginning of the semester 2019-2020, but eventually

teachers ended up using CoRubrics for student assessment, peer-assessment, and self-assessment. Moodle was also a suitable option when using rubrics to assess student progress and performance as the Questionnaire tool in Moodle allows making questions and answers (test type) with positive or negative scores with different values.

6. Students and teachers new learning scenario

Throughout the past months both students and teachers have had to deal with a new organisation of learning-teaching processes and have had to cope with key issues, such as family responsibilities, time management, teleworking, home computer equipment, connectivity, and social isolation (psychological factors). In [Noguera's \(2020\)](#) training course, teachers discussed how to move from face-to-face to distance tuition, they reflected on their teaching, learning, and remote assessment and thought about how to exploit the possibilities of using a virtual classroom and other tools. In fact, teachers had to keep teaching and assessing student skills and attitudes but most of them were not so familiar with remote online language teaching. As a matter of fact, there was a clear lack of time and we had to learn as we kept on teaching. Furthermore, both teachers and students needed some extra training on synchronous classrooms, the use of technology, and social interaction. To keep student motivation high and avoid their dropout, teachers were asked to design short offline activities and enhance coordination among the teaching staff. The institutional technical support offered by CAS was key to help teachers go on with their work by incorporating new resources, making students responsible for their own language learning, opening to new methodologies, and reinforcing active English learning. In this sense, teachers were recommended to use the potential that mobile phones offer to record videos and audios, to take photos, to write short texts, and to vote and answer questionnaires (Mentimeter, etc.) as well as to display images and documents.

Nevertheless, at times both teachers and students felt overwhelmed with work, some users still lacked technological skills and some students seemed confused

at the beginning of online teaching in times of confinement. Not having face-to-face contact made students pester the administrative, teaching, and research staff by sending countless numbers of emails (24hx7), some of them including connectivity issues.

7. Conclusions

When the COVID-19 worldwide crisis emerged, it meant many changes as to health specific measures for prevention besides social, political, and education considerations to cope with a completely new situation, which required very quick responses. As to the teaching practices in this new reality, the UAB recommended that teachers focus on pedagogy and not so much on the platform chosen by the institution (Teams). Our institution's experts suggested that both teachers and researchers spend time thinking about how to use the new technologies in their own teaching practices and reflect on how to exploit the potential that interactivity offers to the teaching-learning community since most students are digital natives and English online teaching may have relevant advantages (Oliver del Olmo, 2017; Pérez-Cañado, 2011).

The UAB as an institution perceived this abrupt change as a clear opportunity to innovate since, in principle, it meant opening to new teaching methodologies, which allowed students and teachers to explore other foreign language learning methods and tools. However, during this process, teachers had to re-think what the main objective of their tuition was in terms of contents and skills or competences and how to proceed by using the most suitable methods and activities.

Collaborative work, on the other hand, urged teachers to find out how to group students and be very aware of the importance of timing tasks properly by using resources accordingly. In addition, teachers had to consider which devices were already available for students and which evidence was the most optimal for collection in order to assess their progress in a fair way. In this respect, our institution has shown a very effective plan based on constant technical support and specific training for students and teachers.

Finally, I would like to state that thanks to UAB's teaching staff's full commitment to their new remote online language teaching and the university students' flexibility and willingness to learn, in rather unfavourable circumstances, this methodological challenge has evolved into a very intense and meaningful opportunity to learn in many aspects. A further study on this issue may include both a quantitative and qualitative research methodology by incorporating interviews with teachers, researchers, and administrative staff involved in the process and passing questionnaires of student satisfaction regarding online teaching and learning strategies. Our results might shed some light on good practices and possible areas of improvement for the current and, most likely, persisting online language teaching at university level.

8. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/ylh38voerncroy8gl0eow02vo74r1gfv>

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
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The world universities' response to COVID-19: remote online language teaching
Edited by Nebojša Radić, Anastasia Atabekova, Maria Freddi, and Josef Schmied

Publication date: 2021/05/24

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ISBN13: 978-2-490057-92-4 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-93-1 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-91-7 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2021.
