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Covid-19 will be painful for universities, but also bring change



In the normal run of things, late summer sees airports in the
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emerging world fill with nervous 18-year-olds, jetting off to begin a
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new life in the rich world's universities. The annual trek of more than
5m students is a triumph of globalisation.

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Yet with flights grounded and borders closed, this migration is
about to become the pandemic's latest victim. Yet the disaster may
have an upside. For many years government subsidies and booming
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demand have allowed universities to resist changes that could
benefit both students and society. They may not be able to do so for
much longer.

Until now most of them have resisted putting undergraduate
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courses online. Now change is being forced upon them. The College
Crisis Initiative at Davidson College says that less than a quarter of
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American universities are likely to teach mostly or wholly in person next term.

Covid-19 is catalysing innovation, too. The Big Ten Academic Alliance, a group of midwestern universities, is offering many of its 600,000 students the opportunity to take online courses at other universities in the group. There is huge scope for using digital technology to improve education. Poor in-person lectures could be replaced by online ones from the best in the world, freeing up time for the small-group teaching which students value most.

Universities are rightly proud of their centuries-old traditions, but their ancient pedigrees have too often been used as an excuse for resisting change. If covid-19 shakes them out of their complacency, some good may yet come from this disaster.