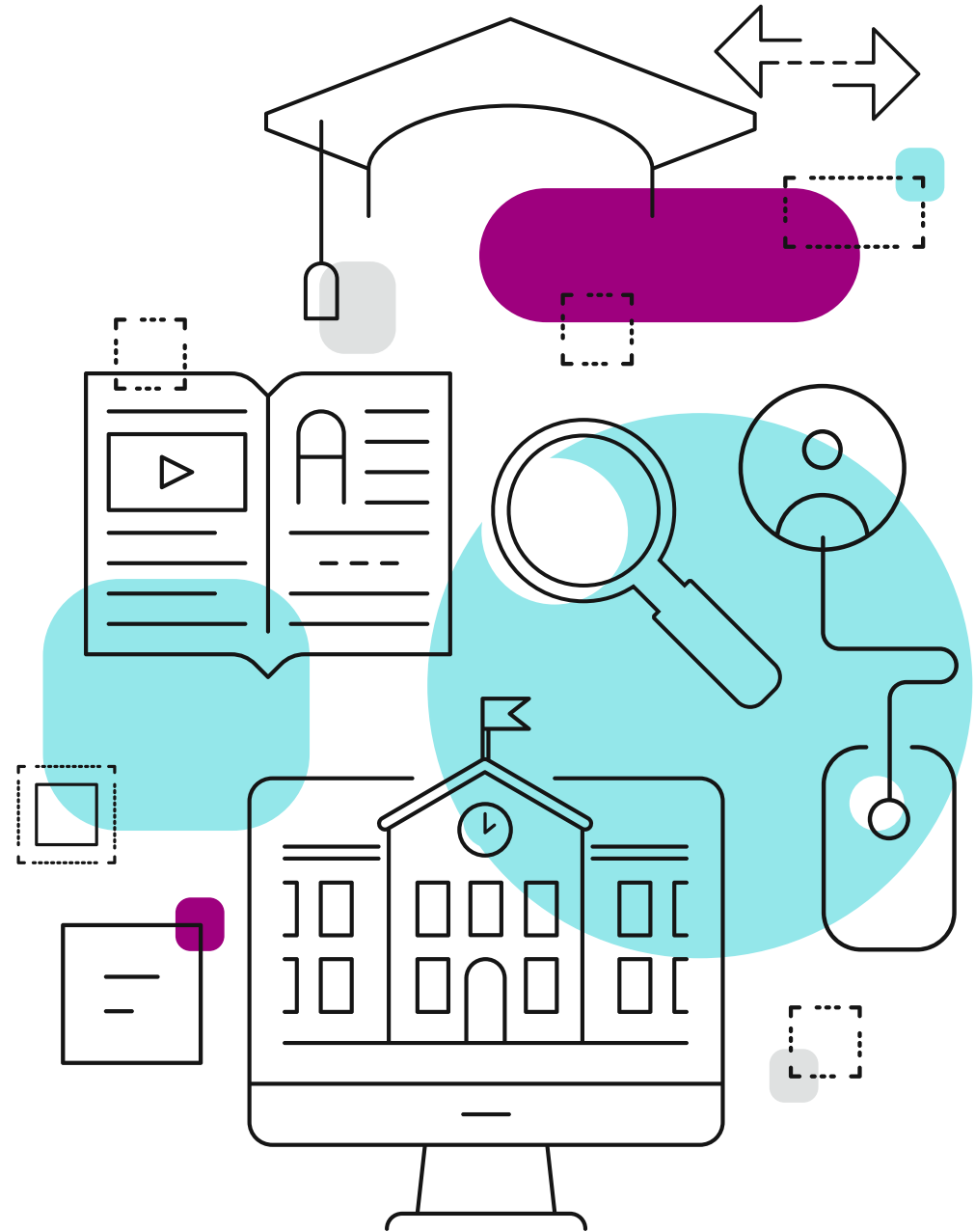


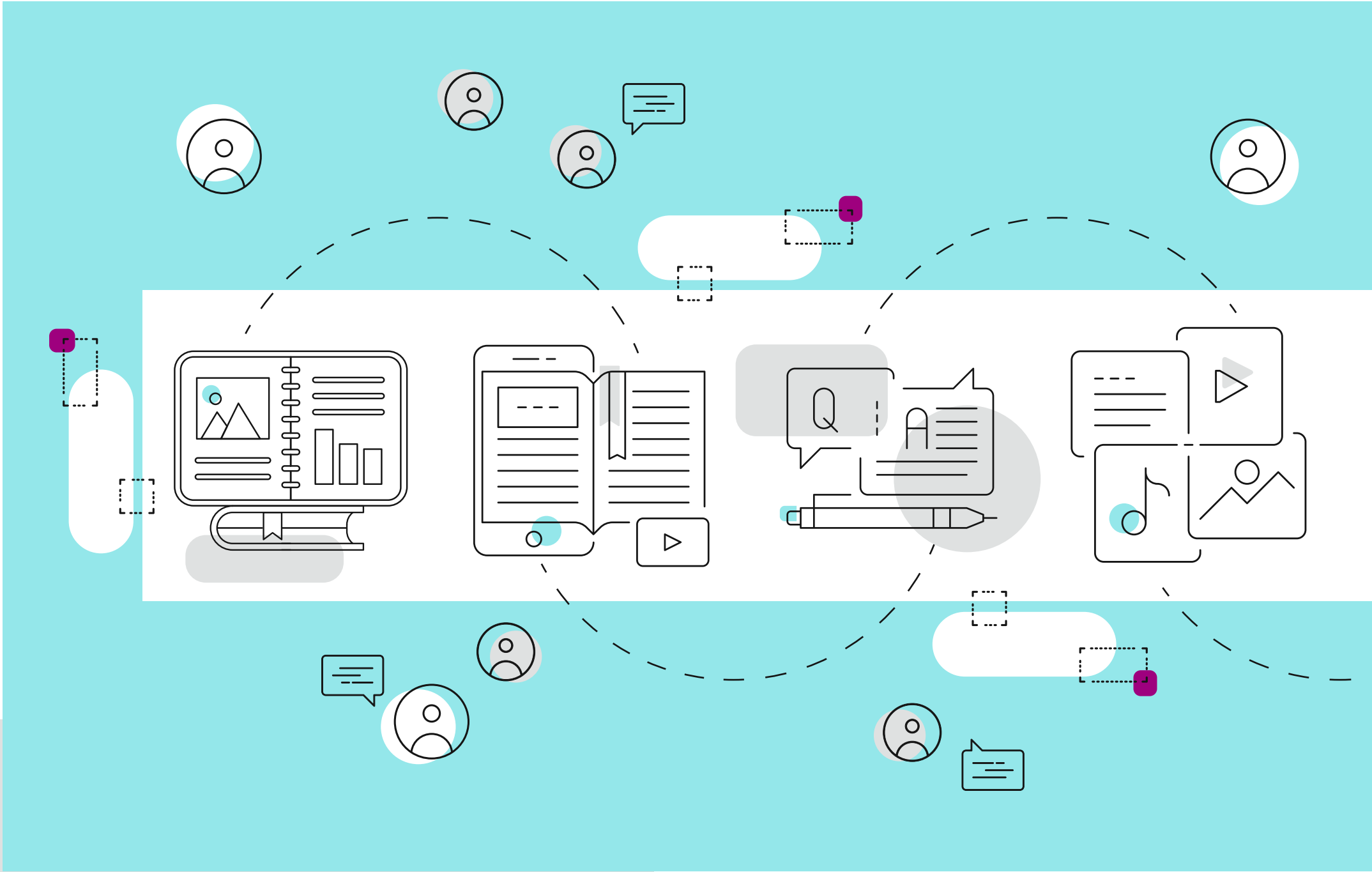
# The Future of ELT in the Middle East

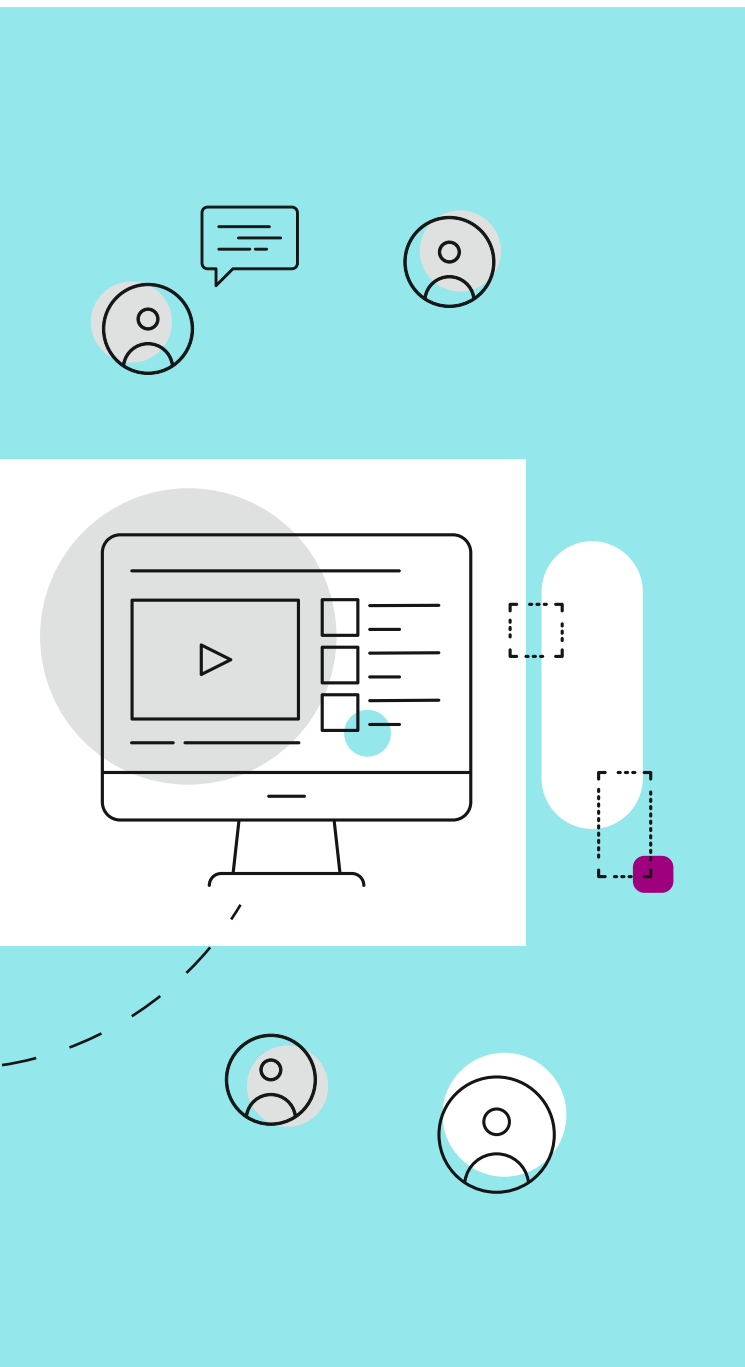
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Higher Education

Pamela Johnson | Pearson Learning Consultant







## Executive Summary

Education is transforming, and with it, the role of course content. The purpose of this study was to find out what higher education instructors and senior leaders were concerned about in a time of transformative change and also to see what role coursebooks will play in the future of English language education. A survey containing questions on course content, assessment and professional development was distributed to educators in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman. It was followed by a focus-group conversation with a small number of survey respondents. The survey respondents ranked finding course content that works face-to-face or online as a primary concern, followed by managing student behavior online, and creating engaging online learning experiences. Survey results also indicated that even teachers who have a textbook assigned to their course prefer to create their own resources for about half of their class time. Respondents also expressed interest in professional development in creating content. This could indicate that the role of commercially produced textbooks in the Middle East might change, and digital course material for synchronous online classes, as well as face-to-face classes, will have to be versatile and engaging.

# Introduction

In spring 2020, educators around the world had to shift to remote learning, whether they were ready or not. Some higher education institutions did well, others got by well enough, and still others struggled as they were starting from zero in terms of their preparation. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a reckoning with traditional content and practices, and it exposed the inadequacies of outdated content and a widespread lack of professional development in teaching with technology.

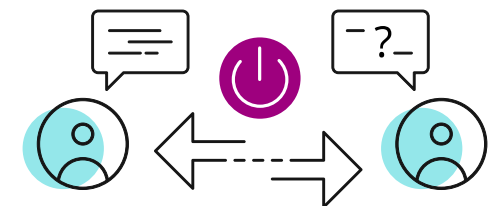
Even institutions with sound instructional technology infrastructure, digital course content, and teachers who knew how to use it still had challenges. Instructors who had been teaching in face-to-face environments suddenly had to rethink how they used their resources in a synchronous online class. Participation and engagement became much harder to see than in brick-and-mortar classrooms. Institutions had to quickly create policies on camera and microphone use, as well as what counted as attendance.

At the other end of the spectrum, there were institutions that had no instructional technology infrastructure, no staff with expertise on how to build that infrastructure, and teachers who on the whole were unfamiliar with technology beyond a classroom projector and online video. More worryingly, there were institutions with strong policies *against* using technology in the classroom, with search engines blocked on campus internet systems, inadequate internet signals, poorly maintained classroom equipment and no professional development strategy to support educators in teaching with technology. These institutions had to build an infrastructure and learn how to use it simultaneously, all while grappling with the same challenges better prepared institutions faced.

Having weathered these challenges, today there is a world of higher education more ready to think beyond traditional classroom practices, to create learning experiences that exploit the advantages of technology and new modes of learning.

In a changed and still uncertain world, some students, educators and institutions remain unable to return to the traditional face-to-face classroom, and others would not wish to do so entirely, having seen the potential of technology to expand the possibilities of learning experiences.

Different experiences mean different types of course content are needed, with different capabilities. Etexts and digital practice platforms are only part of what educators need to create engaging lessons online, in a face-to-face classroom, or some combination of the two.



# The Research

A survey of higher education English language teaching professionals across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain was distributed in spring 2021 via email from Pearson representatives to **60** institution leaders. After **38** responses were gathered, the survey was then posted on LinkedIn by Pearson representatives. Including those garnered via email and LinkedIn, there were **56** total responses. Question topics included course content, assessment, professional development and special needs. The emails requested leaders to forward the survey to their teaching teams. Responses include input from both institution leaders and instructors. Before the survey was placed on LinkedIn, questions on region and occupation were added to filter out potential irrelevant responses. Eight responses were abridged in this way, meaning a total of **48** respondents were permitted to complete the survey.

Questions on content were branched according to respondents' answers. There were also demographic data-filtering questions that could offer insight into differences according to size and in the perceptions of classroom teachers versus institution leadership. It is important to note that **29** of the **48** survey responses are from the UAE.



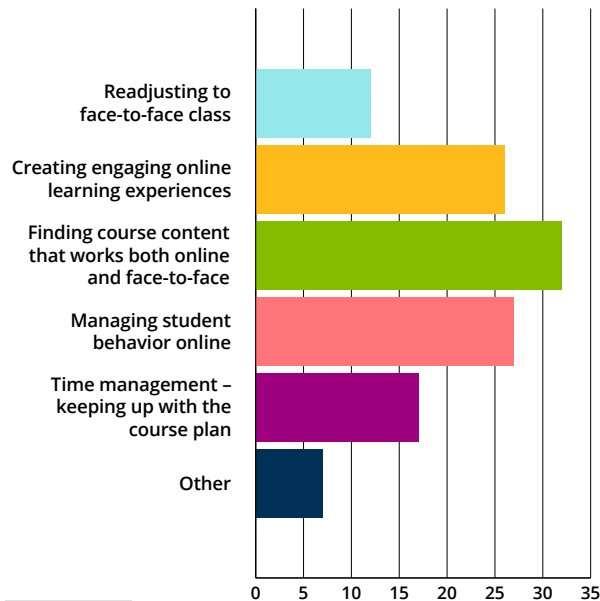
When asked about the type of program they were working in, respondents selected as their top three descriptions academic English (**66.7%**), general English (**56.3%**) and university foundations program (**56.3%**). Respondents selected elementary (CEFR A1 **54.2%**, CEFR A2 **75%**) and early intermediate (**66.7%**) English language learners as the predominant level of students attending their programs. Half of the **48** respondents have more than 20 years' teaching experience, **18.8%** have 11–15 years' experience, and **16.7%** have 16–20 years' experience.

The survey was followed by a focus group with survey respondents who indicated willingness to discuss the questions in more detail. The focus group took place on May 25 2021 and consisted of three participants: one each from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The purpose of the discussion was to gather insight and more detailed information about organizational responses to the spring 2020 shift to remote learning; the conversation explored camera policy, assessment, course materials and what was coming for academic year 2021–22.

# Results

Results indicate the educators' greatest concerns are finding course content that works both online and face-to-face. This is followed by managing student behavior online and creating engaging online learning experiences.

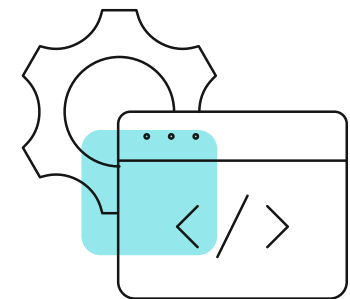
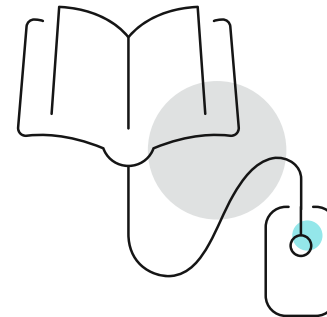
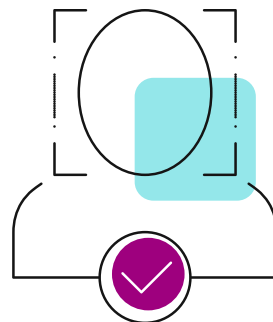
**Q** What are the biggest challenges you predict for the coming year? Choose three.



Sample: 48



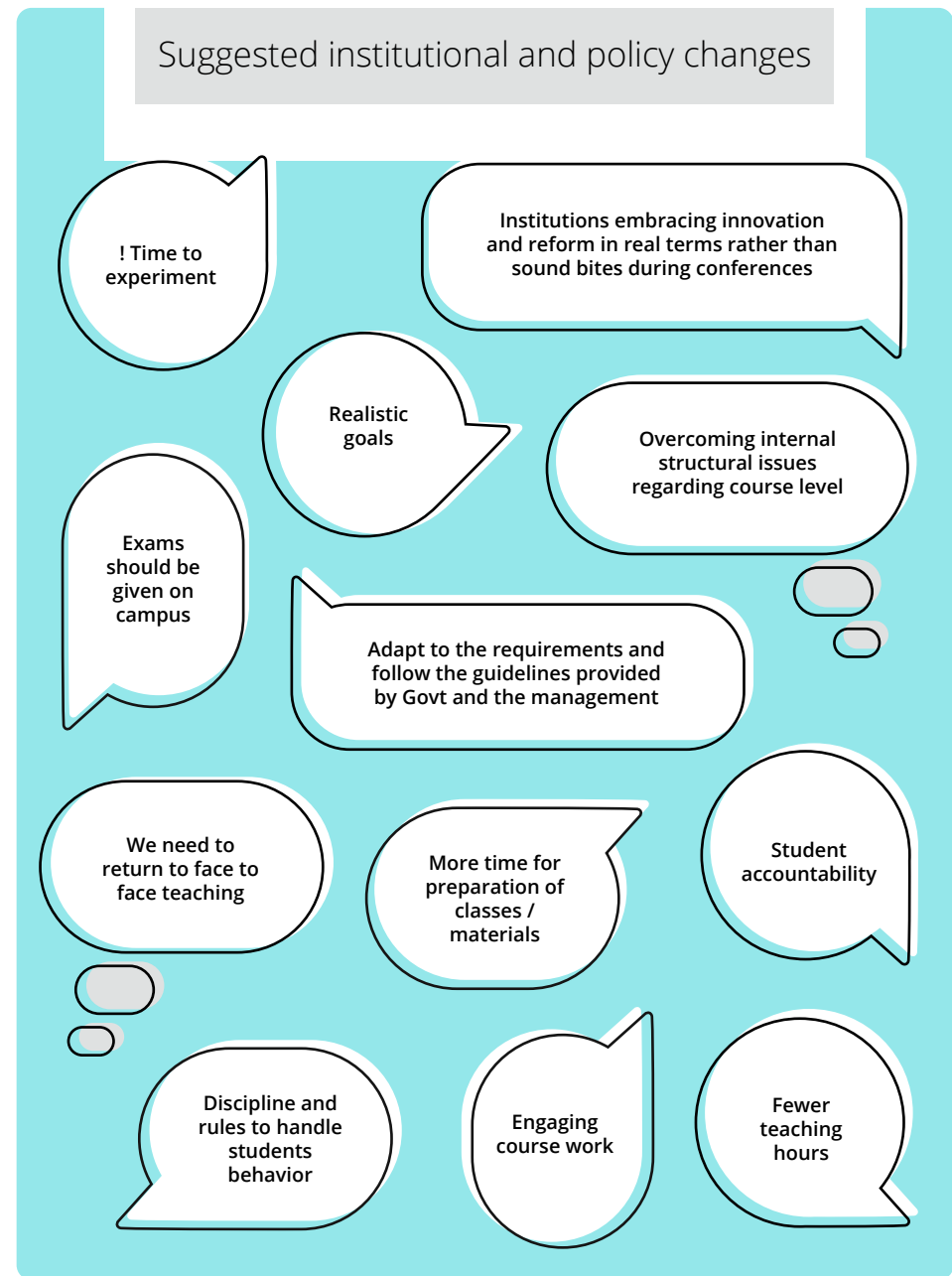
When asked what would help educators overcome their most pressing challenges, there was great variety in the responses, but a few themes emerge. Respondents note professional development, course content and appropriate digital infrastructure as possible solutions for the challenges they face.



**Q** What would help you overcome the challenges you selected in the previous question?

	Professional development	Content	Infrastructure
More time and very high level PD, as well as books that suit the context	●	●	
Targeted Professional Development session	●		
Material that is suitable for both platforms of teaching		●	
Shared experiences	●		
Training and Resources	●	●	
Use the current online delivery experience to modify the face to face content		●	●
Continuing to practice different online teaching methods	●		
Demo lessons	●		
Content creation tools which save time		●	
Resources		●	
Course content needs to be adjusted to suit new set of circumstances		●	
Course materials, development of a program that ties in with specific undergraduate degree courses		●	
Infrastructure, new load subject			●
Different educational platforms		●	●
Professional Development Workshops	●		
Learner management apps in online classes, apps that facilitate online group work			●
New materials to challenge educators as well as students, more fun and engaging content		●	
Unified platform. Remote management of student device			●
Interactive forums with academic gurus to respond to queries. Online publisher forums to encourage CPD	●		
PD, better LMS and video-conference software (BB Collaborate Ultra is not as engaging as Zoom)	●	●	●

### Suggested institutional and policy changes



# Technology Tools

Nearly all respondents used video conference and learning management systems daily. About half said they use digital worksheets daily or weekly, and nearly **70%** said they use quiz and game tools daily or weekly, with **27%** saying they used these tools daily. Just under **19%** report using interactive presenters daily or weekly. Using many of these interactive quiz, game, worksheet and discussion tools gave teachers an indication if students were actively participating in an online class, even when mics and cameras were off. Several of these tools also provide formative assessment data.

One UAE-based focus group participant said –

“ I often feel like I'm teaching into a void. You're just, like, projecting yourself out there and you have no idea of what's happening ... so I know what I did was I used Socrative and I do a lot of mini quizzes and interactive things where they have to basically do something and interact and give responses to something so it's kind of like a check-in. A lot of us use those tiny mini assessments just to make sure they're [students] keeping along, and that seemed to work pretty well. ”

**Q** How often do you use the following tools in your teaching?



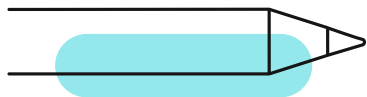
Sample: 48



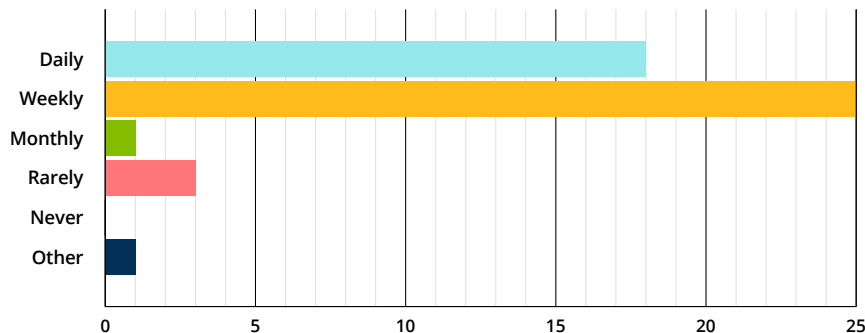
# Course Content

Respondents reported that institutions largely provide commercially produced textbooks for their courses, although the majority of respondents said that they prefer to create their own materials about half of the time, and just over **10%** said they prefer using their own materials entirely. Most respondents said there was an eText or ebook for their course, but **14%** said their students don't know how to access it.

**Q** Do you prefer to create your own resources or use a coursebook?



**Q** How often do you create or use your own resources?



Sample: 48

**Q** Is it hardcopy, eText, or both?



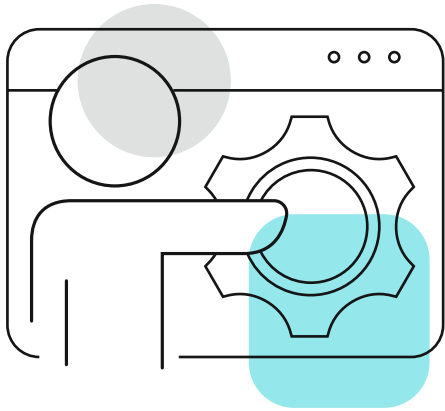
Sample: 42

One educator from the UAE who participated in the focus group explained *"I think right now many of the ebooks available on the market ... they were just paper books that have been transformed into static PDFs that are ok for demonstrating things ... I've done quite a few online MOOC [Massive Open Online Courses] classes where you have short videos, two-to-three minute videos and follow-up questions or activities that allow students to get engaged and follow through bit by bit, very itemized bits. I think that, especially with this generation ... activities and interactive things seem to work much better."*

Another educator in Qatar said *"I think often the feedback on the generic books is that we don't use them all because a lot of it just isn't suitable."*

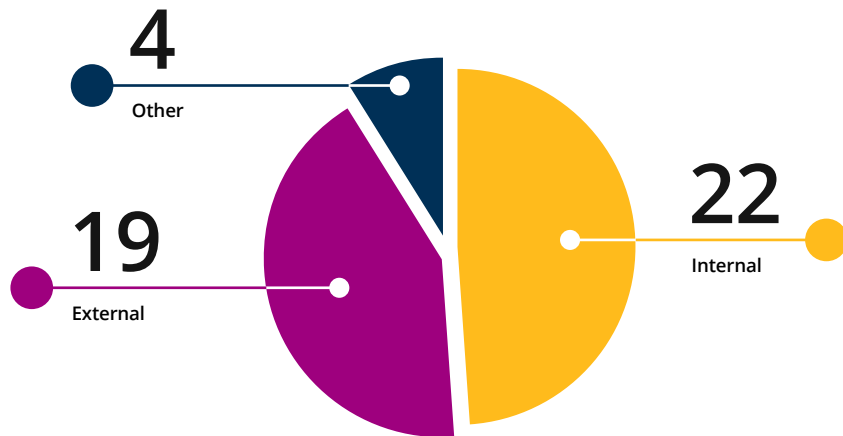
A participant from the UAE said *"... next year everything is supposed to be all ebooks, which for English language teaching is not ideal ... Part of it is for distribution purposes because students aren't necessarily coming to campus and they live all over the country. For other subjects, it might not be such an issue, but for us we resisted until we saw that it might be the best solution."*

# Professional Development



Respondents said that the most useful professional development that they could attend in the coming year would be about maximizing student engagement in a synchronous online class and content creation. Respondents were largely evenly divided on whether internal or external professional development was most effective.

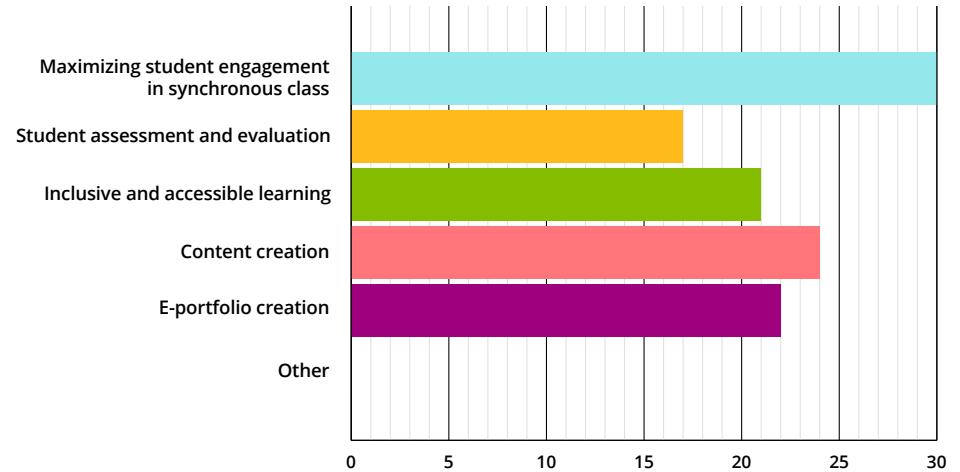
**Q** Was the most effective professional development from within your institution or from an external provider?



Sample: 46

**Q** The professional development that would help me the most this year would be about:

Respondents could choose more than one option.



Sample: 48

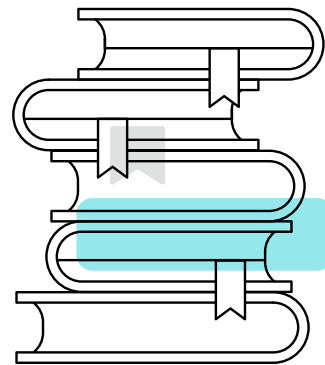
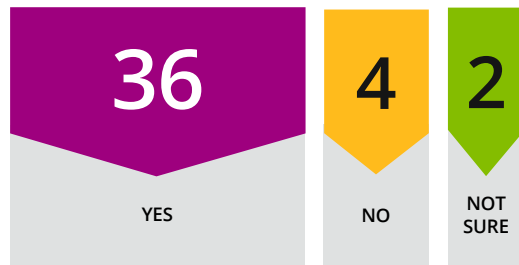
In terms of course delivery during the initial shift to remote learning in 2020, all three focus group participants said that teacher knowledge of the learning management system (LMS) made the transition easier. One participant explained that LMS training was a required part of the performance appraisal at one institution. Another participant noted that the biggest challenge of emergency remote teaching in spring 2020 was secure and reliable assessment.

Before the pandemic, one of the focus group participant's institutions had already started designing hybrid courses, so their teaching teams already had training. This was beneficial for the onset of the pandemic, but the participant noted *"We are all more skilled now than we had been, not by choice but by necessity."*

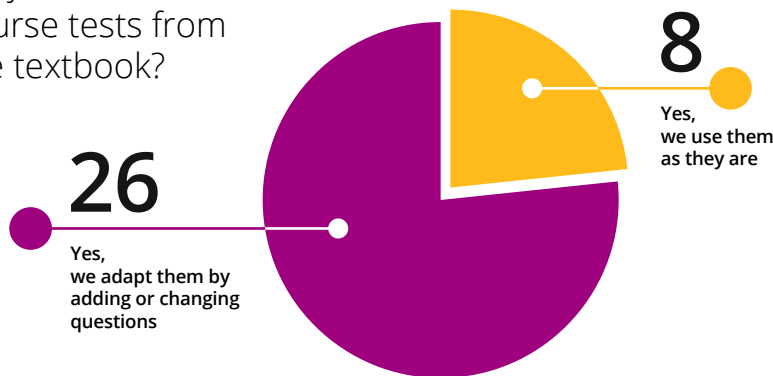
# Assessment

More than **85%** said their tests were based on coursebook content, and most said they use the tests included with their coursebook with adaptations.

**Q** Are assessments based on the coursebook content?



**Q** Do you use the course tests from the textbook?



Sample: 34

One educator in the UAE said the biggest challenge in spring 2020 ...

“Was secure and reliable assessment because all of a sudden you never know what is happening with students when they’re online or offline or getting ... I mean **we had certain procedures in place but I think they were woefully inadequate no matter what we tried to do, and I think that’s still a problem, just securing the assessments.**”

The educator in Qatar said *“We had to rethink our assessment procedures. We didn’t have any lockdown [Respondus Lockdown Browser or Monitor] for our examination procedures so we had to think on our feet.”* The educator later explained during the focus group that due to concerns about cheating, they switched to a portfolio approach, so students were *“assessed on their reflections on their performance rather than their performance.”*

The UAE educator explained how at his institution, in another program, students completed some assessments online and received outstanding scores, but when they had to report to campus to take assessments, their results were *“disastrous.”*

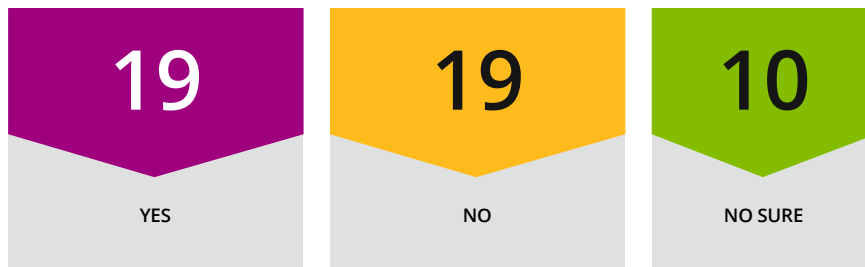
The focus group participant from Saudi Arabia observed *“great variance in a few learners’ marks once you’re talking about online assessments and in-class.”*

This could be why some countries have moved to a combination of online instruction and on-campus exams. The UAE participant noted that for the country, exams would be on campus, and the participant in Saudi Arabia said about **70%** of exams would be on-campus for higher education in the country.

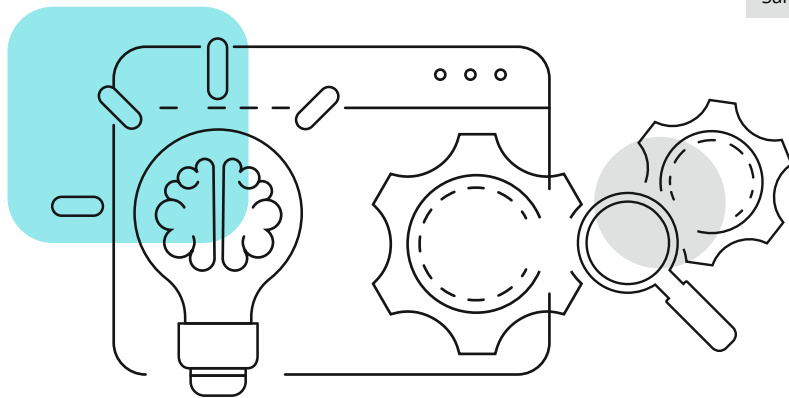
# Special Needs

Nearly **40%** of respondents said they had special needs students in their online classes. Of those, **86%** said they did not have adequate resources to support those students and **72%** expressed interest in professional development on supporting students with special needs.

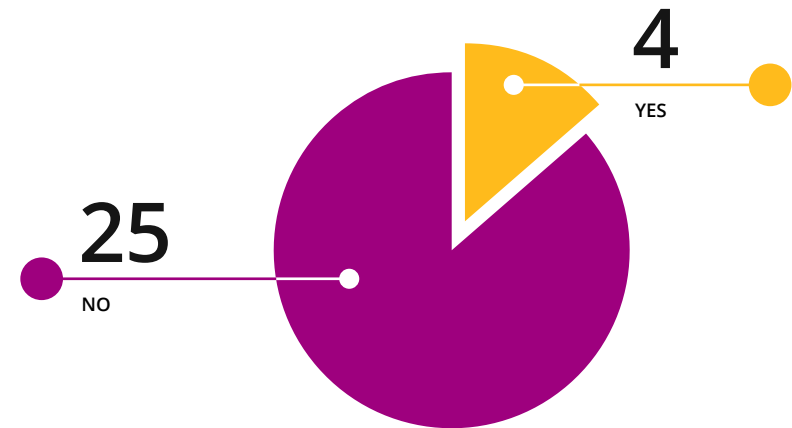
**Q** In the past year, have you had students with special needs in your online classes?



Sample: 48

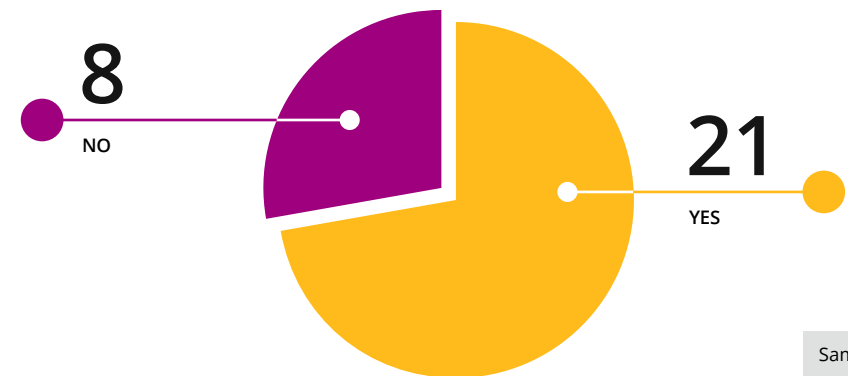


**Q** Have you had sufficient resources to support students with special needs in your online classes?



Sample: 29

**Q** Would you be interested in PD that addresses how to best support students with special needs in your online classes?



Sample: 29

# The Future

The start of the academic year for fall 2021 still holds uncertainties. At the time of writing Saudi Arabia is expecting a fully on-campus start to the academic year, supported by testing regulations and vaccines. The participant from the UAE noted that a return to campus could be more complicated for institutions who traditionally had students travelling from their hometowns and living in dormitories.

However, more broadly considering the future, the participant from Qatar said –

*“ Maybe we should make the new normal one which incorporates different forms of education. So I can foresee institutions in the future having students choosing ... you can do the face-to-face or you can do the hybrid or you can do the online. We have them all, we are ready for all of them. And there are institutions that already do that, but I think the number of [those] institutions will grow as a result. ”*

The participant in Qatar spoke about the need for greater institutional planning and foresight:

*“ We don't know when Covid will end or when we'll go back to this normality. There is a lack of long-term planning in relation to online learning so we're still making decisions for the short or medium term and maybe we need to rip up those plans and just say, you know what, let's just make a 5-year plan which incorporates how we're going to do online learning in the future because whether it's forced on us by Covid or not it doesn't matter. If we make that plan it's no longer emergency remote learning and teaching. It's part of our long-term plan so I guess that is something I think we all should be looking at. There should be project teams in all institutions and all publishers who are making these plans and I don't think in institutions that's happening. ... I think we are just waiting to see and that might ... stunt long term growth. ”*

The UAE participant noted –

*“ The main consideration is the need for flexibility because we're in uncertain times whether we're going back to face-to-face classrooms or we're going to be basically as classrooms with everyone on a laptop the whole time in the classroom, there's going to be some variation there but I think a certain aspect is definitely here to stay. ”*

# Discussion

Respondents' use of web-based quiz, game, video and discussion tools along with their frequent creation of their own materials have implications for English language learning content creation. Responses indicate that educators seek content that will work both online and face-to-face, as well as the flexibility to adapt existing content or create their own. Academic honesty in online assessments was another key concern, and we can infer from some of the frequently used quiz and game tools that offer randomization of questions that this feature could mitigate those challenges. These tools also offer data on student participation, giving teachers an indication of whether students are participating in earnest, even when the cameras and mics are off.

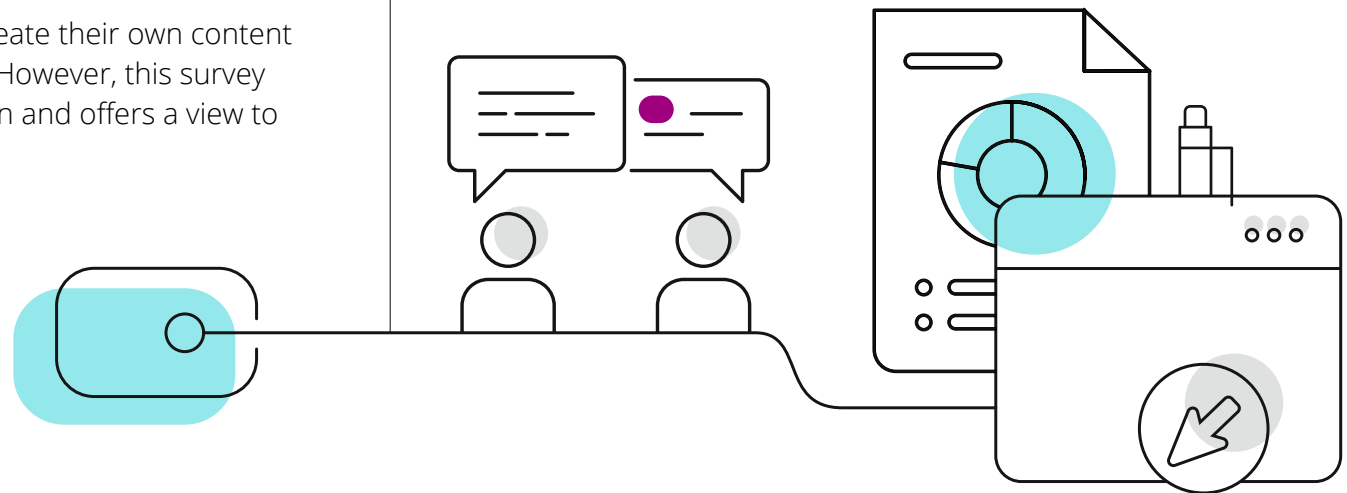
Survey results also reveal an unmet need: support for educators who are teaching special needs students. Several teachers were unsure about whether they had special needs learners in their classes, which could indicate that teachers would benefit from training on how to recognize a student who might benefit from accommodations or adaptations.

It has never been uncommon for teachers to create their own content and activities, even when they have a textbook. However, this survey quantifies the extent of the practice in the region and offers a view to what types of experiences they seek to create.

# Conclusion

This study reveals that flexible, interactive digital course content will be essential going forward, no matter what the model: face-to-face, hybrid, remote, or any combination thereof. Such content will be a fundamental part of any course or program and it will be central to an institution's readiness to face future challenges. Furthermore, professional development, specifically in learning management systems and more generally teaching with technology, was facilitative in the shift to remote learning, and will be essential to institutional readiness going forward. Finally, the challenges of securing online assessment drove changes to national policy on assessment and led one institution to change its approach to assessment.

No one knows what the future will bring, but we know that the right digital content, professional development, and a plan for online assessment can help educators stay ready for anything.



# Acknowledgements

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Special thanks to Elizabeth Cobacho, M. Ed. Harvard Graduate School of Education, who helped design the survey and ran a pilot. Many thanks to Imogen Wylie, who provided thoughtful feedback on the survey and ran an enlightening focus group. Many thanks to Nadia Owens, Aida Osmonova, Jane Chahda, Noura Binkhamis, Tarek Elghandour, Abdullah Aldawsari, Hemani Naran, and George Lindley, who all brought the survey to its respondents. Finally, many thanks to Guy Elders, for making this project a reality, and letting it take its own shape.