

Impact of the COVID crisis:

The pros and cons of moving to a virtual course

Pros

- Can dispense the course more easily in blocks of time
- Allows for more participants to join but still limit if one wants to keep optimize interaction of participants and with faculty
- Increased diversity of participants including some who would not have been able to attend either because of distance or because of their job or other constraints that would have made it impossible for them to attend in person
- Ability for some courses to target other countries or other regions than those normally targeted
- In addition, because of the virtual mode livestreaming can be arranged to give the possibility to additional interested parties to observe the course or some specific lectures. These additional experts benefiting from the course will not be given the possibility to partake directly so that the increased number would not be a deterrent to the interactive participation by the fully selected participants
- Cheaper to organize and cheaper for participants to attend
- Can facilitate cascade training by recording all lectures and making them available to participants to use later. Recording is not limited to virtual settings but it almost becomes a must in virtual settings.

Cons

- Challenging to foster interaction between participants and lead to networking between participants and with the faculty in a remote virtual manner
- Teacher/faculty member can not easily see if participants are readily grasping the content of the presentation as cannot view the class
- Questions in virtual questions and answers session may tend to be more focused on clarifying a point made in the lecture but not on expanding on that point
- Need extra faculty to monitor the chat and Q & A. Not possibility of extended discussions over coffee
- Need special measures to facilitate interaction and networking
- Students' ability to focus and to leave regular work aside can be compromised
- Challenge to have a satisfactory time zone for all when participants and/or lecturers are from around the world
- Need to spread the course over a longer period of time in order to limit to the number of teaching hours in a row- and on any given day more constrained in virtual environment than in presential course due in part to computer fatigue
- Higher risk for technical problems and hence need for good technical support, backup and preparation and ideally prerecording of lectures in case of technical problem at last minute
- Virtual interactions less engaging. Virtual live interactive events are more engaging than mere e-learning.

- Hybrid approach with some participants in person and others virtual challenging and unequitable
- Participants from some countries have limited access to stable internet platforms; need more than a smart phone
- More difficult to check who is participating and to ensure participation to all sessions. Often some registered participants do not join
- Challenge for site visits and hands on demonstrations when some are part of the curriculum