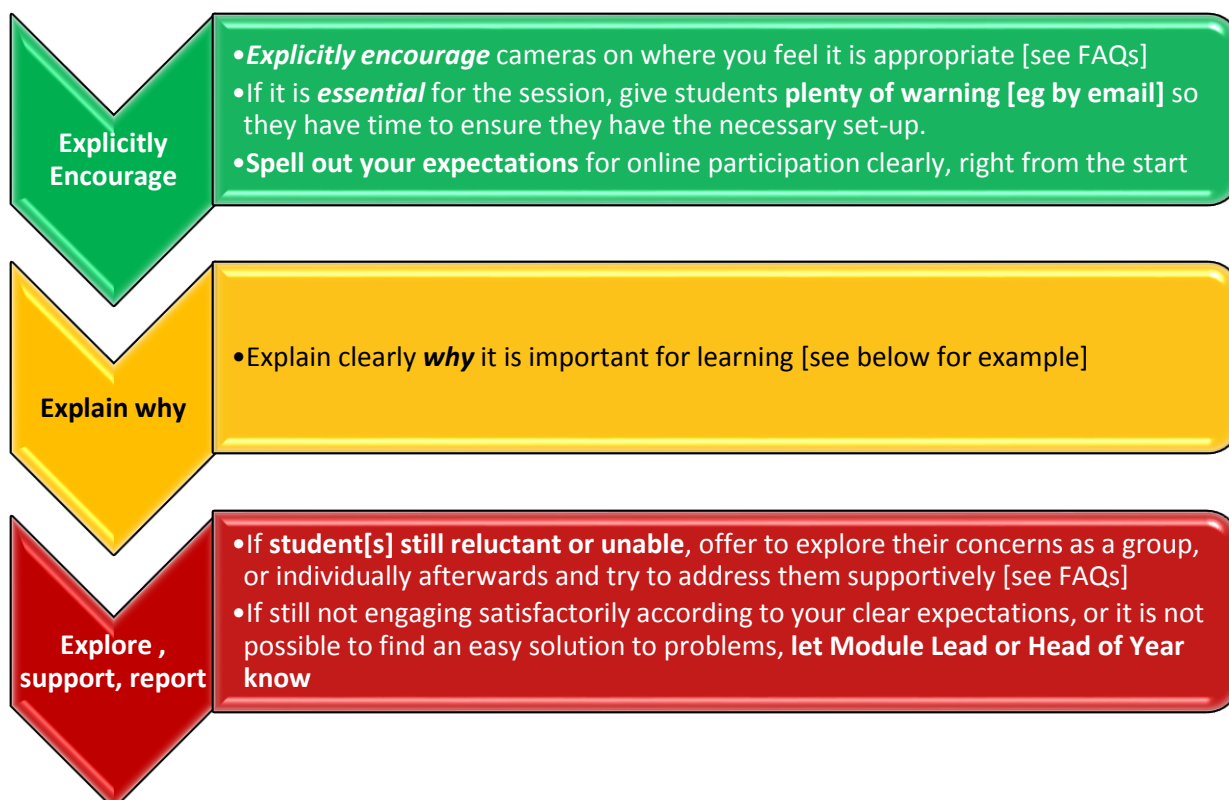**Online teaching sessions: cameras ON or OFF?**

Guidance and FAQs for Faculty and Students [March 2022]

Summary

As much of our teaching has migrated online [via Zoom, MS Teams or Blackboard Collaborate], there has been considerable debate in higher education about whether we should be *insisting* on students turning their cameras on during "live" teaching sessions (Leung, H. 2021; Castelli, F. 2021). In the medical school, and in the Trusts, faculty have reported that students are often reluctant to turn their cameras on.

This can be extremely frustrating and disheartening for teachers [staring at a blank screen], and makes it impossible to gauge students' engagement and understanding. For some sessions, for example those focusing on clinical communication, the absence of non-verbal cues is a major barrier to learning. On the other hand, *insisting* on "cameras on" at all times can cause "Zoom fatigue" and hinder learning; is not necessary or practical for some sorts of sessions [eg lectures when sharing slides]; and doesn't take account of the host of possible reasons why students may be reluctant or unable to turn their camera on [see FAQs below]. At worst, some have suggested it could risk escalating "digital inequities", or challenge the psychological wellbeing of some students.

So whilst we wouldn't advise *mandating* "cameras on" at all times, we don't want "cameras off" to become the norm. Bearing all this in mind, we suggest the following pragmatic approach:

Explicitly Encourage
- *Explicitly encourage* cameras on where you feel it is appropriate [see FAQs]
- If it is *essential* for the session, give students **plenty of warning [eg by email]** so they have time to ensure they have the necessary set-up.
- **Spell out your expectations** for online participation clearly, right from the start

Explain why
- Explain clearly *why* it is important for learning [see below for example]

Explore, support, report
- If **student[s] still reluctant or unable**, offer to explore their concerns as a group, or individually afterwards and try to address them supportively [see FAQs]
- If still not engaging satisfactorily according to your clear expectations, or it is not possible to find an easy solution to problems, **let Module Lead or Head of Year know**

Further Guidance and FAQs

Explicitly Encourage

Spell out explicitly your expectations for engagement in online sessions from the very start, or even before the session. Expectations, including camera use, will vary according to the type of session and your preferences as tutor. For example:

Cameras on throughout	Eg Communication skills learning with role play; or for small group discussions; or when an expert patient/service user/guest speaker is taking part
Cameras on at certain points	Eg. During exercises in interactive seminar, introducing ourselves at start, workshop or interactive segment of lecture, breakout groups [students may feel more comfortable with that]
Cameras off	Eg Lecture to a large group of students where interaction is primarily through the chat function or polling etc.
Microphones muted/unmuted	Usually muted as default, unmuted when invited to speak
Hands-up icon	If student wants to speak
Use chat to post queries or discussion points	To encourage alternative ways to interact, especially in large groups. "Shy" students can feel much more comfortable participating on chat.
Participation in interactive quizzes/mentimeter/collaborative documents etc	Encourage alternative ways to engage, using a variety of interactive tools
Participation levels - in chat or discussion	Eg small groups, interactive lecture. Everyone to contribute to discussion? Or at least one post in chat; or answer quizzes? If none, or not to your expectations, discuss possible reasons with student afterwards as you might in-person, and consider how to support and/or possibly report to med school if no obvious solutions

Explain the reasoning behind these expectations. For example: "I'm asking you to turn your cameras on because…"

- There is evidence that teaching is more effective when the teacher can see non-verbal cues of learners – can check understanding, and engagement
- It's vital in building tutor-student and student-student relationships, just as in face-to-face sessions
- Establishing it as the norm encourages everyone to do it
- For communication skills – we know non-verbal communication is such a huge part of communication, and you cannot learn about that aspect without cameras on

Explore and address openly possible reasons student[s] may have for not turning cameras on, for example:

Reason	Suggestion/support
"I am worried about people seeing the background – my bedroom for example"	Bear in mind that some students may not have access to a private space, and they might be reluctant to share their personal surroundings. They may also be anxious about tutors making comments or judgements, however well intended, about their home environment. **Consider**: Staged background/virtual background/or simply background against a wall. Avoid making comments about students' background environments
"I am worried about people seeing other family members/my dog etc walking through the background"	Encourage students to **let family members/flatmates know** if online; and try to find a **private space** if possible. Again, some students may not be able to find a private space, or may struggle to persuade family members/housemates to give them privacy during online teaching.
"I don't have a camera" or "My wi-fi connection is extremely poor"	**With adequate warning**, students should be able to source a working camera and sort out their connection. If they say they don't have the resources or for some reason are struggling with this, please ask them to contact Student Support as there may be help available; there are also hardship funds available through the Medical School if necessary
"Having my camera on distracts from the tutor and is disrespectful".	Explain why you don't feel this way. Sometimes all that's needed is for students' assumptions to be corrected explicitly
"I get distracted by my classmates' video images"	Check if tool allows for "speaker view", only showing the person speaking. **Blackboard Collaborate**: you have the option of viewing fellow participants in Gallery, Speaker, or Tiled views. You can also toggle between an enlarged view of shared content and participants' cameras. To enlarge a participant's

	camera, hover your cursor over their image to reveal an arrow; click that arrow to enlarge their image and minimise the shared content, or vice versa. **MS Teams**: you can switch views between the in-room camera and the screen share (e.g. slides) by clicking between the presenter and shared item. Be careful when exploring other view option in MS Teams has many options will impact the view for all participants, not just your own. **Zoom**: You can select side-by-side mode to have the screen share (e.g. lecture slides) and the in-room camera stream showing side-by-side on your screen. You can also switch between the screen share and the speaker view. These options are available in the view menu
"I get distracted by my own image"	Check if software allows to **not show yourself**. Or can stick a **sticky note over the self-video.**
"I am worried about people seeing me in my pyjamas/eating food etc"	Encourage students to **dress presentably** and appropriately for online sessions, as they would if coming in for teaching. Students **shouldn't be eating food** during online teaching sessions, or engaging in other distracting activities while camera and mic turned off. Build in **suitable breaks** for this. Think how to build in **active learning** into your session to maintain concentration and engagement – polling, collaborative exercise, breakout exercises, chat comments, quizzes etc

References

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