



| INTRODUCTION

THE 'NEW NORMAL' FOR HIGHER LEARNING

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The third decade of the 21st century is proving to be a time of great challenge and change for higher learning. The global pandemic we speak of as coronavirus has been declared a force majeure. It overrides previous considerations and requires the cancellation

of what we know and have accepted as 'normal'. It comes in the footsteps of Australian environmental catastrophes such as droughts and bushfires. It may yet come to be seen as another harbinger of the impending crises of global warming, sea level rises and pollution of our

lakes, rivers, seas and land on a truly gargantuan and world scale. It follows the persistence of the unresolved 'wicked issues' (Firth, V. Transform: 2018) which bedevil our societies and debase our cultures. We are talking about debilitating poverty, over-population, and obscene and bizarre inequalities of housing, income, health and death and disease rates, which give the lie to the simple notion that we are all in this together and we all live in one world! There is truth in the view that this virus was no respecter of place and status in whom it infected, and death reached out its grasp to both high and low, rich and poor – but there can be little doubt that its most severe impact came to those who were poorest and with least material resources.

As capitalism itself was placed in intensive care and whole economies and social systems of every stripe and sort were declared closed and locked down, governments everywhere declared themselves to be in the hands of the scientists and health experts. Decisions and understanding would come from science-based knowledge, and the social and political decisions needed to combat the evil would be in the general interests

of everyone. ‘We are all in this together’ was a sentiment widely desired and shared. Partisan political capital could not be readily made from this crisis, which was one that could bring people together in shared adversity. The Aussie spirit of ‘mateship’ was invoked, echoing similar nation-strengthening sentiments everywhere (including Old Blighty’s Dunkirk spirit) to combat the deadly crisis.

Yet coronavirus is **not** the existential threat of planetary disaster that rising temperatures and sea levels, environmental degradation beyond repair and the destruction of the earth’s atmosphere portend. These remain the reality for our future generations who are currently in our schools, colleges and universities. Coronavirus can be tackled and defeated, eventually, it is hoped with a vaccine so that we become largely immune. All that this will take will be resources, human ingenuity, effort directed internationally and money – all of which we have in abundance, though not sufficiently or equally distributed at present to get the task done. Climate change on a world scale, the wilful destruction of our rainforests, disastrous carbon levels in our atmosphere and the destruction of marine life in our oceans are another matter, as are eradicating the obscene poverty in developing nations and addressing the migrating millions seeking a better life.

What is new about the coronavirus pandemic is that our focus and attention have been shifted. We have been forced to confront a deadly disease but one that can be combated. This is our opportunity to begin to ask the questions about solutions for the greater and ultimately more destructive problems around the notion of sustainable development and social co-

operation. People of the current generation will be forced to look at the way risk and vulnerability is organised and managed. If it was true in the past that wealth and membership of an advanced nation gave you immunity to worldwide epidemics and ‘events’, it is now clearly not the case. What people expect of government and



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maybe even of themselves will change under the impact of these forces and the questions that arise from them. What will this ‘new normal’ look like for our Australian universities?

There are choices to be made and debates to be held on what should frame and help organise the response to this situation of

crisis by HE, from what is after all a varied and diffuse set of institutions. There is, however, at least one commonly held perspective: higher education is of great if not paramount national importance – economically, socially and politically. Much of it can only exist with government support and there are few if any individuals or communities that deny the strategic significance of learning to their futures.

However, when addressing the concrete issues of what is to be done, it is probably clear that a range of practical matters will come to the fore for universities. A possible list might be as follows:

- tuition restructured and re-ordered to reflect the ‘new reality’ of students’ lives;
- more flexible attendance and use of distance learning;
- online learning and tuition reconfigured to include face-to-face and remote contact;
- independent learning re-assessed as a curriculum objective;
- more creative and ‘fair’ distance assessments;
- less institutional financial dependency on international/out-of-country students; and
- more opportunities for distance students to be socially active and engaged in the university.

Many of these adaptive procedures will inevitably involve the further extension of online learning. University teachers will need to construct new and adaptive methodologies for learning within subject boundaries. Face-to-face tuition may become much harder to get for many students. Assessment within online learning will be an increasingly

important arena for student engagement with critical thinking, which requires conceptual struggle for answers rather than mechanistic and rote-learned responses. The integrity of assessments will be more problematical than before as students naturally seek to manipulate the demands made on their time and efforts. The real issue will be how to make learning progressive and critical in the context of ever-more digitised systems for learning access and support.

At another level – that of strategic intellectual work on teaching and learning – we may want to ask whether we can bring about a more ecologically based education and one that is rooted in the social justice concerns we have alluded to earlier. The interconnectedness of health and social conditions with planetary survival must surely correspond with the need for a critical curriculum that embraces learning, teaching, research and scholarship.

A number of strategic issues can be discerned:

- How might universities adapt to a changing urban/regional landscape and a threatened environment and the communities which inhabit them? (Bell, S. Transform: 2019)
- Should an individual university re-dedicate to engagement or re-trench?
- Can universities themselves provide leadership for the sector and for students against insecurity and a precarious future?
- Is it possible to offer a 'new deal' to students around continuing learning benefits?
- Can the idea of contemporary university engagement embrace the new



challenges of a new era including those of democratic accountability and build on the achievements of those who went before in creating a consciousness of university engagement in Australia? (notably Professor Michael Gibbons, 2005; and Professor David Watson, 2011).

In considering these strategic issues, the argument is that we have reached a turning point in our lives; that history has reached a decisive moment in this crisis and that we shall go forward towards a radically different type of society now that the old one has been found wanting. The era of radical hyper-accelerated, all-consuming forms of capitalism and peak globalisation are now over. A more fragmented and diverse world is coming into existence, it is said, which requires a more adaptable and diverse set of social and political arrangements than that of the hyper-globalisation of recent decades.

This means the 'new normal' will change in the way we live, what we consume, where we travel and how we communicate, and through a more intrusive state. We want to be less fragile and vulnerable; we want to feel we can rely on family

and community for support and we shall hope to contribute more to it; and we want to mitigate the ruthlessness and exploitation we see everywhere with a greater degree of social justice. These things are coincidentally yet intentionally the value orientations of Engagement Australia. Defeating the virus cannot reverse the progress that has been made if we stand by our beliefs and we advocate for our freedoms to think critically, to publish our views, to meet to have our opinions challenged about what the new normal might look like for universities. Engagement Australia is committed to ensuring post-viral cannot mean post-democratic for our universities. We have been locked down not locked up! In the wider scenario of historic time and distance, where will our existing universities stand on the changes needed to sustain a decent and productive life for all people, not just those who have received the benefits of western education? Society will inevitably re-order itself through the actions of its people, and the struggles they demonstrate for opportunities and a better life. Some will strive for human fulfilment through

creativity and artistic expression and some will seek a better economic outcome. Many will strive through learning in one context or another to improve themselves and the lives of their children. Broader collective achievement may come to the fore and the vision of a genuinely collegiate and cooperative university may be possible.

There are curricular issues to be addressed such as the need for a comprehensive and universal literacy. Such a concept would need to include, for example, the commitment to learning, and using more than one language in our public life and discourse. In Australia, the cultural loss of Indigenous languages could be countered by majority populations learning to communicate in local languages as well as the 'national' language, English. In many, many communities throughout the world, people speak more than a single language or dialect and this can be a force for good, helping to sustain a recognised diversity and plurality of cultures. The sheer pleasure and personal growth available through speaking another language has been a major cultural loss for many people.

At the start of the new decade of the 2020s, it is too early to reach definitive conclusions about the coronavirus pandemic. Even the world's best medics and researchers have stated that it may take years to eradicate the disease itself, and the social and economic disruptions it has caused will have unintended consequences beyond anything we have so far predicted. There is, however, learning to be gained from the dreadful days of the pandemic and the massive loss of life, which was much worse in some countries than others. In democratic states, it became clear that citizens had to work at preserving their rights and their lives, and

that the alternative to social solidarity is higher death rates. There is hope, though, available to us – we surely shall find some scientific and medical solutions which work; this is within our capacity and resources. There is also hope in the fact that the pandemic is a spotlight that has illuminated the key problems that have shaped the real meaning of this crisis. Economic and social inequality, racial and ethnic discrimination, ethno-nationalism and xenophobia, exploitative and intrusive techno-surveillance and the threatening crisis of our planet's environmental survival are the underlying issues of our time and the ones that will shape the future for our children.

This future seems set to be one of social crisis, which at the same time is an educational crisis. For universities, this amounts to the existence of a sometimes contradictory struggle to produce critical knowledge as learners, teachers and researchers encounter the older academic forms and silos. Addressing the current and 'popular' trans-disciplinary issues directly is extremely difficult, though popular revolt and demonstrations by young people all over the world on racism and social justice have opened up the possibility of transformations of public education and knowledge. In universities in the third decade of the 21st century thus far, the provided system and the provided curriculum have not been effectively challenged. The exclusions of the provided system have been in general maintained in spite of the expansion and diversification of provision. However, the broadening and deepening themes of university engagement in response to crises pose fundamental questions that are now above the horizon, and are increasingly part of

our consciousness of what a universal higher learning should and can be.

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