| CASE STUDY

REFLECTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF UNE'S SCHOOL OF EDUCATION ON THE NEW NORMAL

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The School of Education at the University of New England currently has 92 per cent of its students studying online. Therefore, when COVID-19 appeared in Australian communities, as an Australian university, we were already well placed. However, that doesn't mean that we were able to continue with business as usual.

By 30 March 2020, all staff in the school had transitioned to work from home. This was Week 5 into the trimester. For most academics this was business as usual. For others, this meant acquiring a computer to work from home, screens and an internet connection, or at least one that would

cope with various screen online meetings. Due to having such a large proportion of our students studying online, this was a surprise to many staff members – thinking that all were set up to work from home. However, this was not the case. For professional staff members, this was a totally new concept. Some embraced the opportunity to work from home while others dreaded it. For on-campus students, this meant they had a decision to make – continue living in Armidale (and many were in university college accommodation) and wait out COVID-19, or go to their homes and work from there. Accommodation in colleges was only available for those who were not able to return to their 'homes'. Social distancing was imposed on everyone. Strict rules were implemented.

This case study is from the perspective of five people who work in the School of Education – one from an overall School of Education perspective, one from a teaching perspective, one from a Higher Degree student coordination perspective, one from the Office for Professional Learning (practicums) and one from a new staff member's perspective. All are currently experiencing working from home on a full-time basis and have been for several months. It may be too early to predict the new normal working environment, however these reflections provide insight for the practitioners amongst us who now must grapple with working (and learning) from home as many of us are having to teach and learn online.

A manager's perspective

When the first cases of COVID-19 came to Australia, the university was diligent in informing staff and students of UNE's strategy to handle the pandemic.

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However, this did mean that things had to change. Most staff would be working from home and those students who weren't already home, would go home, where circumstances permitted. Only with permission were you able to return to your building in the School of Education. Everyone had to learn extremely quickly to adjust from face-to-face meetings to 'Zoom' meetings. The course content was the easiest part for our staff. We were already teaching online and for those students who were on-campus and had to transition to online learning, all the resources were there. The adjustment for teaching and learning was for those students, not staff.

However, there were major adjustments that had to be implemented. Academics were probably used to working from home on a regular basis. Administrative staff were not and their infrastructure was not set up. Other than appropriate computer equipment being taken home, which often included a computer chair, the staff had to learn to work from home. The UNE IT staff were excellent, ensuring that everyone was given a home computer – mostly a laptop - but desktops went home too. For those who had regular or even daily meetings, they still met, even for a virtual morning tea or lunch. One noticeable consequence of this was that there were many more incidences of personal leave requests due to 'rest for eyes.' Adjusting to a Zoom meeting can be tough on the eyes when compared with a face-to-face meeting.

Staff meetings took on a new focus. Instead of a top-down information sharing session, meetings became all-inclusive where everyone had a say. Every single person was asked how they were handling working from home and COVID-19. Other meetings took on a different perspective. Meetings became short, concise and to the point. Even though there was the usual 'small talk' at the beginning, it didn't last as long and people learnt to get their

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point across concisely. State and national meetings were held more often, online, as all universities worked as a collective with government organisations to resolve matters that affected us all.

Due to UNE's excellence in online teaching, many new courses were developed in a very short time to cater for the new market – teaching people to teach online. Professional development modules were created and shared to many hundreds of schools around Australia for free. Research

projects and ideas had to be reconsidered to enable online research to occur.

Feedback from staff has been that they were surprised at how much they have enjoyed working from home. There are a few who have not and many are looking forward to getting back, seeing each other again and having face-to-face conversations.

The biggest factor in ensuring a smooth transition to working from home was to ensure that everyone received full communications on a regular basis so they knew what was happening. This came from school, faculty and university levels. However, we did have to ensure the messages were consistent.

A long-serving academic's perspective

During the COVID-19 crisis, I taught a large first year unit that is unique in Australian teacher education. It is an online professional experience unit where students have their first introduction to classroom practice. In the past, pre-service teachers would have had to make room in their lives for 10 days' intensive work in a school. In this unit, they work online, making links between theory and practice through viewing, discussing and critiquing video footage of locally-sourced classroom teaching. While students experienced extreme stress associated with job losses, separation from family and mental health issues that could be linked with the required lockdown, teaching and learning in the unit continued. There were a record number of extensions provided. However, should the unit have had an embedded school-based practicum, this flow would not have been maintained.

During the trimester, the students read texts and engaged in structured observations to draw conclusions around the quality and effectiveness of pedagogy. There were weekly mandatory tasks requiring postings in the learning management system. Students shared the results of their "practice analysis" (Timperley, 2011, p. 126) with peers and leveraged the ideas of others to extend the discussion of concepts and provide dialogic feedback (Charteris, 2015). This pedagogical approach supported the development of an online professional learning community, like those that leaders and teachers develop in schools to support organisational learning. There were instances in the online environment of collegial support. Many students reached out to lecturers through email and by telephone for pastoral support and, in response, were offered flexibility with deadlines.

One of my key reflections of this experience is that many new teachers when entering practicum classrooms do not know what they are looking for when they observe a supervising teacher and they do not realise how teachers are bonded together in professional

relationships. These students undertaking their online practicum both sharpened their gaze to know what practices to attend to in school classrooms and also developed an awareness of the importance of collegial support and feedback for professional growth.

A research coordinator perspective

As the Higher Degree Research (HDR) coordinator for the School of Education during the COVID-19 crisis, I have observed, and been a part of, a wide range of responses from colleagues across the university. The university's response has been swift, multi-layered and detailed. From the outset, the clear message from executive staff has been the view that the wellbeing of HDR candidates is the first priority. The problems our HDR candidates faced have been many and varied, depending on their personal context. The most immediate and obvious issues were those faced by some international students, including loss of income, precarious living conditions and loss of access to the campus and its resources. A secondary layer of administrative issues would begin to emerge in later weeks and months for some, including problems with student fees, extensions to candidature and adding additional support to supervision teams.

Reflecting on the COVID-19 circumstances, I am reminded of Ron Barnett's notion of the possibilities of 'feasible utopias', hope, and the significance of the imagination in the higher education sector. Imagination, Barnett suggests, might be thought of as 'a power, a potential, a capability' (Barnett, R. 2011, p.93). Under COVID-19, the willingness to explore possibilities

and opportunities and to be imaginatively responsive to circumstances has come to the fore. At an official level, the response was thorough and detailed, surveying the needs of all HDR candidates. At another level, the generous (but often quiet) efforts of individual supervisors and professional staff have stood out. Their kind attention to the needs of the international HDR candidates was swift, practical and unassuming.

Barnett's view of socially meaningful and collective imaginative ideas that give 'rise to different imaginaries' resonated with the thinking and planning that occurred in the university on multiple levels. According to Barnett, our response to the contemporary challenges of the sector must be collective but they must also be adequate. By this he means the multi-layered approach of the institution must be feasible, ethical, diverse, have depth and be open-ended (2011, p. 93). It will be important to reflect on the degree to which the combined response of the official structures, coupled with the individual work of a number of supervisors and professional staff, met these challenges.

A professional learning officer's perspective

The Office for Professional Learning (OPL) was in a reasonable place pre-COVID-19. We were working on plans for systems, better integration, graduate to teacher outcomes and, most importantly, had commenced building better partnerships with schools around community of practice for our teacher education students. The pandemic struck and a lot of these ideas were put on ice; in hibernation, to use the government's words. The OPL, along

with the rest of the university, phased out of on-campus work and moved to working from home, something the staff of the OPL begrudgingly adhered to. Fortunately, we had already agreed that it seemed inevitable home-working would be implemented so we managed, in a very short period of time, to change processes to allow us to manage workloads while being separated from 'the crew'. We had been using collaborative spaces for about twelve months beforehand, albeit in a rudimentary manner. We did not know at the time that working from home would be a 'game changer.'

Pre-COVID-19, we used collaborative spaces for document updates, having conversations about changes in the conversation features available. Live changes of documents, history restoration and true collaboration became the norm when updating information. While it was working well, it is fair to say that working from home has improved it even further.

The first thing I would say about working from home is the sudden discovery of chat features in the software we used. In effect, we found a much better platform for sharing and collaborating than email could ever be. A group chat allows for casual discussions and clarification. It is inherently seen as a general discussion without the need to communicate formally. It is always there, as an informal thought bubble, which can allow for great conversations about small things: 'What is the best biscuit? What film clip has the worst choreography?' to 'This needs changing - suggestions?'. Sharing of documents for comment is better, too. Adding a link from a document directly to a chat makes for far more efficient feedback. Email, by contrast,

is an abrupt interruption: questions from out of the blue, formal language, documents attached that have two people's changes, known only by the title carrying the initials of the two contributors, the person who does not understand 'reply to all', and sending a second separate document in a new thread, throwing out the delicate balance of collaboration to push through their ideas in a separate thread of confusion.

With these excellent changes came some major issues that paused our grand plans. Placements in schools were cancelled en-masse (a good decision at the time), meaning the 2,500+ placements needed for 2020 were in limbo with no known date for return. All projects stalled as we focused on students being unable to complete the mandatory component of their degree. We gave all students special extension as a blanket rule, halted placements and consoled students who had taken leave to complete their placement. In the lead-up to working from home, the common question was 'Why can't I go on placement?', answered with 'because this is the first pandemic in 100 years, a public health emergency, and we don't know how it will pan out'.

Where are we now? Placements are beginning to resume, all 2,500+ of them in the next six months (we usually get 12 months to fit them in). Graduate placements are prioritised, postponed placements next and the rest will follow (we hope). We completed new risk assessments on how we would mitigate risks of something you cannot see, against a factor you cannot control.

Overall, I would say the majority of OPL staff do not see the need to go

back to work on-campus full-time. The changes that have occurred in terms of collaboration have made for a better environment for trial and improvement. In terms of placements, we will struggle this year. We have let our students know the

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demand for placements will likely be high while the offerings from schools, who are still grappling with changes to teaching, may be low. This will pipeline into 2021. My main hope is COVID-19 will be the catalyst for change for how placements occur in New South Wales and how universities, school bodies and accrediting agencies can work together for sustainable change to the system.

A newly appointed academic's perspective

I accepted a new appointment to the School of Education during the times of COVID-19 having considered the challenges associated with this new academic life. A recent paper (Charteris et al, 2016) seeks to expand the idea of what being an academic means by exploring a collective narrative methodology and building on Thrift's notion of "emotional knots" (Thrift, 2008, p. 206). By utilising this theoretical concept of knots, the complexities about beginning a new position in an education school begin to reveal themselves. Using Charteris' dimensions of physical, social, material and imaginative perspectives, I will describe the past few weeks.

The physical space of working from home during COVID-19 presents no change for me prior to the new UNE appointment. This could be perceived as a positive, linear and non-disruptive way to start in a new position. We all know in academic appointments that the space one is assigned and how we inhabit that space in a new job is central to how we present ourselves to colleagues and at the same time to ourselves. I have a new office number and an assigned new space, however it remains tantalisingly unimagined. Which ways do the windows face? Will I like the colour of the walls and flooring? Will I have a view and what will the view be like? Who will be in the offices near me? All relatively basic and simple questions, however no doubt central to presenting me, the new appointee, to the world.

The social aspects of this new appointment are not so intangible in these

interconnected times. Zoom meetings and flawless online platforms have characterised my social connectivity. I have seen all my colleagues and enjoyed talking (and at times laughing) although some of the subtleties that make face-to-face interaction are missing. The miscues in turn-taking are frequent in Zoom meetings: How will my miscues and false starts on Zoom be perceived by colleagues? Will I be perceived as bossy or too casual? How might a miscue be taken as a first impression and held onto? Did I talk over that colleague or did I leave too long a space of silence? How important are these communication discourses? Will this discourse style remain once we are back in face-to-face meetings? All questions of dialogue and once again central to the ways in which we understand, present and value each other.

Now, to teaching and the material of academic life, the way that academics' subjectivities are designed, prepared, and finally presented to the learners in our higher educational institutional spaces using an online platform - this is not a new discourse nor a new material space. The UNE platform has subtle differences to the one I am used to and I suspect that elements of the asynchronous and synchronous teaching spaces will throw up some transitional difficulties, but this is in the unimagined future once my teaching begins.

The imaginative dimension, which is the most tangible of the dimensions for me, is walking in the space of the new workplace. I yearn to walk in this space and think about it a lot. I am becoming more socially connected to the new colleagues. I am hearing the dogs bark in the distances.

I am intrigued by the artworks on the walls behind my new colleagues, which I spy whilst on Zoom meetings. I have met a preschool aged child of one of my new colleagues. I imagine that colleague parenting and walking his child to school in the mornings. I imagine my teaching sites, and my taking up the teaching and learning relationships assigned to me with optimism and hope.

The reader may notice that the questions have become less as this case study narrative has moved through Charteris's et. al. (2016) four dimensions - physical, social, material and imaginative. It is far easier for me to imagine my appointment as I have no sense of the physical or deep understanding of the social and the material I think I now know. This illustrates much of what it means to be an academic in the 'knowledge economy', however it also foregrounds how much of being a newly appointed academic is unknown and linked to a rich imagination of ourselves.

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