

Things will never be the same – or will they?

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Growing up in 1960s Melbourne (I was born in 1954), I was given my first real administration position at my primary school as 'milk monitor'. It came with significant responsibility for ensuring the milk bottles were brought in from the sun each morning in time for recess each day. The position came complete with a badge of honour, rubber gloves and a face mask – after all, I was opening milk bottles and placing straws down the neck of each, so hygiene was paramount. (Ironically, in Melbourne today – and throughout 2020 and 2021 - I have to wear a mask to collect my milk in the morning – but this is an aside.)

In those days, milk came in essentially one form – pasteurised, and later homogenised. By the 1980s, a milk revolution took place. The 'Big M' arrived providing flavoured milk, followed closely by a range of milk types. Today, we have a huge range of milk products catering to every possible need. The slogan accompanying the Big M revolution was *'things will never be the same now the Big M's here'*. And true enough, it has never been the same – arguably for the better.

The same could be said of the 'big C' – COVID-19. Because higher education will never be the same. I believe there will be a number of key impacts over the next, say, five years. Beyond that – who knows – we may simply resort to our old ways, though I think that is highly unlikely. The anticipated short term changes, though, are laid out accordingly.

Heightened sense of hygiene

It is self-evident that sanitisation stations, face masks, heightened cleaning regimes, social distancing protocols and general hygiene awareness are the new norm. Institutions (such as mine) will flock towards COVID-safe certification. Yes, it adds additional cost and red tape. But in truth, better hygiene standards can only be a good thing. The demands of the certification ensure that the appropriate level of attention to hygiene related matters are embedded within the organisation.

Hopefully post-pandemic, we will see less flus and colds on campus – and the associated disruptions – as students and staff remain more conscious of the importance of hygiene and the simple act of washing their hands regularly throughout the day. Heightened hygiene has certainly been a feature of the last two years – in particular – and will probably remain high profile activities moving forward.

What will become the norm is students/staff not coming on to campus if they are unwell. The temptation to 'soldier on' is a thing of the past. If you are unwell – take the time out and recover at home. This will have impact on contractual arrangements in terms of annual sick leave allowances – but as it becomes the norm and legislation will follow. The standard 10 day allowance will probably not do the trick anymore – time will tell.

Changes to assessment and feedback

The inevitable concern about online examination security will lead to a fundamental rethink of the balance of exams versus assignments. The trend is towards a 60:40 model. My institution, like many, has already adjusted the examination regime we had in place pre-COVID. Our pre-COVID model was an examination regime (Weeks 5, 9 and 13/14) – this has now been

replaced by 60% assignment focus and a final examination of 40%. Partial mandatory examinations satisfy accreditation requirements from groups like CPA, CAANZ and IPA.

Further, the importance of feedback to students will be emphasised. Zaglas (2020) recently highlighted the importance of feedback in the digital environment, and educators will need to bridge the tyranny of distance with more proactive feedback to students learning remotely.

Generally speaking, teaching staff have been good at this. However, the new digital focus necessitates new feedback strategies. My own institution consistently scores well with students in the domain of feedback as evidenced in the ongoing Student Feedback on Units (SFUs) – but further focus and attention will become the norm.

Changes to ways of working and communicating for professional staff

The relocation of professional staff to a work-from-home environment has had both positive and negative outcomes to date. Less efficient organisations have further suffered; the more nimble and productive ones have actually transitioned well. My own institution was quick to allow professional staff added flexibility – on the other hand it mandated on campus on line delivery for academic staff to ensure presentation standards were maintained.

As Kidd (2020) argues “COVID-19 has forever changed the way that many people work. Businesses have had to quickly move to models that allow work to be performed remotely and with increased flexibility”. There is little surprise here.

While much has been said of the shift to online for teachers, I think it is non-teaching roles that will most acutely embrace remote working post-pandemic. Routine tasks are easily enough managed. Meetings have become considerably more efficient and focussed on line. Research. Scholarship and projects have also been effectively managed online and working remotely.

We have found a work-from-home roster for professional staff works well and with minimal disruption. Whether staff wish to return to in campus is uncertain. I suspect the most likely outcome will be a mix of WFH and on site – if I were to take a stab – 3 days off site and 2 days onsite.

Increased use of technology

Embracing technology would always have happened regardless of COVID-19. But it is the types of technology that have, and will continue to be, embraced by the higher education sector that will fundamentally change.

Whether or not full classes return to on-site lecture theatres, there will now be a blended approach to teaching and learning. The flipped classroom gathered some momentum over the last few years – but a truly balanced approach is now inevitable. The current lingo around this is the ‘hybrid’ mode (Whateley, 2021) – that is, all sessions are available online with limited access to classrooms in a safe and responsible way. The student decides (in effect) to study online or F2F – and the institution will provide both options simultaneously.

Interestingly, students appear to prefer such an approach. A recent survey of our students found that 92 per cent would prefer classes to stay online. There is likely a combination of factors driving this, including reduced commuting time and cost, convenience, effective use of technology as well as perhaps an alleviation of the fear of asking questions in a full lecture theatre.

The notion of hybrid modelling is the most likely outcome, especially for business schools. Understandably there will be a call for F2F practical classes that are difficult to simulate online,

but I suspect the growth of online theoretical classes will remain strong and dominant moving forward.

Obsession with academic integrity and use of proctoring invigilation software

Regulators will become obsessed (if they are not already) with the issue of academic integrity. This will flow on to administrators and managers. Good schools already have in place a solid system of integrity management.

While regulatory challenges have been with us for many years, they are much more heightened in recent times by concerns over 'digital fraud'. As such, expect the market for proctoring tools to expand noticeably, given the plethora of products available.

It is important to note the increased pressure and demands on professional staff who monitor and manage the online proctoring. With all new initiatives it does take time and effort to embed change. It will come as no surprise to anyone that change is often accompanied by resistance – though inevitable. The only constant, remember, is change!

Change for the better

While we would all prefer the pandemic never happened, the change it has brought about is irrevocable. And that change is not necessarily a bad thing either.

Higher education has needed a shake-up for some time; teaching and learning at universities has long needed a jolt. The current pandemic has challenged the ways administrators and teachers alike go about their work. The relationship between cost and quality is being challenged on line – and this is not necessarily a bad thing.

Post five years, there is an argument that COVID-19 will simply be a thing of the past – a memory - not unlike the Spanish Flu, Swine Flu, and Hong Kong flu – only time will tell. It may become an historical event – a once in a lifetime scenario. For the moment, change is inevitable, and we can either embrace it or get left behind.

References

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