

Educational leadership in a post-COVID world

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The past six months have been challenging for all within the higher education sector. Leaders have had to respond rapidly, adapt to change and lead teams remotely. And as ANU's Vice Chancellor, Professor Brian Schmidt recently noted, "We don't expect to ever return to business as usual post COVID".



So what are the longer-term leadership implications of this changed environment? How will leaders need to operate going forward? The following is a synopsis of responses we received when we discussed this topic with senior academic leaders:

1. Communication is key.

Universities are complex and information flow is not always easy. In a less certain environment, leaders, whether they be Vice-Chancellors or heads of department, must be able to clearly articulate a purpose and foster an environment which encourages feedback and accountability. Leaders will be scrutinised more than ever and their capacity to communicate with authenticity and integrity will be essential.

2. Flexibility and responsiveness need to be business as usual.

The flexibility that has been demonstrated by those in the sector in the past 6 months must remain. Increasingly this flexibility will be needed to take advantage of opportunities rather than solely navigating problems. Leaders at all levels will need to remain agile, able to adapt to situations as they arise. Institutions will need to work on developing leaders with these competencies.

3. Digital is not just on-line learning.

Front-line academics have been required to rapidly adapt to a fully online teaching environment. Much of this change will remain an important part of universities into the future. But more than this, educational leaders must understand the role of a university in a new digital society. How does the technology facilitate the objectives of the institution and lead to an evolved learning and research environment and community?

4. It's all about the student experience.

While a universally accepted objective, universities can struggle with the actualisation of a superior student experience. A quality experience involves connecting and engaging students at multiple levels; to each other, to academics, to industry, to the institution and to the broader community – from the very thought of going to university until long after students leave. The leaders of the future will need to facilitate and leverage these connections including understanding how the digital environment enhances the student experience.

5. The rise of the entrepreneur academic.

Leaders will need the capacity to challenge the traditional business or operating model at departmental, school, faculty, and university level. They will need to adapt to a more financially constrained environment and be attuned to changing education opportunities. This includes a reimagining of external partnerships, industry collaboration, flexible delivery and course structure models.

Universities will be key to a society recovering from the coronavirus. Not only will research and education contribute to the health but also to economic and social recovery

in the world. The coronavirus will not last forever but the long-term implications will be significant. At all levels in higher education, new leadership skills will be required.