

The next 5 (years)

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Predicting the future – whether using a crystal ball, tea leaves, reading a palm or any other device at hand – is always troublesome. After years of teaching the notion of a five-year plan – I have reached the conclusion that even a *living* three-year plan is dubious. The notion then of projecting what the next five years will look like in the Higher Education sector is fraught with uncertainty – but an attempt is at least worth a try.

The last five years (2019-2024) was overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic which changed the landscape considerably – forcing a change to the business plans of ALL providers (public and private) and of course the very fundamentals of their operations. This included online delivery, mass lock downs (nationally and internationally) and of course the significant impact on international education. The inevitable digital revolution that accompanied the change in delivery and focus has further changed the way we operate – and to a large degree the way we now think about learning and teaching.

Rapid Shift to online learning

As the pandemic created its dark shadow we quickly resorted to online learning. Not all providers fared well in this space – either through a lack of expertise or reluctance to spend. My own institution at the time had both the ‘know how’ and the capital to invest in a quality delivery system that paid a significant dividend. Student satisfaction levels were at an all-time high – and the ongoing survey of students indicated that a student majority - 95% in fact (predominantly postgraduate) - were content with the online option and wanted to stay in the virtual environment. The teaching and learning, then, remained positive and workable.

The impact, though, on student numbers meant over a two-year period the number of students (at an international student focussed institution) dipped considerably putting pressure on resources and despite teaching staff not being made redundant did mean that they had reduced class sizes and a reduced number of classes – essentially with income loss associated.

Return to the F2F classroom

In its dubious wisdom – the Australian Government ruled that all international students must be returned to the classroom as a matter of urgency. The rationale was clouded with issues around work/study balance and the notion that online learning and teaching was somehow inferior to the traditional classroom model. Further much of the motivation, in my opinion, was driven by real estate and retail issues – not in any way associated with teaching and learning.

The return to the classroom for some was immediate – for others, better understanding the situation, the online was replaced with a hybrid approach and a balanced delivery (inside the

ESOS regulations) that managed to satisfy students. In the arts context – a return to the classroom was seen as a positive given the opportunity to perform in ensembles and the like. In the business school context, the challenge was more significant – and a creative approach was required.

Gradually over a two-year period student-numbers returned. In the case of my own institution - doubling - given the inventive approach to creating additional campuses nationally and ensuring a working lecturer/tutor model utilising the significant investment in technology during the worst of the pandemic.

The impact of the changes to online and then back to the classroom

The impact of the two dramatic shifts – in a relatively short period of time – created a range of challenges as well as opportunities. I had cause to write many an article during the pandemic period – and continue to consider the issues associated with emerging from the shadows of same.

I recently (2024) shared thoughts on what I thought were the big five issues facing HE in the next couple of years - [The Big Five \(5\) Higher Education Challenges Ahead in 2025 and 2026](#). These same five issues, I believe, will dominate the next five years.

A Return to campus and F2F learning

COVID-19 changed the landscape significantly – if not permanently. Online (including blended and hybrid modes) became the norm. Many institutions fared very well in terms of student satisfaction given the technology available and student aptitude with that technology. Some on the other hand did not do as well – largely due to a lack of investment and perhaps understanding.

The Australian Government, in its wisdom, mandated some form of return to campus in late 2023 and 2024 – driven by real estate and retail issues if the truth be known. It is important to find the correct balance throughout 2025 and into 2026 – and hybrid appears to be the logical option. International students – who appear to be blamed for various shortages and deficiencies – are required to attend largely face to face.

This will create new challenges in a radically altered digital environment.

See – The implausible dream - [6113ad_f6e729eba5724f96a82be6265051f1ef.pdf](#)

Balancing assessment and managing academic integrity

The shift from a full regime of examinations – forced by COVID-19 issues - to a more balanced approach has had little impact on quality outcomes or grade distribution. As the Sector moved to a non-examination environment in late 2023 and into 2024 - we need to be mindful of the new pressures associated with academic integrity and at the same time be fair and honest with students in terms of feedback and results. The current obsession with Artificial Intelligence (AI) – now seen as the great challenge to academic integrity – needs to be met head on with Actual Intelligence (Acl).

A shift to the normalisation of grades is a sensible consideration in the new regime. Hopefully, this will provide a fair and accurate grading system in line with the rest of the Sector and at the same time maintain the standards required.

This will become a key issue over the next five years – and the debate will continue to rage over a return to the examination room or the use of invigilation technology.

See – Integrity in business and academia - [6113ad_53bbff3fdd394d979f42c4dc68956d5e.pdf](#)

Scholarship opportunities

In non-research organisations – as is the case for many private providers – the opportunity to do scholarly activities needs to be emphasised and supported in tangible ways. A clear understanding of what scholarship is – and then a concentrated support mechanism to encourage teaching staff to engage in scholarly pursuits - that support and enhance their teaching - effort is essential.

Once a clear understanding of what scholarship is all about – a simple and accessible harvesting tool needs to be put in place to support and highlight effort as a way of further encouraging staff to make scholarship a part of their daily working lives. Developing a culture of scholarship is not an easy feat – but it is doable. Ongoing profiling and promoting of staff achievement is vital.

See – Scholarship can take on many forms - [6113ad_2887992fd3a440a4bca4cbcb6414de4f.pdf](#)

Meeting smarter and heightened communication

As the landscape changed – particularly with people working from home - or from anywhere for that matter – the importance of communication has become more significant than ever. Institutions need to invest in ensuring that communication channels remain wide - open and meetings (of all sorts) are productive and useful for/to all involved.

This will mean managing hybrid meetings, symposia and conferences in a different – though still valuable and informative – way. Technology can assist with the challenge as will a new perspective on when, how and why meetings occur and how we can maximise the benefits of this time together. It will be about quality rather than quantity.

'Management by committee' is NOT a good alternative to strong and focussed leadership. Communication is the key – and should be explored and utilised on a regular basis (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually).

See – Meeting Smarter - [6113ad_68dc5833e0994e4caba3133953991eeb.pdf](#)

Compliance

Essential to growth and prosperity will be ensuring that compliance is a key consideration when growing and diversifying. Often seen as a chore and a diversion from teaching and learning – compliance in fact needs to be supported to ensure that what is being taught and what is being done - within an organisation - is appropriate and supportive of students specifically.

See – Good compliance is good business - [6113ad_6c3cfa0b3a084f53a8373408af0e74d0.pdf](#)

Ensuring that the HESF (Threshold Standards) are being met (at all times) – will be an important focus.

See – What are Threshold Standards and why are they important - [6113ad_8584b9e8e229438d830f63af90c030dd.pdf](#)

With the five challenges laid out – **the essential ingredient is care**. That is care for students and the way they can best achieve their aspirations; balancing assessment and evaluation to ensure quality and fairness (not to mention integrity); caring for staff and ensuring that they are actively involved in meaningful scholarship that enhances their own profile as well as their teaching prowess; care in understanding how communication can be enhanced and meetings can become more meaningful and supportive; and, of course, taking care to be compliant in all we do. Straight forward? Easy? Probably neither, but an essential focus for the next five years in what is being called the post-COVID era – possibly best called the ‘slowly emerging from the shadow of COVID’ era.

On careful consideration – I believe these five foci for HE will be in fact the key issues to be considered over the next five years.

But wait – a second wave (storm) is heading our way

Considering the current news of ‘caps’ being imposed on international enrolments in Australia from 2025 – my view is that it will have a similar impact as COVID-19 – a second pandemic if you will. Within two years of legislation being passed we will see a similar impact on student numbers – but this time without the option of online saving the day – rather a need for a significant rethink that will probably include online options for offshore students – but equally important creating more attractive options for domestic students and transnational opportunities for international students that fly under the cap restrictions.

For some this will be a challenge to meet head on – for others, sadly, their demise.

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