Leadership strategies for a higher education sector in flux
By Warren Bebbington

Summary

The 2020 pandemic experience signals a pivotal opportunity for a transformation in universities, critically through narrowing and sharpening a distinctive mission and aims for each campus. A series of strategies are proposed for university leadership, commencing with a move towards hybrid delivery of teaching and a reconceived support of the student experience, to a rescheduling of teaching semesters to fill the year, a repurposing of existing buildings to a blended-learning, externally-collaborative norm, a reallocation of funds away from new capital works towards investment in staff upskilling in digital tools and online pedagogy, and towards an array of salaried appointment types rather than casuals contracts for staff. Ways to address the financial crisis are outlined, focusing on a resizing of the university to fit new, more focused goals. These would also facilitate a revitalised, more purposeful approach to donors and government—to the former for more scholarships, research fellowships and chairs targeted to a university’s individual mission and strengths, and to the latter for urgent funds to save our national research effort from demise, to expand CSP places for the growing domestic demand, and to refocus and recover some level of recruitment of international students.

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1. Introduction

After six months of pandemic restrictions, the mood in Australian university communities has never been so bleak. Teaching academics are cut off from vital interaction with their students, researchers are frantic to resource their labs and keep their staffs, scholars are unable to access their libraries or research collections, and students in their isolation are suffering mental health issues in growing numbers. A vast number of international students have not been able to cross borders to join their university at all, while for domestic students, home tensions and complexities can make remote study difficult, or even impossible. Clinical depression and course withdrawal amongst even some of the brightest and most committed students is a matter of sadness for their teachers. All are feeling the loss of the vibrant campus life and life-giving collegial interaction so integral to the essence of a university.

2. Effective leadership through the pandemic

Faced with such an array of challenges, the role of leadership in a university has never been more taxing. Most university leaders moved quickly to deal with the immediate threats from the pandemic: to delay capital works, to cancel unviable courses, to curtail non-core expenditure and administrative costs, to consolidate management roles and reduce executive remuneration, and to cooperate with unions in amending Enterprise Bargains or introducing salary and recruitment freezes.

Undoubtedly, in their daily operations, leaders put the health and security of their staff and students first; then focused on their commitment to deliver existing programs to students and to upholding academic standards. A number have impressively modelled the excellent, regular, and fully-transparent communication, internally and externally so necessary in a crisis, and also taken
care to preserve the traditional collegial participation in decision-making so important to the university idea. But increasingly their minds are occupied with the post-pandemic future.

3. A pivotal opportunity

From famine can a harvest bloom? Two centuries ago in Berlin, in the shadow of the city’s occupation by Napoleon, a new Prussian education director Wilhelm von Humboldt developed a bold plan for reforming the state’s education system. Part of it was the creation of a new kind of university, one rejecting the rote learning methods, lecture mode and vocational training then customary at universities in favour of individual research projects, discussed at weekly seminars, and leading to a single new degree—the PhD. It was a pivotal moment for education, and Humboldt’s new Berlin University, with its narrow, sharply-defined purpose, became the model on which many of the world’s research universities are based today.

In the shadow of COVID-19, university leaders have a no-less pivotal opportunity to rethink their institutions. Can our universities continue with their multiple aims of research, professional education, job training, economic advice and community engagement, or should each identify and focus more on its most distinctive, most outstanding activity? Would this be on its strongest fields of research? Or on excellent teaching? Or on community engagement?

In its April 2020 Higher Education Relief Package, the Federal Government aimed at persuading universities to offer a new array of short courses, featuring skills training in certain job fields of national priority. In considering such a proposal, a university leader always needs to ask: will the proposal further the university’s mission and stay true to its core values? If these include vocational training, then so be it; but if not then a leader should proceed with caution. Introducing new course types should always be guided by the university’s long-established values and aims; indeed, focusing internal discourse directly on the institution’s character, vision and long-term mission and proposing new actions that support them can help significantly to re-energise a demoralised university community.

4. Post-pandemic strategies

One change in recent months was almost instantaneous. The pandemic wrenched online learning modes from the fringe of course delivery methods to the core. Many seasoned academics who had avoided digital learning tools or delegated their use to junior casuals were dragged into video conference platforms as their only viable method of delivery. For many teaching staff this happened with only a rudimentary introduction to the software and technological skills involved, and nil instruction in online pedagogical methods.

The consequences of having drawn online learning into the core will profoundly affect the way forward. Even in the USA, where the drop in student enrolment during the pandemic has been only slight (3% domestic and 11% international), 65% of colleges and university have started the Fall 2020 semester with blended or fully-online delivery (Chronicle of Higher Education 28 Sept 2020). In one US survey, 72% of students wanted to return to F2F classes, but a majority with some online components (Alexander et al). This unavoidably leads to strategies leaders will need to consider for the longer term. These are best considered by taking a bottom-up approach, which begins by considering the attributes we want to inculcate in each student, the modes of delivery and the nature of support we offer them, then reviews the structure and schedule of the
programs, proceeds to the implications for the physical campus and the staff establishment, and arrives at the ultimate question of the university’s core aims and mission.

**Nurturing an analytical mind in students:** The essence of the graduate we all want to produce will not change: inarguably an analytical mind is a fundamental graduate attribute in any field. But its nurturing is not naturally facilitated by online learning modes. The bite-sized information and quick-quiz follow-up mode of online pedagogy brings a danger of students losing the capacity to listen at length, to absorb a complex argument, or to summarise, dissect and evaluate what they hear as they hear it. How many graduates whose learning has been chiefly online are able to comprehend an individual research question, focus on its meaning, master its contentions and respond with a critical perspective? This raises important questions about the best blend of teaching modes for the future: asynchronous screen segments delivering content for individual learning need to be mixed with synchronous group interactions facilitating analytical argument. A program needs as well as problem-based instruction some sustained lectures in which the response requires end-on precis and critique. The comparison between collaborative and individual learning modes and their respective benefits needs to be carefully considered.

**Inculcating ethical behaviour and values for an online world in students:** Character and values education have not been part of the scope of Australian public universities, but in an era of “fake news” and aggressively manipulative social media, helping students to adopt ethical behaviour and values online and critically navigate social media has also assumed a significant importance. While it remains inappropriate for a secular public university to advocate any faith-based code of conduct, it is highly appropriate for a university education to inculcate habits of critical judgement, ethical standards and discriminating use of social media.

**Adopting a hybrid delivery mode:** With online learning now at the core of teaching, a new balance between physical and online modes will need to be identified across the campus offerings. A university needs to identify the full array of activities needed for instruction and how they might blend F2F and online in a hybrid delivery mode (Anne Davies *The Guardian* 26 Jul 2020). It has been said lab experiments are impossible online, yet many secondary schools are using virtual experiment software in science subjects with success. Methods need developing to better manage staff-student interaction, class discussion, group projects, data sharing, and fieldwork. Even the extra-curricular campus life can be drawn in, as there are ways student clubs, societies, perhaps even sporting fixtures can develop with online components.

**Offering choice of delivery modes:** Many universities will consider offering choice in delivery modes to better accommodate the needs of different student cohorts. Some are experimenting HyFlex (simultaneous F2F and online delivery), others with offering alternatives. At Arizona State University, for example, pioneering President Michael Crow is now offering his large student cohort three alternative modes: full immersion on campus with synchronous blended components; full immersion synchronous off-campus; and full digital delivery off-campus asynchronous for those employed. Crow stresses that excellent, carefully-curated student-staff interaction is critical to the success of all three modes. He also insists on regular tenured staff delivering the digital content, not relegating it to junior casuals (*Times Higher Education* 5 July 2020).

**Retrooling student support:** Blended learning demands a new concept of the student-centered campus experience, expanding the use of academic mentors, student buddy programs, and IT support. Student support services will need to help students—and their parents—establish
boundaries at home between life and study; to monitor and address loneliness and mental health issues. Communication protocols need adjusting for the new normal—for new students tailored individual advice on their online options; for current onshore students financial aid and counselling as well as individual support; for those offshore advice on when or if they should return to campus and their options to proceed remotely; for those with study abroad programs—clear information on substitutes, postponements, or refunds; in further periods of campus lockdown—immediate articulation of remote learning arrangements; and for all, reliable information on pandemic facts, the discouraging of misinformation, racism, and other ills (Segura and Zaim Mar 2020).

**Reviewing student administration:** Student administrations need to be reviewed through a student’s eyes, to think through a better array of self-designed, modular course structures more attuned to the changed student needs; to arrive at more liberal leave-of-absence and progress rules matched to the current difficulties students face. Universities need to develop new measurements of the success of their student administration: to what extent are we delivering an experience which is worth the fees being charged? Or should those fees be reduced? In making these changes it is particularly urgent we lift the less than stellar student experience perceptions of international students.

**Growing a global faculty:** Also part of Crow’s new Arizona offering is a much wider involvement of partner universities, with geographically-distant faculty offering digital courses in their specialist areas. In other countries too, teaching staff will no longer need to be solely campus-based but could include some remotely based, chosen for a specialty in which the university is weak and which might be offered through a network of partner institutions (Benhayoun University World News 4 Jul 2020). All teaching staff will need to be upskilled to work fluently online, cultivating much better student interaction to produce and exchange ideas; and made familiar with the pedagogical methods of hybrid delivery, assessment and measurement.

**Year-round campus scheduling:** The financial plight of so many universities makes the fundamentally inefficient calendar for use of campus facilities no longer defensible. Universities should adopt genuinely year-round operations, beyond the marginal summer semesters of the recent past—three full semesters, from which student could choose two to enrol in, or accelerate their progress through all three. Full-time staff should be able to elect whether they teach a full load across two semesters or reduce their load across all three.

**Repurposing buildings and facilities:** A changed F2F/remote balance of delivery will also involve reconceiving the physical university: abandoning the construction of more new buildings and instead repurposing existing buildings to interactive learning commons, innovation hubs with industry, or student-led learning spaces. Moreover, it may be that sessions for students off-campus at rented neighborhood schools or community centres should be added, where small groups of students can come together locally rather than travelling to campus, a far less costly arrangement than providing new buildings. Meetings in rented space off-shore will be needed in significant quantity too.

**Developing better pedagogic skills for staff:** Undeniably, all teaching staff will need enhanced development programs in pedagogical skills, covering instructional design blending F2F and technology, introducing online learning practices and current digital tools, and considering the right mix of synchronous and asynchronous modes for each subject. These development programs will need to consider how to motivate students online, how to promote deeper rather than
superficial understanding of content, and how to develop online assessment and feedback. It is also
time to promote research in cognitive learning more broadly, gathering empirical data for
different methods of instruction, and developing a reflective future teaching practice for the
hybrid environment. IT development and support of a campus’s Virtual Learning Environment
(VLE) will need expansion, and staff support networks in online pedagogy will need incentivising.

5. Narrowing and focusing the mission and aims

Australian universities also have a systemic weakness which it is now an opportune moment to
address. An enduring sameness is our curse: we suffer a lack of diversity of university types and
offer students little real choice—the legislative requirement of research makes it near impossible,
for example, for a university to be a proud, teaching-only institution.

Our increased complexity is another weakness, as each university strives to serve too many aims—
to educate for the professions, to train for jobs, to conduct research, to offer expertise to local and
national governments, and to aid the economic development of each university’s local region or
the nation. Trying to satisfy a “multi-varsity” set of goals adds costs and increased size of a kind
that is now demonstrably unsustainable.

And competing overtly for market approval or regulatory endorsement adds distorting external
pressure. The pursuit of the international rankings with criteria not relevant to a university’s
particular mission, or the seeking to satisfy government attempts at regulation or accreditation by
adapting traditional activities to respond to short-term measurement are both distracting. Better
for a university to define its mission more sharply, then choose its own suite of appropriate
performance measures.

6. Ensuring financial sustainability

The financial challenges brought on by the pandemic are unprecedented. It is estimated
universities will unavoidably lose $16 billion in income by 2023, and $18 billion by 2024
(Marshman & Larkins, Jun 2020); one prediction is that incomes have little hope of recovery to
pre-pandemic levels until 2028. Only a portion of these losses can be offset by a university
accessing its investments and reserves: alarmingly, half the sector is at serious risk of financial
disaster in the coming three years in the absence of significant restructure. There are however
some causes for optimism.

**Domestic student growth:** The current contraction of enrolments has a multi-year pipeline effect,
as this year’s vacant first-year places become next year’s vacant later-year places. But despite the
pandemic enrolment dip, there is every reason to believe a much expanded pool of potential
students is ahead. Demographics forecast strong growth of domestic school leavers until around
2037, when the pandemic’s fall in the birth rate impacts. Weakness in the job market means more
will opt for higher education as an alternative to immediate employment: in NSW year 12
applications, for example, are up 21% for 2021. Older workers are also a strongly growing cohort
keen to upskill and retrain. Government announcements in recent days have included a boost of
CSP funding to address this growth.

**Part recovery of the international student cohort:** While border closures are currently drastically
affecting international student arrivals, some restoration of international student enrolments is
inevitable. Australia’s attractiveness to international students have not evaporated: our proximity
to Asia, our reputation for high-quality education, our multi-cultural society, and our environment of political stability all remain. To be sure, there are significant new concerns: a new Oxford Centre for Global Higher Education study has found the pandemic has diminished the Chinese demand for foreign education, and that once travel is normalised, only 15% of Chinese students will seek study abroad. Australia, which ranked third behind the USA and UK as a preferred destination for Chinese students, will be supplanted in popularity by Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan, all perceived to have handled the pandemic much better (Weiyan Xiong et al). There are also Australia’s deteriorated relations with China, and the level of support our government offered stranded international students during the pandemic, which compared poorly with support in other countries. Without China, it is doubtful international onshore enrolment will recover to pre-pandemic levels.

But offshore, Australian universities have an opportunity to compete for the global online and hybrid delivery market, which remains capable of significant growth. A 2016 Deloitte Access Economics study estimated there were currently some one billion people below age 64 keen to learn (online), in 29 countries Australia could regard as sources of students. Income from online and hybrid delivery never matches F2F, but scale offers at least some opportunities.

**Rescuing Research:** Much more alarming is the threat to the university research capability. 10% of the nation’s research workforce will be gone by the end of 2024 ((5,100-6,100 positions), possibly even double that. Larkins and Marshman (Jun 2020) estimate a $6.4–7.6 billion loss in research income 2020-24, as half the university research expenditure was funded by cross-subsidisation from diminishing international student fees. Support from philanthropy and industry cannot hope to replace this. 60% of the expenditure is salaries and postgraduate scholarships: consequently, younger unemployed researchers—disproportionately female—have especially suffered.

On average Australian universities commit 51% of their discretionary income to research, and with the collapse of this income, the survival of lab-based research is threatened. Australian research expenditure, 1.79% of GDP before the pandemic against an average in OECD nations of 1.49% is now just 0.48%. The effects of this decline will place at risk the international research rankings of Australian universities (7 of which are currently in the ARWU top 100), and inevitably, will slow discovery and new knowledge in many fields of importance to national health and economic development. The cross-subsidy from international student fees will not return to previous levels, and a rescue package of very substantial size is urgently needed. In the UK and elsewhere, this came from the national government; inescapably, in Australia it must come from the same source.

**Right-sizing the university:** Narrowing a university’s mission leads to the question of right-sizing the university itself. The future is likely smaller than the large, complex multi-varsity of the past—ANU and the University of Melbourne already have plans to become smaller rather than larger. This is no time for campus mergers, which would lead Australia’s universities, already bloated by global standards, to even more complexity and impersonal massification—rather, each universities should focus on carving out more sharply a truly distinctive character and appropriate size for its future. Universities will need to play to their greatest strengths - to focus on a limited array of first-class research areas; or on distinction in teaching and learning, graduate or undergraduate (not necessarily both). Such a focussing of purpose by universities themselves would address the “job-ready graduate” agenda more effectively than any government’s legislative intervention can hope to.
Prospectively, there is no stronger principle for improving financial sustainability than a focus on a smaller core; reducing administration costs to match; and freeing up capital, not just by abandoning new building programs by selling property no longer essential in a hybrid learning environment, but also by repurposing existing buildings, renting local or offshore space where F2F teaching demands it, while instead investing strategically in online infrastructure, in digital staff upskilling, and in blended course development.

**Restructuring the workforce:** For a sector where staffing consumes on average 57% of expenditure, the pandemic’s effect on university staffing have been immediate and drastic. 11,000 university positions are already lost; counting casuals perhaps 30,000 people will lose their university work by the end of 2020. There was little government assistance here: JobKeeper benefited only the private providers and was withheld from the public universities. The huge casual workforce in universities, a matter of concern to unions for a long period, has had a sudden and drastic cull, and its victims are facing great hardship.

Of course, the changing nature of work is a global issue far broader than universities: advances in connectivity and cognitive technology were altering the economy of human capital well before the pandemic (Schwartz et al, 2017). But unless staff costs are to be an even more dominant item of expenditure than in the past, the university workforce will also need to be adjusted to the requirements of the post-pandemic world. This need not mean a return to mass casual employment: rather, a growing cohort of academics in future could be discipline specialists sourcing full-time work from several fractional contracts, teaching both F2F and remotely in several geographically-dispersed universities, their teaching arranged to husband substantial time for research in their field. To be sure, for administrative tasks contractors and temporaries will always have a place, but in right-sizing universities, leaders should seek to minimize a return to reliance for core academic activities on piecemeal casual contracts, and plan instead a menu of salaried positions, fulltime and fractional, building a faculty with the bandwidth to care year-round for students and conduct sustained research. The abandoning of unneeded capital programs should help provide the resources to make this possible.

**External fundraising:** A more focussed mission and individualized aims would facilitate a renewed and more differentiated approach to a university’s external funding sources. It would make a more compelling case to donors for scholarships, research fellowships or professorships targeted to a few deliberately-chosen fields of strength, and to industry for more internships and partnerships in areas the campus can offer a strong track record.

And it should offer a re-energised basis for lobbying for better Government investment in higher education: for grants to rejuvenate international student recruitment, for an urgent short-term rescue of our threatened research establishment, for expanded CSP places to match the coming growth in school leavers, for assistance in upskilling our staffs for the digital future, and for a more sensible rethink of the current Federal Government reform proposals.

### 7. Conclusion

Despite the unprecedented disruption it brought, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic signals a once-in-a-generation opportunity for a strategic transformation in universities, toward more differentiated character and missions for each university, and a resizing of each university and its resources to fit new, more focussed goals. COVID-19’s wrenching of online learning and digital tools to the core of delivery methods should begin a development towards a menu of hybrid learning modes on most
campuses, supported by much more sophisticated preparation for teaching staff in blended learning pedagogy and digital tools. With bold thought and a clear vision, there is every reason for optimism about Australia’s future as a leading higher education nation.

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