Reimagining education post COVID-19

by Brett Henebery15 Sep 2020

Since the COVID-19 pandemic turned education on its head, school leaders and policymakers have been eager to understand how to use the learnings gained from this disruption to their advantage.

The Educator Leaders' Summit 2020 on June 25 saw award-winning panellists share their experiences in using cutting-edge technology for impact, design innovative learning spaces and improve student wellbeing before, and during, the pandemic.

Now that the vast majority of schools and universities have established a solid online architecture for remote and flexible learning to continue, the focus is turning to what has been learned and, perhaps just as importantly, whether the education system can afford to return to the traditional model in a very new kind of world.

On Thursday, a panel held by the AFR examined this in detail. "Reinventing Education," – part of the "Reshaping Australia Dialogues" event – heard from several education leaders, including Professor Sanjay Sarma, Vice President for Open Learning at MIT, NSW Education DepartmentSecretary, Mark Scott, and Professor Margaret Gardner, President and Vice-Chancellor of Monash University.

'We need to focus on knowledge transfer, not exams'

Professor Sarma, who has helped develop many of the technologies that underpin radio frequency identification, smart sensors and the Internet of Things, discussed how educators can use this time of disruption to get rid of outdated approaches and create a more fit for purpose education system for the post-COVID 21st Century.

"Young people face a future in which jobs are changing at a very rapid pace. Thirty-to-fifty years ago, technologies had the courtesy to take months, years or even decades to evolve," Professor Sarma said.

"Today, a technology is born and within a year or two it is widely adopted. The half-life of skills as we know is dropping rapidly, and more and more people are going to be self-employed in the future, and this was before COVID-19".

He said that as this continues, young people will increasingly "become the CEOs or CLOs of their own careers".

"They can't rely on degrees for companies to hire them. They very well might, but they will increasingly need to rely on their own merit".

Professor Sarma said the economic impacts of COVID-19 are creating a massive shift of jobs from industries such as retail, commercial real estate, hotels and airlines to digital companies, telecoms, healthcare and biotech.

"What that tells us is that the oxygen for careers is going to be education. Education is something you do to people and learning is something you do for yourself," he said.

"Young people are going to have to become learning animals that essentially keeps them abreast. Basically, they're standing on treadmills

that are moving backwards, and if they're not jogging forwards, they will fall off the edge of the treadmill".

'An overwhelmingly positive experience despite the challenges'

Mark Scott, Secretary of the NSW Education Department said the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how resilient and adaptive educators and students were in the face of the unprecedented challenges they faced.

"The transition to learning from home worked quickly and highly effectively. I will attribute to our teachers a remarkable reskilling in the way they engage with students," Scott said.

"Overwhelmingly, we feel that was a positive experience, and as Sanjay has indicated, it makes us think again what is the classroom best for and how do we best use technology on an ongoing basis to learn from home".

Scott said that despite the challenges, some students thrived when learning from home, demonstrating that there are opportunities for the education system to draw from what works in online education and replicate this more broadly.

"I think we have a lot to consider and evaluate on the back of that," he said, adding that the Department recently finished its first research project on what it learned from the remote learning experience from February through to June.

"It does go more carefully to how we create the resources in the centre that really allow full support for our teachers regardless of what learning environment they're in".

'Grades have gone up'

Professor Margaret Gardner, president and vice-chancellor of Monash University, said the impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector has been unmistakable, but agreed with the notion that educators and students have risen to the challenge given the extraordinary changes that have been forced upon them.

"Certainly there has been a significant decrease in the number of international students who have joined us, and so there is a difference in the student cohort both at scale and it's nature that we're teaching," Professor Gardner said.

"But like everyone else, we've pivoted to online immediately, and it's important to note that Australian universities on average are very large, so you need to think like a large elephant that has been pirouetted on the tip of its ballet shoe to put all of these things online".

She said this was not just true for students who were living in the vicinity, but also for thousands of students who were overseas and in rural and remote who could not move back home.

Despite the complexities and anxieties associated with this upheaval, Professor Gardner noted that after assessing first semester results, grades have gone up, showing that the University's transition to remote and flexible learning has been a success.

"Monash was administering online invigilated exams, so it's a pretty solid result and it's happened in our online teaching, on our Australian campuses as well as our Malaysian campuses," she said.

"We're digging into it to see what we think has caused this, how it's related to changes to assessment, but the data at the moment says they've done better".

Should this be a revolutionary change?

Sara Caplan, CEO of Skills for Australia at PWC said she has been worried that the education system might go back to the way things were being done before the pandemic, potentially missing out on an historic opportunity to bring about positive changes.

"We don't take advantage of what we've learned through COVID-19 about how successful the online model can be," Caplan said.

"You don't need to be teaching or imparting knowledge as much now, because we can get knowledge from almost anywhere".

Caplan said the education of the future will be about using knowledge to solve problems, collaborating, learning from each other and then building on it.

"So, we need to look at what we can do online and do it more successfully. We'll always need people pushing the boundaries in technology and education and working together face to face," she said.

"But there are many fundamentals that we can do online, and that has to be embraced the whole way through, from school, to vocational education and right through to university, and even into employment".

She said young people will need to have a learning mindset and pick up new skills and abilities as we progress further into the new normal.

"That will be absolutely critical to keeping people highly skilled and in work".