

# Signing In and Dropping Out: Coronavirus and the Virtual University

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*It was made with little thought but a good deal of high-minded urgency: Evacuate your office, take what you can, and prepare for the virtual world. Fill in a form, tell us if you actually pinched the office computer. This was the message that was sent to academic staff across Australia in the second half of March. Australian universities were effectively going into a lockdown as a response to directives by the federal and state governments. The objective: to plan for the Virtual University.*

For the most part, the execution was typically shabby. In one university's case, a mere 24-hour notice was given to all staff, a feeble account that meant that much material remains in offices, inaccessible except through lengthy pleas to security staff. In this hurried exercise, no allowances were provided to assist the move of necessary equipment and supplies. In other cases, there were delays in implementing the "shutdown". Campuses remained opened in some instances, though various parts were sealed. Libraries at the University of Melbourne, by way of example, were open even as staff were discouraged from coming onto campus.

The university lockdowns have given a push along to the cost cutting iconoclasts of higher education. Imagine a world where the wings of a teacher are clipped, making that misnomer called student-centred learning an absolute? Forget the fogey in the front, musing on the Socratic method of instruction, the peripatetic walk. Welcome the person before the screen, with domestic backdrop. What a cosy world.

Often ignored in online teaching is not the method but the implication, that grand vision which envisages the elimination of the in-class pedagogue who needs space and podium. The same goes for students who are told that they will have a particular experience in class, their physical presence being necessary along the way. With universities looking at every chance to minimise costs while pretending to deliver a certain quality of course, the policy here is clear: coronavirus is an opportunity to clear the decks and thin the ranks.

The courses of a virtual university are cheaper to deliver and a blessing to the tyrants of the property services wing of the university. Higher education institutions, certainly in Australia, have shown a legendary indifference to students. Far better to have a bloated Human Resources department that serve as bullying dragoons for University management. Best listen to what they say in Property Services, because they know all about the learning and research environment. (An example of such deep learning from the drones in PS is the dogmatic, and continued embrace, of open planning as a suitable environment for teaching and research staff.)

Those backing the Virtual University have suddenly found themselves in clover.

Psychologists Annie Ditta and Liz Davis at the University of California, Riverside, have made a splash by [creating online tutorials](#) using the video conferencing service Zoom. They insist - and here's the rub - on "bite-size pieces" in how to use Zoom and cognate facilities. Fittingly enough, online tutorials on how to use an online instruction or communication service are themselves trimmed of fat and length. "It would be easy to go on for 25 or 30 minutes in one lecture," [suggests](#) Davis, "and that's too much. People will tune out." And, perhaps, drop out.

Then come the words of wisdom from those who speak, not from the summitry of teaching but from the low point of management speak. Pauline Taylor-Guy of the Australian Council for Educational Research and Annie-Marie Chase of the Australian Council for Educational Research [have fighting words](#) in *The Conversation*. They are convinced: "When done right, online learning can actually be as effective as face-to-face education." There you have it; conviction, writ large, no debates accepted, especially the contrary view that some courses should *never* be taught online.

These wise heads, who may well have lost connection with what an actual classroom looks or feels like, with the tart smell of the whiteboard or the worn appearance of chairs and desks, take a shot at the Australian university system for not having "upskilled their staff to deliver this kind of quality online education." Many university instructors merely upload material to online learning platforms, rather than engaging them. And, silly creatures, they have no experience of "online course design and pedagogy."

But Taylor-Guy and Chase are quick to reveal their angle. Not giving "intensive upskilling to lectures to deliver online classes and support effectively, they might see students disengaging and dropping out early." Ways of keeping interest are available: the use of online discussion boards, chat rooms and the replication of "small group work in tutorials."

A far better appraisal would be to suggest blended environments and the good eggs, few as they are in higher education, will consider this in post-ravaged landscape of COVID-19. Till then, it is worth reflecting that the online platform has become an often brain-deadening pre-requisite for any course. What's not on it, does not exist. I platform, therefore I exist. To use a white board and expect students to actually take notes is now considered something of a mild heresy, if not an anachronism deserving of the rack. The decline of note taking as an art is lamentable, and to be mourned alongside the introduction of such terms as "workshopping" and "lectorial".

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