

Resilient Leadership: Perspectives from Boyden's Higher Education Practice Experts

As the grip of COVID-19 continues to impact us globally, Boyden is tapping into the deep knowledge base of our collective partners to bring industry insights and prescriptive learnings to the forefront.

In this issue of *Resilient Leadership*, Boyden shares the expert opinions of Social Impact and Education Practice leaders from across the globe: Alun Parry (Australia), Brent Cameron (Canada), and Nick Robeson (Ireland & United Kingdom).

In conversation with Boyden Canada's Education Leader, Jessa Chupik, the discussion explores the immediate crisis impacts on higher education institutions, the demand for digital, anticipated long-term COVID-19 legacies, and how this translates into transformations within leadership.

Chupik: How is the current pandemic crisis impacting the higher education sector in your country?

Parry: Coronavirus has both changed and accelerated trends across the Australian education landscape. Australian universities have a long tradition in distance education; however, the scale and breadth of the shift to online delivery has been seismic. Colleagues should be congratulated on what they've achieved in such a short period of time. The other obvious impact has been in the collapse of the international student market. Australia is a destination of choice for a large proportion of international students and the collapse of this market has left a significant revenue hole for universities, and well as a palpable vacuum in our communities. Finally, it's great to see that many of the brightest scientific minds in Australia have been committing their energy to finding a vaccine for the virus and demonstrating why university research is so important.



Cameron: Similar to the situation around the world, in Canada, post-secondary institutions have been significantly impacted by the pandemic. Rapidly shutting down campuses – including student residences, research labs, food services, athletics, and classrooms – was a monumental task that disrupted the lives of hundreds of thousands of students, faculty, and staff from coast to coast. But in some ways, shutting down was an easier task compared to the complexity of planning to re-open campuses before a vaccination and widespread testing are available.

Robeson: Conservative estimates show a £2bn shortfall in income across the UK university sector in 2020 with knock-on implications reaching well into 2021 and beyond. It is very probable that some universities will become technically bust, relying on state intervention by way of COVID-19 interruption loans or other forms of financial intervention. The greatest impact is in relation to international student recruitment, albeit the UK should be in a position to recover faster given it remains a hub market for students.

Chupik: What appears to be the current focus of the sector?

Cameron: The current focus is clearly on how to safely and effectively re-open campuses in September. The move to online courses and instruction will continue in many cases, with reduced, smaller class/lab activities happening on campus. Due to restrictions and concerns about international travel, complexities in re-opening student residences, and general concern about a resurgence of the pandemic in the fall, there is significant uncertainty around international student registrations. This has tremendous financial and operational impacts.

Robeson: Substantial dialog with government about student attraction, together with attempts to provide assurance and commitment to the funds required for researchers on research contracts. Also, funding to include any extension required given several months will have been lost.

Parry: Universities quickly mobilised their resources to shift the delivery of programs online and, in tandem, set about the challenge of pivoting their business models to reflect the reality of 2020. The strategic planning associated with this is now largely complete and it's the implementation of some of these painful expenditure control measures that now lie ahead. On a brighter note, as Australia begins to unwrap some of its social isolation and distancing measures, universities are refocusing on the complexity of returning to the campus, what this means for the remainder of the academic year, and how it can be done safely and sensibly.

Chupik: What are some of the C-19 legacies you expect will impact the higher education sector in the longer term?



Robeson: Where organisations were behind the curve on digital transformation, we will witness a sea change. The competitive landscape amongst international students will increase substantially, with the UK potentially losing out to Australia given the term start is January. This year's intake may migrate south.

Cameron: There should be some positive legacies amidst all the harm done by the pandemic. For starters, the crisis forced institutions to move to more flexible modes of learning much faster than many thought possible. The massive scale of e-learning taking place will undoubtedly lead to innovations and the adoption of new methodologies and technologies. On the downside, however, the financial pressures in the coming year – and beyond – will be considerable. Institutions could see declines in tuition revenue – domestic and international, declines in revenue from ancillary services, corporate supporters, fundraising and ultimately governments as the latter begin to rebalance their budgets in 2021 and beyond.

Parry: Given what has been achieved since the outbreak of the pandemic I expect our universities to actively integrate many of the changes - and gains achieved - into BAU, in particular the pedagogy shift. Education technology platforms have shown that they work and online delivery of all programs will be part of the new norm with on-campus activity adding value. The flipped classroom is now a reality. The collapse of the international student market and the resulting drop in revenue will, however, impact on universities for many years to come. Budget holes will take time to fill, especially as student cohorts take 3-4 years to cycle through, and universities will look more creatively at their student markets as they look to mitigate risk and reduce the reliance on specific countries.

Chupik: How do these potential changes translate to the competition for talent in higher education?

Parry: In the immediate term I see a decline in the appetite of international candidates to relocate. Travel restrictions, the prospect of quarantine, and self-isolation plus the emotional impact of the virus is likely to weigh heavily on the minds of candidates as they consider their future. Staff development programs, mentoring and coaching will need to fill the void. In the medium term, however, I think talent will once again be attracted to the performance and attributes of our higher education sector, our lifestyle, and quite possibly how Australia responded to the coronavirus pandemic.

Cameron: The demographic realities and intense international competition for top talent in higher education have not gone away. The impacts of the pandemic on talent movement are still unfolding. In some cases, individuals are proving less willing to move if they are in a relatively stable situation and in an institution well positioned to weather this storm. In other cases, the economic situation caused by the pandemic is causing some to explore opportunities in new regions, countries and institutions that appear better positioned to thrive in the years ahead. In either scenario, the ability to attract talented leaders and academics remains highly competitive.

Robeson: For some, this crisis will have highlighted leadership qualities both in faculty and support infrastructure. These will simply be in higher demand and retention schemes and counteroffers will become a common theme in attempting to prise talent from universities. It is certainly not going to get any easier and the potential reduction in mobility will only impact supply further.

Chupik: Do you anticipate a re-prioritisation of skills and experiences in university leadership teams?

Cameron: Absolutely. We are already hearing boards, presidents and even search committees focus more on the need for leaders that can deal with ambiguity, who can stay calm in a crisis, and who have very strong operational management abilities like budgeting, human resources, etc. While these were always seen as beneficial, they have leaped to the forefront for the next year or two as universities face incredible uncertainty around how they operate and their finances.

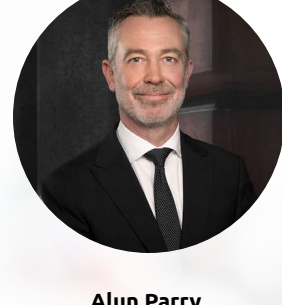
Parry: Yes, definitely. I see university leadership teams tasked with a different model. Partnership building, innovation and entrepreneurial qualities will be more in demand as universities look to ensure they continue to have impact and pivot the business model. As more flexible working arrangements are adopted across society, the ability to lead teams remotely and those that don't co-locate will be increasingly important. I also feel that there will be a renewed focus on performance management as the reality of leadership during tougher times takes its toll.

Robeson: We have seen that re-prioritisation take place over the last 10 years. There is a focus on more innovative, more entrepreneurial leadership. This climate will add crisis management skills and leaders who have demonstrated empathy whilst having a keen interest in the financial efficiency of their organisations.

Boyden's Global Education Practice

Globalisation, economic challenges and growth opportunities are sharpening the focus on one of the fastest-growing sectors – tertiary, post-graduate and professional education.

Meet members of Boyden's Global Education Practice:



Alun Parry
Managing Partner, Australia



Brent Cameron
Managing Partner, Canada



Nick Robeson
Managing Partner, Ireland & United Kingdom



Jessa Chupik
Partner, Canada

Learn more about Boyden's Education Practice ►