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Impact of COVID-19 on academia

When I think of the impact of COVID-19 generally, I imagine a tide going out, leaving exposed on the sand all the treacherous shoals and the rubbish which we have hitherto been able to ignore because these things have been covered by water. Suddenly various flaws and weak points in society are exposed, including in health, in international supply chains, and in the tertiary sector, just to name a few.

Many people have told me that they feel an enduring sense of existential dread. In my sector, students wonder if they will have a job upon completing their degree, and academics wonder if they will have a job at the end of semester. It is, frankly, a difficult time to be a legal academic. Of course, I am writing from Melbourne, which has been particularly hard-hit by lockdown. But I think the effects of COVID-19 upon academia can be summarised as follows.

First, there is a biting and persistent insecurity about what is going to happen to our jobs, and to our institutions more generally. It is well-known that the Federal government has no appetite to help the tertiary sector in its woes, and there is no prospect that the Federal government is going to change its mind on this. My own university announced in August 2020 that 450 jobs will be cut as a result of COVID-19, but we do not yet know how this will play out, or whose jobs will be lost. I am lucky that I can teach multiple “unsexy” compulsory private law subjects—I hope that this means my position is safe. But I fear for valued colleagues, and worry that we will lose wonderful people who have much to contribute to our law school, and to legal scholarship generally. These times are particularly hard on early career scholars and PhD students.

Secondly, teaching has changed radically. We suddenly had to change all our courses to online delivery: pre-recorded lectures, online tutorials, and online discussion boards. I have found this hard. I really enjoy face-to-face interaction with students, seeing them learn. When lectures are pre-recorded, you have to imagine your audience while speaking to a blank wall. You don’t get the same feedback loop: you can’t adjust your lectures when you see that you have pitched something in too complex a manner. We have had to find new means of assessment as well, which fairly replicate the previous open-book exams.

I find teaching an online subject more labour intensive than teaching a face-to-face subject. It has to be planned more carefully and there is far less flexibility. This is not to say it has all been bad. I have learned new skills, and thought of creative ways to illustrate the facts of a case in diagrams. Online discussion boards can produce richer discussions than those in class, simply because people have time to think about what they write, and shyer people feel more able to participate. The help given by our digital learning team has been amazing, too—I could not have done this without their guidance. I expect that when (if?) we go back to face to face teaching, I will incorporate some of the techniques I have learned into my teaching.

Thirdly, research has become very much second fiddle to staying afloat in the receding COVID-19 tide, as we keep our teaching going. I think it is fair to say that universities have long been divided upon what their purpose is. Is it primarily research, or is it primarily teaching? Sometimes, my feeling (as someone who loves teaching) has been that research has been regarded as very much the *raison d’être* of universities, and teaching has not been so much of a priority. However, in the wake of COVID-19, this feeling has very much reversed. Those who are research-focused are very concerned that their work will be impacted by the increased teaching load and labour of online classes. I’m comparatively lucky: I research what I teach, and teach what I research, and so not much changes for me. For others, the change is profound as they come back to teaching because universities can no

longer afford to hire people to fill gaps in the teaching team, and they fear that their research will languish.

I have found it particularly hard to be separated from my office and my library. The Melbourne University library has been *superb* in managing to fulfil all my strange requests. But I miss hard copies of my beloved texts. I did not manage to collect my books before we shut down. The other night, I had a dream in which I was happily reunited with my legal textbooks and monographs, and was most disappointed to wake and find it was a dream.

Some of my conferences have still gone ahead remotely, but overseas travel is not possible. I was supposed to go to India in August to talk on damages in the Indian Contract Act, but my travel plans were scuttled. We managed to catch up online anyway, and had a very productive conference. A very large conference I was due to attend in the United States, however, has been postponed: it's difficult to hold something that large online.

Fourthly, the amount of administration has expanded exponentially. There are so many meetings, and so many changes which need to be made quickly. We have all become very conversant with Zoom meetings. For me, there is something peculiarly exhausting about online meetings. I now have tricks to try to make it less exhausting—turn off the view of myself (does my chin *really* look like that?)—concentrate on the active speaker—and wear headphones because, as that hearing test picked up five years ago, I'm slightly deaf in my left ear, and rely a lot more on lip reading than I had thought.

My online engagement has increased as a result of lockdown. I am much more active on social media than I was previously, simply because I've barely seen anyone outside my immediate family for six months. (As I said to my daughter, it is lucky that we all get along). My online legal friends have been invaluable source of support. Law Twitter buds—you know who you are—you bring me strength and joy! It has actually been a strange silver lining of this whole experience.

On the upside, I find it easier to attend faculty seminars and faculty meetings while I'm working from home: I have a long commute, ordinarily, and before COVID-19, I often rushed around picking up children and squeezing lunch in the gaps. Some lecturers have reported greater class "attendance" presumably because there is more flexibility around when a student can view a pre-recorded lecture, and it can be more easily fitted in around other work and family obligations, just as I can more easily fit in faculty meetings.

And then, there are the peculiar challenges of working from home with children in the house for an extended period of time. My four year old has a sixth sense for when there's a Zoom meeting he'd like to crash, and delights in doing dances for everyone. The juggle is hard: one child is crying, "I have to scan in my maths homework, Mum," as another one cries, "I'm hungry!" and the third child cries, "I don't want to film myself giving a talk about space stations as biomes!" I am sure that the four year old is in the background of at least one of my recorded lectures, but I will use this as an incentive to get the students to watch them all—it will be a game of "Where's Wally?"—spot the online lecture in which the kindergartener makes the guest appearance.

Ultimately, COVID-19 has been a mixed bag. There has been much fear and uncertainty, and that persists. But we have also found strengths we did not know that we had, and the resilience of my colleagues, students, friends and family during this time has been truly amazing. I am immensely proud to be part of Melbourne Law School, to be a member of the broader legal academic community, and to be able to speak out on ways in which the law affects us at this time. I think there is tremendous value in legal teaching and legal research, and I hope that we will be able to salvage

what is good about our discipline from the flotsam and jetsam left behind by COVID-19. I remain optimistic that we will. One of my areas of research is legal history. I was reading of the changes to English law in the wake of the Black Death in 1348–1349, and I was struck by the resilience of the law, and its adaptability. I think the same remains true to this day, but it is also an object lesson in why legal academic study is important: we can learn lessons from the past.

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