

Now. Bridge. Reboot. Thought Paper Series

Leading through the chasm and into the future economy

COVID-19: How to move from response to sustainability



Jim Metson
Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University
of Auckland

We are living in strange and challenging times. The COVID-19 world looks like a Salvador Dali painting. Like surrealist art, we may recognize the motifs, but pieces are missing, and the rest no longer fit into ordered patterns. A predictable response is to seek to get back to the world we knew as quickly as possible. But it is evident in response to the pandemic—we continue to do so at our peril. We may retreat into denial, but as neatly summed up by the news magazine *The Economist*, “You may have lost interest in the pandemic, but the pandemic has not lost interest in you.”

The universal reach and speed of COVID-19 effects present a global challenge unlike any other in our lifetimes. National impacts have demonstrated a disregard for national wealth, political systems and even quality of medical infrastructure. On the other hand, they have provided a visible test of leadership and nations’ collective ability to learn from experiences responding to a clear and present danger. Taiwan, for example, stored the lesson from SARS and responded rapidly and decisively to COVID-19. In terms of health impacts, it has emerged relatively unscathed to date, as indeed has my nation, New Zealand. Leaders confronted with a balancing act between the immediate health threat and perceived economic damage acted swiftly to target elimination, trusting the evidence-based predictions that would ultimately minimize financial and human costs. The

.....
"The pathway to recovery is highly uncertain and will again require the best of our leaders and will test societies’ resilience and innovation capacities."

power of a mobilized community has to date proved a decisive factor over the individual’s autonomy.

In this respect, it is still unclear how various strategies employed across the globe will play out. Even where health impacts have been effectively mitigated to this point, no one is escaping the economic and social damage that coronavirus has wrought. The pathway to recovery is highly uncertain and will again require the best of our leaders and will test societies’ resilience and innovation capacities. The COVID-19 recovery presents a different national leadership challenge to what we have seen in the immediate response. Much of the international fiscal stimulus that the IMF predicts at greater than \$4.2trn committed to date is directed at propping up jobs in a labour market increasingly disconnected from future economies’ likely shape. This is the case in New Zealand.

About this paper

This paper is an outcome of the GFCC Now. Bridge. Reboot. conversation series (conversations.thegfcc.org), which featured business, research, policy and thought leaders from 30 countries in eight live dialogues on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis and the trends emerging for the future economy.

We invited the participants of this dialogues series to reflect on the challenges and issues associated with leadership during the current crisis and in the world that we are seeing emerge out of it.

Learn more about the GFCC Now. Bridge. Reboot. conversation series at conversations.thegfcc.org.

Watch the conversation

Jim Metson participated in the "The economy and society need innovation" conversation June 24. Watch the session on the [GFCC YouTube channel](#).

The Global Federation of Competitiveness Councils

The GFCC is a global multi-stakeholder membership organization that has universities, corporations, government agencies and private sector industry organizations and councils as members. Combining its members and fellows, the GFCC has a footprint in more than 30 countries. Leaders and organizations in our network strive to advance innovation, productivity and prosperity in their nations, regions and cities.

To know more about the GFCC, visit our [website](#) or contact info@thegfcc.org.

 /GlobalFederationofCompetitivenessCouncils

 www.thegfcc.org

 @thegfcc

 /thegfcc/

 the-global-federation-of-competitiveness-councils/

The risk is a drift to incrementalism in attempting to restore the familiar in the face of change that will be irreversible in part. This is not only through immediate factors, such as global travel reset and supply chain disruption, but also in the rising confrontation with climate change and the need for the anticipation of the next global disruptor. While in recent decades, we have been remarkably innovative in driving economic efficiency through optimizing global supply chains, locally we have neglected economic diversity, innovation capacity and the resilience that these engender. The leadership that becomes critical is navigating the disruptive to take us beyond the superficial comfort of the known, and into the different world we are confronting. The hardening of both political and physical borders that COVID-19 has catalyzed is not a short-term effect. In a trading nation such as New Zealand, as elsewhere, industries based on digital platforms have thrived, while tourism, hospitality, and many parts of the export-dependent primary sector have struggled.

The upside is that collectively we have shown remarkable agility in both the response and the initial adaption to a changing world. In the University of Auckland, where I serve as deputy Vice-Chancellor, our incoming Vice-Chancellor (President) arrived in New Zealand only days before she and the rest of the University went into strict lockdown. Faced with never having met the University community, she started a series of virtual staff meetings, often with more than 3,000 participants. Q&A sessions were used to communicate and negotiate the way through the immediate crisis collectively. Digital technology has thus been a critical enabler of a visible and successful leadership model that might not have been stumbled upon without the pandemic and will certainly survive beyond it. The ability to lead in parallel virtual and physical worlds has tested and raised our understanding of these technologies' boundaries.

Technologies that we expected to reshape the University and how learning and research would be delivered over

.....
 "Digital technology has thus been a critical enabler of a visible and successful leadership model that might not have been stumbled upon without the pandemic and will certainly survive beyond it."

the next decade arrived overnight on our digital doorsteps. At the University of Auckland, 1,600 courses accommodating 44,000 students were moved online over three days. Support networks were put in place for students caught overseas, struggling with the technology or without suitable workplaces.

The speed of New Zealand's move into lockdown demanded situational leadership that very quickly morphed into the need for a more strategic response as the far-reaching implications of the pandemic became apparent. After a period fully back on campus, an outbreak of community transmission has moved the city back into partial lockdown and the University back into online delivery. As a country, we are still locked behind closed borders. Being ahead of the curve in terms of controlling community transmission has had significant advantages in social cohesion but does not provide a pathway to recovery. Australia and New Zealand in particular have seen the whole business model of higher education turned on its head. Universities have proved remarkably resilient institutions, but they reflect the communities and global landscape in which they are embedded. The pathway to sustainability will call on the most inspiring of our leaders and our artists to redraw the model and indeed the globe.