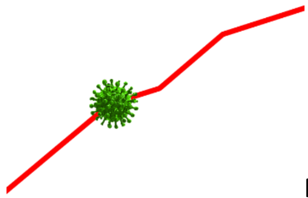

POST COVID-19 futures for the Education Sector

Last month, March, Trajectory Partnership published a quick peek into the future titled “The Post Pandemic Consumer.” With a longstanding interest in future trends and scenario building, I read with interest the trends identified in the paper under 4 “Trend” headings: **Arrested, Slow, Dominant and Advancing**, referring to the likely pace of the trends they identified. Able to spot trends and outliers quite naturally, one must remain aware that the trends are projections of observations made of data and set the scene for anyone interested in the future to play with. Peter Schwarz, my top Futures guru because of his deep understanding of Futures thinking, says simply in his book, “the Art of the Long View”

> “The test of a good scenario is not getting the future right… The real test of a good scenario is: Did I make better choices as a result of having looked at and understood both my own environment better and the consequences of my actions”

What scenarios of the future could be gleaned from Trajectory’s trends? As I was reminded in a conversation with colleagues at TCD, whilst life has slowed for the majority during this Pandemic, it has sped up for many in the NHS, Care sector, specialist manufacturers and supermarkets.

I hope you enjoy my toying with these trends on how **leaders in the education sector** could utilise the thinking to identify opportunities and threats for sustained success in a Post-COVID-19 world. This article may speak differently to you, depending on where you lead - in primary, secondary or tertiary education - so please take what applies and leave the rest on the table for someone else.

Arrested trends include growth in office and shop-based face-to face services, which until recently had gradual growth alongside online services. Demand for office property will reduce in both expensive urban locations but elsewhere, **not based on cost but on choice**. The current successful experience of mostly telephone consultations before face-to-face attendance, **will for the education sector, present opportunities to stretch resources to provide facilities in school where a child and parent could have a telephone medical consultation, so reducing children missing lessons in school. Some INSET training could be delivered remotely with more individualised interactive training bringing together video and written media. Routine face-to-face Parent-Teacher meetings is likely to stop and be offered on demand or based on circumstance, with considerable time savings for parents. Where they take place, most stages of school admission assessments would be virtual, with much reduction in costs to schools**. These demands will put pressure on government to speed up delivery of its digital strategy in the community, by providing wider private access to computers. **Schools on leased accommodation may be well placed in this climate to renegotiate lease terms and reduce costs or get better value.**

Consumer confidence has stalled with the uncertainty in the current crisis - employment, housing market, retail excluding supermarkets and online businesses that sell essentials. Lower interest rates (0.1%) have arrested savings that were already low. School supply businesses are likely to be keen to sell and so present **opportunities for schools to negotiate good deals and strengthen supplier relationships, notably in the area of school meals and supplies** for example, where supermarkets have acted more like social businesses, demonstrating such willingness to support their local communities.

Slowed trends from higher speed trajectories include distrust of government and big business. In the uncertainty, people are seeking stability in the familiar. This faith will outlast the crisis if the populace feels justified. Post-crisis Government support of the NHS, the care industry, individuals and businesses, is likely to uphold that support, provided the crisis is not followed by actions perceived as breaking that trust, such as severe austerity with uneven impact. The education sector would benefit from goodwill towards Government when schools reopen after many parents tire of home-schooling.

Some parents will become more engaged with schools, armed with better appreciation of teachers' efforts and impact. Some parents will opt for full or partial home-schooling. **Remote teaching will provide options for schools to offer remote sessions during holidays**, funded by fees or private sector fundraising. **There is an opportunity to enrich the curriculum with lessons on self-care, emotional resilience and civic responsibility directed at the local community.**

Before the pandemic, voices were increasingly being raised about the pure maximum-profit model of capitalism run in many businesses. The current actions of many supermarkets, financial institutions, manufacturing and service business has slowed this trend and raised expectations from consumers for more ethical business. **Schools could provide an inlet for businesses desiring to demonstrate commitment to society with a tempered-profit business model.**

The ever-quickening pace of life was clearly creating increased societal and work stress for people. The speed and urgency of the commute to work, added to this stress. This lockdown forced many reluctant organisations and managers to successfully trial working from home. Although businesses would want to regain ground and survive, employees will challenge attempts to enforce non-flexible work regimes that require attendance in person even where virtual working has been proved and managers have gained virtual team management skills. More people will be working from home-based offices amidst the tensions of the change which this will require in organisations as leaders seek to rebuild them.

Dominant trends which were identified include consumers' loyalty to only their pockets and not to brands. The forced cut-back to basic-essentials, intersecting with months of reduced income and employment uncertainty, will drive a self-imposed austerity that seeks value. Private educational institutions that cater for a range of incomes will work out a lower cost-base to enable **a variable fee offer.** Rent re-negotiations which started in lockdown will be emboldened by a glut of vacant commercial properties as employers cut back on office space. **Educational institutions will capitalise on the possibility.**

Scrutiny of corporate ethical behaviour will be dominant as more people realise from their pandemic experience, the human interconnectedness of society, their vulnerability to nature and the value of community during crisis. What's-in-it-for-me will vie for the hearts of consumers in competition with the newfound community spirit that reached new heights.

> Admissions policies, fees policies which impact fair representation of the community in good schools will need re-visiting if enough parents become more sensitive to the cost of education, at the same time as scrutinising ethical behaviour of organisations. **Integrity and efficiency in delivering direct educational services would be excellent values to guide educational institutions.** It will be an opportunity for many institutions to **transform and level the playing field for students from disadvantaged backgrounds**, with effective actions that can be evidenced.

A dominant trend to deliver services and products remotely will mean that the education sector will **increase investment in online security, educating parents and students as well as archiving records** with legal advice on their retention.

Although the race to meet the Brexit deadline has slowed, and government's approach to resumption of the agenda could engender or break trust, a dominant trend towards reinforcing Nationalism in many countries as they restrict foreign travellers, could make it a post-COVID priority. The reliance on national governments during the pandemic and vulnerability of global supply chains as exposed by shortage of critical medical supplies, all point in this direction. UK nationalism will show up in the negotiation of trade deals with the EU and other countries. Current negative feelings towards China could become dominant as the UK & USA become increasingly wary of China as a key player on the world stage. This would impact attitudes towards Chinese students and affect student numbers. China's response to such hostility could be to further build up its own institutions perhaps by attracting campuses for UK higher education institutions and attracting foreign students who would otherwise enrol in UK higher education institutions. In the UK this would intensify competition for fewer students at a time when the downward pressure on university fees would continue. Students would have more choice and leaders in education would do well to **empower their students to discern and aspire for the best universities** for academic degrees or degree apprenticeships.

The current Pandemic has shone a light on personal hygiene practices and queried our personal space. This trend is likely to become dominant as social distancing is practiced for a sustained period. Teaching and examinations will be affected. This will in turn, put additional burden on classrooms and lecture rooms. **Some educational institutions may choose to structure classes to combine in-person and online classes whilst others may re-structure the year. Alternative arrangements and timescales for completing work experience will be required, including video observations for example.**

Advancing trends coming out of the crisis comprise stronger family relationships resulting from the forced residence in a contained space, realisation of the serious impact of one's actions on the well-being of family members, the mandatory involvement of parents in their children's education and the resultant tensions which translate into higher incidences of domestic abuse. Bonds and appreciation have been created where they were absent. This presents an opportunity for more parental involvement in education including the possibility of an otherwise well child with an infectious illness studying at home. Proactive schools would explore with parents how to involve them in school practices.

The limitations of government facilities during the COVID-19 crisis generated more personal responsibility for physiological, mental, spiritual and social relationships and health. Students have formed self-routine habits that will grow, if nurtured, with opportunity for guided self-study thereby speeding up the introduction of independent learning. Schools would do well to **consolidate this trend into confidence through coaching teachers into adapting their styles to support the few students who are ahead of the teaching or who are behind in attainment.**

The acceptance of limited choice and accepting basics is building restraint in consumerism, resilience and seriousness in a way that only major crisis tends to do. **Educational institutions would do well to provide occasional opportunity for students to' exercise this muscle'** so it remains primed for life, even amongst the many facilities of modern life.

The dominant trend of reliance on technology for more aspects of life will signal opportunity and will open minds to more technological innovation, especially with the arrival of 5-G and increasing use of Artificial Intelligence. The increased expression of a shared humanity during this crisis will encourage a more human face for advancement in technology to consider in its complex wider impact. Information technology classes in schools would do well to **lay the foundation with students for such development of technology for social purposes, not for maximum profit**.

The rise in public spending during the crisis will be followed by cutbacks and either short term austerity measures or the longer-term prospect of a high tax burden on future generations. This will lead to a debate about the benefits of consistent long-term planning across political office terms. **Such longer-term perspectives will enable educational institutions to plan for sustainability and benefit the quality of research and education facilities, admissions, staffing, development or leadership succession. It will also lead to price sensitivity of whole-life costs instead of annual costs. Schools that invest in development of their leaders in strategy and finance, will thrive.**