ZOOMing out

*The COVID-19 virus has had a profound impact in the way in which our lives are led. The widespread global adoption of remote workplaces and classrooms has introduced us to a new way of life. The question is whether the adoption of this new norm will continue in years following the pandemic. To answer that, **David Mizzi** takes a look at the nature of work and what the raison d'etre of pursuing tertiary education is.*

Twelve thousand years ago humanity started shifting from hunting and gathering to agriculture. The way we lived changed completely. Fast forward a few millennia and we see a shift towards feudalism. A few millennia later we had the Industrial revolution and now a technological one. Are we on the brink of a new revolution?

The way we live, work, learn, and play have taken on a totally different dimension. We warn our family members or housemates that we're going to be on a call. We schedule our meals around online meetings. This pandemic has digitized the way we interact with the outside world and has brought each and everyone of us closer to becoming virtual citizens.

The constant use of technology, whether through the use of spellchecker, listening to music online, interaction with others through zoom, facetime, or online research have made us dependent on a lifestyle embedded with a technologically interactive presence. Our educational systems need to move with the times and embrace the use of technology so that they may empower the workers of tomorrow.

A NEW WAY OF LEARNING

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Lecturing is more nuanced than simply talking about a topic. It involves adjusting the content to your audience, making it relatable. Likewise, we cannot simply record a lecture and call it online learning. According to the "Surveys of Assessment, Learning and Teaching" (SALT), which aims to document students, administrative, and technical staff personal work experience during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, 66% of students reported that they were generally dissatisfied with the shift to online. While students were happy that 'lecturers were always accessible through emails or zoom meetings,' the problems seem to stem from the actual pedagogical strategies used. In some cases, lecturers 'did not even attempt to hold any online tutorials and just uploaded the slides online with [a] question form if we have any difficulties.' A ▶

Dr Sarah Grech
Photo by James Moffett

student highlighted the fact that the main issue was the absence of 'a standardised format for virtual learning.'

There are many teaching methods. There is classroom teaching (with a range of pedagogical strategies), online teaching (with many potential approaches), and hybrid/blended learning. While some students and lecturers prefer face-to-face learning, others found online lectures/tutorials to be more productive. Digital learning can address a completely different range of students and academics. Several academics consider blended learning to be a more effective pedagogy.

Given the results of the SALT survey, it seems rather silly to limit ourselves to just one type of teaching. Diversity is key. Are we, as a society, ready to make this leap?

A NEW SOCIETY

Online learning goes hand in hand with working remotely. What is the point of encouraging hybrid or online learning if workplaces are not ready to adopt remote work? The digital nomad lifestyle has been growing more and more popular, and companies have started to recognise the advantages that remote work offers. Students (as well as educators) should be taught how to make full use of our technological inventory.

For Dr Anne Marie Thake, Head of the Public Policy Department (UM), COVID-19 has forced us to reconsider work practices. This is not only a challenge but also an opportunity. 'We have seen elements of greater flexibility, less traffic, and less wastage of time which have contributed to a greener environment.'

For most companies, employers are used to having employees on-site, managed and monitored by time and attendance. Thake points out that there now needs to be a change in mindset — in the shift of physical location and time boundaries. The employer focus would be on the deliverables and not the process. The relations between employer and employee would change. There would need to be mutual trust. These are new dynamics that would need to crystallise.

Grech invites us to take a look at North European societies, which encourage a healthy work/life balance. 'If this is the type of society we wish to work towards — one which values its citizens on an individual level — our educational system also needs to promote this work/life balance.'

Staying focused can be hard for students working from home. They miss the social aspect of university, while others find it hard to distinguish between their private and work life. Commuting can help us differentiate between these two aspects of our lives; however, it is not the only way. We can adopt new habits to help distinguish between our private and public life.

Just as studying at university helps us to conduct research, design presentations, practice teamwork, and adhere to deadlines (all skills which are highly valued in the workplace) — the workforce of tomorrow needs to be able to work remotely and, more importantly, be able to differentiate between their public and private life.

Our educational institutions should be preparing our students for the world of work, right?

Dr Anne Marie Thake
Photo by James Moffett

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A NEW UNIVERSITY

Are universities meant to train tomorrow's workforce, or are they there to develop the nation's critical thinkers? Perhaps some students do not study to find employment but study for the sake of knowledge. Or is it, to quote a student, 'to learn to be more independent. To conduct research and learn from professionals on how to be a professional.'

Another student remarked, 'I don't know how to pay my taxes. While university has taught me how to work in an organisation, it helped me develop social skills and [has] given me the opportunity to earn an academic degree. I feel there is a difference between real life and university.'

For many, university degrees are considered a gateway into the job market rather than an opportunity for learning life values. Some employers might feel that they are entitled to a say in educational policy-making even though they are passive consumers of the education system.

They show an interest in courses that will create relevant work-ready graduates. Yet employers also need people who can think critically if they are to remain relevant and competent in an ever-changing landscape. As Thake eloquently put it, 'Let not the university be a glorified post-secondary school, where learning is about instruction. It needs to be at the forefront, spearheading new trends, so [that] the public and private sectors follow.'

Yet, initially, it seems that the private sector has adapted most to new ways of working — flexible hours, remote working options, and cultivating a different mode of working.

A well-rounded education means understanding the nuances of modern society. It means understanding the economy, politics, social systems, and the international scene — how our choices affect the bigger picture. A university is not just meant to give you the technical skills to complete a job that will be obsolete in 20 years or that will bore you in 10. A university is meant to cultivate your mental capacity to see, decipher, and improve the world around you. And if that means making a conscious choice to work and study remotely, then so be it. 🇹

Further reading:
Ministry For Education and Employment. (2017). The State of Digital Education. Engaging with Connected, Blended and Open Learning, from https://education.gov.mt/en/digitaleducation/Documents/conference_magazine.pdf

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University of Malta. (2020). Learning, teaching and assessment during the pandemic at the University of Malta. Findings of the SALT Surveys. Retrieved from https://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/443359/UMSALTsurveysreport.pdf