CHARTING AN AMBITIOUS COURSE FORWARD
WHEN PROFESSOR DAMIAN BLAKE took on the role of head of Deakin University’s School of Education in November 2019, he did so with the expectation that the year ahead would be a turbulent one.

“It is clear 2020 is going to be one of the most challenging years we have ever faced, and we are going to need every ounce of creativity, innovation and goodwill we can muster,” Blake said in an interview with The Educator at the beginning of the year.

He wasn’t wrong. Just weeks later, the global pandemic that we have come to call COVID-19 began to transform the world in ways that were as profound as they were surreal. From late March, billions of people around the world sat bewildered in front of their televisions as news outlets reported the first-ever synchronised shutdown and hibernation of entire economies. This was quickly followed by an economic crisis that rivalled the Great Depression of the 1930s. As the reality set in, traditional business and learning models were overhauled to ensure life could
go on – even if it was unrecognisable from the life we knew just months earlier. New models were quickly established, bringing radical change to the way people work and learn.

As one of the leaders at the coalface of these extraordinary changes, Blake quickly set in motion a plan to ensure that teaching and learning adjusted as smoothly as possible to the new remote and flexible learning arrangements that were being implemented across Australia and the rest of the world.

This initiative was buoyed by the fact that Deakin University is both a leader in online education and one of Australia’s fastest-growing research universities. With 40 years of distance and online learning experience, Deakin’s School of Education was well placed to adjust to online delivery of education courses. Many of the university’s postgraduate education courses are already offered online, with over 60,000 students electing to study online at Deakin’s Cloud Campus pre-COVID.

In some ways, the mad scramble that educators experienced earlier this year feels like it took place an eternity ago, but in many respects it’s still continuing across the education landscape, even as institutions acclimatise to the ‘new normal’. While it’s unlikely that the pandemic and its many impacts will disappear any time soon, the focus of Australia’s leaders is now turning from crisis management to what has been learned over the last eight months and how those learnings might improve how our workplaces, schools and universities function.

One recent study found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that while COVID-19 has been generating a fundamental shift in how education is delivered, students are being impacted the most. Many reported that the pandemic had been “the most stressful experience” of their entire lives. This has unfortunately resulted in many students falling behind in their studies.

In September, a survey of more than 800 parents across NSW, Queensland and Victoria – released by the Centre for Independent Studies – found that 1.25 million Australian students have fallen behind in their studies due to the school closures. For teachers across Australia, the challenge lies in not only helping young people catch up on the learning that has been lost but also keeping abreast of important changes to their own roles.

Below, *The Educator* speaks to Blake about how the university has navigated the extraordinary changes that have shaken up education; the key learnings from COVID-19; and

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some exciting initiatives that the university will be rolling out in 2021 to support teaching and learning.

**TE: COVID-19 has been a time of great challenge and change for the education sector. How have these challenges influenced your leadership approach at the School of Education?**

**DB:** The pandemic created the need for staff and students in our school to respond very quickly to the rapidly changing circumstances as they have evolved. We had to pivot rapidly to fully online learning for all our courses, and we had to do it with everyone working from home. This all needed to be done while our staff were often dealing with their own homeschoiling and personal domestic circumstances that made it more challenging.

I have tried to keep a strong focus on our absolute key priorities in teaching and research and on making sure our collective efforts are working towards the same essential goals. This has required some serious prioritisation in decision-making but has allowed to us to stop doing non-essential things so we can put our resources into achieving the essential ones. The pandemic has affected us all in one way or the other. As a leader, this has required me to be sensitive to the periods of personal vulnerability for staff and students alike. I have found it important to keep building and supporting our teams, and to encourage a culture of compassion and collaboration as much as possible to support each other.

**TE:** The ‘new normal’ has prompted a significant rethink of the way teaching and learning work, particularly with regard to digital resources and remote learning. What have been the most important learnings from the pandemic for the school as a whole, and what are some of the ways it is leveraging the new normal to improve teaching and learning?

**DB:** We have learned to use our digital resources to teach and work together in many new and creative ways that may have been difficult to achieve previously and on the scale that we are now implementing. For example, it has been important to blend the affordances of several digital tools simultaneously to engage large numbers of students in a genuinely active learning experience that reaches across our multiple classes and countries. And while it must be recognised that not every discipline or intended learning outcome lends itself well to being taught fully online, we have learned that we can do a whole lot

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more than we thought we could, which has also been recognised by students in their evaluative feedback. When we do eventually move to more campus-based learning again, I think the new normal is likely to involve much more blended learning that takes the best of our digital learning experiences and blends them with periods of intensive campus experiences.

**TE:** Teacher education and professional development has been cited as critical to addressing the learning gaps that have emerged due to the extraordinary events of this year. What areas of teacher education is the school focusing on to ensure that future classroom teachers are of the highest quality?

**DB:** Our young people and their teachers have been impacted greatly by the pandemic, and it will take some years to recover from the extraordinary events of this year. For our Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs we will continue to align our school partnership initiatives in ways that will enable our pre-service teachers (PSTs) to genuinely support school improvements. The pandemic has taught us how incredibly valuable our PSTs can be, particularly during the challenging periods of remote learning in schools.

We will continue to build on those learnings and opportunities by strengthening our PSTs’ capabilities to support effective digital learning in schools and offer credentialled professional learning programs for teachers.

The pandemic has also highlighted the growing need for our teachers to be responsive to young people’s experiences of trauma. We have commenced new work with our colleagues from health and humanitarian leadership to better understand how teachers are experiencing the need for more trauma-sensitive approaches to teaching, and in particular what new knowledge and skills are essential to support their practice in schools. Our learnings from this important research will be included in our ITE programs in the coming year, and also made available as professional learning and postgraduate study for our practising teachers in schools.

**TE:** Are there any new and exciting programs/initiatives on the horizon for the school in 2021? If so, what are they and how will they contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning at the school?

**DB:** We have built what we call an Imaginarium, which we call our IC1 immersive precinct, at the Geelong Waurn Ponds Campus. This is an innovative learning space allowing us to provide amazing, immersive learning experiences to support our ITE and teacher professional learning programs. We will be able to use the precinct to ‘prime’ our PSTs before they undertake their professional experiences so they can maximise the benefit of the eventual placement. This will help their ability to ‘see’ and ‘engage with’ the most important aspects of teachers’ practice and students’ learning behaviours at different stages of their development. Similarly, practising teachers and school leaders in our partner schools will be able to use the immersive capability as an authentic ‘mirror device’ to review complex teaching interactions, such as how teachers work in teams within a flexible learning space.

We are incredibly excited about how we will be able to work closely with our school partners to use the precinct to improve many aspects of teachers’ professional practice, and further strengthen our preparation of classroom-ready teachers as they graduate from our programs.

For more information on how Deakin University’s School of Education is helping to prepare the next generation of cutting-edge teachers, visit the school’s website by clicking here.