Or…adaptation?

Change in higher education post-Covid will need to follow a path of adaptation rather than radical reinvention. Institutions will need to think carefully about how to adapt to a digital learning environment while maintaining the fundamental and foundational strengths of the in-person experience. Three key lessons from the first year of COVID-19 need to be taken into account:

- The essential core of every college and university is teaching and learning. Almost everything else in HE either stopped or was circumscribed in 2020. COVID-19 has taught us that the one thing that colleges and universities do that cannot be interrupted or sacrificed is teaching and learning.
- The growing institutional focus on restructuring in response to new knowledge about how individuals learn now urgently requires greater attention.
- Some institutions are not, however, sufficiently prioritising teaching and learning and learning infrastructures are unevenly distributed across the sector. As a result, students with the least resources and the most significant barriers to learning have been disproportionately disadvantaged by the pivot to remote instruction.

Professors have been called upon to not only transition (sometimes instantly) their courses but also to provide their students with emotional and social supports that were previously distributed across campus entities and professionals. Well-understood and accepted pedagogical practices, such as universal course design and a system of delivery that is flexible and resilient, have been shown to be - at best - unequally present within and across universities.

Many tertiary educators are not entirely comfortable with online teaching. Only 9% of academics prefer to teach in a mostly online environment, according to a 2019 study from Educause. And while 51% are comfortable with blended learning environments, most of these (30%) prefer a mostly face-to-face teaching environment. No less than 43% of survey respondents preferred an exclusively face-to-face teaching environment.

This online shift will come as a shock to the system, then. But there is no escape from the necessities engendered by social distancing.