

## Place your bets: Transformation? Interruption?

Claims that Covid will fundamentally transform our universities may be overstated.

Covid has challenged many of our assumptions. The West's dominance has been brought into question as the UK and US have struggled to contain the virus while countries in the Global South have been more effective. Shutting borders in free-movement zones such as the EU has been unprecedented but has met with little resistance. Restrictions on civil liberties to fight the virus have been accepted in a way that would have been unimaginable before the pandemic.

In HE, the lockdown has forced students and staff to study and work remotely, challenging assumptions about how teaching is delivered and the ways staff work. It seems impossible to imagine this experience will have no impact on the future.

And yet... As global vaccination continues apace, it is conceivable that, by the 2021-22 academic year, universities could go back to old way of working. Some changes could remain - staff could work from home, more lectures could be recorded and made accessible online, for example - but it is entirely possible that fundamental university functions, the delivery of education or offers to students will not be transformed due to COVID-19 alone.

This is, in part, because universities have been largely immune to disruption. No UK university has collapsed or been fundamentally restructured due to the pandemic and student numbers have remained buoyant. Universities continued teaching in September 2020, most with some in-person teaching.

The question, then, is whether universities will revert to business as usual or use the pandemic as a stimulus for big shifts in policy and practice - much needed and essential for survival and fulfilling civic duties, some say. But business as usual seems both an easy and a likely scenario. So leaders need to seize this opportunity to think more deeply about how universities can adapt to meet the challenges facing our world. Failing to do so might just put the long-term future of the sector at risk.