

# Imagine

Dear colleagues,

Here we are again - with most of us (on our campuses in Australia, India, Malaysia and Indonesia) - firmly contained in our particular national form of lockdown, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Colleagues in China and Italy are finding their way into cautiously reactivating campus environments and lives.

All of us are simultaneously more often connected virtually across time and space, but also much more physically disconnected - conscious of the borders and distances between us more than we were before.

In Monash, this most international of universities, life could not be more abnormal, nor more challenging.

Yet we are all connected globally by this pandemic and by the economic downturn that is intensifying in tandem with it, and will wash through our lives well beyond the immediate effects of lockdown.

We're all busy finding ways to continue with and support our education and research – and as is inevitable when the ground beneath your feet shifts so profoundly – this is taking major amounts of our time and effort.

And these efforts should and do ask much of us, because some things remain unchanged. We have students who hope to finish degrees that will shape their future lives, and places, organisations and people who need those graduates for their future. The research challenges that we seek to understand or solve are still there waiting for analysis and answers, and the changes that this new knowledge will bring.

But we must not be overwhelmed by the present. As we entered 2020, I expected that Monash would develop its next strategic plan as the current plan, *Focus Monash 2015-2020*, had reached not only its end date, but also achieved its main purposes.

*Focus Monash* was intended to do just what its title implied - to build and set a clear, sharp and differentiated Monash. The internationalising, enterprising and inclusive facets of the character and purpose of Monash were sharpened and embedded in a foundation of excellence in research and education that clearly met international benchmarks of quality.

Many others sought to be global, but few were so international in depth and reach. Many claimed excellence, but yet were less able to also maintain high levels of inclusion. The modernity of Monash foundations was central to the culture we embraced.

And while not much was made of this externally, by 2020 Monash had reduced its Australian and international campuses in ways that reinforced all those ambitions. All campuses had high quality education and research, a strong graduate footprint, and an engagement with industry and community wherever located.

The next strategic plan was to be about what could be made of these features for the next five years - and then the world changed because of COVID-19.

We must take time away from our immediate and important concerns for some re-learning and re-imagining. Our next strategic plan must look to the next decade not the next five

years - because the changes we're living through will cause profound disruption and unpredictable outcomes.

I will not burden you with the many clichés that attend this need to pause, take stock and then cast our minds forward. But there is a reason for those clichés, lest we keep trying to force square pegs into some newly round holes.

Global challenges have not abated, since we narrowed our gaze and perambulations to the local. Nor will the quality of our education and research be not only excellent but empowering for our students and communities, if we haven't considered and learnt from the experiences to which we have recently adapted.

As universities our role is to reach out, not turn in; to seek the new, not retreat to the old; to learn and still keep learning, not rely on the already accepted ways.

So just when you felt you really needed to rest, we will need to push on and imagine the new Monash, still restless and young, still questing and questioning, still exploring before explaining.

This is our time for a truly global imagining of how we will prepare and support our students for this new time, where we will build knowledge to ride the waves of new and old challenges and how we will ensure that the impact of our education and research provides better for all our futures.

As we work our way through the inevitable operational details of trying to make the present work, we will find time for all of us to take part in imagining Monash in 2030. In doing this together we can have conversations with purpose and for purpose, rather than arguments about what was and should be again.

My offer to all of you in the next few months is that amidst everything else that will be going on, we will use virtual connectedness to take us metaphorically to the page that was not so long ago the beginning of Monash. That page when everything was new, and the possibilities were immense. We must imagine those open muddy red clay fields at Clayton, no time for leisurely planning, and not enough resources for all we had hoped and realise we are actually there again - both embracing and creating the modern Monash.

And then we must make the leap that we need to carry us to 2030, making the impact through education and research that we know is possible. Imagining not only for ourselves as a university charting a new and difficult time, but fundamentally imagining for our communities, for our promise to them is to change it for good and we must find new ways to make this so.