

Estates Strategy: Thinking Beyond COVID-19

Published 19 October 2020

This article was first published in University Business.

Considerations about the future shape of the campus, for any education establishment, are on hold as immediate concerns focus on health, safety and welfare. COVID-19 has created a very real and immediate tactical crisis. It has, however, accelerated the need for strategic re-assessment of medium and long term estate strategies. What could well be a fundamental repositioning requires collaborative discussion, not just across every internal function and every department, but also with the local government and business communities.

A crisis is fertile breeding ground for catastrophists who see COVID-19 as the death knell for the office, the city centre and, with it, the university and college campuses. At the other end of the scale, fantasists envision a life conducted entirely online. The destabilising forces of the pandemic are clear to see and a balance between the two forces will be found. What has been underlined for most of us, though, is the desire and value to create and maintain face to face contact as much as securely possible.

In the book 'The University Challenge', the authors Ed Byrne and Charles Clarke cover every aspect of the future of the sector and its influence for good. As part of their conclusions, they also consider the built environment, anticipating, for example, reductions in the need for large lecture theatre facilities, but also a continuing need for research labs and workshops.

In summary: "University campuses may be a little smaller, but the university as a significant campus entity is likely to continue, even in the age of e-education."

The debate that needs to be held

Whatever your view on that statement, it encapsulates the question that needs to be answered about the scale and nature of future real estate requirements. What needs enhancing, what is superfluous, what could be shared? As part of DAC Beachcroft's education team, I am regularly involved in helping universities and colleges develop and manage their built environment. Real estate is recognised as an important expression of the brand and a key part of the student experience. The focus has been very much on strategic expansion (often through collaboration); post-COVID, I believe there will be more attention paid to the real need, place and purpose of each building in the university ecosystem.

How to improve the quality of education is the constant core question. The answer, and the consequent impact on the built environment, will be different for each establishment, but requires a re-examination of these four key areas:

1. **The proposition to students:** What the establishment offers, who it wishes to attract and how many. COVID may well challenge a previous direction of travel.
2. **The partnership with the local authority:** Universities and colleges have demonstrated their importance in regenerating towns and cities. Understanding how they fit into the wider and evolving economic plan, along with the local authority's vision for land use, retail repurposing and traffic management for example, are critical considerations for the institution's vision. Pre-COVID, conventional wisdom has been, for example, to pull accommodation into larger scale facilities closer to the centre, but will this remain the case?
3. **Blended learning:** Prevarication and delay are understandable as we contemplate the impact of the next age of technology, but educational establishments have shown themselves capable of adapting to other significant revolutions. COVID has forced e-learning onto the agenda as an imperative, but it will be a standard part of the learning package. How does that impact on the real estate requirements, to ensure there is immediate effect and built-in adaptability to respond to further technological advancements?
4. **Wellbeing:** Post-COVID, wellbeing will be an important key performance indicator - both mental and physical, in terms of staff and students. Any building design will need to balance the reality of health and safety requirements, the demands of the user and the delivery of supportive environments. Can this be achieved on an individual and collective basis?

COVID-19 has helped crystallise what we value about coming together. Just as this is shaping the thinking of corporate leaders about the future of the workplace, it is shaping the thinking of further education leaders about the future of the

learning space. With or without COVID, it is a debate that needs to be had to protect the future of each educational establishment.

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