

**Covid-19: From Campus to Online:
A Successful Transition at the Acsenda School of Management**

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Covid-19: From Campus to Online:

A Successful Transition at the Acsenda School of Management

Sir John Daniel
Chancellor

Introduction

In the early months of 2020 the covid-19 disease, caused by a novel coronavirus, spread rapidly around the world, causing thousands of deaths and severe economic disruption. Most countries ordered the closure of their schools and colleges in order to slow the spread of the infection. UNESCO (2020) estimated that by the end of March 1.37 billion students – nearly 80% of the world student population - were now at home with governments and institutions scrambling to ‘scale up multimedia approaches to ensure learning continuity’.

The Acsenda School of Management (ASM) shut down its campus and moved its activities online in March. As the institution’s Chancellor (a figurehead role) I had the opportunity to observe its adaptation to this sudden upheaval without being personally involved in any of the many changes involved. My background is a 30-year career in higher education administration, notably in open and distance learning institutions, followed by ten years at senior levels in international intergovernmental organisations.

By late April I concluded that Acsenda had handled the move off campus rather well and, with the agreement of ASM President, Neil Mort, I decided to try to capture the elements of its success. Over a two-week period I interviewed twelve ASM staff members and attended a drop-in meeting of faculty. I am most grateful to these colleagues for agreeing to talk to me. This narrative summarises my impressions. It is not intended as a substitute for the results of the formal evaluative surveys of faculty, students and staff.

In mid-May a draft of this document was circulated to the colleagues whom I had interviewed. This final version reflects some of their comments, although I take full responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation.

The Institution

The Acsenda School of Management is a private, for-profit business school in Vancouver, Canada. The following chronology details the milestones in its development: from its origins in the Sprott-Shaw Community College to the institution that it is today.

Chronology

2004: The Sprott-Shaw Community College (founded 1903) creates the Sprott-Shaw Degree College, which receives consent from the BC Minister of Advanced Education to offer a Bachelor of Business Administration degree. Creation of the Academic Council.

2005: The first students commence the BBA programme.

2007: The Honourable Brian Peckford, former Premier of Newfoundland, appointed as the first Chancellor.

2008: A first convocation is held for graduates from the BBA program. The CIBT Education Group acquires the Sprott-Shaw Degree College.

2009: Renewal of consent by the Minister of Advanced Education to offer the BBA degree for another 5 years.

2010: The College relocates from Burnaby to downtown Vancouver.

2012: Consent granted for a direct entry four-year Bachelor of Hospitality Management (BHM) Degree with internships.

2013: The College is renamed the Acsenda School of Management (ASM) with a new logo and the tagline: *International Thinking, Individual Focus*

2014: Dr. Lindsay Redpath appointed President and Vice-Chancellor. ASM celebrates its 10th Anniversary with a Lecture Series on Global Leadership and holds a first Alumni Homecoming dinner.

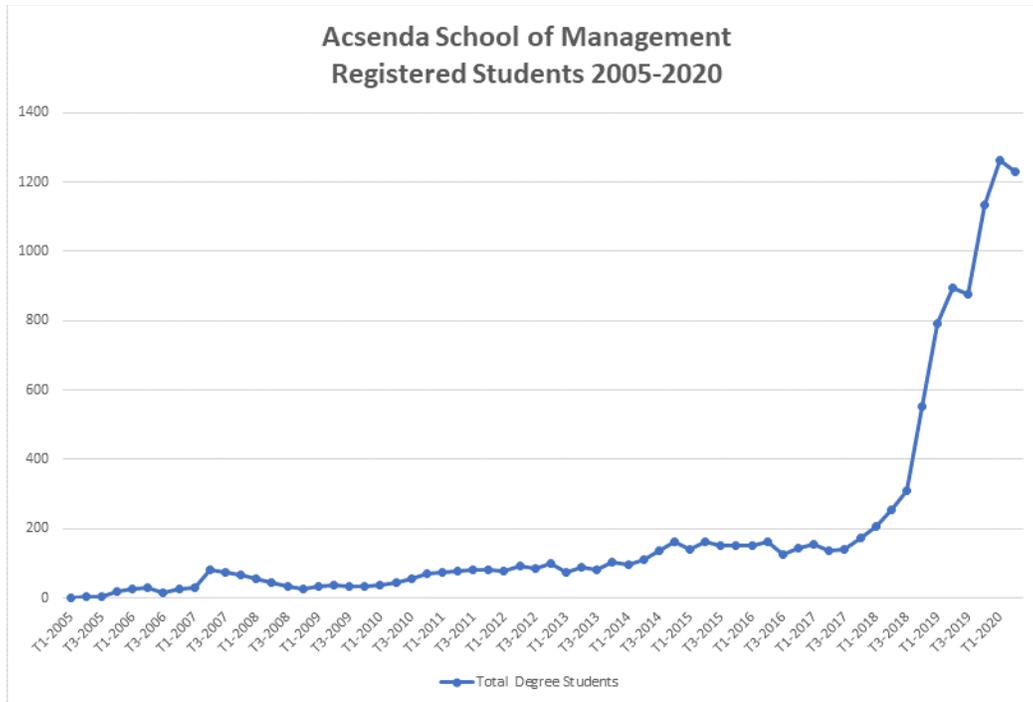
2015: ASM receives ministerial consent to offer its BBA and BHM degrees under Acsenda School of Management Inc.

2016: ASM becomes part of the EduCo International Group, an Australian company, following approval from the Minister of Advanced Education.

2018: Sir John Daniel appointed Chancellor. Mr Neil Mort appointed President. Following rapid expansion of student numbers, ASM occupies a new campus located at 666 Burrard St., Vancouver. ASM receives 5-Year renewal of consent to offer the BHM Program.

Development

From the establishment of its forerunner institution in 2004, until its acquisition by the EduCo International Group, ASM struggled to enrol more than 200 students each year. Under the guidance of EduCo student recruitment increased sharply, necessitating the move to a larger campus. In the 2020 year, which is the subject of this study, ASM enrolled over 1,200 students, the large majority from some 40 countries outside Canada.



All of ASM’s teaching occurred in the classrooms on its Burrard Campus until the covid-19 pandemic struck early in 2020. Already, ASM’s Strategic Planning Committee in 2019 had begun discussions about incorporating more blended learning into the curriculum. These were primarily motivated by considerations of pedagogy, lifelong learning and preparing students for working with technology in the workplace. However, following a BC Transit strike, campus closure due to extreme weather and efficiencies in timetabling also helped to drive a move towards greater integration of technology into the curriculum. These general discussions resulted in a three-year plan to achieve this goal. The fact of having worked on this plan proved advantageous when ASM had to move off campus quickly, even though the plan was **not** aimed at converting Acsenda into an online higher education institution.

Covid-19 arrives: timelines

Although the world and its leaders were slow to react to covid-19 and to appreciate its infectiousness and lethality, British Columbia was onto the case more quickly than most jurisdictions. This was partly because the first case in the US (**January 21**) and its first death (**February 26**) occurred in neighbouring Washington State. BC also has the advantage of an unusually well-integrated health-care system, so that its own first outbreak, at the Lynn Valley Care Centre on **March 6**, caused the alarm to be raised immediately.

BC had put out an advisory on **January 27** and, although the risk was then considered ‘low’, President Mort and EduCo SVP Canada, Scott Robertson initiated discussions within EduCo and sought information from the BC Council for International Education on actions proposed in BC. On **February 13**, following a request from Acsenda’s Occupational Health & Safety

Committee, cleaning practices on campus were intensified with full sanitisation, cleaning three times a day and the placement of wipes and hand-sanitizers around the campus. ASM received the assurance that the air filtration system in the campus building was the same as that used in hospitals.

On **March 5** there was a first covid-19 meeting to explore putting the term's final exams online – but in the expectation that ASM would be back on campus by **March 30**.

Discussions had been underway between EduCo, Acsenda, Arbutus College and other parts of the EduCo network about covid-19. Restrictions on business travel began at the corporate level, and the Senior Leadership Team initiated a scenario planning process and the development of a campus response plans. All staff and faculty were reminded to disclose all past and future business and personal travel plans.

On **March 6**, a message was sent to ASM students, faculty, staff and Academic Council about covid-19, indicating where to find more information and beginning to prepare the campus community for changes that might be forthcoming. A public awareness campaign was initiated on campus to provide more information about the virus and the precautionary measures that people could take. ASM established a health and safety resource for students, known as the 'AskAboutCovid' helpline, an online chat feature on the website. It also began development of a special COVID-19 webpage with information for current and future students, faculty and staff and other stakeholders.

On **March 7** University Canada West (UCW) had a case of covid-19 and shut for three days. Since ASM and UCW share some student accommodation ASM realised it had to take the situation very seriously and ramped up its preparations, engaging in scenario planning for a full or partial shutdown. Some Acsenda faculty teach at other HEIs and they also were able to gather intelligence about the gathering storm.

Starting on **March 7**, acting on the belief that 'communication channels are most important in a crisis', the President communicated regularly with the Academic Council and the students. Checks were made on students coming from affected countries and discussions with EduCo stepped up. Classes continued on campus in the week of **March 9** but stopped for the week of **March 16**, with the campus finally closing on **April 3**.

March 7 heralded a period of intense preparation, under the guidance of the Vice-President, Academic, Pedro Cortina, for moving all academic activities off campus. Preparations were made to implement the technology framework for a shift to online learning and a virtual classroom software, Big Blue Button, was added to the Moodle learning management system. The original intention had been to introduce this in Term 4 (October) 2020.

An important ASM executive meeting was held on **March 10**. Final exams would be online, and no one would come on campus in finals week; faculty should set take-home exams where they counted for more than 20% of the marks and give additional assignments where they counted for less than 20%. Implementation of these decisions was 'a bit bumpy but 95% successful'.

ASM began preparing a student support strategy and developing systems and information to help students. A two-week quarantine period was being put into place for persons who were entering Canada, which raised concerns regarding student adjustment, feelings of isolation and access to essential requirements.

By **March 16** ASM realised that it could not soon return to campus. In order to go online it explored the use of Zoom and the information technology team integrated the BigBlueButton (BBB) open source web conferencing system with Acsenda's existing Moodle system. Moodle was already integrated with the Student Information System.

On **March 17** the leadership team decided to move all teaching online for the coming term. BBB would be the main platform with Zoom as a backup, although Zoom could have worked as the main platform too and, according to later surveys, was preferred by faculty and students.

March 19: Zoom meeting for all ASM faculty and some from Arbutus College (another EduCo affiliate). This 'was a good session with lots of energy and supportive participants. The tools were in place and the faculty enthusiastic'. From this point the Vice-President, Academic felt that ASM was in good shape for the transition.

March 23: Orientation of the new student intake using a fully virtual system including a new online payment system.

March 22-27: Two IT-skilled staff members were identified as BBB and Moodle coaches. They contacted all faculty and supported them through the week **March 22-27**, doing an 'amazing job' in getting everyone online, despite steep learning curves. Only two or three faculty members had major difficulties. A stipend of \$75 was paid to faculty for attending the first of a series of weekly training sessions on the use of Zoom. There were also weekly drop-in meetings, hosted by the VPA, to share practice. Having attended such a meeting on **May 7**, I can attest that they are popular and successful, pooling the remarkable collective knowledge of the faculty about technology-based teaching and learning systems.

By **March 30 (Monday)** everyone was ready, and, despite some outages, there was a successful test run. The tricky issues were server capacity, sharing webcams and creating videos. ASM was identified by Zoom as a special organisation (lifting the 40-minute meeting limit) and all ASM staff and faculty were asked to sign up with Zoom individually as a backup. In the first week of classes Acsenda struggled a bit and 20% of courses encountered difficulties, but by the end of the week problems with the server had been identified and dealt with through 'real-life testing'. On **April 10** arrangements were made with EduCo to record student presence and participation, which is now done more assiduously than it used to be in the classrooms.

Was any previous planning useful?

Some previous planning, both by ASM as a corporate body and by some of its staff did prove useful, although this planning had not been carried out in the expectation that a global pandemic would close down the institution's normal operations almost overnight. One view was that

Acsenda benefited from not having planned for this particular eventuality in advance. Addressing problems as they arose was a better approach.

After years of complaints at the Academic Council about the ineffectiveness of the student record system, ASM introduced a new student information management system in 2018. This enabled a wider range of online management of student records, registration, financial, and course/learning management. Both the system and the processes underpinning it had recently been comprehensively reformed to make them simpler. As well as being a virtue in itself, the system's simplicity makes it easier to transfer registrarial staff between tasks; an important consideration because Ascenda-trained staff are attractive to other HEIs and turnover in the Registry is high. An effective and accurate Student Information System, including records of faculty and staff attendance, proved to be even more important for online operations because only the system 'knows' who was present in courses. It is also the basis for the official reports to governments. Training faculty on the new system had gone well, although some 15% still need additional support with the new technology.

This was an even greater challenge with the students, many of whom who have a limited command of English and needed the reassurance of talking to someone. E-mail traffic about administrative questions increased dramatically after operations went online. The Registrar also deals with changes of schedule. This term, as a result of the covid-19 pandemic, ASM enrolled significantly fewer students than expected, so the schedule had to be adapted and sessions cancelled in an equitable manner.

Also, at the corporate level, the Academic Council had been musing in a desultory way for some years about the implications of e-learning for Acsenda's future. The general view was that Acsenda's key strength, and the characteristic most valued by students, was the personal contact among students, faculty and staff, implying that online teaching and learning might be helpful at the margins but was not a mainstream concern. Nevertheless, in 2017 the Strategic Planning Committee was asked to examine the potential use of online methods in more detail, to assess the pedagogical, organisational and technological opportunities that they might afford, and to make recommendations. This led to the presentation of a Strategic Technology Plan in **November 2019**.

This plan aimed to achieve the following impacts between 2020 and 2022:

- To use technologies that enable ASM to achieve efficiencies in the deployment of institutional resources;
- To use technologies that enhance the quality of programme curricula, improve flexible access to courses, and, enhance learning effectiveness;
- ASM graduates are able to demonstrate competencies related to using technologies that support continuing education activities throughout their lives.

Key outcomes of the plan are to:

- Use a 3-hour block format for all courses;

- Render students and faculty competent in the use of common business technologies;
- Improve efficiencies of scheduling and facilities use

This was **not** a plan for converting Acsenda into an online teaching institution. Nevertheless, staff felt that the reflections stimulated by its formulation did prove useful as ASM faced the very different challenge of taking the institution 100% online in a few days. Although these previous discussions had assumed considerable use of asynchronous approaches, there simply was no time to prepare such materials, so most of the teaching had to be synchronous: ‘you do what you were doing in class, but online’.

Making the transition: Curriculum

The whole BBA curriculum was revamped in a week. The Dean assessed which faculty were most ‘online ready’ and trained them first. Focus groups of the faculty teaching each course had daily meetings to revise the curriculum. They also reviewed pedagogy and came up with a four-element structure, having decided that three hours was too long for a lesson.

1. Lay out a clear agenda for the session – posted previous day.
2. Live synchronous session not more than 45 minutes
3. Use of platform for interaction online
4. Assessment and discussion to assess students using various teaching media.

At first the Dean visited each focus group daily to encourage cooperation between faculty. The meetings then moved to a weekly schedule. There was also a weekly meeting outside the focus groups. The Vice-President, Academic also had all faculty check in weekly.

The Dean judged that Acsenda’s earlier planning discussions about online teaching proved helpful, as did tips from other institutions (e.g. minimising time for open-book exams to give less time for consultation). Acsenda instituted a dress code for students for online lessons (no pyjamas!) and insisted that students raise their hands frequently to ensure participation.

During exams week a new faculty member with strong IT experience did video training and one-on-one sessions with faculty in the use of Moodle. This was just one example of relatively new staff members blossoming in this crisis situation.

Making the transition: Technology

The Technology Plan, conceived over three years for a different purpose, had to be re-versioned for implementation in two weeks. Some key technology updating (e.g. the plagiarism checker) had already been done, but other projects hanging fire (e.g. an online payments system and putting fillable forms online) were now carried out. This was done alongside the upgrade on **March 29** of an old version of Moodle that had been planned for October, which included integrating and configuring, on the fly, the open source web-conferencing system BigBlueButton (also used by UBC). This all had to be done at a time when IT service providers were experiencing huge increases in systems usage, leading to lots of outages. Zoom was offline for

hours. The upgrade didn't work perfectly because 'we didn't understand enough about the system', but registration took place over the phone and on BBB.

Zoom, which was envisaged as a back-up option, removed its 40-minute meeting restriction, leading many Acsenda staff to use and prefer it, since there were some initial issues related to bandwidth when using cameras. ASM asked faculty members to obtain Zoom licences since ASM does not have a collective Zoom licence.

Faculty quickly developed successful approaches to using Zoom; such as the importance of starting sessions with 'icebreakers' for a few minutes to 'warm people up and get better engagement between the students. The BBA has classes of around 25-35 students and its thirty faculty represent twenty-five nationalities. These sessions help participants to appreciate Acsenda's diversity.

E-learning works best when pre-prepared material, used by students asynchronously, is combined with synchronous class discussions in break-out rooms on Zoom. Although few faculty had asynchronous materials ready in advance, this blend worked well for those that did, and a later survey showed that students would like to have more asynchronous teaching. Using 'scramble' for allocating students to the break-out rooms, and asking students to leave their cameras turned on, broke down barriers and led to some good discussions.

Among the faculty, previous experience of online teaching and learning varied widely. One, who had been an early adopter of Moodle and other distance learning tools, was already moving courses online and helped colleagues to put their exams online. The few who had already developed distance learning materials for asynchronous use found that know-how helpful. From their experience of teaching at other BC institutions some faculty were familiar with a variety of online tools (BigBlueButton, BlueJeans, Collaborate, Zoom, Moodle). As already noted, the readiness of faculty to share experience and knowhow with each other was impressive.

In the vital area of English for Academic Purposes, exploration of online teaching and learning had been going on at Acsenda for over a year.

The Vice-President, Academic, circulated an important document about the privacy restrictions on recording students' use of Zoom.

Closing the campus

After the decision was made to close the campus it had to be shut down in a systematic way. Fortunately, the staff member responsible had previous experience of closing operations in another organisation and knew how to do this in an orderly and recorded manner.

This work involved:

- Ensuring that all regular services were advised (janitorial, vending machine servicing, phone communications message on voicemail);
- Contacting building management to advise on closure of elevators and front door to the campus, advising building security, arranging for mail pick up;

- Cleaning out the fridges of any foods that could spoil, arranging any outstanding deliveries that were still pending;
- Setting up cell phones for communication; making sure everyone had a laptop or computer at home to work from; getting everyone set up with VPN connection to access campus files through the server; getting to know how to hook up computer equipment at home, and the debit/credit machine;
- Learning how to explain to students on the phone how to make a payment via the website (which only became possible at the time the campus closed);
- Speaking with the student workers, and providing some emotional support because their work hours were reduced.
- Recommending strategies such as upcoming CERB announcements for students' income. A large amount of information had to be made available the same time.

Communications

From **March 7** the President communicated regularly with staff, students and the Academic Council.

The role of the staff member responsible for communications is to keep students informed and to project the persona of ASM. Prior to covid-19 this work focussed on text exchanges because students could interact with each other and with staff by coming to campus. The task now is to 'get the word out and push content at them': especially video content and infographics. He has taught himself video production and graphic design and aims to ensure a 'cornucopia of student interaction' with more engaging content. The situation is in constant evolution, with something new every day. He relies on data and analytics to assess the impact of his work: e.g. attendance at group sessions; how many people open emails; weekly reports on social media. An EduCo affiliate also provides some useful material and the President hosts a live video meeting with students every Wednesday and posts a video update every week.

ASM students mostly have the equipment necessary for these communications, although media are chosen partly for their accessibility. Acsenda tries to offer a balance of diverse material, some of potential interest to everyone as well as niche cultural nights. There is more and more development of unique communication material and heavy reliance on social media: Facebook and Instagram. Before covid-19 Acsenda had no infrastructure for daily messages.

Initially, students were concerned about making friends and being able to talk to them, but this worry has dissipated as they have acquired the habit of keeping in touch with each other. Student Affairs does frequent events and there are episodes each day of gatherings using Zoom (e.g. Trivia nights and meeting rooms). Zoom has proved to be excellent because it can cope with large groups, it is versatile, and it works. The online world encourages students who used not to participate in discussions to do so. A wide range of additional events is under consideration going forward, including group movie nights.

In this work Communications works closely with the Registrar, for official and administrative information, with Student Affairs and with the student ambassadors. These are high-performing students who determine the agendas for student nights and keep their fingers on the pulse of the student body.

How are the Faculty coping?

Going into the covid-19 pandemic Acsenda had the advantage of competent and motivated faculty and harmonious relations within the institution based on a learning culture. The Vice-President, Academic has given strong leadership by holding a faculty forum each week. It was not difficult to motivate faculty members to acquire new skills, although a stipend was given for the first BBB training session, attracting 60 people. Subsequent ‘best-practice’ and drop in sessions were also well attended.

Acsenda also has a tradition of nurturing and team leadership at programme level. Many faculty are also affiliated with other universities and professional associations in Vancouver and are able to draw on these connections for ideas regarding professional development. Social get-togethers of the very diverse programme faculty (25 nationalities) to share national music help to bond the group and encourage identification with Acsenda as a good place to work.

At the institutional level, while providing general professional development and training, Acsenda has also provided individualized training and support, including several peer ‘coaches’. It has been important for Faculty to become proficient in both BBB and Zoom because of technical difficulties with both platforms. MS Teams is also under consideration since the times call for flexibility. Some faculty have adapted to the new instructional environment very successfully, others have faced greater challenges adjusting from their traditional face-to-face delivery style. There is occasional resistance from people who are already heavily invested in a particular technology. But by now most faculty know the broad strokes of the technology and want details – such as how to pre-record video. The current challenge is group presentations because camera sharing is sometimes a problem.

It has been important to provide institutional guides and regular e-mail updates. Faculty drop-in sessions have worked well because attendees can share their experiences. These also help to break down the barriers between departments. A ‘Moodle Stars’ programme has been instituted by identifying instructors who are available to teach this technology to colleagues.

Faculty, like everyone today, have work life and home life all in the same place at the same time, which is difficult. Going forward, Acsenda may need to support faculty in acquiring equipment to assist in more effective delivery of classes online.

As one colleague remarked, quoting Sir Richard Branson: ‘You should train them well so that they can leave, but you should treat them well so that they want to stay’.

How are the students coping?

The President holds a drop-in session with students every Wednesday. These sessions have provided a good opportunity for Acsenda to receive feedback on student experiences and to respond quickly to any situations that may arise. Students in countries such as India and the Philippines have also been participating regularly, joining in late at night from their home countries.

When covid-19 struck, most students were at first lost, nervous and scared. Much effort was invested in loosening them up and embedding humour with scheduled group sessions. This increased the level of interaction between students and created a 'sense of community and confidence'. The origins of the students are highly diverse. Some had never previously touched a computer and had no idea of the concept of plagiarism. Some do not have laptops and are using their phones. Basic personal hygiene and attitudes to women are sometimes a problem. Providing guidance and academic counselling is a challenge and helping students to become more independent takes time. But most students want to perform well because their futures are at stake. Acsenda must show empathy for different student situations and, going forward, it may have to help students to acquire laptops.

Financial hardship had a special focus in the response planning. Students were and are concerned about their financial well being and being able to afford to study. Many had lost their jobs due to closures of businesses. Some, who depended on parents for funding, now faced difficulties due to problems in their home countries. Others expressed concern about not being able to support their families in their home countries. Some qualified for a federal support programme through unemployment insurance, or the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). However, many did not qualify. In addition to ASM's regular financial aid support budget, which is about \$600,000/term, it introduced several additional measures to assist students which provided about an additional \$100,000 in this term in direct special covid-19 financial aid through:

- Waiving of some student fees;
- Establishing a special bursary which students could apply for some additional financial support;
- Allowing early distribution of some scholarships which would normally be distributed over several terms.;
- Expanding the payment plan programme for returning students;
- Extending the payment deadlines;
- Waiving penalties for late registration;
- Setting up a more convenient and cost effective online payment system absorbing the normal transaction fees.

Student Affairs aimed to be as holistic as possible in integrating academic, social, psychological, physical and informational support to students, by taking what was already being done and continuing it. The result was to offer more events to students than had been the case on campus,

where the availability of rooms had been a big constraint. Zoom has proved good for live sessions; students take to it well and even engage in arguments. A combination of in-person and virtual events is called for after the covid-19 confinement. Live virtual events have been less successful than activities that students can do in their own time (e.g. quizzes and photo challenges).

Student Affairs has been doing more one-on-one work with the students off campus, many of them new students referred by their mentors or by the (very helpful) student ambassadors. Office hours for lower level maths classes have been made mandatory and students are getting to like them.

More students are asking for help with learning, so a learning support session is offered every week on topics like time management; or exams. These sessions would have attracted 4 or 5 students on campus but bring in about double that online. When the session is later posted online many watch it because they like asynchronous material. These students never had access to specialist advice on learning in their previous education.

As a part of its retention initiatives, ASM has monitored student attendance closely throughout the term as an indicator of student engagement. The tracking reports have showed both a very high level of participation (higher than 90%) which has consistently increased each week. The current attendance rate is over 95% overall for the term. Faculty have been doing an exceptional job of monitoring student progress and engagement and have followed up personally with students who were showing difficulty.

Despite all the good news some students are struggling. Some are not isolating and doing physical distancing. They don't see online as social. Considerable efforts have been made to communicate information through email and social media channels to promote safe practices.

Acsenda's student ambassadors, senior students who are part of a peer-advising program, have played a strong role with the other students. ASM initiated a mentorship programme for new students this term and found that, with the support from Student Ambassadors, first-year students, who tend to have higher levels of attrition, are seeking help more often. It expects that this individually focussed initiative will have a positive impact on retention and is considering extending it to upper-year students.

Acsenda students, faculty and staff have a strong sense of community, compassion and care, as they demonstrated in their support to a new student who had just arrived in Canada. The house in which she was living burned down and she not only lost all her belongings, but also became homeless. The Acsenda community rallied around and raised \$2,000 for her in days. 'It is magical that people in this community are so eager to help'.

What of the Future?

The big challenge is dealing with tomorrow. Various scenarios are under discussion. Much will depend on external forces and decisions. Most Acsenda students come from countries with no

data or unreliable data about the impact of covid-19. Furthermore, the schedules for lifting restrictions on airline travel are still unknown, even to the governments that will make them. Will the Government of Canada continue its benign policies on student visas and immigration if unemployment remains high after the pandemic? What will be the provincial policies, orders and guidelines? What rules will the campus building put in place and how might this restrict the use of classrooms?

Will many students lose the ambition to study internationally? Higher education newsletters are full of speculation on this topic. Some argue that covid-19 is a game-changer for higher education because international student mobility will decrease dramatically and teaching will move online.

On the issue of international mobility Altbach and de Wit (2020), two well-respected scholars in the field, comment:

‘Some institutions have become dependent on international student tuition fees as an important part of their financial survival. ...The coronavirus crisis shows that this dependence is deeply problematic: it is likely that institutions dependent on this income will face significant problems.’

And on changes of teaching methods following covid-19:

‘But we are somewhat sceptical that what is being offered is of high quality or that students are very satisfied with the new situation. Most faculty members worldwide are not trained to offer distance courses, do not have the sophisticated technology necessary for high-quality teaching and learning and have not adapted their curricula to the web.’

These challenges face higher education institutions both large and small. For example, Monash University, by far Australia’s largest and most complex, is now facing a revenue shortfall this year of AU\$350 million (US\$226 million)’ (Maslen, 2020).

What are the views within Acsenda? Three options are possible: go back to ‘normal’; go to a blended ‘semi-normal’ format; and stay online. However, there are no quick answers.

Returning to fully face-to-face classes is unlikely in the short term (probably not until later in 2020) due to physical distancing restrictions. Fully online learning is not appropriate for the longer term because of Acsenda’s essentially international student population. Very small face-to-face classes could be financially unsustainable. A combination of larger online lectures with smaller face-to-face tutorial groups (to decrease numbers in the building) may be an option. In any case, account must be taken not only of numbers in classes, but also of the overall number of students on the campus at any one time. For instance, ‘opening the library could present challenges because students will want to congregate, meet and talk. Things will never be what they were, although people will be more open to online education’.

Whatever the option chosen, with an enrolment that is 97% international, student recruitment is the central challenge. Prospective students and their parents in many countries are nervous about going abroad. Educational agents face difficulties with their offices shut down and potential

students difficult to reach. Although there are students in the recruitment pipeline the prospect of studying fully online makes them hesitant. In some countries lockdown means that the banks are closed so students cannot make payments. In general, it is not the restrictions imposed by Canada, but those posed by the countries of origin that pose problems – with the exception of possible changes to Canadian policy on visas for online study. The prospect of enrolling to take courses online may be appealing to students abroad. It would offer them a more cost-effective way of starting their programme and, following recent announcements from Canada Immigration, it would not affect their post graduate work permit eligibility.

There is also the challenge of fees. Some institutions in BC are reported to be adjusting their fees and incentive structures to attract international students. Some students expect a discount on fees for online programme, which is already allowed – up to 50% of their programme can be taken online.

Being within the EduCo group is proving very helpful to Acsenda in the present circumstances. ASM staff consider that Australia is ten years ahead of Canada in its expertise on international student recruitment. EduCo understands the recruitment cycles and sees trends before they happen, enabling it to plan far ahead. It knows how to recruit while being serious about academic quality.

Acsenda's recruitment work has the advantage that selling 'the dream of Canada' is still a good approach. There is an opportunity to divert students from the US as that country gets less welcoming and has a tougher experience with covid-19. Some US institutions are already struggling because losing one annual cohort of international students has a four-year impact on budgets. Canada's response to the covid-19 pandemic and its treatment of international students is highly regarded in international education markets, making the country well positioned for recovery.

As regards teaching methods, the general view is that covid-19 will leave a lasting trace:

'this pandemic throws us 20 years into the future';

'things will never go back to normal';

'a lot of what we are doing will carry on';

'once consumer behaviour changes people don't go back';

'covid-19 forced us to become modern';

'We have had to make compromises and it has brought out the best in many people';

'The experience of working ASM through the transition has been 'extremely overwhelming but also really rewarding';

'We just had to do it'.

Most expect that Acsenda will use hybrid methods in future. Online will still be needed in the autumn because people will still be fearful and some students may have to self-isolate from time to time. There could be various approaches: e.g. 2 classes of 15 instead of a class of 30, and staggered timings. Students will want both online and presence. A survey showed that ASM students split 55%/45% on whether online teaching had a positive or negative impact on course

outcomes or academic quality. Going online with a new cohort of students will not be straightforward, because the current students knew each other from class, making online interaction easier.

As Acsenda incorporates online teaching into its ongoing work it will have more opportunity to incorporate asynchronous learning materials into its courses, giving much greater freedom to both faculty and students. McKie (2020) reports on the huge take-up, by campus institutions, of the online materials made available by distance-teaching organisations. For example, some 1,200 higher education institutions around the world are now using online courses from the French company *Open Classrooms*, reaching 120,000 students. 30,000 people have enrolled in the *FutureLearn* course 'How to Teach Online'.

In the post covid-19 era, the Student Affairs function envisages both on-campus and online events and will get input about the optimal balance from the student ambassadors who meet weekly. They have many ideas, and some put on events themselves. The new normal must be super fluid and try to prevent students from getting bored. Student leadership has become more prominent over the covid-19 weeks and the student ambassadors are now thought of as an extension of Student Affairs. The Orientation Class will be made compulsory.

Conclusions

Acsenda owed its relative success in closing the campus and moving operations online to a combination of factors:

- Good leadership at all levels of the organisation. The President and the Vice-President, Academic set clear directions while remaining open to new ideas and alternatives;
- The senior team met daily and made decisions expeditiously;
- There was active and extensive scenario planning;
- There was effective communication across the organisation;
- Previous preparation and planning for future online operations had sensitized the institution to new possibilities and challenges without being too prescriptive;
- The institution promoted a collegial, caring and collaborative work environment;
- There was a strong focus on individual support and care for students;
- The organisational culture promoted adaptability, creativity and innovation
- The strong professional staff are well-networked with other institutions in BC and beyond;
- There are harmonious relations among staff, based on a culture of learning;
- The owner, EduCo International Group, has given consistent support and encouragement.

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About the author

A citizen of Canada and the UK, John Daniel was educated at Christ's Hospital school and the Universities of Oxford and Paris. After completing degrees in Metallurgy, he taught at the École Polytechnique, Montréal before studies in Educational Technology led him to re-orient his career to open and distance education and take up appointments that included 17 years as a university president at Laurentian University, Ontario and the UK Open University. After serving as Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO from 2001 he moved to Vancouver as president of the Commonwealth of Learning in 2004. He was knighted in 1994, appointed Officer of the Order of Canada in 2013 and holds 32 honorary doctorates from universities in 17 countries. His 390 publications include the books: *Mega-universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education* and *Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All*.