

Adapting to lead... at *speed*

The exceptional disruption of 2020 means leaders must gain skills to equip them for “the new normal”, even as it unfolds around them. An MBA from the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Business School or a short course from the school’s Executive Education suite gives leaders the tools, techniques and frameworks to navigate rapid change, as well as the confidence to make the bold decisions required to build progressive, resilient, ethical, inclusive and sustainable business models for the future.

Most modern leaders are well versed in dealing with the opportunities and risks of disruption but we are now navigating a period of unprecedented upheaval. For Australia, the year began with what’s become known as the Black Summer: fires brought devastating loss of human and animal life, homes and bushland, along with huge economic effects. Almost before we had caught our breath, the pandemic was upon us.

Australia has so far been fortunate to avoid the tragic impact that COVID-19 has wreaked on many nations. Nevertheless, the social and economic consequences of the pandemic require leaders to sharpen their entrepreneurial skills, enhance their adaptability and find stronger ways to connect with their teams, customers and the wider community.

“Adaptability now sits across multiple dimensions,” says Magnus Gittins, director of Executive Education at AGSM. “It’s like a Rubik’s Cube: the scenarios in which someone has to adapt are getting more complex, more frequent and more significant in terms of order of magnitude. Leaders are being tested in ways they haven’t been tested before.”

“Expectations of responsible management are much higher,” says Michele Roberts, program director at AGSM. “Purpose and profit are regarded as equally important by employees and the larger community. Corporate and social responsibility is no longer a box to tick; there’s a whole new standard.”

To support leaders on a mission to “do well and do good” and to cope with rapid change, new programs have been rolled out across the AGSM MBA stream and the school’s short-course Executive Education offerings. On the following pages, Roberts and Gittins discuss how they’re adapting what and how they teach, an AGSM alumnus shares how she put her MBA to use during the pandemic and a sports star describes his journey of learning during lockdown.

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Agility in action

Equipping a new generation of leaders to thrive on the challenges of disruption is a long-held purpose at AGSM @ UNSW Business School, where #AlwaysBeLearning is a mindset as well as a motto.

Developing programs in line with the latest suite of on-demand skills has always required a nimble approach but 2020's unique challenges had to be turned into opportunities, while supporting teams and customers more than ever before. Leaders needed to upskill in double-quick time.

The Executive Education team walked the adaptability talk when COVID-19 restrictions put an end to face-to-face classes almost overnight. "We launched 14 new Executive Education Short Courses, all fully virtually delivered, inside three weeks," says Magnus Gittins, director of Executive Education. "We've created a combination of social learning through an online platform that we've built – AGSM Navigator – with a series of practical tasks that people can take back into the workplace."

Of course, that workplace has been virtual for many – and for many months – so participants not only had to be able to learn online, they also had to become confident *leading* online, too.

Gittins and his colleagues developed courses to answer that specific demand, including Activating Authentic Virtual Presence, Leading Virtual Teams and Leading an Organisation through Dynamic Environments. Gittins says students are hungry for even more learning in the adaptability space. At the same time, the school limited workshop participants to 25 students to enhance interactivity and the opportunity for feedback.

"Our faculty also adapted – they're used to being able to draw on the energy in the room and now they have to do it over a web link," says Gittins. "It's gone much better than we ever could have imagined." Students "jumped right in", too, perhaps recognising that adapting the way you learn is a fine warm-up for adaptive leadership. We've had some of the best evaluation scores we've had on any program, regardless of how it's been delivered."

Student comments included how impressed they were at the interactivity of virtual workshops and the level of participation in group breakout rooms, and how the real-life scenarios explored and applications and frameworks offered strengthened their understanding of how to apply them practically.

Building skills for creative problem-solving and adaptability

Expectations of modern leaders are becoming increasingly significant and complex. Gittins says AGSM's focus on lifelong learning – with the "ability for students to build blockchains of specific credentials" that offer pathways between the university's short courses and MBA programs – is more important than ever.

"Our motto at UNSW is '*Scientia Manu et Mente*' or 'Knowledge by hand and mind'," explains Gittins. "This very much applies across the UNSW Business School. We've seen leadership skills go from being a mindset to needing quite a wide range of specific skills."

Gittins sees some parallels with capabilities found in leading consulting firms, where he's worked previously, but today's leaders must develop these skills individually. "They need to be able to disaggregate a problem into its constituent parts, which is a consulting-related skill, and then to communicate that clearly," he says. "Leaders have to really study how to effectively lead a team, which is why we have several courses dedicated to various facets of that."

These skills were never innate and have today been joined by a host of new ones. To stay on top of rapid changes, leaders must now acquire a strong understanding of core principles in areas such as digital transformation and innovation, data strategy, cybersecurity and the rising expectations of connected consumers. "We're using a combination of different techniques and frameworks and some of the latest research from UNSW Business School," says Gittins. "Today's leaders need to have it all: the mindset, the skills and the capabilities."

More than ever, complacency is a threat. "Massive shifts in consumer behaviour are making it clear to leaders that what has made their company successful in the past is not necessarily going to keep them successful," says Michele Roberts, program director at AGSM. It's yet another area of change to confront, now with added uncertainty. "Many leaders are going to have to really pivot their organisations in different ways to navigate through all of the disruption. They need to build up their skills to have the confidence to be more entrepreneurial and agile."

For those leading us through and beyond the pandemic, of course, it goes even further than that. "They also need to read how society is changing and to understand how to adapt their offerings to meet the evolving needs of society, consumers and their own employees," says Roberts. "The disruption is in every aspect of our world: healthcare, housing, sports, entertainment, the arts, travel and tourism. It's time to be the adaptable leader who can sense where the new opportunities are and pivot."

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Embedding ethics at every turn

The speed that the current situation requires risks letting the focus slip regarding purpose and responsible management. But amid the turmoil of change, ethics-anchored management is critical.

It's part of AGSM's mission to embed responsible management in all of its programs. For the Executive Education stream, Gittins points to new operational risk programs for the financial services industry, a sector that suffered an erosion of consumer trust, particularly in the wake of the Hayne banking royal commission.

Gittins points out that when he and his colleagues talk about sustainability, "we're talking in a literal sense – there are multiple examples of companies in other industries that can lose their foothold if they drop the ball on ethics and the reputational damage takes years and a lot of work to repair."

AGSM has also advanced several new concepts for the Full-Time MBA cohort this year and will roll them out to part-time students in 2021. "Foundations of Responsible Management is three days of ethics training at the very start of the program," explains Roberts. "We deliver it in partnership with The Ethics Centre – its executive director, Dr Simon Longstaff, is our new adjunct professor."

Armed with Longstaff's training and frameworks for ethical decision-making, students refer back to them as they progress through their MBA. "They're applying these foundational concepts within each course and being assessed on it. It's been really powerful."

Adaptive leadership in action



Cue the pivot!

The performing arts has been one of the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic. Adele Schonhardt, a 2018 AGSM MBA (Executive) graduate and arts-management specialist, partnered with a colleague to come up with a pivot so successful it's become a startup.

Schonhardt is media and public affairs manager at Musica Viva, Australia's oldest independent professional performing arts organisation, and chair of 3MBS Fine Music radio station. "When the coronavirus hit, a lot of music venues had to close to keep the community safe, orchestras cancelled their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely," she says.

Schonhardt and her friend, Chris Howlett, a cellist and long-time music festival director, watched as their friends and colleagues "suddenly had no income... They went from feeling quite secure, with work lined up for

the next six months or more, to suddenly it was all gone. We couldn't sit there and let this happen and do nothing."

One Sunday morning in mid-March, not long after the lockdowns in Australia had commenced, she and Howlett had a phone hook-up – "from our respective homes, with our kids playing in the background" – and brainstormed what became the Melbourne Digital Concert Hall (MDCH). "We thought, 'Why don't we take it online and introduce paid ticketing to support these musicians directly,'" she says. "Within 10 days, we had our first performance."

After putting their first Facebook post up on a Monday night, they awoke the next morning to find it had been shared 105,000 times. Within 10 weeks, they'd streamed some 78 recitals and raised more than \$350,000. "We knew there would be a critical mass of audience members who love music as much as we do and are concerned enough about the musicians to be willing to try the live streaming," she says. "We priced the tickets relatively modestly: \$24 of which \$20 goes straight to the musicians and \$4 goes towards the streaming costs. The idea of paying for the live stream becomes normalised with everybody on this platform, which we have established on their behalf."

Schonhardt – who studied classical piano at the conservatorium at the University of

Melbourne before embarking on a career behind the scenes in arts management – undertook the EMBA at AGSM because she wanted to advance her leadership aspirations and "have a clear balcony view of all of the different areas that go into running a company. I have a bias towards marketing, media and public affairs but I wanted to understand the perspective of the finance manager and the operations director. The MBA enables you to ask the right questions to ensure you are stewarding your company in the right direction."

She says the MBA was also invaluable for communicating the mission of music to those outside it, such as on trips to Canberra to meet with politicians on behalf of Musica Viva. "The wonderful thing about music is that there's immediately common ground. It's a matter of coupling that with the

"[The Melbourne Digital Concert Hall] is tapping into a new market and we think it has a very strong future."

corporate perspective and making it clear why what we do is important for people's wellbeing. It benefits society but also has financial importance: the entertainment industry is a \$111 billion sector."

Schonhardt and Howlett intend to continue the MDCH long term, to meet the demand from thousands of fans who are unable to attend concerts because of ill health or their remote locations. "It's tapping into a new market and we think it has a very strong future."

For her, one of the defining elements of AGSM was the concept of T-shaped leadership. "You're not just important to your role with one company. Rather, you see your position in society much more broadly and you shoulder that responsibility," she explains. "I'm an arts manager with one organisation but I bear responsibility towards the musicians who deliver the 'product' we promote. I need to make sure that musicians are looked after, regardless of whether they're working with my company at the time. We're lucky enough to work in this industry and we need to look after it as a whole."

The flexibility of further study



Pat Cummins
Co-vice-captain, Australian cricket team

Learning through lockdown

The COVID-19 lockdown forced professional sportspeople off the playing field, during which time AGSM worked with Cricket NSW to offer players access to its Short Courses programs – an opportunity made possible by education grants from the Australian Cricketers' Association.

Top fast-bowler and Australian co-vice-captain Pat Cummins was quick to sign up to three courses: Accelerating Innovation in Your Organisation, Leading Change and Leading an Organisation through Dynamic Environments. "I chose ones around leadership and leading through changing circumstances," he says. "It's interesting to step into the business world, where so many people are experiencing change, whether through innovation or disruption, and see how I can bring that back to cricket."

The AGSM Short Courses gave the players (including Ashleigh Gardner, Moises Henriques and Alyssa Healy) the chance to use the pandemic downtime to learn skills for their life after cricket. However, Cummins – who already has a Bachelor of Business – regards it as real-time learning for his sport. "In leadership, a lot of the problems and

"It's interesting to step into the business world where so many people are experiencing change..."

the opportunities come down to how you interact with people within your organisation. For us in cricket, it's when you're sitting around in the change room or during training and games. But the crossover with the business world is huge: you bring in a set of diverse people with different sets of motivations and beliefs and try to march towards the common goal. The problems we deal with aren't unique; they're common problems slightly altered towards the cricketing situation. We spend our life around cricketers so it's a breath of fresh air listening to different perspectives."

Cummins and his fellow players joined in the weekly 90-minute webinars – one session for each course – and breakout rooms. He says the virtual classes were more engaging than he expected. "You had 30 people on one call and by the end of each week, you knew most of the people in your class through the breakout rooms."

That flexibility means Cummins can see a future – when the world has returned to some normality and he's on tour – where he could use tournament downtime to further his studies. "The barrier to study for us as full-time cricketers is that we're often travelling," he says. "To be able to finish training and jump on a call for an hour-and-a-half from your own home and learn was pretty cool. I'm sure I'll be back for some kind of learning."

Doing well and doing good

The AGSM Short Course team also keeps the school's ethos to build business models that "do well and do good" in sharp focus. "It's now well understood that positive customer and employee outcomes directly equate to the sustainability of an organisation," says Magnus Gittins. "In the past, corporate social responsibility was something tacked on to one side for organisations; now it's fundamental."

Gittins says AGSM's Short Courses weave the concept of doing well and doing good into everything they teach and not just because it's the school's philosophy. "If you do the right thing by all the stakeholders, it leads to mutual benefit and greater loyalty for the organisation," he explains.

"When we're teaching decision-making, for example, it's easy for us to show how, when you make decisions that affect your employee or your customer, you get much greater long-term results all round when you do it in a purposeful, ethical, values-laden manner. People have that 'aha' moment around responsible management when you come at it from different ways and they're not ostensibly looking to find it."