

Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Theological Field Education in Australia and New Zealand

Richard Trist

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia and New Zealand in 2020 led to major disruption in every sphere of life. Health and personal well-being, social relationships, economic activity, and political alignments were all impacted. Governments closed national and state borders; schools, universities, businesses, and places of worship were all shut down to contain the spread of the virus.

Theological colleges were not immune to this disruption. College and university programs needed to be quickly reorganised. Zoom meetings and online instruction rapidly became the norm.

This was challenging enough in biblical and theological studies, but what of theological field education, where person-to-person interaction is so much a part of students' learning? How did students, supervisors, and program directors manage such a change to circumstances whilst keeping to the overall ethos of the discipline?

Richard Trist is president of the Australia, New Zealand Association for Theological Field Education (ANZATFE), dean of the Anglican Institute, and senior lecturer in pastoral theology at Ridley College, Melbourne. Email: richard.trist@bigpond.com.

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

* © Copyright 2021 *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*
All Rights Reserved

To find answers to these questions, the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Field Education (ANZATFE) undertook a survey of members in October 2020 to explore field educators' perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on students, supervisors, and programs. For a small organisation, it was heartening that over thirty field educators responded from theological colleges across both nations. The pandemic had obviously caused disruption, and respondents were keen to share their experiences.

This reflection will share some of the key findings of the survey.

IMPACT ON STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The nature of the pandemic required an overhaul of the original goals and expectations of student placements. Seventy percent of respondents indicated that their students' ability to achieve their original learning goals decreased.

Although students varied in their responses to the sudden changes, the timing of the pandemic meant those new to placements felt particularly disadvantaged. With the academic year in Australia and New Zealand commencing in February and government lockdowns starting in March, they had the challenge to connect meaningfully with supervisors and congregational members they had only just met.

Forty-five percent of respondents reported that at least one of their students cancelled or suspended their placement for reasons related to the pandemic. Such reasons included an inability to fulfil requirements due to a lack of genuine engagement opportunities; personal reasons such as increased anxiety or feeling overloaded because of extra responsibilities at home, e.g. having to supervise children unable to go to school; and practical reasons such as travel restrictions for those planning overseas cross-cultural placements.

Despite the challenges, respondents indicated that most students were able to adapt to the new situation and develop new learning goals. These included

- working with supervisors to reinvent what church gatherings might look like,
- developing online mentoring groups,
- organising grocery deliveries to needy families,
- making music videos for online preschool groups,

- running a Zoom seminar on a Christian response to lockdown anxiety, and
- teaching church members how to use webcams and engage in online worship.

Interestingly, despite the initial disruption to learning goals, it seems that for some students the new goals were more meaningful. Students discovered that ministry is truly contextual and that having an adaptive leadership style is beneficial. As one respondent observed, “With churches scrambling to pivot to online/hybrid gatherings, the majority of students found the significance of their role in the local church, and their responsibility, was increasing.”

Another respondent included the following summary of a student’s learning in the midst of the pandemic: “I operate in a context where services and other events are a big part of what we do, but this made me go back to what ministry really is, how we do it and why, and who are we really serving. At the end of the day, I am doing God’s work, in whatever environment, and with whatever difficulties are there.”

IMPACT ON SUPERVISORS/MENTORS

Like students, supervisors and mentors varied in their responses to the pandemic and its impact on the field education program. Thirty percent of respondents reported some supervisors finding the circumstances too challenging, leading to a decrease in meaningful contact with students compared to a normal year. Most respondents (59 percent), however, indicated that meaningful student and supervisor contact increased or stayed the same, with students and supervisors connecting via online platforms.

It seems that supervisors were generally able to assist students to find significant ministries to undertake, and, despite not having face-to-face contact, they continued to provide feedback. In the words of one respondent, “Although they didn’t directly observe [students] doing their tasks or interacting with others, they were still able to observe the fruit of their tasks and [give] feedback to students on this basis. It was not as beneficial as working side by side, but it was the best available in the circumstances.”

IMPACT ON FIELD EDUCATORS AND COLLEGE PROGRAMS

Field educators themselves were not immune to the disruption caused by the pandemic. Respondents noted increased workloads as they sought to manage student anxiety; mental stress and uncertainty at having to organise new placements; greater fatigue as Zoom meetings multiplied; and personal disappointment at the lack of face-to-face engagement with students and colleagues.

With respect to the overall program, 30 percent of respondents noted a decline in time spent leading theological reflection in student peer groups. Similarly, 30 percent reported a decline in lay field committee meetings.

Most respondents, however, felt that field education programs and colleges had been able to quickly respond to the new situation. Responses included

- flexibility with requirements for placement hours,
- extensions offered for assessments,
- increased student support services, and
- training offered to students and supervisors in the use of Zoom.

FIELD EDUCATORS' OVERALL REFLECTIONS

As well as reflecting on the challenges of the pandemic, program directors were asked to list successes for themselves and their programs despite the difficulties. Many mentioned their own upskilling in the use of online platforms, seeing students grow in innovation and creativity, helping students refocus on the core commitments of ministry, and having the opportunity to think about church and mission in alternate ways.

There was a mixed response to the question of how field education programs might be reimagined moving forward. Some were cautious: "The pandemic is a once in a lifetime event that disrupted all of our activities. It would be a mistake to adapt future field education programs based on this crisis".

Others, however, saw opportunities to reshape field education programs and college curricula. One spoke of the need to introduce online counselling as a learning module, another of the need to move programs online to build capacity for interns to minister in digital contexts.

Generally, it seems that field educators in Australia and New Zealand have seen a need to be prepared to roll out creative online solutions. They recognise, however, that this needs to be done with consideration to the context moving forward and the overall purposes of the field education enterprise.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic that swept our world in 2020 has been a profound reminder of the fragility of human society. Everything and everyone experienced a measure of disruption as never before. It has forced major rethinking.

In the light of this, the ANZATFE survey has demonstrated the importance of cultivating church leaders to meet the challenges of change. What is needed more than ever are the skills of adaptability, contextualisation, and reflective practice. Theological field education plays a crucial role in developing these characteristics, preparing students for the real world in which they will live and minister. As the world and the church are led to new possibilities, our students must be equipped to do the same.