

The global long haul

As schools and colleges in Europe return for all pupils in the new academic year, as people drift back to work and, with the occasional fine summer's day seeing folk flock to the beach or off to the pub, or for their first hair cut in months, there is a feeling that, although the pandemic is not over yet, things are at least starting to get back to some sort of normal.

Certainly the Government hopes this is so, as the economy has already taken a massive hit with Boris Johnson being prepared to spend what he called Rooseveltian levels of money to keep the ship of state steady during what is as much an economic crisis as a health one. As so often with Boris, the claim was an exaggeration. Roosevelt spent vastly more money than Boris is planning to, but Boris is going far further than any previous Conservative government in peacetime.

As Professor Sir Jeremy Farrar, director of the Wellcome Foundation and a member of SAGE, warned in July, "we're on a knife edge. It is very precarious." The R rate is inching up to a position above 1. If it reaches 2 or 3, one academic model predicted up to another 120,000 people in the UK could die, although in practice COVID-19 is now infecting younger people and the increase in cases has therefore not been matched by either hospital admissions or deaths.

Yet Boris has the luck of the devil. His gamble might just come off. How likely is that? Sadly the answer is, not very. The World Health Organisation has reported that while COVID-19 was in retreat in Europe it was still reaching new highs in the world as a whole. It is still raging across the USA, which has the largest number of cases and deaths in the world, and Brazil, which is just behind it. India may overtake both of them, in a race no nation wants to win. Cases are rising throughout Latin America and Africa. In Europe and Asia, which were the first to succumb to the virus and the first to seem to recover from it, there has been a second wave of new cases, especially in France and Spain. Even in countries like Germany and South Korea, which were very successful in containing the virus first time round, there has been an increase in cases.

As we found out when the pandemic first hit us, we can't isolate ourselves from the rest of the world. The English Channel is not wide enough, and as America has found out neither is the Atlantic or the Pacific. This is a global pandemic and we are part of the globe.

A number of international organisations have realised this and are planning for the long haul. Looking at five global organisations - the WHO, UNESCO, the World Bank, the OECD and Education International - the warnings they are giving are clear. As the World Bank report, *The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses*, published in May, noted: "Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was living a learning crisis ... the Learning Poverty rate in low-and middle-income countries was 53 percent—meaning that over half of all 10-year-old children couldn't read and understand a simple age appropriate story." On 8 September the OECD will publish its annual volume of *Education at a Glance*, which will be dominated by the effects of COVID-19. There are likely to be several more waves of the COVID-19 virus circling the world, as there were in previous pandemics from 1918 onwards. That will mean many school systems being closed several times over the next two years. As the OECD has observed, "planning is taking place on two timescales:

the short-term challenges in the return to school, and the challenges over the next 18-24 months as systems work to build resilience and adaptability for the future.”

How much the British government is planning for closing schools again, perhaps several times over the next two years, is not clear. While its main focus is naturally on reopening schools this month (September 2020) it must also give thought to preparations for multiple closures whether of individual schools, towns or even nationally. This is going to be the reality for much of the world for some time to come.

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