

Challenges and opportunities

How COVID-19 changed the Bar Practice Course forever

By Stephen Ryan



When COVID-19 forced the cancellation of the May Bar Practice Course, Bali Kaur and her team were forced to re-think how they could deliver the program and help readers establish themselves in a disrupted legal market.

Teaching materials were amended, the Bar Association's audio-visual equipment was upgraded and a plan B was devised in case a positive test or government mandate forced a shutdown mid-course.

Now with the September course successfully behind them, Ms Kaur and the team are preparing for 2021.

'The biggest challenge was accommodating the larger number of readers due to the cancellation of the May Bar Practice Course while taking into account health and government guidelines, the health and wellbeing of readers, presenters and staff, and maintaining the integrity of the course,' Ms Kaur said.

'We had 71 readers complete the course. We did not restrict numbers in any way. The format was modified to a hybrid course. The course utilised both online and in-person teaching methods, which were subject to continuing consideration in the context of changing circumstances.'



There were only 35 readers in the Common Room each day while the rest worked from home, chambers or other rooms within the Bar Association's headquarters. And while they alternated between working remotely and from the Common Room, all court-based sessions went ahead with face-to-face appearances in the state courts and remote appearances in the Federal Court.

'Some of the workshops and all mini-trials were conducted remotely via Zoom and all Federal Court applications were conducted via Microsoft Teams,' Ms Kaur explained.

'We were also able to run the final mock trial face-to-face in the usual way by only making minor adjustments.'

Each day began with temperature checking, QR code scanning and an acknowledgement as to whether readers had been in contact with any sufferers of COVID-19 or any known hotspots. There were new sessions on appearing remotely, adapting to new methods and technology and dealing with mental health issues, while fears of a loss of collegiality were addressed by virtual drinks to help readers meet not only other members of their cohort, but clerks and support staff at their chambers also.

'When we redesigned the course that was one of the most important considerations and the objective was to not lose that collegiality,' Ms Kaur explained.

'That was the reason why the course was not conducted completely remotely. This model also allowed readers to start to settle into chambers earlier than they normally would and therefore allowed them to interact with their colleagues and tutors on a daily basis.'

Had there been an outbreak or a shutdown of the Phillip Street precinct, the course could be delivered entirely remotely with face-to-face assessments done at a later date, an option that will remain next year if needed. The course can even accommodate a reader self-isolating from home. And while readers enjoyed the benefits of the Common Room's equipment upgrade, including four weeks of glitch-free live-streaming, all members of the association will see improvements to the streaming and recording of CPD events.

'The remote working went well and readers' feedback was positive regarding the format,' Ms Kaur noted.

'The best thing about the course was the way in which everyone embraced and worked with the new technology. Due to the current environment we will continually adapt to what is going on in practice and in the courts.'

