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This quote by His Highness The Aga Khan from 2003 is still relevant 17 years later. This pandemic has drastically changed our lives. From remotely facilitating workshops with new clients to wearing a mask every time I leave my home in Toronto, this pandemic has made me realize the many things we take for granted, including community gatherings, our health, and education.

When the various schools at Harvard announced that classes would be delivered online, I was initially shocked. I was confused. I was upset. “How am I going to make the most of my Harvard experience?” I asked myself. “Should I defer or should I continue? Is it worth it?”

After days of contemplating, speaking with my parents and mentors, and listening to words of inspiration from my role models, I took a step back and reflected on the reality. More than 1.2 billion students were impacted due to school closures. Teachers and school boards have faced multiple challenges delivering quality education remotely. I felt grateful to be part of an academic institution that is...
pushing the frontiers of education in research and innovation to combat the inequalities and hardships that COVID-19 has surfaced. Looking at the silver lining, I decided to pursue this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to educate myself in an ecosystem of the highest quality and to turn this crisis into an opportunity. These are the three ways through which I am “pivoting to the new”:

1. Harvard@Home
The first thing I did was set up my study area to resemble a Harvard classroom with a little bit of a personal touch! Whether it is drinking tea in my HGSE mug or purchasing “study from home” essentials from Amazon, I felt it was important to change my study space to look and feel like Appian Way. One advice that I was given was that going to Harvard is like drinking from a firehose. There are a tremendous number of events and opportunities to be a part of; staying organized and focused is key. I decided to use a flipchart and some sticky notes to create a Kanban board to stay on track with my academic and extracurricular tasks and deadlines. Another unique aspect of remote learning is the ability to study from anywhere on this globe. For me, it means being able to tune into lectures and do my work from the beautiful Aga Khan Museum across the street. While I may not be walking from one HGSE building to another, I hope to walk from one exhibit to another to get an artistic refresher! Who knew that a museum could serve multiple purposes?

2. Global Knowledge Bridges
A couple of years ago, I co-led an initiative called the Time and Knowledge Nazrana (TKN) in Canada. TKN is a global framework that provides members of the Ismaili community (a subset of Shia Islam) a platform to share their expertise and best practices to improve the quality of life of individuals across the world. Because of this pandemic, even though the world is physically distant, we are much closer together. I wanted to leverage the learnings from TKN to build global knowledge bridges and create partnerships for impact. From Tokyo to Toronto, Badakhshan to Boston, I have been engaging in insightful conversations with Harvard alumni and professionals to understand how they are transforming their educational practices and how I can contribute. Since most interactions are through video, my cohort and I have also been virtually bonding. It is truly unique to have a global community of friends who are resilient, passionate, and “learning to change the world.”

3. New Problems = New Opportunities
I recently learned that Sir Isaac Newton also had to study remotely due to the Great Plague, a major pandemic during that era. During this time, he continued to work on his mathematical theories and flourished. Though it is not necessary for a pandemic to bring creativity and invention, stories like these are reminders that one can still make a positive impact, despite the circumstances. COVID-19 has not only created new problems but has also surfaced existing issues, such as lack of education equity. As an engineer and digital consultant, I am a huge advocate of leveraging technology to improve experiences. Through my coursework and research projects, I look forward to collaborating with classmates and faculty from Harvard. Already, I have participated in a virtual challenge by MIT where 1,800 participants from around the world came together to work on education, health, and economic solutions to combat current issues. My team and I developed a winning solution to analyze and improve student engagement and personalized learning through the use of machine learning. While at HGSE, I am excited to continue working on this idea.

This is not the year anyone had imagined. I had not imagined attending lectures from my room. I had not imagined talking to my professors over Zoom. I had not imagined doing an internship remotely. But I had also not imagined the acceleration of digital learning experiences and how the world would need educators and innovators now more than ever. This quote by Dean Long from the 2020 commencement ceremony provides both inspiration and a positive course of action for me. “As we have recently been shown, this is a time when old assumptions have been thrown out the door,” she said. “Let new ideas combine with evidence on what works and come together in new collaborations, breaking down traditional barriers because we’re all in this together.”

AMREEN POONAWALA RECENTLY FOUNDED ED2ENGAGE, AN EDUCATION ANALYTICS STARTUP THAT AIMS TO IMPROVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT DURING REMOTE LEARNING. AT THE ED SCHOOL, SHE WILL BE FOCUSING ON STEM EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION AND WORK. SHE IS ALSO CO-LEADER OF THE HGSE INNOVATION AND DESIGN CLUB.

If we make the most of the crisis by way of what we can learn, not just from our own practice, but around the world, and how we can do a better job of personalizing, customizing education to meet the needs of our students and families and use the tools and technology … then we have a chance of making this a turning point.”

Professor Paul Reville
IN A JULY HARVARD GAZETTE STORY ON EDUCATION DURING COVID