

Report: University student online learning experiences in COVID-times

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Abstract

This report summarises findings from an ethics approved, cross-institutional project focused on foregrounding student voice and experience in the shift to emergency remote learning and teaching during the pandemic. The project team worked in collaboration with student associations to invite participation in a survey exploring students' experiences of online learning. Invitations were sent to University students through social media, institutional newsletters and blogs between July and Oct 2020. There were 952 valid survey responses from all eight New Zealand universities, complemented by 20 individual interviews and nine focus groups involving 41 student participants both on and off-shore. Detailed analysis of the data is in process and will be forthcoming in peer reviewed journals. The purpose of this report is to provide a brief overview of high level findings to disseminate to our participants and institutions involved.

Background

In response to COVID-19, Universities had to “go online” suddenly in 2020. We know there is a difference between carefully planned online learning experiences and courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). Students faced multiple demands (many of which persist) in the pandemic context. For example, access to resources, financial hardship, family responsibilities, living circumstances and experience and orientation to learning online.

Despite increasing research on online learning in the pandemic context (Smith Jagers, 2021), student voice, which we regard as essential to informing good design and facilitation of online learning experiences, is underrepresented in the emergent literature. How teachers teach online, and how students experience and learn online can be poles apart (Forbes & Gedera, 2019), necessitating explicit attention to how students have experience online teaching and learning. In particular, online students engage and interact with their studies in different ways (Brown, Davis, & Eulatth-Vidal, 2019). This project sought to explore the perspectives and experiences of New Zealand university students studying online in 2020 to help inform our approach to teaching and learning over the long term.

Summary of results

Demographics

Most of our survey respondents were female (76%), domestic students (89%) under the age of 24 years (61%). They were studying full-time (87%), on campus (70%) at one of the eight universities in New Zealand at the time of the 2020 lockdowns. A large percentage (89%) of students had either broadband or ultrafast fibre connection for their internet and most used their laptop (95%) for studies. Slightly more than half (53%) of the students did not have any prior online learning experience since three quarters of all respondents were studying on-campus.

On-campus to online transition - challenges

Students mostly missed having their classes face to face (24%) where they had more structure (20%) and an opportunity to connect with their friends (17%).

*“Being at home is a home environment, where family activities normally take place, not study per se. I do most of my learning on campus, where it is easier to get in the zone. At home there are **too many distractions**, I normally only do revision at home)”*

They did not report missing campus facilities per se but indicated that their study space (61%) influenced their learning experience.

*“I found that my study routine was completely **disrupted** and I lost all motivat[ion] for my studies. When I am able to go into class I find that the environment itself influences my study and losing that was very hard.”*

However, this wasn't the case for everyone

*“.. to be fair i feel more 'challenged' when i have to make the 1hr 20min journey into campus. At home i definatly had more time, more fun and a **more productive learning space**.”*

Students were mostly challenged by the demand of a different routine (74%) for learning online, where they had to balance their time and prioritise family commitments (39%).

*“everything was very **uncertain** and a single email could change the trajectory of your entire stay [study] plan”*
*“felt like i was **studying all the time** but didn't know what to study”*

Benefits of online learning mode

Though students reported feeling less motivated (65%) and less focused (63%), they became more used to online learning and could leverage the good aspects when they had the right support or knew where to get required support. More than half of the students appreciated not having to travel (53%) and having the flexibility to learn at their own pace and place (50%).

*“Personally i felt that the online based learning and tests and exams, more specifically for my law degree was **extremely beneficial**, i have studied this same paper for the third time and i have never even come close to a B in my exam, online exams helped me because even though they gave us more time and allowed us to see notes, they were still marking ferociously. In other words i realised that this whole time during lockdown i **was genuinely focused and studied daily**, i knew i had to always be online and even though i would*

procrastinate here in there i still learnt things, more importantly i became better at learning those things through online based exams.”

Useful teacher behaviour - content, communication and facilitation

Students indicated that regular updates (66%) and clear communication (63%) were key aspects of either teacher behaviour or teaching approach that helped them learn online.

*“it was good to see lecturers to students/lecturers talking about their daily life before online live lecture starts. This gave a **sense of 'interaction'** rather than being talked at in campus lecture where I usually felt a bit of distance from lectures.”*

Students also reported the usefulness of video recordings (61%) as part of their learning materials.

*“The classes that were most helpful were lecturers who continued to give their lecture content via video and then had catchup session to clarify understanding. The ones that were not so helpful were those that relied on delivering content just by powerpoint or written content as it did allow us to get the **personal insights** they often add in a face to face session which are most helpful.”*

Emerging themes

A number of key themes have emerged from our preliminary analysis.

Theme 1: Diversity of students' learning approaches and experiences.

While for some, at times, it may have felt lonely, frustrating, and unmotivating in comparison to the routine of attending campus with peers, at other times it was flexible and liberating, even for the same students.

In contrast, the same student appreciated the flexibility of self-paced learning.

*“I think having recorded lectures and PowerPoints, and stuff where I could look through it **at my own time** because often there is like other things going on or stuff I have to do, especially when I was at home. So, when I was at home, being able to, like, just stick it on pause for 10 minutes and then come back to it. That was pretty useful” (FG4_P2).*

*“it's really hard to go to an online class. ...When you've got like a physical classroom to go to, you kind of just suck it up and go to it. But when you're still at home you I guess you kind of **distract yourself** with other things” (FG4_P2).*

Key issues in terms of motivation coalesced around loss of routine, coping with distraction and inability to focus due to the challenges of compartmentalising home and university tasks. For some, the call of social media, Netflix, and games with the family were key distractions from study time.

On the other hand, the affordances of flexible and self-paced learning was an important theme in the research data.

*"[Studying] online gave me more **flexibility** in terms of how I tackled my learning and, and when I did lectures and just found time in the day where it was most appropriate to do the things that I wanted to do" (FG5_P1).*

While undergraduates found flexibility helpful, this was also the case for postgraduate students working on intensive writing:

*"I found it really helpful in terms of the **flexibility** of like, I'm stuck with this bit of writing that I'm doing at the moment. I'll take the dogs for a walk and come back to it or like, I'm... the kitchen's right here near me, I can actually cook lunch, while I'm at home and then get back to my writing or work on it while I'm cooking, that kind of thing. So I think the flexibility of being able to do that was really helpful" (FG7_P2)*

This sense of freedom was particularly empowering for students with health issues. For example,

*"I have a chronic illness. Sometimes the first half of the day. I'm not so good. So the beauty of online learning, particularly when the tutorials are recorded, means that sometimes I'm fine from three o'clock to midnight, you know, so I can **study when my brain and energy and my physical health are ready for it**. So that's the thing that I have to say is really excellent is that if there is online learning that tutorials and lectures, the pressure, the provision be there for distance learners to access them at a later point, to fit with their lifestyle or health" (INT_P3).*

This is a reminder that we need to be cognisant of the difference in the home lives of our students (Hartnett 2017).

Theme 2: Digital equity: Access and prior experience

Whilst young people are viewed as digitally savvy and always connected, digital equality still proved to be an issue in our context. In addition to lack of access to suitable devices for learning and the internet, knowing how to use technology personally (frequently for social and entertainment purposes) doesn't equate to knowing how to be an online learner. Unfamiliarity with online learning created extra work pressure for students.

*"my internet is not stable. It's rural wireless broadband. So, as you can probably see, **the connection does drop in and out**. And that actually has impacted my studies as well because I can get maybe four hours of videos for one particular topic ... and that actually eats up a lot of my monthly data allowance, which isn't very much" (FG9_P3)*

Firstly, in terms of access, some students reported unreliable internet connectivity, which made access to their university's Learning Management System, and particularly smooth play of video lectures or Zoom meetings challenging.

At times there were technical issues on both sides as students witnessed lecturers struggling with technology, while peers had connection difficulties and microphones

malfunctioned. Both students and staff were impacted by unreliable connections, particularly in rural areas. As one student explained,

"it's a mix. It was just a bit of a problem with one lecturer in particular because he lives quite rural.... so it's very hard, imagine he's trying to teach us at midday and the lecture cuts in the middle, so the quality of that particular paper, when it went online it was a bit difficult for us because we were wondering, hey, so when is he coming back on to teach us" (INT_P9).

In terms of knowing how to be an online learner, some students found that online learning took them a lot longer to process and engage with. For example, there was a tendency to overthink in relation to recordings:

*"it's the time schedule that's a little bit different from the real one. Because in real lecture if it's an hour lecture, it's actually an hour lecture. Whereas online I actually spent three hours in one lecture because I just keep pausing every time to write notes. Because like in a real lecture you can't pause the video but in a recorded lecture, you can just keep pausing it so that it takes me three hours to do one lecture. It's **really time consuming**" (INT_P2).*

Similarly, with online forums, confidence and fluency were challenges:

*"I still prefer face to face especially with the workshops or tutorials because of lots of in-class discussion and we did some of the things on Moodle forum but it's never the same. And I'm also quite, I don't know. When it comes to Moodle, posting something on Moodle, I like to make it perfect. Check my grammar, check my punctuation, and see if it makes sense. It's like [a] mini assignment.... And then like a tiny comment, a tiny post maybe a hundred **words might take forever for me to write it**, for me to post it; whereas, in class we just have to say it" (INT_P13).*

In contrast, students with experience of online learning understandably found the experience far more familiar.

*"I feel really fortunate that I was already doing distance that I didn't have to adjust to... I was **already used to being in that online environment** and making the most of it and making the most of other tools as well like Facebook groups and chatting and as well the online lectures and the best way to do them, whereas I suspect that would be tricky for someone who isn't used to that environment" (INT_P12).*

*"It didn't really make much difference for me, given that I had the experience of doing some papers via distance anyway. Um, so I found it **quite easy** to, I guess transition to a full online course for all my courses" (INT_P17).*

As such, there was a degree of inequity between students with good connectivity and prior experience as online learners, as compared with students living rurally who were used to attending classes exclusively on campus.

Theme 3: Students' wellness and wellbeing.

This was particularly foregrounded by the [New Zealand Union of Students Associations](#) (NZUSA) and [Te Mana Akonga](#) rapid research conducted to assess the impact of COVID on students' lives. Our research showed that stress was a significant challenge for over half of the

*"Overall, it was quite stressful. My eldest son is a severe asthmatic and my younger son is an essential worker, so he had to go to work every day during all the levels. So there **was concern for his well-being** and also that he would, you know, there was a chance he could bring Covid home to us, you know, so that was quite stressful and it affected my study. Because of that stress, the worries" (INT_P3).*

students. Students attributed anxiety and stress to various factors, including feeling loss of control, isolation, and workload pressures, with the latter particularly due to juggling paid work and/or parenting with study.

Some students missed the activities they usually engaged in for stress relief, such as going to the gym. Other students worried about family members, for example,

A minority of students found online learning less stressful than their usual study routines, due to less time spent commuting, with an apparently

more relaxed pace that allowed time for sleeping, cooking, eating and exercising outdoors.

*"it was a good time of being able to just recover and **take things slowly** without any pressure from like the outside world" (FG2_P2).*

The degree of stress was related to the individual circumstances of students, in terms of living arrangements, competing demands, and diverse psychological needs.

*"It was as though I entered into this zen period. Yeah, I had a bunch of people living here that, that had their own demands. But largely, because no one could go anywhere and there were **no pressing deadlines apart from study** that was submitted online, there was no hard copy or anything. It was a really calming time" (FG6_P2).*

Theme 4: social connections needed to support learning networks with peers

Compounding this were additional unforeseen responsibilities (for example child and family care). It is therefore unsurprising that many students felt isolated in their learning. Social learning, [care, and connection](#) are critical elements of learning. Students appreciated the human connection from staff who checked in on them, had coffee chats/drop in sessions, and were flexible about timeframes.

Family:

"It was hard. Because a lot of my family members, um, they got redundant and then they lost their house. There were 11 people staying in my house. I couldn't study. And then I was also working at the same time. So I had to pick up more shifts to help, because there

was 11 people in my house and not just three. **Work more hours and then, um to try study on top of that** and on top of that, my house was always loud. And I had to be quiet. So it was just hard for me" (FG5_P2).

" So, the lockdown was quite difficult because my husband was working from home and we didn't have a desk in the spare room. So, he worked in the living area. We have an open plan. So we have the living area and TV in the kitchen. So it was hard to have a toddler running around. So it's quite stressful and obviously his work comes first, because he paid for my tuition fees. And so **I had to do all my work in the evening** when the baby was asleep. So it was very difficult and yeah very stressful and I think she felt that, too. So she wasn't going to bed till about half eight and nine. After doing all of that, at half a half nine, then I would study. And I'm tired. It was a bit of a struggle" (INT_P19)

Isolation:

" it was very **hard for me as a social person**, because everyone's trying to you know, get their bearings and all my friends and my classmates, trying to get their bearings, right, that whole... having those conversations with your friends and your classmates is gone. So you're all trying, you don't have any sort, sort of social contact. You only can talk to your family, but considering that was, how long from what March to May? That was quite a long time, of just whatever all of us are suddenly available one evening. Sweet. Let's go on Messenger or let's go on Zoom. That was once in a blue moon, like once every two weeks. So everything which was casual came to a halt, it was very hard" (INT_P9).

" So during the lockdown I was alone, you know, **isolated without classmates** or friends in the same courses to go to. Um like, I used to be able to go to them if I needed help, you know, sit down with them in the library where there was a study area with them. Like, I enjoyed studying with other people during regular experiences. So being by myself was a bit of a downfall. I did contact friends like on Facebook, but it wasn't really the same thing" (INT_P7).

Staff support:

"from [my university] I got a lot of support regarding the amount of hours that I work and my special considerations. They also supported me, like, they gave me some financial assistance as well. And **they also supported me** like, the teachers were like, communicating with me and helping me to find, like days and hours that I could actually attend workshops" (FG5_P2).

"my inbox was absolutely flooded with emails every day, offering overwhelming amounts of support. And within that there were little, sort of links or, you know, if you're struggling with this go here and ask. Or if you need help with this, go here and ask, because there was a lot of that sort of, extra support and for those that needed it, they could look and figure out about it" (FG5_P1).

*" the lecturer was really, really good. ... she was awesome. She offered to like, text me or phone me or do whatever I could, because I couldn't get the answer to one problem. And in the end, when we sat our final exam that came up. So I was very glad that she was **so proactive**" (FG6_P2).*

Conclusion

The uncertainties of the on-going pandemic crisis and lessons learnt from emergency remote teaching demand that we plan for and accommodate increased flexibility and adaptability in our approach to teaching/learning. Education that is responsive to both students and current social contexts is key. The pandemic can be a “turning point” presenting us with a unique opportunity to shift our systems and practices. We need to think beyond zoom and video-lectures as the main means of online learning. The value of considered, inclusive learning design cannot be underestimated. We all know learning is so much more than just delivery of content. [Equity and diversity](#) need to be at the forefront of our thinking when we transition to blended, flexible or online modes of study (Willems et al 2019). Interaction and co-creation are key aspects of engagement. We need to rethink our ethics of care for digital learning in the “post-pandemic” university. As this preliminary report demonstrated, student experiences are not homogenous.

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