

On-Campus Students Moving Online During COVID-19 University Closures: Barriers and Enablers. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report shares the experiences of on-campus students enrolled in their second or third year of undergraduate business studies at Charles Sturt University, Australia as they moved to online study during the COVID-19 shutdowns. It details both the barriers and enablers to successful study the students identified. Barriers included loss of support networks, online fatigue, and technology connectivity. Enablers for success included empathic and understanding staff; clear directions; and, engaging, interactive delivery of the online learning activity. The report concludes with recommendations for future practice in assisting on-campus learners with the transition from a physical to a virtual learning environment. In particular, a strong teacher presence is recommended to foster the development of an engaged learning community where student-to-student interactions are facilitated and students feel supported and connected.

Keywords: Student engagement; COVID-19; student success; teacher presence.

Introduction

Student engagement has been found to be an important factor in student success at university. Krause and Coates (2008) describe engagement as “a broad phenomenon that encompasses academic as well as selected non-academic and social aspects of the student experience” (p. 493). Many researchers have emphasised the importance of social connection and engagement to enhance university success (Attree & Small, 2013; Cooper, 2021; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Connectedness is one of the five senses for student success proposed by Lizzio (2006) who argues that students with stronger connections with peers and staff at the university are more likely to be successful learners. Vinson et al. (2010) similarly argue that forming good relationships at the beginning of university can affect students’ academic performance and success. Wilcox et al. (2005) report a link between social integration with peers and student retention. Such connections can foster the sharing of notes when classes are missed and help students work through course-related difficulties (Krause & Coates, 2008) and collaborate in the construction of knowledge (Nelson, et al., 2011). Teacher presence is an important component of student engagement both for on campus and online students and as Drok (2020) notes, for online students “it can play a vital role in building a sense of belonging to the learning community and in improving student retention” (p.2).

Charles Sturt University is an Australian multi-campus public university delivering both on-campus and online programs at Bachelor and Post-Graduate level as well as Single Subject Study programs. The sudden move to online study for on-campus Australian university students in March 2020 impacted both lecturers and students alike. First-year students new to campus had



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to suddenly abandon newly formed network groups. Those living on campus had to pack up their belongings and move elsewhere; while day students had to swap their daily commute and physical classrooms for a computer screen. However, it was not just first-year students who faced the sudden disruption of networks. Second and third-year students who are generally viewed as more “acculturated” to the university environment; more independent and experienced learners; and more able to navigate systems, seek support and forge connections where needed; unexpectedly found many of their established support mechanisms and learning practices upturned.

The impetus for this investigation was a “sharing of practice” conversation between lecturers regarding the challenges experienced by one individual student in the move online. A general sense that “more students may be struggling” prompted a desire to canvass the student experience more broadly. In total, six undergraduate students in their second and third year of study were contacted and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences moving online. Only four students responded with three agreeing to participate in a semi-structured qualitative interview exploring the barriers and enablers they experienced in the move to online study caused by the COVID-19 campus closures. The individual student responses were summarised and emailed back to each student providing them the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings or clarify any issues. Information on students was presented in a de-identified form and students chose their pseudonym. The next section introduces the participants and outlines their experiences.

The Participants

Leah is a traditional “high school to university” student enrolled in the last year of her business degree during 2020. She normally works between 20 to 25 hours per week in two jobs in retail and hospitality. Due to the impacts of COVID-19, this had dropped to about 17 hours in retail only. Leah stated that she “didn’t like taking online subjects if she could avoid it”, having taken two subjects online previously and failed one. In session one of 2020, one of her core subjects was only available for study in online mode which she “was kinda annoyed by”.

James is a second-year business student. Like many of Charles Sturt University students, he is what is termed as a non-traditional student in that he has a technical qualification and worked for several years prior to commencing university. He balances full-time study with significant work commitments in hospitality and his technical field. James chose to study on-campus because that is how he believes he “learns best”. He had not taken any subjects in online/distance mode previously.

Holly is a mature age student in her second year of full-time study who came to university seeking new opportunities following a long career break as a primary carer. She had no prior tertiary study experience, and like James, hadn’t studied online previously.

Their Stories

Leah described moving to study completely online as “a bit of a shock to the system.” To complicate matters, she had recently bought and moved into a house with her partner mid-session. Also, her father is very ill and Leah felt the need to provide significant support and assistance to him during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online experience was definitely a lot less personal for her: “you don’t develop as strong a relationship with the lecturer as you do in the face to face environment.” She felt she was not absorbing the content of the online sessions and this was impacting her motivation to study. Studying at home was also adding to the challenge as it was easy to be distracted by domestic tasks. Leah stated that she is “normally pretty strict about going to class” since this keeps her on top of her work. With online classes, she didn’t feel the impact of missing class in the same way. In balancing work, moving house, no internet connection for a while, and needing to support her father, she missed a number of classes, fell behind, and was struggling to catch up. “That’s the thing about uni”, she said, “once you are behind, you are behind”. James acknowledged that he is “not the best at keeping a schedule” but that to keep up to date with his studies he had been trying to be rigid in his attendance in online classes as these represented his best chance of engaging with and maintaining good study habits. “If you fall behind it is all over,” he said.

Learning in the Virtual Environment – The Enablers

Originally James had enrolled in three subjects. However, with the uncertainty around what would happen and how this would impact his workplace commitments, James made the decision before the HECS¹ census date to continue with only two subjects. These two subjects provided James with two very different experiences. One subject was delivered using the Zoom video conferencing platform. For James, this experience felt the closest to being in a physical lecture or tutorial since the lecturer requested students to keep their cameras on. Students could ask questions and the lecturer was able to check in with all students to ensure that they were grasping concepts, contributing to the learning environment, and able to stay on top of the subject content. James felt this delivery approach made him more accountable, alert, and engaged with the learning process. He reported that he felt a lot more on top of the content and this flowed through to his performance in terms of marks.

Leah enrolled in three subjects and Holly four. Both also expressed a strong preference for the Zoom environment. Leah agreed that it was better to have the camera on because “if the lecturer can see me, I am less likely to get distracted and am more engaged in the learning.” Holly added that the camera enables students and lecturers to read non-verbal signals: “You can tell by people’s faces whether they are getting it or not”.

Learning in the Virtual Environment – The Challenges

By comparison, for those subjects where classes were delivered using different software, all three students reported feeling less engaged and connected. With no cameras enabled and unable to see the lecturer, James said:

It feels like I’m watching a YouTube video. The learning is much more self-guided, you have to muddle your way through Interact 2 (Blackboard) to find content. The lecturer has been keen to stress that she is very happy to take individual phone calls and is very responsive to emails but there is essentially no class interaction. It’s all one way delivery, with very little chat, and the discussion boards are dead.

On Fridays, Holly had a mammoth six hours of online study for two subjects. She described the experience of concentrating online for that duration as “just exhausting”. In her Wednesday maths class, the lecturer enabled his camera, used slide shares and a small on-screen board to work through examples. Holly acknowledges that the lecturer was trying to deliver the same lesson as he did in the physical classroom but it was very hard to follow: “You are staring at a monitor trying to concentrate and it’s not working. In class he had a massive whiteboard and it was easier to ask questions if you didn’t understand,” she said. There seemed to be a time lag when the lecturer used the on-screen board which meant that sometimes she wasn’t sure when he had finished giving the example.

Another challenge that students faced was internet connectivity. Holly says:

Some of my classmates are in remote locations with limited connectivity. They can’t drive to a major town every time they need to join an online class. For them, the online situation just doesn’t work which is why they chose to study on campus in the first place.

Although closer to town, internet connectivity was also a worry for Holly. “We don’t have NBN where I am,” she said, “and sometimes our connection is glitchy. The idea of an outage in the middle of my end of session online exam makes me very anxious”.

Connections Between Time and Space

Interaction with other students was something that all three missed most about moving online. James highly valued the opportunity to interact with his peers as this helped him get “more of a gauge of the subject.” Not physically going to class he missed “the little pockets of information, the general chat that happens before or after class and the tips you pick up [in-class] from other people’s questions.” James found connecting in with one other classmate via social media to chat about study

¹ Higher Education Charge Subsidy (HECS) census date usually falls on the Friday of the fourth week of session and is the last date students can withdraw from a course without incurring a fee for their studies.

concepts, seek clarity, share mutual understanding, and bounce around ideas was helpful: “There are some questions where you don’t really want to ask the lecturer.”

Holly would normally meet with other students after class and share ideas and experiences. With the move to online, she spent a lot of time talking to others on the phone:

It’s been very hard to maintain motivation and keep going. Normally, in class, students would talk about the upcoming assessments and where they are up to. If you hadn’t started working on it that would motivate you to get going.

To get by in the online environment Holly became focused on dates, keeping a detailed study schedule of when assessments were due and the topics and readings required to be completed each week.

Leah also stayed in touch with a couple of other students, one of whom works in the same centre. She said the opportunity to share experiences helped. “Sometimes you feel a bit like a silly person because you can’t do online. It’s nice to hear from other students that online is not for them either and you are not alone.” Leah used the Charles Sturt library space occasionally for study and reported that it was very busy there. She felt many people, like her, found it difficult to study at home - in a place where they normally relax or in an environment that may not have the space for study. For others, she felt it may be the mental shift, i.e. “if you are at the university then you are in the study zone. If you are lucky” she said, “you might even get a room with a whiteboard in the library and can use that to mind map and brainstorm.”

Teacher Presence: Virtual and Real

What worked well for Leah was that her lecturing staff were “amazing, understanding, empathetic and interpersonal” and connected with her by phone when she indicated that she was struggling. Being told to take her time to do an assessment and get it in when she was ready was a “massive relief” to her. She also reported that all of her lecturers were very understanding and willing to extend deadlines.

Holly found the regular announcements from lecturers vital to keep her on track with due dates and in understanding what was happening and where she should be up to with her subjects.

In summing up the session James said: “It hasn’t been the worst experience but it’s definitely not something I would want to continue for all subjects. My major preference is on-campus study”. His advice to lecturers was to concentrate on the interactive element – “run the class like you are in the room and make it interactive. Talk to the students, not at them.”

Reflections for Teaching and Learning Practice

Reflecting on the experiences of these three students with colleagues, it became apparent that we had not expected our second and third-year students to find the move to online study so challenging. Most of us teach both on-campus and online classes and did not consider that we may need to offer a different style of online delivery to our on-campus students. We also neglected to appreciate the broad differences between on-campus and online learners. These differences are summarised below in Table 1.

Table 1*Differences between On-Campus and Online Learners*

On-Campus	Online
Full-time (3 to 4 subjects)	Part-time (1 to 2 subjects)
Part-time work	Full-time work
Career next	Career now
Seeking interaction and collaboration	Collaboration relevant to learning
Normal learning environment – campus	Normal learning environment – home/office
Social connections – campus centred	Social connections – home and work centred

Krause and Coates (2008) state that success (in the first year) relies on the student’s capacity to manage their time, study habits, and strategies for learning. Wilson (2009) explains that students are more likely to succeed at university if they invest time in studying, regularly attend classes, balance their work/study commitments, develop a social network, have a clear goal for attending university, engage with the online learning environment and have some measure of academic self-confidence. Our students had successfully navigated first year and were ticking all these boxes when COVID-19 suddenly threw them an unexpected challenge. Fully engaging with the online learning environment became the central requirement for the continuation of their study. Being full-time students, mostly enrolled in three to four subjects, meant that they were engaged in up to 12 hours of online synchronous delivery as both lecture and tutorial sessions were moved online. By comparison, our online students generally engage in 1 to 2 hours of online synchronous learning per week. As Holly identified, focusing for extended lengths of time online was “just exhausting.”

Our on-campus students told us that they chose on-campus study because they believed that they learned better in a face-to-face environment. What was evident was that they missed the social connection and interaction that was familiar to them on-campus and struggled to find that connection in the online environment: “it has been difficult changing to completely online courses, it feels like that I have lost the support network and motivation I had while I was on campus” (Holly). Their experiences align closely with the experiences of online students at other regional universities recorded by Devlin and McKay (2017) e.g. “Being a distance student you don’t get that camaraderie that comes with being on campus” (CQU_STU_083). Our students told us that they missed the informal opportunities to chat with other students, learn from each other, gauge their own progress, and work through course-related difficulties. These are all aspects of engagement noted by both Krause and Coates (2008) and Devlin and McKay (2017) as contributing to student success and retention. The value they obtain from engaging with their peers is evidenced in James’ comment about the value of connecting in with classmates to chat about study concepts, seek clarity, share mutual understanding and bounce around ideas. To bridge this gap our students turned to electronic alternatives such as social media and phones.

Role of the Teacher

A strong teacher presence has been found to have a positive impact on student engagement, sense of connection, and retention (Shin, 2003; Stone, 2014; Stone & O’Shea, 2019; Tinto, 2005). Stone, 2017 (cited in Stone & O’Shea, 2019) highlights how “A strong teacher-presence provides online students with a sense of belonging, helping them to feel connected to a community of learning and increasing their likelihood of persisting” (p. 65).

Reviewing these three students’ experience helps us think about how we can more effectively deliver “on-campus” classes in online mode. The students themselves recommended a more interactive and interpersonal delivery mode for online classes with cameras and microphones enabled. Other strategies to foster a more personal and inclusive environment could include “bring your pet to (virtual) class” days or opening the online class early to allow informal student interaction before the lecture. We can also even integrate wellbeing check-ins into the delivery and invite students to share their methods for keeping on track with study and assessments. Encouraging students to set up social networks via social media or other electronic media can help foster those vital social connections that facilitate learning.

Lastly, by providing advice and direction via regular (weekly) emails outlining where students should be up to in relation to content, reminding them of upcoming assessment, providing links to academic support and assistance, and generally helping them to keep on track with their learning can help students adjust to the online learning environment and overcome the absence of classroom cues. Similar benefits of this regular course focussed communication have been found by others to foster belonging and engagement and benefit academic performance (Dart & Spratt, 2021; Drok, 2020; Lawrence et al., 2021)

To summarise the learning and teaching practices that most effectively enabled these three students to learn during the COVID move to online were:

- Delivery of interactive classes using video conferencing software with cameras and microphones enabled and two-way dialogue with students.
- Regular clear communication advising students where they should be up to in the subject, reminders regarding assessment dates, tasks, and other key information to keep students on track in the absence of classroom cues.
- Flexibility and empathy around students' individual challenges and personal circumstances.

For students themselves, having a designated place to study and connecting with other students were important.

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