Guest Editorial

Student Success in a Global Pandemic

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Australia

2021 Special Issue: Student Success in a Global Pandemic

Introduction and Background

When the topic of *Student Success in a Global Pandemic* was selected for the special issue of *Student Success* in June 2020, we debated the wisdom of a topic that might become dated by the time the special issue was published in November 2021. We concluded that even if the pandemic were well and truly over by the time the special issue came out, some 18 months after the initial call for papers, the edition would serve as an interesting historical piece. In June 2021, at the time of reading the post-review papers, suggesting final edits to papers and preparing our editorial, the pandemic rages on.

Indeed, in May 2021, a COVID-19 outbreak occurred in Victoria, Australia, where both editors live. This led to an initial 7-day lockdown by the state government, strict restrictions on movement, compulsory mask-wearing, and the closure of university campuses and schools, among many other closures. This lockdown was then extended for another seven days in the city and extended again, albeit with some movement restrictions lifted.

For us as editors of a special issue on student success in a global pandemic, the timing of the outbreak was somewhat serendipitous. The return to lockdown, restrictions and daily press briefings on new cases and their details so familiar to Victorians who had lived through waves in 2020 – reminded us in real time about the potential impacts of the pandemic on student experiences and success. The personal, lived experience of the May 2021 outbreak and lockdown served as a useful reminder of the emotional, physical, social and other challenges of the pandemic and the potential individual, group, cohort, community and global impacts.

The Pandemic and its Impact on Higher Education

As we said in our call for papers in mid-2020, the catastrophic disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes to the provision of teaching and learning in higher education institutions around the globe, in particular through the use of online learning. The special edition on *Student Success in a Global Pandemic* has enabled academics, practitioners, leaders and policy makers to share their stories, outcomes and learnings from an extraordinary time of innovation.

The pandemic has borne witness to many higher education institutions moving to remote teaching, learning and student support, in most cases with very little notice. The rapid moves to adopt online learning and support through necessity have had implications for pedagogical and support theory, practice and research and for student success. The changes have underscored a multitude of challenges that institutions may face in relation to staff development, technology infrastructure, changes to approaches to teaching and support, and student persistence, retention and success. All of these themes are touched on in this collection of papers.

The sudden and unplanned shift to remote teaching and learning, with many teaching staff and students having limited knowledge of online pedagogy, and in a context in which significant numbers of students have had limited access to technology and the internet, has created new and/or larger gaps between learners. Notwithstanding the ongoing efforts of institutions to maintain quality in their provision of online teaching and learning during the pandemic, this unprecedented shift has impacted on students' learning, experience, satisfaction and success.

Research-based and empirical evidence on the effects of the rapid responses to COVID-19 were limited at the time of the call for papers. Anecdotal evidence however pointed to key issues relating to potential risks such as: students from disadvantaged backgrounds having accessibility and connectivity issues; failure rates increasing; many students needing to withdraw for non-academic-related issues related to the virus – for example, health, finances or caring responsibilities; the importance of additional support – for example, financial, academic, personal and/or pastoral; and the ability of support services to operate effectively in a virtual capacity; among many others. Many of these themes are taken up in this collection which covers preparation for study, teaching and learning practice, partnerships and policy.

This special issue sought empirical studies on pedagogical and support innovations and applications of evidence-based practices to online and remote teaching and learning and student support during a time of national and international crisis. Papers in the collection include evidence drawn from robust empirical studies using quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The collection contains findings and conclusions that can be considered by educators or institutions broadly to improve understanding, practice and student outcomes in a range of contexts.

Papers in this Collection

The 11 papers in the collection are from Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and South-Africa, from a total of 48 authors.

Pre-University Papers

Two papers in the collection focused on the pre-university context. The collection commences with the paper, *Digital Disruption in the COVID-19 Era: The Impact on Learning and Teaching and Students' Ability to Cope with Study in an Unknown World*. Authors Trixie James, Gabriela Toth, Melissa Tomlins, Brijesh Kumar and Kerry Bond examine the learning and wider experiences of a group of Australian students in a tertiary enabling program. As these authors note, lockdowns and related restrictions disrupted many aspects of students' lives. These included: changes to their routines, personal space and household dynamics; challenges related to technology, working from home, home-schooling and caring responsibilities; job losses; and mental health issues. They report that while most students experienced increased stress, many reported improved study and technological skills, as well as an awareness of their ability to cope with change.

Also focused on the pre-university context is the paper *Equalizing and Widening Access to Higher Education During a Pandemic: Lessons Learned from a Multi-University Perspective*. Authors Emlyn Dodd, Sonal Singh, Jim Micsko, Kylie Austin, Carolina Morison and Stuart Upton examined the impact of the pandemic on widening participation and outreach programs. The views of practitioners, students, teachers, parents, and researchers about the rapid move of these programs to online formats were sought across four case studies. The authors conclude that continued program delivery is a priority given global commitments to university access and that online components can enact these commitments by engaging new cohorts, increasing the scale of engagement, and providing program participants with exposure to a greater range of program experiences.

Australian Perspectives

Four papers in the collection were set in the Australian context and three focused on the first year of university study. In their paper, *"My uni experience wasn't completely ruined": The impacts of COVID-19 on the first-year experience*, Loraine McKay, Steven O'Bryan and Ella Kahu tracked the wellbeing and engagement of 60 new students in an undergraduate teacher education program at an Australian university. These researchers employed an innovative use of images chosen by students to explore how COVID-19 had impacted on aspects of their experience. As the authors note, the photos supported students' recall of events and emotions (Glass, 2011), enabled examination of complex ideas, and assisted in the interpretation of other data. The results showed a strong dip in student wellbeing and engagement early in lockdown that recovered over time. Results also

highlighted the diversity of student experience in relation to: access to time and space to study; the ability to sustain relationships; and cumulative stress.

The second paper that focused on the first year experience was *That Synching Feeling: An Exploration of Student Engagement in an Online Environment* by Kate Kelly and Edward Lock. Using two skills-based first-year units – adapted to a predominantly asynchronous mode of delivery – as the basis of their study, these researchers examined student engagement, perceptions of how well supported they were and the impacts on student success. Results indicate that student engagement was high, that individualized support, teacher presence and flexibility were key success factors and that that final grades and completion were positively impacted. The need for educators to be mindful of the complexities of students' broader lives was also noted.

In the third paper, a Practice Report from Kath Attree, *On-Campus Students Moving Online During COVID-19 University Closures: Barriers and Enablers*, the experiences of on-campus students enrolled in their second or third year of undergraduate business studies at one university are shared. The barriers – including the loss of support networks, online fatigue, and technology connectivity issues – and the enablers – including empathic and understanding staff; clear directions; and engaging, interactive delivery – to success are discussed. The report concludes with recommendations around assisting on-campus learners transition to a virtual learning environment. As was the case in the paper by Kelly and Lock, strong teacher presence is highlighted as important to student success.

In another Australian study, *Learning from the pandemic: The impacts of moving student-staff partnerships online* authors Madeleine-Marie Judd, Franciele Spinelli, Brooke Szucs, Naima Crisp, Julia Groening, Christy Collis, Beata Batorowicz, Dino Willox and Anna Richards examine the experiences and perceptions of students and staff in one university as they shifted their partnership practices online. Both positive and negative impacts of online student-staff partnerships were explored. Results showed that accessibility and communication were key factors and that these need careful consideration in post-COVID recalibrations of programs. The authors recommend offering opportunities to engage in partnership in dual-mode, that is both online and on campus, as both have pros and cons. They also recommend careful consideration of boundaries around necessary communication, noting the need to protect privacy.

International Perspectives

Moving to international perspectives, one paper from South Africa and two from the UK examine the student experience and student learning in those locations.

In *How Home Contexts of South African University Students Shape their Experiences of Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning* Ansurie Pillay, Martha Khosa, Ayub Sheik, Bridget Campbell, Bheki Mthembu and Nicholus Nyika employ a critical paradigm, a qualitative approach and a case study design. The authors used interviews, voice notes and text messages to explore how South African university students' home contexts shape their experiences during remote learning. Building on the theme of the complexities of students' broader lives highlighted by Kelly and Lock, the findings of this study indicate that these students' learning at home was negatively impacted by a wide range of factors. These included: poor internet connectivity; home duties and responsibilities; cramped living conditions impacting on study space; a lack of safety; resource poverty; and financial and psycho-social stresses.

In the UK-based paper, *Supporting Student Experience During the Pandemic and Beyond* authors Rebecca Sanderson, Rachel Spacey, Xiaotong Zhu and Rhianne-Ebony Sterling-Morris report on the findings from a small-scale, qualitative and phenomenological institutional study on the experiences of undergraduate students from groups who are traditionally under-represented. Key themes identified included worry, stress, anxiety, feelings of loss of informal interactions and disconnection from staff, a sense of a 'new geography' of campus life and the importance of effective communication and of students being and feeling they are 'in the loop'. Evidence of changes in the relationship between students and their institution were also found. Suggestions for mitigating some of the ongoing negative effects of the pandemic on students are offered.

In their UK-based practice report, "*A More Personal Way to Learn During Such an Isolating Time": The Value of Live Lectures in Online Teaching* authors Richard Harris, Pam Blundell-Birtill and Madeleine Pownall reflect on the synchronous delivery of a popular final-year module in a psychology undergraduate degree. In the module, students learned via live lectures hosted in the virtual learning environment. Interactive online polls and small group discussions were facilitated. Students' qualitative

feedback on the live lecture delivery indicated three themes: technology-enhanced engagement, barriers to access and 'togetherness' in live lectures. The authors argue that the feedback suggests that notwithstanding technological and logistical challenges, live online lectures can be useful in instilling a sense of togetherness online. This report positions access as a logistical matter – elsewhere in the collection it is seen as a matter of equity. These different perspectives point to the richness of the collection.

System and Policy Papers

One paper each in the collection focused on systems and policy. In their paper, *Teaching resilience: Enabling factors for effective responses to COVID-19 through transdisciplinary and focus on systems* authors Alex Patrick Baumber, Lucy Allen, Tyler Key, Giedre Kligyte, Jacqueline Melvold and Susanne Pratt note that the pandemic has provided an opportunity to better understand the pre-existing conditions that enable higher education systems to be resilient. They define resilience as the ability to respond and adapt to disturbances in ways that retain the functions and structures essential for student success. Using a case study of two transdisciplinary undergraduate courses at an Australian university, they highlight the importance of information flows, feedback, self-organisation, leadership, openness, trust, equity, diversity, reserves, social learning and nestedness. They show that resilience frameworks developed by scholars offer guidance on which university teaching system features require protection and strengthening to enable effective responses to future disturbances.

In the final paper in the collection, *The Best Chance For All: A Policy Roadmap for Post Pandemic-Panic*, Sally Kift, Nadine Zacharias and Matt Brett issue a policy call to arms. They argue that that COVID-19 has exacerbated the issues that the 2018 'The Best Chance for All' policy vision sought to address and has in fact increased demands on and of post-secondary education. They argue that the magnitude of the social and economic challenges brought about by the pandemic warrants holistic policy responses that enable the transition to a connected tertiary education system that is designed to deliver choice and flexibility for lifelong learners. They suggest that the roadmap for the necessary transition exists in 'The Best Chance For All' and can be activated through demand driven funding arrangements across tertiary education, underpinned by sustained investment in equity outreach and support.

Thank You

We would like to thank all 48 authors for the work they put into their research, writing and refining their papers for publication. We have learned a lot from you. Our heartfelt thanks also go to the generous peer reviewers who so kindly offered their time and expertise to the greater good of scholarship and sector-wide learning. And our sincere and deep thanks to our collaborator and journal manager Tracy Creagh, without whose expert guidance, these papers would not have reached you.

We hope you enjoy and benefit from this collection as much as we did.

Reference

Glass, C. (2011). 'There's not much room for anything to go amiss': Narrative and arts-based inquiry in teacher education. *Issues in Educational Research*, *21*(2), 130-144.