



Australian Government

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

Foundations for good practice: The student experience of online learning in Australian higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic

November 2020

TEQSA

Foreword



The rapid adoption of online learning by Australia's higher education sector was an enormous undertaking by providers at a time when staff and students were facing a range of pressures stemming from the pandemic's impact on everyday life.

Given the speed of the change from on-campus to online learning environments for the majority of students, TEQSA has been conscious of the need to consider students' online learning experience as part of our ongoing response to support the higher education sector through the pandemic.

TEQSA's Student Perceptions of Online Learning Quality Project was established to help us to develop a thematic understanding of student experiences to enable both TEQSA and the sector to better consider and develop tools, webinars and other expert advice to further support the quality assurance of online learning.

As part of this project, 118 providers voluntarily shared summaries of their student experience surveys with TEQSA, enabling us to develop this report. I'd like to thank both our providers for their co-operation, and Dr Lin Martin AO for her work in analysing this data.

While this report reaffirms the tremendous effort that was put into making the transition to online or remote learning as good as possible, and acknowledges that students recognised and appreciated this work, there were understandably some concerns encountered during this transition. This includes the reduced interaction with academics and peers, the impact of IT issues on learning, and the difficulty of transitioning some fields of study to online learning.

However, as the report indicates, many providers have noted these impacts and are undertaking various responses to assure the quality of online learning for their students. This is another positive sign of the Australian higher education sector's commitment to upholding the quality of education during the pandemic.

TEQSA looks forward to continuing to work cooperatively with the sector to support the development of further online learning resources, as appropriate, to ensure the ongoing quality of the student experience.

Professor Nick Saunders AO

Chief Commissioner

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

Acknowledgement

TEQSA is grateful to all of the higher education providers who responded to the request for summary information about surveys that they had conducted of their students who had participated in online learning as part of the transition from face-to-face studies during semester 1 of the 2020 academic year. This report is based on the wealth of information submitted, which has allowed the identification of themes associated with the transition to online learning. These themes will assist providers in assuring the quality of their teaching and learning in this transitional phase and into the future.

About the author

Dr Linley (Lin) Martin AO was a TEQSA Commissioner from 2015–20. Prior to this, Dr Martin held a number of senior positions at universities including as the Vice-President and Council Secretary at Deakin University. She was also a senior adviser to the Review of Australian Higher Education (the Bradley Review) which was pivotal to the establishment of TEQSA. In 2020, Dr Martin was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Australia in recognition of her distinguished service to education, particularly to student equity, educational standards and academic administration.

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Section 1 – Executive Summary

In response to the emergence of the COVID-19 virus as a pandemic, and actions taken by the Commonwealth and State Governments to contain its spread through restrictions on international and domestic travel and imposition of social distancing in public places, Australian higher education providers had to rapidly transition their teaching programs to online or remote learning and assessment if their students' participation and progress were not to be disrupted. This report presents the outcomes of Phase 1 of a Student Experience of Online Learning Quality Project initiated by TEQSA to understand the nature of the experience of students in this transition phase of the response in higher education to the COVID-19 crisis. It is a high level study of the impact of the rapid shift to remote teaching and learning and consists of a thematic analysis of the results of various surveys submitted to TEQSA by registered higher education providers in Australia.

The study shows that a great deal of effort was put into making the transition to online or remote learning as good as possible and that this was recognised and greatly appreciated by students. While the information forwarded by the providers was overwhelmingly positive, a significant percentage of survey respondents indicated that they did not wish to continue with remote study and wished to return to a face-to-face experience as soon as possible.

The characteristics of what worked well identified in the summary reports are relatively few with the following being the most common ones mentioned:

- flexible access to materials, including early availability of lecture and tutorial questions
- good access to academic help and advice online, with many staff making extra 'online' time available for discussion groups or to answer individual students' questions
- the technology used made it easier for the students to learn.

These each represent between 20 per cent and 25 per cent of summary responses provided.

Other multiple positive responses from students included:

- the capacity to manage their own time better than in the face-to-face environment
- better learning outcomes (some reported improved retention in semester 1)
- flexibility with types and outcomes of assessment conducted online.

More detailed feedback was provided by students on what did not work well in the transition to online learning. There were 15 matters which appeared frequently as issues perceived as problems by students. Different issues were mentioned depending on the student profiles of particular types of providers.

Based on the frequency with which these themes were mentioned, the most critical issues needing to be addressed include:

- IT related issues
- academic interaction
- examinations
- staff expertise with using the IT applications
- academic issues associated with particular disciplines or type of study.

In addition, lack of access to libraries emerged as a significant concern to students. It appeared this was related to not having a quiet place to study but also contributed to the sense of isolation because libraries are now a major contributor to students' socialising with their peers. The expected health and well-being issues such as the economic impact of the virus on individuals' employment, housing and finances were evident in the survey responses but overall these were not mentioned as frequently as the above academic matters.

In summary, this phase of the Student Experience of Online Learning Quality Project has identified the main themes raised by students in adapting to an online learning regime as:

- reduced interaction with academic staff and peers
- difficulties with IT and variation in staff expertise in its use
- assessment changes
- isolation, lack of engagement and reduced motivation
- difficulty with the translation of some subject areas from an internal to an online mode of delivery.

Section 2 – Background

In mid-March 2020, in response to the increasing global health and economic catastrophes associated with the emergence of the COVID-19 virus as a pandemic, the Australian Government put in place national restrictions on entering the country from overseas and on social interaction in public areas, workplaces and educational institutions in Australia. The administration of the last three restrictions were the responsibility of the States.

Members of the population were required to exhibit social distancing in their interactions with other people. This had a significant impact on higher education, how teaching and learning could be undertaken, and on the flow of students from overseas countries to Australian higher education institutions. The specific responses to the establishment of these arrangements differed between States, depending on infection rates and arrangements for lockdown. The strict limitations on social interactions meant that higher education providers would need to modify their teaching and learning modes and transition from campus based to online teaching and learning extremely quickly. The vast majority of higher education providers managed to make these modifications to their teaching, support and assessment regimes, even in those cases where they had not previously engaged in online or remote education, and students had to adapt quickly to a quite different educational experience with much greater focus on online or remote learning. Because of the need for agility in these circumstances, the impact of the changes on higher education quality of content and delivery and the staff and students' experience is not known at this stage. TEQSA was keen to facilitate the process of transformation required for the rapid change and to ensure that higher education providers were supported as much as possible to maintain a high-quality learning experience for their students. Some data collection and research were, therefore, undertaken on what outcomes were achieved for students in the first six months of the new arrangements.

The first semester of tuition in Australian higher education institutions under the transition online learning arrangements has ended but, with second wave infections of COVID-19 and various degrees of lockdown in the different States, it is clear that the remote learning regimes put in place will need to continue for some time yet. It is also possible that some new opportunities to increase the use of online or blended learning may have been identified through these transitional experiences and so it is important for the sector to evaluate the success of what has been done and identify any improvements to the new delivery modes for the future.

Section 3 – TEQSA’s guidance and support

Early in the pandemic, TEQSA commissioned a number of reports on working online in higher education to assist staff with the transition. TEQSA has been undertaking work on trends towards online learning for several years. The TEQSA website (teqsa.gov.au/international-perspective) contains a range of information on online teaching activities and principles in place in a number of countries and international organisations prompted by the pandemic. Of particular interest to the Australian higher education sector is work done in Canada, which included a collection of curated materials to assist academic staff in teaching in the new environment, and in Ireland on making an assessment of the nature of the student experience of online learning. The Irish report provides a comprehensive preliminary analysis of information collected from the publicly funded higher education sector, further education and training organisations and private providers (the independent higher education sector) about the nature of the student experience during COVID-19. The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) undertook a survey of individual students and there is some detailed authoritative analysis of these responses which supplemented the summary survey and other initiatives undertaken by the groups of providers. The work undertaken by TEQSA at the summary levels is similar to that presented in the Irish report.

The research presented in this report has been undertaken in the context of these initiatives and the advice provided to the sector on maintaining quality assurance in the transition to online and remote learning. TEQSA was keen to assess how effective the rapid transition to online teaching and learning and different forms of assessment has been and what the student experience was of the changed arrangements.

The current research sets out a preliminary analysis of summary information submitted by registered higher education providers as at 18 November 2020.

Section 4 – TEQSA’s approach to the research

On 18 August 2020, TEQSA wrote to higher education providers requesting summary reports of their student experience surveys for semester 1, 2020 as part of Phase 1 of a Student Experience of Online Learning Quality Project. A follow-up request was made in September. TEQSA was interested in gaining a better understanding of student

perceptions and experience of online learning undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic and to see what students thought had been successful and what had not worked in the transition regime. Providers were asked to supply summary reports of any special surveys they had undertaken but were not required to conduct any new surveys.

The requirement, for health reasons, for a transfer of any face-to-face mode of teaching to universal online learning in higher education was very rapid, occurring in the middle of the first semester. For providers that were not previously involved in online education, this was a dramatic and fast change required at scale, which presented quite a challenge to both teaching staff and students.

The purpose of this project was to develop a thematic understanding of the experience of students with the recent shift to online learning. Summary reports were requested from registered face-to-face providers based on usual student surveys of learning and teaching experience undertaken as part of quality assurance processes within institutions. It was expected that these standard surveys might have been enhanced by asking additional questions specifically related to the experience of online learning but this was done to varying degrees. The approach taken and the way data was collected differs between providers, so direct comparisons between outcomes cannot easily be made. Some have asked no additional questions and used only changes in levels of student satisfaction from the 2019 results of student evaluations, or the QILT survey, as a surrogate for whether the different mode of study has impacted on the students' learning experience during COVID-19. In these cases, it is difficult to ascertain what has actually been done by the provider and what the students have thought of the specific changes that have been made. However, many providers, particularly the larger ones, have developed separate, more sophisticated survey instruments or additional sections in existing surveys and have explored a range of academic, support and welfare issues associated with the change in mode of delivery. The level of the analysis undertaken varies a great deal between providers, as does the focus. However, many of the summary reports contain quite specific detail about what aspects of online learning students found problematic and what aspects they thought were positive and contributed to their learning experience. Some of the providers used sophisticated analytical approaches (customer experience tracking) or focus groups to classify and interpret the many open-ended responses obtained through the surveys, which allowed the grouping of common comments into particular themes for discussion. Many providers used short pulse surveys to tease out areas of concern and these were often in the same format across the institutions (what worked, what didn't, and what needed to be changed or improved).

In addition to the survey outcomes, providers identified other initiatives of a practical and welfare nature that they had put in place to assist students during this time. These included supply of food parcels, supply of health products to combat the corona virus, lending providers' computers to students who didn't have adequate IT to participate online, and a number of dispensations about payment of fees and adjustments to assessment requirements. This overview report draws some conclusions about the positives and the commonality of issues reported by the providers and their students. Hopefully, this will enable TEQSA and the sector to develop new approaches and tools to support and improve the quality of online learning should there be a need for its continuation in a major way due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also important that the sector takes what it has learnt from the last six months and considers whether any of the changes made to mode of delivery and pedagogy should be continued in the longer-term post-pandemic as a way of improving the student experience.

What is clear, despite the variability in approach, is that almost all providers took the transition to online learning very seriously and were interested in finding out about their students' views of their learning experience. In general, the reaction of the providers and their students to what was done was positive and frequently views were expressed by students that they recognised how much effort had gone into the transition and were grateful that they didn't have to abandon their studies.

Section 5 - Methodology

Each of the summary responses supplied by providers (a total of 118 responses or 66 per cent of the 179 requested) was reviewed and the key positive and negative issues identified. These issues were classified in a spreadsheet under a range of common headings to see how frequently particular matters were mentioned. The incidence of the cells marked to identify that the issues have been mentioned forms a heat map on what students identified as the strengths and weaknesses of the online learning response.

Notes were made on each of the summary and detail reports submitted by the providers to assist in identifying similar concerns and satisfaction between the providers. In 2018, about 20 per cent of all students were already studying either externally or through blended learning, with an increased tendency to teach remotely in recent years. Providers teaching in these modes already would have had materials prepared for their students to use remotely and were generally better prepared with IT infrastructure to facilitate the students' learning. Hence, the challenge to rapidly adapt to a different pedagogy and delivery method at speed was not the same for all providers. On completion of the review, a frequency count on the number of mentions made of each issue in both the 'worked well' and 'didn't work' categories was used to identify which aspects of the transition were most supported and which areas gave rise to the least satisfaction during the transition period. The negative issues which had the highest frequency counts could be explored further in a universal survey of students conducted on a common basis, which would allow comparisons to be made between providers and the effectiveness of approaches used.

The analysis undertaken of the summary reports for this study was not sophisticated, and because of the difference in approaches used, meant that only broad themes could be identified. The reporting of the survey summary outcomes submitted by most providers is in the form of pdf documents and, while there is a broad degree of commonality in the questions asked, the reports are in various formats, conducted at different timepoints and do not enable detailed comparative analysis. Appendix 1 is a de-identified copy of this issues map. Some more detailed conclusions based on the findings of the individual providers are discussed below.

Section 6 – Analysis

6.1 Approach taken by the providers to the transition

In general, the providers adopted two broad types of IT tools to support student learning. Most employed the Learning Management Systems they already had in place for face-to-face and remote teaching for the delivery of content and tests online and augmented this with some form of collaborative or meeting tool to enable tutorial type discussion or demonstration of practical tasks depending on the disciplines being taught. Frequently, this was the use of Zoom (or equivalent) software to simulate face-to-face delivery of lectures and for conducting online tutorials and discussion sessions. The learning management systems were more familiar to students than the collaborative tools which tended to be commonly used in professional or commercial environments. There were a number of complaints from students about difficulties with having to learn new software tools such as Zoom to be able to communicate adequately with their teachers and peers and not finding the new software packages to their liking, but, generally, students were appreciative of the opportunity to have some form of virtual engagement with their teaching staff and fellow students. The limited range of scope of the electronic tools used during the transition is somewhat surprising given the large amount of resources that has been put into the development of learning management systems and online learning in the sector in the last fifteen years. The heavy reliance on the Zoom/Teams and other low cost software for delivering significant aspects of online learning during this transition period, even for providers with considerable experience in remote learning, is difficult to understand and raises questions about the quality of the sector's teaching and learning IT infrastructure.

The nature of assessment and examinations also needed to be changed in most cases, if these were offered online, to ensure that the appropriate linkages to learning outcomes were maintained. Many adjustments appear to have been made to timelines for assessment tasks and in some cases to the grading systems used. These are discussed in more detail under assessment issues below (section 7.3).

6.2 Diversity of student experience

Many of Australia's higher education providers are multi-campus and these are sometimes located in several States. Also, higher education providers which run offshore operations had a different set of issues to deal with for these campuses and were in countries with sometimes alternative approaches to Australia to addressing the coronavirus pandemic. Responses from these providers did not usually compare well with those from the providers which were running solely onshore higher education in a transitional regime concerned with issues typical of the Australian response to the pandemic. Because of this diversity in the sector and the broad nature of some of the survey questions used by providers, it was possible to get different opinions of the student experience under the same headings. For example, a campus in Western Australia might have a more positive view on an issue than one in Victoria because of the less stringent lockdown and transition arrangements put in place in Western Australia. Views of the student experience varied between campuses and the incidence of international students

on some of the overseas campuses. This was not highlighted if the summaries of the surveys were presented at the whole of institutional level but did show up when analyses were presented by campus or category of student, leading to apparently conflicting opinions between students. A very small number of providers reported that they had chosen not to transition to online study at all and some deferred studies for a semester in the hope that the teaching regime would revert to face-to-face due to the passing of the pandemic. Given worldwide resurgence of COVID in second waves of infection in recent weeks, and the imposition of lockdowns in a number of European and Asian countries, it appears unlikely that the need for transitioning to online learning will be over quickly in Australia, even with its relatively low levels of infection.

Similar apparent diversity of views was sometimes presented in the survey results within particular themes. This was often the case for opinions about IT issues. Students on a particular campus or in different disciplines in the same institution might have quite different views on how effective they found a new online approach, which was only revealed in the detailed analysis of their responses. If no subgroup analysis was presented in the summaries, it was sometimes difficult to tease out what the overall views actually represented. The general 'pulse' surveys undertaken which just asked for what worked and what didn't sometimes produced significant numbers of students opting for both types of responses and not a clear outcome for the organisation as a whole.

6.3 Positive views of students and staff – what worked well

As Appendix 1 shows, there was generally a lot of positiveness expressed and appreciation by students of the effort undertaken by academic and support staff to enable them to continue with their studies online instead of having to interrupt their courses because of COVID-19. Most surveys reviewed gave students the opportunity to comment on things they thought worked well and those they thought could be improved. Many of the surveys started with the basic student experience or the usual student evaluation surveys of teaching and subjects but with a small number of additional questions asked about the experience of transitional online learning needed to address COVID-19 issues. This said, a significant number of providers had developed quite specific surveys purely related to the online experience and many had undertaken extensive analysis and developed sophisticated reports on their students' experience. It is clear that the focus of most of the providers was first on the health and wellbeing of their students and staff and keeping the educational process working was a secondary concern.

The characteristics of what worked well identified in the summary reports are relatively few in number with the following being the most common ones mentioned:

- flexible access to materials, including early availability of lecture and tutorial questions (29 reports). Often students commented that they hoped such flexibility might continue after the return to face-to-face teaching
- good access to academic help and advice online with many staff making extra 'online' time available for discussion groups or to answer individual students' questions (29)
- the technology used made it easier for the students to learn (24).

These each represent between 20 per cent and 25 per cent of summary responses provided.

Other multiple positive responses from students included:

- the capacity to manage their own time better than in the face-to-face environment (16)
- better learning outcomes (some reported improved retention in semester 1), (10)
- flexibility with types and outcomes of assessment conducted online (9).

Initiatives also mentioned which were considered by students to have been beneficial were:

- scaled up academic support for students put in place for the duration of the semester
- providers loaning old IT equipment to students to work on at home
- staff keeping a closer watch on LMS activity to review progress than in previous face-to-face teaching
- access to additional financial aid for students
- reduced international fees.

Many of the providers' special or pulse surveys about the student experience, which were new or added to the questions in the student evaluation of teaching and units (SETU), were focused on what had **not** been successful or on what could be improved and so attracted a greater number of negative responses than positive comments and, in this way, the results of this analysis may have been biased towards trying to identify areas for improvement.

In addition, in spite of the overall positive response and appreciation by students of effort made to transition to remote learning, a very large proportion of respondents in the various surveys commented that they did not like the experience of online learning and did not wish to ever experience it again. In many cases, these proportions of disaffected students were between 33 per cent and 50 per cent of respondents. These are large numbers across the sector and present a problem if the transition to online study must remain well into 2021.

6.4 Negatives – what didn't work well

The following table shows the broad themes which were regularly mentioned in the summary responses of providers. There were 15 key issues which appeared frequently as issues where things did not work well or were perceived as problems by students. The most frequently mentioned were (see next page):

Table 1: Things which did not work well and number of mentions in the summary surveys

Issue	Number of mentions by providers in summary reports	% of responses
Lack of engagement	34	29
Lack of/ inadequate academic interaction	40	34
Lack of/insufficient peer interaction	34	29
Access to services	18	15
Assessment type and arrangements	35	30
IT problems	48	41
Housing/home environment	18	15
Finance	18	15
Isolation	18	15
Job loss	8	7
Mental health	19	16
Subject matter issues	33	28
Staffing resources and expertise	30	25
Online workload	27	23
Personal time management/ motivation	16	14

These are issues which might provide opportunity for improvement in the approach used in coming teaching periods. Different issues were mentioned depending on the student profiles of particular types of providers. For example, the nature of the home environment was an issue for groups of students at providers with a lower socio-economic status (SES) profile, where it was important for the students to replace the quiet study spaces available in their HEP in a face-to-face teaching mode which had been lost due the COVID-19 restrictions. This was less of an issue for students enrolled in most universities, and when it was, it was seen in those regional or rural universities known to have a low SES or indigenous student profile.

Based on the frequency with which these themes were mentioned, the most critical issues needing to be addressed include IT issues, academic interaction, examinations, staff expertise and academic issues associated with particular disciplines or type of study. The detailed aspects of these concerns are discussed below, grouped into the thematic areas of teaching and learning and professional accreditation; assessment and academic integrity; IT issues; and student welfare and wellbeing.

Section 7 – Detailed findings: issues needing to be addressed

7.1 Teaching and Learning

7.1.1 Engagement and interaction

The key negative issues mentioned about the academic experience of the students included the level of engagement the students felt in their new experience. It was reported many times that the duration of classes in the transitional online mode was less than for face-to-face instruction as well as a tendency of many providers to reschedule classes when they moved content to online mode, causing disruption to students' schedules. The students reported that this was unsettling and led a number to comment that they didn't think they were getting 'value for money' by receiving tuition in the online mode. This in turn led to requests for refunds of fees even though the students had been able to complete the units online under the original timeframe. This was particularly the view of overseas students who had changed their mode of study under the more flexible arrangements allowed by the Government in relation to online or remote learning.

The most common area of complaint about online teaching and learning was that there was insufficient engagement with teaching and tutoring staff and that much more interaction with individual students was expected than had occurred. Many students commented that they missed the informal interaction with lecturers before or after lectures and tutorials that often occurred when they were studying face-to-face. Suggestions were made about broadening interaction on Zoom, or similar software, so that these previous one on one interactions could be mirrored virtually to allow greater informal interaction. Students also generally considered that they were more reliant on getting feedback from teaching staff than in their previous mode of study and advocated for more timely interaction and feedback from staff on work submitted electronically. The survey responses suggested that not all staff were equally committed to assisting students and in a few providers students felt that staff 'did not care' about the plight students found themselves in due to the pandemic.

Although there was opportunity for students to interact with their peers through classes and in the smaller tutorial or practical groups run through the LMSs or the collaborative software, they generally did not regard this type of contact as equivalent to meeting informally on campus with friends and colleagues. It was this deficiency in terms of student to student interaction that was linked to students feeling isolated and not enjoying the online experience, indicating that a lot of the students who did not wish to continue with online study were alienated by the absence of the campus based social experience, rather than difficulties with online learning per se. These responses also linked to concerns expressed about not being able to meet in the libraries of their institutions. This is discussed further in section 7.1.4.

7.1.2 Staff skills and development

With one exception about the lack of synchronisation of what was presented by lecturers on Powerpoint slides and what was being presented verbally in lectures on Zoom,

students were not critical about the quality of what was put on line in the transitional regime. In a small number of cases, students did express views about some of the staff needing development in how to present content and to use the IT capabilities effectively in this environment. Staff members need to ensure that they can capitalise on the strengths of the IT environment in their provider and to understand the importance of good communication in the new teaching regime. Many providers indicated that they had developed specialised development programs for staff who were teaching online for the first time to try and optimise the quality of the student experience and to ensure that the achievement of learning outcomes associated with the face-to-face teaching of subjects was not compromised. However, it was not possible to measure the impact of such programs or assess whether they were effective in improving the skills of staff in teaching online. Also, the scope of the brief of this project was to gauge how the student experience had been impacted by moving to an online environment because of COVID-19 and was not focused on staff and their development.

7.1.3 Online student workload and related issues

In most providers, students claimed that the transition to online learning had increased their workloads. There was nothing to suggest that the content had increased but it was possibly the extra skills students had to learn to handle the online material and the new forms of IT software that gave the impression of a heavier workload. A rather surprising outcome was also students reporting that they had much more difficulty managing their own time and workload than if they were studying face-to-face on campus. The feelings of isolation and lack of interaction with peers in the online environment no doubt contributed to this sense that they were on their own in managing their studies. The usual interactions and discussions that they would have in workspaces with fellow students were no longer available to make them feel comfortable about where they were positioned compared with their colleagues in relation to their study load. It did appear to be a common view for many student cohorts. In many cases, they reported feeling unmotivated in relation to their studies when this had not been a problem previously.

7.1.4 Library access

A complaint that was frequently made by groups in the surveys was that students were unable to access the library on their campus due to the lockdown conditions in the various States. The issue here was less about access to library materials than the fact that the libraries provide two major benefits: being a quiet place to study away from the increasingly congested home environment during lockdown; and libraries now being major places of student social interaction where work is also discussed.

In relation to access to readings and materials in the libraries, a number of providers reported that they were digitising some of the materials and distributing electronic copies of papers or chapters of books to ensure that students had access to a similar breadth of publications than in the face-to-face mode. This was no doubt helpful to students but did not seem to be at the core of the concerns about access to the libraries. It appears that the access issue links more to student isolation and lack of motivation reported in other parts of the surveys.

7.1.5 Subject matter issues and professional accreditation

There was significant reporting of issues associated with online learning for particular disciplines. Some of these issues were also mentioned in the context of professional accreditation. The main areas where it was considered that the breadth of exposure to

particular professional skills and practice was inferior to being involved in a face-to-face class included:

- music practice and performance – the difficulty in practising orchestral or other performance pieces with other students and performing in choral groups using Zoom or its equivalents
- art (including sculpture, painting and other visual arts) – problems with uploading visual displays of works of art and other educational artefacts
- engineering and science practicals which require laboratory spaces that are not easy to simulate in a virtual environment
- internships which could not be run as they would in a face-to-face mode of learning either on- or off-campus
- capstone subjects which cover a range of topics and were intended to bring together materials from various components of a course. These were usually outside of the conventional subject structures
- teaching quantitative studies such as mathematics and physics over Zoom and difficulties with visual representation of symbols and equations.

The concerns varied between the disciplines. Some examination of the ways that experienced remote education providers teach these types of disciplines online should mean that these problems are not insurmountable and could be addressed if the transition period is extended. Some issues about ownership of Art uploaded onto the online system was a concern to one group of students.

7.1.6 Research degree study and the difficulties of maintaining momentum with research

All of the survey reports reviewed were about the experiences of coursework students but two universities reported that there were concerns of their research higher degree students about the impact the COVID pandemic was having on their research and the difficulties in maintaining momentum in their projects. There were also issues raised about access to laboratories and technicians on university campuses which meant, in some cases, interruptions to projects and delays in getting results. This was less of an issue for arts, humanities and social sciences students except for access to library resources but these could mostly be accessed from home or other locations using research catalogues in the libraries. This issue of research progress needs to be examined more fully with research students in a more targeted way.

7.2 IT issues

IT issues were reported with the greatest frequency of any of the concerns canvassed by the surveys conducted by the providers. The matters causing difficulty range from access to adequate computing equipment to having to learn new software and collaboration techniques associated with Zoom or its equivalents, to slow internet speeds at home compared with what would be available on campus in face-to-face experiences. Some students complained about audio quality of the lectures and tutorials and having difficulty with the quality and age of some of the lecture recordings. A degree of frustration was reported with the tendency for many lecturers to deliver the lectures over Zoom and require the students to sit and listen to them in real time rather than pre-recording them

and allowing students to access them in their own time. There were also numerous complaints about the intensity of the Zoom sessions with requests for better scheduling and the elimination of very long periods with no breaks.

There were two surprising and somewhat disturbing issues which were reported in several surveys which did not occur in previous face-to-face study. These involved students' reluctance to use the video in Zoom (or equivalent) sessions and relying only on the audio component. This was because some students did not wish to show their colleagues the interiors of their homes because they were concerned about the physical contents and appearance and also the presence of family members because of the lockdown which had led to the transition to online education. The second aspect was a reluctance of many students to 'perform' at tutorials and other discussions while being filmed or recorded as part of the collaborative technology. Removing the video component reduced the benefit to the student and sometimes led to complaints about the adequacy of the audio quality. It also appeared as if some students' behaviour was not appropriate for the online conduct of discussions and several surveys concluded that there should be development of a protocol for participation in online discussion groups so that the experience was not harmed by the presence of other noisy and disruptive students. Again, no doubt rules of engagement have been developed by experienced remote education providers which could be shared with those experiencing these difficulties for the first time.

7.3 Assessment and academic integrity

In addition to changing the nature of content and delivery of subjects being transitioned to online learning, it was necessary for providers to change the way subjects were assessed in the new regime.

A variety of different approaches were used which included changing the nature of the assessment tasks from those used in on-campus learning; replacing examinations with more continuous assessment tasks; and engaging in examinations remotely using electronic proctoring to ensure academic integrity was being upheld. This new approach attracted the greatest amount of criticism with students believing their privacy was being invaded. TEQSA has recently commissioned a [paper on electronic proctoring](#) which will explore this issue further.

Other interventions included shortening examinations, as well as adjustments to the grading scheme to record only pass/fail results and eliminating the use of GPA calculations in some providers. The greater use of regular short tests was also reported, making use of the capabilities of the learning management systems and automated marking. Some providers reported pressure from student groups to reduce requirements for examinations and previously agreed forms of assessment. Because assessment is so closely related to the attainment of prescribed learning outcomes, some of the adjustments made have the potential to impact on the quality assurance arrangements for both the course and its subjects which have been presented in accreditation and registration documents. The adjustments made and student learning outcomes achieved should be examined further.

Much has been written and discussed about the likelihood of an increase in threats to academic integrity and how contract cheating may become more prevalent with less face-to-face contact with students but this has not emerged as a key concern in the

survey reports forwarded by the providers. A comment made by staff in reports, and by students, related to the transition to online learning was about how to assess individual students' contributions to group projects and how this could be appropriately monitored when the contributions were not as obvious when activity was being recorded through Zoom or its equivalent.

In addition, in some providers the challenge of learning differently in this period has led to expressed dis-satisfaction by some groups of international students with assessment and support provided, and to questioning whether the teaching has to be in English. Complaints have also been made about the quality of teaching materials, which are independent of new delivery mechanisms. These are matters of some concern as they suggest approaches to teaching and assessment which would possibly not comply with approaches approved in accreditation and registration applications.

7.4 Student welfare and wellbeing

The impacts on students' welfare and support from COVID-19 and the transition to online learning were commonly reported as:

- reduced access to services and support on campus with many staff in these groups working from home during lockdown periods
- loss of housing due to economic problems
- job loss due to lockdown and lack of government support for higher education students
- impaired financial position because of losing employment due to the recession
- requests for reduction in fees, particularly from international students who had lost casual employment during the pandemic
- problems with mental health – anxiety and motivation problems
- isolation in situations where the students were trying to deal with these problems.

Providers have been innovative in adapting many of the support services previously offered on-campus to the students now studying online using IT solutions. These have provided ongoing assistance to students concerned about their health and wellbeing and in the surveys students have expressed appreciation of this.

7.5 Other conclusions involving interpretation of responses

There is some evidence in the summary reports about the differential impact of COVID-19 and the shift to remote study on low SES, rural and Indigenous students of the COVID-19 lockdowns. In particular, the health and wellbeing impacts listed above relating to job loss, financial difficulties and problems securing a satisfactory study location with the shutdown of higher education campuses and libraries are more evident in some providers than in others. This is also seen in the university surveys for regional and remote campuses or for those with a known higher proportion of disadvantaged or mature students. These students often mention busy and distracting housing arrangements; missing access to campus resources; the presence of children and other family members at home; and so forth. These disruptions are not often mentioned in the larger more elite universities.

Issues relating to greater difficulties in managing online learning by students with disabilities have been raised in general discussions about the sector but these have not been mentioned in the providers' summary reports. ADCET, the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, has independently undertaken some research on how students with disability have coped with the new online teaching regime, and have identified a range of issues.

Some providers did analyses by equity group on differences observed in levels of satisfaction in responses to the surveys but these did not reveal major differences in opinion by equity groups and the broad student population.

Section 8 – Examples of good practice in the transition to online learning

The majority of providers have produced very extensive and thoughtful reports about the transition to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As has been shown in this discussion, there are several overarching themes which have been reported by high proportions of providers which bear further exploration.

The rather loose wording of some of the findings and the lack of much quantitative information in this report is the result of the plethora of different approaches taken to the surveys and their analysis. The summaries submitted by providers are not consistent enough to enable rigorous identification of good practice in online learning to be made at this stage but there are some examples of good practice in the way students have been surveyed and the results analysed in this transition period. Many providers did more than just report the results of the various surveys they undertook by considering actions they needed to take to address the areas for improvement identified. In this way, through the development of action plans and looking forward to next steps, they were exhibiting strong quality assurance approaches and identifying risks in the way they were adapting to the COVID-19 environment. The examples included summary analysis and reporting from both universities and higher education providers and showed innovative presentation of the results of the surveys.

Section 9 – Next steps

This phase of the Student Experience of Online Learning Quality Project has identified the main themes raised by students in adapting to an online learning regime as:

- reduced interaction with academic staff and peers
- difficulties with IT and variation in staff expertise in its use
- assessment changes
- isolation, lack of engagement and motivation
- difficulty with the translation of some subject areas from an internal to an online mode of delivery.

It would be beneficial for further work in some of these areas to be done if the need for ongoing use of online teaching and assessment continues and its efficacy is to be demonstrated. A more concrete analysis than has been possible here could be provided by either conducting a new sector-wide survey of a sample of students over all providers, or to repeat what has been done in this thematic study but with a more structured approach to the type and content of surveys that might be conducted by the providers, focusing on the above thematic issues.

In this context it should be noted that some useful questions related to the COVID-19 responses have been added to the QUILT student experience survey this year.

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Appendix 1 – Mapping of survey results by providers and issues identified, semester 1, 2020

Provider	What worked - positives						Issues - what didn't work																
	Flexible access to materials	Able to manage own time better	Good access to academic help and advice	Technology helped them to learn	Positive academic outcomes (eg retention)	Assessment approach	Lack of engagement	Academic interaction	Peer interaction	Access to services	Assessment type	IT problems	Housing	Finance	Isolation	Job loss	Mental health	Subject matter issues	Staffing resources/ expertise	Online workload	Time management / motivation	Research degree study	
1								x	x		x	x			x		x	x					
2								x	x	x		x		x	x	x							
3																							
4									x	x		x		x	x	x				x	x		
5								x	x											x			
6							x		x	x	x				x				x	x	x		
7								x	x		x			x		x	x	x (prac)					
8																							
9							x				x								x	x			
10							x		x									x					
11																							
12							x		x	x	x		x	x			x		x		x	x	
13																							
14											x			x									
15	x										x	x					x		x		x		
16				x				x	x		x		x				x		x	x			

Provider	What worked - positives						Issues - what didn't work																
	Flexible access to materials	Able to manage own time better	Good access to academic help and advice	Technology helped them to learn	Positive academic outcomes (eg retention)	Assessment approach	Lack of engagement	Academic interaction	Peer interaction	Access to services	Assessment type	IT problems	Housing	Finance	Isolation	Job loss	Mental health	Subject matter issues	Staffing resources/ expertise	Online workload	Time management / motivation	Research degree study	
17		x		x		x			x	x		x										x	
18		x		x								x											
19							x		x		x												
20				x		x		x											x				
21							x																
22		x	x							x													
23																							
24							x	x	x			x											
25	x		x					x		x												x	
26			x				x				x	x			x		x					x	
27			x					x		x								x					
28		x	x						x			x											
29																							
30																							
31			x			x		x															
32	x									x							x		x	x			

Provider	What worked - positives						Issues - what didn't work																
	Flexible access to materials	Able to manage own time better	Good access to academic help and advice	Technology helped them to learn	Positive academic outcomes (eg retention)	Assessment approach	Lack of engagement	Academic interaction	Peer interaction	Access to services	Assessment type	IT problems	Housing	Finance	Isolation	Job loss	Mental health	Subject matter issues	Staffing resources/ expertise	Online workload	Time management / motivation	Research degree study	
33																							
34																							
35																							
36	x						x	x	x		x	x	x					x	x	x	x		
37			x					x	x		x							x					
38								x	x		x												
39																							
40	x						x	x	x		x	x	x					x		x	x		
41							x	x			x	x	x					x	x				
42		x						x	x									x					
43	x		x					x			x	x						x		x			
44					x																		
45	x			x					x								x (nursing)						
46	x			x			x				x												
47	x	x	x	x																			
48							x				x		x	x			x	x		x	x		

Provider	What worked - positives						Issues - what didn't work																
	Flexible access to materials	Able to manage own time better	Good access to academic help and advice	Technology helped them to learn	Positive academic outcomes (eg retention)	Assessment approach	Lack of engagement	Academic interaction	Peer interaction	Access to services	Assessment type	IT problems	Housing	Finance	Isolation	Job loss	Mental health	Subject matter issues	Staffing resources/ expertise	Online workload	Time management / motivation	Research degree study	
65																							
66	x						x			x								x	x				
67			x	x			x	x		x	x												
68			x	x														x		x	x		
69	x		x											x									
70																							
71	x	x			x	x		x	x					x				x			x		
72	x			x				x											x				
73	x	x	x																	x			
74				x																			
75	x		x	x	x - repat					x				x			x						
76			x		x																		
77				x									x						x	x	x		
78			x	x						x (lib)									x				
79											x		x					x (music)	x				
80	x			x							x		x						x				

Provider	What worked - positives						Issues - what didn't work															
	Flexible access to materials	Able to manage own time better	Good access to academic help and advice	Technology helped them to learn	Positive academic outcomes (eg retention)	Assessment approach	Lack of engagement	Academic interaction	Peer interaction	Access to services	Assessment type	IT problems	Housing	Finance	Isolation	Job loss	Mental health	Subject matter issues	Staffing resources/ expertise	Online workload	Time management / motivation	Research degree study
81																	x (Eng)					
82																x	x	x				
83	x						x		x									x				
84																			x	x		
85										x	x						x					
86	x			x			x		x		x		x				x	x	x			x (Hons)
87	x	x	x		x		x	x	x			x										
88																						
89			x	x							x											
90	x	x					x	x	x			x										
91			x			x	x					x						x (place	x	x		
92						x													x			
93																						
94			x		x							x		x	x				x	x		
95	x	x	x	x			x		x		x								x			
96								x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x					

Provider	What worked - positives						Issues - what didn't work															
	Flexible access to materials	Able to manage own time better	Good access to academic help and advice	Technology helped them to learn	Positive academic outcomes (eg retention)	Assessment approach	Lack of engagement	Academic interaction	Peer interaction	Access to services	Assessment type	IT problems	Housing	Finance	Isolation	Job loss	Mental health	Subject matter issues	Staffing resources/ expertise	Online workload	Time management / motivation	Research degree study
113							x	x	x		x				x		x	x	x			
114											x											
115							x	x			x	x						x	x			
116							x			x		x						x				
117							x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x						
118			x			x				x	x	x										
	29	16	29	24	11	9	34	40	34	18	35	48	18	18	18	8	19	33	30	27	16	2

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