

Lessons Learnt From the 2020 COVID-19 Lockdown: Case Study of an Online Students' MS Teams Project

Leigh Quadling-Miernik

New Zealand

kiwileigh.nz@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper outlines an investigation of the impact of *Students Online*, a programme that was created in Microsoft (MS) Teams during New Zealand's level 4 lockdown of March-May 2020. *Students Online* was developed by the Learning Hub, the learning support centre for a large tertiary institution in response to an international student's request for a way for students to meet and practise English. The study aimed to investigate the experiences of those who engaged with the *Students Online* programme and derive implications for possible future improvement. Participants were drawn from Learning Hub staff and students who interacted within the programme. Offering focused learning support as well as sessions about life in New Zealand, the most significant benefit of *Students Online* was the overall sense of togetherness at a time when many aspects of life were disconnected. Other benefits highlighted by participants included improved communication between students and the Learning Hub, offering a "mental release" during the day, building relationships, and enhancing the institute's value as supportive. This study found that the *Students Online* programme was considered generally useful and successful, and provides suggested modifications for similar such programmes in future.

Keywords: Learning support; MS Teams; pandemic; lockdown; Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about much change across the world since its initial outbreak in early 2020, not only within education but across many sectors of society including economic (Padhan & Prabheesh, 2021), societal (British Academy,

2021; Politico, 2020), environmental (Dartnell, 2020; Ju et al., 2021), and health sectors (Vargo et al., 2020). While much has been written about the challenges, responses, and future-focused actions, this case study outlines the set-up and experience of *Students Online*, a programme set up on MS Teams within a large tertiary private training establishment, in order to support students during lockdown.

At the end of 2019, news around the world started discussing the emergence of a virus (Coronavirus disease 2019/COVID-19, or SARS-CoV-2) within the Republic of China, whose central Government took the action of a severe lockdown in Wuhan province on January 23, 2020, which was quickly followed by the declaration of a global pandemic in March 11th 2020 (World Health Organisation, 2021). In response, educational institutes around the world closed face-to-face instruction for all students and made the rapid switch to emergency remote online teaching/learning (ERT). New Zealand's students in early childcare centres through to tertiary institutions, along with the estimated 1.5 billion learners in 165 countries (UNESCO, 2020), stayed home and shifted their learning online.

The Learning Hub, the learning centre for a large tertiary institution in New Zealand, was established in January 2020, and at the time of the Covid-19 outbreak was in the early stages of combining the separate study skills and library services into a modern learning support centre. Usually the institution had around 95% international students, and the projections for 2020 were just over 1,000 students starting in Trimester 1, increasing to a total of nearly 1,2000 students by the end of the year. Relationships with teaching staff and students were being built and topical online resources were being developed. Staff were forming as a team and the space was being reorganised into a warm inviting space for students, with access to all learning support services and resources. In response to the national lockdown and shift to online learning, the Learning Hub supported students and teaching staff with training and documentation on the tools the institute would be using. When lockdown in New Zealand began on March 25, 2020, the Learning Hub communicated to all students where they could find e-learning support online, offered workshops through MS Teams, and provided email guidance on where to find help on Moodle. In addition, a practice MS Team was set up for those students wanting to learn more about the app they would be using for their

classes. In response to this information, a student emailed on April 9, 2020, with this request:

“Could you create a Team’s general group with people mentioned? It is a useful way to be in touch and to practice real English. Do you think that this could be possible?”

This student was not alone in their desire. This request coincided with the Learning Hub having a large number of interactions with students and noticing their strong need to engage with others online. It was at this point the Learning Hub team discussed the idea of setting up the *Students Online* MS Team programme. The programme’s goal was to create a space for students to use as a “community of learning”. The following email from a staff member on April 15, 2020, sets out the basic concept of the programme:

“[as a] learning space to communicate, post questions, and we can schedule ‘live’ meeting times (once per day - 30 or 60 mins) where one of us is there to engage with [students], share learning support resources, tips and answer their questions, including pastoral care/life quality ones. ...For example, we could ask students to each post short intro about themselves, who they are, where they are coming from, their previous study experience and personal corona-isolation tips, how they experience New Zealand, etc.

This is just an idea ... It may be popular with students, and then, it may not...For them to engage, there will have to be arranged activities, tasks to promote networking and foster ... community ... something like that.”

From this point, the idea quickly developed into reality, with the Learning Hub staff enthusiastic to provide this service; it was an opportunity to ‘meet’ students, albeit remotely. The planned format of this MS Teams online learning space was as follows:

- Daily meetings, 2.30-3.30 pm, to allow English language students to join after class.
- All students invited, regardless of programme.
- A single coordinator each day; however, any one of the other coordinators could join and support.
- A coordinator would be either from the Learning Hub or one of the students involved.
- One-hour meetings loosely based on a schedule of pre-determined topics (see Table 1).

- Clearly stated guidelines for operating in the MS Team to ensure everyone respected the space and each other.
- Should conversations go off-topic, leeway would be allowed, but if any pastoral issues arose, notes would be taken and emailed immediately to Student Support Manager.

Table 1.*Students Online MS Teams Schedule*

Week 1	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Monday				
<i>Staff member 1</i>	<i>Staff member 1</i>	<i>Staff member 2</i>	<i>Staff member 2</i>	<i>Staff member 3 plus guest speaker</i>
Who are we and what is our purpose here	Studying online - hints, tips, experiences, Q&A	Surviving lockdown – hints, tips, experiences, Q&A	Weekend events to get involved in	Post lockdown – where to go in NZ for a great time. Sharing experiences and advice.
Week 2	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Monday				
<i>Staff member 1</i>	<i>Staff member 1</i>	<i>Staff member 2</i>	<i>Staff member 2</i>	<i>Staff member 3</i>
NZ movies/tv to find and watch. How they help you understand life in NZ	Facing assessment - hints, tips, experiences, Q&A	Skills beyond content knowledge – Q&A on academic support	Aunt Daisy time – free chat about anything.	Weekend events to get involved in
Week 3	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Monday				
<i>Staff member 1</i>	<i>Staff member 1 plus guest speaker</i>	<i>Staff member 2</i>	<i>Student 1</i>	<i>Staff member 3</i>
Recorded presentation	What shall I study next?"	Skills beyond content knowledge – Q&A on academic support	How to prepare for the future in New Zealand” Practicalities of living in NZ	Weekend events to get involved in

Three and a half weeks after lockdown started, the *Students Online MS Team* was in place and on April 17 it was announced via email to all students, including details on where to find the team, meeting times, and the schedule of topics for the first two weeks.

No one had to be responsible for enrolling the students; all the students needed to do was join the *Students Online* MS Team. Students were also free to join on the day or not, and to come and go within the time period, and classmates of existing members were encouraged to join. All communication from the Learning Hub staff conveyed the message that it would be a great idea to join, promising ‘no pressure, just fun’. This paper reports on the evaluation of the *Students Online* MS Team initiative.

Research Questions

The following questions were designed to inform management on the success of the project:

1. What were the experiences of those who engaged with the online support programme?
2. What implications can we derive from this experience to improve future programmes?

Literature Review

The switch to emergency online learning during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is not the first time online learning during a crisis has created opportunities to change and deliver instruction, as well as provide emotional support and connection to domestic or international tertiary students. For example, in the United States of America, an online initiative was created to support higher education students to continue their studies after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (Lorenzo, 2008), which had forced institutes in the affected areas to close temporarily. This project, the Sloan Semester, was developed by passionate educators, with the goal of supporting students to continue in their education; as a side result, the project created a sense of connection. Likewise, student protests and university shutdowns in South Africa during 2015-2017 saw some institutes turn to online and blended learning to enable students to continue their education. While not directly relating specifically to emotional support, these examples highlight how technology can be used to support students to continue their studies during times of disruption (Czerniewicz et al., 2019).

Recent research has begun exploring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students’ wellbeing. Firang (2020) examined how the pandemic impacted on international students in Canada in order to understand how social workers could better

support this group. Holzweiss et al. (2020) investigated the crisis response to Hurricane Harvey in Texas and suggested that a ‘crisis team’ be created within institutes to develop strategies for various scenarios. Although the crisis team’s focus would be on academic issues, the authors recommended involving a “member of the student affairs” (p. 33) for support with non-academic needs. During Queensland Australia’s lockdown in 2020, the School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University phoned each international student with a set of questions to determine the level of support required. This response highlighted the need for resources such as food banks, religious centres, and ways to access financial support (Gallagher et al., 2020). As students and staff worked through this social work case management project, trust slowly grew and led to improved connections.

Providing avenues of support at such times, particularly for international students, is the responsibility of the institution, as laid down in New Zealand’s Education (Pastoral Care of International Students) Code of Practice (Outcome 7): “Signatories must ensure that international students are fully informed about relevant advice and services to support their educational outcomes” (New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA], 2016). The 2019 amendment to Outcome 7 also requires institutions to provide international students with information and advice on how to adjust to the different cultural environment in New Zealand.

The pandemic has made the issue of pastoral care even more pressing. The evidence of past management of student learning and support systems during a crisis is clear. This investigation into how the *Students Online* MS Team is seen as an addition to these approaches of learning support.

Methodology

The study was undertaken at a large tertiary institution in New Zealand and adopted a case study approach. This approach allowed the event of the MS Team to be studied within a real-life context. The researcher received approval to conduct a qualitative research study, based on interviews around a set of questions. A qualitative approach was chosen over quantitative one as it provided the opportunity to explore answers about participants’ experiences at the time of their interview.

Participants

The *Students Online* MS Team involved around 50 students and the Learning Hub staff. A call for participants was made through MS Teams and respondents were contacted to arrange an interview. Altogether only four participants were willing to be interviewed to share their perspectives of the *Students Online* programme: the three Learning Hub staff members, and one student who had attended *Students Online* daily.

Data Collection

An open-ended set of questions (Table 2) was created to allow a flow of conversation around the central topics of the *Students Online* programme and benefits of participating in the regular meetings. Future considerations about the *Students Online* programme were also sought.

Table 2.

Interview Questions

Opening questions:	How did you know about the meetings? How often did you attend the meetings? Why did you attend? What topics did you join in on?
Overall impressions	In your opinion, what benefits did the <i>Students Online</i> MS Team provide for students (not just you)? ... and for staff?
Future	How would you change the experience you had with the Team? What changes would you like to see should this online Team be required again?

All interviews were recorded using MS Teams, and MS Stream was used to produce an electronic transcript. Manual adjustments were made to the transcripts upon review by the researcher.

Data analysis

All interviews were systematically listened to and the transcripts read several times to identify common themes. These themes were then categorised, and a further review of transcripts ensured aspects were linked within categories.

Reliability

In order to protect reliability, participant checking was used. This involved sending the draft of the article to the participants to check that they agreed with how their responses were recorded. Necessary adjustments were to be made should any discrepancies be noted; however, none were needed.

Ethical issues

The proposal for this study was submitted to and approved by the research committee at the institution where this programme operated. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that the data provided would be kept confidential and anonymous.

Results

This case study investigated an online MS Teams programme set up to support students during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Although the original goal had been to trial the project for a 6-month period, after lockdown (May/June 2020) it was clear from the offset that everyone had returned quickly to a semi-normal routine. Lockdown levels 2 and 1 saw students returning to school, coming and going in classes in person, and generally patterns to life returned. Therefore, the online programme ended and replaced with causal meet-ups in the Learning Hub. However, despite the shorter-than-expected timeframe of *Students Online*, the case study found the programme had a number of benefits for its participants. Four key findings emerged from this study; they linked with each other but were distinct in terms of participants' perceptions:

1. Connection
2. Relationship building
3. Opportunities for communication
4. Institutional value

When talking to participants about their experiences, a significant theme was the idea of connection. The *Students Online* programme created a connection during a time where many things were disconnected. Joining in with friends created a sense of normality and provided a supportive environment, in line with one of the institute's value statements: "It is important that you feel confident and comfortable while you are studying – especially if you are a long way from home" (AIS, n.d.).

“It provided a platform where [students] connected regardless of what programme they are in, regardless of which courses they are doing at the moment” (Participant 3).

“It was nice to see people [and] talk to people outside of your bubble, even though you were in a bubble” (Participant 4).

For the learning support staff involved, the *Students Online* programme helped them build relationships with the students. This finding was seen across all Learning Hub staff. The Learning Hub was in its early stages of development, unknown as an entity within the institute, so to be part of students’ lives for an hour, daily, was an opportunity to do the Hub’s work, provide services in a different way, and be working with students.

“In situations like this [the lockdown] they really need support, more than what they otherwise need” (Participant 2).

Participants commented that the regular meetings were a “mental release”, “real but removed”, and “like working but in a different manner”. Working and studying during a lockdown was a new experience for all, with Learning Hub colleagues wondering how to support students while at home and distant from the on-campus space where the Learning Hub services usually occurred and with the students studying far from their homelands and their classroom environment. Perhaps most importantly, as expressed by Participant 2:

“the whole idea of a lockdown was an uncomfortable situation. There is a lot of nervousness, a lot of anxiety, so this is a little bit of normality in their life”.

Therefore, a benefit of the project was building relationships with and supporting students during a period when life was uncertain. Another benefit of these regular meetings was the opportunity to create a flow of communication. Not only did *Students Online* provide a chance for students to practise English, but the programme also provided opportunities to discuss educational and personal issues. The Learning Hub staff were able to check in on the students help them understand the lockdown rules and extend this understanding to living in New Zealand. Meetings covered topics ranging from study aspects to life aspects. Each *Students Online* member could give advice and comment on points raised, from small things such as how to reference within

an assignment to larger questions such as what parts of the North Island would be good for an after-lockdown holiday. This flexibility fostered ongoing engagement:

“We couldn’t keep the students quiet. They were all ‘What about this area? What about here?’ The conversations just flowed” (Participant 4).

The *Online Students* programme was seen as an added value to the services already delivered by the institution, promoting the family feeling that the institute strives to achieve. The student interview participant commented that this programme could be used as a promotional or marketing tool. The staff at the institute are very conscious that international students are away from home and family support is sent from afar, and that building a sense of family within the institute is seen as a comfort for students. During the trimester, students usually meet other students and staff, see friendly faces, respond to the smiles around them and laugh and joke while playing table tennis in the café. However, during the lockdown, when everyone was isolating at home, this aspect of normalcy was missing. The *Students Online* programme provided a time to be ‘part of the school’.

“The main benefit, first of all, was to be in contact with the staff. To be part of the university or with the people who want to be part of this team” (Participant 1).

According to the participants’ responses in this study, *Students Online* provided not only academic learning support but also a space for emotional/friendly connection. This was at a time when students were potentially alone, far from family and friends, isolated in their homes, fearful about how this pandemic would develop, and confused and stressed about life in lockdown and how it would affect their studies. The informality of the daily meetings created an atmosphere where “it was like meeting friends in a café or pub, having a chat about life and study, and offering ideas to support each other” (Participant 4). The role of learning advisors helping to build connections for students beyond the academic setting was considerable.

Discussion

This case study of an online MS Teams programme set up to support students during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic reflects the experiences reported from the Sloan Semester (Lorenzo, 2008) and Griffith University (Gallagher et al., 2020): that is, that the online programmes created connections for students and provided a forum for

communication. The case study also highlighted the importance of offering an alternative method of reaching students alongside providing the core service of education, particularly during the lockdown period. As Firang's (2020) research highlighted, international students looked "to their universities for guidance and support" (p. 822) during the start of the pandemic. Furthermore, academic support and pastoral care both fall within the desired outcomes of the Education (Pastoral Care of International Students) Code of Practice (NZQA, 2016). The wide variety of topics that arose during the *Students Online* meetings meant that discussion was not purely focused on study; it also offered light relief in a potentially exhausting day. Topics covered not only study skills but also personal development and information on 'life things': for example, there was a weekly topic on living within New Zealand. For many international students, living in New Zealand required adjusting to a different cultural environment. Therefore, expanding topics beyond learning support helped create connections between Learning Hub staff and students, and also fulfilled the Code of Practice outcome.

Relationship building through trust and support was a common finding in both the literature and in this case study. Holzweiss et al. (2020) demonstrated that the combined efforts of the Online Support team not only kept students enrolled but created pride in the teamwork and to their commitment to their "students first" sentiment" (p. 32). Similarly, Gallagher et al.'s (2020) study showed that building trust between the School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University staff and the international students enabled barriers to be identified and solutions worked on. The *Students Online* meetings built students' understanding on the range of services the Learning Hub provided, so when lockdown finished these students were confident to come in, knowing who the Learning Hub staff were and what they could ask. They could work with their classmates in the space, broadening awareness across the student population. For the staff it meant we were confident in working with the students no matter the method of service delivery.

Flow of communication within *Students Online* was revealed as an important finding, and this mirrored the literature. In the Sloan Semester, communicating to students about how to continue their studies with a different provider was key to the initiative (Lorenzo, 2008). With Griffith University's approach, the initial goal was to

find out how to support students on campus, but resulted in developing a list of external services students could use to access support (Gallagher et al., 2020). Such examples illustrate changing directions of communication flow, both from and to students. The Learning Hub staff had the express understanding that within the daily *Students Online* meetings, any arising pastoral issues such as financial hardship, accommodation, and mental health factors should be referred to the Student Support Manager to take over this pastoral care factor. Again, this illustrates the potential for further pathways of communication from the students to the institute as a whole.

One of the key findings of this case study was that the *Students Online* programme helped students feel confident and comfortable while studying. The programme was seen by the participants as adding value to the institute by fulfilling the aims stated in the institute's publications (AIS, n.d.). This finding reflected Holzweiss et al.'s study (2020), where the frontline staff felt proud not only of their team efforts but also the institute's approach in supporting students' online learning. Similarly, the Griffith's University staff gained a deeper understanding on how to improve access for international students as well as the cohort's strength and resilience during a crisis (Gallagher et al., 2020). In all cases, the provision of online support added to the institutes' overall offerings.

International research shows that levels of anxiety, stress and general mental health were affected during 2020 (Husky et al., 2020; Khoshaim et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2021). Providing an institutional response can help relieve the anxiety and stress felt by international students (Firang, 2020) and perhaps also motivate students when selecting where to study. As this case study has shown, setting up daily online MS Teams meetings for students is one way in which an institute can provide learning and life support to students during lockdown. What now needs attention are solutions to problems as they arise and identification of the most effective strategies to support students through pandemics (Khoshaim et al., 2020).

Reflections (What worked and what did not work)

The inclusion of more faculty members would be of benefit for future development of this programme. Having the Head of an academic programme as guest speaker was the most significant event in terms of attendance. It was the most popular

session, which continued long after the hour was over, and it created an opportunity for students to interact and meet the Head and ask questions about their future study within the programme.

Secondly, the advertising needed to be targeted. The announcement of the *Students Online* programme and its purpose was sent at the same time as numerous other emails were being sent to students. The school roll was over 1000, yet fewer than 50 students engaged with the Team. No investigation was undertaken as to why, and only speculations can be made. However, lack of publicity may have been one reason. A Moodle page on Remote/Online Learning was created for students, detailing how emergency remote learning and MS Teams in general worked, plus whom to contact for online technical support. However, the offering of informal opportunities for daily interaction via the *Online Students* MS Team was not a part of this Moodle messaging: this was a missed opportunity. Moreover, the advertising needed to make it clear that participation in the programme was optional:

“A benefit was it was not compulsory [for students], it was their choice to be part of this...a good thing” (Participant 1).

If the programme was offered again, communication would need to cover the purpose of the MS Team as well as the benefits and informality of the sessions. Such advertising would need to be across all channels of communication: emails, social media posts, and announcements within class from the teaching staff and on the learning management system.

Lastly, considerations around managing online group dynamics would need to be explored for the future. Large online groups are difficult to manage at the best of times, with smaller groups less so. The MS Team was set up at a time when Learning Hub coordinators themselves were also learning how the technology could be utilised to its fullest. While the coordinators asked questions in an attempt to engage passive listeners, with some success, it is recommended that there be further training on alternative options such as use of interactivity apps and techniques to bring outsiders in, and training within MS itself such as setting up breakout rooms quickly and smoothly.

Conclusion

This article has outlined a study of a pilot online MS Teams programme, *Students Online*, that was set up to support students at a New Zealand tertiary institution during the Level 4 lockdown in March-April 2020. Interviews with participants focused on two key questions: ‘What were the experiences of those who engaged with the online support programme?’ and ‘What implications can we derive from this experience to improve future programmes?’ As with other initiatives to support students during in times of crisis in other countries, the goal of the *Students Online* programme was to provide a service that went beyond academic/learning support needs. This case study has shown that participants in the study certainly appreciated the *Students Online* experience. The programme created the opportunity to identify pastoral care issues, and to establish timely communication and support systems. Perhaps it achieved even more than that, by creating personal connections, warmth and shared experiences at a time when people felt isolated, and life seemed fractured. As such, although there is always room for further development should the need arise again, those involved acknowledged the programme’s success in addressing both student and institutional needs.

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