Prioritising lifeload over learning load: Understanding post-pandemic student engagement

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Abstract

Higher education institutions universally need to maximise student engagement by modifying teaching practices in response to changes caused by globalisation, technological innovation, and community values. To do this, it is necessary to deeply understand the complexity of student needs and identify how to respond. The global shift to wholly online learning during COVID19 presented a unique opportunity to better understand the influences and outcomes of student engagement in practice. We conducted an extended 2-day focus group with students from an Australian university and applied Kahu and Nelson's educational interface framework to investigate how the shift to online education affected students' perceptions of learning and engagement. Students reported their primary needs related to digital competencies, flexible learning, and teacher care and enthusiasm. In these contexts, educators must support students to develop self-efficacy and a sense of belonging. However, most significant was the inextricable connection between students' personal lives, including emotions and wellbeing, and their university lives. Students reported that they consistently prioritised lifeload over learning load, while consciously knowing their choices were at odds with their learning. We provide suggestions for improving future learning models, while also acknowledging more work is needed to better understand student lifeloads and decision-making. These insights are valuable for improving practice in higher education, as institutions internationally and sector wide continue to adapt to the evolving needs of students within global sociocultural contexts.

Practitioner Notes

1. COVID19 caused significant disruption to student engagement
2. Student engagement is affected by mediating factors including self-efficacy, sense of belonging, emotions, and wellbeing
3. The following were key to student engagement for our law student participants during COVID19: flexibility, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging; teacher care and enthusiasm; and developing competencies in new digital environments
4. Students appeared to prioritise lifeload over learning, even when this choice was detrimental to their learning
5. More work is needed to understand whether the prioritisation of lifeload over learning is widespread across other student cohorts and disciplines

Keywords

Student engagement; online learning; COVID-19; higher education teaching and learning; lifeload

Introduction

This article investigates student perceptions of engagement during the sociocultural context of the COVID19 pandemic, which necessitated a sudden shift to wholly online learning. Before the pandemic, socio-political events were already impacting how students were engaging with learning experiences and deriving value from higher education (Kahu, 2013; Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018; Marginson, 2002). In early 2020, students found themselves suddenly and unexpectedly learning in an online-only environment with little opportunity to prepare for the transition. This resulted in a range of experiences for students including overwhelm, isolation, panic, uncertainty, and having to rapidly acquire the hardware, and develop the skills and confidence, to use a range of online tools for learning from home (Baker et al., 2022; Dodd et al., 2021; Colclasure et al., 2021; De Boer, 2021). For some, COVID19 affected their work and income, their health, their living arrangements, and their parenting or other care responsibilities. The effect of new technologies on the 'attention economy' also meant that teachers were competing for students' attention amongst a world of physical and virtual distractions (Dontre, 2020; Tai et al., 2019; Flanigan & Babchuk, 2018). These shifts had already been intensifying due to the rapidly evolving knowledge economy along with increasing moves away from face-to-face learning towards online learning. COVID19 added an additional layer of unanticipated, rapid change which potentially amplified these dynamics. Given that engagement is critical to student success, higher education institutions, educators and students alike are increasingly recognising the need to update traditional models of learning and engagement (Lin & Eichelberger, 2020; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). This has resulted in a burgeoning body of literature addressing the state of higher education during COVID19, some of which outline the institutional changes undertaken during the pandemic, and others which highlight the emotional impacts of rapid changes to higher education for students. This study is unique because it identifies the indivisible connection between students' personal and university lives, and how this affects student engagement and outcomes. Further, this study gathered both verbal and visual feedback from students to co-produce findings about the state of student engagement during the COVID19 pandemic, and what implications this may have for the future of higher education in practice.

Theoretical framework

There is a substantial body of literature linking student engagement with improved student outcomes. Studies consistently show correlation between student engagement and improvements in desirable outcomes for student success and development, such as student satisfaction, critical thinking skills and capabilities, self-esteem, psycho-social development, identity formation, and social engagement (Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Bowden et al., 2021; Bowden, 2021). This paper addresses the research question: how has the shift to online learning during the pandemic affected students' perceptions of learning and engagement? For this study, we applied the 2018 Kahu and Nelson conceptual framework of student engagement to understand how the pandemic affected students' learning. The framework incorporates the traditional three dimensions of student engagement – behaviour, affect and cognition – as well as the influences on, and the consequences of, student engagement (Figure 1) which are embedded within the wider sociocultural context.

The framework draws on transition theory and cultural studies to 'propose that individual student engagement occurs dynamically within an educational interface at the intersection of the student … and the institution and its practices' (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). It recognises there are psychosocial constructs (or 'mechanisms') which explain how student engagement is shaped by the interaction between the institution and the student, including the student's own circumstances, characteristics, and background. The mechanisms by which these interactions are mediated are

said to include academic self-efficacy (belief in one's own capacity to complete a given task), emotions (resulting from the student's appraisal of their situation), belonging (connectedness to the institution), and wellbeing (particularly stemming from lifeload and stress). In this framework, students are recognised as 'learner-consumers' — that is, as both 'consumers' who are influenced by structural and psychosocial systems, and as 'partners' who are active creators in immediate and long-term learning outcomes (Partington, 2021).
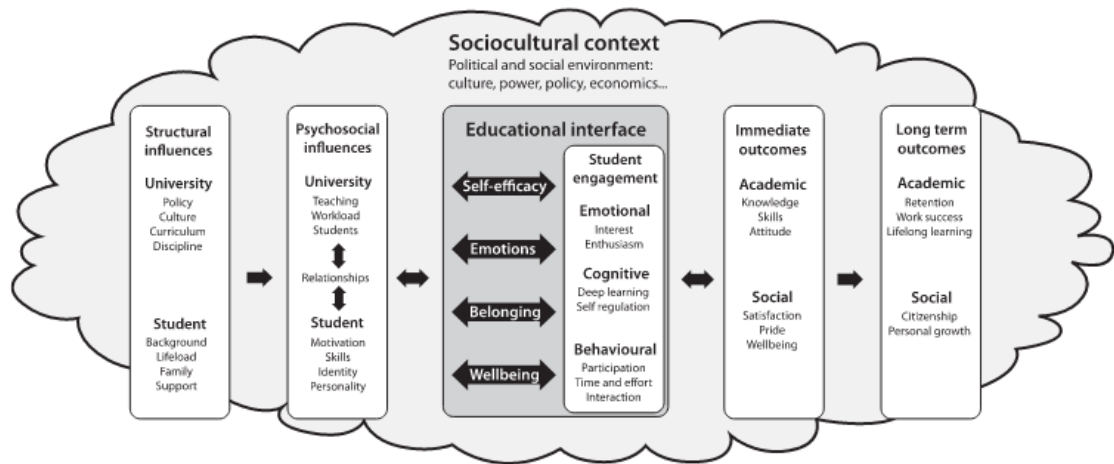
Figure 1: Conceptual framework of student engagement incorporating the educational interface (source: Kahu & Nelson, 2018)

Methods

We collected qualitative data (comments and flowcharts) from 10 focus group participants, which we then thematically analysed by applying Kahu and Nelson's framework of student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Our approach to data collection and analysis is set out below.

Data collection

We used criteria-based sampling to identify and select participants who could provide rich information in response to our research question (Morgan, 2012). Given proximity and budgetary research constraints during COVID19, we combined this strategy with convenience sampling to ensure we could easily access participants and collect information (Frey, 2018). In terms of criteria, participants needed to be undertaking a Bachelor of Laws (Honours) in Semester 1, 2020, at Queensland University of Technology, an Australian university. Our focus group participants included students who, prior to the pandemic, had studied on-campus, remotely, or both, and, as they were studying in Semester 1, 2020, they were all impacted by a rapid transition to wholly online learning during COVID19. We sought to ensure our sample composition was as representative of our student population as possible (Frey, 2018), thus, we applied additional criteria including demographic, gender, age, mode of learning, stage of degree and previous academic history (Durdella, 2021; Frey, 2018). We made provision in our research plan and ethics application to exclude applicants should our sample lack diversity, but this was not necessary as our research participants included a mix of: gender, age, background, representation from first to final year, part time and full time, internal and external, students who had previously completed a higher education degree, and students who were studying single or double degrees. We did not

collect further personal data, as our participants were current students and anonymising their contribution was paramount. However, during focus groups participants described a range of personal experiences, in addition to their current and prior learning experiences, that affected their engagement and provided further context to our analysis including: family pressures; working long hours; involvement in sport; financial difficulties; mental health challenges; undergoing surgery; other illness or health issues; living environment; social life; relationships; and even the weather.

To allow time for individual participants to reflect, compare and share their experiences both verbally and visually (Morrison et al., 2020), we aimed to recruit 6-12 participants. This number is considered ideal for focus groups (Barbour, 2018), and was also a manageable participant number for online moderation, facilitation, and collaboration. Due to the small size of this study, we note our findings may not be generalisable to other student populations. It is also worth noting that while our participants were law students, and this will have shaped their responses, they rarely provided input that was law specific. This may be due to the nature of our focus group questions, but it also appears to relate to our participants' perceptions of what was most important to them in terms of learning and engagement. As a result, our findings and discussion focus more generally on student engagement, learning and teaching, and our participants' unique needs and circumstances.

Our research design conducting focus groups online was one of necessity — there was no alternative during COVID19 — but we factored this into our research design in a way that was advantageous to our data collection. Like discussions in conventional focus groups, this synchronous approach allows for dynamic and immediate interactions where 'discussions can thrive' (Fox et al., 2007). By using online collaborative tools Miro (Miro 2021) and Zoom (Gray et al., 2020), students were able to communicate verbally and in text, to collaborate with moderators and other participants instantaneously, and to record their input in real-time. As participant data was stored instantly in Miro, we were then able to easily upload to Nvivo for thematic analysis (Nvivo, 2021; Davidson, 2018).

In terms of our questioning approach, our focus group was specifically content-oriented. For example, we asked students to describe their best learning experiences both before and during COVID19 and then used 'probing' approaches, like the 5 whys, to guide students beyond their initial or obvious responses, towards deeper and more significant insights (Moaveni & Chou, 2016). Once they provided a response, we then asked them 'why'. Once they provided their next response, we again asked 'why'. By moving '5-why's deep' (Voehl, 2016), we were able to better understand what motivated students in the context of student engagement. This approach also strengthened our insights, because when there were similarities across deep student responses, they provided opportunities to better understand systemic student needs. In addition to text responses, we asked students to create visual flowcharts of their independent learning journeys (Harrington, 2016), such as a timeline of a standard week during a university semester and a graph of their study behaviour across an entire semester. Asking students to develop visual flowcharts of their experiences was important as it allowed them to understand, analyse and communicate aspects of their experience that were not as easy to recognise or explain using words alone (see examples in Figures 2, 3 and 4).

Figure 2:
Visual impression of text-based responses and flowchart

While the content is not legible, these images provide a visual impression of the initial detailed text-based responses (left) followed by the creation of flowcharts (right) to depict a range of experiences throughout a semester.
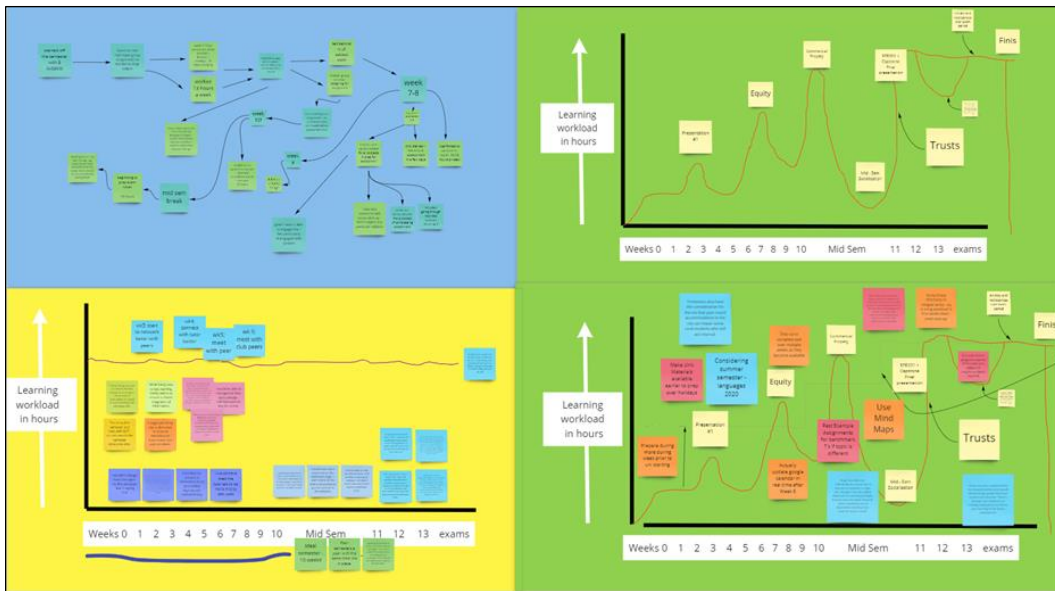

Figure 3:
Flowcharts created by participants

These further images depict the types of flowcharts, graphs or visual representations created by participants, including one participant's initial graph (upper right) which they expanded and amended throughout the '5-why's' questioning (lower right).

Figure 4:

Example representation by one participant

This flowchart provides an example of how one participant represented 10 weeks of the semester, including lifeload and study load.

Data analysis

We conducted our extended focus group over a two-day period on 29–30 September 2020 in the format of 4 x 3-hour sessions and collected approximately 400 comments and 20 flowcharts. We used a deductive approach to understand the qualitative data (Miles et al., 2020), including initial data familiarisation and coding, followed by theme identification, review, definition and naming, and report assembly (Braun & Clarke, 2008). We then used inductive analysis to identify new codes not already covered by the coding scheme and to iterate on existing codes (Allen, 2017). Our initial data familiarisation took place during the focus group, as we engaged in dialogue with the students to understand the nature and background of the information they were providing. We used Kahu and Nelson's theoretical framework (see Figure 1) to develop our coding scheme and then applied this to specific comments or parts of the flowcharts created by our participants. To do this, we first identified whether a comment or part of a flowchart related to the sociocultural context or educational interface, or whether it was an influence (structural or psychosocial) or an outcome (immediate or long-term). Within the relevant category, we then coded each datum based on the specific part of the framework that was applicable. For example, a comment regarding curriculum was coded as a *structural influence* under *university* and related to *curriculum*.

We adopted this approach individually, and conferred collaboratively, to ensure inter-coder reliability (Hsiu-Fang Hsieh & Sarah Shannon, 2018; Given, 2008). As we worked through the data, we inductively identified further themes (such as the prioritisation of lifeload over learning load) and expanded our coding scheme to include these. Once we were comfortable with the reliability of our coding, one researcher coded the remaining data. We then undertook a broader thematic analysis to identify common themes and findings. This thematic analysis provided a clear sense of how students perceived their learning and engagement experiences during the pandemic.

Findings and discussion

As one of the most significant sociocultural events in recent history, COVID19 affected (and continues to affect) political and social environments globally. Our study supports the growing body of literature that demonstrates the pandemic has been (and continues to be) a significant sociocultural factor that has affected all dimensions of student engagement (Chiu, 2021; Zapata-Cuervo et al., 2021; Domina et al., 2021). This disruption to student engagement has resulted from both the pandemic's influence on higher education institutions, as well as its effects on the mediating factors affecting individual students (self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and wellbeing). By applying Kahu and Nelson's refined framework (2018), we were able to better understand the sociocultural effects of the pandemic for law students at our institution and the resulting disruption to their educational interface. Based on our participants' responses, we found the primary factors affecting student engagement related to: developing competencies in new digital environments; flexible learning, self-efficacy and sense of belonging; lifeload, emotions and wellbeing; and teacher care and enthusiasm. We also note that one of most significant findings relates to students' choices to make decisions that are at odds with learning. We have aimed to present our results below in an order that is consistent with our 5-why's questioning methodology. First, we present our participants initial and more obvious responses, and then we progress through to those responses that required our participants to think more deeply about their engagement.

Developing competencies in new digital environments

For our participants, shifting to a digital learning environment during the pandemic affected their engagement. This was due to the challenges they experienced in acquiring hardware and software, in developing the skills and confidence to use a range of technological tools from home, and in feeling comfortable using those tools. This is consistent with other studies that found student success online is affected by the ability of students to use the technologies being adopted to facilitate learning (e.g., Ekici & Ekici, 2020; Muller et al., 2021). Students reported it took time to become comfortable using the affordances of platforms and tools. For example, they needed time to become familiar with using features of Zoom such as audio to ask questions, text-based chat, and buttons for 'raising your hand' or 'liking' something. Some felt reluctant to participate in class online, particularly those who were uncomfortable when they felt pressured to turn on their video. These students resisted asking questions or conversing with lecturers or peers in the way they might have in-person. One student observed that they

> …really have not enjoyed zoom tutorials, as I find many tutors quite strongly push students to switch on cameras and microphones, which is not something I'm generally comfortable with.

This general reluctance is problematic, given the benefits to students are reduced when they fail to fully participate online and use their video in synchronous classes (Martin, 2020). This problem is also potentially compounded by the fact that each student's choice in turn affects how other students in the cohort experience their own online learning. The more students choose to switch off their camera, the more inferior the learning will become for all.

Emergency remote learning also caused additional stressors including 'zoom fatigue' and a loss of situational interest. It was common for those who had transitioned to online learning or work, to experience mental and physical exhaustion described as 'zoom fatigue' (Ebner & Greenberg, 2020), a phenomenon also described by most of our participants. While flexible learning options allowed students to partially manage their 'zoom fatigue' by choosing which classes they would attend in real-time and when they would watch recordings, it was still difficult to avoid. This fatigue may also have contributed to a loss of situational interest which also appeared to cause a

reduction in student engagement. Schraw et al (2001) define situational interest 'as temporary interest that arises spontaneously due to environmental factors such as task instructions or an engaging text'. A reduced level of situational interest has been shown in several studies as one of the negative effects of the transition to online learning during COVID19 (Garris, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). This was consistent with the views expressed by our participants. For example, one first-year student highlighted that the modified online course work differed from the collaborative and immersive environment they had envisioned for their law degree:

> *While flexibility is a strength and being able to catch up on material missed online is a bonus, missing out on live engagement either physical or online is not always a positive. Occasionally, this can affect aspects of how you choose to approach work.'* Another noted that: *'I find it challenging to study solo though as I can get quite agitated.*

Consistent with Ekici and Ekici's studies (2020), we found that students related their interaction with teaching staff in a *synchronous* environment with feeling engaged. Several students specifically noted that in comparison to *asynchronous* learning, the learning benefits of *in-person or synchronous* online tutorials included a significant improvement in attention and focus, as well as allowing students to ask questions as they arose and seek feedback, and it provided a source of accountability to stay on task. For example, students commented that:

> *[D]uring the live tutorials, I participate and listen - and find I get confirmation that I am on the right 'track' with my study that week - or redirection to the right way of doing things - in a constructive manner.*

> *With Zoom, the chat function allows tutors to address their questions in real time and choose the best questions to address for the class*.

In contrast, where students relied solely on *asynchronous* learning, they reported a negative impact on their capacity to deeply understand course content and receive feedback on learning:

> *Where lectures are delivered online [asynchronously], it would also be nice to see lectures being delivered live (e.g., through BB Collaborate), and then recording this live lecture so people have the option to watch it later. This may help with engagement, because then students can ask questions as the lecture is happening, rather than having to email someone after the fact, and potentially not getting a response for a few days.*

While the transition to a new digital environment was generally challenging, participants who described themselves as quiet, shy, or introverted — those typically less vocal during in-person classes on campus — reported it was easier to participate in online classes where they were somewhat anonymous and felt more comfortable. Other studies have also found that the move to online learning 'enabled some students to feel more confident about class participation' (Baker, 2022). One student explained:

> *Physical classrooms often favoured the louder, more controlling students and left the quieter students unable to ask questions.*

For these students, the shift to online learning had the effect of increasing their sense of belonging. Online learning was an '*equaliser for different personalities'* as it promoted equity for students who were more comfortable where they could *communicate verbally and non-verbally in class through the use of Zoom'*. Another explained that when tutors are

> *Well adapted to the requirements of online learning, the environment for speaking can be more welcoming. [My tutor's] approach to engaging the class, and encouraging active participation is an approach that many students would find intimidating in physical*

> *classes. Online, it translates to some of the best and most comprehensive regard for the course material of any law subject I've studied.*

These insights were important reminders of Kahu's (2013) focus on the 'unique nature of the individual experience'. Student engagement is individualised and, while changes to learning environments caused by COVID19 affected many negatively, those changes had a positive and 'equalising' effect on others.

Flexible learning, self-efficacy and sense of belonging

Increased flexibility has been recognised broadly as one of the positive outcomes of online learning reported during the pandemic, as it allowed students to make strategic choices about how they learn (Martin, 2020). The benefits of flexibility were felt most strongly by participants who perceived themselves as having *higher levels of self-efficacy*. This is consistent with recent research that suggests student engagement during pandemic-related emergency remote learning was positively correlated with having greater self-efficacy and previous e-learning experience (Ekici & Ekici, 2020). Self-efficacy is influenced by a range of personal and institutional factors including the students' socio-economic status and wider sociocultural factors (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Participants who perceived themselves as having higher levels of self-efficacy tended to be students who had completed a previous degree, had previously studied remotely or online, or who were already balancing a combination of study and work. For these students, who also described themselves as 'intrinsically motivated' or 'disciplined', the increased flexibility of online learning increased their level of autonomy to choose how they would study, set goals, organise their learning, and manage their time and conflicting commitments. For example, students could choose to study intensively by engaging with multiple weeks of content over a short period (especially when assessment was due), they could pause or re-watch class recordings and take notes, and they could take breaks to consult other resources and clarify concepts. One student reported: *'the best aspect of online learning is having the independence and flexibility to learn at your own pace';* and:

> *To be honest I enjoyed the fact there was a varying element of learning tools to work through. I like the podcasts being pre-recorded, as that means I can stop and relisten to parts I needed to.*

Another mature aged student commented:

> *I enjoy managing my own hours and days - I've worked that way for decades. So, the independence and self-motivation required to study online, is something that I have been doing for about 10 years part-time, getting my last degree.*

At the educational interface, these students were able to access and draw upon what they needed from educators, and then learn independently.

However, not all students experienced the benefits of flexibility. This was particularly the case for our participants who perceived themselves as having *lower levels of self-efficacy* and who did not feel confident in their ability to learn independently. These tended to be participants who were accustomed to attending classes on campus and who valued the more structured and facilitated process of in-person learning. The perception (or reality) of reduced contact, connection, and support reduced their motivation and incentive to engage with their learning (Ekici & Ekici, 2020; Kahu, 2018). For example, one student reported: *'I am a strong believer that in person classes are naturally better for learning and are generally more engaging'.* Another reflected that her best learning experience was in 2019 (pre-COVID) during on-campus classes:

> *My tutor was incredibly engaging ... Her ability to actively interest everyone made studying enjoyable ... The structure of the class was centred around discussion, encouraging discourse among all students ... This class lifted my mood so much that it made my experiences in other classes that semester extra positive too.*

For these students, access to educators, peers and support was critical in helping them to progress with their learning.

Changes to learning environments influence whether students feel like they are part of a broader campus culture and affect how they receive support from staff and peers (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Lack of interaction with teaching staff, including informal interaction before and after class, was also reported as affecting students' sense of belonging. This is consistent with the work of Martin (2020) and Muller et al. (2021). The unexpected and rapid loss of campus culture during the pandemic and lockdowns reduced students' perceptions of connectedness to the institution and diminished their *sense of belonging*. This was exacerbated by feelings of isolation, uncertainty, confusion, and panic. Students experienced a distancing in their connections with educators and peers and became less involved in co-curricular activities. This diminished sense of belonging was more strongly felt by early year students than by those in later years. For example, one student thought that shifting early-year law lectures to podcasts felt like '*just being talked at'* and failed to recognise that '*building a class community is fairly important in early years'.* Another wanted *'to get involved [on-campus] as much as possible',* while another reflected that for students new to university, *'online material should only be ancillary to the personal mode of teaching'*. One other student reported: '*given I wasn't able to engage live, I felt particularly disengaged with content'*. This decline in students' sense of belonging was both a symptom of, and contributor to, reduced student engagement. For these students, it is the on-campus environment that promotes student engagement and their sense of loss during the pandemic was not compensated by the increased flexibility of online learning.

Students as humans: lifeload, emotions and wellbeing

During COVID19, the transition to online learning via video conferencing platforms had the effect of providing previously unseen glimpses into the homes and lives of students and educators alike. Almost overnight, it became acceptable for learning to be interrupted by partners, pets, children, colleagues, and housemates. Potentially, this has been one of the most humanising global shifts in our lifetime, as it has increased our understanding of students (and educators) as humans, each with unique lifeloads, emotions and wellbeing. As a structural influence, students' *lifeloads* — 'the sum of all the pressures a student has in their life' (Kahu, 2013) — affected their *emotions* and *wellbeing* which, in turn, affected their engagement. For example, one participant commented:

> *External stresses influence my learning experience a lot. Whether that's financially, relationships, mental health, social life, or weather (the colder months I stay at home more)'*; and another stated *'having options to attend or watch tutorials is important, as life commitments may and will come into play.*

For those experiencing considerable lifeload and external stressors, student engagement was reduced. As our study took place during the early onset of COVID19, all students were experiencing pandemic related stressors. Most were also experiencing pre-existing or new lifeload stressors, including economic, employment, family, social, or health pressures. Some were also experiencing difficulties with their physical, mental, social, and emotional wellbeing. Student comments included:

> *My engagement is… heavily influenced by work and mental health';* 'Some weeks this
> semester I have had to prioritise other activities like work and family over uni[versity].*
>
> *I needed to take one day off every week - regardless of what I was doing.*

As Kahu and Nelson (2018) note, emotions and wellbeing play a complex role in student engagement. While positive emotions such as interest and enthusiasm can result in increased engagement, other emotions related to students' personality, experience, and skills, such as extreme anxiety, can negatively influence engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). This is particularly so for vulnerable students, and even more so for those facing intersectional vulnerabilities (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Baker, 2022). For our participants, those experiencing more stable emotions and wellbeing, regardless of their cause, were better able to engage, while those experiencing challenges, found it more difficult. One student commented that during COVID19 they were: *'Still staying at family home, was unmotivated to do uni work with everything happening'.* For some, it was the shift to online learning itself that caused changes in emotions, such as a reduction in enthusiasm for learning and 'ontological terror' (Tam Le, 2021). For example:

> *I found the workload too high in the early weeks - especially taking into consideration the
> amount of new information coming at me from every source. ie; website, discussion
> board, live tutorials.*

While most of this discussion relates to the negative effects of lifeload, emotions and wellbeing, the shift to online learning during COVID19 also had positive outcomes. For some students, the compulsory lockdown meant they were no longer commuting or attending many social events, and this freed up more time in their day for study. One student reported that lockdowns allowed:

> *Definitely more time studying. I didn't have to travel into uni and could spend more time
> from my home base and studying at my own pace. Also all of the social outings were
> reduced*;
>
> *[I was] able to get a lot more study done without having to worry about travelling to
> campus.*

This is consistent with other recent studies (Baker, 2022). For others, forced isolation allowed them to focus their time, energy, and attention on discrete tasks, and this served as a positive coping strategy (Freire et al., 2020). For one student, the benefits were considerable:

> *It has been really beneficial for me to save time. I achieved my best grades during the 1st
> semester of this year [during COVID19]. I've also really enjoyed doing the exams online
> - I get very stressed during invigilated exams and this impacts on my performance in the
> exam and my overall grade.*

Power of teacher care and enthusiasm

Almost irrespective of students' self-efficacy, emotions, sense of belonging, or wellbeing, at the educational interface it appears to be the power of educators showing genuine care for students and enthusiasm for teaching that had the greatest effect on student engagement. This was particularly so for students experiencing a high lifeload, difficult emotions, or issues around wellbeing. *Caring* includes showing a warm and respectful disposition (Bryson & Hand, 2007), a caring attitude, and interest in the subject matter, teaching, and students (Anderson et al., 2020). For example, one student whose capacity for study was reduced due to surgery reported:

> *For me, the release of class materials isn't important - social interactions is what
> motivates me, so as long classes are engaging me on a personal level via group*

> *discussion, or that my tutor actually cares about me as a student, I'm more likely to do the work.*

Students in our study who reported experiencing overwhelm, isolation or other types of pandemic-related stress, reported that quality, empathetic teaching, and interaction with teachers, were critical to their online engagement. For example, one student emphasised:

> *My ideal future in online learning would focus around student and professor relations, with more engagement and interaction occurring between the two. I don't expect super deep and personal relationships to develop, but I do think more creative mechanisms for collecting teaching feedback, regular student progress and even mental health can be harnessed.*

A recent national study also recognised the importance of care and of the need to prioritise student wellbeing to support engagement, inclusion, and success (Baker, 2022).

Teacher *enthusiasm* is also central to fostering student engagement (Bryson & Hand, 2007) and this was particularly recognised during the pandemic (Martin, 2020). Participants reported much higher levels of engagement when they could see their teacher's effort and feel their enthusiasm for e-learning and the subject matter. For example, one student reported that, although they had not '*particularly enjoyed*' the transition to online learning, one of the most engaging aspects had been the '*spirit and effort*' some lecturers invested in their online teaching approaches. Expanding on what was meant by '*spirit and effort*', students discussed the effort invested into teaching materials, their enthusiasm or excitement for the subject matter, and their willingness to customise the content to fit individual student's learning needs. In contrast, disengaged teaching methods had a negative effect on engagement. One student noted:

> *One lecturer in particular puts lots of effort into their slides so that they're entertaining, and is always cracking jokes and sounding excited. This makes it much easier to complete long lecture recordings as it keeps me engaged, whereas other recordings ... are very long and sound like a script being read out, and I really struggle to focus.*

Student decisions at odds with learning

Perhaps one of the most significant findings from our study was the tension between our participants' knowledge of how they learn best, compared with how they actually chose to learn. Put simply, they prioritised their lifeload over their learning load, even when that choice was detrimental to their learning. Our participants unanimously recognised there were considerable learning benefits from attending classes *in-person* (pre-COVID19) or *online in real-time* (during COVID19), when compared with *asynchronous* learning. They provided several examples of benefits including increase in engagement and personal motivation, the ability to work in groups to support learning, increase in attention and focus on tasks, opportunity for conversation (including before and after class), the ability to better immerse oneself in learning, being able to ask questions as they arose, and providing a source of accountability. Yet students reported that during COVID19, although they knew in-person or synchronous learning would provide benefits that could not be replicated in asynchronous learning, mostly they still chose (or defaulted to) *asynchronous* learning. That is, they chose to watch both lectures and tutorials asynchronously rather than participating in synchronous classes. This was mainly due to the flexibility it offered, particularly around managing lifeload, but for some students this choice was also due to their diminished sense of belonging and connection which reduced their engagement during the pandemic. Employment was one of the more significant aspects of lifeload that made learning difficult:

I could have tried harder to get my hours at work reduced - the amount I worked made it very difficult to find time for study;

Still trying to catch up - finding it difficult to find time around work.

Another described the effects of their lifeload:

I also would have liked to remain up to date with live tutorials like I was last semester, it just didn't work that way this semester due to work commitments and because I moved house over the mid-year break. I didn't feel as though I had a break so have been a bit less motivated and engaged with live things. I have been keeping up to date with recordings though.

Some participants appeared to recognise that aspects of their own decision making made learning more difficult: *'I initially started 4 subjects but dropped to 3 in week 3 - it would have been better if I'd been realistic and never started the fourth one to begin with, as it made those first few weeks difficult with a lot of wasted study hours'*; and another that their learning would have benefited from *'putting more time into my study at the beginning of semester'*. This same decision-making process appeared to play out when students chose to switch off their cameras during synchronous online learning, even though they acknowledged that switching cameras on was better for individual and collective student learning (Martin, 2020). The finding that students prioritised lifeload over learning, in a way that was at odds with learning, is possibly one of the most important when we consider what type of future learning models can best support student engagement.

Future learning models

Kahu and Nelson's framework has provided an opportunity to better understand the interplay between our participants' engagement with learning and their self-efficacy, emotions, sense of belonging, and wellbeing. This is important when considering what types of learning models might maximise student engagement and success as we move past the pandemic. Many of the factors that influenced student engagement before COVID19 — such as the massification, globalisation and commercialisation of higher education, and increased reliance on blended and flexible learning (Zepke, 2018; Macdonald & David, 2006) — have now become more pronounced, as the pandemic has intensified existing inequities and vulnerabilities (Ossiannilsson, 2021). Concurrently, students themselves, and their changing motivations and priorities, continue to shape how they engage with their learning. Future learning models must account for both the individualised nature of student engagement, as well as for the complexity of the interplay between students, teachers and educational institutions (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Based on our findings, three of the areas where educators can focus their attention relate to digital environments, flexible learning, and teacher care and enthusiasm. The fourth area relates to students as humans: the reality of student lifeload, emotions and wellbeing, and students' apparent decision-making that is at odds with their perceptions of how they learn best.

In terms of *developing competencies in new digital environments*, our participants mostly reported negative experiences. However, consistent with recent studies, it is possible that by now, in 2022, our participants may feel that the rapid transition to online learning has increased their range of technological skills, including using e-learning and collaborative tools, attending video classes, and undertaking assessment online (Baker et al., 2022). Regardless, our findings suggest academics responsible for designing future learning models should conduct an early assessment of students' competencies and then scaffold these where needed. Beyond scaffolding, encouraging broader interaction between educators, students and peers may increase students' sense of belonging, with the effect that students feel more supported, while also having broader access to

others who might support their skill development. Digital skills are considered essential for the future, and they can also improve the learning process for students (Talmo, 2022), so it is vital that universities ensure students are properly supported in their digital learning.

Online-only learning appears to be an appropriate learning model for those who perceive themselves as having higher levels of *self-efficacy*, particularly because of the *flexibility* it offers. But for others, on-campus learning is critical for their *sense of belonging*. Regardless of their learning style, our participants expressed a general preference for hybrid or blended learning. The benefits of hybrid or blended learning have a long history (Baker et al., 2022; Yang & Huang, 2021; Selingo et al., 2021) and support of these models appears to be renewed even more strongly as a result of the pandemic. For educators, it is important to recognise that a hybrid approach extends beyond merely offering virtual courses alongside in-person classes. Instead, a hybrid approach should offer students a blended and immersive experience that supports seamless interactions between all aspects of the in-person and virtual campuses (Selingo et al., 2021). More work needs to be done to understand exactly how universities can achieve this. They might consider, for example: taking a more deliberative approach to what is provided on-campus and what is provided virtually; reconfiguring existing academic portfolios and student support systems; creating 'micro-campuses' to serve as local harbours of collaboration; prioritising co-creation or partnering with students (Selingo et al., 2021; also see Baker et al., 2022); redesigning the static schedule of the academic calendar (McMurtrie, 2020); or creating new alliances with other education institutions to share courses or resources in low enrolment but critical areas (Joo et al., 2019). Our participants were generally enthusiastic at the prospect of being consulted and involved in the process of co-creating learning experiences. For example, one student stated:

> *I wanted to be part of this research study because I genuinely thought it would improve teaching in the law faculty [and] I've been passionate about the topic of student engagement for a long time.*

> *[I wanted] to leave a lasting impression on the learning experience of other students.*

Beyond these suggestions, we the authors contend that Law Schools (and possibly other disciplines) must investigate how to create learning models that allows students to select customisable or bespoke learning pathways that align with their unique and diverse needs. These pathways will likely incorporate a range of flexible options, while also integrating accessibility and inclusivity.

Both the quantity and quality of teacher-student interactions — particularly *care and enthusiasm* — appeared to have a significant effect on our participants' learning and engagement, including those facing challenges with emotions or wellbeing. It appears that greater teacher care and enthusiasm leads to higher student engagement which leads to more successful student learning. Educators must continue to find ways to deliver classes, particularly online, that: make course content interesting and palatable; create safe and comfortable opportunities for teacher-student and student-student interactions; provide timely feedback through both synchronous and asynchronous means; and establish interpersonal teacher-student relationships. This may include increasing opportunities for students to connect with educators by allocating more time for answering questions and by being accessible through different mediums such as in-person, in online collaborative spaces, or by emails, phone-calls and so on (Baker et al., 2022). In doing so, educators will increase students' sense of belonging, emotional interest and enthusiasm for learning, and potentially improve student wellbeing (Eringfeld, 2021). It is important to note here that increasing pastoral care for students comes at a cost to staff, especially for large cohorts. So that educators can better support students, institutions must ensure that educators are also supported through additional training and workload adjustments.

Arguably, the most interesting aspect of our participants' responses was the apparent dichotomy between how they reported they learn best and how they reported they choose to learn. Put simply, our participants responses overwhelmingly suggested they know how they learn best, but they do not choose to learn that way. This is due to their *prioritisation of lifeload over learning load*. This is especially interesting because there is a long history of literature around the effects of excessive competition and high workloads for law students that drives them to prioritise their *learning* above lifeload, emotions and wellbeing, and this can be detrimental to their long-term goals, and physical and mental health (Duncan et al., 2020; Hess, 2002; Fines, 1997). Yet, our participants reported the reverse. Students' lifeloads were generally increased during the pandemic (Colclasure et al., 2021) and whether this increase simply made it impossible to prioritise learning load, or whether prioritising lifeload is representative of a broader societal re-prioritisation about 'what is important in life' (Asmundson et al., 2021) is difficult to determine.

More work is needed to better understand students' perceptions of how they engage best, how their *lifeload, emotions and wellbeing* affect learning, and how they make choices about learning. If these student choices relate primarily to flexibility and prioritising lifeload over learning load, then supporting students to develop and hone their self-efficacy is vital. But we do not understand enough to know whether the way forward is this simple. The authors contend that institutions must find ways to 'meet students where they are' (Sunderland, 2014) and to support students in making 'strategic' learning choices that are best suited to their broader lifeload, emotions and wellbeing. We need to investigate how we can design learning experiences, curricula, and even entire degrees in ways that permit and support students to prioritise their lifeload over their learning load. During 2022-2023, the authors (Hews and McNamara) will be conducting further focus groups with a view to discussing these specific questions with students. We will also be working closely on our institution's Bachelor of Laws (Honours) curriculum review and reaccreditation. During internal and external consultation, we intend to specifically raise the possibility that student prioritisation of lifeload over workload is widespread and seek input on how students might be better supported in this context. However, as the authors are somewhat constrained within the legal discipline, it would be valuable to know whether this lifeload prioritisation exists within other disciplines and geographical locations. This may represent an opportunity for other researchers.

Conclusion

Our study has affirmed the educational interface model in higher education practice, demonstrating that student engagement is embedded within broader structural and psychosocial systems. To engage the whole of the student, it is necessary to consider how students' interactions with those broader systems affect the ways they interact with, and derive value from, higher education. Our findings supplement other international studies that have explored the impact of emergency remote teaching during the pandemic on student engagement. Of particular significance is our finding that students prioritised lifeload while consciously knowing their choices were at odds with their learning. More work is needed here to better understand students' needs and choices. As we move past the pandemic, adopting flexible learning models, recognising the power of teacher care and enthusiasm, scaffolding digital competencies, and recognising the learning choices students are *actually* making, rather than those we might prefer them to make, will help higher education institutions support mediating factors and maximise student engagement. Customisable pathways and learning models that 'meet students where they are' may also have a place here. In these ways, higher educational institutions internationally and sector wide can recognise students' unique experiences and provide support in practice that promotes high quality learning and superior graduate outcomes.

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