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SUPPORTING STUDENT WELLBEING DURING COVID-19: TIPS FROM REGIONAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA

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**“All classes will shift to online,
effective this Monday.”**

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching staff at universities across the world are being told they must shift courses from face-to-face to online delivery — not next year, not next semester, but next week. Some colleagues have been teaching online for many years, but for many of us it is a daunting change.

In this time of physical distancing, the preliminary findings of my [NCSEHE Equity Fellowship](#) research on supporting the mental wellbeing of mature-aged students in regional and remote Australia may be helpful. Why? The majority (53 per cent) of the students surveyed (n=2,401) and interviewed (n=51) study fully online.

Their experience is quickly becoming the “new normal”; with almost all tertiary study suddenly online, no longer is it a tyranny of distance for the few, on the periphery and out of sight.

The survey and interview findings highlight the importance of teaching practices and the learning environment on student wellbeing. What can we learn from these regional and remote students to support students’ mental health, wellbeing and success, in the context of learning and teaching online?

1. Know students' needs: understand their diverse circumstances

[My study] is a tiny desk in their playroom. And I've got just a little swivel chair and a tiny little desk, and stuff cluttered around everywhere. Often I'm listening to a lecture with the kids climbing on top of me ... so concentration can be harder. Sometimes I bring my laptop out and I'll listen to lectures while I'm doing the dishes, or while I'm cooking dinner. Yeah, it's tricky.

Your students may be juggling parenting and work with their university studies, as well as becoming home-school teachers (overnight), and coping with the stressful and anxiety-provoking environments in which we're now living.

Tip: Take an inclusive approach to your course content, delivery and LMS tools; think about: Who is it including? Who is it excluding? For example, if you're offering synchronous sessions, not all students will be available at the scheduled time. Ensure such sessions are voluntary and that options to cover the same material asynchronously are also available.

2. Be aware of practical challenges: e.g. bandwidth

[The Internet] does drop out, and we do lose connectivity ... afternoons are worse ... And, it's also impossible to watch a lecture when there's no download.

While it's a frequent experience for students in regional and remote Australia to have inconsistent internet access, this could increasingly be the case for students and staff in cities, where more bandwidth will be used by the upsurge in people working from home and videoconferencing. Also, we can't assume that all students can afford high-speed internet, and their usual work-arounds (e.g. using a university campus or local library for free wifi) might not be an option.

Tip: Keep your technology simple and ensure that lecture recordings and other materials are downloadable, not just streamable. It will provide students with the opportunity to download the weekly course content, and the flexibility to listen/read/watch at a time suitable to them.

3. Facilitate student connections

The ability to actually talk with other students face-to-face about an assignment and how they're approaching it and how they've interpreted a question and all that; that's priceless.

And just encouragement, too. I think having someone there on Facebook that you can just message and go, "You know, I've had a rough time with this," or, "You know, this assignment's been really difficult." Yeah, you've sort of got someone else who can relate to you.

It takes time for on-campus students to initiate conversations and find like-minded peers; it's even more difficult for online students. While it's tricky for staff to facilitate, do endeavour to create opportunities for the informal, "corridor-type", incidental interactions to take place in an online context. Why? Students learn a lot about the academic culture and day-to-day requirements of the course from each other, as well as provide emotional support.

Tip: Provide opportunities on your LMS for students to communicate synchronously (e.g. Collaborate/Skype/Zoom meetings) and asynchronously (e.g. discussion boards). Take a few minutes at the beginning or end of synchronous sessions for some lighter/informal communication. Ask questions on the discussion boards that encourage students to share something (e.g. an interest/hobby) about them. You could take the lead; students enjoy seeing their teacher's human side. A lot of online students use closed Facebook groups as an online forum for students in their unit/course.

4. Provide opportunities for Q&As

One of the biggest things that holds you up on assignments, is that you've got a question and you post the question to the forum, and you have a look and it hasn't been answered, or you don't really understand it still, and sometimes it can take a while to get a response.

Students studying online want opportunities to ask questions and receive timely answers. They miss out on hearing the questions and answers that occur in a face-to-face environment (e.g. while a teacher is setting up for, or packing up, a lecture or tutorial). Not understanding how to approach assessment tasks is stressful and even more so when advice isn't easily received.

Tip: Dedicate a regular Collaborate/Skype/Zoom meeting for Q&As about upcoming assessment tasks (and record them for students who can't make it). You could shift your student consultation times to an online meeting. Whatever forums you're using, it's essential that they are maintained throughout the semester. Just because a lot of students aren't responding to your discussion posts doesn't mean they aren't reading them and benefiting from them. Provide students with clear expectations about your response times for emails and discussion posts.

5. Check in with students: online learning can be lonely and isolating

Have someone that can check in with the student from time to time — a simple call to see how they are progressing or if they need any help. Speaking from experience I won't ask for help, I will tackle everything on my own, which normally means I end up stressed. Some people are too embarrassed to ask for help.

Studying fully online can be an isolating experience. Some students are proactive in asking questions; but a lot aren't. Having lecturers or tutors check in with students contributes to students feeling they are visible, connected, valued and that they belong to their course or university.

Tip: Be approachable and proactive in supporting students. Check in with them semi-regularly in a personalised way via email. Depending on your staff-to-student ratio, you could check in via phone—say once a semester—particularly with the students who can't make synchronous sessions. You could make a point of emailing the group to forewarn them that lecturer/tutor A, B, C plan to call them at a certain time that week. The students will likely have questions and be extremely grateful for your call; leave a message if they don't answer — they'll be chuffed that you care. Alternatively, a **short (2 minute) video** at the end of the week—summing up the week's focus and introducing the next (or a few times per semester, especially around assessment time)—is a way to check in with large numbers of students, and for them to see you (on video).

6. Promote your university's services

Reminders that support services are available and there is no harm in using them.

I think the more separated you are, the less likely you are to know of what you can do or things you can access.

Students studying online are often unaware of their university's student services. They might have heard about them at Orientation, but that may have been a period of information overload or a long time ago.

Tip: Draw your students' attention to your university's services, such as counselling, disability services and academic learning support. These services will also be reorienting their practice to deliver appointments and workshops online. You could send reminders a few times per semester and in different ways: e.g. email newsletter, discussion/announcement on the LMS, at the beginning or end of a class.

7. Your impact is enormous: it's the small (human) actions that count

The lecturer sent me an email as he noticed I had dropped the subject and was checking in to see why. I explained that I dropped due to personal stressors, he replied empathetically and wished me well. He didn't have to check in ... it was meaningful to me at the time.

It's likely that the positive impact of your small actions, such as replying to a student's email or discussion post, is far greater than you realise. Numerous interviewees recounted such actions, which made them feel that their teacher knew who they were and that they cared. For many students studying online, you are the connection to their course and university. The students also acknowledged that their teachers are often overworked. They aren't expecting you to bend over backwards for them.

Tip: Don't forget the impact of your actions — it's the little, kind, human things that really matter!



Not everyone will be accustomed to teaching and learning online. Students and staff may both be experiencing fear and anxiety as we absorb the exceptional changes at home and around the world. Colleagues will need support and reassurance to make the transition online; there are inspirational examples of how the higher education community is supporting each other in these extraordinary times.

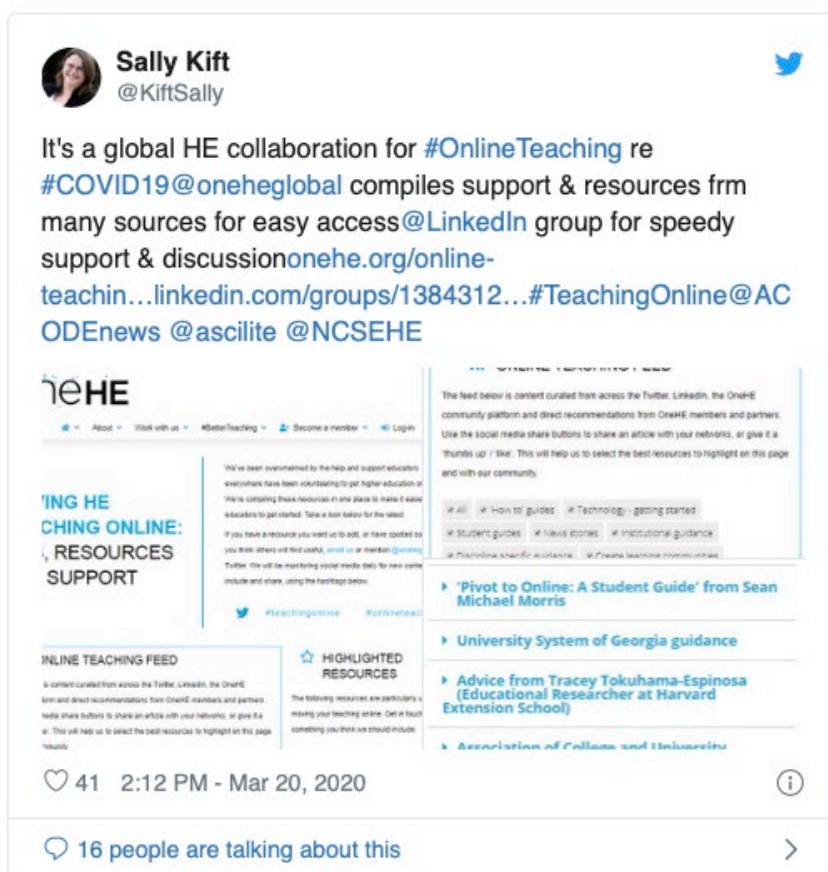


Colin Simpson
@gamerlearner

Got questions about teaching online? Ideas you'd like to bounce off someone? Need to talk about technology enhanced learning? The @TELeDvisors Te@ch Support room is open - staffed by experienced education technologists and learning designers bit.ly/TELeDvisinar #TeachSupport

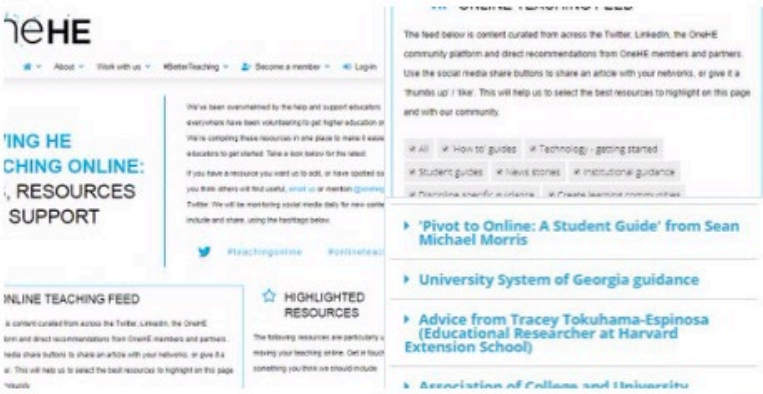
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See Colin Simpson's other Tweets



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It's a global HE collaboration for #OnlineTeaching re #COVID19@oneheglobal compiles support & resources from many sources for easy access @LinkedIn group for speedy support & discussion onehe.org/online-teaching...linkedin.com/groups/1384312...#TeachingOnline@AC ODEnews @ascilite @NCSEHE



The screenshot shows the OneHE website interface. It features a navigation bar with 'About', 'Work with us', '#BetterTeaching', 'Become a member', and 'Login'. The main content area is titled 'ONLINE TEACHING: SUPPORT RESOURCES' and includes a 'TEACHING ONLINE: SUPPORT RESOURCES' section. Below this, there are two columns: 'ONLINE TEACHING FEED' and 'HIGHLIGHTED RESOURCES'. The feed section contains a list of resources with filters like 'All', 'How to guides', 'Technology - getting started', 'Student guides', 'News stories', and 'Institutional guidance'. The highlighted resources section lists items such as 'Pivot to Online: A Student Guide' from Sean Michael Morris, 'University System of Georgia guidance', 'Advice from Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa (Educational Researcher at Harvard Extension School)', and 'Association of Colleges and Universities'.

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16 people are talking about this

Right now, we can learn from the experiences of students in regional and remote Australia who are experts in studying at a distance and online. They don't expect technological wizardry and neither will your students. In your move online, keep it simple — be clear, consistent and provide flexibility. Importantly, consider what you and your colleagues can sustain — do what you can, and look after yourself and each other.

Links to further information & resources

Stone (2017), *Opportunity through online learning: Improving student access, participation and success in higher education*

Baik et al. (2016), *Enhancing Student Wellbeing*

OneHE (2020), *Moving HE Teaching Online: Tips, Resources and Support*

DTEach (2020), *Transitioning Teaching Online — Teaching Tips*

CAST (2020), *About Universal Design for Learning*

Australian Psychological Society (2020), *Coronavirus (COVID-19) information for Australians*

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Nicole Crawford

27th March 2020