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Anxious, Disconnected and 'Missing Out', but Oh So Convenient: Tertiary Students' Perspectives of Remote Teaching and Learning with Covid-19

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Abstract: The higher education sector has learnt a great deal in the online delivery shift due to Covid-19, however, student voice has been underrepresented in literature. This paper reveals 15 student perspectives, including both international and domestic students, who were studying a Master of Teaching (Secondary) at one university in Melbourne, Australia, during heightened social distancing restrictions. The inductive thematic qualitative data analysis collected through semi-structured interviews showed opportunities and challenges of learning experiences. Emergent themes found affordances of convenience and challenges of relational and structural aspects of teaching and learning. Relational aspects of learning were more challenging, including peer collaboration, seeking informal advice and feedback from academics, and participation and engagement. We recommend the inclusion of student voice to guide post Covid-19 teacher education design recommend several areas of support to guide a humanising and personal connection into the remote learning environment.

Introduction

Covid-19 had an unprecedented impact, including an immense shift in the education sector worldwide. In response to the highly contagious effects of the Covid-19 virus, social isolation practices were implemented. This meant that universities were required to rapidly redesign programs to fit virtual environments to remain operating worldwide (Clapsaddle et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2020). Students who had chosen face-to-face learning experiences were forced to experience a form of distance education, continuing through periods of uncertainty through synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid deliveries of teaching and learning. Tertiary academics attempted to transition their usual practices into fully online environments in an "emergency remote teaching" program (Hodges et al., 2020). With this implementation of a novel program, there were opportunities and challenges experienced by students. These student perspectives of the fully online classes during the pandemic offer insights useful for informing future online teaching program design.

Covid-19 Impacts on Higher Education

Although learners' and teachers' mental health and wellbeing are not traditionally considered in the context of education, the broad perspective of the pandemic and the rapid speed of change renders its consideration. The mere fact that this seismic shift resulted from a global pandemic meant that poor mental health and wellbeing were potentially a by-product of this global shift and uncertainty (Fisher et al., 2020). When reflecting on the student experience through the changed Covid-19 teaching and learning, it is essential to reflect upon these underlying impacts of the global pandemic on individuals, that created a climate of uncertainty and stress as context for the online classes (Varma et al., 2021).

While the wellbeing of students conceivably affected their learning experience, there were multiple design and technological issues that also impacted learning. Transitioning programs online presented technology access and infrastructure constraints (Bennett et al., 2020; Christian et al., 2020). Specifically looking at Initial Teacher Education (ITE), the programs connected with professional placement were hit hard. The difficulty for universities to find their students of teaching a practicum in the school setting was immense. Schools were also navigating the shift into online learning, meaning many were not able or hesitant to add the extra responsibility of supervising a student (Ryan, 2021).

Literature worldwide has looked to some of the challenges and opportunities presented to educators in the shift into digitally supported remote delivery (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Henriksen et al., 2020; Marek et al., 2021; Neuwirth et al., 2020; Paudel, 2021), including a look into quality of programs (Sahu, 2020). However, there is limited research on student experience within this shift. This research aimed to explore the tertiary student experience within the significant disruption to the teaching, learning and assessment practices due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Digitally Supported Remote Delivery

In the Covid-19 climate of higher education rapidly shifting to completely online practices, pedagogical teaching, learning, and assessment decisions have leaned towards pre-Covid understandings of online frameworks. The Community of Inquiry Framework (CoI) is an example of an online pedagogical framework developed to build a community by establishing trust and support within the teaching and learning of a blended environment (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Blended learning is generally defined as integrating combinations of both face-to-face and online teaching in programs (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), although also noting that the definitions in literature are described in different ways which are not always clear (Smith & Hill, 2019). The CoI framework is consistent with the constructivist approach to teaching and learning in that the students are active members of the learning process (Garrison, 2007). The framework presents three core elements, social, cognitive, and teacher presence, which are relational, interdependent, and connected to support the blended educational experience.

Technology, especially in asynchronous text-based communication, can remove some of the socially cued aspects of communication, challenging the establishment of social presence (Duncan & Barnett, 2009). Taken from Garrison's (2011) definition, social presence can be defined as "the ability of participants to identify with the group or course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities" (p. 34).

The cognitive presence is focused on the intellectual component of the learning experience and is somewhat easier to plan for in the online environment. The cognitive

presence is interconnected and more easily sustained with a strong social presence where the students first "must feel comfortable in relating to each other" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 94).

The design and considered organisation of the overall learning experience and how the teacher facilitates direct instruction and critical dialogue are regarded under the teacher's presence (Garrison et al., 2000), and is valued by the online student (Duncan, 2005).

The additional online implications for teaching, learning, and assessment design in the pivot under social distancing with the Covid-19 pandemic are important considerations in the switch from face-to-face teaching to online environments. In this study, the pandemic conditions are described as 'digitally supported remote delivery' in which teaching is done in real-time over a video conferencing platform, to minimise disruptions to learning. This research was driven by the following question: What shift in teaching, learning, and assessment perspectives and experiences of students have occurred due to Covid-19 and the change to digital remote learning?

Methods and Participants

Exploring students' experiences and perceptions during Covid-19 teaching and learning restrictions, this qualitative research was conducted during Melbourne's second lockdown in 2020, when heightened social distancing restrictions were enforced, and teacher education remained in digitally supported remote delivery.

Students who were studying a Master of Teaching (Secondary) at an Australian university in Melbourne, enrolled in core curriculum and pedagogy units were invited to participate. Ethical approval was granted by Victoria University Low Risk Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE19-064). Social risks were managed by explaining the research objectives, confidentiality procedures and withdrawal rights to participants, and written consent was obtained. Three men and 12 women agreed to participate, including both international (8) and domestic (7) students. Individual semi-structured interviews 20-30 minutes in duration were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions were broadly focused on participants' experiences shifting to the digitally supported remote delivery and centred around engagement, level of understanding, assessment, and feedback (see Appendix A for interview questions).

Adopting the reflexive view of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019), inductive thematic analysis processes outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed, due to the researchers' active roles within the higher education teaching and learning communities. Transcripts were read for overall familiarisation, then each line re-read and preliminary open codes across transcripts were created by one researcher (first author). The coding process was refined through sorting data by noting relationships (similarities and differences) between perspectives and key issues between open codes. During ongoing meetings, the research team further developed these codes through systematic sorting and re-grouping of code categories, which were then grouped into themes (once consensus was reached). These themes are presented in the findings, with direct quotes (pseudonyms used) presented in italics.

Findings

The analysis showed opportunities and challenges of learning experiences for these students during Covid-19 times. Emergent themes found challenges of relational and structural aspects of real-time online teaching and learning including: online environments as not conducive to students asking questions, absence of professional

placement leading to anxiety about professional preparedness and course completion, and absence of peer rapport reinforcing feelings of isolation. There were three main subthemes of the barriers of peer relationship building in the Covid-19 remote delivery environment, including: the absence of contribution of peers in collaborating situations, the unnatural feel of the remote conversation, and technology constraints. Despite these challenges, silver linings and positive outcomes were also apparent.

Online Environments Were Not Conductive to the Asking of Questions, Which Limited Engagement and Learning

Overwhelmingly, participants raised the lack of natural opportunities to learn by questioning as a barrier to their learning. The lack of social cues, and unnatural and awkward feel of the conversation in online environments contributed to participation anxieties for some participants, that eventually led to the avoidance of asking questions:

> *"...on Zoom, you can't tell when someone's about to speak like in real life. So suddenly, like five people speak... I've literally given up trying to speak in class because of that, because I'm just like it's not worth the stress… Whereas in in real life you can sense, you know, the conversation flows more."* (Pru, domestic student)

Participants also mentioned the social anxiety associated with having their face on the screen:

> *"Usually, I cross my fingers and hope someone asks because…I don't want the attention... I think it's the idea of, like, having everyone looking at my face."* (Seann, domestic student)

The unnatural feel of the online conversation contributing to the reluctance to ask questions was often attributed to the absence of observable body language:

> *"Because there's just so much to read for body language when you're in a real-life space."* (Tanah, domestic student)

Given that several students felt this way, there was also the subsequent loss of learning through the answers to questions asked by others. Participants noticed the lack of questioning in the class environment, and reflected that it impacted their learning:

> *"People need people. And if you're in class, people ask questions that sometimes clarify things for you, or somebody will say something that you think, oh, okay, but you hadn't considered. You don't get that [in a remote classroom]."* (Daphne, domestic student)

Students noted the absence of overhearing questions being asked by peers in class and answers being given by the academic. The time for these informal conversations was especially important for some international students who indicated that they used this as a strategy to approach other students for informal learning support. Padmini (international student) shared she would usually gauge which students understand the assessment task and directly approach them after class:

> *"We can figure out that this student understands the assessment task very well… she or he can help me… so, we directly approach to them, 'Hey, hi, how are you?"*

The remote environment made it difficult for students to scan the class to determine who understood the assessment, and even more challenging, to approach individuals directly. Despite being classified as a domestic student, Tanah was from Southeast Asia and had no prior experience with the Australian secondary or tertiary education system. She was

frustrated that she could not use her usual strategies employed in a face-to-face setting to ask questions about the Australian school system's context:

> *"I usually could just hang about and ask the lecturer or ask somebody in class. 'Hey, you are an Australian student here. Can I ask you a question?'"*

Emailing the academic was a popular method for seeking clarification. However, the delay in response from the academic was frustrating, which was not a reflection on the academic, but the remote delivery space increasing email assistance requests (Thomas et al., 2022) and subsequent delay in email responses:

> *…[The] frustrating thing is, that sometimes you don't get the answer… straight away… So, you have to keep emailing and [it] just gets really awkward because you don't know if they received it or not and you don't want to bombard someone with like 5, 6 emails"* (Tam, international student)

Students shared changes in their usual participation approaches as a result of the classroom medium. Tanah shared she did not feel she could be heard on the video conference platform unless she was uncharacteristic of her personality:

> *"…I really want [to] ask a question but have to like be very aggressive, very loud and like do the, do those traits that, you know, that's very masculine and very dominating."*

Instead of relying on usual in-class questioning, online support networks formed on platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups were utilised. Despite these collaborative opportunities, the online networks came with some constraints:

> *"We have a WhatsApp group for every subject. And it's just flooded every day, like, I've turned off notifications. And then I look at it, like, one hundred and seventy-three new messages! … It's just like this huge, overwhelming mess. That's all we have."* (Pru, domestic student)

Utlised in many tutorials, the breakout room feature of the video conference platform also provided opportunities for students to collaborate in small groups. However, the breakout rooms had removed the academic presence from the room. Gulsheen was observably infuriated with this aspect:

> *"Every week we've been left alone [in breakout rooms] … Three people or four people in a group. Absolutely useless."*

Absence of Professional Placement Led to Anxiety About Professional Preparedness and Course Completion

Over half (9/15) of the student participants were not yet placed in a school for the practicum component of their course, due to the Covid-19 restrictions on face-to-face teaching and system and individual teacher barriers to taking on the additional work of supervising pre-service teachers (PSTs). Of these students not placed in schools, only one student had any experience of teaching in a school. The absence of professional practice was thought to leave a gap in the practical element of teaching to draw upon for assessment tasks. It also caused some anxiety about not experiencing teaching in front of a class:

> *"I don't know what teaching actually feels like. We've just been reading about different things like behaviour management and stuff, but we don't know how to actually apply it."* (Yara, international student)

The applications of theory within practice for deeper learning of the course content were not possible without placement. The impact of this was compounded for international students, especially when their country of origin's education system is contrasting to the Australian's school system:

> *"...we don't know about the Australian education system… We don't know how the students are going to be, like, how they react… and without any placement experience, it is very difficult to assume some kind of a student and then prepare assessments according to that."* (Padmini, international student)

In many cases, the placement process felt messy to the students, as some had placement to draw upon, and others did not. Student participants who did not have placement were often comparing themselves to those who did, feeling they were disadvantaged in contributing to class discussions and in their assessments.

Absence of Peer Rapport Reinforced Feelings of Isolation

Participants often spoke about the challenges of building relationships and a rapport with their peers in the remote delivery environment, and how this was affecting their overall higher education experience. The global pandemic magnified this lack of access for peers. For international students, in particular, peer friendships were crucial due to the limited family and friend support:

> *"In the first semester… I felt very lonely because I didn't have my friends with me to discuss and, you know, to interact about studies as such."* (Eesha, international student)

The feelings of isolation when learning online that were revealed by the students suggests this was an important element of the experience, that warrants further future research.

There were three main implications of the barriers of peer relationship building in the online environment: the absence of contribution of peers in collaborating situations, the unnatural feel of the remote conversation, and technology constraints:

Absence of Peer Contribution Damaged Effective Collaboration

Many students noticed the ITE course focused on collaboration between peers that intentionally aligned with practices within Australian schools. However, some students felt it was challenging to collaborate effectively in the online environment. The breakout room feature in the video conferencing platform filled a need for students to be grouped for tasks. However, the rooms felt unnatural to students. The students were often with different peers each week when working in the smaller breakout rooms, which limited initial rapport building:

> *"...Sometimes it's like I've never talked to this person before, but we've been in class for seven weeks together. And you're supposed [to be] doing the task, but then you kind of want to talk about other stuff."* (Pru, domestic student)

The medium of communication made it difficult to form a personal bond through a screen, especially when working on collaborative assessments:

> *"I don't have any problem with individual assignment. But in a group is a problem because…I haven't even interacted in person yet. Now… [to] work with them is hard because like you don't have a bond, like, personal bond. Now you have to work with them toward an assignment."* (Tam, international student)

Unnatural Feel of the Remote Conversation Impacted Peer Interactions

Students' hesitation to contribute to class discussions may have stemmed from the unnatural construction of the online classroom:

"[In the remote classroom] somehow you're kind of exposed. When you're in a lecture theatre, you're not facing all of your fellow students. Whereas Zoom, everyone's looking into each other's face directly." (Faye, domestic student)

The unnatural feel of online conversations in class may also have emerged from students multitasking, and not being fully 'present' in the online environment. Anthony described how he changed the way he approached his engagement in class activities, likening an online tutorial to listening to a podcast:

"I'll do lots of things whilst listening to podcasts. And that's essentially what going…, like what class has become for me now. Like, I just sort of go about my day and I just have it on in the background…" (Anthony, domestic student)

These changes in feelings and behaviours would undeniably affect how students interact with their peers and, in turn, affect the relationship and rapport building. In his reflection above, Anthony would turn off his camera while simultaneously completing other tasks while listening to the class. The feeling of peer disconnect could potentially come from the blank screens themselves. Dafne was visibly annoyed when her peers did not turn on their cameras:

"When they've got their videos off, you don't know who they are."

Achara (international student) questioned if there was a person behind the blank screens:

"…99 percent of our mates prefer keeping the camera off. So like, sometimes I really feel awkward because we never know… behind that turned off camera whether there is a really person standing [there] or not…"

Some participants used the camera as a motivating feature and kept them accountable:

"…I have been always the camera person I loved keep my camera on because I think when I keep my camera on then I remain focussed in the class…" (Achara, international student)

"… I want me to be away from those distractions. I want to turn it on… I know the feeling there is someone may be watching me so, I have to be nice and easily focusing. (Tam, international student)

Although Faye indicated that she kept her camera on, she felt uncomfortable inviting people into her "*private space*" of her home. She asserted, "*you're a different person when you're at home.*"

Technical Issues had Far-Reaching Implications for Learning and Engagement

Some students were frustrated with the technical malfunctions that resulted from poor internet connection or limited technical skills of peers.

Tanah shared a fascinating perspective of the change in university ecology. She was in the first semester of her course, and like many, had not attended a face-to-face class on campus. Despite technically classified as a domestic student, Tanah had only ever studied overseas and therefore had no Australian education system experience, for both secondary and tertiary. She shared that navigating technology itself had added an extra fear to the learning experience on top of what would be experienced face-to-face:

"I don't feel like a lot of the teachers are understanding there's a lot of assumptions made in the instructions. We are virtual people who have not been on campus and navigated the ways of the university, which can be quite culturally different….it took me about two, three weeks to just get a sense of … this is how Uni works in Australia, right!"

Ineffective use of technology was seen as a nuisance. At the start of the semester, Tanah observed her teachers *"were spending more time managing tech issues than needs to be."* Additionally, peers that were *"not tech-savvy"* were *"a point of frustration in class"* for Pru as she felt that a basic understanding of how to use communications technology was essential for teaching in the 21st century.

Silver Linings and Positive Outcomes were also Apparent

Despite the challenges students faced in the online environment, many students reflected opportunities resulted from remote learning in improving their digital competencies. Achara noted that remote delivery *"has made us technologically advanced."* Along with unexpected learning in digital technologies, students mentioned other positive outcomes of digitally supported remote delivery. Many students valued the convenience of saving time and money by not needing to travel:

"I've like realised how much time I've saved rather than getting to uni… getting up, showering, getting dressed, packing your lunch, getting on the train. Like it takes so much time. And now that I've just saved all that time…So I really, really appreciate it that…" (Pru, domestic student)

Others recognised that they needed the face-to-face setting to motivate themselves, ask questions, and collaborate between classes:

"…I definitely don't feel like I've learned as much as I have when I was in the classroom." (Anthony, domestic student)

"…I prefer going in [to campus] because it kind of gets me. It's a nice routine… I can be prone to slacking off, especially if I'm stuck in like my room where I am all day. I like going into class, having that interaction, that human interaction, and being around people." (Seann, domestic student)

Interestingly, workload was not a large concern for most participants. Those who were concerned with workload had family responsibilities at home (home schooling kids and lack of childcare due to lockdown) and increased essential worker commitments due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Although not surprising, during this time of a pandemic where students were physically isolated from others, their conversations focused on the connections with others and the support they felt or experienced. Many students commented on how the academics and the university itself were successful in providing appropriate support in their studies in such a difficult time:

"Teachers are trying their best, their very best to be just as accommodative as ever when compared to being in a physical classroom" (Eesha, international student)

Additionally, when reflecting on what Achara had learned in the remote delivery experience, she admired the support people in the institution had provided to her and her peers:

"…one thing that I have learnt about remote delivery is like we need to support each other for learning. So, the remote delivery would not be possible [without support]. So, if there is no support from our university, from our tutors, from our

lectures and even from our friends, because in-between we are missing something. And we need each other support to fill up that missing gap."

Discussion

This research contributes unique insights into students' perceptions of the emergent shift to digitally supported remote delivery due to Covid-19 restrictions. Themes that emerged from student interviews indicated that students were aware of the impact of the environment disabling opportunities to ask questions in class which limited engagement and learning. Students were anxious about professional preparedness and course completion due to delays in professional placement. Additionally, students reported a lack of rapport that reinforced feelings of disconnect from peers, but also reported unexpected positive outcomes of the shift. The following sections discuss the key implications and considerations surfaced by the students' perceptions of remote teaching and learning.

'Anxious, Disconnected and 'Missing Out''

The difficulties experienced by students was multifaced and complex and largely related to the relational dimensions of the CoI online pedagogical framework social and teacher presence core elements (Garrison et al., 2000), complicated by structural dimensions related to access to technology and placement school experiences. Across many difficulties participants shared were feelings of anxiety and disconnection. Participants often disclosed difficulties due to the Covid-19 restrictions, such as home-schooling challenges and longing to visit family internationally. While there is an understanding of the adverse effects of social isolation during the pandemic (Smith & Lim, 2020; Venkatesh & Edirappuli, 2020), there is limited research on the impacts of the rapid and severe nature of Covid-19 on individuals in communities, especially within the education sector. While this research did not initially aim to specifically examine participants' mental health and wellbeing, these concerns emerged as vital for the participants in the extremely challenging period each were experiencing, no doubt influencing their learning experiences and perceptions during those times and potentially underlying the findings from these interviews.

Research supports the importance of forming peer relationships in positively shaping the university experience (Maunder, 2018), and influencing the effectiveness of group work (Mamas, 2018). Considering this, it is disappointing to hear that participants in this research felt an absence of relationships and personal bonds with their peers. Participants noted limited opportunities and time to develop rapport, a lack of contribution of others, and not being able to see many class members behind blank screens all contributing to a relational disconnect. Additional anxieties in the video conference classroom have also been reported by American college students (Peper et al., 2021), other research has described student feelings of discomfort about showing their appearance online preferring to keep cameras off (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Yarmand et al., 2021). These social anxieties are reiterated in this research with participants not wanting to be the centre of attention on everyone's screen. Additionally, students voiced fear surrounding risk of interruption and not being heard. These trepidatious feelings presumably would have some effect on peer connectedness.

Participants discussed aspects of social presence being less frequent in the online environment, impacting peer interactions and limiting formation of peer bonds. Social presence is established within collaborative communities when trust and support with open communication free of risk, and the interaction between group members are trusted and

meaningful (Duncan & Barnett, 2009; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The effectiveness of online group contribution and collaboration can be improved when students frequently communicate and share personal information (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996). However, it is essential that the sharing comes from a safe environment and the information shared is appropriate for the online classroom space.

The breakout room feature of the video conferencing platform attempts to positively promote these smaller discussions to allow for less vulnerable group interactions (Neuwirth et al., 2020). However, as the students in this research noted, they were hesitant and held back in these rooms, indicating the breakout room feature has missing elements to promote this group work. Identified as necessary in the facilitation of online teaching (Martin et al., 2019), breakout rooms have also removed the academic's presence and perceptions of availability and oversight. Participants noticed a diminished academic presence that may cause social loafing through perceived lack of accountability, which is known to occur in online learning environments (Loh & Smyth, 2010). Additionally, student agency in choosing their own working groups is often removed Tai et al. (2019). In a face-to-face setting, students can move freely using social cues together with their past experiences to help categorise peers based on who will be able to assist and those who will not (Brewer, 1988; Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). Using this classification strategy to work out who they would like to work with is not easily accessible in the video conference classroom.

Accompanying a feeling of detachment from their peers, participants also reflected a disconnect with academics. They were hesitant to seek informal advice and feedback from academics during the video conference. The unnatural feel of the conversation in the synchronous video conferencing platform presented a barrier for students to ask questions, which is not surprising given online learning is known to be affected by differences and difficulties in the unnatural feel of the communication of a computer-mediated compared to face-to-face environment (Weiser et al., 2016). There are challenges present in the video conferencing conversation, including the unusual taking of turns, where one cannot speak while another is speaking, as well as interruptions and backchanneling within the 'chat' function (Al-Samarraie, 2019). Instead of the usual larger scaled class communication, students were choosing to communicate individually, most often by emailing the academic, thereby adding to academic's workload (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Jensen et al., 2020).

Not surprisingly, combined technical issues impacted participants' engagement and approach to learning. Digital competencies are required to navigate digital devices and programs with efficiency and effectiveness (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Ferrari, 2012), and technology issues contribute to feelings of disconnect (McBrien et al., 2009). Technology infrastructure is also vital for the teaching, learning, and assessing of online programs (Alhabeeb & Rowley, 2018; Marek et al., 2021). While low socio-economic supports to students were provided by many institutions internationally during the pandemic (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020), including the institution in this research, to assist with access, these did not completely address these infrastructure and technical issues for individuals.

The absence of the professional practice, in-school teaching element during the pandemic also presented challenges in the effectiveness of programs researched in this study through diminishing integration of theory and practice. A key inclusion in ITE programs is the connections and practice of professional capabilities through teaching in front of a classroom during the students' placement in schools under an in-service mentor's guidance (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Le Cornu, 2015). This enables deeper analytical connection and reinforcement of the academic curriculum (Ingvarson et al., 2014), allowing for cyclical discussion of theory to practice, then from practice back to theory (Darling-Hammond, 2006). During the social isolation restrictions and the closing of classrooms to shift into remote

delivery for all schools in Melbourne, schools were reluctant to take on additional mentoring tertiary students (Ryan, 2021).

While teachers often hold strong motivations and aspirations for entering the teaching profession (Adoniou, 2013; Richardson & Watt, 2006), some of the participants voiced their anxieties about needing to experience teaching to confirm their choice and ease their apprehension. Professional practice is known to develop teacher identity and agency through continuous professional development and reflexive opportunities (Le Cornu, 2015; Molla & Nolan, 2020). Additionally, students of teaching and beginning teachers value professional placement experiences as the 'real' teaching experience (Allen, 2009), contributing to their teacher identity. Therefore, it is not surprising that participants deeply missed the highly valued professional practice, and the absence of such during the pandemic pivot to online learning impacted the suite of diverse learning experiences for the student teachers.

'But oh so Convenient'

Despite the student participants voicing negative aspects of their online learning experience, with difficulties experienced in two of the three recommended core aspects of CoI framework, most students indicated flexibility and convenience factors balanced out the lack of relational interactions. Depending on different approaches to online learning, time and place provide flexibility and access (Fuller & Yu, 2014; Redmond, 2011). As a result of a change of space providing affordances in personal gains, many students disclosed a preference in the remote learning mode despite the drawbacks experienced with this style of learning. Echoed in research by Duncan (2005), students in this research also valued the ability to work (those who were essential workers) and simultaneously study online. Additionally, the students also valued the opportunity to continue to study through the pandemic. They valued focusing on something other than the pandemic, although noting this was sometimes difficult.

Strengths and Limitations

While this qualitative research adds to the limited work investigating student experiences as they navigate the shift into novel learning environments, it has done so from a nuanced perspective of one university. Therefore, research findings could be broadened through further research into student perspectives from other universities. The addition of the international student cohort adds to the strength of this research to be able to reflect upon the differences in experience between international and domestic students to address some of the assumptions made by academics in the learning and assessing space.

Recommendations for Future Practice and Research

Although at this stage the students' perspectives are from a small sample, these perspectives are important to hear to improve teaching and learning in future ITE programs, with potentially permanent shifts to remote and hybrid modes of teaching and learning in tertiary education in the future (Benito et al., 2021; Clapsaddle et al., 2021; Pelletier et al., 2021). Accordingly, from our findings about the student experience of remote teaching and learning, we suggest the following supportive strategies for addressing the students' barriers and concerns about engaging with remote delivery in tertiary education:

Pandemic support:
- The pandemic provided challenging experiences and contexts for students attempting to manage significant changes to their social, personal, professional, and study lives. Consequently, attention should be given to students' emotional and personal situations to consider how students have been affected negatively and support them accordingly.
- Those especially vulnerable should be given opportunities and additional support where appropriate to prevent inequalities (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Dodd et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2020), including financial and educational support with greater flexibility in the learning experience, and access to mental health and wellbeing supports (Salimi et al., 2021)
- Universities should continue to provide appropriate ongoing support, including trauma-informed educational, financial and wellbeing services, to mitigate the issues caused by the sometimes traumatic disruptions through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Technological support:
- It cannot be assumed that students have the digital literacies and competencies to navigate the environment with ease (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Bennett et al., 2008; Maderick et al., 2016). Technology skill and infrastructure support for students would increase the efficiency, reliability and comfortability in learning to use technology tools and platforms.

Participation support
- Deliberate relationship building support strategies are needed for students to feel comfortable enough to risk the vulnerability of participating and asking questions in the medium. By approaching teaching and learning through a relational approach, student relationships and support can be fostered (Pearce & Down, 2011). This relational approach is well established in higher education literature as effective in face-to-face teaching (Ramsden, 2003), and also applicable to effective online teaching (Bailey & Card, 2009; Rose, 2018).
- Support from academics can be provided through displaying a compassionate understanding (Rose, 2018), being approachable (Richardson et al., 2016), and with a "strong desire to help students be successful" (Bailey & Card, 2009, p. 154). Arguably, these elements also ring true in the face-to-face setting.
- Further research into the efficacy of various support systems would assist in the implementations of future remote delivery practice.

Positive social presence support
- Social presence is a likely predictor of student satisfaction and perceptions of learning (Richardson et al., 2017), a component of building a community of inquiry framework (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), and a means to engage students in critical and higher-order thinking (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2013). Therefore, intentional planning of strategies to boost social presence is arguably more critical in the online environment, with limited social cues accessible to students.
- Supporting Northcote's (2008) recommendation, online learning "could be a little more humanised, a little more supported, a little less formal and a little less jungle-like than the past." (p. 682). In order to improve teacher-student relationships and subsequent learning experiences, humanising the interactions between teacher and student can be achieved through empathy and humour (Berge, 1995). If this is recognised, valued, and developed by stakeholders, this would undoubtedly improve social presence and the sense of connection with content, community, and compassion for all within the digitally supported remote delivery space.

Conclusion

Despite rapid changes and periods of uncertainty impacting student lives in 2020, education continued through adaptations to usual learning approaches and experiences. This research, undertaken during the emergency switch to remote learning in the first years of the Covid-19 pandemic, revealed that students valued flexibility and support from academics and the university during a time that presented them with significant stress. The video conferencing platform for classes provided challenges to relational dimensions of the CoI pedagogical framework, including peer collaborations, seeking informal advice and feedback from academics, and participation and engagement. Some students experienced social anxieties arising from the unnatural conversation and lack of visual body language. Not all students had the skills, knowledge or digital competencies required to navigate digital environments with efficiency and effectiveness. Additionally, some participants expressed concerns regarding the absence of professional placement. Despite limitations, most preferred this mode of learning due to affordances in personal gains. Therefore, as universities move toward post Covid-19 arrangements, further consideration should be given to ongoing relational, structural and wellbeing supports for students during these times of rapid change and disruption to learning experiences.

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Appendix A. List of Interview Questions

Gender identity:
Domestic / International Student
Number of months into the Master of Teaching course: _____
What are your two specialisations?
What are your experiences with assessment in higher education?
How has the remote study experience felt for you?

Assessment design
What are your current concerns in terms of assessment in ITE? What would you like to see changed?
Have you noticed a change in assessment design because of remote deliver?

Engagement
What experiences with assessments have you really enjoyed?
How has the self-directed learning been for you?

Level of understanding
What aspects of an assessment determine important aspects of the curriculum? (e.g. knowledge, behavioural competence, values, etc.)
During remote delivery, what did you do when you didn't understand something?

Feedback
What type of feedback is the most valuable for you?
Has remote delivery changed the way you have experienced feedback?

Technology
Have you been able to use technology effectively during remote delivery? Have your tutors been able to use technology effectively?
What have you learnt about remote delivery?