Identifying Common Student Experiences That Affect Success in a Crisis Context (COVID–19):
A Case Study from Aotearoa New Zealand

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learning experiences and educational opportunities around the world have been disrupted due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This chapter outlines a case study involving foundation-level students enrolled at an urban university in Aotearoa New Zealand. The case study is designed to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences during this time of crisis. Student narratives are analysed to identify common experiences and gain a clearer understanding of the self-reported factors that students identified as affecting their success, allowing academic and support staff to improve the pre-degree experience for foundation students. Affordable access to connectivity, increased pastoral care, and a digitally responsive curriculum were identified as key considerations to addressing inequities present in a crisis context (COVID-19) within the educational context and wider community.

INTRODUCTION

Educational practices and student experiences have been profoundly affected by the most recent epidemic. First reported at the end of 2019, COVID-19 (the name of the disease caused by a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2) was subsequently declared a global pandemic in March 2020, placing education in a situation of crisis. What quickly followed were radical and far-reaching changes to education systems at all levels. This chapter presents a case study of a tertiary foundation program delivered at an Aotearoa New Zealand university in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The program is available for both international and domestic students and is delivered using a blended pedagogical approach that supports students with the transition into university studies.

Research by the authors conducted prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 showed common trends and variations across pre-degree programmes at a tertiary institution in Aotearoa New Zealand, which resulted in a clearer understanding of the factors that affect foundation student success. Moreover, necessary and relevant support systems for students in foundation programs could then be promoted, ensuring academic and support staff collaborated to improve the pre-degree experience for foundation students.

This chapter builds on what has already been learned to discuss commonalities identified from self-reported student experiences of the COVID-19 crisis. The data collected in this case study has been useful to ascertain what additional factors need to be considered, as well as to re-evaluate areas of practice and support currently available to students and teachers within the institution and the wider community.

It is important to understand (tertiary) education in the context of the global COVID-19 context, and more specifically in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). This chapter considers the framework of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and how they apply to foundation education in NZ. A brief overview of NZ's Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) is then presented, focusing on key priorities with direct relevance to foundation education. This is followed by the findings obtained from a case study conducted at a NZ university during the COVID-19 crisis, and recommendations that reaffirm the need for ongoing digital transformation within NZ's tertiary education sector.

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