Life after COVID-19: same-same or different relationships?

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Relationships with our students and each other have changed over the past two years with the necessary changes to teaching and learning enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. A group of academics from business schools in Australia and New Zealand have been reviewing the impact of the changes to teaching and learning implemented over the past two years and consider what has worked, what has not, what changes can be built on and what practices need to be reconsidered. This paper concludes with a set of recommendations on how business academics can reconnect with each other and their students and how business schools can support this reconnection.

Keywords: online teaching, online learning, online assessments, educational technology

BACKGROUND

In May 2020 the authors of this paper commenced a collaborative autoethnography (Hernandez et al., 2017) to reflexively make sense of the impact that COVID-19 and the pivot to online learning was taking on their academic lives as well as the experiences of their students. The discussions identified numerous similarities being experienced across the different business schools as well as some very significant differences in the way that their schools were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. What was key to the discussion was that business faculties around Australia and New Zealand were struggling, as were so many others, with how to effectively use technology to continue the relationships established with students as well as how to support new university students, particularly those moving from secondary schooling where considerable face to face (f2f) support had been the norm.

The resulting papers published (Barker et al., 2020, 2021) concentrated on the impact of COVID-19 and the rapid movement to emergency remote teaching on assessment practices. It focused on how business faculties were responding to the change from invigilated assessment (for example face to face exams) to fully online remote assessment.

This paper reviews the changes to our teaching practices over the past two years, what has been retained from the COVID-19 response, what has had to change and what the future holds for business academics and their relationships with their students and each other. We do this through the lens of our changing relationships with various stakeholders and through technology. Despite experiencing differing lockdown conditions, universities mostly remained online throughout the various waves of COVID-19 to provide continuity and certainty for staff and students.

METHOD

In 2020, seven academics and academic developers from five Australian and New Zealand business schools commenced a collaborative autoethnography to reflexively make sense of, and inform, the rapid adoption of

technology enhanced learning and teaching in our respective schools. We shared assessment related insights from this study in 2020, 2021 (Barker et al., 2020, 2021). Since then, five of us continued this collaborative autoethnographic journey through the period of disruption, where two of our roles became the victims of COVID-related organisational restructuring and voluntary and forced redundancies.

Drawing upon the logic of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2012), we believe our insights are transferable to Australian and New Zealand business schools more broadly. Insights reported here are based on observations made at three large business schools, one from New Zealand and two located in different Australian states. Across the three schools, students were enrolled in programs that ranged from face to face (f2f) on campus, f2f online and solely online asynchronous modes of delivery. This paper is our co-constructed account of how technology is mediating relationships between students, with students, amongst staff and with the wider community within our respective schools from the partial and perspectival views (Ely et al., 1997) as business educators. By sharing on-the-ground realities based on our collective experiences, this paper will assist business educators in making informed decisions about leveraging the power of technology for reconnecting and strengthening relationships with students, staff, and the wider community.

OUR COLLECTIVE AND VARIED EXPERIENCES

Relationships with educational technology

In Table 1 below, we build on our earlier discussion (Barker et al.,2020, 2021) by reviewing how our schools' relationships with these forms of technology have evolved in the new COVID normal.

Table 1: Relationships with varied technologies

	University of South Australia (UniSA)	**University of Auckland (UoA)**	**University of Technology Sydney (UTS)**
Proctoring	Being used extensively with UniSA Online programs but there has been a reticence to use it for on campus/external offerings. Used only where courses required proctoring for professional accreditation purposes.	Began using proctoring to meet the requirements of accounting and other professional accrediting bodies.	Proctoring through AI continues, especially to meet professional accreditation requirements. There has also been increased usage because of concerns about academic integrity in take home exams.
Learning management system	Increased focus on using more functionality of LMS and improving academic implementation of interactive tools.	Increased focus on using more functionality of LMS and integration with new services for video recording and streaming, interactive tool H5P and improving academic understanding of LMS features.	A transition between LMS of Blackboard and Canvas occurred during the pandemic (planned prior). H5P was introduced to increase interactive learning elements.
Oral/video communication and presentation tool	Increased use of student video presentations and oral exams. Both live and pre-recorded videos are used for individual and team presentations.	Video presentations, both pre-recorded and live, have been integrated across courses, they are also being used increasingly as they	Video presentations, both pre-recorded and live, have continued to be popular. The requirement for students to be visible in the videos and to

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	External students are increasingly using software such as Zoom/Google Meet to undertake teamwork.	provide opportunities for domestic and offshore students to work together.	include transcripts was added for academic integrity purposes.
Collaboration platforms	Increased usage of OneDrive for student collaboration (Microsoft Teams is not available for student usage).	Increased usage of Google tools and some courses did trial Microsoft Teams for students.	Increased usage of Microsoft Teams for within-class collaboration activities. Decreased usage of Google Drive tools due to inaccessibility from China.
Video interview software	The use of video interview software (e.g., VidCruiter) has increased to assist with oral exams.	Not used at all.	Vieple was used prior to COVID19 for developing student employability skills, some increased usage as an oral exam.
Simulations and industry partnered projects	Simulations used in very few courses, but where used, students engage to high degree. Increased use of online industry partnered projects.	Continued use of simulations. Increased use of online industry partnered projects.	Commercial simulations limited in use due to budget constraints. Increased use of online industry partnered projects.
Standard professional software tools	All institutions have in place Microsoft arrangements that allow students to access Word, Excel, PowerPoint etc. via a web browser and download the software onto their own personal computer, whereas in the past, students were often expected to purchase these tools because institutions provided on-campus access free of charge.		

The pandemic increased the level of integration of student learning with technology across our schools. Pre-COVID, the LMS was considered by many as a repository for artefacts to support student learning (such as lectures slides that students could print and bring to class). However, the pandemic saw an increased shift in more educators using the LMS to foster interactions for supporting asynchronous learning. Early adopters and innovative educators had always used the LMS to create interactive learning opportunities, however this has now become more of the norm and technology has become a larger part of interactive learning with formative feedback opportunities.

This shift has resulted in the need for staff to develop a better understanding with various forms of technology – from understanding affordances of various features within the LMS, to understanding how to effectively use the relevant features to foster learning in an online environment – whether synchronous or asynchronous. Amongst academic communities, staff were learning these new tools along with students – rather than waiting until they had mastered them. Many staff learnt new technologies and built solid relationships with learning designers and learning technologists to help support student learning. Others focused on using only the bare minimum in an attempt to reduce information overload and upskill fatigue (White, 2021). When compared with pre-pandemic times, there is greater collegiality and sharing of learning technology related knowledge and skills within schools and departments with the shared experience of transitioning to emergency remote online learning in tough circumstances.

One important shift in terms of the relationship with technology is in major assessments, especially exams. This is because of the rise of online proctoring within Australian institutions (Selwyn, O'Neill, Smith, Andrejevic & Gu, 2021). A common issue is the need to educate all students about how to use new technologies such as online proctoring, and the difficulties of reaching all students. The availability of recorded classes leads to many students choosing not to attend (for a variety of reasons including work, caring and recreation) but then failing to catch up by going through the recordings carefully (Yeung, Raju & Sharma, 2016). There is also increased student anxiety in relation to using such technologies (Woldeab & Brothen, 2019, 2021) – sometimes because they have failed to take up opportunities to learn about how to use the technology, other times because the technology has failed, or because the students' equipment is incompatible.

Staff have also developed a love-hate relationship with online proctoring technology. Online exams provide many affordances such as increased authenticity by allowing students to use workplace tools like Excel and Tableau along with faster marking, less manual administration, and fewer mistakes when it comes to preparing final grades. However, the increase in issues experienced by students when using such software has resulted in many academics acting as exam and IT help lines in the lead up and during the exam. With more technological issues such as internet dropouts or computer issues, there is increased, even though unrewarded and unrecognised, administrative workload related to special considerations and the need to grant students a replacement exam. As online proctoring systems use artificial intelligence to flag potential instances of misconduct, staff need to be trained for making informed decisions by reviewing proctoring recordings to determine what is and is not cheating. This becomes challenging in the absence of any fool-proof strategies as noted by several experts (Dawson, 2020). Whereas in pre-pandemic times, the rules were fairly clear – with online proctoring – academics are being asked to make judgement calls about whether behaviour in a recording does or does not constitute misconduct. This has created greater anxiety around staff workload and the potential consequences of these decisions on student mental health and academic progression.

Impact on student peer and educator relationships

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities globally have had to make decisions on how to conduct their academic year in an unprecedented environment. Universities in Australia and New Zealand were no different and implemented a variety of approaches depending on government policies, local attitudes and specific COVID-19 responses as countries began opening their borders and campuses. With requirements to work-from-home to deliver online teaching reducing, students and staff are being urged or encouraged to return to university campus while introducing a range of mitigation strategies to protect them and reduce the spread of COVID-19. These strategies include mandated face-coverings, limiting the size of class numbers, COVID-19 Vaccine Pass, reduced dormitory occupancy, and accommodations for isolating and quarantining students. In the following section we will examine the impact of COVID-19 on two key relationships during the transition to the 'new normal' and the likely implications. Firstly, student to student relationships and secondly, student to educator relationships. At the nexus of these two relationships, we will examine the benefits and challenges technology has presented for both students and staff.

The creation of online study habits

Gardner et al., (2012) suggested that it takes on an average 66 days for a new habit to form and become automatic. As students and educators across the globe had their learning environment rapidly moved online, this had a substantial impact on their daily routines and habits. For both educators and students, merging the home and workspaces into one became the norm and saw the formation of new behaviours, where work and home became comingled and intertwined.

For students, learning is largely comprised of attending online classes and completing assignments in isolation. Across multiple media platforms, many students have commented on the challenges associated with cultivating and growing relationships and friendships in online learning mode. Students found it near impossible to engage with new people, talk before class with classmates or even get to know educators when they only saw them virtually for a couple of hours during the week. Benito et al (2021) refer to a study undertaken in the US in 2015

with over 300,000 participants across 541 institutions. Even prior to COVID-19, when interactions outside the virtual classroom could occur more readily, students engaging in online courses were "less likely to engage in other essential aspects of the learning process, such as collaborative learning, student- faculty interactions and discussions" (Benito et al, 2021, p. 53). Studying online for some students created a sense of digital isolation and potentially impacted on their academic performance. Fleischmann (2020) noted from participants comments that "time management and distractions working from home diminished motivation to attend a virtual class and/or watch pre-recorded lectures online; while social isolation issues included students missing the give-and-take of working with their peers in face-to-face collaboration" (p. 7). Many students noted a lack of community and friendship in the online space, even when educators tried to provide structure and keep students in teams to encourage familiarity and interaction. Experience showed that some students did not want to turn on their cameras due to privacy or personal issues, while others could not readily interact online based on their personal situation (e.g., sharing study space in a dorm or hall of residence, or at home or not having the necessary technology or internet access to engage). While educators attempted to mitigate these issues. Through a variety of initiatives and technologies, it continued to hinder student engagement and learning.

Creating community in online learning

One such initiative was the introduction of a virtual study hall that was created to support a new cohort of students with their transition, belongingness, and the development of their academic literacies in the first semester of their first year at university. The initiative sought to improve outcomes in several areas from the transition to university, first-year experience, social inclusion, growing learner confidence and agency space. It focused on leveraging peer support techniques and supporting the co-construction of knowledge to overcome the isolation and distractions students faced when studying online. The virtual study space was staffed by nearly 40 senior student leaders affectionally known as 'Study Buddies', who were there to connect and motivate students to thrive. Students were encouraged to join this space, the study buddies welcomed them and helped answer any study questions they had. The online study hall spaces can be used for individual, group, and general study space.

Other initiatives were set up to support students as they navigated higher education for the first time. Academics logged online earlier to check in with students, some played music to set a positive or fun mood and others remained online after class to answer any questions that had arisen. Some other academics opted to make available pre-recorded lectures and offer live Q&A sessions where students could ask questions and work through problems, in lieu of a conventional lecture format. Another strategy was to integrate into teaching other technology, such as Padlet to provide students with the opportunity to ask questions ahead of class anonymously. This allowed the educator to address student questions at the start of the session rather than waiting for student questions to be raised during class. Further technological initiatives saw the creation of digital modules that provided students an opportunity to virtually see their university campus or work through modules on resilience for wellbeing. Some staff made time in their virtual office hours to foster wellbeing by doing digital wellness checks on students and teams. One undergraduate University of Auckland course integrated Pastoral Care sessions with teams that were based internationally to concurrently adapt the course based on student feedback.

A greater emphasis on care

Care in higher education is not a new concept. Scholars like Noddings have been writing about care for over two decades (1995, 2013). Nevertheless, the pandemic and isolation of students brought to light the importance of care in higher education (Bali, 2020). Care was easier to provide to students who attend classes synchronously through simple activities, such as celebrating good news or sharing grief and concern. However, reaching students who could not attend live classes was more difficult – a lack of community in large classes meant that discussion forums weren't particularly effective in providing support. Social media was used effectively in some instances to provide care by humanising the learning experience. By giving students greater insights into who their teachers are as human beings, teachers tried to build relationships with students, create community and foster a feeling of belonging. Other tools, such as personalised emails based on learning analytics data are also increasingly being used to demonstrate care and gently nudge students towards greater engagement

Return to campus: the benefits and challenges for both staff and students

Studying on campus is viewed as providing students with a clearer distinction between study and home life, rather than the nebulous blurred study/home life that students have lived for the past 2 years. For some students, attending campus enabled them to have a dedicated and supportive learning space to study, concentrate and complete assignments. Face-to-face environments also provide opportunities for organic discussions to emerge and evolve, where students can bounce ideas off their peers who share their scholarly interests and develop a deeper understanding of their studies. For many students who have entered tertiary study over the past two years, the return to campus is not actually a return – it is their first opportunity to be on campus and engage with their peers' face to face. A potential challenge for this cohort of students is a lack of social awareness and norming that they might encounter as a result of missed social cues from studying online and limited social interactions. This sometimes led to social anxiety and stress.

Further complicating the decision making around on-campus study, many students have had their work-life balances disrupted. While job losses or absences due to sickness as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak are the most obvious, other students were required to care for younger children (either their own or siblings) due to childcare and school closures, restricting their ability to work, or conversely required to increase their working hours, often in lowly paid jobs, to contribute more to the household finances). These students may find it difficult to return to study, if they cannot afford to reduce the working hours and support, they provide their families, or if they have had to erode their educational funds through times of hardship (Kernan, 2019).

Compounding these financial challenges, many economies have been strained during the pandemic with consequent impacts on the economy as the world adapts to COVID-19. In New Zealand, inflation has increased to the highest level in 30 years (StatsNZ, 2022), increasing not only the general cost of living, but also driving up commuting costs for many considering on-campus education.

Just as students face challenges returning to campus, so do staff. Many universities offered voluntary redundancies or placed staff on furlough, to reduce operational costs, and many staff used these opportunities to re-evaluate their careers. Now, emerging from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, society is experiencing 'the great resignation' in conjunction with a strong labour market and increasing demands for more flexible work practices, compounding the reduction in staff continuing within universities and conflicting with the drive to return to campus. This has resulted in universities filling permanent positions with staff who had previously been on fixed term contracts and relying on increasingly junior staff to fill roles. While this rapid development can be seen to be beneficial to these staff, it is also accompanied by an increased demand on more senior staff to mentor and develop these staff while still maintaining continuity and delivering the educational standard expected by students.

Whilst the shift to online learning provided opportunities for greater flexibility and reduced travel costs for both staff and students, for many students the rapid transition to online learning due to COVID-19 raised several issues and disproportionately affected some students with "rich over poor, urban over rural, high-performing over low performing, student in highly educated families over students from less educated families" (Agormedah et al, 2020, p. 196). Like many other researchers, we also observed the negative impact of the digital divide on some students (Camara, 2020; Langenfield 2020; Wiley & Buckendahl, 2020). Even though all universities are trying to equitably support students from varied socio-economic and demographic backgrounds, by providing technology and other assistance, there is "no one size fits all approach to returning to campus" (Deliotte, 2021, p. 1).

Staff on campus vs work from home (WFH)

As a result of COVID-19, the experience of academics working from home (WFH) has varied (Parham and Rauf, 2020) The positives of the WFH are that it provides the flexibility of avoiding the daily commute, drastically reduced the possibility of infection and enabled staff to carry out work from their comfort zone. However, this was not the case for all academics, work arrangements impacted on academic staff's work-life boundaries, work pressure and work life conflict. Added to this mix was the increased workload from both learning and adapting to online teaching.

The shift back to campus brought with it much trepidation and excitement. Some staff saw it as an opportunity to draw on the energy of students on campus. Others were concerned about how to reinforce mandatory mask wearing in large lecture theatres. A further fear for many staff with childcare and eldercare responsibilities was that they would bring the virus home (especially for staff with children too young to be vaccinated). Staff also had to navigate mandated back to university teaching whilst also having to create videos for students who were isolated at home. As can be seen in Table 2, our schools used a variety of strategies to encourage students and staff to return to campus. While two universities the third university refused to mandate a return and instead encouraged local leadership to work with staff to encourage some return to campus. However, some work from home is now available at all institutions, reflecting the global shift in perceptions around work and where work must be conducted.

Table 2: Summary of Return to Campus Strategies

University	**What our university did with the move back to campus: Rationale and steps taken**
UTS	Clear messaging to staff and students that UTS undergraduate programs are designed to be on-campus experiences. However, there is more flexibility in Masters programs with an increase in programs designed for online-only delivery, mixed delivery (mostly online and then blocks of on campus) and some programs designated on-campus only. Have shifted to guidelines around timetabling of on-campus vs online classes for undergraduate with a desired 75-85% of classes on campus in undergraduate programs. Online classes are often kept only for students who are offshore or show medical evidence for studying remotely. Created pathways in Masters programs for students who want to study part time – with an on-campus path and online path. For students wanting to study full time – they must accept a blended approach.
UniSA	UniSA has on-campus (face to face) and external (online) offerings for most courses. Timetabled "face to face" lectures continue to be offered **online only** and academic staff are being encouraged to pre-record short concept videos and use the "lecture" time for more interactive and engaging learning activities with the students. All small class teaching (tutorials, seminars, and workshops) has returned to campus. With the return to campus additional professional development workshops and teaching and learning symposia are being held on campus as a method of reconnecting staff and building relationships through shared experiences.

University	What our university did with the move back to campus: Rationale and steps taken
UoA	UoA had very clear messaging sent to all staff and students around the University wanting to all teaching and learning activities, with the exception of most tests and exams, will be in-person and on-campus as timetabled, subject to any changes in Government requirements that might affect our operations, and with limited exceptions. Students were expected to attend on-campus unless aspects of their course are delivered in an online, blended mode. These settings will be subject to ongoing review. This decision reflects UoA's preference to provide high value in-person teaching and learning to our students, including the provision of course delivery where a blended mode is more suitable, while balancing this against the health, safety and well-being of our students and staff. Already implemented health precautions used in the past, such as expectations for mask wearing and enhanced ventilation in our buildings, will remain in place. Leaders were encouraged to implement flexible working arrangements with their teams as appropriate. Pathways in Masters programs for students who want to study had a hybrid approach. Some degrees were offered as purely an online delivery, and this was communicated to students from the outset of enrolment.

Impact on staff relationships

For those with management responsibilities within schools or departments, the direct management and oversight required increased with the pandemic due to negotiations around teaching loads/allocations, adjustments to research output requirements and providing compassionate care and understanding to our colleagues. While we have closer relationships with some of our staff and know more about them and their lives than pre-pandemic, others have chosen to stay more isolated – creating an increase in misunderstandings over email communications and unrealistic expectations. Many institutions have corporate-facilitated Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to support mental health, however many staff have expressed concerns in using these as accessing an EAP is included on that staff member's record.

University management are keen to return students to campus, however school and department heads manage concerns around risk, anxiety, and the demand by students for continued online classes. Contingency plans for teaching teams, designated backup teachers and the emergency phone tree are tools that are now part of the everyday norm in academic management.

LESSONS LEARNED AND MOVING FORWARD

Our shared experiences have led to the identification of a series of initiatives that are being used to rebuild our relationships in this 'new' normal.

Reconnecting people with educational technology

A deeper understanding of affordances of educational technology has become imperative for every academic in higher education, not just those focused on innovation; technology facilitates more learning experiences for students than in the past and is becoming an integral aspect of any higher education learning environment. We recommend creating more accessible spaces for sharing learnings about educational technology amongst peers, while also incentivising staff participation. Institutional funding for attendance at online conferences around teaching and learning would increase the exposure of the everyday academic to educational technology and good teaching and learning pedagogy. We strongly recommend institutions consider institutional memberships to professional associations focused on the uplift of teaching and learning with technology, including ASCILITE. Institutional licences for educational collaborative tools for polling (e.g., Mentimeter) and sharing (e.g., Padlet)

have the potential to drive increased the adoption by staff.

Reconnecting students with each other and educators

Students are often experienced at interacting in digital communities in their social lives through a multitude of social media platforms. A challenge faced by higher education is what space(s) to use to create a digital learning community of students, educators and even alumni. Institutional digital community spaces like LMS discussion forums, virtual study halls, Microsoft Teams sites do not seem to have large scale and saturated interactions – with only a few keen students interacting. However, moving to non-institutional spaces like Facebook and WeChat can create inequities (for example, students in China are unable to access Facebook and many students studying in Australia are distrustful of using WeChat due to privacy concerns) and privacy concerns when it comes to private businesses selling data from social media usage. This may be one area where student-driven approaches to creating community are best – and that academics may choose to go to those student-led spaces to engage. One example is the student-run Facebook page UTS Confessions – a place where students can submit anonymous questions and receive advice from the broader community. It has become a place where students, alumni, full time staff (both professional and academic) and casual staff work informally to support the student experience by answering questions – personal, administrative and academic.

Reconnecting staff with each other

As staff return to campus amidst this period of disruption and staff mobility, many staff find themselves in a situation where some have not even met in a f2f situation due to new staff commencing at the university after lockdown was enforced. The connections with these staff have been fully online and as such the process of connecting (and reconnecting with other colleagues) has been slow whilst we adjust to being back on campus. The implementation of knowledge sharing opportunities with staff on campus, such as teaching and learning symposia or showcases, will allow time for staff to reconnect and learn from each other, thus building a stronger academic workforce. In addition to on campus events, the relationships between academic staff can be supported with technology through online training – at our institutions, we observed a greater number of staff attending workshops online (compared to on campus) because of increased flexibility. Staff are also more likely to reach out for teaching and learning support with peers by using video calls in systems such as Teams and the easy ability to see whether a colleague is available from their status notification. People are also proactively managing their time by using status notifications and blocking time in their diary to minimise work distractions.

CONCLUSION

The changes that have taken place in the last two years have highlighted the inequities alongside the opportunities that exist in higher education, particularly around how technology can be used to enhance the student and educator experience. When designing learning environments, degrees, programs, and courses – we must continue to focus on social aspects of learning while also considering accessibility and equity as well as the impact on learning outcomes and the student experience. Otherwise, a tertiary education may regress to an experience only for those who can easily afford the technology required to study.

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