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ASQA - VET student transition to online learning

Qualitative research report

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Project no. 31402

Date: 29th September 2021

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STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS - STRATEGIC REVIEW OF ONLINE LEARNING IN THE VET SECTOR

To the Australian Skills Quality Authority,

Enclosed are the research findings for the focus group project **as part of the strategic review of online learning in the vocational education and training (VET) sector** ("The Services"). The purpose of the project is to understand the student experience as a result of the transition to online learning within the sector.

This report has been prepared in accordance with terms and conditions of the MSRP agreement and the work order dated 3rd March 2021.

Please contact myself, Jo or Adeline if you have any questions regarding this report.

Yours sincerely,

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Introducing the study

Introduction

The Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) is the national regulator for vocational education and training (VET). It registers training providers and accredits VET courses to ensure nationally approved standards are met.

As outlined in the Regulatory Strategy 2020-22, the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) is undertaking a strategic review of online learning in the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

The purpose of the strategic review is to:

▶ understand the opportunities and risks of online learning in the VET and English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector, to ensure regulatory approaches are effective in responding to our changing environment

▶ ensure that the quality of Australian VET delivered online to domestic and international students remains at a high standard so that students, employers, the community and governments can have confidence in the integrity of national qualifications issued by training providers.

▶ understand the student experience of the transition to online learning and other impacts

of the pandemic on training

▶ determine the implications for quality training delivery, assessment and student engagement, in particular any risks to the quality of VET and English language training.

In order to understand the student experience of the transition to online learning, research was required with VET students. The following report outlines the findings from this research.

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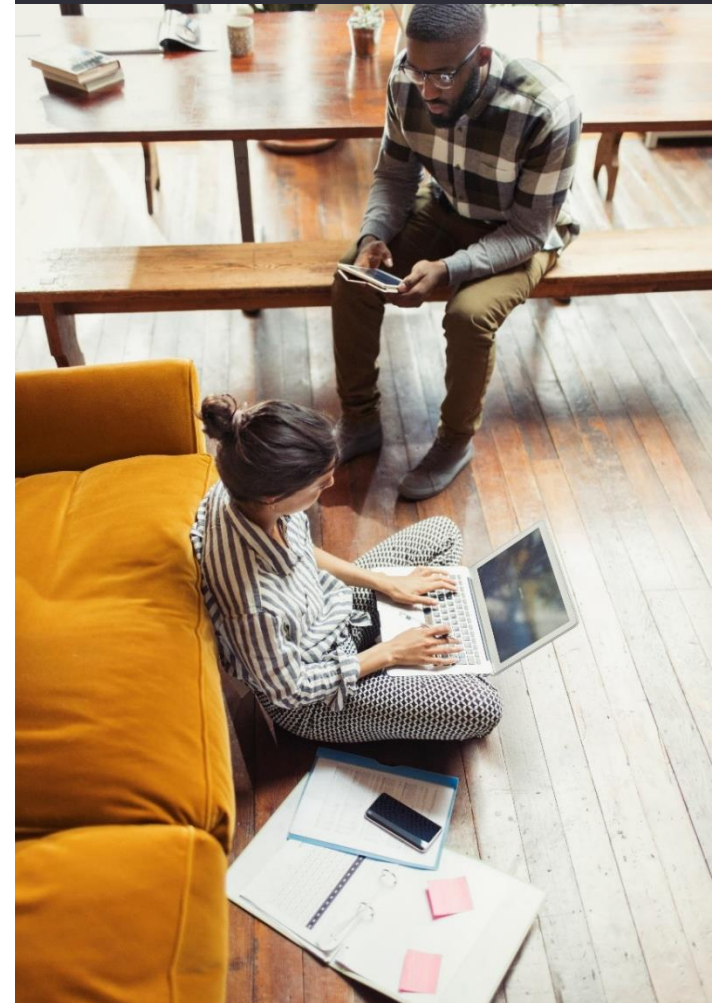
Aim and objectives

The overall aim of the project

The research forms part of a larger strategic review to understand the opportunities and risks of online learning within the sector, to ensure that the quality of Australian VET delivered online to students remains at a high standard.

The specific research objectives

Transition to online learning

► Understand the experiences of VET students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular the transition to online learning that training providers made in response to the circumstances of the pandemic, including challenges and opportunities resulting from the transition to online learning.

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Research
methodology

Research methodology

A series of 4 focus group discussions and 2 in-depth interviews were conducted with VET students. The depths were included following the groups which provided more targeted feedback.

The final achieved structure is shown opposite. The participants included:

▶ **Pandemic impacted...** students who were studying courses that were transitioned to online as a result of the pandemic

▶ **Domestic and international...** including international (onshore) and ELICOS students

▶ **A mix of age and life stage**

▶ **Location...** participants were recruited from a range of states, including Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia (metro and regional areas)

▶ **Provider type...** students who were studying at private colleges and TAFEs.

▶ **A mix of study areas...** including: building and construction, hospitality, tourism, counselling, human services, business, health and nutrition, education, arts, entertainment & recreation, and fitness

▶ **A mix of qualifications...** from certificate through to diplomas

Some students had studied multiple courses, and were able to discuss their different experiences.

Participants received an $80 reimbursement for participating in the research.

Research methodology overview			
Target market	**Metro**	**Regional**	**Total**
School leavers	1 group 2 depths	-	1 group 2 depths
Mature age/career changes	1 group	1 group	2 groups
International/ ELICOS	1 group	-	1 group
Total	**3 groups 2 depths**	**1 group**	**4 groups 2 depths**

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Summary of key findings
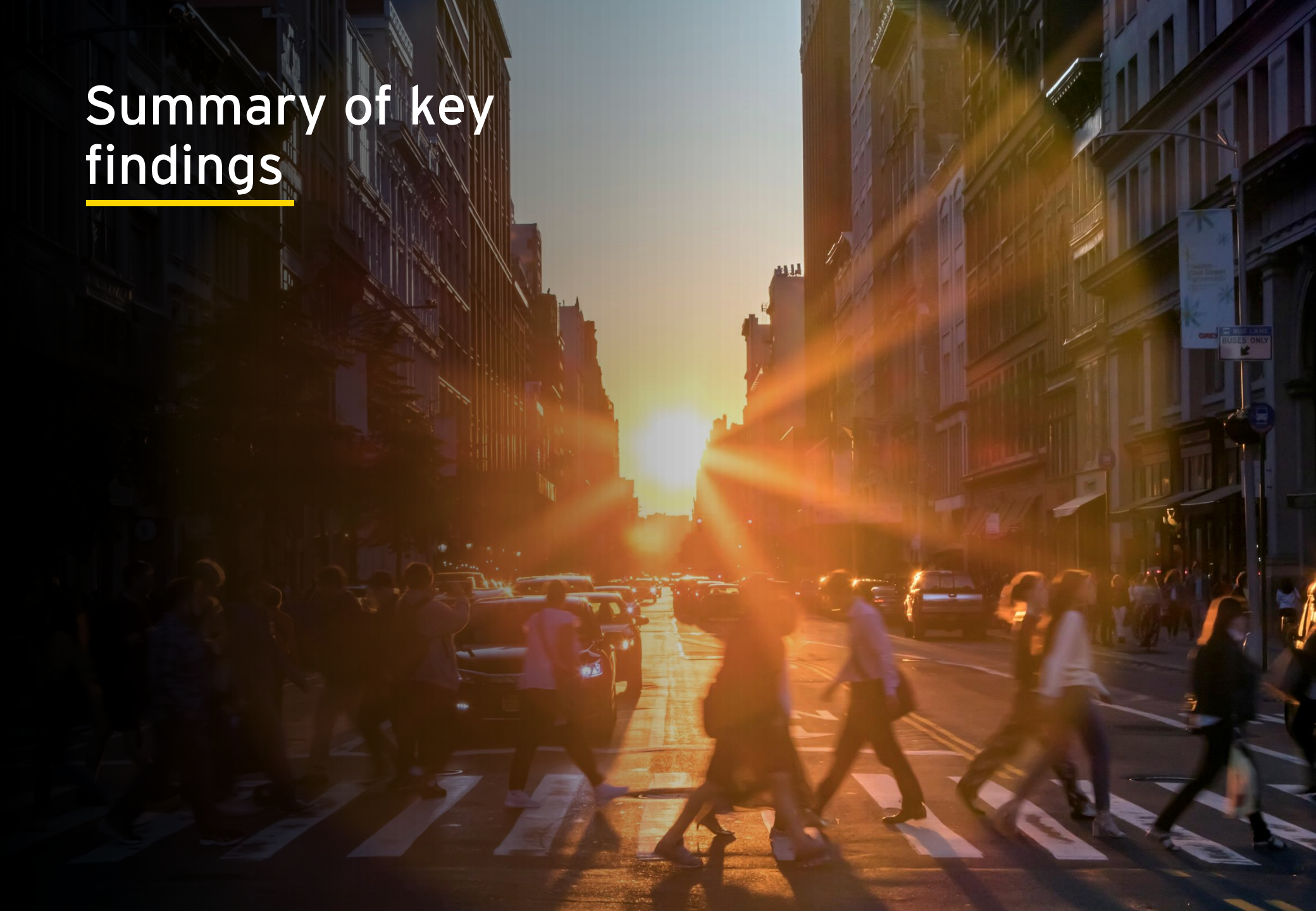
Summary of key findings

1 A diverse sector

The VET sector is diverse and caters to a variety of students participating in a raft of courses in various fields and sectors. As a result, students come from a range of backgrounds with different capabilities and support needs to study effectively.

In transitioning to an online learning environment, recognising that VET students respond differently and that this transition is easier for some more than others is important. Acknowledging the different study mindsets and needs can facilitate suitable support options for different cohorts – from the technological, to the social and wellbeing needs of both students and teachers.

2 Bringing reality to the virtual

Recognising the appeal and motivations for studying a VET course is key to understanding how students have responded to online learning.

Students are drawn to VET for practical, hands-on learning experiences as well as the more experiential aspects such as networking with industry, connecting and learning from peers and teachers and participating in study-related excursions. These aspects have proven difficult to replicate online and appear to have an impact on motivation, engagement and learning outcomes.

3 Trying to make the best of it

The COVID-19 pandemic evidently shocked the education sector and caused providers and students to adapt promptly, without hesitation. Most students acknowledge the challenges providers have faced during the transition to online learning.

Nevertheless, these challenges have had an impact on students and their actual and perceived readiness for the industries they hope to enter as a result of what has been considered as compromised study. Even the most proactive and motivated students have faced setbacks and unexpected costs, and are not always confident in their skills at the end of their study.

4 From face to face to Zoom

For many, the transition to online meant classes were transitioned to Zoom or Teams.

This new way of studying has worked well for some as it reduced distractions and facilitated flexible learning.

However, in practice, students faced a number of challenges as providers learned how to deliver courses whilst operating through government restrictions.

These challenges were driven by the delivery of the classes (the skills of the teachers, scheduling, class sizes), disruptive classmates, and the skills of those learning.

5 A brave new world

Online learning is very different to traditional study and needs to be treated as such. As students engage differently online and face specific challenges, such as screen fatigue and poor engagement, it is important to note that delivering courses this way has to come with a different set of requirements.

While acknowledging that a full transition to online learning was unexpected for all, the new reality means that novel methods of optimal online learning, such as interactive simulations, could be more broadly considered.

Opportunities moving forward

Offering targeted student support that caters to a variety of needs is a key opportunity that has arisen from the research. Effectively bringing the practical, experiential and industry to online learning is another. Furthermore, ensuring equitable access to support and equipment to students as well as teachers, facilitating social networks and ensuring student and teacher accountability for study could go a long way to improving online learning experiences.

> Be more flexible, be willing to provide tools we need.
>
> School leaver, VIC, Hospitality

Detailed findings

Context and understanding

Study context

COVID-19 has changed the study context for students for a variety of reasons. Both providers and students have had to grapple with seismic changes and the necessity to pivot quickly in order to continue teaching and learning as effectively as possible. Both have had to deal with a raft of implications which provide context for the proceeding analysis. Including:

▶ **Impact on practical components for students and teachers...** Shifting to different modes of study to accommodate social distancing has meant that face-to-face study modes were directly impacted, including any practical components. These modes were directly affected by social distancing measures enforced by governments as a result of the pandemic.

▶ **Emotional impact on students and teachers...** Including broad mental and emotional health implications of threats to safety, lockdowns, living situations, financial situations and carrying the burden of having to continue to teach and learn while simultaneously dealing with these issues. The emotional impacts on students and (from the student perspective) their teachers is apparent and an impact on study appears inevitable.

▶ **Overall impact on desire to study...** Broadly the pandemic appeared to have had wide-ranging impacts on desire to study, both from affirmative and negative perspectives. While some may have been reluctant to begin or continue studying due to the pandemic, others may have felt more driven to study as a part of a need to upskill, change roles/careers or use extra time as an opportunity for educational purposes.

▶ **Differing impacts on students according to state...** Of course, government restrictions differed from state to state, as did the timings and length of imposed restrictions. It is important to consider that, for some students, the length of time studying online has been much greater than others.

Reasons to study VET

VET study is viewed as a more accessible and affordable study option that provides a degree of flexibility for students. It is these elements which tend to drive students to participate in VET and make VET study and attractive option when wishing to upskill, change career or otherwise.

▶ **A stepping stone...** VET study is seen a good starting point for getting used to study and building confidence for those who may feel anxious about beginning or re-entering study after a period of time away. It can be used as an introduction to a field and is a seen as a low-risk option for those who do not necessarily want to commit to a larger course (say, through university), but may want to keep this option in the future.

▶ **Affordability...** Associated with this lower risk, VET is study is considered lower cost than other study options such as a university degree. This makes it accessible to a broader audience. Additionally the range of funding options for VET study, including government subsidies make it an attractive and potentially cheaper option in this regard.

▶ **Industry connections...** VET study is considered attractive for its connections to industry including its industry-based teaching staff. This is seen to facilitate opportunities for networking, work experience, contacts and potential job opportunities.

▶ **Career enhancement...** VET study offers an opportunity to upskill or change careers, either through self-determination to pursue an interest or on the necessity of industry or employer. With a number of courses offering practical or hands-on experience, VET is considered an effective way to build new, or build on existing, skills.

▶ **Flexibility...** By and large, VET study is seen as a flexible study option, with regards to a variety of aspects. including:

- **Variety of study options:** including the breadth and depth of courses available.

- **Length:** study options that vary in length so students can pick that which is most appropriate for them.

- **Study modes:** either face to face, in person, mixed, or fully online by which students can choose their preferred learning style to fit study into their life.

66

It doesn't take 4 years like an actual degree. It's more flexible. A good steppingstone, rather than a uni degree which isn't work related. A good options for starting out to get used to study habits. More accessible and with a variety of different study options and courses.

(Career changer / mature age student, VIC, Business)

I chose VET due to work experience, it's more practical than going to uni. With the practice, it's good for your resume. When you do work experience, can add it when applying for jobs.

(School leaver, NSW, Business)

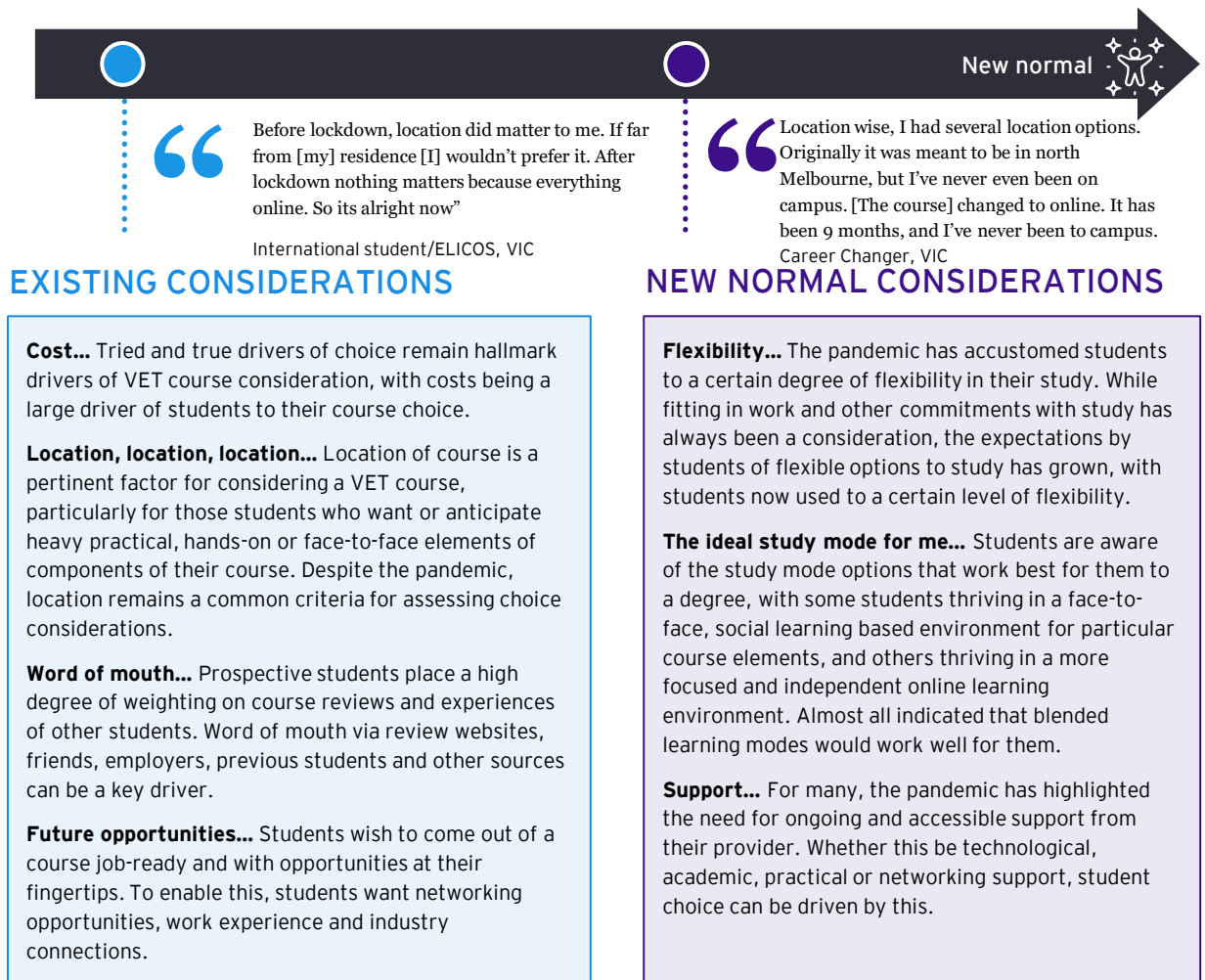EY Sweeney

Choosing a VET course

Considerations when choosing a VET course were traditionally focussed around cost and location. The pandemic has prompted students to reassess these considerations to some extent. Nevertheless, location remains important in the hope that they can at a future time return to the classroom, or have some form of in-person connection with their provider.

New normal

> "Before lockdown, location did matter to me. If far from [my] residence [I] wouldn't prefer it. After lockdown nothing matters because everything online. So its alright now"
>
> International student/ELICOS, VIC

> Location wise, I had several location options. Originally it was meant to be in north Melbourne, but I've never even been on campus. [The course] changed to online. It has been 9 months, and I've never been to campus.
> Career Changer, VIC

A CONVERGENCE OF CONSIDERATIONS

Understanding how the pandemic has affected study attitudes and behaviours is key to understanding how VET students think about choosing a VET course.

Considerations that previously drove student course choice pre-pandemic, while still incredibly relevant, now converge with new considerations that the pandemic has presented for students to factor in. For example, while there is still an expectation of face-to-face course components and in-person engagement, students also want flexibility and autonomy in how, when and where they study.

This may lead to greater prioritisation or compromise by students in various elements of their course consideration.

EXISTING CONSIDERATIONS

Cost... Tried and true drivers of choice remain hallmark drivers of VET course consideration, with costs being a large driver of students to their course choice.

Location, location, location... Location of course is a pertinent factor for considering a VET course, particularly for those students who want or anticipate heavy practical, hands-on or face-to-face elements of components of their course. Despite the pandemic, location remains a common criteria for assessing choice considerations.

Word of mouth... Prospective students place a high degree of weighting on course reviews and experiences of other students. Word of mouth via review websites, friends, employers, previous students and other sources can be a key driver.

Future opportunities... Students wish to come out of a course job-ready and with opportunities at their fingertips. To enable this, students want networking opportunities, work experience and industry connections.

NEW NORMAL CONSIDERATIONS

Flexibility... The pandemic has accustomed students to a certain degree of flexibility in their study. While fitting in work and other commitments with study has always been a consideration, the expectations by students of flexible options to study has grown, with students now used to a certain level of flexibility.

The ideal study mode for me... Students are aware of the study mode options that work best for them to a degree, with some students thriving in a face-to-face, social learning based environment for particular course elements, and others thriving in a more focused and independent online learning environment. Almost all indicated that blended learning modes would work well for them.

Support... For many, the pandemic has highlighted the need for ongoing and accessible support from their provider. Whether this be technological, academic, practical or networking support, student choice can be driven by this.
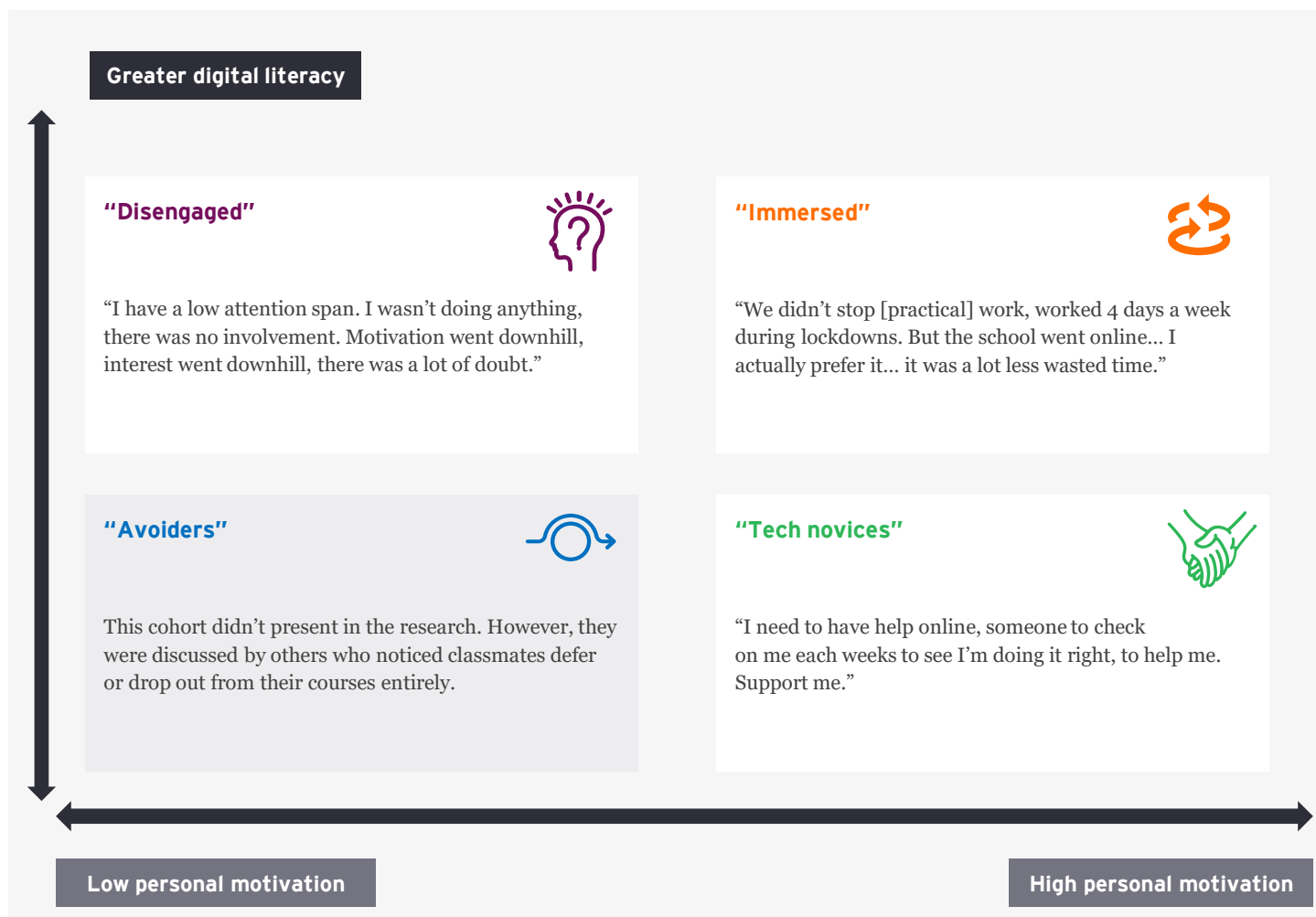
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The VET mindset

The research indicated varying attitudes and capabilities with regards to online learning, which impact on how students perceive and react to online learning,

These mindsets were framed both by students' attitudes and capabilities:

1. **Digital literacy...** Digital literacy plays a large role in how easily and effectively students are able to engage with online learning and study content, from a technological capability perspective.

2. **Personal motivation...** Relating to the level of motivation at an individual level to be proactive and engaged with online learning and learning more broadly.

While these elements exist on a spectrum and are not necessarily fixed, they indicate that students present differing needs and risks when presented with online learning as a result.

Greater digital literacy

"Disengaged"

"I have a low attention span. I wasn't doing anything, there was no involvement. Motivation went downhill, interest went downhill, there was a lot of doubt."

"Immersed"

"We didn't stop [practical] work, worked 4 days a week during lockdowns. But the school went online... I actually prefer it... it was a lot less wasted time."

"Avoiders"

This cohort didn't present in the research. However, they were discussed by others who noticed classmates defer or drop out from their courses entirely.

"Tech novices"

"I need to have help online, someone to check on me each weeks to see I'm doing it right, to help me. Support me."

Low personal motivation

High personal motivation

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The VET mindset

Immersed

Keen to learn: In difficult circumstances, these students are trying to get the most out of the situation they find themselves in. Undeterred by the pandemic, these students are motivated to put in the effort they need to in order to make the best of their studies.

Risks: Despite their best efforts, these students may find themselves frustrated that online learning doesn't provide to them what they need to feel fulfilled and to achieve their best. They may find content too basic or theoretical, or may be disenchanted with teachers, resources and platforms.

Needs:

► Challenging content
► Class discussions
► Social engagement and community
► Networking opportunities
► Work experience opportunities

Disengaged

Need motivation to study: With technological savviness and an aptitude to engage online, these students don't need help with their tech skills. They do however need help with staying connected, maintaining attention, staying motivated and engaged with their study.

Risks: While remaining enrolled and attending class, these students are more likely to 'disappear' at times during class, to be reluctant to participate in rigid online learning, and to be the "ghosts" of the class (i.e. mic and video turned off), that is, to be somewhat present but not fully.

Needs:

► Engaging content and novel styles of online learning
► Sense of community
► Engagement with teachers and peers
► Accountability

Tech novices

Not tech-savvy: These students are keen to learn and want to try their best. They don't however have the digital skills they need to fully immerse in online learning, leaving them to feel a bit lost, alone and confused.

Risks: Despite their keenness and motivation to learn, these students may miss out on key learnings due to the fact that they can't properly engage with the online modality. They may feel daunted, confused and find their ability to engage online is too slow.

Needs:

► Technical support
► Advice and / or accessibility help from their provider
► Simple and user-friendly software

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Needs and expectations

Learning is much more than simple content delivery. Success in their studies in a traditional/face to face environment is much more than just coverage of the content. Those VET students who sought more from a course wanted to gain experiences, connect with others and immerse to allow them to truly engage. Students were the least engaged when adjustments resulting from COVID reduced their course to core content delivery only.

Core learning content	Broader study experience
Coverage of this core content is the basis of their study throughout the pandemic:	The study experience is considered richer as a result of the additional components that can enhance the learning experience

Core learning content

Coverage of this core content is the basis of their study throughout the pandemic:

▶ **Basic coverage**… Content that is core to the study area – the basis of the learning which may involve both practical and theoretical components.

▶ **Access to equipment…** This includes access to equipment and facilities as part of the learning (i.e. professional cameras, electrical equipment, cooking facilities) which is essential for some courses.

Broader study experience

The study experience is considered richer as a result of the additional components that can enhance the learning experience

▶ **Industry expertise…** They want to be able to connect with those who already have a foothold in their respective industry to give them up to date and relevant insight into their field, and to allow them to connect with experts.

▶ **Networking…** Familiarisation with the lecturer/teachers and peers is considered much easier in person. Those who commenced learning after the pandemic hit struggled more to engage with their cohort if they didn't have that existing connection.

▶ **Work placements…** The tangible experience is a highlight for some students keen to gain real world experience, and build up a network in their chosen field.

▶ **Excursions…** Visits to relevant venues/places as connected to the course topic not only exposes the student to their area of study, but also allows them to network with peers and industry along the way.

"

"VET is shorter, more practical, easier to get employment. The learning is more practical, as you do placement hours."

(International / ELICOS student, NSW, Education)

"Lots of my subjects are very practical and hands on, camera, lighting and sound. We missed out on so much of that, didn't get to do it."

(School leaver, NSW, Arts)

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Attitudes to online study

Whilst online learning is now central to many courses, learning fully online is still considered a compromise. There are some clear benefits, in that it is both flexible and can facilitate accessibility. However, there are clear challenges in terms of the nature of VET study, as well as with the motivation of the students themselves.

Flexible and accessible

✓ Online learning has allowed students to continue to access their studies during times when all face to face study was impossible. It has enabled some VET students to have a focus through lockdowns, and progress their learning at a pace that suited them, giving them a greater sense of control.

✓ In some instances, learning has been enhanced as a result of transitioning to online as the removal of distractions allows them to focus.

Best suited to core learning content

▶ The broader benefits linked to VET study that can enhance the learning experience are considered compromised in a digital world.

▶ In addition, although there was some experience with simulations, students expressed that it simply isn't the same as doing something in person.

Reality of the experience more challenging

▶ Technical challenges, variation in skills and student disruptions are central to the online learning experience, making it disruptive.

▶ Ability to engage, and interact through the online medium is much more difficult and less organic. It becomes more difficult to ask questions and it can be disruptive.

Personal motivation critical

▶ Working 'alone' can be an Isolating experience, with students finding it easier to hide under the radar.

▶ This difficulty in connecting with others (both peers and teachers) can make it difficult to stay motivated – particularly if the course is largely self-paced.

> "
> "I found [online] difficult for group assignments, if it's by yourself you can do it on your own. For groups, its difficult when its online, you can't chat with the person, check with them in person. Sometimes you can't find them. It's challenging for online study. But online is more flexible. Studying while working, its easier to manage time with recorded lectures."
>
> (International / ELICOS student, ACT, Education)

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Impact of COVID-19

Impact of the pandemic

Digital connectivity has played a key role in ensuring that organisations can continue to operate through global lockdowns, including in the education sector – from schools through to higher education.

Online has typically been viewed as an inferior approach to learning – as outlined in our University of the Future research, 37% of students believe online learning is as effective as traditional learning methods – highlighting a sizable proportion that disagree with this statement (source: https://www.ey.com/en_au/government-public-sector/can-the-universities-of-today-lead-learning-for-tomorrow).

Nevertheless, it has been an essential medium, that has allowed students to continue to study through the pandemic.

For the students involved in this research, the transition to online has had varying perceived success, with some clear challenges raised as a result.

> "
> I have a low attention span when it comes to academic things. [During COVID, with the shift to online learning], I wasn't doing anything, there was no involvement. I ended up deferring. I wasn't keeping up with the work.
>
> (School leaver, VIC, Building & Construction)

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Provider response to Covid-19

Students highlighted a range of approaches that providers took to manage the initial repercussions of the pandemic.

1. Pause

Some took time to determine how to move forward with learning

▶ **Face to face classes cancelled/postponed…** As providers sought to understand how to manage learning moving forward.

▶ **Varying duration of hiatus…** The pause ranged from relatively short term (i.e. a week or two) to longer term where classes were paused for months.

> " I can't remember when lockdown started but there was 4 months where we had no school. They only set it up towards the end of lockdown because they couldn't get it organised.
>
> (School leaver, VIC, Hospitality)

Impacts

▶ Disengagement from learning and the provider as students lack certainty as to their future learning pathway.

2. Pivot to online

Students were in the classroom on one day, with online learning resuming the next

▶ **Immediate switch to online…** Some students highlighted that their classes were immediately conducted virtually and their entire course was transitioned to online.

▶ **Impact to scheduling…** Delivery of the learning in some instances meant classes were delivered over 1 day, rather than 3 and could have larger student numbers.

> " My course was meant to be only on campus, then changed from 3 days on campus to 1 long day online on Saturday 8am – 5pm, crammed all into one day rather than 3. It was quite mind numbing.
>
> (Mature age student, VIC, Human Services)

Impacts

▶ Limited time to consider the online experience.

▶ Availability of suitable teaching/delivery skills.

▶ Limited ability to deliver practical experiences

3. Adapt

▶ **Re-think of learning structure…** Some students flagged that their providers focussed the structure of the learning, encouraging students to focus on theoretical aspects of the course, with the practical to be re-scheduled at a later date.

> " Classes got cancelled. Got emails from college saying that now is a good time to focus on [theoretical aspects of] the course, with self-paced learning.
>
> (Mature age student, NSW, Health and Nutrition)

Impacts

▶ Practical elements missed altogether before course completion

▶ Students making compromises (i.e. using personal equipment that may be inferior)

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Covid-19 impact timeline

Students' have been on a journey as providers have responded and learned how to deliver courses throughout the COVID-19 pandemic along with the regular disruptions different states faced.

There are key points of impact at which students had differing needs to effectively make the transition to online learning, and subsequently a new evolving model of learning more broadly.

It is important to consider that, prior to the pandemic, providers were offering online or blended learning to varying degrees.

Common themes across each of these impact points include the need for continual communication and support from providers.

Disruption... to learning.

Face-to-face learning cancelled. Providers pause, pivot or adapt

Need:

▸ *Communication from provider*
▸ *Information on impacts, implications, alternatives*
▸ *Support for ongoing study*

Initial shift to online learning only

Need:

▸ *Technological support*
▸ *Communication from provider and teachers*
▸ *Wellbeing check-ins*
▸ *Course counselling i.e. how this might affect their VET study (i.e. impact on practical study, work experience, etc.)*

Ongoing online learning

Need:

▸ *Regular check -ins with provider / teachers*
▸ *Opportunities to connect with peers*
▸ *Engaging learning methods*

New normal

Need:

▸ *Ongoing support and communication from provider*

Return of face-to-face learning – mixed modes

Need:

▸ *Communication about status of learning*
▸ *Support adjusting back to face-to-face modes*

Learning as normal

Need:

▸ *Support as usual*

Pandemic

Pre-Pandemic

Now

Time... from the very initial stages of the pandemic, and through its evolution.

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Impact on the study experience – core content

Ultimately, throughout the pandemic, students found that the core content was much more easily transitioned to the online environment, although it did present some challenges with regards to accessing equipment and the practical classes.

Practical classes

Students found that their practical classes were cancelled during the lockdowns – some of them never experiencing any practical learning throughout the duration of their course.

These students who never had the opportunity to experience practical learning as part of their course, commented on their feelings of unpreparedness for their future roles. Students were concerned that they hadn't acquired the practical skills they need and queried whether they were in fact qualified as a result of their study.

For some, practical classes resumed at points when restrictions eased – though this was largely in the states that have been impacted less by COVID-19 (WA, SA, QLD).

Access to equipment/books

Those students who need access to equipment and materials have been particularly frustrated about the lack of access to these resources as a result of COVID-19. Although providers have clearly tried to make the best of the situation, some students flagged that they or their classmates missed out on access to quality equipment or materials that they wouldn't have otherwise, if studying in a non-COVID-19 environment. For example, digital hardware, books, fabric, cooking utensils.

For these students who did not have access, the quality of the learning experience was diminished. Students who were able to acquire their own equipment and materials had a richer learning experience and an advantage over those who did not. This ultimately meant that some students were able to acquire skills others missed out on.

"I'm missing out on practical components I need to use in the field. If I'm going to be a builder, I need to know what I'm doing"

(School leaver, VIC, Building & Construction)

EY Sweeney

Case study - online learning was a success

Immersed: Robbie

▶ **Who are they...** A young apprentice electrician, Robbie is halfway through currently completing a Cert III in electrotechnology. He loves his job and is keen to upskill where he can.

▶ **The attitude...** Robbie is highly motivated and keen to learn. Despite COVID-19 and the pandemic, he is still raring to go and with work continuing on for tradies, he has a positive attitude and is able to put his mind to the matter to continue learning effectively.

▶ **The experience and needs...** As a tradie apprentice, Robbie has been able to continue working on a building site and gaining essential practical experience on the job. As he works full-time, he has found the transition to online learning to be convenient and flexible, fitting it with his other life commitments. He is a technologically savvy millennial, and as such has no trouble jumping online for a lecture. All of his classes and theoretical components of his course are now online. He has no qualms about this and his learning experience has been overwhelmingly positive and productive as he is able to fully immerse in each of his learning components. In fact, Robbie has found he is able to concentrate more effectively with online learning and learn at his own pace, due to the fact he is not distracted by his peers. Before COVID-19 hit, Robbie would attend classes with his tradie mates, and while enjoying the social aspects of his course, at times, found his tradie mates distracting. He can go at his own pace, doesn't have issues with lecturers and finds his practical and social aspects of learning outside the classroom at his current job anyway. As he was already familiar with his peers and teachers, his ability to connect with others through COVID-19 was strong. As such learning during the pandemic has been a quality experience for him and he has experienced no negative impacts.

> ❝ [My theory] went online for COVID. I actually prefer it, because for the Cert III there's a lot of time wasted because you're sitting there waiting for everyone else.
>
> (School leaver, VIC, Building & Construction)
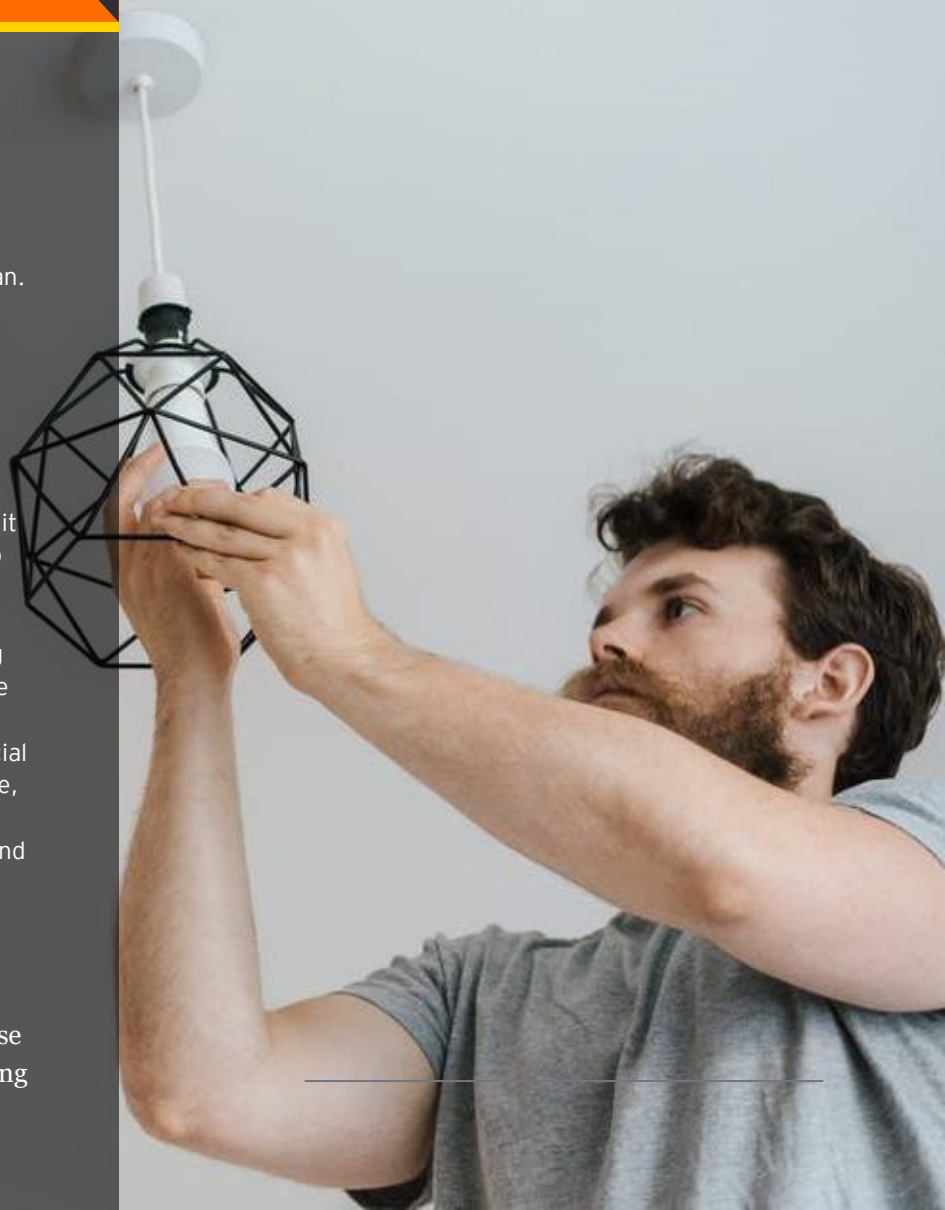
Impact on the study experience – broader student experience

Ultimately, most students felt that the digital experience could only replace some aspects of the study experience (largely the core content). Where students felt most impacted was with regards to the range of elements that make up the broader study experience.

Industry expertise

Industry expertise tends to be viewed as a major drawcard to undertaking a VET course, through learning from industry teachers, gaining exposure to organisations within a particular field and attending industry events and sessions.

As a result of the cancellation of most face-to-face interactions, access to industry expertise has been limited in an online environment, in line with the cancellation of many practical classes and in-person events.

While students may still have access to industry teaching professionals, this is constrained in an online contact environment.

Networking

Traditionally, students seek to build their networks through a number of mediums, including work experience, connection with industry-based teaching staff, excursions, and peer engagement.

The challenge that many have faced through COVID-19 is that this is considered much more difficult to do online. Whilst some students felt their provider had attempted to facilitate this, in reality it was considered difficult.

The online environment is thought to constrain interaction, making it harder for students to try and stand out/differentiate themselves through informal discussions.

Work placements

Along with the practical classes, work experience is highly valued by VET students looking for hands on experience within their chosen field.

Although understandable that there have been impacts to this, for some it is a source of frustration as they look to move into a career or vocation that they have very limited tangible experience in.

Excursions

There was a general understanding that excursions would be impacted as a result of the pandemic. However, in states where this had resumed (i.e. South Australia), students highlighted that they were left out of pocket if they wanted to take up this opportunity. This was thought to be different to before the pandemic with the costs of an excursion was included in the study fees.

EY Sweeney

Case study - practical course cancelled

Immersed: Charlotte

- **Who are they...** Charlotte is a school leaver who completed her TAFE course in fashion design during VCE independently of her school. Following on from her VET course she is looking to continue her studies in fashion design at university.

- **The attitude...** Charlotte is passionate about design and undertook a VET course alongside her VCE studies as a result of her interest in the creative arts. As design is her passion, she is highly motivated to study and tries her best to stay engaged during online study.

- **The experience and needs...** While highly proactive to make the most of difficult circumstances, Charlotte has faced a number of setbacks during the course of her study. Her face-to-face practical course components were cancelled and shifted to online, and her access to the resources she needs to effectively gain the required skills has been limited. She has not been able to access material to make her designs, a core component of her fashion design course. She also had no access to a mannequin which was crucial in learning how to design and drape fabric correctly. For materials, Charlotte ended up out of pocket for fabric she bought herself and was not able to acquire a mannequin. She also had limited access to industry networking - though there were attempts to shift this online too - in an industry where connections are highly valued. Unperturbed, Charlotte soldiered on, regularly catching up with a friend for DIY practical sessions and to fill the social void of online learning. Her personal motivation allowed her to go on and complete the course.

> " I really learn by doing, by being shown techniques. In a studio we learn lots about techniques and the industry. I know how to do it now, but not properly.
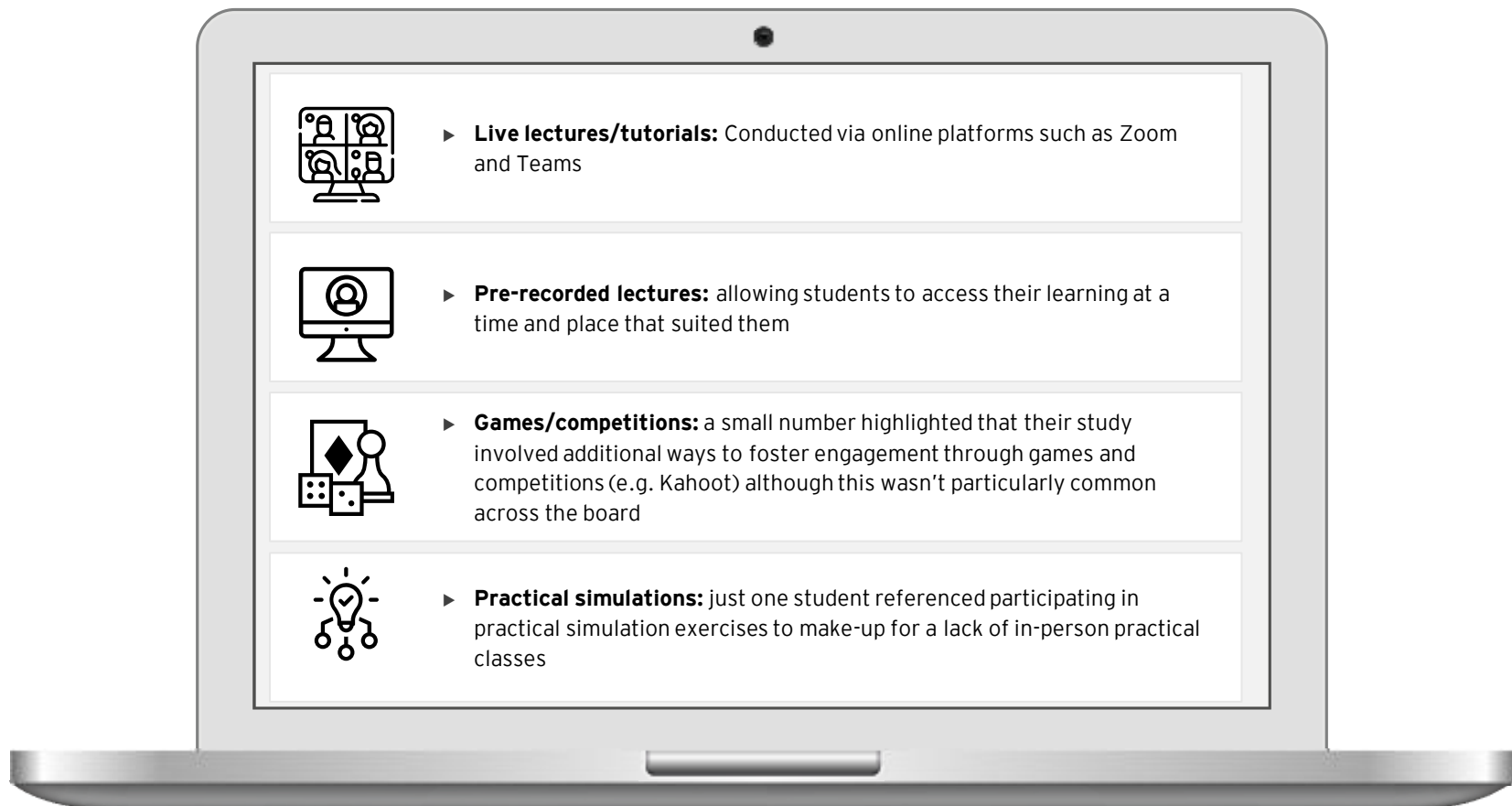>
> (School leaver, VIC, Fashion)

The digital experience

▶ Students were most likely to report that their provider had responded to COVID by replacing face to face lectures with Zoom or Teams lectures. Very few reported more sophisticated approaches. Where asynchronous learning was available, it tended to be via pre-recorded lectures, without other tech-supported learning methods.

▶ **Live lectures/tutorials:** Conducted via online platforms such as Zoom and Teams

▶ **Pre-recorded lectures:** allowing students to access their learning at a time and place that suited them

▶ **Games/competitions:** a small number highlighted that their study involved additional ways to foster engagement through games and competitions (e.g. Kahoot) although this wasn't particularly common across the board

▶ **Practical simulations:** just one student referenced participating in practical simulation exercises to make-up for a lack of in-person practical classes

EY Sweeney

The digital experience - Live lectures/tutorials

Widely available platforms like Zoom and Teams have been key to helping students remain connected throughout COVID-19, and those involved in the research highlighted this as a key component of their online learning experience. This has allowed them to continue with their studies when in-person contact hasn't been possible.

What worked well

Live lectures have allowed students to access learning remotely and continue their course through the pandemic. For some, this approach to learning has worked in their favour:

- **No in-person distractions...** without the distractions that can come with class-based learning, students could concentrate on the content and progress through their studies

- **Maintaining live contact...** students still felt that they were 'attending' class. While not the same as usual, it allowed students to maintain a sense of contact

- **Existing social groups...** students who already had friends / acquaintances in their live lectures seemed to have a more positive experience when it came to engaging with learning and maintaining motivation

Student concerns

- **Uncomfortable/reluctant...** to speak up or ask questions in a live lecture environment where students felt as though discussions with teachers would be amplified to the whole class in an online setting. This caused students to be enthusiastic about a return to the classroom, where they felt they were able to interact, ask questions and be more comfortably connected to their learning.

- **A loss of one-on-one time...** where there was little opportunity to have individual discussions with teaching staff during the course of a live lecture

Examples of online platforms given by students:

- ▶ **Zoom**

- ▶ **Teams**

- ▶ **WebEx**

- ▶ **Kahoot**

Most students indicated these platforms functioned well for the purpose of live online lectures. Some commented that interactive platforms, such as Kahoot, were better for staying engaged with live-classes.

EY Sweeney

The digital experience - Live lectures

Although this medium allowed students to continue their course, there were also a number of challenges associated with this learning.

Challenges/risks

Student concerns:

▶ **Connectivity...** not universally good, resulting in students dropping out, challenges with sound and potentially missing out on content

▶ **Visibility...** the platforms can make it easy for students to literally disengage by turning off their microphones and cameras. This in turn feeds in to the challenge around limitations in connecting with peers

▶ **New classmates...** some noted that their class was attended by some who were not enrolled

Skills of the teaching staff:

▶ **Management of the class...** a key concern was around teachers' ability to manage a class in an online environment, including managing the students/disruptions as well as effective content delivery

▶ **Tech knowledge...** difficulty in managing the technology, such as an inability to put students on mute, meant some students would have to step in and help

▶ **Behaviour...** as well as students learning from home, teachers were also teaching from home. There were some questions raised about the professionalism of some teachers in this environment (i.e. going to the bathroom throughout the lecture)

Provider management:

▶ **Scheduling...** was managed differently, with some students attending full day lectures that would have been delivered in multiple sessions if face to face (i.e. all day on a Saturday), making it tiring and difficult to concentrate

▶ **Class sizes...** some also noted that their classes online grew in size, making it much more difficult to engage with others and experienced more disruptions as people attempt to engage

Impact by mindset

▶ **Disengaged:** May disappear and isolate from the class in this environment if cameras/microphones were not required

▶ **Tech novices:** Could face more technical challenges, making it easier for them to miss the content and/or disrupt the class

▶ **Immersed:** Raise concern about the quality of the learning, and face challenges engaging with the class/teacher (inability to ask questions without disrupting the class). They may take initiative and try to help the teachers with technical challenges

If managed well, students have the ability to concentrate and get through the content. However, there is a lot that can go wrong, from a range of different perspectives making it a highly disruptive environment, and one where it can be easy for students to disengage.

EY Sweeney

Case study - no computer skills

The tech novice: Kathy

▶ **Who are they...** Kathy is a mother and grandmother, currently looking to transition into work in the carer industry. As such she is undertaking a VET course in aged care.

▶ **The attitude...** Kathy has a go-getting attitude. Looking to transition into aged-care after taking care of her children as well as her elderly parents for some years, she has a passion for the sector and wants to learn as much as possible throughout her study. Unfortunately, Kathy is not as tech-savvy. She prefers traditional learning methods, like textbooks and practical components that are hands-on.

▶ **The experience and needs...** As the pandemic has hit, Kathy has really struggled with some of the ramifications. She doesn't know how to use a computer, let alone the online platforms that her provider has asked her to use and can barely navigate the intricacies of the internet. Even Microsoft Office is all new to her. As a result, Kathy needs early and consistent technology training and support from her provider – something that has so far been provided but lacking in volume and efficacy. As this tech support has been conducted remotely, this too has been a big barrier to her learning. One of the other big impacts on Kathy is that, as a result of her field of study being in aged care, Kathy has been understandably shut-off from accessing aged-care homes, due to safety requirements. As a result, she cannot participate in practical exercises and instead has resorted to practising her learnings in caring on her elderly parents. Kathy is aware that she must gain practical training before she can work in her field, but is forced to wait until she is allowed to access aged-care facilities to do this. Keen to stay motivated and engaged, these set-backs haven't disheartened Kathy and she is continuing to learn how to use new technology so she can complete her course and pursue her career.

> " [What's important to me is that] I have help online, someone checks on me each week to see I'm doing it, help me. Support.
>
> (Career changer, QLD, Human Services)

The digital experience – pre-recorded lectures

Students valued the option for pre-recorded lecturers. However, in isolation, they can make it easier to disengage meaning they work much better when combined with other methods of engagement.

What worked well

A self-paced approach to learning that some students really value:

▶ **In their own time…** allowing access the learning at a time that suits them – making it much easier to fit their study in, when perhaps it wouldn't otherwise be possible

▶ **Ideal for revision…** the ability to go back to the lecture, revise and review content they may have missed the first time

Challenges/risks

Motivation is key if this is the primary mode of delivery for study:

▶ **Quality of the delivery…** when done well, it can be highly engaging, but lectures that fail to engage (i.e. through monotone delivery) can make it harder for students to effectively connect with the content

▶ **Motivation needed…** this learning approach requires a degree of autonomy, and students need to have some level of self-motivation. If the content fails to engage, or students are facing issues that may otherwise prevent them from engaging effectively, it could result in them giving up

Impact by mindset

▶ **Disengaged:** May struggle with motivation, and can easily disengage from content that doesn't capture their interest

▶ **Tech novices:** As it is more self-paced, and requires them to engage on their own, they may struggle with practically engaging (logging on, finding the content, etc.)

▶ **Immersed:** If solely pre-recorded lectures, this cohort may miss out on the lack of personal engagement, or the ability to ask questions

There was a mixed response to pre-recorded lectures, which are thought to work well if used in conjunction with other learning approaches.

EY Sweeney

The digital experience - practical simulations/games/competitions

It appeared that fewer students had experienced additional ways to engage with content, although those who had appreciated that they were able to do so.

Simulations

Few had experienced simulations in place of practical work (possibly a result of the speed at which providers had been required to switch to online). However, those who had experienced these highlighted:

- **Connection...** classes were split into smaller groups allowing students to connect with others and work together online

- **Engaging...** an immersive way to understand the content and think differently about what they are learning

- **Problem solving...** working through scenarios allowed the students to think about how they would manage situations in real life

... however, the student who had a relatively positive simulated experience still had concerns over her readiness to move into the workplace with no other practical experience highlighting that this type of learning can only take students so far.

Games/competitions

The few who had experienced games or competitions (through platforms like Kahoot) highlighted a number of benefits:

- **Connection...** allowing them to get to know their peers more

- **Engaging...** a more engaging way to learning content, facilitating knowledge retention

- **Accountability...** encouraged them to attend class and take ownership of their learning

... although this is a good way to facilitate engagement, it was very few students who claimed to have accessed this approach to learning.

Impact by mindset

- **Disengaged:** offering this cohort the option to participate in any simulations or games could help them to remain connected to the class, and improve accountability.

- **Tech novice:** may need greater support if undertaking simulations or participating in games/competitions digitally.

- **Immersed:** a valuable way to take the learning further and create connections

> Although these approaches are valued highly, they aren't always considered effective replacements to face to face study. Nevertheless, they can facilitate engagement, but don't appear to be widely used.

EY Sweeney

Student response

The pandemic has had a big impact on all walks of life. How students responded to the their experience of online learning was somewhat impacted by how they managed some of the challenges with lockdowns, and general uncertainty around the future of industry. With varying coping mechanisms employed, students also managed their studies differently:

Make the most of the time	Those that decided to use the lockdowns to their advantage, as they seek to get ahead or accelerate their learning overall with as much education as possible before industry opens up.
Get through the theory	Students who saw the period as time to work through the theoretical components of their study quicker than they otherwise would, and would look to complete their practical components face-to-face when allowed.
Re-think career	Students who found time to pause and reflect, to find their passion and use the pandemic to re-think their career direction.
Getting through it	Students that just wanted to get through the learning as easily as they could without the engagement they really needed – knowing that they were potentially compromising their learning outcomes.
Time out	*Although this cohort was not a part of this study, as the 'avoider' group, students talked of others taking a pause to think about their options or to wait until study could resume in a semi-normal manner (inferred).*

❝

"Motivation went downhill, interest went downhill. There was a lot of doubt. I didn't know if this was still for me."

(School leaver, VIC, Building & Construction)

EY Sweeney

Case study - lack of accountability

Disengaged: Bobby

▶ **Who are they...** The perennial student and jack of all trades, Bobby is completing his third VET course, this time in management. He sees VET as a stepping stone to greater things and believes having different options and pathways of study is key to his success.

▶ **The attitude...** Bobby's attitude to study is relatively relaxed. He is technologically savvy and finds it easy to navigate online platforms, but struggles to stay motivated without teacher support, accountability and others to feed off in the class. At times, he finds assignments difficult which has resulted in him having to resubmit them multiple times. It is in these instances that he feels he needs more support of teachers or trainers. Without these aspects, he finds class difficult.

▶ **The experience and needs...** Bobby has no trouble transitioning to an online earning environment from a skills point of view, and with few practical components to his course he doesn't feel that he's missing out much in that regard. What he does miss is the comradery of being in a room with other students and feeding off the energy of his peers and teachers. He finds he struggles to get this in an online environment where everyone has their cameras switched off, the lecture isn't interactive and he has trouble keeping up with what is going on. When it comes to assignment time, Bobby feels as though he is struggling a little more than usual, without face-to-face support from his teachers, he has to put up with inconsistent emails and teachers that are not as responsive as he needs. He is disengaged and has switched off from his course - just hoping to pass.

" Online you can cut corners, it' not disciplined. You can't really have a laugh like you can in person. You don't get the energy off other people.

(Career changer, VIC, Business)

Provider handling of the pandemic

Attitudes to provider

Provider handling and ongoing management of the VET course learning during the pandemic strongly impacted on the overall student experience and learning outcomes throughout the period. While providers executed alternative study plans in various ways, there are consistent elements that determine whether a provider managed the transition to online learning well or poorly, and the subsequent impact on the online study experience. This was impacted by:

▶ **Communication and engagement with students…** At all stages of the pandemic, students needed clear and direct communication from their provider on all aspects of their course, what was happening to their course, how it would affect their study plans, information around changes or shifts in their study and general reassurance. Students feel it is important that providers maintain consistent and regular communication with them, even if, at the time, the provider wasn't yet sure of how they intended to manage learning during the pandemic. Communication is a key pain point for students' interactions with their provider, with some experiencing very little engagement, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. This exacerbated heavy feelings of uncertainty and impacted negatively on the study experience.

▶ **Support…** Student attitudes to their provider consistently correlated with the level of support they received. While there is acknowledgement that providers had to change quickly when social distancing measures came into effect, students wanted support ranging from technological and equipment support to wellbeing support. This is particularly pertinent from a educational support perspective, where given the lack of opportunities for in person facetime with teachers, the offering of basic study support from teachers and peers, as well as basic access to learning resources and equipment, were baseline requirements for the VET study experience.

> "
> They did the best they could with what they had at the time.
>
> (School leaver, VIC, Fashion)

EY Sweeney

Communications to students

While students acknowledged that providers were under pressure to adapt when COVID-19 hit, they believed that communication was a key pain point and a crucial area that be improved.

COMMUNICATION PAIN POINTS

▶ **Inconsistent...** Students seemed to have widely different experiences with communication from their providers, ranging from relatively regular, through to non-existent. Some stated that they would have preferred acknowledgement from their provider about their unpreparedness for the evolving situation rather no communication. Many noted sporadic updates, unresponsiveness to inquiries and changes to study timetabling without consultation.

▶ **Impersonal...** Some felt that the communication from providers was generic and lacked specificity to their personal situation. Some indicated they had experienced automated responses to queries, either administrative or course-related, while others commented on the fact that they didn't have the opportunity to speak to a real-person, instead deferring to impersonal email responses that ignored their situation and left them feeling lost.

▶ **Lack of available channels...** A limited range of channels for communication was a clear limitation to communication for some. Using email as the primary form of communication between providers and teachers appeared to be insufficient in meeting the needs of students and contributed to inconsistency and personalisation as mentioned above.

▶ **Communication expectations...** Students were, at times, expected to monitor multiple communication channels for updates, however some students experienced instances when only one channel or platform was updated, while other channels were not. Adding to the stress this caused, students were sometimes expected to respond to communications from providers promptly or within a certain timeframe. Teachers and providers, on the other hand, were often delayed in responding to student communications – suggesting there were differing communication standards applicable to students and to teachers respectively – and causing further stress to students.

RISKS

▶ **Confusion...** A lack of clear and consistent communication can leave students feeling lost, confused and stressed, directly affecting their ability to positively engage with study.

▶ **Misinformation...** A lack of clarity and knowledge means misinformation is likely to spread, deadlines are missed and requirements misinterpreted.

▶ **Disengagement...** Generally, frustration and confusion at the lack of communication has lead students to become more disengaged and less accountable. Feeling disconnected inevitably left some students questioning their course of study.

EY Sweeney

Communications to students

Despite some communication difficulties, there were some exemplar cases of communication from providers. A two-way communication system between the student and provider / teacher tended to work well for many students in an online learning environment.

Examples of good practice

▶ **Monitoring student progress...** through attendance and assessments to see if and where students were falling short, in order to offer extra support for those struggling. This was beneficial for students who felt 'like a number' in their online class and, as a result, were reluctant to speak out to their provider if they were struggling.

▶ **Checking in on students...** having one-on-one check-ins, for example an individual monthly phone call with a teacher, allowed students to feel comfortable to speak freely, to share their concerns and to confidently ask questions without the impediment of other students

EY Sweeney

Skills of teachers

Capabilities and adaptability of teaching staff, including that of lecturers and trainers, can make all the difference to the online student learning experience. Equipping teachers with the necessary skills, resources and technical capabilities may go a long way to ensuring students are motivated, engaged and supported.

Students noted common experiences with teaching staff and setbacks they faced as a result. While they again acknowledged the quick adjustments teachers had to make and the pressure they were under, the skills of teachers had a direct impact on their learning experiences. Recognising that the pedagogy is different to traditional learning, and equipping teachers with the right skills and resources is particularly important in an online setting.

▶ **Knowledge of digital platforms…** Students expressed that not all teachers had a base level understanding of digital platforms and technological nous to effectively run classes. A common gripe was a lack of technical know-how to run basic classes on platforms such as Zoom, Teams etc. and that teachers required upskilling in this space (simply being able to place the class on mute, for example).

▶ **Ability to connect in a digital forum…** Students found it difficult to engage in classes where teachers struggled to connect with students in stimulating and digitally-friendly ways. Dull, monotonous lectures were cited as contributing to a lack of engagement and

motivation in class as a result. A challenge for teachers is to develop engaging content versus reading off a script.

▶ In a similar vein, to drive further engagement and collaboration, students appreciate teachers fostering a sense of community with their peers – something they found to be lacking. Students tended to see peer-to-peer engagement as a meaningful mechanism to help reinforce their learning.

▶ **Ability to handle/manage class dynamics…** Learning to manage dynamics in an online setting (e.g. keeping people quiet, answering questions effectively and equitably, allowing people to drop in and out, being able to facilitate class discussions) is a necessary and needed skill for teachers in an online setting – and one that not all got right.

▶ **At-home etiquette/decorum…** Students cited examples of teachers inadvertently oversharing or blurring the lines between home and work. Ensuring that teachers maintain a professional demeanour when teaching at home allows students to feel safe and supported.

"

Teachers needed more training on how to use zoom. Some teachers were not used to online training, they needed training for that. A lot of them struggled.

(School leaver, SA, Fitness)

The lady had to troubleshoot herself a lot. Basic stuff like that. She would forget she was muted. For me it was basic stuff, for her, she was older and struggled.

(Career changer, QLD, Human Services)

EY Sweeney

Student support

Students suggested online learning was often isolating and with support aspects of face-to-face learning removed from the online student experience, the ability to access other means of support was considered even more important.

▶ **Community and social support...** While preferencing differing learning styles, students found that the online learning setting facilitated a lack of connection to their peers and teachers or a 'cameras off' disconnect, an inability or lack of opportunities to ask questions, an inability to reinforce their learning through meaningful peer discussions or to learn new ideas through informal or incidental encounters, resulting subsequently in a lack of overall motivation and engagement with study. While some proactive students tried to create informal opportunities to connect, support from providers to combat these issues, such as interactive online activities, is enthusiastically welcomed.

▶ Students who were fortunate to have regular check-in with teachers and peers found that this was key driver of their ability to stay engaged.

▶ **Practical and equipment support...** Having equitable access to equipment required for study is an important aspect of VET. With many practical classes cancelled or pivoting to online, the importance of having equipment to adequately prepare students for their

industries cannot be understated. Some students found that a lack of practical course components or a shift to online practical classes, combined with a lack of access to equipment caused them to feel unprepared or unskilled – and they would even be inclined to participate in voluntary follow-up practical skills sessions with their provider to ensure they gained the skills they felt they missed out on. Some found they had to purchase materials or equipment that would've otherwise been provided to them, at their own expense.

▶ **Mental health support...** Through the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, their study and the future, students who had general welfare check-ins genuinely appreciated this.

▶ **Networking and future opportunities...** With face-to-face opportunities for networking and industry exposure being a key drawcard of VET study, and also sidelined, students are conscious of having support from their provider to continue being able to access industry and the opportunities this can create for them.

> **"**
>
> I got it done because I had a friend there, but not to the best of my ability. I would have liked to have seen what others in the class were doing [but you couldn't online]. That would've helped with learning and creativity.
>
> (School leaver, VIC, Fashion)

Technology support

The general simplicity of online course delivery meant that those who were already confident with online were able to excel while those who lacked technical know-how struggled to even get online and stay engaged.

While they didn't lack the motivation for their study, this mindset group, 'the tech novices' could have avoided technology pitfalls if they had been better supported through the transition to online study, via provider support sessions and consultations, and actively encouraged to access support where already available.

EY Sweeney

Rating the quality of training received during COVID-19

To ascertain the students' perceived quality of the training received during COVID-19, students were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 to 10, the quality of training received.

Student quality scores varied, with the majority of scores sitting at 6 or 7 out of 10. Some common themes came through in students' reasoning of these scores:

▶ **High scores (8-10)…** Students that gave high scores indicated this was due to good communication and student support from provider, opportunity for flexibility in online learning, opportunity for blended learning, supportive teachers and well-structured lessons.

▶ **Middle scores (5-7)…** Students that gave middle scores indicated this was due to missed face-to-face connections, poor use of technology by teachers, lack of interaction, lack of practical, classes, but that some positive elements such as supportive teachers and engaging content / delivery made up for some of these things.

▶ **Low scores (1-5)…** Students that gave low scores indicated this was due to little support, inability to ask questions, monotonous lectures, lack of practical classes, lack of interaction with teachers and other students, poor communication from provider, unprepared or non-technologically capable teaching staff and that an online delivery mode unsuited to their learning style.

QUALITY OF TRAINING RATING

Score	Frequency
1 0 - Excellent	1
9	3
8	3
7	5
6	5
5	1
4	2
3	2
2	2
1 - Poor	-

Base: n=24
Q. If you could sum up your course at this stage, on scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate the quality of the training you received during COVID-19?

EY Sweeney

Suggested provider improvements by students

Taking into account the preceding analysis, students offered suggestions for how the provider could have improved in their shift to online learning during the pandemic.

▶ **More opportunities for social interaction...** for example formalised peer study groups, mechanisms or channels through which students could easily ask questions

▶ **Better and consistent communication...** through regular updates, personalised communication and talking directly to each student over the phone where possible

▶ **Improve teacher etiquette...** with regards to at-home demeanour, management of online classes and technological aptness

▶ **Fun and / or practical activities...** such as competitions and gamification to keep students motivated and engaged

▶ **Incorporate more visual learning aspects...** particularly in live or pre-recorded lecture formats

> " COVID added an extra element of solidarity. Online learners might have had a get together at one point or have study groups. But COVID makes you meet no one, everything is so solo. It's a bit lonely. And I'm not a lonely person. You don't have anyone to ask. There's no contention to classmates, [if you] need a person to talk to, work together, meet up. We used to have meet ups when first started, but [don't] do it now.
>
> (Mature age student, QLD, Human Services)

> " Be more open, talk to the person properly, answer emails. Communicate where you're going wrong, don't leave person for weeks. Quick email with feedback. I don't get much.
>
> (Mature age student, QLD, Human Services)

EY Sweeney

Learning outcomes

Back to 'normal'

The rapid, evolving and ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic means that many students and providers are still working out how to best operate in a COVID-19 world. It is important to note that students and providers in different states experienced, and are still experiencing, various degrees and rates of change and recovery. As such, there is no uniform approach.

Various stages of a return to 'normal' study coinciding with continual cases of outbreaks in various locations across the country dictates that COVID-normal means different things to different students. Commonalities include:

▶ **Some return of practical / face to face components…** in some states students experienced a return to face-face learning to some extent.

▶ **Mixed-modes…** incorporating the positive aspects of online study such as flexibility with the benefits of face-to-face elements for practical, hands-on classes.

▶ **Fully online…** some students finished, or will finish, their study without having set foot inside a classroom – which was largely unexpected.

▶ **Uncertainty…** there was a degree of uncertainty as to how the courses would continue – largely as a result of the continuously changing COVID-19 environment.

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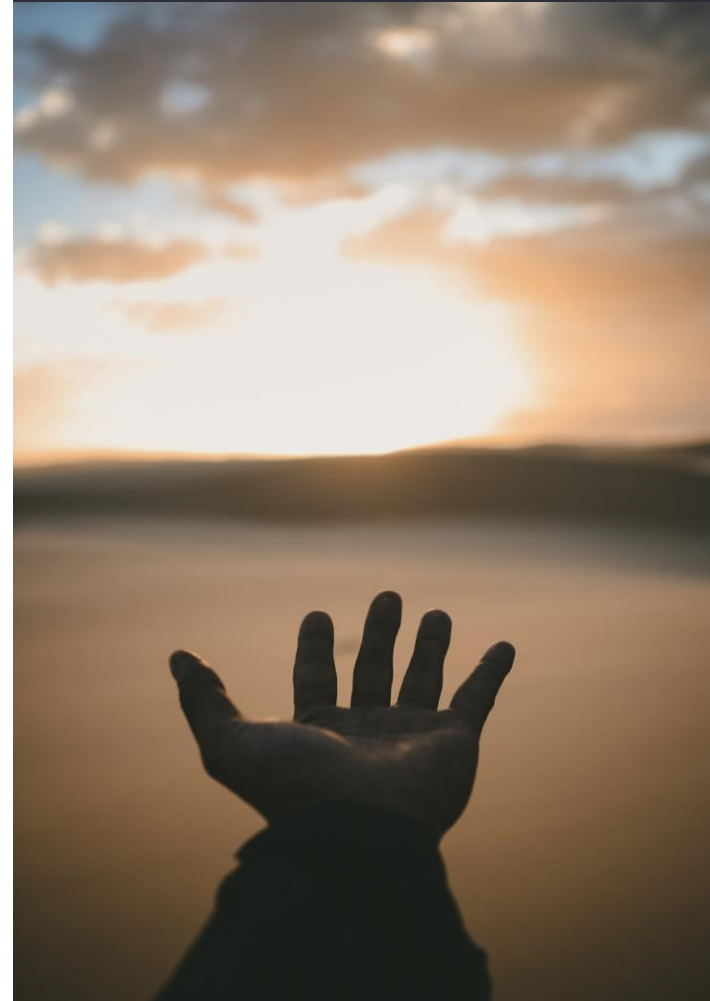
Course outcomes

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to online learning methods, most students feel their learning had been impacted more negatively than had they completed their course in non-COVID times.

Common themes surrounding course outcomes arose throughout consultations with students, including:

▶ **More flexibility for some/able to progress through course faster...**Online learning benefitted some cohorts who felt that the self-paced aspects enabled them to progress through their course faster than they had originally anticipated. Others felt as though they were better able to balance study and other life commitments as a result of the flexibility online learning granted them.

▶ **Unprepared for practical work...** A common theme that arose was students feeling ill-equipped and unprepared for practical work related to their course, where practical components were cancelled or switched to less effective online methods. This is a major concern of students as practical course components are often seen as a major drawcard to studying VET.

▶ **Disengaged from learning...** Online learning appears less effective with regards to engagement and subsequently less effective in learning. This lack of engagement meant that

many felt the need for more revision / study than they would regularly.

▶ **Reconsideration of course...** Thoughts about deferring or reconsideration of their VET course was an extreme, yet not uncommon, outcome of the shift to online learning.

"

You need that hands-on aspect. Everyone's going to laugh at you with no hands-on experience.

(School leaver, VIC, Building & Construction)

EY Sweeney

Student needs

Given the impact of COVID-19, students have heightened and differing needs to participate effectively in online learning. Needs are more pronounced in particular areas and differ from student to student, however there is some degree of commonality in needs across student cohorts.

Increased support	Connection	Equipment	Accountability
▶ **Wellbeing support...** including tips and strategies for online study / staying motivated, counselling support ▶ Technology support... including regular technology support offerings / check-ins, tutorials etc. ▶ Course support... guidance on how to manage online learning, options to replace face-to-face activities	**Meaningful / regular connection, with...** ▶ **Other students...** to ideate, discuss, share experiences leanings, build rapport ▶ **Teachers...** ability to ask questions easily, receive guidance ▶ **Industry...** build experience, create opportunities, become familiar with industry	**Access to equipment...** ▶ **To accommodate practical study at home...** where possible so that students do not miss out on developing practical skills	**Accountability mechanisms for...** ▶ **Attendance and involvement...** for example 'hiding' in class or false class attendance, and participating in class ▶ **Assessment integrity...** no cheating in assessments, staying up to date

Mindsets in need:

▶ **All mindsets**, but particularly:

- Tech support for '**Tech novices**'

- Course support for '**Disengaged**'

Mindsets in need:

▶ **All mindsets**, but particularly:

- '**Disengaged**', and;

- '**Immersed**'

Mindsets in need:

▶ All mindsets, but particularly:

- '**Immersed**'

- '**Disengaged**'

Mindsets in need:

▶ '**Disengaged**'

31402 – Australian Skills Quality Authority – Strategic review of online learning in the VET sector – Report V5 – 29SEP2021

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