

WHO'S ZOOMIN' WHO? STUDENT ENGAGEMENT DURING A FACELESS PANDEMIC

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COVID-19 brought about a faceless threat that impacted Higher Education, and the whole of Society, in a way that had not been seen in our lifetimes - faceless nanoscopic threat to humanity and to the way we facilitate learning as passionate educators.

The impacts on students, especially those of international status, were substantial. Isolation, enforced by the Federal Government, was as new to us all as the coronavirus was to our species. As a social species, we had no prior 'immunity' to the experience and the scramble to adapt within the teaching and learning environment that raised many difficulties experienced by all participants. However, nowhere was this more adversely felt than in our Transitioning First Year Student (TFYS) cohort. Students, already having to adapt to the foreign experience of learning in a higher education landscape, were dealt the additional blow of doing so under Australian government enforced isolation. Most, far from home and from their social networks, found themselves living an experience devoid of the social experience that is expected during their first year of university. A time where many form peer groups which last beyond higher education; a time when you have the opportunity to 'navigate your identity' amongst peers, was taken from them.

Regardless of the impact on grade distributions, the effects of isolation were seen in overt and distressing declines in mental health across the first-year cohort (pers obs.). But what about those that did not feel they could, or did not know how to, reach out and engage? Here we show how collegiality, honesty and a peer-like approach to Coordination helped lessen this. However, despite these efforts, many students remained 'invisible' – hiding behind the smokescreens of upheaval and workloads, and most evidently behind the black square of a faceless Zoom. We also explore alternate ways of fostering inclusion through the scaffolding of 'social engagement' amongst the students themselves.

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