Article

THE LEARNINGS PROJECT:
LEARNING FROM THE FIRST YEAR OF AN ONLINE CAMPUS

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INTRODUCTION

What makes an educational institute an excellent place for learning? More specifically, what is excellence for learning online? For non-university tertiary providers, it might mean being accredited with approved courses, while maintaining a category 1 or 2 status (NZQA, 2024). It might be built around Bangert's (2004) Seven Principles of Good Practice framework. It might be as simple as having an excellent team (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2021). An online campus is a space which differs greatly from a face-to-face campus. There are no chance doorway encounters to chat, nor a staff kitchen in which to grab a coffee or a student common room to meet up in. However, the goal of an online campus is like that of every other campus: to support students to achieve their educational goals. What is experiencing excellence in learning for an online student? It might be that the school has followed any of the nine principles set out by Henry and Meadows (2008), such as understanding "Principle 1: The online world is a medium unto itself," (p. 1) and so knowing the teaching and learning environment is a completely different one compared to a face-to-face environment. Or it might mean knowing that the students need to feel the presence of and engagement with the faculty and the school community (Wylie, 2023).

The Online Campus is one of five campuses within Yoobee College of Creative Innovation. The Online Campus' inaugural year in 2022 launched with six programmes within the faculties of Foundation, Design and Technology. The Level 4 to Level 6 programmes range from 20-week certificates to a two-year diploma. All programmes are delivered in a facilitated asynchronous manner. The content and formative and summative assessments are on the bespoke Learning Management System (LMS) and the tutor facilitates discussions and hosts live session tutorials as well as answers questions via email, the LMS message system, or MS Teams. This method of delivery enables the online tutors to encourage and strengthen learners' engagement with the content on the LMS.

In the first year of delivery, there were six intakes in February, April, July, August, October, and November, with some intakes having all six programmes starting in their full-time and part-time modes, and some intakes only having a few programmes. By the end of 2022, the Online Campus had over 1,000 students in 33 cohorts (some rolling over into 2023), with 729 of those students completing their programme successfully.

There is research that focuses on developing online delivery within existing face-to-face institutes (Edge et al., 2022; Libo & Fuyao, 2012; Tanis, 2020). It is not often a specifically online campus is set up, allowing reflection on whole school development. This is a whole school, and all its programmes are delivered in a facilitated environment, rather than part of the school going online. A small research initiative, entitled The Learning Project, arose as a way to capture the experiences of those involved in the first year of the campus. This was a rare opportunity to hear from people who had experienced the setup, the successes, and the hiccups of the first year. The Learning Project had two areas of focus along with one goal.

The focus areas were:

- to gain an understanding of the online team's learnings from the first year of the campus.
- to utilise the learnings to inform future development.

The goal was:

- to inform the Senior Leadership Team of the results in order to make informed decisions on the direction and the growth of the Online Campus by way of a report.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online education is not a new mode of delivery; for some institutes, it has been their only environment. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a global shift by educational institutes to online teaching. This had the goal of keeping both staff and students safe, while maintaining the educational journey the students were on. The shift to online delivery during the pandemic is often described as "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020) to distinguish this unplanned and atypical delivery and learning of content from a deliberate and intentional method. Many institutes choose online teaching and learning after careful planning, preparation, and much research to support strategic decisions. Coming out of the pandemic, more and more institutes have seen the opportunity that exists for a flexible delivery mode, be it via blended delivery or a fully asynchronous mode (Aristovnik et al., 2023; Tang, 2023).

Tanis states that "online teaching requires a different perspective compared to on-ground teaching" (2020, p. 19). An online classroom requires educators to look differently at the interaction within the programme around the content or subject matter. It also requires a different view on students' engagement and achievement beyond the actions observed in the classroom. New and different demands are placed on the online educator that stem from these different perspectives (Kwapy, 2014).

Creation and maintenance of an online community goes beyond the technology used to deliver the content (Tanis, 2020). A social presence within the online space arises through interactions. These interactions connect the campus to the students, creating a community: a learning community or a community of practice. Wenger (1998) describes a community of practice as a group of people with a common goal who interact to improve their understanding. One important characteristic of a successful community is a connection between an educator and the students (Kwapy, 2014). The challenge of building a community that may be scattered and asynchronous requires careful and consistent communication in order to halt the perception of isolation.

In an online asynchronous campus, students may have little to no human contact throughout their programme. The role of the educator or motivator changes to become more visible within their limited communication and interactions. There are no immediate smiles, thumbs up or questioning glances. Understanding the role an online educator takes is an important aspect in building the online community (Kwapy, 2014). In a community where all belong but have little social interaction, the educator needs to use different strategies to create a sense of belonging. It is not just about creating the community but also fostering it so that it continues (Henry & Meadows, 2008). Managing the expectations of the students towards the educator is also required. In a synchronous environment, students know the tutor is there for immediate answers and encouragement; however, in an asynchronous environment, answers may come a day later. Students need help to understand that the different environments have different operational practices. The educator is required to carefully consider every student within the whole group through individual communication (Libo & Fuyao, 2012). Answering whole-class or individual questions, providing support, advice and direction, and enhancing confidence and participation are just a few aspects of the role. Providing educators and students with the appropriate tools and training is important for individual success (Kwapy, 2014). Not only do tutors need to be tech-savvy (Aggarwal et al., 2006), but they

must be aware of the different pedagogical approaches that are required. Research has shown that students need an online educator who is engaged, organised, and communicative (Tanis, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The Learning Project's first focus was to gain an understanding of the Online Team's learnings from the first year of the campus. This meant that everyone involved in the Online Campus was a potential participant; a total of 15 people with roles from administration, teaching, campus management, and strategic leadership. Anonymity was given and participants chose pseudonyms should any responses be used in the eventual report to the Executive Team. The research design for the project was a small qualitative-based investigation extended to all potential participants.

After gaining initial approval from the organisation's Research Ethics Committee, The Learning Project was planned to invite written responses to questions with a specific focus, to elicit thoughts on the given topic. The potential participants were sent an introductory email outlining the investigation and the process for gaining information over the coming weeks. Each week for five weeks the participants were sent a Microsoft form link to that week's focused question along with the detailed information about the project. Each Microsoft form gave recipients the option to opt into the research before answering the question.

Questions

Question 1: How does the Online campus differ from a F2F campus in terms of: your role as a tutor, an administrator, a leadership team member? Your processes, your practice?

Question 2: How does the Online campus differ from a F2F campus in terms of: building a relationship with students? What stories do you have on how you built a relationship with a student, a group, or an intake?

Question 3: How does the Online campus differ from a F2F campus in terms of: building a relationship with fellow staff members? What stories do you have where you changed your actions to build a relationship with a colleague/colleagues?

Question 4: How does the Online campus differ from a F2F campus in terms of: creating a learning environment for students, for you, for others? What stories do you have where you created this environment?

Question 5 (final): What do your learnings mean for the overall improvement of the Online Campus as we grow?

The questions were designed to take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to answer. Participation was voluntary with the weekly option to opt in, depending on the participant's time, and consideration of the focus area. Data was not reviewed for analysis until after the week six email.

- Week 0: Introductory email to all, outlining the project's aim, the potential outcomes of the research, and the method of data collection.
- Week 1: Email with link to an MS form asking if they agreed to take part, what their pseudonym would be, and question 1: their role in the Online campus compared to the F2F campus.
- Week 2: Email with link to the second question: relationship building with students.
- Week 3: Email with link to the third question: relationship building with colleagues.
- Week 4: Email with link to the fourth question: creating a learning environment.
- Week 5: Email with link to the fifth question: learning for overall improvement.
- Week 6: Thanks, with links to the MS forms with focus topics for any extra data they had to offer.

The raw data of a total of 35 responses was collated, put into a spreadsheet under each of the questions, and analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen as it is a robust method that allows for developing and analysing patterns across a specific dataset from coding to themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis started with the question, "What is this story trying to say?" The answer to this question led to words and phrases that became the codes seen across the entire dataset. Some codes were frequently seen, including *techno focus* and *isolated*, while others were intermittent, such as *WFH (work from home) – a bonus.* From the codes, themes were identified. Some had an overall topic focus and subtopics within that; for example, *communication* was broken down into sub-topics: *communication – challenging, communication – time consuming, communication – techno.*

As the questions each had a different focus, it was important that the themes that arose were different to the topic areas. Braun and Clarke (2022) have three guidelines when coding: do not copy, identify the angle, and indicate the analytical take. Taking question two, for example (How does the Online campus differ from a F2F campus in terms of building a relationship with students?), the topic area is relationship, but the themes arising emphasised the differences within relationships such as a difficult connection or communication challenges and building trust.

Maintaining distance and anonymity

The researcher is a part of the Online Campus; therefore, it was important that all data was deidentified and could not be associated with the participants. Although the Microsoft Forms response spreadsheets had participant names within them, only participants' responses were added to the separate data analysis spreadsheet after data collection had closed. This allowed coding and analysis to focus purely on the responses. The responses were mixed up so that each participant's answers were not in the order in which they were received. This created distance between the two spreadsheets and any knowledge of the participant or previous conversations had around the Online Campus. If the report to the Executive Team required any responses which needed names associated with them, then the pseudonyms would be employed.

Limitations of The Learning Project

As the survey was voluntary with the opt-in approach across the weeks, not every participant responded. Some responded only once or twice, others responded to all five questions, and some not at all. The questions had a short response time so as not to add to participants' already-overburdened workloads. This gives a shallower depth of data than one would hope for.

FINDINGS

The Learning Project's first focus was to gain an understanding of the online team's learnings from the first year of the campus. This understanding led to the project's second focus: to utilise the learnings to inform future development, namely to the Executive Team who have the power to make decisions. From the data analysis, the codes were collated, and four key themes arose, some with sub themes:

- Connection: The importance of building it and the challenges in building it.
- Communication: Online communication challenges, the different communication strategies used to build relationships, and the intentional efforts used.
- Intentionality/Proactiveness.
- Isolation of the students and of the staff.

Quotes from participants have not been adjusted for grammatical errors.

Connection

Connection between the educator and the students is considered an important characteristic of education, especially within the online environment (Kwapy, 2014). It is therefore very significant that the first theme that arose was the importance of connection and the challenges of building it. Connection covers aspects of the relationship between educators and students, the social and learning interaction, the trust that is within the connection, and the sense of community within the cohort. Many participants commented on the need to build this sense of a community, relationship, or connection between the individual and the cohort. One participant highlighted that, due to the invisibility of the educator, the students may wonder who or what the educator actually is: "In the online campus environment, students cannot get in touch with the tutor directly and they don't even know whether the tutor is a real person or just a robot with AI." The response highlighted the experience of the participant with a student who was surprised to find that the communication received was from their tutor not a generated AI response.

Creating a connection that is personal, honest, and empowering for the students generated some common statements. One participant listed their important focus areas as "encouraging active participation, giving clear and timely feedback, fostering a sense of community, and utilising the right tools and resources." Challenges with building that connection were also a common theme among participants. One respondent claimed that "the majority of the learners do not want to engage with the tutor/facilitator. They are happy to do the work and complete the qualification."

Attention was also drawn to the obviously different environment: "there is a lack of face-to-face interaction. Without the ability to physically see and interact with students, it can be harder to establish a personal connection."

Respondents also considered the educator's role: "Another challenge in online is that there should not be too much tutor involvement and so as a tutor I struggled with where to draw the line. When am I building relationships and when am I giving more than I should."

Communication

Communication between educators and students is considered to be critically important (Tanis, 2020). Within online teaching, communication tends to be more written than verbal. Various tools are used by the participants, such as email, video conferencing, and chat/message systems, but in general "all communication is more 'laboured'" was a comment that was present throughout the data. Written communication could be seen as more formal than spoken communication, as written exchanges lack the nuances that can be expressed in verbal tone, facial expressions, and body language. One participant summed it up in one sense: "It takes longer to type something (and word it well), then [i.e., than to] quickly pop over in person and say something."

There was a strong awareness of the challenges various communication methods posed, not just in communicating between the educator and students but between colleagues. Proactiveness in reaching out, quick response times, and regular communication and feedback featured in the participants' comments. One participant has learnt to distinguish their communication based on the recipient: "Some colleagues take in information (and action it) better when it is written, not spoken. I have learnt which I do a quick video call then convey the info verbally and which I type up what I want them to do."

Intentionality/Proactiveness

Kwapy (2014) considers three areas important for developing online communities: careful planning, continued support, and intentional tasks and activities. The Online Campus team members highlighted their awareness of

their actions. They were intentional in building relationships and connections with the students as well as with their colleagues. They did this not only by having regular meetings or using collaboration tools but also by how they communicated: "More greeting and use more emotion symbol to reduce the possible misunderstanding between each others."

The participants were aware of their actions creating connection with the students as highlighted by this comment:

> Sometimes during 1:1s I'll practise active listening and connect with the students in that way .... I enjoy getting to know people and so I generally can connect with students easily in a 1:1. I realised that I needed additional time between the 1:1s to allow the students to share about themselves and foster that connection.

As an online campus has the challenge of fostering more social interaction, the push to create moments where it was "more play than business" was a sub-theme. This often involved taking an interest in the person's life, having more sideline chatter, and meeting for the sake of personal interaction rather than a discussion about education.

Isolation

The Online Campus team all work from home, so the participants are located across Aotearoa New Zealand. There is no ability to all meet in one face-to-face campus without booking flights and accommodation. Flexibility with work, no traffic, and no parking issues were mentioned as bonuses of being part of the Online Team; however, there was awareness of the isolating nature of the campus environment, not just for students but also for the staff. Working from home is part of normal Online campus operations, yet there is a lack of policies and procedures to support staff in isolating environments, beyond those that were created for the temporary COVID-19 emergency lockdown response. The online environment lacks human contact unless people make the intentional effort to create a sense of community (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Henry & Meadows, 2008). One participant observed that students "only want to reach out once they have seen/heard the facilitator and have confidence that the desire to connect is real."

The awareness that students need a high level of self-motivation and resilience was a sub-theme, echoing Wylie's (2023) research. As one participant described, without the "tutor's gate-keeping" to manage the progression of learning, some students feel empowered; however, without the "spoon feeding of information by the tutor, some students struggle more than if they are based in a classroom."

OUTCOME

The Learning Project had two focus areas with one goal: to gain an understanding of the Online Team's learnings from the first year of the campus, and to utilise the learnings to inform future development. Learnings from this research led to a report with recommendations to the Senior Leadership Team to consider in their strategic planning for the Online Campus.

Recommendations covered:

- A revision of the Tutor induction process to incorporate the intentional effort that is required to build and maintain communication and connection with both students and staff.
- A suggestion that every team member work on campus at least once a fortnight to build connection with the face-to-face campuses and reduce the feelings of isolation.
- Improved communication flow of face-to-face campus events that staff and students can attend.
- Consideration of the policies around working from home.
- Consideration of the health and wellbeing of the Online staff.

CONCLUSION

It is rare that a new school is set up from scratch allowing for whole-school reflection leading to improvements from what is learned. The purpose of The Learning Project was to gain an understanding of these learnings and to utilise them to inform future development. The four themes highlighted in this project are known factors in the operations of an online institute. Being similar to other online institutes allows the Online Campus to know they are following a similar journey, and from this knowledge comes great opportunities to bring change and improvement for everyone involved, from staff to students. Currently, the Online Campus has been described as "an invisible campus held together by spreadsheets." This is an apt description. The Online Team strive to be and have excellence within our campus for both the Online staff members and the students through improved practices around connection and communication. We strive to uphold Henry and Meadows' (2008) eighth principle for excellence in web-based teaching: "Excellence comes from ongoing assessment and refinement." It is hoped that with these findings the Senior Leadership Team will be able to make informed decisions on the direction and growth of the Online Campus for future years.

Leigh Quadling-Miernik is building on her experience in a career of education by taking the Doctorate of Professional Practice journey. The journey, in its fourth year, is looking into professional identity development for tertiary educators. Her passion for creating learning opportunities and the motto "whatever gets to the goal with integrity" are her trusted travel companions.

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