"My Uni Experience Wasn't Completely Ruined": The Impacts of COVID-19 on the First-Year Experience

Loraine McKay
Griffith University, Australia
Steven O'Bryan
Victoria University, Australia
Ella R Kahu
Massey University, New Zealand

Abstract

The first year at university is always challenging, but particularly in 2020 when COVID-19 triggered lockdowns and a rapid shift to online learning. This mixed methods study tracked the wellbeing and engagement of 60 new students in an undergraduate teacher education program at an Australian university throughout the first trimester of 2020. Follow-up focus groups with 14 students used interview and photo elicitation to explore how COVID-19 influenced wellbeing and engagement. Quantitative results demonstrate both student wellbeing and student engagement dipped strongly at the start of lockdown but recovered towards the end of the trimester. Focus group findings illustrate the diversity of experience in terms of student access to time and space to study, their ability to sustain relationships online, and the cumulative stress of COVID-19. The findings lead to recommendations for supporting this cohort and for future research.

Introduction

Starting university is well documented as a challenging time for students (Baik et al., 2015) with student attrition highest in the first year (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2020). This is particularly so for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs, the focus of the current study. A recent report showed the ITE first-year retention rate was just 77%, three percent lower than comparable undergraduate programs (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2019). The reasons for first-year attrition are complex with the student experience influenced by a wide range of interacting contextual, institutional, and student factors. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic added a new challenge to what is already a difficult transition. The current study explores two critical and related dimensions of the student experience, engagement and wellbeing, in the first trimester of a Bachelor of Education degree at an Australian university. In Week 5 of the semester various locations in Australia went into lockdown which severely restricted people's movement and led to a rapid shift to online learning.

Student engagement — the students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive connection to their learning — is widely recognised as critical to student retention and success (see Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Kahu's framework of engagement (Kahu, 2013;

Kahu & Nelson, 2018) illustrates the complex array of institutional and student variables which intertwine to foster or inhibit the student's engagement (see Figure 1). An important feature of the framework is the recognition of the importance of the wider sociocultural context within which university and student interact – a context that has become particularly visible in the face of the global pandemic. A second important feature of the framework is the educational interface at the centre. Drawing on Nakata's (2007) cultural theory, the interface is a tangible representation of the complex interactions between student and institution. The educational interface incorporates four specific facets of the student experience presented in higher education literature. The facets, self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and wellbeing represent students' "conscious or unconscious reflections on their situation" (Kahu & Picton, 2020, p. 667), and act to foster or inhibit engagement. The focus of the current study is wellbeing, as an influence on engagement and a factor strongly related to retention.

Figure 1

Framework of Student Engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018, p. 64)
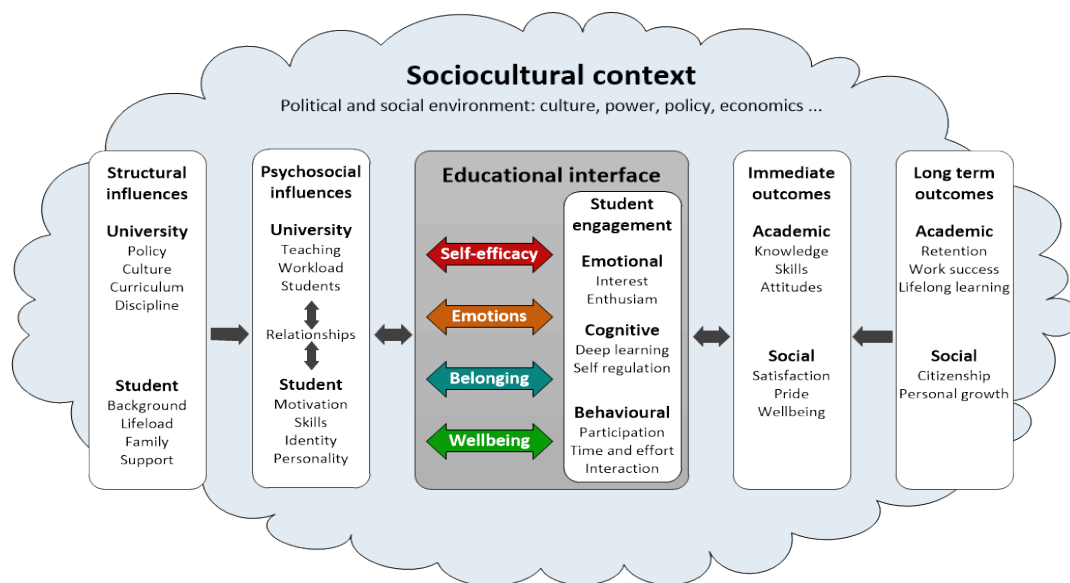
Wellbeing is a complex, multi-dimensional construct defined by Dodge et al. (2012) as a person having "the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge" (p. 230). Much of the literature on student wellbeing has focussed specifically on psychological wellbeing with a recent review highlighting psychological distress as a worldwide issue for university students (Sharp & Theiler, 2018). In one Australian study, 19% of students reported high distress compared to just 3% of the general population (Stallman, 2010). Multiple factors contribute to these high rates of distress including: lack of connectedness (Gibney et al., 2011); perceived workload and time management (Balkis & Duru, 2016; Deasy et al., 2016); financial pressures and stability (Adams et al., 2016); and unmet, unanticipated, or inflated expectations of self or the university experience (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). These challenges play out differently depending on the student's context. For example, many of the current participants are second chance learners, coming to university as non-direct school leavers. These students often experience additional anxiety from being out of education for some time, and tend to have more complex lives with associated time and financial pressures impacting on their wellbeing and engagement in the first year (Stone & O'Shea, 2012). To capture some of this complexity, and to take a more holistic approach to wellbeing, in the current study we explored the construct of wellbeing across four interrelated dimensions: physical, social, emotional, and financial wellbeing. The first three are taken from Dodge et al.'s (2012) work defining wellbeing as discussed above. Financial was added as it has long been recognised as a stressor which impacts on university students' wellbeing (Lange & Byrd, 1998).

Starting university has been described as an emotional rollercoaster (Christie et al., 2008), and stress is recognised as a big part of the first-year experience. When sustained at high levels, stress can have a negative effect on wellbeing (Baik et al., 2019).

While an Australian study revealed students' overall stress increased steadily in their first semester (Pitt et al., 2018), few studies have explored how students perceive changes in aspects of their own wellbeing during the transition period, and the role this might play with their engagement. The initial aim of this study was to use weekly experience sampling to measure the fluctuations of engagement and wellbeing that occur in the first teaching period of university. The unexpected advent of COVID-19 lockdowns and the rapid shift to online learning during the trimester led us to extend the project and include focus groups with participants in order to get a deeper understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on their engagement and wellbeing. The research questions therefore were:

1. *How do the engagement and wellbeing of preservice teachers change throughout their first semester; and*
2. *How did students experience those changes during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Methods

The participants were commencing a Bachelor of Education degree; the trimester consisted of 12 teaching weeks plus a week for final assessments and an exam. The trimester was planned to be predominantly on campus, with Week 7 dedicated to teaching students how to operate in the online space in preparation for the remainder of the degree, which includes various online elements in a mixed-mode delivery. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, many students were self-isolating from Week 4; in Week 5 the physical campus closed and learning went entirely online. A few computer labs and library spaces opened later in the trimester. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee and was extended later to incorporate the focus group stage of the project.

Weekly Survey

In Week One, all commencing Bachelor of Education students (>550 students across three campuses) were invited by email to participate in the study. Sixty students volunteered (mean age 25 ± 7.8 years; all on campus and 95% studying full time). Each week, participants completed an online survey (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). Perceptions of wellbeing were measured with four items:

- I am physically well,
- I am emotionally well,
- I am financially secure, and
- I am socially connected.

Three items captured behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement:

- I studied a lot,
- I learned a lot, and
- I am enjoying my study.

Responses were recorded on 5-point Likert scales (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) and overall 'wellbeing' and 'engagement' scores were calculated by summing items (i.e. wellbeing maximum = 20 and engagement maximum = 15). In response to the data set, weekly wellbeing and engagement scores were then averaged over the following teaching periods of the trimester: Period 1 was weeks 1-3 with standard face-to-face learning; Period 2 was weeks 4, 5, and 7 (Week 6 was mid-trimester break) in COVID-19 lockdown with online learning beginning; Period 3 was weeks 8-10 with exclusively online learning; Period 4 was weeks 11-13 including final assessments.

Focus Groups

At the end of the trimester, the cohort was invited to take part in online focus groups. Fourteen students (all female except one) took part – ten had also completed the weekly surveys. Participants' ages ranged from 19-44, no one was transitioning directly from school, and four were also caregivers. The interviewer (first author) was the First-Year Coordinator and had taught one of the courses so had developed rapport with the students. In accordance with ethical clearance and to minimise the power dynamic, all assessment was finalised prior to the call for interviews. Focus group interviews, with 2-4 participants in each group, were recorded and fully transcribed with pseudonyms allocated to protect student anonymity. The participants brought to the interview three images and a free drawn graph mapping their perceptions of their engagement and wellbeing during the trimester. Sharing these images prompted the direction of the conversations and each participant had the opportunity to discuss

their own images before others were invited to contribute. While supporting participants' recall of events, emotions, and influences (Glass, 2011) the images also allowed the examination of complex ideas beyond rational thought (McKay & Sappa, 2020). Examples of question prompts include:

- *To what extent do you think COVID impacted on the difference between what you experienced and what your thoughts or expectations were?*
- *Talk me through the images you have chosen to represent the beginning, middle and end of trimester.*
- *How did you manage your time during the trimester?*
- *Talk me through the map you have drawn to illustrate how you perceived your wellbeing and engagement at various times throughout the trimester.*
- *When you felt you were engaged/not engaged what were you doing? Thinking? Feeling?*

Thematic analysis following the four stages proposed by Vaismoradi et al. (2016) – initialisation, construction, rectification, and finalisation – was used to examine and understand the data. Data transcripts were read with units of meaning highlighted and annotated and used to identify codes. Participants' graphs and annotated images were also examined in relation to the coding, and this information was transferred onto a spreadsheet to organise each focus group data set. Working between the transcripts, spreadsheet, and the literature, a concept map was constructed and reconstructed to classify, compare, and organise the codes and categories, and to generate the themes. While the lead author undertook the process of analysis, findings were discussed with the research team to strengthen confirmability of the analysis process and identified themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Finally, a story line was constructed based on meaning making from the participants' experiences and including their voice in the narrative.

Weekly Survey Results

The survey response rates were: 92% (n = 55), 82% (n = 50), 65% (n = 39) and 58% (n = 35) for teaching periods 1, 2, 3 and 4, respectively. Participant retention over the course of the study was 47%. McDonald's omega (ω) assessed the reliability of wellbeing and engagement items; all items were reasonable to high ($\omega = 0.69$ and $\omega = 0.76$, respectively). Pearson product moment correlations (r) assessed the validity of aggregating individual survey responses to represent overall measures of wellbeing and engagement; for both measurements, $r \geq 0.7$ and $p < 0.001$. A non-parametric Skillings-Mack (SM) test assessed students' perception of wellbeing and engagement across the four different teaching periods. This test is a valid and robust method of detecting changes in non-parametric data over time, when data is missing (Chatfield & Mander, 2009). Following statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), post-hoc Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests were performed to determine any differences in wellbeing and engagement compared with teaching period 2 (i.e. onset of COVID-19 lockdown). Statistical significance was Bonferonni, adjusted to allow for multiple comparisons and to avoid committing a type 1 error (3 pairs, adjusted $p \leq 0.0125$). Statistical analysis was performed using XLSTAT (v19.1; Addinsoft, Paris, France) and SPSS (version 26, Chicago, IL, USA) software.

Students' perception of overall wellbeing fluctuated over the course of the trimester ($p = 0.001$), with a significant reduction observed during teaching period 2 compared to teaching period 1 and 4 (both $p \leq 0.01$) (Figure 2). Specifically, emotional and social wellbeing decreased during teaching period 2 compared to teaching period 1 and 4 (both $p \leq 0.01$), whereas financial wellbeing decreased during teaching period 2 compared to teaching period 4 only ($p \leq 0.01$).

Students' perception of overall engagement fluctuated over the course of the trimester ($p = 0.001$), with a significant reduction observed during teaching period 2 compared to teaching period 1 and 4 (both $p \leq 0.01$) (Figure 2). Specifically, cognitive and behavioural measures of engagement decreased, with cognitive engagement lower during teaching period 2 compared to teaching periods 1, 3 and 4 ($p \leq 0.01$), whereas behavioural engagement was lower during teaching period 2 compared to teaching period 4 only ($p \leq 0.01$). No changes in emotional engagement were identified over the course of the trimester ($p = 0.08$).

The SM test rejected the null hypothesis for behavioural and cognitive measures of engagement (both $p \leq 0.01$), whereas the null hypothesis was true for the emotional measure of engagement ($p = 0.08$). Post-hoc tests revealed that cognitive engagement was lower during teaching period 2 compared to teaching periods 1, 3 and 4 ($p \leq 0.01$), whereas behavioural engagement was lower during teaching period 2 compared to teaching period 4 only ($p \leq 0.01$).

Figure 2

Students' Perception of Engagement and Wellbeing over the Trimester
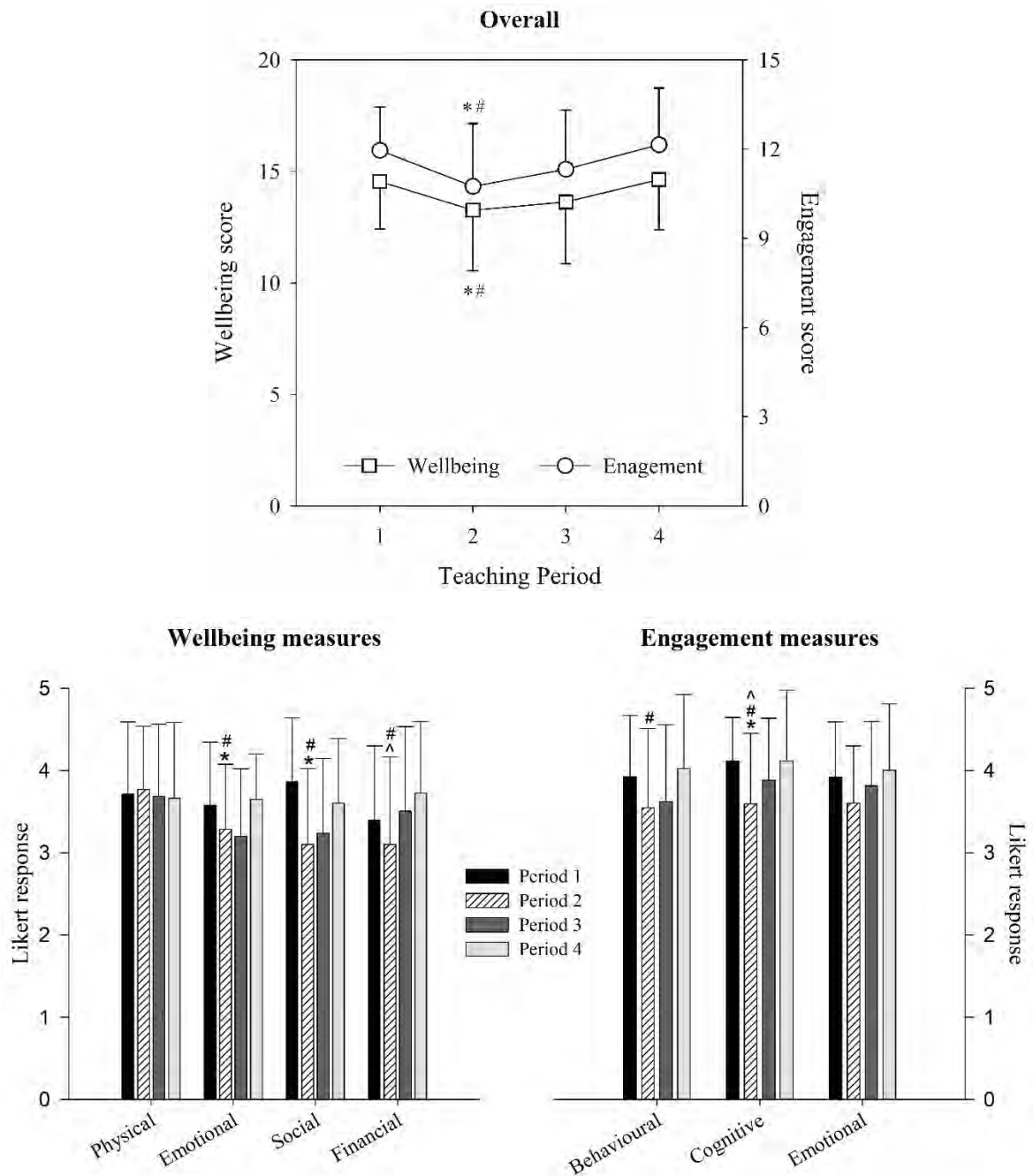
* Lower than teaching period 1 ($p \leq 0.0125$)
^ Lower than teaching period 3 ($p \leq 0.0125$)
# Lower than teaching period 4 ($p \leq 0.0125$)

Notes: Mean changes in overall wellbeing and engagement, and individual measures of each, over the four teaching periods of the trimester. Error bars represent standard deviation.

Focus Group Findings

The focus group findings are presented in three themes: disruption, people, and turmoil. Within each theme, impacts on participants' wellbeing and engagement are highlighted.

Disruption

The first theme illustrates how Covid disrupted the students' plans for study. As first-year students, the participants had recently restructured their lives to free up time and space to study. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown disrupted those arrangements in diverse ways: students or partners lost jobs, worked from home, or had increased work hours. Schools and the university closed so children had to be home schooled and study shifted online in a home filled with partners and children. These disruptions made managing the time and space they needed to study challenging: "At the beginning I was very focused. I had my plans, knew what I had to do … going into isolation I was okay, I was still keeping to my plans and then home schooling started, everything went downhill" (Sue). The two aspects of disruption: time and space, are addressed as subthemes.

      Time

COVID-19 and lockdown increased the available time for some participants, while others became time poor. Students such as Kay gained study time through losing work: "I lost my job in maybe the third week of uni … it kind of had a positive effect … I was able to focus a lot more on my studies." Amy was able to access the government's JobKeeper Payment[1] which increased her income supporting financial wellbeing and allowing more time for university studies. For some, studying from home saved commuting time: "The COVID stuff, was an advantage … because I didn't have to travel all the way into the university" (John). However, for many students, this gain in time was offset by other challenges such as increased working hours and unexpected parenting duties, such as home schooling.

For some, having more time was a double edge sword; they struggled to sustain a routine with procrastination a commonly identified issue. While this may have been an issue anyway, it was magnified by COVID-19. For instance, Kim recalled that after losing her job she "had more time on my hands to study, I was always finding that I'd procrastinate." A related issue was the narrowness of life for some time-rich students such as Nat:

> I had so much time and I put it all into uni. I got uni tunnel vision, and especially with COVID and you couldn't go anywhere… couldn't do anything, I used to go to the gym every day and then once uni started it was like, no, just uni, just uni.

The excess of time, along with the loss of routine and usual coping strategies, such as going to the gym, impacted on wellbeing generally: "my health really suffered by the end of it" (Nat). Emotional wellbeing was particularly challenged when time and routine were disrupted. Heidi explained:

> … all the time to spend on my own. And when you're alone, you have a lot of things to think about and it haunted me … And when the gym closed, it really stressed me out because I have nowhere to go when I get stressed.

In contrast, other students became extremely time poor. For some this was from additional paid work. For example, both Bev and Amy had extended hours of work because of COVID-19. The stress of extra work was compounded by fear of contracting COVID-19 in high-risk settings – a medical centre and childcare centre. For others the loss of time was from increased caregiving and home schooling. For example, Deb was home schooling teenagers and supporting her elderly parents during COVID-19 and reported being sleep deprived with "too much lifeload". Sue also struggled with the impact of home schooling:

> At the beginning I was fully engaged, because it was all new and then things started to go a bit haywire, during the home-schooling, so March, April, it was very distracting ... I did lose some engagement because I physically could not do anything.

---

[1] In Australia, the JobKeeper Payment was a temporary payment which supported businesses significantly affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) https://www.ato.gov.au/general/jobkeeper-payment/

Sue talked about having "too many external factors coming in" and going into "survival mode", coping by "staying up late, lots of coffee." Both these students reduced to part time study to manage their increased lifeload and free up more time.

Space

Time and space are interrelated. During lockdown, everyone was forced to spend more, if not most, of their time in the home. Activities which previously had been enacted elsewhere – work, school, and university – filled the home with people, noise, and competing demands. The consequence for participants was "more distraction at home, because everybody was at home. So I had my wife and children at home … got to home-school" (John). As with time, the impact depended on individual circumstances. Nel described attending an online tutorial with her children around:

> I would have my headset on and the screen off just because I had kids screaming, singing Frozen around me, and it was just blocking them out while I was trying to listen, trying not to be rude but with no screen on and headset on so that I could block them out.

There is a clear tension of trying to balance the need for her children to play, the need for herself to concentrate on her learning, and the need for her fellow students to have classmates who are present and engaged.

As well as difficulties from sharing space with family, students' preferences in where they study and lockdown severely limited their options. For example, Ivy's plan to spend 20 hours on campus and 20 hours working at home was disrupted and unbalanced during lockdown. Even though her child still went to day-care, being forced to stay home inhibited her engagement with her studies: "suddenly we're stuck in my four walls at home … my time on task really dropped… I was struggling to get all the hours up being by myself and I guess cutting the motivation to keep going." Heidi was similar: "I expected … and planned to go university as much as I can, because I cannot keep self-motivated in my own house." Later in the trimester Heidi took advantage of the university campus opening some study spaces: "I went to university during COVID, at night, at really unpopular times, because I need some place to … like forced me into doing my assignments."

Other students found different ways of coping with the limited spaces they had access to for their study including setting up an inviting workspace away from family which allowed them to engage more freely online. For Amy this was an important influence on her motivation and focus during the trimester:

> I used to do study at the dining table … I bought a lot of different things to make my study pretty, to make it a bit of a sanctuary, so that I wasn't in my bedroom. I wasn't in the lounge room. I had this one space in my home to be in.

People

The second major theme focusses on students' reduced contact with people during the trimester and the impact this had. There are three subthemes: connection, emotional support, and academic support.

Connection

COVID-19 and the accompanying shift to entirely online learning reduced students' interactions with other people. Nat gave up work to come to university and anticipated university would replace contact with people in her workplace: "My biggest thing was probably the social aspect more because not going to work, being in a really social place, the reason I chose to study on-campus as opposed to studying online was that isolation." Ivy was similar: "I really wanted the university experience. Being there, being a part of it, meeting new people, and just having that face-to-face contact all the time." The students had not signed up for online learning, and some found "trying to study online and not seeing people is really strange" (Kay).

This lack of face-to-face contact with people impacted students' wellbeing and engagement in different ways. For some, the lack of connection with other people, both in their studies and in other areas of life due to lockdown, seriously impacted their wellbeing. Heidi, for example, described: "I'm literally isolated. That's all… I had like all the time to spend on my own. And when you're alone, you have a lot of things to think about."

Importantly, not all students wanted the same degree of connection with other people. John talked about his initial plans for university in the context of his full lifeload: "With my life and business and stuff, I sort of didn't want to have to… be forced

to deal with everybody else. I just wanted to be able to do my thing, get in, get out." COVID-19 and the shift to online learning enabled an individual and strategic approach to his study: "Once COVID got into full swing, I stopped even bothering listening to the tutors, I just went, 'Okay, what do I need to do for my assessment?'"

Emotional Support

Peer relationships are important for emotional support for students and potentially particularly valuable during the stress of COVID-19. For Toni, her online study group helped her manage her stress: "when COVID hit we had kind of established a bit of a study group, maybe not initially but within the week of COVID first hitting. So, I don't think I was freaking out as much … we'd kind of established a group." The power of peer support was clear, as stated by Kelly: "super important to have that kind of emotional and academic support."

Building connections with other students can be challenging for students even without COVID-19, and for some this was made more so by the shift to exclusively online learning. Not all students managed to transfer their relationships online and these students talked about the missed opportunities for support. Amy struggled, explaining how hard it was for her to make friends in the early weeks of university and how COVID-19 disrupted that process: "I went through a major anxiety stage coming into uni… then eventually, came out of my shell and made friends which was good, and then, 'Hello Corona'. And we … did lose touch … and that kind of just made me feel like I was on my own again." Amy wanted to reach out to other students but lacked confidence: "it did make it a little bit hard to be like, 'Oh. Should I … should I not message?' Am I going to annoy this person if I message them?"

This was a difficult trimester for many students and access to effective university support could make a significant difference. As Sue describes, the sense of doing this alone was overwhelming at times:

> I tried to reach out to the counsellors, but because they were moving from campus to online, everything was up in the air. For a while there I was, I felt there was nothing. My study group had fallen apart a little bit, so I really felt there was nothing, that this was just me going through it. That's why I reached out to [the first-year coordinator] a fair bit, just to clarify, just to have that, yeah, we've still got this.

Liz said: "It was just a nightmare. But the support that I was given throughout that time, I highly appreciate it… I'm someone that really benefited from it. Without it, I would have sunk."

Academic Support

Academic support is also critical and the reduced contact with people – both staff and students – meant it was harder for students to get the academic support they needed. Kay explained the difference in peer support before and after COVID-19:

> It's all difficult socially and in terms of study as well, because it was good just before COVID, sort of meeting up in the library and being able to bounce ideas off and do the study guides together. And then it's just really difficult to try and do that online. So, it just sort of fell away.

Kelly talked about how her expectations of working closely with other students were interrupted by the lockdown: "I always had some core friends I made before COVID, but definitely the expectations of really working in groups ... definitely dropped with COVID."

Other participants successfully shifted the student relationships they formed during Orientation week and the initial month of on-campus learning into online spaces. Those relationships helped their engagement and their wellbeing. For example, Nat explained how her study group impacted her engagement, helping her understand and complete an assessment:

> One of the exams that we needed to complete I was not interested, had no intent of doing the assignment, and it was the girls that kept going, 'Relate it back to you, come on now. Look at it this way, look at it that way', so it was having that personal attachment.

Online peer support was invaluable for motivation and behavioural engagement: "Having them on Facebook, messaging me, being like 'Hey, did you do this?' Or, 'Hey, have you completed this yet?'… Just keeping the loop with each other and kind of motivating each other" (Kim). As some students recognised, learning is a collaborative process: "You do need to have that interaction with … a variety of people … to get more understanding, to reaffirm your own understanding" (Liz).

Accessing academic support from the university was also challenging at times. As first-year students, the participants had only just begun to learn how university works and how to access support as Kelly explained:

> I definitely didn't utilise those supports as much as I think I could... I think I was kind of like that high school experience, I was still adapting to ... seeking out help. Instead of having it really laid out.

Overall, the students were satisfied with the level of support from staff throughout the trimester: "the support that was given really exceeded all my expectations" (Kelly), but the sudden shift online made it harder to access that support. Practical difficulties sometimes meant students used services less:

> I found the library a little bit harder to get in contact with once we went online. It was a bit hit and miss, or the email would go to the wrong area and so I thought I didn't use that service as much as I probably would have liked to have used it, had we been on-campus. (Nel)

Accessing support can also be emotionally challenging. A disadvantage of online help seeking is that it can't be spontaneous. Amy explains how much harder it was for her to ask for help from a tutor online rather than in the physical classroom:

> Because when our lecture finishes, you could just pop up and steal them for five seconds while you're walking out of the hall. Or grab them at the end of a tutor session and not feel like you were taking up too much of their time. Obviously, you guys [staff] would have been spammed with emails. I was like, 'I shouldn't email about this, but I really need to email about it.' And then went through that pattern of, 'Is this a silly question to ask the tutors?'

Turmoil: Surviving the Trimester

The final theme illustrates the students' emotional upheaval and change throughout the trimester which matched the curve of the survey data. As well as evident in the students' talk, the dramatic changes to students' emotions, wellbeing, and stress were clear in their hand drawn graphs and the pictures they shared to represent their trimester. Despite choosing different images, almost without exception the images reflected similar sentiments and highlighted the turmoil: from the initial nervous excitement "about the prospect of new horizons" (Deb) to the relief and "sense of accomplishment and pride" (Bev) once it was over. In between was "self-doubt" (Ivy), and "too much to juggle" (John) contributing to a dip in engagement and feeling "overwhelmed" (Nat) and "set adrift from work and uni" (Kay), in part due to changes linked to COVID-19. The impacts on student wellbeing varied. Some students reported instant relief once assignments and assessment were completed, others talked of needing time to heal.

For a few, the cumulative stress of the trimester was particularly difficult. For example, ongoing financial strain connected with the closure of the family business added another dimension to Sue's level of stress. This triggered a usually controlled auto-immune condition and she required hospitalisation. Despite this, she completed the trimester. Her use of humour as a coping mechanism was evident in her image choice – a perplexed-looking, swirly-eyed, photo enhanced image of a dog with wild hair. She described her trimester as "a little bit ugly, completely crazy" and noted with humour and pride, "I am probably in need of a good rest and a haircut but I survived." Liz also found the trimester very difficult, saying she lost "the rhythm of life". The reduced social and emotional wellbeing influenced her motivation:

> I started to become too encaged in a box. Then I started to lose my motivation for my own, even to do some exercise. … It's the tempo … of the routine, I lost a little bit too… when you don't have the other people buzzing around, you sort of lose that.

Finally, Heidi had other stressors including the recent death of a friend and, for her, COVID-19 and the shift to online learning was particularly stressful: "I messed up literally everything in my life. Like my sleeping pattern, my eating pattern and just everything. So I wasn't able to think in a positive way. I just felt really unstable."

Despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges they faced, the students all reported positive emotions at the end as the following examples show. Deb, despite describing herself as "physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted" chose an image of a young woman, arms outstretched in triumph, looking towards a sunrise: "I did it!" Sue, who became quite ill as mentioned above, still "walked away with more confidence in completing my course in full." Finally, Ivy's choice of a kitten reflected in a mirror as a lion illustrated the "extreme pride in myself and my marks". Successfully navigating the barriers faced by students throughout the trimester highlighted their resilience and diverse coping strategies including: humour, optimism, persistence, and building social networks. As Kelly said: "Even though COVID happened, my uni experience wasn't completely ruined."

Discussion

This study contributes valuable understandings of first-year student wellbeing and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the first research question asking how engagement and wellbeing change, the weekly survey data showed a decline in student wellbeing, particularly social and emotional wellbeing, at the onset of the lockdown period, and then an improvement in wellbeing in the final weeks of the trimester. This pattern contrasts with Pitt et al.'s (2018) study of first-year students which found that stress increased evenly and steadily through the whole semester. However, while stress is a known impact on wellbeing, it is not the only impact. The findings potentially show that towards the end of the study period, the positive experiences and emotions of achievement and satisfaction helped to offset the stressors. In addition, COVID-19 may have meant the initial decline in wellbeing was sharper and the sense of pride and relief at the end stronger. The current study also measured four dimensions of perceived wellbeing in contrast to Pitt et al. (2018) who used a single measure of perceived stress. Further research tracking wellbeing and stress of students through time is needed.

Another contribution the current study makes is the survey finding that wellbeing and engagement varied in parallel throughout the trimester. While it is not possible to draw a causal conclusion from those data, the students' explanations of their experiences in the focus groups lends support to the view that wellbeing has a significant impact on engagement, as found in other studies (Cole & Korkmaz, 2013; McKay & Gibbs, 2020; Lin & Huang, 2014) and as illustrated in the framework of student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

The second research question asked how those experiences were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is not possible to know from the survey data if it was COVID-19 that triggered the decline in wellbeing around the fourth week, the focus group data do highlight the additional stress that the students experienced because of the lockdown and quick shift to fully online learning. As illustrated by the focus group data, and as shown in the framework of student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), the students' wellbeing stemmed from the complex interaction of university factors such as teaching methods, and staff, with student factors such as family circumstances and ability to cope. What this study also illustrates particularly well is that all elements of this interaction occur within, and are impacted by, a wider context as shown in the framework—a context which, in 2020, included a global pandemic. As we saw, the pandemic altered both the university part of the equation, including the shift to online learning, and the student part of the equation. The majority of the participants in the focus groups were older students and the pandemic added an extra layer of stress to this cohort who already had complex lives due to family and work commitments, as well as the high stakes risks associated with returning to university later in life (McKay & Gibbs, 2020).

Students starting university expect to make friends and there is a significant positive relationship between the quality of friendships for first-year students and their social and academic adjustment to university (Buote et al., 2007). It is not surprising therefore, that when the students were forced to isolate at home and study online, social wellbeing decreased and the importance of relationships was identified as a common thread stitching together the focus group narratives. The participants expected that while studying on campus they would make social connections through meeting new people, learning alongside their peers, and interacting with staff, in an environment that fosters engagement (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). Feeling supported by staff and fellow students is an important predictor of student satisfaction and student learning (Kahu et al., 2013) and the quality of relationships is linked to student engagement (Xerri et al., 2018) and predicts student wellbeing (Bowman, 2010), highlighting the complex links between these two important dimensions of the student experience. The advent of COVID-19 interrupted the formation and quality of these students' relationships. Participants who did successfully transfer their student relationships online benefitted from that emotional and academic support. Similarly, effective teacher-student relationships allowed students to reach out for help and access support.

While, according to the survey data, physical and financial wellbeing were less impacted overall, the focus groups point to the diversity of the students. For example, most students' physical health remained stable but one required time in hospital. The impact on financial wellbeing also varied across students. Financial insecurity is a commonly reported stressor during transition into and throughout university (Deasy et al., 2016; Pitt et al., 2018) and some of the students' family employment and income plans were severely disrupted by COVID-19, adding to that stress. Our study supports the findings by Adams et al. (2016) that financial strain directly and indirectly impacts students' academic and emotional wellbeing.

Peer support was one of a range of positive coping strategies used by students in the current study as they learnt to contend with the stress related to the transition into university and the additional stress related to COVID-19 and lockdown. Similar to a study by Deasy et al., (2014), proactive and maladaptive strategies were employed with varying degrees of impact on wellbeing and engagement. Personal resilience strategies identified in the current study included humour, strategic decision

making, and help-seeking. Maladaptive coping strategies which can have consequences for health and wellbeing were also identified, including procrastination, which can negatively impact students' wellbeing (Balkis & Duru, 2016). On the one hand, procrastination could be seen by students as a self-care strategy because they escape the negative feelings that can arise from the immediate task. On the other hand, procrastination can be linked with depression, anxiety, and stress and have negative consequences for academic performance (Balkis & Duru, 2016).

A final finding of note was the impact the shift to entirely online learning, combined with the contextual changes of COVID-19, had on students' access to and management of time and space for study. The struggle to balance time and space with family and other commitments has long been recognised as a challenge for distance students, particularly older students with families (Kahu et al., 2014) and particularly women (Stone & O'Shea, 2012). Early research on COVID-19 has also found distinct gender differences, with women taking on more of the additional domestic work in the home caused by the pandemic (Andrew et al., 2020). With only one male focus group participant, a gender analysis is not possible in the current study, but it is noteworthy that he also struggled with the balance. Finding quality time and space matters as it impacts on student engagement and can be a cause of stress for students (Kahu et al., 2014). These difficulties, along with the reduced opportunities for interaction with peers and staff discussed earlier, and the need for greater self-discipline in distance learning, are critical reasons why, while distance students are as satisfied with their learning as on campus students, they can be less engaged (Kahu et al., 2013). For the cohort of 2020, represented in the current study, this was exacerbated by them not choosing nor expecting to be studying entirely online and so not being able to plan coping strategies to manage those challenges.

Conclusion

As with all research, this study has limitations. In-depth studies of this nature do not intend to produce directly transferable results – as well, the sociocultural context is a critical influence on the student experience so the experiences of students at other universities, or within the same university but in different disciplines, may have differed. In addition, only stories from students who completed the trimester have been captured so these may be the experiences of the more resilient students or those with less challenging life circumstances. Finally, none of the focus group participants were direct school leavers. The experiences of that first-year student group, particularly those still living at home with stable financial and family support, may present differently and is suggested for further investigation.

Nevertheless, the findings in this study contribute to our understanding of the challenges first-year students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. These understandings include the complex impacts of lockdown on the dimensions of wellbeing, the self-reported experiences of wellbeing and engagement and the observed similar patterns of change, the diversity of individual experiences, and the critical importance of relationships, timely support, and coping strategies on that experience. Given the extended and unpredictable nature of the pandemic, the cumulative impact on this cohort is worthy of further research to explore ways to support wellbeing and sustain engagement in particular through providing supportive environments that foster relationships and a sense of belonging. Of particular interest is how to support the needs of those students in real time, or at critical periods of the trimester, as well as how to develop support seeking behaviours in students who do remain predominantly online.

Finally, this study raises implications for practice. With the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, the cumulative impact of change and uncertainty, and a less than traditional transition into university, this cohort and other commencing students in 2020 and beyond may require more specialised supports in subsequent years. Explicit teaching of reflective and reflexive practices may support personal accountability. Monitoring engagement through student management systems (access to learning materials, attendance, assessment, completion, and extension requests) may help to identify those students who need in-time support. Facilitating social networks that encourage student-student groupwork through low-stakes assessment, drop-in sessions with support staff, and providing opportunities for extra-curricular activities that provide purpose and connection to programs of study can be used to build relationships and maintain connection to short- and long-term goals. Celebrations to acknowledge student success in the form of academic outcomes, overcoming adversity, and leadership within the cohort could also be useful. This strategy could complement the internal drive that may be drained through times of uncertainty but is required for success in higher education.

References

Adams, D. R., Meyers, S. A., & Beidas, R. S. (2016). The relationship between financial strain, perceived stress, psychological symptoms, and academic and social integration in undergraduate students. *Journal of American College Health*, *64*(5), 362-370. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2016.1154559

Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A., & Sevilla, A. (2020). *The gendered division of paid and domestic work under lockdown*. IZA discussion paper No. 13500. https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/13500/the-gendered-division-of-paid-and-domestic-work-under-lockdown

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2019). *Initial Teacher Education (ITE) data report* https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/ite-data-report-2019

Baik, C., Naylor, R., & Arkoudis, S. (2015). *First year experience in Australian universities: Findings from two decades, 1994-2014*. https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/1513123/FYE-2014-FULL-report-FINAL-web.pdf

Balkis, M., & Duru, E. (2016). Procrastination, self-regulation failure, academic life satisfaction, and affective well-being: Underregulation or misregulation form. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *31*(3), 439-459. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-015-0266-5

Bowman, N. A. (2010). The development of psychological well-being among first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, *51*(2), 180-200. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0118

Buote, V. M., Pancer, S. M., Pratt, M. W., Adams, G., Birnie-Lefcovitch, S., Polivy, J., & Wintre, M. G. (2007). The importance of friends: Friendship and adjustment among 1st-year university students. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *22*(6), 665-689. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558407306344

Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V. E., Hounsell, J., & McCune, V. (2008). 'A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': Learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education*, *33*(5), 567-581. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802373040

Cole, J. S., & Korkmaz, A. (2013). First-year students' psychological well-being and need for cognition: Are they important predictors of academic engagement? *Journal of College Student Development*, *54*(6), 557-569. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2013.0082

Deasy, C., Coughlan, B., Pironom, J., Jourdan, D., & Mannix-McNamara, P. (2016). Psychological distress and help seeking amongst higher education students: Findings from a mixed method study of undergraduate nursing/midwifery and teacher education students in Ireland. *Irish Educational Studies*, *35*(2), 175-194. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2016.1146157

Denovan, A., & Macaskill, A. (2013). An interpretative phenomenological analysis of stress and coping in first year undergraduates. *British Educational Research Journal*, *39*(6), 1002-1024. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3019

Dodge, R., Daly, A. P., Huyton, J., & Sanders, L. D. (2012). The challenge of defining wellbeing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, *2*(3). https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v2i3.4

Gibney, A., Moore, N., Murphy, F., & O'Sullivan, S. (2011). The first semester of university life; 'will I be able to manage it at all?' *Higher Education*, *62*(3), 351-366. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9392-9

Glass, C. (2011). 'There's not much room for anything to go amiss': Narrative and arts-based inquiry in teacher education. *Issues in Educational Research*, *21*(2), 130-144.

Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *38*(5), 758-773. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.598505

Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *37*(1), 58-71. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197

Kahu, E. R. & Picton, C. (2020). Pathways to engagement: A longitudinal study of the first-year student experience in the educational interface. *Higher Education*, *79*, 657–673. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00429-w

Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Leach, L., & Zepke, N. (2013). The engagement of mature distance students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *32*(5), 791-804. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.777036

Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2014). Space and time to engage: Mature-aged distance students learn to fit study into their lives. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *33*(4), 523-540. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2014.884177

Lange, C., & Byrd, M. (1998). The relationship between perceptions of financial distress and feelings of psychological well-being in New Zealand university students. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *7*(3), 193-209. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.1998.9747824

Lin, S.-H., & Huang, Y.-C. (2014). Life stress and academic burnout. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, *15*(1), 77-90. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787413514651

McKay, L., & Gibbs, K. (2020). Using arts-based reflection to explore the resilience and well-being of mature-age women in the initial year of preservice teacher education. In L. McKay, G. Barton, S. Garvis, & V. Sappa (Eds.), *Arts-based*

research, resilience and well-being across the lifespan (pp. 105-126). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26053-8_7

McKay, L., & Sappa, V. (2020). Harnessing creativity through arts-based research to suppport teachers' identity development. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education, 26*(1), 25-42. http://doi.org/10.1177/1477971419841068

Nakata, M. (2007). The cultural interface. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, *36*(Supplement), 7-14. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1326011100004646

Pitt, A., Oprescu, F., Tapia, G., & Gray, M. (2018). An exploratory study of students' weekly stress levels and sources of stress during the semester. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, *19*(1), 61-75. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787417731194

Sharp, J., & Theiler, S. (2018). A review of psychological distress among university students: Pervasiveness, implications and potential points of intervention. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, *40*(3), 193-212. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-018-9321-7

Stallman, H. M. (2010). Psychological distress in university students: A comparison with general population data. *Australian Psychologist*, *45*(4), 249-257. https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2010.482109

Stone, C., & O'Shea, S. (2012). *Transformations and self discovery: Stories of women returning to education*. Common Ground.

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. (2020). *Good practice note: Improving retention and completion of students in Australian higher education*. https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/good-practice-note-improving-retention-and-completion-students-australian

Trowler, V., & Trowler, P. (2010). *Student engagement evidence summary*. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/StudentEngagementEvidenceSummary_0.pdf

Vaismoradi, M., Jones, J., Turunen, H., & Snelgrove, S. (2016). Theme development in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, *6*(5), 100-110. https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v6n5p100

Wimpenny, K., & Savin-Baden, M. (2013). Alienation, agency and authenticity: A synthesis of the literature on student engagement. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *18*(3), 311-326. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.725223

Xerri, M. J., Radford, K., & Shacklock, K. (2018). Student engagement in academic activities: a social support perspective. *Higher Education*, *75*(4), 589-605. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0162-9