

## **Perceptions of Providing Student Support During COVID-19: Future Implications**

**Topics:** Student learning

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated shifts to remote teaching and learning. This presentation explores the perceptions of teaching assistants, tutors, mentors, and retention officers in providing online support to first-year students. The focus is on insights and learnings gained by these student support champions as they dealt with shifting from pre-pandemic support practices to remote learning support practices.

This adaptation to change speaks to resilience thinking, which forms the backdrop of the literature that frames this study. Resilience thinking 'involves being able to withstand or overcome adversity and unpleasant events and successfully adapt to change and uncertainty' (McEwen, 2011: 2). Learning to be resilient and adaptable in order to rise above challenges, is simultaneously transformative to create new ways of thinking and dealing with current situations. Resilience requires a shift in thinking from focusing on the risks themselves, to how best to deal with the risks, 'leading to positive developmental outcomes over the longer term' (Ungar, 2013:3 49). Data were generated by means of surveys to student support champions, to garner their insights and experiences in providing online support to first year students. These tutors, teaching assistants, retention officers and mentors were assigned to specific departments as part of the First Year Experience (FYE) success and retention project. Data were analysed according to emergent themes based on challenges, improvements, and future practices. This study resides within the interpretivist paradigm and draws on the subjective experiences and understandings of research participants within a University of Technology context. The data revealed that the biggest challenges for first-year students were learning to learn remotely, time management, difficulties to engage with course content and knowledge application. As such, the kinds of student support provided, extended beyond subject content. Despite the demands placed on tutors, teaching assistants, retention officers and mentors, they managed to cope with their studies and acquired attributes, dispositions, and values to provide the necessary student support. The value of student support projects resides in acquiring attributes and skills beyond the formal curriculum. This study shows that times of complexity present opportunities to be resilient and transform to changing circumstances.

### Questions:

- How do we engender attributes and dispositions for student learning in how and what we teach?
- What strategies might be employed for first-year students to embrace self-regulated learning and take ownership of learning?
- What kinds of support should be provided to student support (tutors, TAs and mentors) in times of adversity when they themselves are struggling to cope with different teaching and learning circumstances?

**Keywords:** First-Year Experience, Student Support, Resilience