# Engaging and supporting students in higher education during a pandemic

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Increasingly, higher education institutions are implementing strategies and practices to engage students in meaningful ways with the university community and enhance their sense of belonging and connection to the institution. Research has shown that the quality of students' university experiences, particularly in relation to their level of engagement with and integration into institutional academic and social systems, are critical factors for successful student outcomes (e.g., Kahu, 2013). Tinto (1993, 2017) argues that the more engaged and assimilated a student is in their institution's academic and social environment, the more committed they will be to the institution and to their academic goals and study, and the more likely they are to be successful learners and persist with their studies

In early 2020, with the advent of COVID-19 and shift of all staff and students off-campus, higher education institutions in Australia were faced with the need to strategically revision the student experience and, in particular, the ways that students engaged with and were supported by the institution. Then with the lifting of many COVID-19 restrictions towards the end of 2020 and into 2021, the need turned to encouraging students back to campus and providing quality on-campus experiences to complement what has become a vital and dynamic blended learning environment involving both campus-based and online spaces.

This poster describes the journey of one higher education institution in Australia, the University of Tasmania (UTAS), as it responded to these unprecedented contexts, navigating the varying restrictions imposed by the pandemic but keeping student engagement and success as a core purpose. We examine the student experience during the pandemic within an holistic context, acknowledging and responding to the impact it had, and continues to have, on students' academic lives as well as their personal circumstances and wellbeing. Key areas covered in the poster include: strategies for supporting students moving from campus-based to online learning; the reshaping of existing campus-based student support to online/distance mode; and the introduction of new initiatives to enhance the online student experience and engage students more deeply with the University in the online environment. The second part of the poster looks at the return of students to campus in 2021 and delivery of a student experience with COVID-safe, on-campus connection and vibrancy designed specifically to foster student connection and belonging, alongside fully-online options. We also describe a range of supports that addressed students' individual circumstances, and their safety, health and wellbeing, as the COVID environment in Australia changed over 2020 and 2021.

## References

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