



CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH RESEARCH BRIEF

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COVID-19 online learning landscapes and CALDMR students: Opportunities and challenges

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Investigator in a national study involving 30 universities across Australia

This research was carried out under the [NCRERS Research Grants Program](#), funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

This study finds that emergency provision of online learning during COVID-19 creates challenges and opportunities for all stakeholders, and specific to this research culturally and linguistically diverse migrant and/or refugee university students. The challenges – and the opportunities – are ongoing, engendering a shift of educational thinking and practice that may redefine the future shape of education.

The project highlighted the potential for change, towards new and enriched teaching practices, including flexible delivery; enhanced technological capability on the part of educators and students; and increased interactivity, democratisation and a sense of belonging for students.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities of education globally. In universities the rapid transition to teaching online deepened inequalities in access to quality learning experiences. While the educational challenges presented by COVID are yet to fully unfold, what we call Emergency Remote Delivery (ERD) has presented both barriers and opportunities for all participants. The negative impact of this rapid transition has however been particularly acute for culturally and linguistically diverse migrant and/or refugee (CALDMR) communities. COVID has also presented stresses and difficulties for all stakeholders: educators, student-facing support staff (SFSS), and educational developers, as well as the students themselves.

THE STUDY

The project involved a collective of interdisciplinary academic researchers across Australia. Working with a steering group from the Refugee Education SIG, and involving 30 universities, the study investigated the ERD challenges and opportunities for the four identified stakeholder groups: 87 CALDMR students, 29 educators, 13 SRSS and 19 educational developers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Design focused on examining the equity-related challenges and opportunities of online teaching & learning during COVID-19, through the lens of CALDMR students. The mixed methods interdisciplinary project drew on the fields of refugee education, psychology, sociology, educational design and public health. Methods included quantitative surveys, qualitative follow-up interviews, self-recorded photovoice and photo-mediated interviews, and a review of the current policy framework. All data collection was carried out via online media. A collective analysis of the data enabled us to create a toolkit of good practice, using the four stages of Appreciative Inquiry (discover, dream, design, and destiny) for a strengths-based focus.

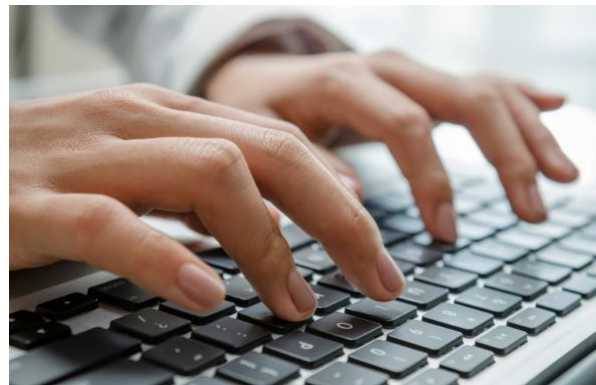


Image: canva.com

KEY FINDINGS

Major findings involved policy issues, as well as implications for the four stakeholder groups. Policy responses to support students focused mainly on financial assistance, and the academic challenges of disadvantaged students gained little attention in most cases. Therefore, while the CALDMR students benefitted from some of the emergency measures, learning support was not targeted to their needs.



Specifically, the CALDMR students' engagement in their studies was disproportionately impacted by factors such as finance, mental health and wellbeing, living and learning environments, and ability to access computers and the internet. CALDMR students also reported that carer responsibilities impacted on their ability to engage with online learning. They did however report that they enjoyed online learning, and remained engaged, enjoying the increased flexibility, reduced commuting time and enhanced relationships with educators.

Impacts for educators related to insufficient time to prepare for the transition to online teaching; heavier workloads; and navigating their own work-life balance. They described an increased sense of responsibility and care for student wellbeing beyond their pedagogical work. Opportunities for this group included the discovery of different pedagogical strategies and modalities, and the adoption of online tools to engender student confidence, participation and a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Student-facing support staff (SFSS) faced the challenge of an unprecedented activation of online student support services and a greatly increased workload. Staff with specialised knowledge of equity cohorts such as CALDMR were largely absent from decision-making processes, resulting in policy-level gaps in provision of student support. Interviews with this group highlighted the need for ongoing support to help students navigate the 'new normal' of tertiary education.

Educational developer (or designer) interviews evidenced the need for considering the specific needs of CALDMR students, with interculturally inclusive educational design for

online teaching and learning. What also became clear was the need for expansion and adjustment of the professional development support that this group provides to support educators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The strengths-based Appreciative Inquiry approach enabled the development of a research-informed advocacy agenda, making recommendations at federal, institutional and community levels.

The Federal agenda advocates for recognition of refugee student groups who have been in Australia for less than 10 years as an equity group; and provision of emergency equity funding for CALDMR students.

Institutional changes to better support CALDMR groups could include improved identification systems; better care and advocacy; employing CALDMR liaison staff; proactive planning for flexible learning; structural support such as computer equipment; increased institutional capacity; and development opportunities for staff in cultural awareness/intersectionality and implicit bias training.

A university community-level agenda advocates for fit-for-purpose teaching and learning resources; teaching and learning strategies that integrate accessible, inclusive and engaging digital technology; support for teachers in offering student-centred, diverse and engaging learning experiences; and enhancing overall CALDMR engagement and sense of belonging through use of community languages in communications and in student services areas.

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Baker, S., Anderson, J., Burke, R., Fazio, T., Hartley, L., Molla, T., Morison, C., Mude, W., **Naidoo, L.** & Sidhu, R. (2022). *COVID-19 online learning landscapes and CALDMR students: Opportunities and challenges 2022*. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/research-covid-19-online-learning-caldmr-students/>

ASSOCIATED RESEARCH FROM A/PROF LOSHINI NAIDOO

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Associate Professor Loshini Naidoo teaches in sociology of education at Western Sydney University. Her academic areas of interest include equity and access, transition and aspirations of refugee, migrant and low ses students, school-university-community partnerships and language and literacy development. She is the recipient of numerous national (ALTC 2009, 2010; 2011) and international (2012- Duke University, NC, USA) teaching awards for her outstanding contribution to student learning. She led a large cross-institutional study that investigated school-university partnerships for refugee students' access and participation in tertiary education. Through her deep engagement with the secondary schools of Greater Western Sydney she continues her social justice work in the conduct of educational research on communities affected by poverty and forced migration. Loshini is a member of the the Refugee Special Interest Group at <https://refugee-education.org>

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