

Online academic support during the COVID-19 pandemic: Reflections on unexpected outcomes that challenge assumptions

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The shift to entirely online delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for higher education institutions, students and staff. However, it has also led to new opportunities and new ways of working to deliver learning and teaching support online. In this reflective paper, we report on the outcomes of the shift to online academic support at our institution, and we specifically focus on how certain assumptions that we held about our students and our work with colleagues have been challenged over the last few months. We examine the four key areas of focus of our learning and teaching support service: in-class and individual student support, online resources, teaching support, and collaboration with other academic teams. We conclude by reflecting on how we adapted, the outcomes and how this will influence our practice beyond the time of the pandemic.

1. Introduction

Like most higher education institutions, Asia Pacific International College (APIC) rapidly moved to entirely online delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following advice from the Australian Government, APIC closed its campuses on March 20, 2020, in an effort to help slow the spread of the virus. Prior to this, APIC offered on-campus classes only. While we had already developed some online support and had plans for further development, online provision was not our prime focus, so the sudden shift to online delivery accelerated our plans and presented some challenges.

As an institution, we have been working to support our students to stay engaged and committed to their studies during this difficult time. Currently, APIC's entire student cohort is international students, many of whom lost casual jobs or picked up extra jobs to make ends meet. In addition, most of our students had not studied online before, so there was concern that students may not be equipped for online learning, disengage and 'fall through the cracks'. From a business perspective, it was critical to retain students given that international student fees are the only source of revenue for the college, like many private providers (Ferguson & Sherrell, 2019). The college also worked hard to support academic staff in their teaching, some of whom had limited experience teaching online. Central to this support for both staff and students has been the APIC's Learning and Teaching Support (LTS) team, which includes the authors of this paper.

Prior to COVID-19, we held certain assumptions about our students, many of which are assumptions shared by other academic language and learning (ALL) practitioners and discussed in the scholarly literature. Two assumptions in particular that we held were that:

- LTS staff need to have a strong on-campus presence to have students engage in workshops and consultations.
- When under stress, students may turn to contract cheating.

We also held assumptions about collaborating with academic staff, which also seemed to be common assumptions among ALL practitioners:

- Academic staff need to balance immediate teaching delivery demands with course enhancement and collaboration with the LTS team.
- It takes time to build authentic and sustained collaboration with other academic teams/staff.

However, these assumptions have been challenged over the last few months since the shift to online course delivery and online LTS.

In this paper, we report on the outcomes of the shift to remote learning and teaching support at APIC. We examine the four key areas of focus of the LTS service: in-class and individual student support, online resources, teaching support, and collaboration with other academic teams. We outline the strategies implemented and the results, some of which surprised us and challenged our assumptions about our students and colleagues. We conclude by reflecting on how we adapted, the outcomes and how this will influence our practice beyond the time of the pandemic.

2. Overview of APIC and the Academic Enhancement team

APIC is an independent higher education provider within the Education Centre of Australia (ECA) group. APIC offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses in business, business information systems and project management and follows a trimester academic year calendar. Although the college is a specialist provider, it functions in much the same way as universities in Australia and must comply with regulatory requirements such as those set by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). APIC has a primarily international student body, with campuses in Sydney and Melbourne. In 2020, there were just under 1000 students enrolled in Term 1 and around 900 students enrolled in Term 2. Half of these students were enrolled in postgraduate courses and the other half were enrolled in undergraduate courses. All students were international students, with the greatest number originating from India and Nepal (54% and 24% respectively) while a significant proportion also came from Pakistan, Brazil and Colombia.

APIC's LTS team was formed in 2017 and came under the Director of Academic Enhancement in 2018, along with the Library. Given the concentration of international students from diverse backgrounds at APIC, this academic service is critical to support student success.

3. The shift to remote online learning and teaching support

Before COVID-19, APIC offered on-campus classes only, so the sudden shift to online teaching was a significant change. The campuses closed on Friday, March 27, which was week 5 of Trimester 1. We then paused the semester for a week while we transitioned to working from home and prepared for online delivery. The academic team, which includes the LTS team, spent the week undertaking training to enhance our skills in using Zoom and other tools for online classes, adjusting assessment tasks for online delivery, confirming online pedagogy, and purchasing more e-books. During this week, staffing was also reviewed. Initially, the Director of Academic Enhancement was asked to reduce the FTE of the Academic Enhancement team (4 staff), and so the sole LTS Advisor¹ had her FTE reduced by 0.2 and a Library Officer was temporarily stood down. However, this was quickly reversed after the increased demand for support from both staff and students became apparent.

Since the commencement of online delivery on March 30, a considerable amount of work has been conducted in collaboration with various teams, particularly academic teaching team and the Digital Learning team. A more detailed timeline of the transition to working from home and

¹ The other members of the Academic Enhancement team are its Director and two librarians.

online delivery is presented in Figure 1. Luckily, APIC had a well-developed learning management system (LMS) (Canvas) with significant use of unit specific sites which laid a solid foundation for the transition. We also have excellent online resources such as digital library databases and academic skills e-resources.

APIC's LTS team was well-equipped to move to online delivery and working remotely. Almost all regular services, resources and support for staff and students have been maintained, as outlined below:

- **Learning Support online resources:** The Learning Support site within the LMS is well established and has a suite of online written and video e-resources on a range of topics.
- **In-class support:** The LTS team has been able to deliver all usual in-class academic skills workshops and support sessions via Zoom.
- **Individual consultations:** The team has been providing online individual consultations to staff and students via Zoom, email, phone and live chat.

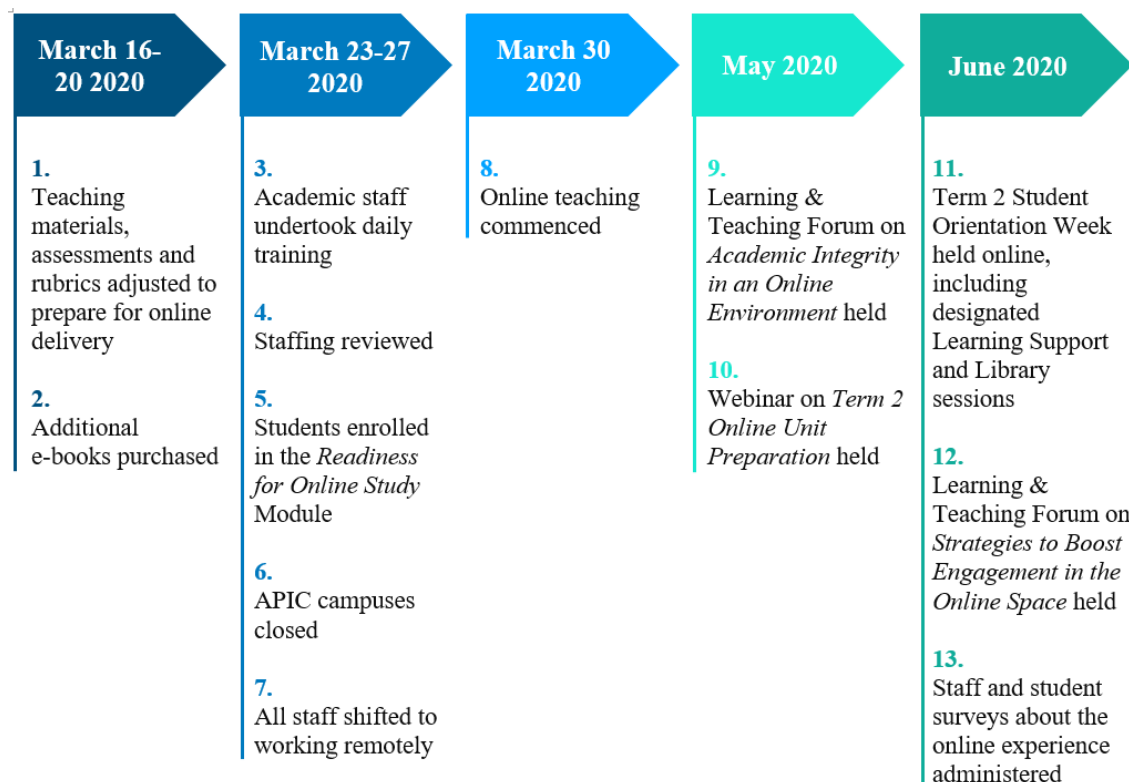


Figure 1. Timeline of the transition to online delivery at APIC from March 16 to June 30, 2020.

In addition to the abovementioned 'usual' activities, further online support was provided as outlined below:

- **Readiness for Online Study Module:** The week before online delivery commenced, all students were given access to the Readiness for Online Learning Module, which was developed by the LTS team, via the LMS. This module was designed to help prepare students who are new to an online learning environment. The module covers technology considerations, online communication skills, time management, active and self-directed learning and more.
- **Live chat support:** The LTS team established the 'Chat' function on the Learning Support section of the LMS so that students could seek assistance via live chat.

- **Social media marketing:** The LTS and library team worked with the digital marketing team to prepare an ongoing series of social media posts to ensure students are aware that library and learning support remains available and accessible.
- **Online Orientation session:** A dedicated 1-hour Learning Support Orientation session was introduced in Term 2 Orientation week to introduce students to the online resources and ensure that students know how to seek support online.

4. Outcomes of the shift to online learning and teaching support

4.1. In-class workshops and consultations

Assumption 1: LTS staff need to have a strong on-campus presence to have students engage in workshops and consultations.

Outcome that challenges that assumption: LTS provided triple the usual number of workshops and consultations while delivering remotely, which suggests that connection and online presence (as well as increased student familiarity with online systems as will be noted below) were the keys to high levels of engagement with students, not physical contact.

Interestingly, there was a surge in demand for LTS services since the shift to online delivery. LTS in-class workshops and individual consultations more than tripled in Term 1 and 2 compared to the previous terms, as illustrated in Figure 2. We were able to handle the demand as our priority and key focus was to provide immediate support for students and staff in the transition.

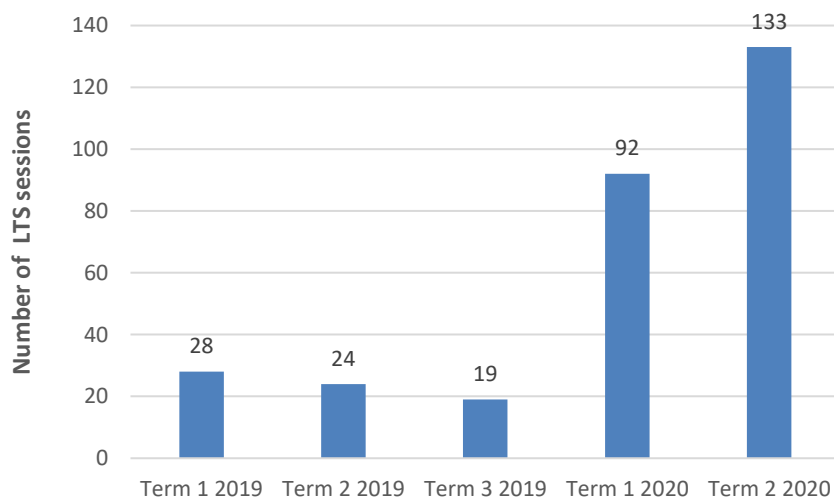


Figure 2. Comparison of demand for LTS sessions (in-class workshops and individual consultations).

While we expected an increase in demand for support, this surge was much larger than we anticipated. We assumed (or feared) that students may not seek support because they could not meet with someone face-to-face, given that many students have a personal preference for face-to-face interactions (Kelly & Columbus, 2020; Sangster, Stoner, & Flood, 2020). We based this assumption on our experience of not having a dedicated Learning and Teaching advisor at APIC's Sydney campus. The Director of Academic Enhancement is based at the Sydney campus and sees students when she can (usually one or two per week); however, she does not have much availability or presence on-campus among students. On the other hand, the Melbourne-based Learning and Teaching Advisor has a strong on-campus presence and consequently sees a higher number of students. This imbalance between campuses has always been a concern and we have tried to remedy this by offering Zoom consultations and cross-campus streaming of in-class academic support

sessions. However, before COVID-19, the uptake of such online support was not significant, thus there was lower learning support provision in Sydney compared to Melbourne.

However, the shift to online delivery in Term 1 of 2020 out of necessity has led students to become more familiar with the available online platform and thus utilise the online support services more. Consequently, in Term 1 2020 there was much more balanced learning support provision, whereby 52% of the consultations were provided to Sydney-based students and 48% to Melbourne-based students. We also attribute this to the increased promotion of the LTS team's online presence on the LMS, social media and the "FAQs on coronavirus (COVID-19) and your studies at APIC" page. The introduction of the live chat function also provided students with the synchronous and instant support they needed, and this mode of support has been well utilised by students.

Another reason for this increase in the demand for Learning Support is the revision of assessment tasks in Term 1. Given that some assessments did not readily conform to assessment in the virtual context, the tasks needed to be revised without compromising the link with the unit learning outcomes, as maintaining constructive alignment is essential in pivoting to online delivery (Anderson, 2020). The revised assessments tended to involve more reflective and critical writing, and, consequently, specific writing and research skills became particularly essential. Thus, in-class support sessions were increasingly requested by teaching staff to provide students with the necessary guidance and training to complete their assessments. Academic staff were heavily focused on supporting students to ensure that they were engaged and achieved the intended learning outcomes, and this is a common theme reported by others around the globe during the pandemic (Sangster et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the changes in assessment tasks also led to a change in emphasis for in-class workshop topics between Term 1 2020 and the previous terms. Previously, the LTS team's in-class workshops covered a wide variety of topics, such as tackling specific assignments, maths refresher, academic reading, using Microsoft Excel for maths, academic writing, referencing and test preparation. However, in Term 1 2020, the in-class workshops focused on only two topics, namely tackling specific assignments (70%) and academic integrity (30%). With the changes in assessment design taking effect mid-term, the urgent need to get the assignments 'done' in-time accounts for this shift and narrowing of focus.

4.2. Online resources

Assumption 2: When under stress, students may turn to contract cheating.

Outcome that challenges that assumption: Incidences of substantial academic misconduct did not rise, and students were highly engaged with the assessment support resources.

The move to online delivery saw an influx in the use of the learning support online resources. The LMS (Canvas) analytics data revealed that there was a 300% increase in page visits to the LTS online resources compared to previous terms, with a total of 69,065 pageviews in Term 1 (equivalent to nearly 70 page views per student) and 46,112 in Term 2 (equivalent to 51 page views per student). Figure 3 illustrates the increase. (Note that in Term 1, 2019 the online learning support resources were under development, hence the low number of page views).

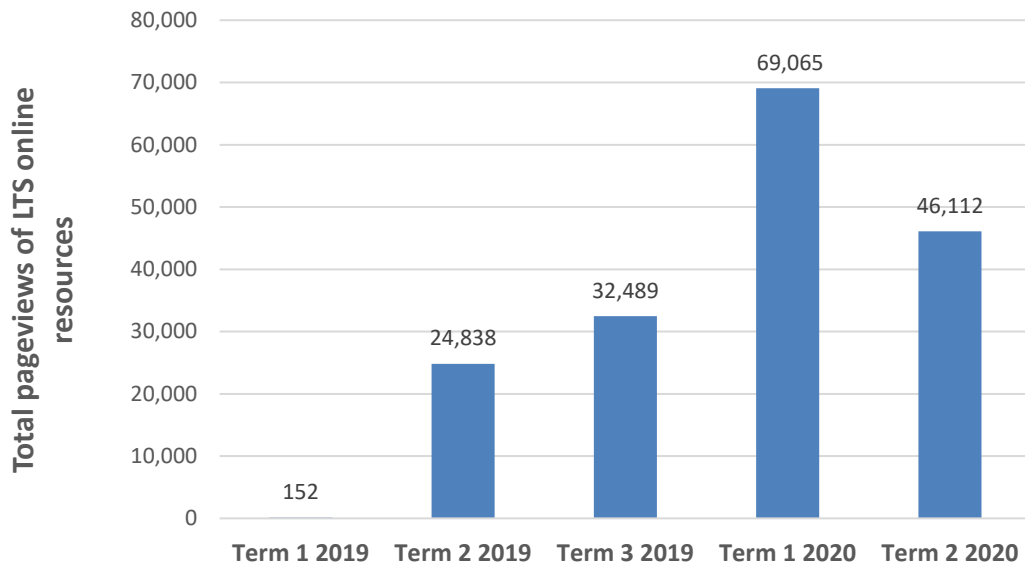


Figure 3. Total number of pageviews of LTS resources on the LMS.

Access to the LTS online resources significantly “spiked” in weeks 3, 7 and 10, which aligns with the common due dates of most assessment tasks, as shown in Figure 4.

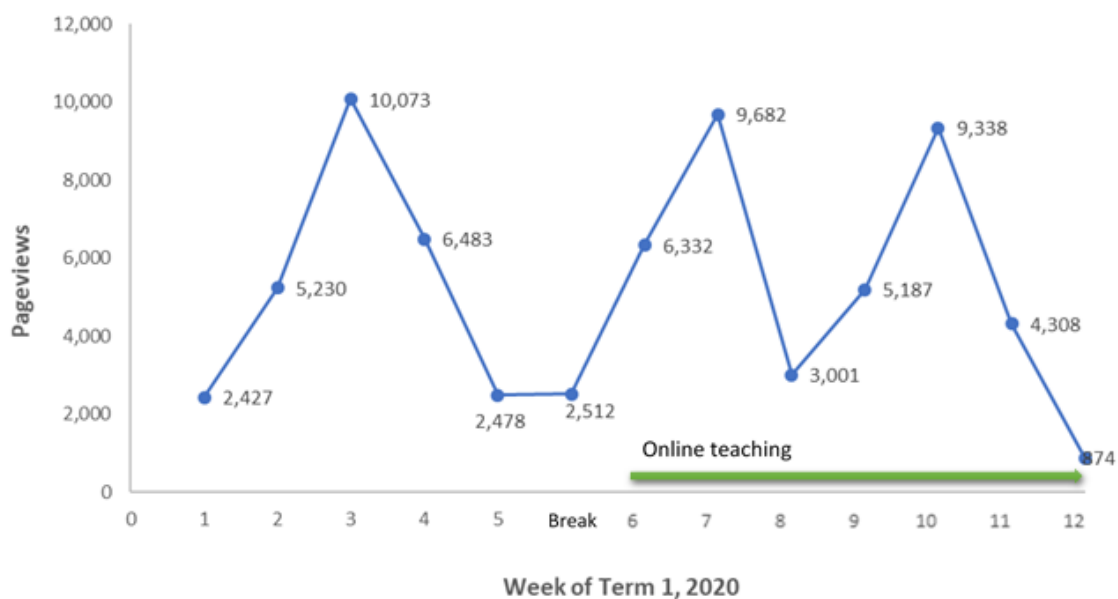


Figure 4. Distribution of LTS online resources pageviews throughout Term 1.

The most accessed resources are listed below in order of page views and the asterisks represent pages that moved into the top 10 in Term 1 2020:

1. Assessment coversheets
2. Basic Algebra*
3. Writing different assessment genres*
4. Writing assignments*
5. Researching for academic purposes*
6. Taking notes for assessments*

7. Teamwork
8. Why do I need feedback?
9. Referencing
10. Essential computer skills*

This significant increase in access to the online resources was another interesting by-product of the shift to online delivery. We assumed that students may be too busy adjusting to the new learning environment to consider using LTS resources. We also know that many of our students are likely to be stressed due to COVID-19 and associated issues such as separation from family, uncertainty in employment, financial hardship, and the shift from on-campus to online classes, as these factors have been identified as significant sources of anxiety for students during the pandemic (Brammer & Clark, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Kecojevic et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). We were concerned that these increased levels of stress may prompt our students to turn to cheating, and in particular plagiarism and contract cheating, which has indeed been reported in literature (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019; Eaton, 2020; Pitt, Dullaghan & Sutherland-Smith, 2020). Furthermore, many studies on academic integrity highlight that plagiarism and contract cheating amongst international students continues to escalate (Bretag et al., 2018a; Fatemi & Saito, 2019). There is also ample research to support that there is not necessarily more cheating in online courses but rather changes in the nature of the cheating (e.g. Harris, Harrison, & Ford, 2019), so we were concerned that that we might see an increase in incidences of more serious types of academic misconduct, such as contract cheating.

However, in Term 1 2020, the number of serious academic integrity breaches, such as contract cheating and intentional plagiarism, decreased when compared to previous terms (although there was an increase in the number of reports of minor academic misconduct, such as poor or incorrect referencing and inappropriate collaboration). We attribute the reduction in serious misconduct to the increased promotion and uptake of support services and resources during this time, and others also report that this type of support is a factor that has increased engagement (Donovan, 2020; Sangster et al. 2020). As reported by others (e.g. Brammer and Clark, 2020), we also found that the willingness of staff to find additional and alternative ways to help students continue their learning is generating long-lasting impacts. It should be noted that academic misconduct, and in particular contract cheating, can be difficult to detect and substantiate (Harper et al., 2018), so it is possible that some breaches of academic integrity were 'missed'. However, staff participated in a professional development forum on academic integrity in the online environment in May 2020 (five weeks after online teaching commenced) and were provided with a document listing and describing indicators of contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2018b), so we feel confident reporting the decline in serious academic misconduct cases.

4.3. Teaching support

Assumption 3: Academic staff need to balance immediate teaching delivery demands with course enhancement and collaboration with the LTS team.

Outcome that challenges that assumption: The shift to online delivery created a new paradigm of engagement and support with academic staff.

A key responsibility for the LTS team is to support staff to implement strategies that enhance the quality of learning and teaching at APIC. This is typically done via team projects, professional development sessions and LTS resources, and to a lesser extent via individual consultations. We assumed that this is because staff are often too busy to seek one-on-one support from the LTS team. However, our data showed that the LTS team provided significantly more staff consultations than usual in Term 1. The most common topics of the consultations were:

- online teaching, planning and delivery
- using Canvas and Zoom and overcoming technical issues

- assessment task and rubric design
- academic misconduct contract cheating matters
- creating copyright-compliant content.

As previously mentioned, there were important changes that needed to be implemented to shift to online delivery, and the changes had to be made in a very short timeframe. As reported widely in the recent literature, this put pressure on institutional systems of quality assurance and governance, and significantly increased workload for staff (Brammer & Clark, 2020; Sangster et al., 2020). Consequently, our academic staff reached out to the LTS team for assistance, advice and support regarding re-designing the assessment tasks and marking rubrics, revising the teaching and learning activities, and adjusting teaching materials. Moreover, the teaching staff had a wide variety of experience of online support from little to significant, hence the focused and individualised support with tools such as Zoom and e-portfolio. Anderson (2020) advocates for this type of individualised and “just-in-time” professional development and support that recognises the interrelationship between technical, pedagogical and content knowledge. Concerns about copyright when recording online lectures were also expressed and the LTS team liaised with the Copyright Agency to provide advice to staff (Cavaleri, 2020). Importantly, academic staff recognised the potential increased risks of academic misconduct by students as a result of the swift changes and stressful environment; and consequently, as a preventive measure, more consultations with LTS team were sought by academic staff and more in-class support sessions on this topic have been delivered. We believe that this proactive, educational approach, as advocated in the literature (Bretag et al., 2018a; Fatemi & Saito, 2019), has contributed significantly to the positive observation regarding students’ academic integrity conduct.

4.4. Collaboration with other academic teams

Assumption 4: It takes time to build authentic and sustained collaboration with other academic teams/staff.

Outcome that challenges that assumption: We fast-tracked fruitful and ongoing collaboration with the Digital Learning Team and Campus Academic Managers.

The LTS team works with staff and teams across the college; however, in the past, it has taken time to establish and maintain ongoing collaboration with staff, and this is a sentiment shared in the literature (e.g. Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller, 2001; Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). However, the demands of the sudden pivot to online delivery require close collaboration between academics, technology support units, and learning and teaching support teams to implement and sustain pedagogic change processes (Anderson, 2020). As reported by others (e.g. Brammer and Clark, 2020), the closer collaboration and more frequent communication among teams has been a pleasing benefit of the shift to online learning and teaching.

When the decision was made to shift to online delivery, the LTS team and Digital Learning team immediately began working together to coordinate support for staff in the transition to online delivery. To assist teaching staff with preparing for and delivering online teaching, the LTS team co-delivered five staff webinars with the Digital Learning team during the break week before online delivery started. Topics included using Zoom, Canvas, marking rubrics and assessment, and online student engagement. Since then, LTS and the Digital Learning team have co-delivered three additional webinars to encourage best pedagogical use of the technology available. Numerous collaborative consultations between the two teams were also delivered to academic staff to assist in strengthening pedagogical and technical skills and developing confidence to create and curate online learning materials. We anticipate that our close collaboration with the Digital Learning team will continue even when face-to-face classes resume as the shift to online delivery has opened up opportunities to develop communities of practice and new ways of working together (Anderson, 2020). We found that there is overlap in the type of support we provide to staff and

we enjoyed the opportunities to develop and implement strategies in tandem with the Digital Learning team.

Another successful and lasting collaboration also emerged between the LTS team and the two Campus Academic Managers. Both parties are involved in academic integrity process and procedure at APIC. Typically, the LTS team worked on the 'educative' elements, such as administering the Academic Integrity Module, delivering in-class presentations on academic integrity to new students, and working with students who have been referred for poor paraphrasing and referencing; whereas the Campus Academic Managers dealt with academic misconduct cases and reporting breaches. These academic integrity tasks are typically carried out quite separately. However, given that maintaining academic integrity standards was a concern with online delivery, the LTS team and Campus Academic Managers collaborated to develop and co-facilitate an in-house professional development session (Learning and Teaching Forum) on academic integrity in the online environment. The session was well received by academic staff, and outcomes of the session included two documents that were developed by staff during the session called 'Strategies for Mitigating Risk and Identifying and Responding to Breaches' and 'Indicators of Copying, Collusion and Contract Cheating'. A flowchart for markers for identifying and reporting potential breaches was also discussed at the forum and is being developed by the LTS team and Campus Academic Managers. This cooperative focus on academic integrity processes, procedures and training will continue during Term 2 and beyond.

The online Orientation week for Term 2 is another successful collaboration among various teams within APIC, namely the Registrar's Office, Campus Academic Managers, the academic team and LTS. Compared to previous terms, Term 2 Orientation covers a wider range of topics and has a heavier focus on the available supports that students need during this challenging time. All orientation sessions are recorded and published on the newly established Orientation page in the LMS for students' reference and support.

5. Reflections and Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges to higher education, and APIC and our staff and students are no exception. This crisis has led to new opportunities and new ways of working to deliver learning and teaching support online. We held assumptions about how we expected things to 'play out'; however, some of the outcomes have surprised us. Our students did not shy away from challenges but instead became more engaged with their online classes and assessments and sought more academic support and assistance than normal. Similarly, academic staff worked closely with the LTS team to move to online delivery and maintain a quality educational experience for our students. Interestingly, the crisis has fast-tracked many initiatives at APIC, such as the improvements to online learning provision, further upskilling of staff digital literacy, and collaborations to tighten academic integrity processes, to name a few. Such initiatives could have taken much longer to happen if it were not due to the quick responses and most importantly, the exceptional inter-departmental cooperation at APIC.

The LTS team has been a key player in these initiatives and outcomes and has contributed to APIC's journey through this crisis. We are pleased to have been able to maintain almost all regular LTS services, resources and support for staff and students and feel that online LTS support could feasibly be maintained indefinitely. It will be interesting to observe whether the outcomes described in this paper continue beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. We predict, like others (e.g. Brammer & Clark, 2020; Sangster et al. 2020), that many of the innovations implemented during the pandemic and aspects of the changed delivery model will be maintained beyond the crisis. Looking ahead, we will continue to develop and polish our online learning support resources given that they have become popular with staff and students. When we return to campus, we will maintain the live chat support given that this has also been popular and will continue to offer Zoom consultations to provide maximum availability of LTS staff. We will also provide more

strategic staff support in collaboration with Digital Learning Team and Campus Academic Managers, rather than operating in a somewhat siloed way. On an individual level, we feel that this extraordinary time has helped us develop personally and professionally. We have worked very hard to respond, adapt, connect, develop and thrive. This experience of a lifetime has made us more resilient and has also reignited our spark for our work as we continue to adapt to find ways to support our students and staff while remaining safe.

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