The role of online tourism education and its impact on student wellbeing during a 'COVID-pause'

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Article Info

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created an extremely challenging landscape for the tourism and hospitality industry, particularly in terms of the wellbeing of those employed in the sector. In mid-2020, in response to the pandemic, the University of Tasmania, in conjunction with the Tourism Industry Council of Tasmania, designed a fee-free Graduate Certificate of Tourism, Environmental and Cultural Heritage for Tasmanian residents employed in the tourism sector who were impacted by COVID-19. The course was designed to upskill participants, but as the course progressed, anecdotal evidence emerged about the wellbeing side-benefits of this online educational offering.

As a result, an empirical study was conducted as it was not clear from previous research whether online education could contribute towards psychological wellbeing during a pandemic. A web-based survey and focus groups were designed to collect data. The findings revealed the extent that online delivery in tourism higher education can contribute towards wellbeing during a prolonged crisis event. It revealed that the free education attracted students who would not normally attend university. As a result, they felt a great sense of achievement and, ultimately, wellbeing during and following the completion of the course. The findings also revealed that the hybrid online model employed for this teaching model generated a sense of community and wellbeing.

Introduction

Recent research suggests that people's sense of wellbeing has suffered greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). Stressors such as health-related worries, job insecurity, work-family conflict, and discrimination against those affected by the virus have all negatively affected people's subjective wellbeing (Mutinda & Liu, 2021). The tourism and hospitality industry has been impacted by these issues while also facing existing difficulties, such as gender inequality and workplace exploitation (Milano & Koens, 2022) and emotional labour (Ek et al., 2020). The pandemic crisis has arguably amplified many of these issues and, in doing so, has demonstrated that workers in the industry are highly vulnerable in terms of their socio-psychological wellbeing during times of crisis (Kimbu et al., 2021).

Tasmania, an island state in south-eastern Australia, was the first state to instigate border restrictions following the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in the entire tourism industry being brought to a standstill and vast job losses in the sector. In response to this, the University of Tasmanian (UTAS) and the Tourism Industry Council of Tasmania offered a Graduate Certificate in Tourism, Environment and Cultural Heritage (GCTECH) as a six-month full-time (or 18-month part-time) degree designed for tourism professionals impacted by COVID-19. The concept proved very popular, with 340 enrolments coming in between its announcement in May and the start of teaching in mid-July 2020. The course was designed to be at the cutting edge of online teaching by utilising modern educational technology with learners who were geographically dispersed across and beyond Tasmania.

As the course progressed, anecdotal evidence emerged about the wellbeing benefits of education during the pandemic. Although the literature on the impact of online education on students' wellbeing in a pandemic context exists (Butnaru et al., 2021; Petillion & McNeil, 2020), there are still significant gaps in knowledge. Specifically, while it has been demonstrated that online education can be a contributing factor to wellbeing (Morgan & Simmons, 2021), it is not clear what role online education can play in promoting psychological wellbeing during a pandemic. Subsequently, our key research questions were:

1. Can online teaching environments foster a sense of student wellbeing during a crisis event? And

2. If wellbeing outcomes exist, what are they?

To respond to these questions, a web-based survey and focus groups were conducted in late 2020 and early 2021. This paper discusses the finding of these methods and, in doing so, contributes to the emerging literature on online education and wellbeing during crisis situations.

Literature review

The impacts of education on individuals' wellbeing

Most wellbeing concepts in the literature are related to a positive philosophical vision of the world. Wellbeing is primarily viewed through the individual lens and what makes people feel happy and good (Cloninger, 2004; Smith & Diekmann, 2017). There are now a multitude of wellbeing measures that have developed to assess individuals' wellbeing, ranging from scales that assess individuals' satisfaction with life and mood (Larsen et al., 1985) to those which assess anxiety and depression (Kessler, 2002) and those that consider individuals' ability to deal with difficult situations (Luthans et al., 2007). However, some scales have been critiqued for their inability to assess external factors that affect individuals, including relationships and one's sense that they are surrounded and supported by others. One scale that attempts to deal with these external issues is the PERMA framework (Kern et al., 2015; Seligman, 2018). This tool attempts to address a wide variety of dimensions of wellbeing by considering Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. The five major constructs of the framework, as outlined by Seligman (2011), are:

- *Positive Emotion*: hedonic feelings of happiness such as joy and contentment;

- *Engagement*: feeling engaged in life and connection to activities or organisations;

- *Relationships*: feeling socially integrated, cared about and supported by others, and satisfied with social connections;

- *Meaning*: believing that one's life is valuable and feeling connected to something greater than oneself; and

- *Accomplishment*: making progress toward goals and feeling capable of doing daily activities.

PERMA is not without its criticisms; it has been described as a 'good start' but not a definitive theory for measuring wellbeing and has been critiqued for lacking instruction on how to build wellbeing (Seligman 2018). Despite this, its strength in educational settings has been noted because of its use of multiple dimensions that can provide guidance to educators as to where the wellbeing of students may be lacking (Kern et al., 2015; Morgan & Simmons, 2021). Indeed, researchers in the field of education and wellbeing argue that education itself can contribute to the PERMA elements, which lead to positive wellbeing (Michalos, 2008). This is significant because the degree to which education contributes to positive wellbeing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet understood. Research has clearly demonstrated the impacts that the pandemic and measures such as lockdown, isolation, social distancing and border closures have had on the wellbeing of people within the university sector (McGaughey et al., 2021; Sutherland et al., 2021). For example, amongst university students, a study

conducted in Bangladesh showed that living in urban areas, having an unstable financial situation, living without family, and having infections of family or friends were factors that caused anxiety during the COVID-19 outbreak (Dhar et al., 2020).

Further research demonstrated that uncertainty about academic performance, graduation and career prospects are other stressors reducing university students' wellbeing during the pandemic (Sundarasen et al., 2020). This leads to the question of whether learning can contribute to wellbeing during a crisis situation? Bensalah (2002, 2011) argues that education can provide a channel for teaching new skills and values and benefit the "reconstruction of the economic basis of family, local and national life and sustainable development and peace building". Moreover, as a way of implementing emergency remote education, effective online learning is claimed to enhance students' mental wellbeing (Shohel et al., 2021). Scholars in the field of psychology and education argue that higher education institutions can play an important role in assisting students in coping with stress and anxiety (Morgan & Simmons, 2021; Mutinda & Liu, 2021) as well as improving academic and social integration during the pandemic (Resch et al., 2022). However, not all studies have yielded positive outcomes; a study of chemistry students in a Canadian university during the pandemic found that emergency remote learning was unfavourable to students' engagement and mental wellbeing (Petillion & McNeil, 2020). Another study into students' wellbeing discovered collaborative learning with peers did not affect hope or academic satisfaction (Zhong et al., 2021). The inconsistencies in findings emphasise that the role that education can play in enhancing wellbeing in times of crisis is not yet thoroughly understood. This is critical because COVID-19 has created the necessity for, and subsequent heavy reliance upon, online education.

Online education and its prospects in higher education

Debates regarding the benefits and challenges of online learning are not a new phenomenon (Forsyth et al., 2010; Pillay et al., 2007). Recent research reported that online learning can have a negative effect on students' perceptions of their personal development (Butnaru et al., 2021), and student learning outcomes and course-learning outcomes were generally lower when the study was online (Kristianto & Gandajaya, 2022). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, online educational providers have often been criticised for providing inadequate training conditions, poor infrastructure and hardware (Budur et al., 2021) and inadequate access to digital resources (Adesina & Orija, 2020; Zhao et al., 2022).

Conversely, positive dimensions of online learning have been documented; Adesina and Orija (2020) found students perceived many benefits of online learning during the pandemic, including scheduling flexibility, self-paced learning and skill development. Online learning has also been said to reduce mental stress (Sundarasen et al., 2020). However, it has been found that this depends on individuals' personalities (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021) and that skills training is essential to help students succeed in online learning environments (Tabvuma et al., 2021). However, what remains

to be understood is the extent to which online learning can facilitate a sense of connection between students via online environments during a pandemic. The PERMA model argues that social integration and engagement with activities and organisations are important contributors to a sense of wellbeing (Seligman, 2018). Further research is needed to explore whether connection and engagement with academic staff and peers via online learning can positively influence student wellbeing.

Butnaru et al. (2021, pp. 4-5) argue that "to increase wellbeing in the context of online education, the focus of universities will have to be on how to facilitate social-emotional learning in virtual classrooms". This implies that online platforms require direct interaction to enhance communication and feedback, such as through facial expressions, gestures, feedback and personal connection. Researchers have shown that hybrid modes of delivering courses, such as experiential online learning, hold considerable promise (Snow et al., 2019) because students can connect, reflect, share, and interact with teaching staff and peers. Similarly, blended learning platforms in tourism programs have been found to positively impact students' cognitive engagement and emotional participation and, ultimately, their satisfaction (Gao et al., 2020). Adedoyin and Soyka (2020) argue that effective online education requires cautious design, planning and development in order to ensure positive emotional outcomes. COVID-19 has challenged this knowledge. The sudden pivots required by universities following the outbreak of the pandemic meant that educational planning and educators were under tremendous time pressure.

Furthermore, students who chose in-person education were forced to change modes. Waller et al. (2021) claim that the social benefits of learning may have been reduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as opportunities for socialising suddenly decreased when learners were forced to go online, which coincided with pandemic-induced stress. Definitive research is yet to emerge on whether the social and emotional aspects of wellbeing could be fulfilled via an online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This, coupled with a need to understand the ways in which online education can improve student perceptions of their skills and knowledge and how these impact their wellbeing, served as a major impetus for this study.

Tourism in Tasmania, COVID-19 and the creation of the GCTECH

Tasmania is highly reliant on tourism; the industry contributes $2.95 billion (9%) to the Gross State Product and is responsible for 14% of Tasmanian employment (Tourism Tasmania, 2022). Consequently, when the Tasmanian Government closed Tasmania's borders on the 30th of March 2020, the tourism industry was brought to a complete standstill. A variety of emergency responses emerged following this announcement, including the development of the Commonwealth of Australia-supported GCTECH, which meant that studying was effectively free. The degree offered four core units that contained online live lectures, along with highly interactive teaching modules. It also used teaching tools such as recorded interviews with overseas

tourism experts, live webinars, online tutorials, workshops, and online social events, such as panels and a quiz night, to complement the learning experience.

Between early June 2020 and the enrolment cut-off date in early August 2020, 340 students enrolled into the course. In July, the state-wide lockdown ended, and the tourism industry began to 'open up' to Tasmanian residents. This resulted in 168 students not commencing the course, but 172 students remained. Of those, 81 students graduated at the end of December 2020, 34 students graduated in August 2021, and at the time of writing, the remainder were completing the course. Students were geographically spread across the entire island of Tasmania, and the majority of them were 'mature students' (over 21 years of age); with family, work, or other care commitments. Approximately 75% came from a non-academic background (no bachelor's degree or equivalent acquired prior to the enrolment). They were offered a place in the course because of their rich industry experience. The response of the research team was to develop a suite of teaching tools aimed at bringing those who had a non-tertiary background 'up to speed' with academic writing, literature and behaviour. This required measures to be put in place that extended beyond the normal support systems offered by UTAS.

In addition to online sessions on enrolment and the universities' online learning platform MyLO, the researchers developed a non-award learning site called the 'Tourism Lounge'. This site sought to assist students from non-academic backgrounds with learning resources such as webinars, podcasts, academic readings and vignettes from the teaching staff on their favourite research articles. The goal was to upskill students on academic norms in a casualised and non-overwhelming manner. Within the Tourism Lounge, students could access modules such as "Papers that you can't live without", where seminal tourism articles were highlighted, and a module called "Theories that make us sweat", where lecturers gave four-minute video blogs on their favourite theories. The Tasmanian tourism industry was variously celebrated and criticised in lectures, discussions and readings (Ooi & Hardy, 2020; Denny et al., 2019). The teaching team wanted to reassure students that the classroom environment was one where freedom of speech and respectful debate were encouraged.

Methods

We utilised mixed methods to elicit a sense of the breadth and depth of students' experiences, thus aligning with approaches often seen in education and the social sciences (Chubchuwong & Speece, 2015). This included an online quantitative survey followed by two Zoom-based focus groups with students. Digital methods were necessary, given that some students were in lockdown or quarantine during the survey period. They have been recognised as suitable research tools during exceptional times, such as natural disasters and occasions that cause anxiety (Ma et al., 2020).

Online survey

To determine the impact that the GCTECH had upon wellbeing, questions and options for responses were drawn from three psychological models: Seligman's (2011) PERMA model (adapted from Kern et al. 2015), with additional influence from the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) and the PsyCap scale (Luthans et al., 2007) (See Table 1).

First, to tailor our questionnaire for an education setting, we used questions from the PERMA model, via a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater amounts of the given construct (Kern et al., 2015). For example, we used the PERMA model to create questions on the positive emotions that students had towards the degree, as well as to gauge the emotions that were brought about because of their study, their engagement with the content and other students, and their sense of accomplishment. We also used this scale to assist with the construction of questions that determined students' negative experiences, such as stress.

Next, we drew inspiration for our questions from the PsyCap scale to assess students' perception of the impacts that the course had upon their confidence, optimism and sense of hope for the future and ability to problem solve (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Specifically, questions 1-6 on confidence and 8-10 on resilience were deemed used from Luthans's (2017) scale. Minor adjustments to the wording were made so that the impact of the GCTECH could be explored. For example, PySCap item 10 was changed from "*I feel confident in representing my work area in meetings with management*" to "*The GCTECH has given me confidence in some ways*".

Finally, to determine whether the GCTECH impacted students' sense of positive emotions and nervousness, we drew inspiration from the K10 Kessler Psychological Distress scale (Kessler, 2002). For example, we used measure 3 from the K10 scale as inspiration. The question "*During the last 30 days, about how often did you feel so nervous that nothing could calm you down?*" was reframed to: "*The GCTECH calms me down during the pandemic*".

Table 1: Example of survey question design, building upon previous scales and theoretical concepts.

Thinking about the GCTECH and its impact on you, to what extent do you agree with these statements? (5-Point Likert Scale)		Thinking about the GCTECH and the impact that it has had upon your tourism knowledge and skills, to what extent do you agree with these statements? (*5-point Likert scale*)	
Survey Questions	**Theories/Concepts**	**Survey Questions**	**Theories/Concepts**
I feel connected to a community of tourism students	Positive relationships (PERMA, Kern 2015)	I have more useful connections with the industry	Social networks and subjective wellbeing (Litwin et al 2013) Positive Relationships (PERMA, Kern 2015)
The GC TECH has more work than expected	Negative emotion (Kern 2015)	The GC TECH has NOT improved my knowledge of the industry	Project specific question Accomplishment (PERMA, Kern 2015)
The GC TECH gives me a purpose	Meaning (PERMA, Kern 2015)	The GC TECH does NOT help me to pursue my work goals	PsyCap (8, 10-12) work goals Accomplishment (PERMA, Kern 2015)
The GC TECH does NOT cheer me up	K10 (Q9) so sad that nothing could cheer you up	The GC TECH has given me confidence in some ways	PsyCap (1-6) confidence at varies work related areas. Positive emotions (PERMA, Kern 2015)
I realise that I have good ideas	Accomplishment (PERMA, Kern 2015)		
Because of what I learned, I feel optimistic about my future	PsyCap (21,22) optimistic for future, bright side. Meaning (PERMA, Kern 2015)		

The survey concluded with questions related to the perceived outcomes and challenges that students faced during the semester, plus their gender, family status and previous educational experience. We used the Qualtrics platform and emailed all students enrolled in the course (n=340). At the time, just over 170 enrolled students actively participated in the course, and 49 completed the survey in full. Respondents had the option to provide contact details for participating in focus groups to further engage with the research.

Focus groups

The focus groups were designed to explore the issues raised in the survey in further detail, including how COVID impacted our students' employment, the role that their studies played during COVID with regard to their wellbeing, and perceived outcomes of the course, both positive and negative. We also triangulated the online survey data by delving into the focus group discussion to seek confirmation and explanation of certain survey findings. Two semi-structured Zoom focus groups were held by an experienced facilitator in May 2021, with a total of eight participants recruited successfully.

Recordings were transcribed digitally. Then, to ensure the participants' anonymity, the facilitator removed all references to students' and employers' names within the industry, ensuring that the research team could not identify individual students' identities. The transcribed manuscript was read through, interpreted in context and categorised into themes and sub-themes by two of the authors, first independently, and then their individual notes were compared, including categories, themes and examples of quotes, and finally integrated into one data analysis document. The coding structure, analytical process and outcomes were discussed among the authors. In this paper, we provide some brief background information on the participants when quoting them.

Results and analysis

Motivation to enrol for studies during a pandemic – the power of 'free education'

The promise of free education was a major motivational factor:

> I did the course because, to be honest, it was free. And I thought I'm really interested in it. I don't know if I would have enrolled if I had to pay for it just because it would have felt a bit frivolous. Because I don't really work in the area. (Participant 5, manager, vocational education provider)

This finding was interesting as previous literature has found that fee-paying courses encourage learners to pay attention to the benefits of their courses (Lee & Yeung, 2022). It is possible that these findings did not apply to this study due to the financial pressures created by COVID-19.

Further motivations for studying included an opportunity to upskill:

I saw it as an opportunity to just update my knowledge, refresh everything. (Participant 6, worked in tourism, hospitality and brewery)

Table 2: Respondents' motivations for studying the GCTECH.
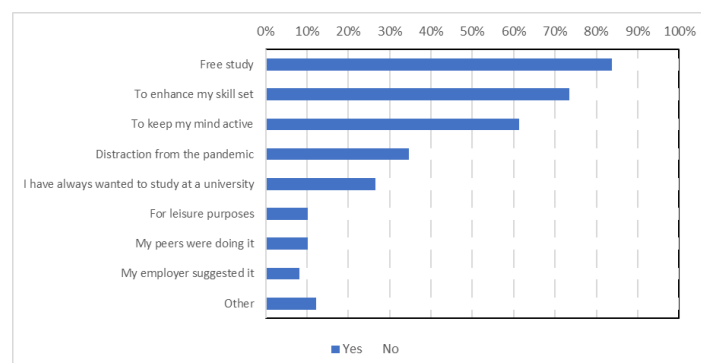
Distraction and keeping minds active during the 'tourism pause' was also a major motivator:

> I thought, well, I'm going to be bored. I'm still not doing many hours a week. This would be nice to get it ticked off, and everything that that course had just caught my eye because it was relevant to my job. (Participant 7, brew house general manager)

And finally, the short length of the course emerged as an attractive proposition: pause' was also a major motivator:

> It was an opportunity for me to really take six months and branch into a different area... The briefness of it. (Participant 3 started a building design business)

Towards the end of the survey, we probed further by asking, "If the GCTECH was not provided free of charge during the pandemic, would you have done it?" (n=49). 90% responded that they would not have done it if it was not free. This further highlighted the influence of the free study on their decision to enrol.

Exploring correlations in the data on wellbeing

To summarise the survey dataset and identify noteworthy associations related to students' wellbeing while learning in this course during the pandemic, we created a correlation matrix for all relevant parameters using the Kendall rank correlation coefficient (tau, τ) (Hervé, 2007). Multiple choice questions were separated into true/false answers for each option. Kendall's tau is a robust measure of the relationship between two statements when the sample size is small, and the dataset includes ordinal ranks. The calculated p-values for a hypothesis test whose null hypothesis is the absence of association ($\tau = 0$) suggest that all correlations discussed below are highly statistically significant (p<0.01), except where explicitly stated. The following analysis explores the relationships that were identified from this process. Many affective outcomes from the survey also emerged from the

focus groups; many themes that appeared here were deeply personal.

The question statement "I feel good that I am doing the GCTECH" correlated positively with feeling a strong sense of community in class ($\tau = 0.48$, N = 29); with the perception that the GCTECH has connected them to other students ($\tau = 0.41$, N = 26); and that the GCTECH plays a role in improving their happiness/sense of achievement ($\tau = 0.62$, N = 30). This indicates that the students believed that GCTECH positively impacted their wellbeing during a period of prolonged uncertainty. From these responses, we can see how students' wellbeing is closely tied to a sense of being connected to others. We also found support for this in the qualitative data. Tourism is a highly networked industry, particularly in Tasmania. Some focus group participants were motivated to enrol in the GCTECH after hearing about it from their colleagues and network and saw it as an opportunity to stay connected and make new connections:

> I then started to learn about other people I knew that were going to undertake it as well. And I thought it's a great way to stay connected. And during the lockdown, I also thought this is going to be good or keep me really mentally stimulated to make those connections with people who worked in the industry. To really have access to those different people with different experiences and businesses, and backgrounds was just fabulous. (Participant 7)

Additionally, participants appreciated that they were able to support each other through the pandemic via the creation of an online community:

> Probably the coolest thing out of [the] course is to have conversations with the other participants in the breakout spaces or group work – to understand their stories and what they're going through. (Participant 2, a hotel group commercial manager)

Next, we found several strong relationships with the notion that the GCTECH had played a role in improving students' sense of achievement. This was positively correlated with the perception that the GCTECH had an impact on students in that they felt connected to a community of tourism students ($\tau = 0.52$, N = 20); and that because of what they had learned, they felt optimistic about their future ($\tau = 0.61$, N = 25). This is an indicator that the connection with fellow students and confidence in realising a better future is important for wellbeing and a sense of happiness during times of uncertainty. A sense of 'doing something together' comforted students who had a tourism background:

> So there was that sort of boost of just being in that space with people, and we're all studying together, and it's hard work, but it's good fun... So that was actually quite reassuring and reconfirming. (Participant 6)

The focus groups also revealed that students felt a sense of accomplishment and worth, which improved their self-esteem:

> When you get your first marks back, and you did okay, it was really good. It was like, well, I'm not so dumb after all, and even being able to participate in the tutorials and workshops where you could add value because you have experience in the industry. Yeah, that was really, really good... So during that time, it was really good for my self-esteem. (Participant 6)

The notion that the GCTECH played a role in improving students' happiness and sense of achievement also had strong relationships with perceptions that students can use the knowledge for their work ($\tau = 0.43$, N = 27); that they understood the tourism industry more than before ($\tau = 0.43$, N = 29); and that the GCTECH has given students a greater understanding of the tourism industry ($\tau = 0.44$, N = 27). The question statement also showed a negative correlation with the notion that the GCTECH did not help students pursue their work goals ($\tau = -0.49$, N = 27). These relationships indicated that the more relevant the GCTECH was to a student's work life, the greater the relationship to feelings of happiness and achievement became. We heard similar sentiments in the focus groups when participants commented on specific learning outcomes:

> It made me really more self-aware about my own social media use and how I use it, and also of things I'd not really connected with before. (Participant 5)

> I did actually feel really excited that we've got all of these operators within Tasmania, and people involved in the industry who are getting these new perspectives on issues of sustainability and gender, and lots of those things, which, in everyday life, we're so busy with just working and dealing with immediate problems that we don't think from a wider perspective. (Participant 4, working in various casual tourism jobs)

Our analysis of the statement that the GCTECH played a role in connecting students had a strong correlation with the statement that the GCTECH expanded students' networks ($\tau = 0.51$, N = 23); and specifically expanded students' networks through group work ($\tau = 0.59$, N = 21). We also saw moderate correlations with the statement that the GCTECH helped them make useful connections with the industry ($\tau = 0.34$, $p = 0.011$, N = 19) and gave students confidence ($\tau = 0.40$, N = 27). This also indicates that the design of the GCTECH, including online tutorials, the format of assessment tasks, and social events played a role in strengthening professional connections for the exchange of ideas, advice, and support; and, potentially, in the longer term, may help students advance career prospects. Within the focus groups, similar themes emerged:

> I felt it's really enriched my personal experience and the ability to actually apply that to my business... I can actually say these are my qualifications that I have, which gives me credibility and professionalism, as well. (Participant 1, tourism business operator)

We asked students about the role that the GCTECH played during the pandemic. Their responses aligned with their motivation to enrol: keeping one's mind active, knowledge, a sense of achievement, networks and connections, plus a distraction from the pandemic proved to be very commonly held outcomes (Table 3). However, our absence of pre-enrolment motivational data means that these data were collected once the course began. They should thus be viewed with caution.

Table 3: Students' perception of GCTECH.
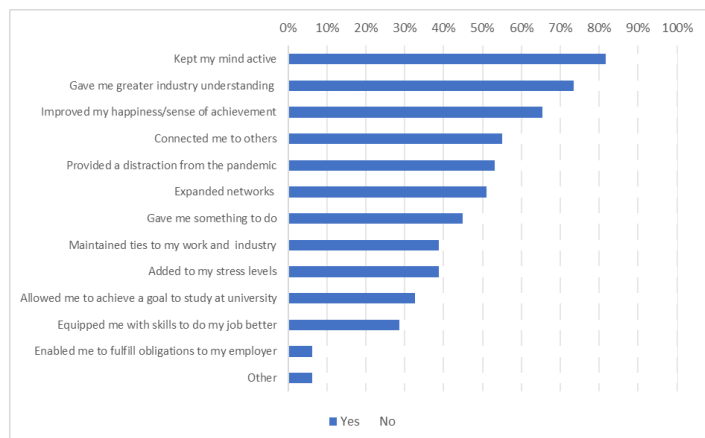
The powerful and often deeply emotional responses from the focus group data highlighted that, to many, the GCTECH provided a distraction from the stress of the pandemic and the worry of when it was going to end:

> Look, it was really important, actually. I wasn't having a good time mentally as soon as everything happened... But I think the main thing was it kept me focused on something. So, my mind wasn't thinking about what had actually been the reality at the time as much. You know, everyone's got COVID, or everyone's lost their jobs. That is shit. But here we are with this great opportunity. And I think, for me, it was just a lifesaver, really. (Participant 7)

It also suggested that the course was significant in giving students mental stimulation and, more importantly, hope.

> So, the psychological aspect is that it just kept me really stimulated mentally. You know, always thinking, always researching. I just wouldn't miss any Zoom opportunities, just for that interaction, and talking with others, seeing others. (Participant 7)

> I distinctly remember one time, towards the end of the semester, when the sun was starting to come out again. And I was at home, had my laptop on the grass on the front lawn, and we had a Zoom. I put the table umbrella up over my head and had my legs in the sun, laptop in the shade, sort of doing a Zoom session out in the garden. It was a pretty good time. (Participant 3)

Discussion

Scholars in the field of psychology and education agree that higher education institutions can play a fundamental role in assisting people in coping with stress and anxiety. This project aimed to add to these ideas by exploring the contribution that online education can make during pandemics in terms of student wellbeing. Our research highlighted several key findings.

Firstly, our study demonstrated that the unique interactive pedagogies played an important role in facilitating a sense of wellbeing, by distracting students from the pandemic that surrounded them and giving them a sense of hope, improved skills and confidence in their abilities. A key outcome of the course was a sense of connection that students felt with each other and their fellow community of GCTECH students. The students enrolled in this course were under stress, particularly those whose work was impacted by COVID, and these were the students who reported the greatest wellbeing outcomes. Our study also showed that these students significantly benefitted from feeling that they had improved their skills and knowledge during the course, which ultimately led to enhanced confidence and a sense of wellbeing.

Secondly, this study highlighted the importance of online learning design in facilitating wellbeing. Although the PERMA model argues that social integration and engagement through activities can contribute to wellbeing (Seligman, 2018), little is known as to whether connection and engagement with teaching staff and peers online can positively influence student wellbeing. This study illustrated that this can indeed occur. Online education has changed the higher education landscape during the COVID-19 period. It holds considerable promise for the design and delivery of tourism courses post-pandemic, especially in the context of Australia, where the population is dispersed across a wide geographical area. The students in this cohort were not traditional graduate certificate students; they were often not well-versed in academic conduct, critical thinking, educational techniques or online learning. Their highly diverse backgrounds and mature age meant that accessibility and flexibility were required to ensure their learning was supported. The online learning was designed to be connectable, interactive, supportive and caring. Although the learners were in different regions, they were able to enjoy the social connections while participating in learning activities. Our course adopted a hybrid online learning mode and used resources such as live Zoom lectures, recorded lectures, recorded interviews and live webinars with domestic and overseas tourism experts, online tutorials and workshops, a discussion board, 'The Tourism Lounge' plus online social events. All these appeared to play a very significant role in ensuring engagement and, ultimately, fostering a sense of wellbeing.

Thirdly, this study clearly demonstrated the power of free education in terms of it acting as a motivator to engage in studying and its role as a 'distraction' during times of crisis. The powerful responses from our students when asked about the importance of the 'free' aspect of our course clearly show that short courses, introductory courses and 'tasters'

play a crucial role in attracting non-traditional students to education. This is extremely significant in regional and low socio-economic destinations such as Tasmania, where 'first-in-family' learners make up a large proportion (70%) of students at the UTAS.

Along with the positive aspects, this study was limited in a variety of ways. Firstly, our absence of pre-enrolment motivational data means that these data should be viewed with caution. Additionally, a larger study is needed to add more rigour to our findings. That said, the richness of the qualitative data collected through the focus groups served to triangulate the results, and their congruence with the quantitative data gave the research team some level of confidence regarding their relevance.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic decimated the tourism industry around the world, including in Tasmania. The University of Tasmania wanted to support the community during the pandemic, and offering GCTECH for free to Tasmanians was one strategy. We did not know what to expect. This study is a real-life experiment of sorts, and we can draw at least three conclusions from our research questions.

First, free education has indeed attracted students who would otherwise not go to university, and in the case of our research, the lack of charge did not hinder them from focusing on the benefits of the course. This differs from previous research by Lee and Yeung (2022), possibly due to financial pressures placed by those in the tourism industry during COVID-10. Further research in this space would provide insights into this finding. Further, higher education plays a significant part in social mobility. Our study has shown that providing a free education has given opportunities to many who never thought they would go to university. Second, despite apprehension towards online teaching, our hybrid online model has indicated that it is possible to generate a sense of community and wellbeing. However, the model we use was created to generate sustained interaction. Social connections and interactions are important to maintaining student wellbeing. This bodes well for this mode of education delivery, but efforts are needed to generate a sense of community and wellbeing. Third, a sense of achievement also contributes to one's sense of wellbeing. Having to study and learn new things can provide a sense of achievement and generate a greater sense of wellbeing which may be particularly important during an involuntary pause in a job and career.

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