Skills Matter programme impact of COVID -19 on students' study and work

November 2021

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

This report provides findings from the evaluation conducted by Te Pou on the impact of COVID-19 on students participating in Skills Matter programmes. The Skills Matter programme provides postgraduate training funding for new graduates and existing practitioners working in DHB, NGO and primary care settings, including nurses, social workers, occupational therapists, psychologists, and addiction practitioners. The aim of the Skills Matter programme is to support new entrants to develop the required clinical skills and knowledge as they transition into practice and to support existing practitioners in mental health and addiction to develop advanced skills in high priority areas. Students study while they are in employment.

This evaluation was conducted by Te Pou at the request of the Ministry of Health. The purpose was to capture the impact of COVID -19 on Skills Matter students' study and work from different perspectives, Te Pou conducted three separate surveys: students who were enrolled in 2020, students who were enrolled in 2021, and employers of those students. This report is the combined feedback of the three surveys. Of the total invited to take part in the students' survey, 24 percent completed it. Of the total employers invited to participate in the employers' survey, 17 percent completed it. These overall response rates provide a moderate confidence the feedback reflects most of Skills Matter students and employers.

The tables below on the left side show the most frequent responses at the top, the less frequent responses in descending order, and the least frequent responses at the bottom.

Challenges of the online learning environment for 2020 students

Unstable home environment
No challenge
Lack of previous experience
Poor communication
No advice
Lack of course resources

Early in 2020 students were forced to study online due to COVID -19 national lockdowns. Most students found the shift from in-person learning to online learning challenging. They reported their main challenges were an unstable home environment followed by a lack of previous online learning experience. One quarter of students also reported no challenges.

Challenges/barriers at work and study for 2021 students

Work stress
Work overload
Financial impact due to COVID -19

The majority of 2021 students reported work stress was one of their main challenges, followed by work overload. Most students indicated work stress and work overload were very challenging.

Study-related stress
Less motivation
Financial impact due to COVID -19

Students found study-related stress a challenge, with most students rating this very challenging.

Employers' views on 2021 students' challenges combining work and study students

Work/study related stress

Work overload

Low motivation

Financial impact due to COVID -19

Employers reported work and study related stress was the main challenge for students during their study, followed by work overload. Most employers rated these very challenging.

Disadvantages of studying during COVID -19 for 2020 students

Hard to concentrate for longer online presentations

Lack of face-to-face interaction with course facilitator/fellow students

Lack of physical and/or mental space to study from home

Lack of face-to-face interaction with workplace supervisor/mentor/preceptor

No disadvantages studying during COVID -19

One of the most frequent disadvantages students reported was difficulty concentrating with longer online presentations. This was followed by a lack of in-person interaction with the course facilitator and other students. Lack of physical and/or mental space to study from home and lack of in-person interaction with workplace supervisor/mentor/preceptor were the third and fourth most frequent disadvantages students identified. Only six percent of students reported no disadvantages studying during COVID -19.

Advantages of studying during COVID -19 for 2020 students

Less time and expenses spent on travel to the course

More flexibility around study times

More one to one time with supervisor preceptor/mentor/preceptor

One of the most frequent advantages students identified was less time and expenses spent on travel to the course, followed by more flexibility around study times.

Support/s available to students during study

Mentors/supervisors

Colleague

Family

Fellow students

Overall, the evidence suggests the majority of students received support from mentors/supervisors. Many students also received support from colleagues and family. Only a small proportion of students indicated they received support from their fellow students.

Support provided to students by employers

Additional mentoring

Studying during work time

Coaching

Workplace study

No support provided

The majority of employers reported additional mentoring was provided to support their employees' study. A third of the employers introduced a study-during-worktime strategy to support students. Overall, the evidence suggests employers supported students during their studies. Only a small proportion of employers reported they did not offer any support.

Students' connection with others during their study in 2020 and 2021

Course facilitators

Supervisors/mentors/
preceptors

Students

Most students reported they were well connected with course facilitators and supervisors/mentors/preceptors during their study. A third of students reported they were not well connected with other students. Overall, the evidence suggests students were able to connect with course facilitators and supervisors/mentors/preceptors during their studies.

Flexible working environment introduced by employers

No flexible working strategies introduced

Flexible working hours

Working remotely

Reduced working hours

A third of students indicated there were no flexible working strategies introduced by employers. Some students reported they have had flexible working hours. A small proportion of students indicated their employer introduced a working-remotely strategy and a reduced-working-hours strategy during their study.

Working remotely
Flexible working hours
Reduced working hours
No flexible working environment introduced

Unlike students, almost all (96 percent) of employers reported introducing flexible-working strategies. Working remotely, flexible working hours, and reduced working hours were some of the flexible working strategies reported by most employers.

Wellbeing initiatives introduced by employers during students' study

No wellbeing initiatives introduced
Reinforce the importance of sick days & time off
Set up wellbeing sessions

Make lunch break mandatory

Around half of students reported there were no wellbeing initiatives introduced by employers during their studies. A third of students indicated employers reinforced the importance of sick days and time off. Some (12 percent) indicated their employer introduced wellbeing sessions, and a smaller proportion (8 percent) reported their employer made lunch breaks mandatory.

Reinforce the importance of sick days & time off
Set up wellbeing sessions
Make lunch break mandatory
No wellbeing initiatives introduced

Interestingly, unlike students, the majority of employers reported different wellbeing initiatives were introduced. They also indicated they reinforced the importance of sick days and time off. They also said they introduced wellbeing sessions. A few employers indicated they made lunch breaks mandatory.

The differences between students who studied before COVID -19 and during COVID -19 – an employer survey

Employers were asked if they noticed any differences in their employee's/s' attitudes, values, and engagement between those who studied before COVID -19 (pre-2020) and during COVID -19. About two in five employers indicated students who were studying during COVID -19 were less engaged and struggled more compared with previous students.

Impact of COVID -19 on students' study and work

Some negative impact
Significant negative impact
Some positive impact
Significant positive impact
No impact

Over seven in ten students who were enrolled in 2020 and 8 in 10 students enrolled in 2021 reported COVID -19 has had a negative impact on their study and work. Similarly, 9 in 10 employers indicated COVID -19 negatively impacted students' study and work. Overall, the evidence shows that COVID -19 negatively impacted students studying in 2020 and 2021.

Conclusions and recommendations

The COVID -19 pandemic has led to unprecedented changes across the globe, challenging every aspect of life. Due to the pandemic, Skills Matter providers were forced to cancel students' classes, examinations, and some clinical placement activities. Students were required to continue their studies through an online learning environment. The move from in-person to online learning brought many challenges, such as increased workload, work and study stress, concentration difficulties, low motivation, and lack of previous exposure to an online learning environment. These resulted in many students functioning without adequate supervision and clinical training and prevented students from achieving the highest performance in their studies and work. COVID -19 has also affected students' connections with others. Mentors/supervisors provided support to students; however, students in 2020 received less support from their peers. Most students reported COVID -19 has negatively affected their study and work. Students enrolled in the programme of New Entry to Specialty Practice Mental Health and Addiction Nursing experienced the most negative impact. Employers indicated they introduced some flexible working strategies and wellbeing initiatives during students' study. However, the majority of students reported employers did not introduce any flexible working strategies or wellbeing initiatives.

The demand for mental health, addiction, and disability services is increasing due to demographic changes in areas such as population ageing, socio-economic issues, and problematic substance use, and an increase in the size of the population (Ministry of Health, 2017). However, despite the increase in the demand, increasing the supply of a professional mental health and addiction workforce has been a challenge. The Skills Matter programme is one of the sources of supply for the mental health and addiction workforce. The programme may continue to be affected due to the challenges faced by the students caused by the pandemic. Therefore, to attract more students to the Skills Matter programme and retain them, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration.

Recommendations for employers.

- Introduce adequate support, such as reducing working hours, introducing flexible working hours, and introducing workplace study.

- Introduce adequate wellbeing initiatives, such as setting up wellbeing sessions, reinforcing the importance of sick days and time off, and introducing mandatory lunch and tea breaks. Ensure that these are clear and explicit to access, with prompts being given in supervision sessions.

- Ensure there is access to increased supervision and preceptorship when needed.

- Ensure students have access to resources and materials they need to undertake online learning.

Recommendations for programme providers.

- Introduce strategies to support students and improve their performance working alongside employers

- Continue to introduce peer-to-peer online communication to build connection among students. While there are very low numbers withdrawing from programmes, the compounding work overload, study stress and lack of connections with their peers is likely impacting their wellbeing. Facilitating connections between students is likely to reduce a sense of isolation and build students' networks.

- Continue to incorporate a variety of online teaching methods to suit different learners such as interactive activities, regular breaks, and break-out rooms to promote connection and consolidate learning.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Health.

- Consider extending the one-year completion timeframe for the NESP programme. Extending the timeframe would help mitigate the additional challenges students are experiencing when shifting from student to employee within the MH&A environment, due changes in the learning programme delivery and generally in response to the COVID pandemic.

- Explore additional funding options to enable new graduates to access more study leave and spend less time in clinical work.

Introduction

Skills Matter is a workforce development programme within Te Pou. Skills Matter funds programme providers to deliver post-entry clinical training to the mental health and addiction nursing and allied health workforces on behalf of the Ministry of Health (MOH). The Skills Matter programme provides postgraduate training funding for new graduates and existing practitioners working in DHB, NGO and primary care settings, including nurses, social workers, occupational therapists, psychologists, and addiction practitioners. Most students of Skills Matter programme participants are expected to complete their study while working full time.

Skills Matter programmes contain both clinical and academic components. The Skills Matter programme team within Te Pou manages and administers contracts with programme providers to deliver the training programmes and support to students.

The programme includes six programmes of study delivered through tertiary institutions:

- New Entry to Specialty Practice Mental Health and Addiction Nursing (NESP Nursing)
- Post-graduate Diploma in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)
- Co-existing Substance Use and Mental Health (CEP)
- Clinical Leadership in Nursing Practice (CLNP)
- Core Skills for Infant, Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Addiction (ICAMH)
- New Entry to Specialist Practice Allied Mental Health and Addiction (NESP Allied).

Purpose, objectives, and methods of evaluation

COVID -19 has caused numerous challenges for Skills Matter students. Due to the national lockdown in early 2020, and some subsequent regional lockdowns, students were forced to move from in-person block course learning to an online learning environment. In addition, many students have been facing an uncertain environment where financial issues, the online learning environment, or lack of resources may have affected their educational plan, ability to complete the course, or performance.

Therefore, Te Pou, at the request of the Ministry of Health, undertook this evaluation to:
- identify students' challenges/barriers experienced while studying,
- identify supports students experienced and found valuable while studying,
- assess the impact of COVID -19 on students' study and work, and
- identify strategies introduced to support students during their study and work.

The expected outcomes from the evaluation of the Skills Matter programme were as follows:

- identify issues and challenges, and propose support needed to improve the Skills Matter programme
- provide directions for its future in the period of COVID -19.

Data collection methods

The evaluation was informed by three surveys that were distributed in September 2021. Students who enrolled in 2020, students who enrolled at the beginning of 2021, and employers of those students were all surveyed separately. Students who started in 2020 were treated as one group whether they completed their studies or continued into 2021.

Survey questions were developed against the key evaluation questions.

1. What challenges did students experience while studying during COVID -19?
2. What supports did students experience and find valuable while studying during COVID -19?
3. From the perspective of employers, what were the differences in experiences, if any, for those students who studied before COVID -19 compared with those who studied after the outbreak of COVID -19?
4. What strategies were introduced by employers to support students during their study and work?

Closed-ended, Likert scale, and open-ended questions were developed to capture the impact of COVID -19 on students' study and work. A survey invitation through Survey Monkey was sent via email with periodic reminders to each group. R statistical analysis software was used to clean, filter, and cross-tabulate questions. Open-ended questions were coded into themes using MAXQDA.

This report combines the results of these surveys.

Findings

A total of 208 students (24 percent, n = 884) and 26 employers (17 percent, n = 151) completed an online survey. These overall response rates provide a moderate confidence the feedback reflects most of Skills Matter students and employers. Out of the total students who responded to the survey, over one-third (35 percent) of respondents were enrolled in NESP nursing. The next largest group were students of CBT (25 percent). Six students did not give their programme of study (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Survey respondents by programme of study

Programme name	Number of responses	Percentage
New entry to specialist practice: mental health and addiction nursing	70	34.7%
Postgraduate Certificate & Diploma courses in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy	50	24.8%
New entry to specialist practice: allied mental health and addiction	27	13.4%
Core skills for specialist practice in infant, child and adolescent mental health and addiction	21	10.4%
Clinical leadership in nursing practice	21	10.4%
Assessment and management of co-existing substance use and mental health	13	6.4%
Total	202	100%

Students' study completion status

Of the respondents, the majority (64 percent) of students who enrolled in 2020 reported they completed their study. Around one-third of students (34 percent) indicated they were still studying. Most (91 percent) of students enrolled in 2021 reported their study is ongoing. Only two percent of students enrolled in 2020 or 2021 reported they had stopped their studies.

Employers were also asked if any of their employees stopped studying, and 2 in 10 (18 percent) respondents indicated some students had stopped studying.

Four students shared their reasons for stopping studying. Of the four students, two indicated their role had changed. One said they decided to do a PhD instead, and one indicated they were unable to travel to their course due to COVID restrictions.

Challenges of the online learning environment for 2020 students

Students were asked about the challenges they experienced during their online learning environment. They could give multiple responses. The most frequent challenge students experienced was an unstable home environment. Around one-third (31 percent) of students cited this as an issue. The second biggest challenge was the lack of previous experience with an online learning environment. Around a quarter of students (26 percent) cited this challenge. Interestingly, a quarter of students (25 percent) indicated they had no challenges with the online learning environment.

Only around 1 in 10 students indicated that poor communication from course facilitators/course facilitator/course administrators/workplace was a challenge (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Challenges to the online learning environment for students in 2020

Unstable home environment (unstable internet, childcare, lack of quiet space etc.) — 31%

No barriers/challenges — 25%

Lack of previous experience with online learning environments — 23%

Poor communication from course facilitator/course administrator/workplace — 11%

No/little advice and help to utilise online tools — 5%

Lack of course resources — 5%
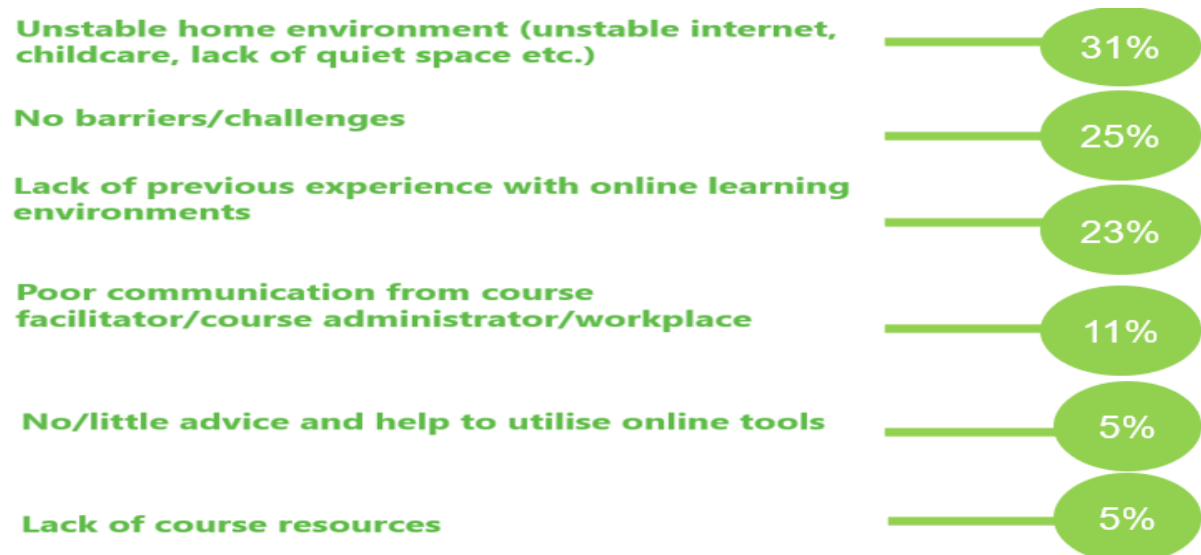
Those students who experienced challenges were asked to rate the impact of each one on their study. Of the total students who responded unstable home environment (unstable internet, child care, lack of quiet space) was one of their main challenges, four in five respondents, reported that it was very challenging. Similarly, over half (56 percent) indicated a lack of previous experience with an online learning environment was very challenging. About half of the respondents also reported that poor communication from course facilitators/course facilitator/course administrators/workplace was very challenging (see Figure 2 below).

Figure **2**. The impact of the challenges of an online learning environment

● Slightly challenging   ● Moderately/very/extremely challenging

- Poor communication from course facilitator/course administrator/workplace: 46% / 54%
- Lack of previous experience with online learning environments: 44% / 56%
- Unstable home environment (unstable internet, childcare, lack of quiet space etc.): 22% / 78%
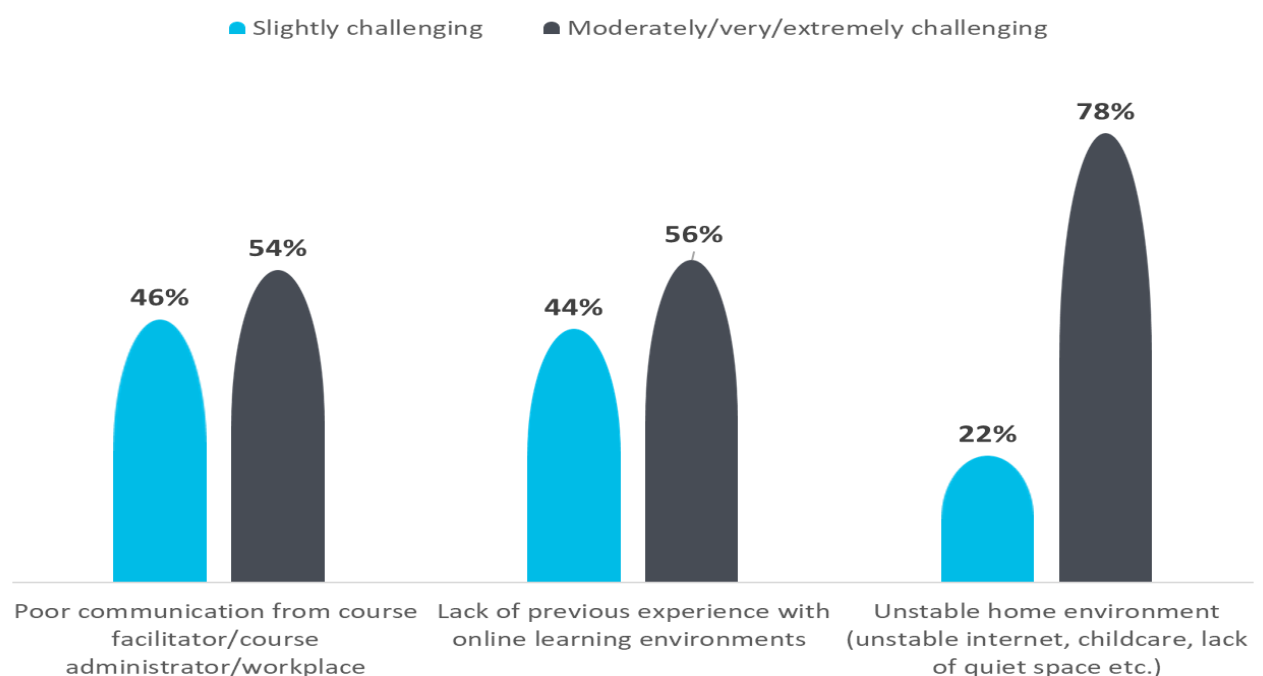
In response to an open-ended question about some of the other challenges they faced, such as increased workload, technology issues and not being able to connect with other students, 12 students provided feedback. Some of their comments are provided below.

> "Lack of otherwise regular contact with classmates and lecturers, feeling disconnected and isolated as a result."

> "Worked as an essential worker, workload and shifts increased in response to lockdown and vulnerable staff needing to be offsite."

> "I found long online sessions very draining. More so than in person."

> "Everything was a bit more difficult. I found it difficult to fully engage with study with it all being via Zoom. It was harder to ask questions; it was harder to engage with fellow students. Work was very different, but I did implement some positive changes."

> "The main direct impact of COVID is unable going to class and meet with other students. Working from home was challenging especially when I had to do my assignments, work, and help my children with schoolwork as they are in early grades when they need support."

## Challenges at work and study for 2021 students

Students were asked about the challenges COVID -19 caused in both their work and study. Around half of the students (48 percent) indicated work stress was one of the major challenges at work during their study, followed by work overload (39 percent). Over half (55 percent) of students reported study related stress was one of the major challenges during their study, followed by less motivation (34%). Only a small proportion (7 percent) of students reported COVID -19 had a financial impact on them. It appears financial impact due to COVID -19 was not a challenge for most of the students (see Figure 3 below)

Figure 3. Challenges of COVID -19 on work and study for students in 2021

Challenges of COVID 19 on study for students in 2021

Study related stress	55%
Less motivation	34%
Financial impact due to COVID 19	7%
No Challenges	5%

Challenges of COVID 19 on work for students in 2021

Work stress	48%
Work overload	39%
Financial impact due to COVID 19	8%
No Challenges	5%
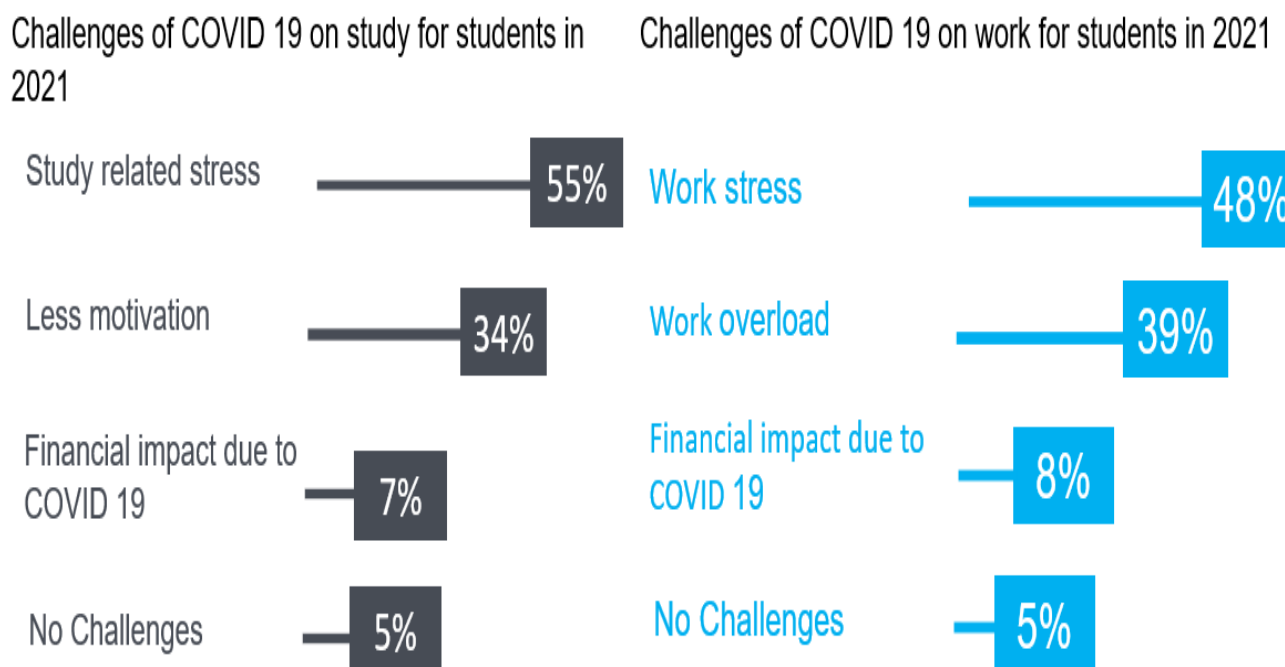
In addition to identifying the challenges they experienced due to COVID -19, students were asked to rate the impact these challenges had on their work and study. Almost all (98 percent) of students indicated their work stress was very challenging. Similarly, around 9 in 10 students reported their study-related stress was very challenging. Over 8 in 10 (84 percent) students reported low motivation was very challenging (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4. The impact of challenges due to COVID -19 at work and study for students in 2021
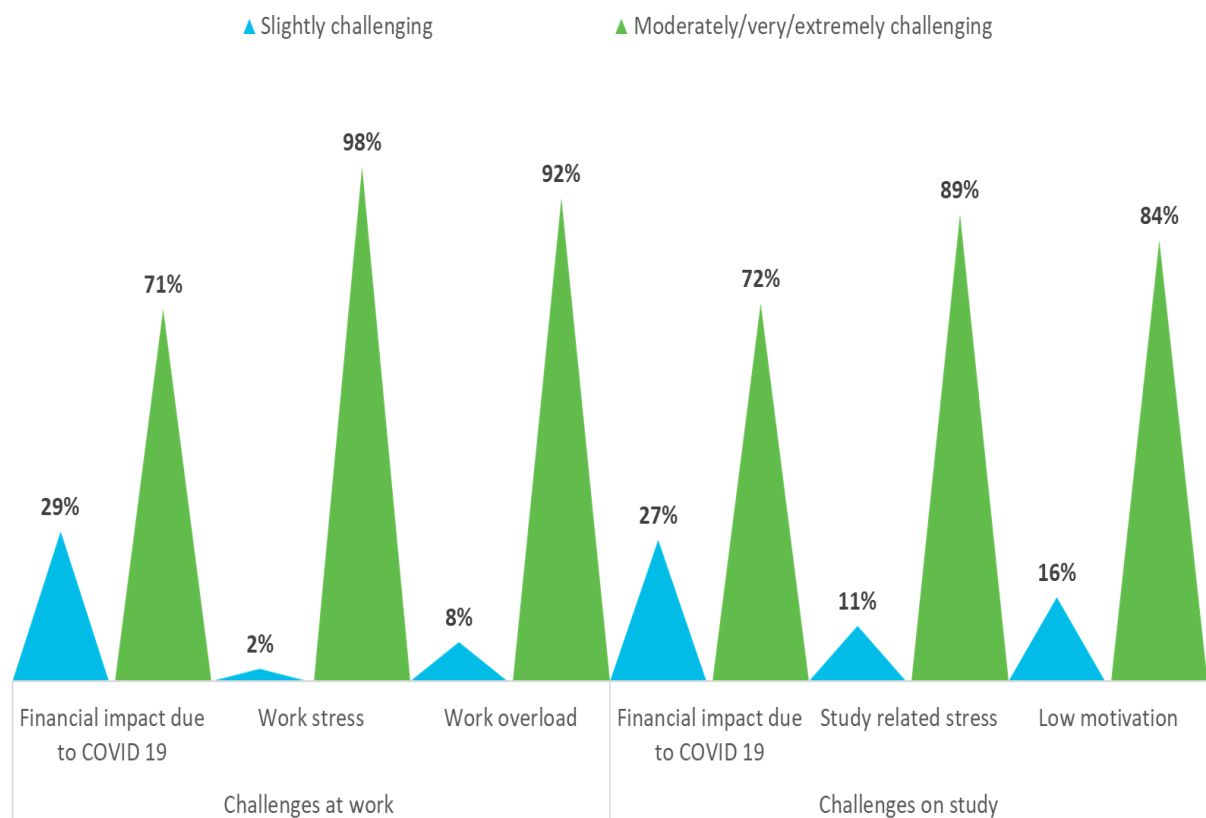
Students were invited to provide comments on any other challenges faced during their study. Of those invited, 34 students responded. Most students mentioned work stress, work overload, and COVID -19 restrictions as some of their main challenges.

> "The biggest challenge was the clinical component of the course as clients did not always want to use zoom or phone. Or their symptoms reduced significantly during the lockdown, and they no longer needed help. This made learning the new skill for certificate more challenging last year."

> "Difficulty completing assignments and engaging during block learning courses due to lockdown restrictions."

> "During the lockdown, my husband changes to night shift so we can have someone home with our four-year-old 24 hours. This makes it challenging to study and do assignments."

> "Reduced face-to-face access to mentor and supervisor."

Challenges of employee/s – employer survey

Employers were asked what challenges their employee/s faced during their studies. Employers indicated students' most frequent challenge was work/study related stress. Around half (49 percent) of employers reported this as an issue. Around a quarter of employers (27 percent) indicated students' biggest challenge was work overload. About 2 in 10 (22 percent) employers cited students had lower motivation than previous students (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5. Challenges on employee/s during study – employer survey
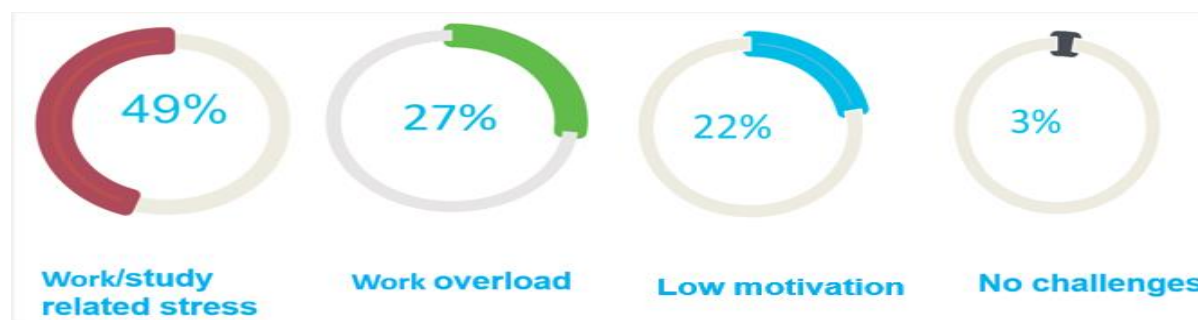
Employers were also asked to rate the impact of the above challenges on students' study. Nearly 8 in 10 (78 percent) employers indicated that students found work overload was very challenging. Close to six in ten (58 percent) employers indicated work/study related stress was very challenging for students. Surprisingly, more than half (55 percent) of employers indicated that students' motivation was slightly challenging, compared to over 8 in 10 (84 percent) students who reported low motivation was very challenging (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6. Employers' ratings of the challenges faced by their employees due to COVID -19
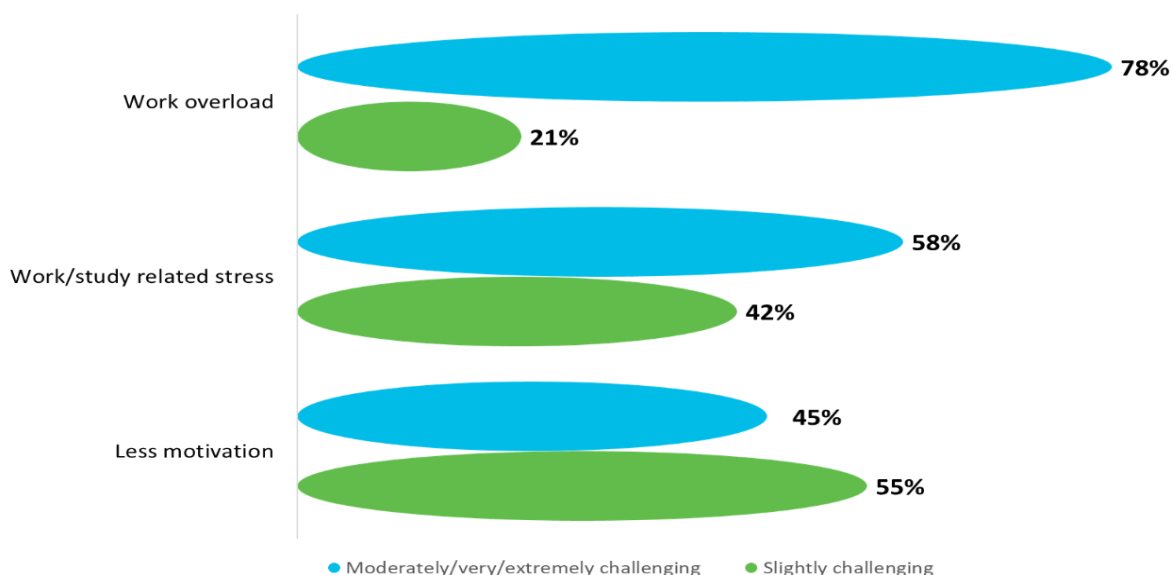
Employers were also invited to provide comments on any other challenges students faced during their studies. Of those invited, five employers provided comments. The majority commented that technology issues and study and family pressures were the students' main challenges.

"The Drama of a fast-changing world with so much uncertainty and spin."

"Difficulty with zoom classes."

"Combination of study and family pressures."

Disadvantages of studying online during COVID -19 for students in 2020

The disadvantages of studying in an online learning environment were captured in this evaluation.

The most frequent disadvantage that students reported was difficulty concentrating with longer online presentations. About 3 in 10 (29 percent) identified this as a disadvantage. Similarly, 3 in 10 (28 percent) students identified a lack of face-to face interaction with course facilitator/fellow students as a disadvantage. About 2 in 10 students identified a lack of physical and/or mental space to study from home as a disadvantage of studying in an online environment (see Figure 7 below).

Error! Reference source not found. Figure 7.Disadvantages of studying online during COVID -19 for s tudents of 2020
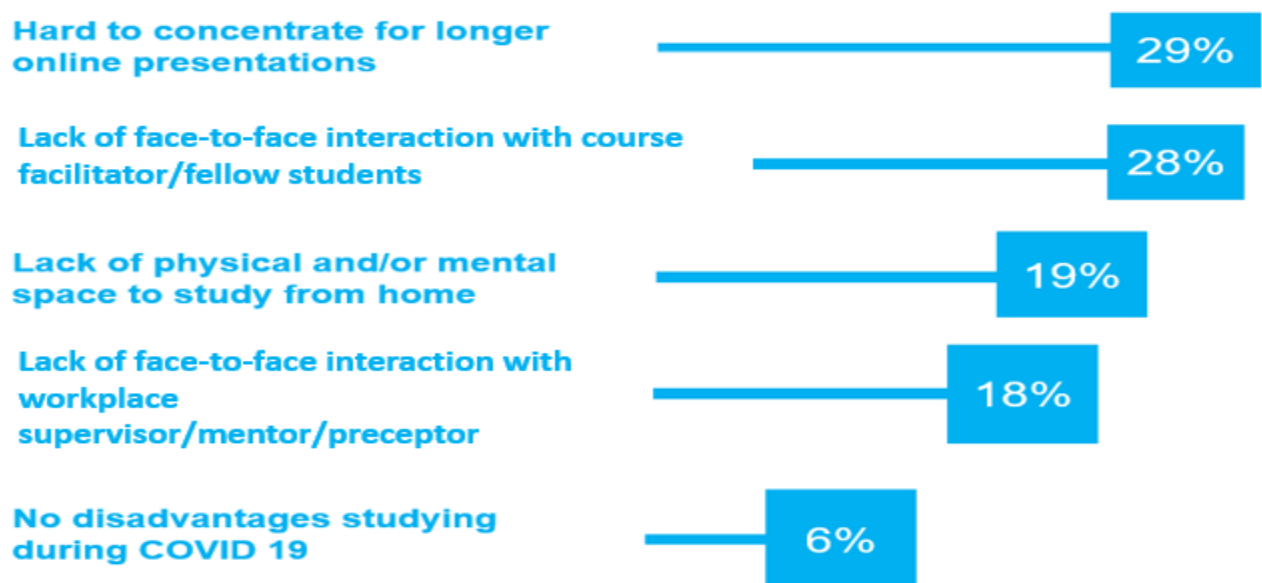
Students were also asked if there were any other disadvantages of studying during the COVID -19 period. Of those invited, 13 students responded to the open-ended question. Technology issues and lack of in-person communication with clients were some of the most frequent disadvantages discussed by students. Most students commented there were no advantages of studying during COVID -19.

"Very difficult to implement CBT via Zoom with anxious or depressed teens; very difficult to

concentrate on specialist clinical work in my bedroom; additional costs of canceled accommodation due to last-minute face-to-face teaching cancellations, no reimbursement for this so far greater personal financial outlay than expected. Very stressful managing uncertainty about block teaching cancellations."

"Uploading video assignment, also getting the time to do the video with clients was impossible during the lockdown."

"I don't think there were any advantages. We managed well, but the block courses that were organised to happen pre-covid would have made the learning time better, richer, and more enjoyable. The lecturers did well using Zoom, but it just doesn't offer the connection that meeting together does."

"I found it more difficult and noted that other learning institutions changed the way that grading was done. But not [mine]."

Advantages of studying during the COVID -19 for students of 2020

Students were asked if they experienced any advantages of studying during the COVID -19. More than half (53 percent) reported spending less time and expense travelling to the course. This was followed by more flexibility around study times (43 percent) (see Figure 8 below).

Figure 8. Advantages of studying during the COVID -19
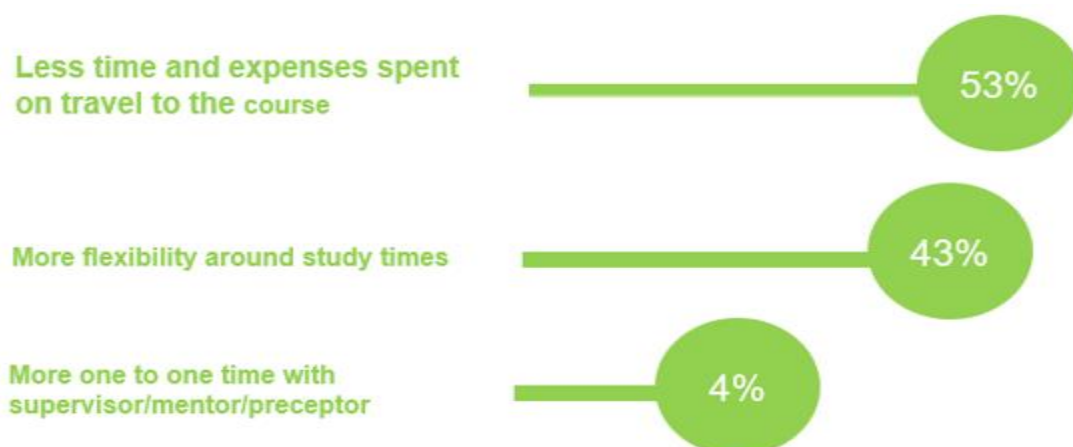
In response to an open-ended question about the advantages of studying during the COVID -19 period, 12 students shared the following comments.

"I have been very fortunate to work in an environment that was already very supportive. COVID has meant studying and working remotely. This has not been an issue for me. I do note a handful of my clients have waited until after lockdown restrictions to re-engage with our service rather than continuing remotely."

"During this COVID time, work has not caused any stresses or pressure; it works as normal keeping within the COVID guidelines. The staff were very supportive of one another. I am able to continue with my studies with flexible work hours."

"Easier to get to know the names and characters of other course participants as [they were] constantly visible. I also found it useful to use the voting tool and the chat tool on Zoom to hear other people's opinions during lecture presentations without disrupting the lecture."

"For me personally, there were no advantages compared to face to face."

Support available to students during study

Students and employers were asked to identify any supports received or provided during students' study. Nearly a third of students (31 percent) reported they received support from mentors/supervisors. A similar proportion (27 percent) of students indicated they received support from colleagues and family. Only a small proportion (15 percent) indicated they received support from their fellow students.

Employers most frequently reported they supported students by providing additional mentoring. Around 4 in 10 (36 percent) indicated this as a support. A similar proportion of employers, 3 in 10 (33 percent), reported that allowing study during worktime was one of the supports provided to students. About 2 in 10 (18 percent) employers reported coaching was introduced to support students' study. Interestingly, three percent reported there was not any support provided to students during their study (see Figure 9 below).

Figure *9*. Support(s) available to students during study
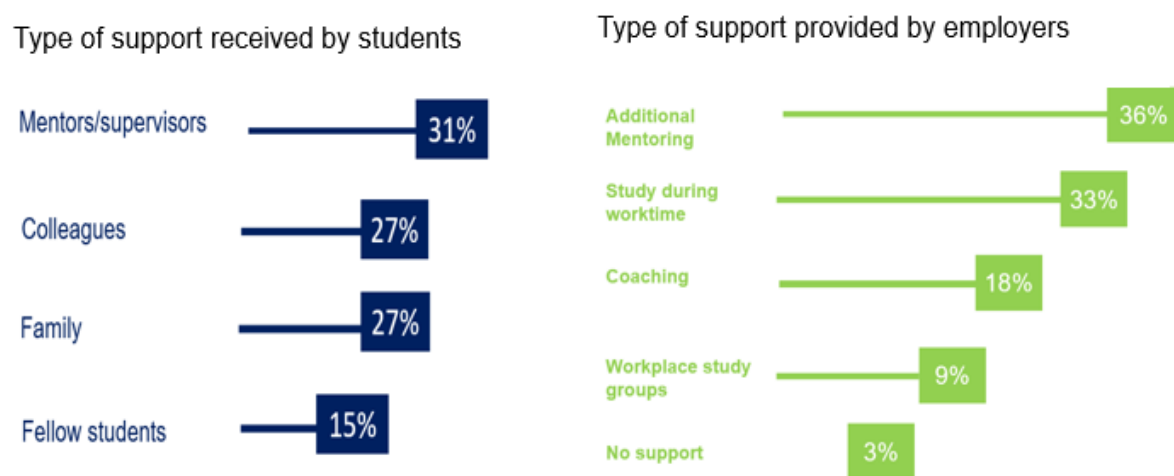
Both groups were invited to comment on the support received or provided. Of those invited, 17 students and 5 employers responded to the open-ended question. In line with the quantitative findings, most students commented they received support from supervisors, mentors, and university lecturers. Employers most frequently mentioned IT support, providing supervision, and paid leave to support students' study. Interestingly, only supervision/mentoring appeared in the quantitative findings.

"[The] supervisor and university mentor have been very helpful and supportive."

"It is very difficult to maintain the appropriate work/study/life balance that is required when doing postgraduate study when you can't utilise your natural supports such as family and friends, as well as the extra stress it brings such as not being able to travel and visit other important family members. The overall unpredictability we have had as well as constant changes in how we work just brings generalised stress that impacts motivation and the ability to focus on complex tasks."

"I had to change supervisors halfway through the course and found the course coordinator extremely supportive. My second supervisor was very helpful."

"Extra counseling and other legal/union services."

Students' connection with others during their study for students studying in 2020 and 2021

Students were asked how well they could connect with others during their study. The majority (84 percent) of students reported they were well connected with course facilitators. Only 16 percent of them said they were not well connected with their course supervisors. Similar to students' perceptions of the support they received, (84 percent) of students were well connected with their supervisors, mentors, or preceptors.
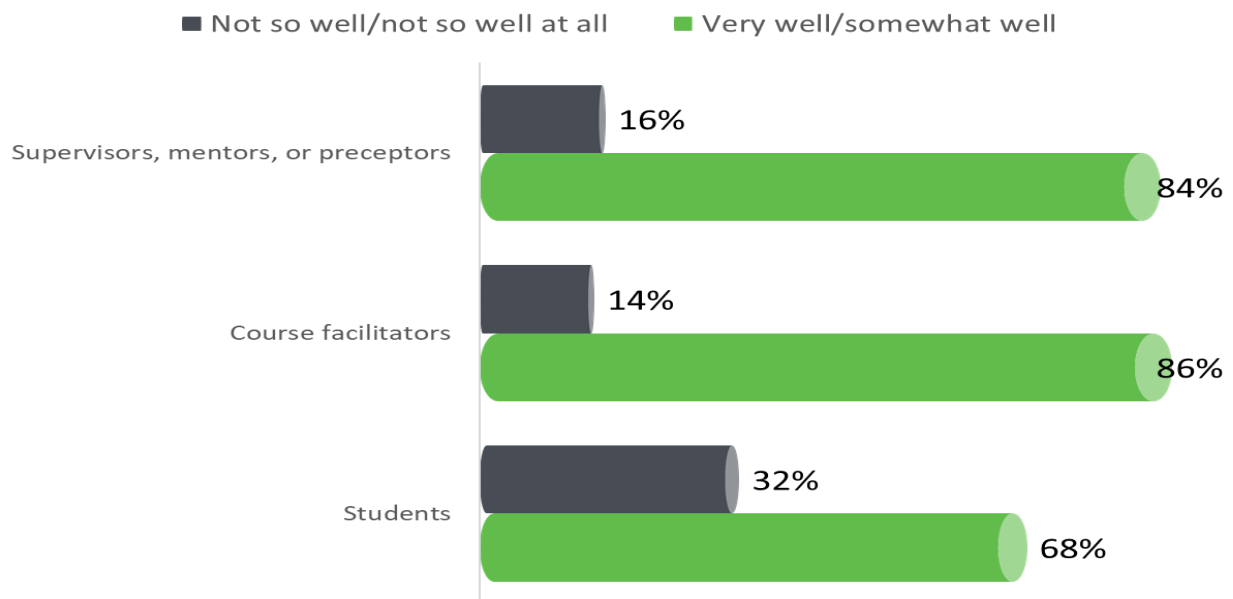
Almost 7 in 10 (68 percent) students reported they were well connected with other students while studying. In contrast, 3 in 10 (32 percent) students indicated they were not well connected with other students while studying. Overall, more students were well connected with their supervisors, mentors, preceptors, or course facilitators than with their fellow students (see Figure 10 below).

Some students commented on the impact of not connecting with others during their studies.

"COVID stopped me from developing more relationships with classmates, and I enjoyed getting away to study so that was destroyed. Zoom sessions can't be as interactive as a classroom. COVID -19 saved me money on accommodation, but I would prefer to have been in Auckland more."

"It is more challenging during the lockdown; it was a challenge already before lockdown and amplified more during the lockdown. Having to navigate zoom, its difficulties when meeting clients, and not having the face-to-face contact when establishing a rapport whilst establishing a therapy work with a client is hard."
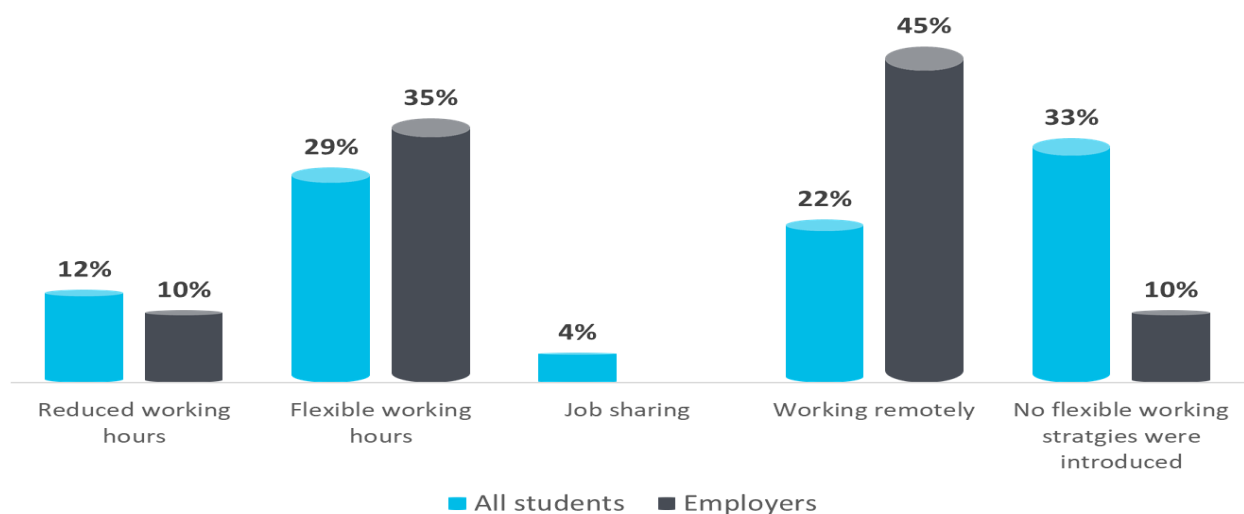
Figure **10**. Students' connections with others during study

<table>
<tr><th>■ Not so well/not so well at all</th><th>■ Very well/somewhat well</th></tr>
</table>

Supervisors, mentors, or preceptors — 16% / 84%

Course facilitators — 14% / 86%

Students — 32% / 68%

Flexible working strategies introduced by employers during students' study

Students and employers were asked to identify what flexible working environments were introduced to assist studies. About one-third (29 percent) of students reported their employers had introduced flexible working hours. Approximately 2 in 10 (22 percent) students reported that employers had introduced working remotely. Almost half (45 percent) of employers reported they had introduced working remotely, and one-third (35 percent) indicated they had introduced flexible working hours. Interestingly, around one-third (33 percent) of students and 1 in 10 (10 percent) employers indicated there were no flexible working strategies introduced (see Figure 11 below).

Figure 11. Flexible working strategies introduced

	Reduced working hours	Flexible working hours	Job sharing	Working remotely	No flexible working stratgies were introduced
All students	12%	29%	4%	22%	33%
Employers	10%	35%		45%	10%

Students and employers were asked if there were any other flexible working strategies introduced. Of those invited, 41 students and 2 employers responded. Some of them commented that measures such as time off to study, reduced working hours and study leave were introduced.

"Lighter workloads, limited to 3 patients, it helped to reduce stress levels."

"My employers were not helpful, in fact, they worked against me enrolling in this course, I paid half the supervision fees myself."

"My caseload was slightly reduced."

"Time off to study one day every fortnight. I don't think they know how much time we need to study, balance work and home life."

"My role was 0.8 full-time equivalent to accommodate study."

"We were allowed our study leave away from work, which had always been the case. No extra time offered, however."

"I had some study leave but my role changed mid-way and that meant an increased workload and responsibility (by choice)."

"Well, I felt like I couldn't really talk about it [study]."

Wellbeing initiatives introduced by employers during students' study

Participants were asked what wellbeing initiatives employers introduced during study. Surprisingly, almost half (48 percent) of students reported their employers did not introduce any wellbeing initiatives. In contrast, one in three (31 percent) students indicated their employer reinforced the importance of sick days and time off for those with health issues. Only three percent of employers indicated they did not introduce any wellbeing initiatives.

More than 40 percent of employers reported they began reinforcing the importance of sick days and time off for students experiencing a health issue. A similar amount of employers (38 percent) reported they introduced wellbeing sessions (see Figure 12 below).

Figure 12. Wellbeing initiatives introduced employers and students survey
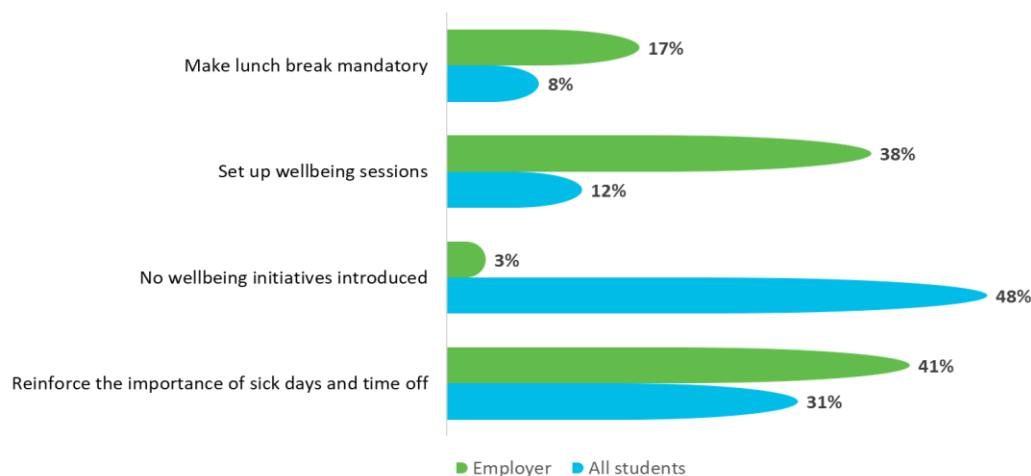
Participants were asked about employers introducing any other wellbeing initiatives. Of those invited, 18 students and 6 employers gave comments. Most students indicated their employers introduced wellbeing initiatives such as discussing wellbeing at work, discouraging working overtime, approving leave when assignments are due, and encouraging students to take a short break.

> "Discouraging working overtime or on weekends on work-related administration. I take regular lunch breaks and am able to request additional support as and when required."

> "We were encouraged to be proactive with our wellbeing."

> "Encouraged staff to not be at work if unwell."
> "Our nurse educators encouraged time off and taking breaks and annual leave as well as reminding us to stay active."

> "They allowed me to get a small amount of grocery shopping in work time if my son had no food, as husband was looking after son at home and unable to take son to the supermarket."

> "Wellbeing at work activities were introduced."

> "Allowing me to know myself and being approachable and supporting when I am needing a bit of support."

Employers gave the following comments.

> "Organising counsellors to come on site for employees."

> "Encouraged to go out walking at lunchtime (together) which has now become pretty much routine - with real benefits felt by all."

> "Additional touch points with Nurse Educators. CNM's supporting with some days off."

Differences between employees who studied before the start of COVID -19 and those who studied after - employer survey

Employers were asked if they noticed any differences in their employees' attitudes, values, and engagement between those who studied before COVID -19 and those who studied after the outbreak of COVID -19.

Around 6 in 10 (58 percent) employers indicated they did not notice differences in their employees' engagement between those who studied before COVID -19 and those who studied after the outbreak of COVID -19. In contrast, about half (53 percent) of employers reported they did notice differences in students' attitudes and values. Together this indicates at least 4 in 10 employers felt students who were studying after the outbreak of COVID -19 were less engaged and struggled more compared with previous students (see Figure 13 below).

Figure 13. Differences between employee/s who studied before COVID -19 and after the outbreak of COVID -19

Employers did not notice any differences in their employee's/s' engagement between those who studied before COVID 19 and those who studied after the outbreak of COVID 19

58%

Employers did not notice any differences in their employee's/s' attitudes and values between those who studied before COVID 19 and those who studied after the outbreak of COVID 19
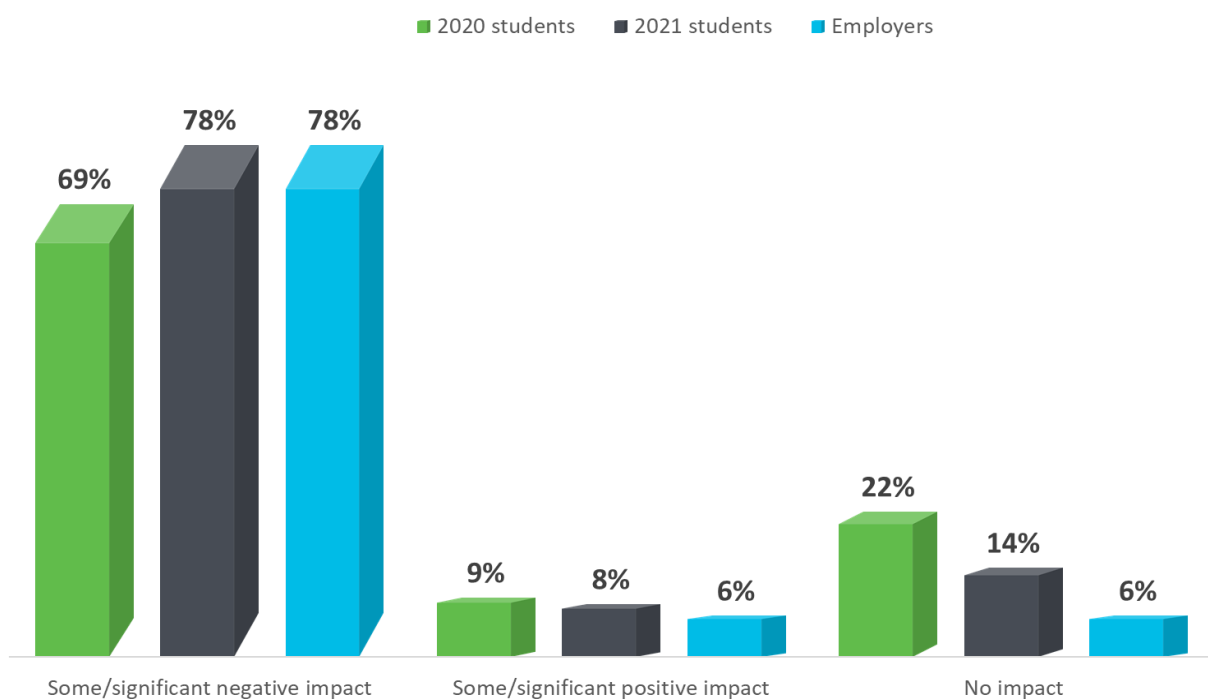
53%
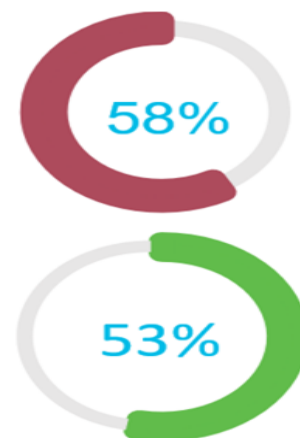
Impact of COVID -19 on students' study

Students were asked to rate how COVID -19 impacted their study overall. Most students indicated COVID -19 has negatively impacted their study. Students enrolled in 2020 were slightly less likely to report a negative impact than students enrolled in 2021.

Around 7 in 10 (69 percent) 2020 students, 8 in 10 (78 percent) 2021 students, and 8 in 10 (78 percent) employers reported COVID -19 has had a negative impact on study.

In contrast, 22 percent of 2020 students, 11 percent of 2021 students, and 1 percent of employers reported COVID -19 has had no impact on students' work (see Figure 14 below).

Figure 14. The impact of COVID -19 on students' study

- 2020 students
- 2021 students
- Employers

	Some/significant negative impact	Some/significant positive impact	No impact
2020 students	69%	9%	22%
2021 students	78%	8%	14%
Employers	78%	6%	6%

Both students and employers were invited to comment on how COVID -19 had impacted study and work. Of those invited, 108 students and 16 employers discussed the impact of COVID -19 on these issues. The majority of students reported COVID -19 has negatively affected their study. Most indicated that COVID -19 has increased their workload and negatively affected their mental health and study.

> "Study in 2020 was primarily impacted by COVID -19 due to a period of doing a CNC role at the time lockdown started. This combined with limited access to clients to begin learning to deliver therapy were the main impacts."

> "I definitely didn't take in far as much information from the Zoom sessions as I did [with the] face-to-face lectures."

> "Difficult connecting re: role plays/scenarios have not been able to be in the room. Did miss a few days due to redeployment as it was the first-ever lockdown."

> "Most found it stressful, some more than others; all struggled with motivation/finding the right headspace to study, work, and manage COVID worries."

Work overload, stress, low motivation, and issues with technologies were some of the main comments discussed by employers.

> "I think overall people are tired, and the workload has increased significantly."

> "Change to Zoom sessions, we moved into two cohorts - due to an error of communication from one the service directors. Which meant they were not a part of the wider [regional] cohort. [The provider] was very accommodating to make sure we could support."

> "COVID, particularly during the first outbreak/lockdown, had a noticeable effect on the employees who were completing study at the same time. They struggled with having no face-to-face contact with their tutors, as everything needed to be via Zoom. They struggled to apply the theory to practice as everyone was having to adapt their practice to meet infection control standards. As the focus at the time was managing an outbreak and preventing further spread, many other things seemed to fall by the wayside for a while."

Impact of COVID -19 on students' work

Survey participants were asked to rate the impact of COVID -19 on students' work. Of those responded, 6 in 10 (60 percent) of 2020 students, 8 in 10 (83 percent) 2021 students, and 9 in 10 (94 percent) employers reported COVID -19 has had a negative impact on students' work.

In contrast, 15 percent of 2020 students, 24 percent of 2021 students, and only one percent of employers reported COVID -19 had no impact on students' work (see Figure 15 below).

Figure 15. The impact of COVID -19 on students' work
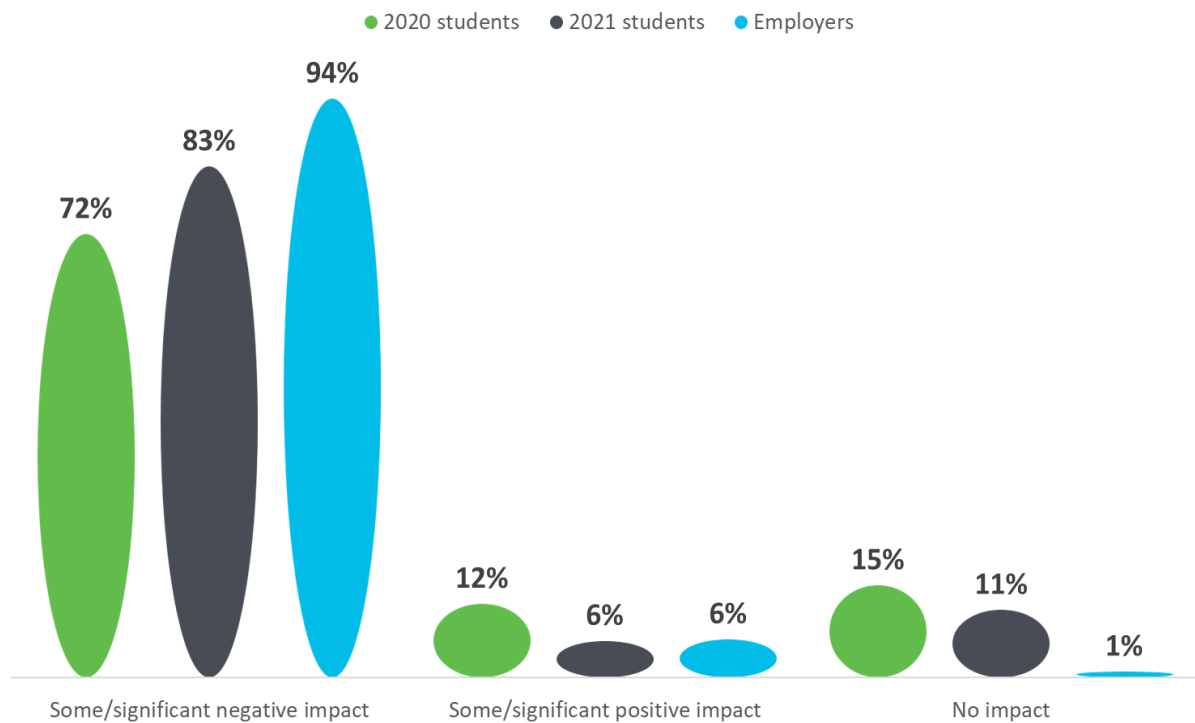
Students were asked to comment on the impact of COVID -19 on work. Most students reported COVID -19 has negatively affected their work.

"COVID -19 has meant an increase in demand on mental health services with no increase in staff to meet these demands; therefore, the workload is higher, and the stress is higher on existing workers. Finding time and energy to complete assignments has been very difficult and has resulted in lower grades than I usually get."

"Work as normal during a global pandemic has meant that there's always a big elephant in the room that really doesn't get addressed (pandemic-related fatigue and stress)."

"Difficulty managing the increased stress from work with study.

"COVID affected not only my work and study space but [also] my home life as well. It has been difficult. It has really made me consider whether I should study next year as the lockdowns make it super hard."

"I have been so burned out for over a year [that] I am changing my job, as soon as my exam is finished, to primary health care, and [I] am reducing my hours. I have never had such a negative impact from work or study. My supervisor and two fellow students kept me going, along with knowing that a student would miss out next year if I didn't complete."

Conclusions and recommendations

Feedback from students and their employers is important to understand how COVID -19 has impacted their study and work.

This evaluation demonstrates that Skills Matter students have faced considerable challenges during the COVID -19 period. Students' challenges include work overload, lack of previous online learning experience, work stress, less motivation, study stress, and overall pandemic stress and fatigue. Many students found it difficult to concentrate during the online learning environment. These challenges prevented students from achieving a higher performance while adapting to the new normal online learning environment.

Employers indicated they offered additional mentoring, study during work time, coaching, and workplace study support. In addition to this support, employers introduced some work and wellbeing strategies including working remotely, flexible working hours, reduced working hours, reinforcing the importance of sick days and time off, setting up wellbeing sessions, and making lunch breaks mandatory. However, over half of the students indicated they did not receive these supports, suggesting they did not benefit from any wellbeing initiatives. A third of students also indicated there were no flexible working strategies introduced by employers. Similarly, in the open-ended question most students indicated employers were not supportive during their study. This is contrary to almost all employers who indicated there were some flexible working strategies and wellbeing initiatives introduced to support students' study.

COVID -19 has both negatively impacted students' study and work and their relationships with other students. Students were most connected and supported by mentors/supervisors during their study, along with colleagues and family. However, they experienced challenges connecting to and receiving support from their fellow students.

The results demonstrate most employers (53 percent) noticed differences in their employees' attitudes and values between those who studied before COVID -19 and those who studied after the outbreak of COVID -19. Interestingly, six in ten employers did not notice any differences in their employees' engagement between those who studied before COVID -19 and those who studied after the outbreak of COVID -19. In contrast, at least four in ten employers noticed students who joined the Skilled Matter programme since the beginning of 2020 were less engaged than those who studied before COVID -19.

Many students indicated the challenges due to COVID -19 have directly affected their study performance and their engagement with people who are accessing services. Skills Matter students may continue to experience stress, and burnout, potentially could lead to reduced quality of service. Given the pandemic is still continuing , adequate support should be provided to Skills Matter students to address the spillover effect of COVID -19 on people accessing mental health and addiction services, as well as addressing pandemic fatigue and stress of the workforce.

The Skills Matter programme is expected to contribute to the mental health and addiction workforce supply. Students enrolled since the beginning of 2020 have faced significant challenges due to the abrupt change from in-person to online learning education and the overwhelming demand for mental health services caused by the pandemic. This has negatively impacted students' studies and work as they manage a different way of studying, working, and living. Some students have stopped their studies because they were unable to travel to their course due to COVID -19 restrictions.

Given the shortage of professionals in the mental health and addiction sector, Skills Matter students are an important source of the future mental health and addiction workforce. Inadequate support may result in a decline in Skills Matter students entering and staying in the mental health and addiction professions, which are already experiencing a huge shortage. Therefore, addressing their fears and wellbeing with adequate support should be a priority.

Recommendations for employers:

- introduce adequate support, such as reducing working hours, introducing flexible working hours, and introducing workplace study

- introduce adequate wellbeing initiatives, such as setting up wellbeing sessions, reinforcing the importance of sick days and time off, and introducing mandatory lunch and tea breaks. Ensure that these are clear and explicit to access, with prompts being given in supervision sessions
- ensure there is access to increased supervision and preceptorship when needed
- ensure students have access to resources and materials they need to undertake online learning.

Recommendations for programme providers:

- introduce strategies to support students to improve their performance working alongside employers

- there are very low numbers withdrawing from programmes; however, the compounding work overload, study stress and lack of connections with their peers are significantly impacting on wellbeing. To mitigate this, continue to introduce peer-to-peer online communication to build connection among students
- continue to incorporate a variety of online teaching methods to suit different learners such as interactive activities, regular breaks, and break-out rooms to promote connection and consolidate learning

Recommendation for the Ministry of Health:

- future consideration is needed regarding the one-year timeframe to complete the NESP programme. Given the normal challenges of shifting from student to employee within mental health and addiction environment. Students increase in stress and anxiety and changes to how the learning programme is delivered in response to the covid pandemic, requires a wider discussion around its set timeframe.

- explore additional funding options to enable new graduates to access more study leave and spend less time in clinical work.

References

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