Optimising Online Learning for a Changing World

The opportunities and challenges of delivering homework clubs online

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Acknowledgements

Optimising Online Learning for a Changing World provides coordinators and tutors working in Out of School Hours Learning Support Programs (OSHLSPs or 'homework clubs') with insights about the opportunities and challenges of running programs online.

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Images in this report are by Harjono Djoyobisono and the Centre for Multicultural Youth unless otherwise stated.

Centre for Multicultural Youth

CMY is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation supporting young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build better lives in Australia.

Our purpose is to ensure that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds have every opportunity to succeed in Australia.

CMY was the first organisation in Australia to work exclusively with migrant and refugee young people. We've come a long way since 1988 but there are still significant challenges and much work to be done.

Young people can encounter significant barriers as they try to settle in Australia. Alongside the challenges of growing up, they are figuring out how things are done and adjusting to unfamiliar cultural, academic and social expectations. Despite these complex issues, we know that young people have the enterprise, resilience and optimism to contribute to the continued prosperity of Australia. By engaging them as experts in their own lives and focusing on their strengths, they can be empowered to adapt and thrive.

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Introduction

Out of School Hours Learning Support Programs (OSHLSPs)—more commonly known as homework clubs—provide free learning support and tutoring to students in primary and secondary school. They operate both within schools and community settings and offer an important service to families who could not otherwise afford private tuition or fee-paying academic support services. While all programs have an overall focus on improving academic outcomes and/or engagement in learning, many programs also have a strong emphasis on building social connection and emotional wellbeing. OSHLSP models may also respond to specific needs or include family engagement activities, for example a family reading club.

Out of School Hours Learning Support Programs allow students who may otherwise have limited access to learning support, to receive assistance in reaching their learning potential. This assistance can result in improved academic outcomes, social connections and wellbeing. The benefits of OSHLSPs are particularly evident for students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, as well as students from other disadvantaged groups, who might face considerable hurdles to learning in regular classroom settings. Common educational barriers for students from migrant and refugee backgrounds and their families include having English as an additional language, experiences of disrupted education and a lack of familiarity with the Australian education system.

In the context of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions starting in April 2020, many OSHLSPs and Victorian schools were forced to move their programs online, leading to considerable impact on student learning outcomes. Historically, very few OSHLSPs have operated online and so the move to online programming represents a significant moment in the development of the sector. Although there have been limitations associated with the move to online learning, this change also represents an opportunity to gain insight into how innovative ways of managing and facilitating programs can support best practice in the OSHLSP sector. This report aims to highlight the opportunities and challenges of online learning for students from refugee and migrant backgrounds in the OSHLSP sector, including those associated with access to and use of digital technologies.

It is evident through this report that the online learning models developed out of necessity in response to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have resulted in a range of positive outcomes that are unique to operating online. While access to programs, subject specific support and learning related to the use of digital technologies has been enhanced, the need for face-to-face, in-person social engagement remains a primary preference for the majority of students, coordinators and volunteer tutors involved in OSHLSP programs.

"Online was very good for me, especially during quarantine: sometimes I needed that motivation to get me through the day" — *Student*

Research Methodology

Data Collection Summary

During the first half of 2021, a range of quantitative and qualitative data was collected from the OSHLSP sector. The audit of a database of OSHLSPs operating throughout Victoria supported the identification of programs that had been operating online throughout 2020. The coordinators of these programs were contacted and invited to participate in the project, with data collection methods including student focus groups, coordinator interviews and surveys targeting volunteer tutors. Questions were designed based on the project rationale and key target areas for impact within the OSHLSP sector based on previous CMY reports and findings, including the 2020 end of year report for the Homework Club Partnership Fund (HCPF). In particular, questions centred on the topics of academic outcomes, digital literacy, social connectedness, accessibility, family engagement and tutor satisfaction.

Seven programs in metropolitan Melbourne participated in the research, along with one program from Ballarat in regional Victoria. All participating students were from refugee and migrant backgrounds, including a combination of both primary and secondary school aged students. Some student and volunteer respondents had only engaged in online sessions, whereas others had engaged in both online and in-person sessions.
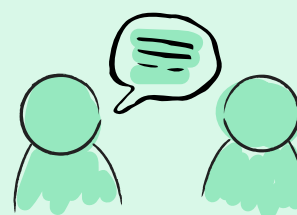
5 student focus groups

18 volunteer surveys

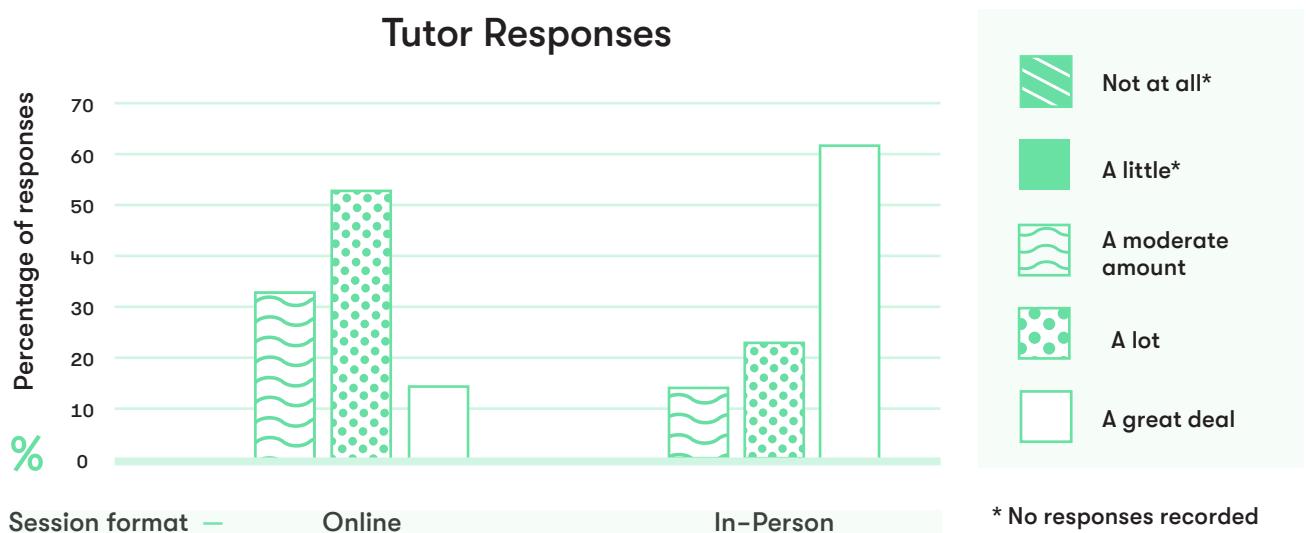**8** coordinator interviews

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Key Findings and Recommendations

Learning

Learning Outcomes

How much does homework club help students to learn?

Student Responses

Percentage of responses (y-axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80)

%

Session format — Online | In-Person

Legend:
- Very little*
- A little
- Some
- A lot

* No responses recorded

Tutor Responses

Percentage of responses (y-axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70)

%

Session format — Online | In-Person

Legend:
- Not at all*
- A little*
- A moderate amount
- A lot
- A great deal

* No responses recorded
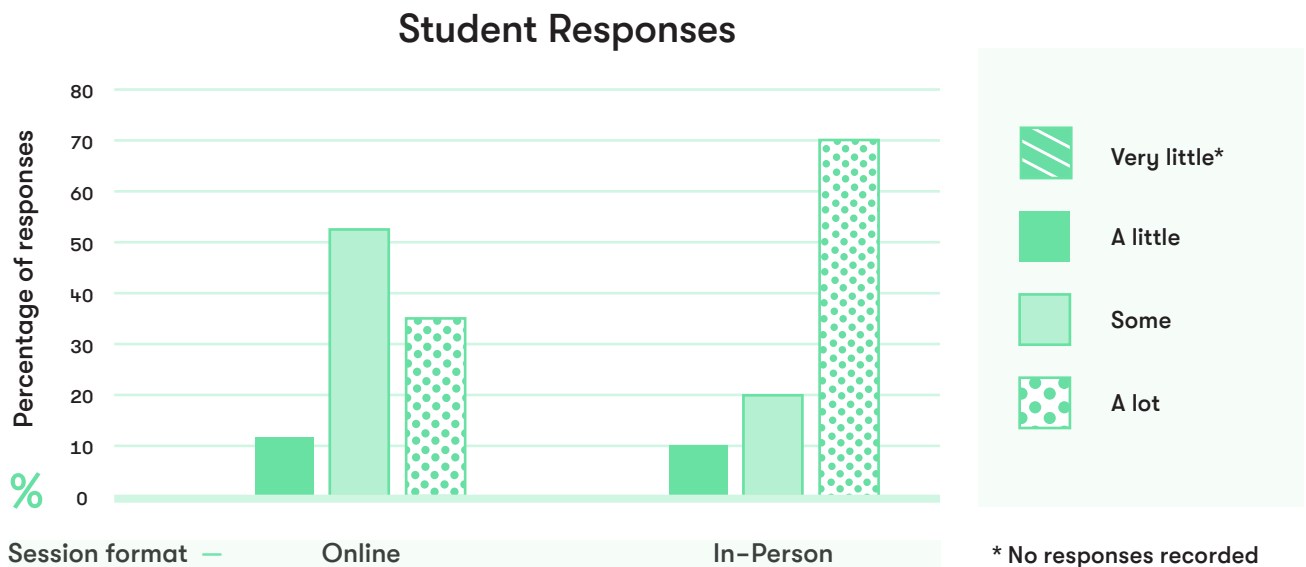
Learning

Overall, there was a perception that learning outcomes were stronger for in-person as opposed to online sessions. Participants suggested that English was particularly suited to online teaching and learning, whereas mathematics was less suited to this context. This observation may be due to anecdotal evidence from program coordinators and volunteers who shared that it is difficult to draw maths diagrams, pictures and symbols online, making mathematics more challenging to teach in an online context. Participants also outlined various specific advantages and disadvantages of online homework club sessions with respect to learning outcomes.

Evaluating online sessions for learning outcomes	
Advantages	**Disadvantages**
• Typically adopt smaller tutor-student ratios online leading to more targeted support, and potentially improving student confidence • May help establish the home as a place of learning, encouraging students to complete homework at home independently • Convenient to send through files such as questions and assignments to students before sessions • Easy integration of software that is supportive of teaching	• Internet connection issues, microphone and camera glitches and sound quality problems can disrupt learning • Tutors may be less effective online, due to an inability to see student errors and keep students accountable for staying on track

"It's great to learn from the comfort of home"
— Student

"There needs to be a higher ratio of tutors to students in the online environment"

— Program Coordinator

Based on these findings, it is recommended that clubs offering online sessions:

• Adopt smaller tutor-student ratios. Note however that child safety best practice would require that 1:1 ratios (which include tutors alone in break-out rooms with students) be avoided.

• Utilise the full suite of digital teaching aides as appropriate, including whiteboard explanations on video conferencing software, shared videos, chat functions, break-out rooms, page-sharing, and online educational activities and resources.

• Trouble-shoot common technology errors with tutors and students.

• Train tutors to monitor and assess student work, for example, using questioning and screen sharing.

Learning

Digital Literacy

Participant responses suggested that improvements to digital literacy are a particularly important learning outcome of online homework clubs. Many students may already be relatively tech savvy before commencing online learning, although this may be less likely with primary school children. Through their clubs, students can learn to better navigate video conferencing and other online platforms, and they can develop more familiarity with online etiquette—digital skills that may be important for students' eventual careers. Note, however, that where student digital literacy out-paces that of their tutors, they can occasionally use their skills to disrupt sessions (e.g. muting the tutor, or sharing their own screen disruptively).

Coordinators also highlighted the capacity of their online clubs to support family digital literacy, by running digital support sessions and calling home when students faced technical issues. At times it may be challenging to convey this information to families due to language barriers. However, one club reported that after some initial difficulties, parents' digital literacy tended to improve over time.

> *"Online sessions have provided an opportunity to build those digital literacy skills in students"*
> *— Program Coordinator*

Based on these findings, it is recommended that clubs offering online sessions:

- Explicitly support students to navigate video conferencing and learn online etiquette.
- Encourage students and families to appreciate the vocational relevance of digital skills.
- Train tutors in relevant software before launching the club online, covering how to prevent students from disrupting sessions.
- Run digital support sessions with families, using interpreters where appropriate, and enlisting the support of students to teach their parents.
- Call home when students face technical issues.

> *"It is more difficult to keep students effectively engaged for a long time [when] tutoring online"*
> *— Tutor*

> *"Background noise during online sessions can make it difficult" — Student*

Learning

Learning Engagement

As with student learning outcomes, data collection revealed that online sessions had both advantages and disadvantages when compared with in-person sessions in regards to student engagement.

Evaluating online sessions for student engagement	
Advantages	**Disadvantages**
• Fewer behaviour management issues • Fewer social distractions • Reduced classroom noise • Students can work from the comfort of their own home and choose their work place and clothes • There was boosted student motivation to connect with others during lockdowns • Some students find online learning fun • Clubs may be more innovative and include more diverse content	• Difficulties concentrating due to screen fatigue (especially during lockdowns/remote schooling) • Accessibility of distracting device apps • Noisy home environments • Students talking over each other on video conferencing platforms • Students working on their beds and falling asleep • It can be difficult to gauge engagement levels especially when students do not share their camera

Based on these findings, it is recommended that clubs offering online sessions:

• Seek to innovate and include diverse content.

• Limit screen fatigue by giving regular breaks and off-screen tasks like scavenger hunts and writing with paper and pen.

• Encourage students not to be on other device apps during homework club, explaining the importance of concentration and attention for learning.

• Work with parents to see if home noise can be minimised.

• Have a consistent behaviour management policy to reduce the likelihood of students talking over each other.

• Encourage students not to work on their beds.

• Try to gauge engagement by questioning, requesting students to share their video and by encouraging students to show work samples.

"A lot of students were doing online learning for school and then needed to do online homework club... leading to screen fatigue" — *Program coordinator*
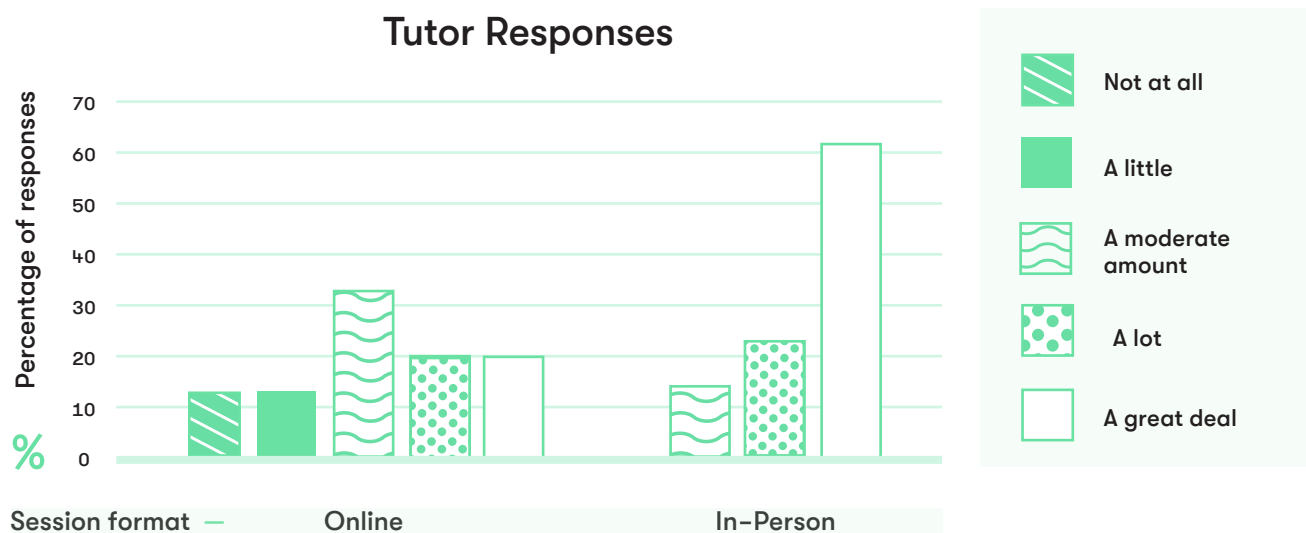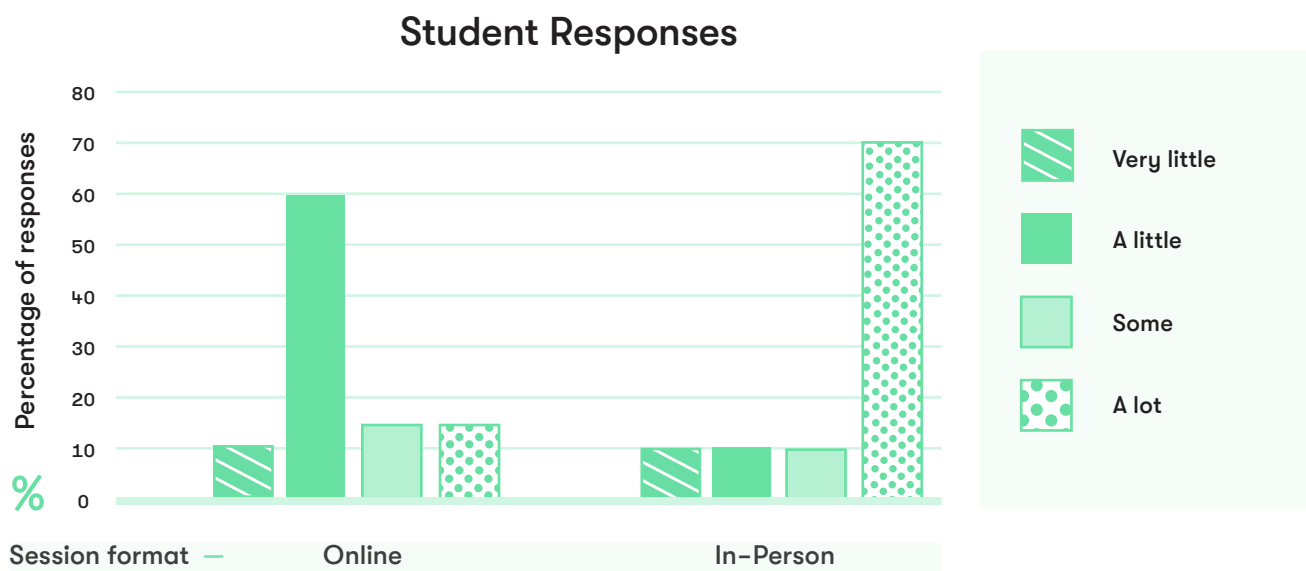
"Concentration and staying engaged is more challenging for students online" — *Program coordinator*

Social connections

How much does homework club help students connect with each other?

Student Responses

Legend:
- Very little
- A little
- Some
- A lot

Percentage of responses (%)

Session format — Online — In-Person

Tutor Responses

Legend:
- Not at all
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A lot
- A great deal

Percentage of responses (%)

Session format — Online — In-Person

Social connections

In general, there was a strong perception among both students and tutors that in-person sessions were better able to facilitate social connections than online sessions. However, participants indicated that online sessions had a spread of advantages and disadvantages when compared with in-person sessions.

Evaluating online sessions for student engagement	
Advantages	**Disadvantages**
• Smaller tutor-student ratios supports establishment of rapport and better learning relationships • Some students feel more comfortable sharing online perhaps due to smaller group sizes and capacity to share without camera being on • An important source of social connections for students during lockdowns • Some software supports socialising, e.g. online quizzes and chat functions.	• Loss of irreplaceable qualities of face-to-face communication • Difficult for tutors and coordinators to establish initial rapport with students • Structure of sessions can inhibit social connections (e.g. there tends to be fewer informal chats and breaks) • Coordinators and tutors can tend to be more didactic, requiring students to listen without talking • Technological factors can make it hard for students to share work and for tutors to run social activities, digital glitches can impair communication, and the context can feel isolating for participants.

"Face-to-face sessions can allow you to connect to more people and it's easier to be social" — *Student*

"It's trickier to facilitate student-to-student connections online" — *Program coordinator*

"Some students feel more comfortable sharing online" — *Program coordinator*

Based on these findings, it is recommended that clubs offering online sessions:

• Utilise small tutor-student ratios to build initial rapport.

• Encourage student sharing of their views, especially during small group work.

• Allow students to share without their camera at times.

• Utilise software to support socialising: online educational games, break-out "fun rooms", the chat function.

• Build in time for informal chats and breaks, for example, by having all-in group chats at the start and end of sessions.

• Give the students the opportunity to work in pairs and in groups of different sizes.

• Try different groupings of students, for example, according to age or year level, especially if in primary school.

• Mix didactic teaching style with more relational and dialogue-based approach.

• Train tutors in building rapport and managing relationships.

• Facilitate wellbeing activities.

Student access

One of the most commonly cited advantages of online sessions was their accessibility, however, some participants mentioned online sessions also posed some challenges in this regard.

Evaluating online sessions for student engagement	
Advantages	**Disadvantages**
• Sessions could be accessed from any location via the internet • Students didn't need to travel to attend homework club • Higher student attendance in a number of clubs • Some students who lived too far away from the club to attend in person could now participate • Clubs were supported by experienced tutors who otherwise wouldn't have been able to attend as the in-person sessions were too far away • Sessions interfered less with student chores and parents' work. • Some clubs could facilitate longer sessions because of the time saved commuting • Easier for some students to attend during religious occasions such as Ramadan • Learning at home was seen as safer than commuting to in-person sessions by public transport or walking • Boosted student agency as students could log in and leave whenever they wanted	• Some students lacked access to the digital resources required to attend clubs, and may need to share devices with siblings which can result in disruptions to learning. • Limited by poor internet connection and technology issues, such as passwords or links not working • Sometimes difficult to attend online sessions when they are scheduled too soon after school has finished

Based on these findings, it is recommended that clubs offering online sessions:

• Trouble-shoot digital accessibility issues with students and families.

• Help students access resources necessary to attend, e.g. explore whether donations can be made to purchase laptops for students, or whether the student's school can provide them with a laptop.

• Schedule sessions so that students have enough time after school to prepare before attending.

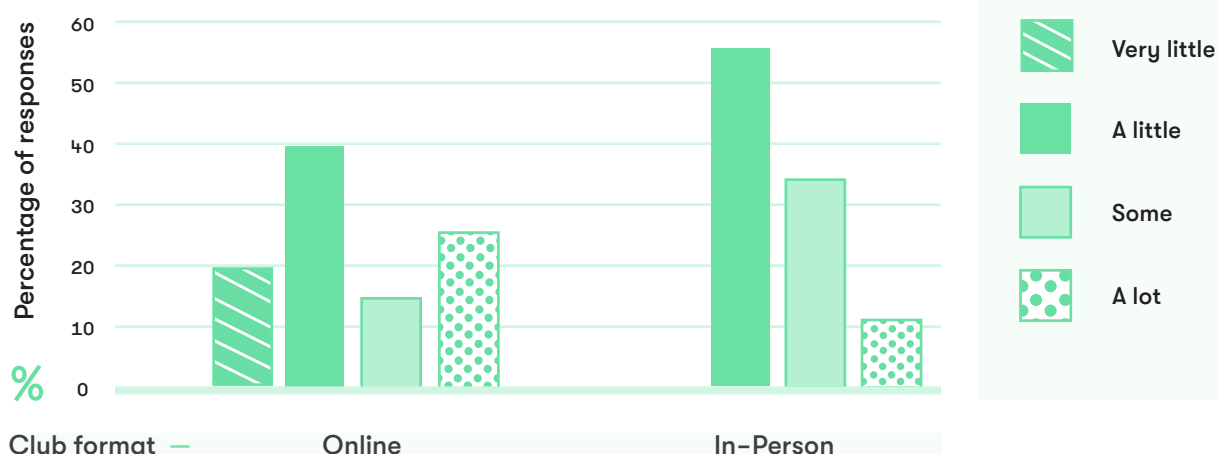*"During Ramadan it is hard to come to a face-to-face session" — Student*

"If the club was not online then it would be hard for their family to find the time to get to the homework club" — Student

"I can just come home, log on and go to the subject I need" — Student

Family Engagement

How much does the homework club engage students' family members?

Student Responses

Legend:
- Very little
- A little
- Some
- A lot

Y-axis: Percentage of responses (0–60)
X-axis: Club format — Online, In-Person

Quantitative data revealed a notable spread of student perceptions regarding family engagement with online sessions in particular. Qualitative data suggested that efforts to engage families differed across homework clubs, with some programs having the capacity to make regular phone contact with parents and others finding the connections of face-to-face contact hard to replicate online. In many cases, it seemed that parents would sometimes communicate with coordinators and tutors when they dropped off their students to in-person sessions, whereas students were usually able to access online sessions themselves, reducing the amount of incidental contact between parents and club staff. However, primary school students typically required more support from parents to log on to sessions, thereby increasing parent engagement in these situations.

On the basis of the data collected, it is recommended that online clubs seek to better engage families by:

- Dropping off learning kits to family homes to create an opportunity for incidental contact.
- Conducting regular consultations with families about the club.
- Utilising video conferencing to maintain good parent communication.

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Tutor Engagement

How satisfying is it for tutors to volunteer for the homework club?

Tutor Responses

Legend:
- Not at all*
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A lot
- A great deal

* No responses recorded

Tutors tended to find in-person sessions more satisfying than online sessions, although they still found online sessions to be relatively satisfying. There were elements that tutors seemed to like about online sessions, and other elements that they disliked.

Tutor Engagement

Evaluating online sessions for tutor engagement and satisfaction	
Advantages	**Disadvantages**
• Tutor satisfaction remained relatively high during online sessions • Engagement and retention of tutors remained strong in their clubs despite the transition into online sessions • Tutors particularly appreciated features related to the improved accessibility of online sessions as the time saved gave them the capacity to support more students and in some cases increase their volunteering to a second night	• There may be more meaningful learning and stronger relationships between tutors and students when sessions were face-to-face • Tutors may miss the connection with other tutors

Based on these findings, it is recommended that clubs offering online sessions:

• consciously express their gratitude to tutors to support engagement and satisfaction.

• allocate some debrief time for tutors, especially those that are new, at the end of each session to support social connections.

"The online program has meant that I have been able to volunteer in an area that I would otherwise have difficulty commuting to" — *Tutor*

"I generally prefer working face-to-face" — *Tutor*

Case Studies

Student Experience

One female student from year 10 expressed her preference for online homework club sessions. She had attended an in-person program before the lockdowns, and continued participating as the club transitioned into the online realm. This student explained there were many learning benefits of online sessions, including that she can learn from the comfort of her own home and work alone without distraction as it is not too loud. Additional tutors were able to access the online sessions, and so she was able to work with different subject specialists on different nights. The only downsides of online sessions, according to this student, were the lack of social interactions with peers and the short duration of the sessions:

"[one hour] is not enough time".

Coordinator Experience

For one program that has been offering free homework tutoring since 2016, during the 2020 lockdowns, they chose to transition to online sessions. Initially, there was a drop in student numbers, from over 100 participating students a week before lockdown to just 6-7 students after lockdown had commenced. However, gradually, the sessions gained popularity, and the club started to offer three sessions a week rather than just one, with numbers of participating students increasing back to around 30 per week.

The club realised soon after lockdown that student needs had shifted, as social connection and wellbeing became increasingly important. The coordinators grappled with the limitations of the online format for building social connection and resolved to provide additional training to their tutors on building rapport and relationships. They built in time and activities which allowed participating students to have more informal conversations—including about their wellbeing—with other students and with tutors.

An Emerging Approach: A Hybrid Learning Model

Data suggested that online homework clubs may not merely be a feature of lockdowns, but in fact, may offer some enduring benefits. Some coordinators mentioned that their clubs are pursuing hybrid models into the future, supporting both in-person as well as online sessions. This approach was seen to be beneficial as it capitalises on the benefits of each model and provides greater choice to students and families. A coordinator from one of these hybrid clubs expressed concern that this model might not be sustainable for them due to a lack of resources. Similarly, another coordinator explained that their club would only be continuing in-person due to insufficient resources to pursue a hybrid model.

Conclusion

It is clear that students have a different experience of online as opposed to in-person homework clubs. This difference is particularly large in relation to learning outcomes and levels of social connection. While online sessions will not replace in-person programs, there are unique benefits of operating online. Hybrid learning models allow clubs to harness the advantages of both formats, providing their students and tutors with more options. However, these models require a greater level of resourcing, which may be beyond the capacity of most existing programs. Without new and sustainable funding streams, the potential benefits of more hybrid learning models in the OSHLSP sector will not be realised. Finally, this report affirms the capacity of homework clubs in general—both in-person and online—to effectively support the learning and social connections of students right across Victoria.

Find out more at

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