

## Case Study 1: Learner Pod Initiative, NCI School of Business

### Introduction and Context:

The NCI School of Business Learner Pod Initiative was developed to mitigate the lack of social interaction experienced by first year students as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Social distancing requirements coupled with ongoing public health advice meant that face to face orientation was not possible. We know from research and past experience that the initial 8-10 weeks of starting college is when learners are most vulnerable to drop out. This initiative was proposed to minimize withdrawals and help new learners develop a sense of belonging and feel supported by their peers.

The concept of the Learner Pods was to provide a space for learners to come together outside of the classroom, to assist learners to make connections to other learners, to develop informal support networks and to create a sense of belonging and connectedness to their programme of study and hence the wider institution. While some class groups and some pockets of learners were connecting and communicating online, we wanted to ensure that no learner was left behind. This initiative provided an initial touch point to ensure that every learner was given the opportunity to meet and engage with other learners from their programme.

### Summary of the Initiative:

The Learner Pod Initiative was approved in 2019/2020 and implemented over Weeks 6 to 8 of Semester 1 2020/21. All first-year students, irrespective of whether they were full-time or part-time learners, or studying on postgraduate or undergraduate programmes, were randomly allocated to a Learner Pod of 8-12 learners from their programme of study. Each pod was invited to a 15-minute Microsoft Teams meeting, which was led by a facilitator who took steps to help pod members bond by conducting icebreaker sessions. The session allowed participants to share their experiences and their concerns. Following the meeting, students were encouraged to stay in touch with their fellow pod members through Microsoft Teams and the individual pod channels were maintained to allow for this ongoing contact. In total, 96 learner pods were created and facilitated through this initiative in Semester 1 2020/21. This represented a significant challenge and resource commitment on behalf of the School.

### Key Findings:

Following the launch of the Learner Pod Initiative, feedback presented from pod facilitators, class representatives and individual learners showed that students were appreciative of the opportunity to interact with their classmates in a small group setting and felt better supported by NCI. Prior to the launch of the pod meetings, many student groups, particularly international students, expressed concern in Lockdown 1, at the prospect of isolation due to little interaction with their classmates. While NCI student groups were active on social media platforms within Lockdown 1, students were eager for opportunities to socialize with their peers at a programme level. Postgraduate students also confirmed they benefited from the Pod Initiative by forming study groups with their pod members.

**Measuring the Impact:**

In addition to monitoring student feedback and engagement data, student withdrawals data was identified as a key data set for measuring the impact of the initiative. The January 2021 examination boards would be used to provide quantitative data in relation to the impact of the initiative on student retention and progression. Pre-exam board data from alternative assessments and online examinations completed in Q4 2020 indicated a positive impact across first year programmes.

**Conclusion:**

NCI's School of Business will continue to gather and review feedback from students, including through the NCI first year student experience survey, to inform decisions on the continuity of the Learning Pod initiative and its potential scalability both across the institution and beyond the COVID crisis. Evidence to date demonstrates students are welcoming the opportunities provided by the Pods to bring classmates together in the virtual learning environment. The School of Business also intends to consider rolling out more of the postgraduate study groups in response to postgraduate student feedback.

In conclusion, the findings of this initiative demonstrate that the Covid-19 Pandemic has greatly impacted the student experience, particularly in terms of peer socialization. The NCI School of Business response to the need for programme-specific peer interaction through the Pod Initiative has been widely welcomed. Despite the logistical and resource challenges, the initiative has been considered successful in providing students with a means to connect with their peers and as a result, students feel more engaged and less isolated within the virtual College environment.