Social Sustainability through Equitable Access to Higher Education: An Action Research Study

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Abstract

The skills and knowledge for future generations to handle social and environmental changes. The New Zealand education system is ranked highly globally in providing quality education to its citizens, however, "Māori, Pasifika and students from the low socioeconomic background fall among the lowest-performing in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries" (Bolton, 2017). Research indicates that access to tertiary education is a serious global issue for indigenous groups and those from the low socioeconomic background. The disruption to tertiary education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will have a long-term impact on marginalised groups in society. Without appropriate intervention, access to education for these groups will be further limited.

The main challenge that this study aims to address is to improve social sustainability through equitable access to education for the disadvantaged groups in society who lack access to technology. Equitable access to education plays a significant role in social sustainability by providing. This study uses action research as an intervention to address barriers for equitable access to tertiary education during a pandemic. The need for additional resources to allow marginalised students to continue study was determined through the use of semi structured interviews, leading to the establishment of a cloud-based application server that enabled students to access a set of programs that they needed for their study remotely during COVID-19 lockdown through a web browser. A survey was used to evaluate the impact of the intervention.

The results from this study showed that while the intervention in this research provided a positive outcome for a small group of students who took part in this study, a more long-term plan is required to address this issue at community and national levels. With the infrastructure already in place, future work includes an increase in the sample size for the next iteration of this research for a more comprehensive assessment of the intervention with a larger population. To do this, the plan is to make the intervention available to a larger population by including students from institutions 'A' and 'B'. With over 600 students at the School of IT between the two institutions, over different locations, a larger and broader group of students can be invited to participate in the next phase of this study.