

# Social Connectedness with Schools for Young People with Long-Term Conditions [LTCs]

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## Introduction

Young people with long-term conditions [LTCs] experience prolonged school absences due to their health conditions. LTCs can include chronic diabetes, cancers, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, chronic pain, and chronic kidney disease<sup>1</sup>.

The health of these students prevents them from attending mainstream school regularly; their absences often last days, months, and even years. When their social connectedness with schools is disrupted, students are at risk of experiencing social isolation and exclusion, impacting their academic performance and well-being<sup>2</sup>.

Research continues to investigate the outcomes, challenges, and enablers of virtual inclusion to connect young people with LTCs with schools but is limited in the NZ setting<sup>3</sup>. The Patience Project was the first intervention programme that used telepresence technology to establish a hospital-to-school connection in New Zealand<sup>4</sup>. The collective voices and perspectives of the key people involved in such initiatives can add valuable qualitative data on how these initiatives can be advanced.

This study is the first to bring together stakeholders, teachers, medical professionals, parents, counsellors, academic leaders, and young people with LTC experience to have this significant conversation and to provide a collective stakeholder perspective.

## Why is this study important?

During the pandemic lockdown, conversations centred on the impacts of social isolation and exclusion on wellbeing. Due to their health conditions, young people with LTCs can experience social isolation from their schools, missing out on the normalcy of peer and teacher interactions for school-going students. Young people with LTCs often find themselves displaced within the larger inclusive education support systems and practices available in schools – because of their absence from school.

This is a critical conversation that needs to be ongoing. How can we support the students' social connectedness with their schools; how do we keep them in sight and mind and secure their sense of belonging to their school context? Virtual inclusion using appropriate and feasible technology is a potential that needs to be further explored. The VIIF derived from this study supports this conversation and offers significant considerations for how this initiative can be successful.

## An Exploratory Research Methodology

The overarching aim of the two-phased research was to investigate stakeholders' perspectives of virtual inclusion initiatives for young people with LTCs.

A heterogenous purposive sampling strategy using the snowball approach was used to recruit thought leaders/key informants and young people [above 16 years] with knowledge, expertise, and experiences related to LTCs.

18 key informants were involved in a semi-structured individual interview with the researcher in Phase One. Nine key informants participated in a novel collaboration that encouraged dialogue through group discussion in Phase Two.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data in both phases.

## A Virtual Inclusion Initiatives Framework [VIIF]

The framework summarises key findings from both phases of the study. An illustration of the waka signifies the binding of the three significant components: social, school, and virtual connectedness. The enablers are projected as the sail that can progress the initiatives with important key considerations addressed. Best practices to advance the initiatives can be learnt from schools through a ripple-effect model. Fundamentally, the core values of a school culture of care and every child matters support the VIIF.

