

Research Article

Post-COVID Education in New Zealand: Approaching Normal Lives? The Context of COVID-19 in New Zealand

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Abstract.

New Zealand had a relatively low death toll from Covid-19 because of stringent measures against it but this did not mean New Zealand escaped economic and social disruption at this time. The well-being of people was a key priority of adjustments in education in this period and the success of adjustments to delivery and assessment was dependent on the efforts and good-will of the people involved. Academic standards were largely maintained but the most disadvantaged groups were most affected by lack of resources and other forms of support. The drawbacks in emergency remote teaching that emerged in the period serve as a reminder of the value of sound underpinning principles for online teaching. In 2023, the unsatisfactory mixed model of both online and face-to-face delivery underlines the role and importance of teacher presence in relation to social presence and cognitive presence in teaching and learning.

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Published: 9 August 2024

Publishing services provided by Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the 6th SoRes Conference Committee.

Keywords: kwd

1. Introduction

New Zealand escaped a high death toll from Covid-19. On March 20th 2022 the New Zealand government closed New Zealand borders. Nation-wide and local lockdowns were enacted with an initial aim of eliminating the spread of the virus within the country and at times the country came close to achieving this goal. As vaccines became available the health authorities then pivoted to attempting to achieve high national vaccination rates and eventually to reopening the borders and attempting to live with the virus. The effect of these measures was to contain the potential loss of life from the virus. Although small numbers of people are still dying weekly the total death toll from the pandemic in early June 2023 was 3001.

Escaping a high death toll, on the other hand, did not mean that New Zealand escaped from the economic and social disruption that has affected the rest of the world. A strong

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initial consensus supporting the stringent measures began to erode as economic effects were felt from the closed borders and lockdowns, particularly in the region of the largest city, Auckland, which was subject to the longest periods in lockdown because of case numbers. The New Zealand economy was affected particularly from loss of revenue from tourism. There was also an emotional toll on family members living abroad who were unable to return, sometimes even when their loved ones in New Zealand were terminally ill. A vocal anti-vaccination lobby also developed, staging a sit-in at the New Zealand Parliament in 2022.

The effects on education also changed during the three year period. Writing about the effects on secondary school assessment [1] describes three phases. She designates the first as Phase 1 in 2020 *transformative* and united, the second as Phase 2–2021 (Delta) *adaptive* and the last as Phase 3–2022 (Omicron) *disruptive diversity*. In 2023 things may be approximating more closely to some sort of “normal” but they are far from entirely settled.

2. Covid-19 And Education In New Zealand: The Importance Of People

Literature around the education response to Covid-19 in New Zealand emphasises the importance of people to the process of coping initially with the pandemic and subsequently mitigating the pandemic’s on-going long-term effects. New Zealand government announcements highlighted the need for kindness and a community ethos of care. This ethos carried over into education with student well-being given consideration alongside maintaining academic standards.

There was a particular awareness of the inequity of the effects of the pandemic on low-socioeconomic groups and Maori and Pacific students. [2] found that both internet access and quiet places to work were a problem for a significant proportion of Maori students in this first year. Lecturers found flexible ways to attempt to maintain the personal relationships both between teachers and students and between students themselves so important to Pacific approaches to education. [3] describes quickly shifting communications to Facebook which was easier for some students to access so that a relational approach was not sacrificed.

A *Good Practice Report* (2021) from the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (based on reports from the eight universities) found that cross-function

teams were quickly established to draw on varied forms of expertise within the universities. There was a quick transition to online learning drawing on the technical and pedagogical expertise within the universities. The universities started to use analytics to find out which students were struggling from hardship so that support might be offered. The Tertiary Education Commission developed a Technology Access Fund for Learners. Universities extended existing financial hardship funds, but the report acknowledges that inequities remained for some students. The report expresses some confidence that academic standards were maintained. Technical expertise became important. People were also seen as critical, and the report mentions aspects such as organization culture, collegiality, staff commitment, flexibility and expertise.

People were also seen as critical in the adaptation of the assessment programme in New Zealand schools. [1] describes “extraordinary inter-agency/sector collaborative efforts” to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing and achievement. Teachers used “more checkpoints (breaking assessment tasks into smaller chunks to keep students on track), extending deadlines for assessment tasks, being more flexible with students submitting part or whole assessments, using platforms like Google Classrooms so that students could complete assessments at home or in class, and in what counted as evidence” [1]. The Ministry of Education supported these adaptations and provided guidelines for flexibility.

Initially, [1] argues “a third thrived, a third survived, a third dived.”

Students appreciated teachers who kept in regular contact, chunked learning into manageable size, provided additional or flexible time for learning and assessment, explained, or gave feedback on learning, varied their teaching resources, and accordingly devoted more time and effort to assessments.

Home circumstances made learning harder for other students and levels of fatigue emerged. Some students coped less well with independent and online learning and with lack of interpersonal contact. Internet connectivity remained a problem for some.

The combination of internal and external assessment in the New Zealand secondary school national qualification system proved a strength during the pandemic. Adjustments were provided to both internal and external assessment requirements including extensions of deadlines and the timing of the examination period and micro-adjustments to internal assessment expectations in consultation with schools to maintain rigour but increase practicality. There were also adjustment to the numbers of overall credits

required to achieve national qualifications. This later amounted to a kind of universal aegrotat provision for periods of learning opportunities lost.

As with universities it seems that academic standards were reasonably well-maintained. [1] argues that “A national qualification with in-built flexibility of systems and structure that combines the higher validity and usability of teacher/student designed assessments with the higher reliability of national examinations, accommodates some adjustments in times of pandemic crises.”

3. Emergency Remote Teaching And Well-Planned Online Teaching

A recent study from the engineering school of Canterbury University stresses the importance of a principled approach to online teaching and learning. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) of the kind used during the pandemic (and previously at the time of the Christchurch earthquakes) may not meet all the criteria of a more principled approach, [4]. This study used a community of inquiry model of analysis.

A community of inquiry model suggests that social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence are all required for effective online teaching. Social presence, the building of a community of learners comfortable with working with each other, is a significant antecedent to collaboration and critical discourse. The process of working together on group projects, assignment, and tutorials supports critical thinking, develops interpersonal skills, and investigates tacit bodies of knowledge [5] The theory also argues that teaching presence is critical for setting the parameters for cognitive exploration and moving students from the exploratory stage to critical thinking and cognitive development. Active teacher presence is needed “ to diagnose misconceptions, to provide probing questions, comments, and additional information in an effort to ensure continuing cognitive development, and to model the critical thinking process” [5].

In the Canterbury Engineering School study flexibility of online lectures was reported to help student schedules. Some students were overseas when the borders closed. Some were employed full-time (e.g. some master students). The study found international students had a significantly higher self-perceived ability to learn at their own pace than domestic students. Students reported significant challenges during COVID-19. Many felt it had negatively impacted their academic performance. They also reported that online lecture content was variable across lecturers. 23% felt the lecture content was not interesting and 53% that lecturers didn't have good online presentation skills.

Wider issues of the pandemic outside of university work affecting students individually were reported to have increased general anxiety. Technical issues of online access were not significant except around the logistics of assignment submission [4].

Motivation and lack of interaction were found to be particularly problematic. 63% didn't find online learning motivating. Over 80% felt there was insufficient communication between students. They missed the benefit of working with and learning from each other in face-to-face classes and on projects. The things that made online teaching effective were (in this order): student – lecturer interactions, a supportive online environment, student – student interaction and prompt feedback [4] What was sometimes missing in the pragmatic practice of ERT during the pandemic was the benefits to learning of effective social presence and teacher presence.

4. Autoethnographic Report On Teaching Online During The Pandemic In The Field Of Teacher Education

At this point I will describe in an autoethnographic way my direct experience of teaching online during the pandemic. The self-report of this writer teaching in the School of Education at Victoria University of Wellington was that both teacher presence and social presence could be replicated in the ERT context, at least to some extent. In 2007 Garrison suggested a well-planned online course to support teacher presence would include:

Re-creating Power Point presentations and lecture notes onto the course site, developing audio/video mini-lectures, providing personal insights into the course material, creating a desirable mix of and a schedule for individual and group activities, and providing guidelines on how to use the medium effectively [5].

The School of Education has taught remotely for many years. Students preparing to be primary and secondary school teachers could join the programme from areas outside Wellington or within Wellington if their personal circumstances made it difficult for them to attend campus face-to-face. These students then undertook teaching practicum in their local area and lecturers travelled to observe their teaching practice. The school in other words had existing expertise in online delivery. At the time of the pandemic lockdown we were advised by the technology lecturers in the school to divide our lectures into smaller chunks for online delivery. While practice was similar across the school I will describe my own approach from this point.

After recording online lectures in manageable chunks of 10 – 20 minutes each and posting these at the beginning of each week I would also upload interactive discussion board questions (often based in weekly course readings) or collaborative learning tasks replicating pedagogical approaches useful for the classroom. Students were required to respond to a set number of other students' posts. As a lecturer I was then able to guide the discussion by prompting and probing student response. Originally face-to-face students found this approach more difficult to acclimatise to than existing online students but gradually an interactive online learning community began to build. Alongside this asynchronous approach I also held several weekly synchronous tutorials which enabled me to introduce further brief interactive activities, to follow up on misunderstandings within the discussion board responses, to monitor learning preparatory to assessments, and to prompt further higher-level thinking. I was then able to follow up more individually on students who were struggling, sometimes through email or individual phone calls. My practice during this period replicated to a large degree my normal practice of teaching some students face-to-face and some online. Not everything happened smoothly and not all students were equally successful but the range did not vary significantly from what would also be expected in a "normal" period. It is however more time-consuming to respond online through written chat or email than direct response in a face-to-face classes.

This anecdotal experience suggests that it is possible to replicate, at least to some degree, the ideal for online learning scenario suggested in 2007 by Garrison, even in ERT conditions. This is perhaps more likely if, as in our case, parallel practice for teaching online already exists. A more rigorous research approach would be required to substantiate this. It is important to note that the model depends on manageable teacher / student ratios, particularly for outreach to individual students, something more likely in a post-graduate professional qualification than large undergraduate courses.

5. Discussion: A Return To Normal?

Research on the 2022 period in New Zealand is at present scant, although research is in the pipeline. One study, also from Canterbury University, suggests that while students may express gratitude for a return to face-to-face teaching, in practice varying levels of attendance at lectures and tutorials may be reported [6]. Universities have in some cases mandated lecture capture recording of all face to face lectures. This means that students can "pick and mix" face to face attendance and online viewing of lectures to

meet their other work and family commitments. The problematic nature of current face-to-face attendance has led some to question the viability of the traditional one-hour lecture in an era of digitalisation [6].

In the post-pandemic period both schools and universities need to be ready for another crisis that could lead to the need for ERT. New Zealand is particularly susceptible to the risk of earthquakes, something already experienced directly by the University of Canterbury in 2010, 2011. In 2022 other pedagogical challenges face educational institutions alongside the post-pandemic normalisation attempts, such as currently the need to respond to increasing use of AI tools. Both the research surveyed in this paper and the self-report of the writer point to the importance of understanding the role of people in crisis scenarios. Institutions need to be able to draw quickly and efficiently on the existing expertise of the community of teachers and administrators in order to pivot and adapt content to the local situation. The New Zealand experience is that some degree at least of mitigating response to inequities caused by pandemic was possible. It was clear in New Zealand that the good-will and additional professional efforts of lecturers and teachers was essential to maintaining standards. Some flexibility within assessment processes and within school and university regulation was helpful in evening out teaching and assessment loads.

6. Conclusion

It may also be helpful to both schools and universities to consider what principles of good teaching and learning practice underpin their current delivery, whether face-to-face or online. Then any adaptation to ERT can be evaluated not only against pragmatic and reactive needs but also against sound pedagogical principles. In the current return to a desired “normal” context what may be missing is the careful building of social presence as a foundation for cognitive presence mediated by teacher presence, something which may have been taken for granted in a more unrecognised way in the era before Covid-19.

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