A Sample of Vocational Tertiary Educators' Experiences of Transitioning to Online Teaching During the 2020 National Lockdown

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The COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdowns, disrupted the education sector during a nationwide lockdown period of seven to nine weeks (April and May 2020, with regional variation). Aotearoa New Zealand's tertiary education campuses were closed and tertiary educators had to transition to online teaching from home. This research aimed to explore a sample of tertiary educators' experiences of working from home during the 2020 lockdown. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 tertiary educators (12 female, 2 male) from one Aotearoa tertiary education institution. An inductive thematic analysis of the data was undertaken. Themes were grouped into a three-step framework proposed by Breakspear (2020). In the crisis phase, a lack of resources and support, lack of online teaching experience, anxiety, and an 'out of kilter' work–life balance were features of the emergency shift to online teaching. In the adaptation phase, participants became familiar with videoconferencing tools, and emphasised 'checking in' with colleagues and the importance of managerial support. In the final phase, opportunity, the participants stressed resilience, self-care, and setting boundaries and realistic expectations of themselves. Tertiary educators are very capable of shifting their traditional classroom practice to the online format in a crisis, such as the 2020 lockdown.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19; online teaching; crisis; tertiary education

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Godber (2021) and Pather et al. (2020) highlighted how COVID-19 lockdowns have had disruptive impacts on teaching and learning. For students whose courses require a clinical or practical component, such as social work and anatomy, lockdown has made course

completion difficult (Halbert et al., 2020; Jonuscheit et al., 2021). At the same time, many tertiary educators have had to move their courses online with little or no preparation (Kohnke & Zou, 2021). Nevertheless, studies have shown that educators can overcome such obstacles and teach effectively, yet the long-term impacts of teaching online compared to face-to-face remain uncharted (Kumar et al., 2021).

COVID-19 was initially detected in Aotearoa New Zealand in February 2020, and in response the government implemented a four-level alert system to manage the outbreak in March (New Zealand Government, 2021). Level 3 (implemented 23 March) consisted of staying in household bubbles and working from home, while level 4 (implemented 25 March) involved a national lockdown with only essential businesses remaining open (New Zealand Government, 2021). Under levels 3 and 4, tertiary education campuses were closed, and educators were forced to transition to online teaching. Tertiary campuses were permitted to reopen in May under level 2.

However, prior to 2020, there was considerable argument for the transition to online teaching, as it was considered necessary for students to 'enter the information economy' (Kozma, 2011, p.106). The transition from classroom-based to online learning needs careful strategic planning, trust and reinforcement of all parties involved, as well as organisational knowledge and support (Cameron & Green, 2019). The absence of a carefully planned digital migration process can lead to friction, with some educators reporting that their ability to teach online has been affected (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al. 2020; Vlachopoulos, 2020). The shift to online teaching as a response to the national lockdown of 2020 was rapid, but friction associated with the transition has not been explored in depth (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

DEFINITIONS AND THEORY

A theoretical framework and key concepts from educational research are utilised in the study and explained here. A three-step framework coined by Breakspear (2020) is useful for understanding how transitions can occur in educational settings during a crisis (e.g. COVID-19). The first step is the crisis phase, where there is urgency to meet challenges, such as ensuring staff safety and connection. The second step is the adaptation phase, where regular checks, clear communication and innovative solutions are encouraged and fostered. The final step is the opportunity phase, where staff reflect on their learning and use it to improve organisational procedures. We elected to use this framework because it provides insight into the participants changed experiences of teaching online during the national lockdown.

Key tenets of educational research, such as competencies and self-efficacy, are also employed to highlight the participants' personal and professional agency over lockdown. In educational research, competencies are defined as 'context-specific, cognitive performance dispositions that are functionally responsive to situations and demands in certain domains' (Kaiser & König, 2019, p.599). Educators must draw on their range of professional knowledge and weave it into coherent understandings and skills to master the core challenges of teaching (Shulman, 1987). With online teaching, educators' knowledge categories have been extended to include how to navigate information and communication technologies (Selwyn, 2012). Lockdown has meant that educators have had to become competent in delivering education in the online environment (Bahur et al., 2021).

Self-efficacy can be defined as possessing the confidence to complete professional responsibilities, such as an educator's ability to facilitate learning outcomes in online courses (Lahaie, 2007). Psychologist and seminal educational thinker Bandura (1997) divided self-efficacy into two components, efficacy expectations and response-outcome expectations. Efficacy expectations refer to a person's belief in their ability to execute a certain behaviour to achieve a predetermined

outcome. Response-outcome expectations are an individual's prediction that a certain behaviour will lead to a specific outcome. A person may avoid or cease a course of action due to a lack of self-efficacy and the belief that their competency will fall short in an hostile or unresponsive environment (Bandura, 1997). In the teaching context, an educator's self-efficacy may influence whether they invest in action, and how long they sustain their response to challenges (Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

The present study explores 14 tertiary educators' perspectives and experiences of online teaching during lockdown, and the challenges of working from home. The following two research questions guided the study:

- How did the transition to an online work environment impact on a group of tertiary educators?
- How can employers support tertiary educators during the transition to an online working environment?

An aim was to explore tertiary educators' self-efficacy when transitioning to an emergency online teaching environment.

We utilise and adapt Breakspear's (2020) three-step framework to structure our findings. The crisis phase refers to the time leading up to, and immediately after, lockdown. The adaptation phase was the weeks of the lock-down period, while the opportunity phase is the period where the participants returned to campus under alert level 2.

METHODS

After obtaining ethics approval from the relevant ethics committee (December, 2020) the research team advertised for volunteers on the intranet of one national tertiary education institution. In order to be included volunteers had to be employed in a teaching role at the institution during the 2020 lockdown. It should be noted that the data collection occurred approximately six months after the cessation of lockdown, so the participants' accounts were retrospective. There was a total of 14 volunteers, which was enough to provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences of the transition to online teaching, and their experiences of working from home.

A semi-structured interview schedule was devised by the research team and reflected their reading in the field. After gathering the participants' informed consent, individual interviews were conducted either online via Zoom, or face-to-face. Two participants chose face-to-face. To avoid any conflict of interest, a research assistant was employed to conduct the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first researcher coded the interview scripts in NVivo 12. The coding framework was discussed among the research team, and all members agreed to its accuracy. The data was then analysed inductively using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. The first researcher identified corresponding patterns and themes in the participants' responses which addressed the research questions and aims (Aronson, 1995). Six broad themes emerged in the data analysis, which are presented in the findings according to the three phases identified by Breakspear (2020). In some instances where a theme related to more than one phase, it was grouped into the most prominent phase that it exemplified.

The research team comprised of four females with expertise in business, nursing and health research. Three were employed in one tertiary education institution, and the fourth was employed in another.

It should be noted that much of the research on the transition to teaching online in the tertiary sector has been undertaken in universities; however, the impact on vocational training (which may include more interactive and practical courses, such as carpentry and hairdressing) is more scarce. This research adds nuance to the large body of literature on how COVID-19 has impacted on the tertiary education sector. The tertiary institution where the participants were employed is in the North Island and focuses on vocational education.

FINDINGS

The 14 (12 female and two male) interview participants taught in a variety of academic disciplines including Business and IT, Foundation Studies, Student Support, and Health and Social Services. Some participants were employed in senior management roles and others were early career tutors. Other demographic information is not reported to protect the participants' identities.

Phase 1: Crisis

During the initial crisis phase in the transition to remote teaching, some participants reported that they lacked necessary equipment and IT support. Others stated that they had difficulty balancing their work and home lives, as many were working from home for the first time. Fear of another lockdown impacted on their stress levels. Due to the emergency nature of the lockdown, participants said that they did not have the opportunity to gather the necessary equipment to teach remotely. Other participants stated that a lack of home office or office furniture were challenges. These comments are represented by the following excerpt:

> *When we left the campus, I had to … go back to borrow … a chair because you don't think about needing a proper computer chair until you need to use one … pick up a mouse because I didn't have a mouse … and headphones … that was quite a mission to actually get settled in the end. – Participant 4*

Many participants also said that the sudden transition to remote teaching meant they were ill-prepared. Participant 1 said, 'I can mark from home…but… remote teaching, it's the first time I've ever done that. So, I was not well prepared.' Some participants also felt that they did not have the opportunity to adequately plan how online delivery would be undertaken. As participant 10 stated '… my colleagues and I hadn't talked about how the class will actually work. We hadn't had the chance to talk to our manager, and I've never taught online before.' Other participants also said that they did not have adequate access to IT support. For instance:

> *Having technical problems with our ICT Services was incredibly frustrating, not being able to access them … [or] troubleshoot issues as quickly as we would like … [on campus] we would … call them, they come and … replace the laptop … or whatever … if you don't have those skills that was incredibly frustrating. – Participant 3*

The participants also reported several other factors that negatively impacted on their wellbeing during the early stages of lockdown. One factor was having to work longer hours to complete extra work and provide students with pastoral support. Others said that 'working into the evenings and weekends' impacted on their work–life balance. For instance:

> *The down parts [of working from home] was the working constantly … I found myself anxiously checking emails at nine o'clock at night in case [a colleague] sent me something … that I needed to get to first thing in the morning … I was really anxious … just not really having any time to chill. – Participant 3*

Another factor that added to the participants' anxiety was the possibility of a further lockdown, and uncertainty about how long they would have to teach from home. For instance, 'There's a real anxiety around it … for both staff and students. Students are very aware of it, all my colleagues and me are incredibly aware … that we could be permanently online … there's a huge anxiety [about] everything that we're doing.' Participant 6 elaborated in more depth:

> *I'd know what was coming if we had another lockdown because … none of us knew … and I think that that's actually one of the big things over that time was … [that we had] high levels of stress … because no one actually knew what was going to happen.*

Other participants shared similar sentiments about their anxiety, but this was not discussed with colleagues due to the siloed nature of remote teaching.

Phase 2: Adaptation

The participants stated that supportive colleagues and managers were necessary for the transition to online teaching. Through trial and error, the participants became skilled in teaching online, and teaching experience was considered an advantage when shifting to online teaching. To cope with stress and feelings of isolation, many participants made extra effort to interact with their colleagues. Participant 2 described how collegial contact was vital for her wellbeing:

> *[W]e … met every morning during … lockdown … and most of that first ten minutes was, 'How's it going … tell me about your day,' … it was not really work … it was more about checking in with people and … whether there were any issues, was there anything that's concerning them, but it was more about … how they're feeling.*

Having 'clear expectations' (P11) was considered important, while two participants shared how their team manager made them feel supported. For instance:

> *Having a really supportive manager [who] didn't … say no … I'd come up with an idea that might seem outlandish, and she'd say, 'go for it, go and touch base with ICT and see whether they can give you that app' and she would never say no … .When we went into lockdown, she's like 'whatever you need … that's a great idea. I'm going to share it with the other teams'… so … you felt like you were one of many moving parts of a big system that was really motivated to helping each other … [and] the students[to] be successful. – Participant 3*

However, at the same time, participant 1 made comments highlighting how team emails needed to be selective, so staff were not overwhelmed.

> *Emails were sometimes … unmanageable, and we had to have a team conversation, 'Now look everybody. Let's only reply to an email if we really have to'. You don't have to reply to the email and say 'okay that's great. Thanks' … otherwise your email box will just fill up … and you just couldn't cope.*

As reported in the previous section, online teaching was new for many participants. However, the participants' comments highlighted how they adapted as lockdown continued. For instance, 'I had never used Zoom and I had no idea what the difference between teaching in person and teaching online would be … that was just something that I learned along [with] my colleagues' (P10). Through trial and error, the participants were able to employ teaching strategies that benefitted their students. For instance:

> *One-on-one or small groups … I think that that's a more effective way and that you can create a greater relationship and contact with students … in the big classes, I… found that my students turn their cameras off, they don't want other people to see them, they felt shy to ask questions and to use the technology and that they may feel stupid. – Participant 4*

For participant 2, breakout rooms on Zoom were a helpful strategy because 'you can get [students] to go break out into breakout groups and come back and reconnect. It did work.' However, in an effort to maintain students' engagement, participant 1 said that her team kept 'teaching to the key points and to a minimum as much as we possibly could.'

The participants' levels of teaching experience also impacted on their ability to adapt to remote teaching during lockdown. Participant 1 explained:

> *The fact that I am already an experienced teacher … I was very familiar with the content, so I was able to adapt [it] into the remote learning. I think that would be very challenging if you didn't know the content and … were developing new work for people … I think that was a real advantage that … in my team, I have people that are also quite experienced teachers … so we were able to support each other in how do we do this remotely.*

While participants relied on their existing competencies and capabilities when adapting to an online work environment, they also trialled

creative strategies to improve their teaching during lockdown.

Phase 3: Opportunity

Relating to the opportunity phase, the participants made comments highlighting their learning around the importance of self-care, resilience and setting realistic expectations. The participants also reflected on how they, and other tutors, could cope better if another lockdown were to occur. Many responded with comments indicating the need for self-care and connection. For instance, participant 1 stated in relation to online teaching, 'don't be too hard on yourself and you don't have to be perfect … you're learning … so let that … happen.' Participant 5 made comments focusing on the importance of self-care:

> *Make sure your self-care is … good …. I think [if] it wasn't for the fact that me and two of my staff members were connected to my team [it] probably would have been a lot harder … I had to get very strict on 'I'm working these hours and I'm getting off my laptop', because … I was working till 10:00 at night … then … we haven't done anything else … a schedule was important.*

The participants also mentioned positive gains from the emergency transition to remote teaching, such as an increase in resilience. For instance, 'We learnt a hidden resilience with how courses can be taught … you found some hidden gems and the fact that some of the things that you might have dealt with in person are not as important in this … [online] environment' (P11). Participant 12 also said he 'pick[ed] up some new skills that [he] didn't have beforehand', such as helping his students to learn online, while participant 5 said:

> *I learnt to work Zoom … I had to learn … to use the internet … for certain things, I learned about confidentiality and what it means to keep our students safe through these things … I did an awful lot of pastoral care, via the internet and online, to keep students engaged and … safe … it was just a lot of learning to do other things differently.*

Despite lockdown being an opportunity for some participants to develop new capabilities, others expressed a need for institutions to invest in their IT capacity. For instance:

> *I think the institution would gain a lot with ensuring their IT capacity is sufficient to cope with demand … because those are the things that either make or break … a session … whatever difficulties there are … maybe that's something that institution could invest in is how they support the teaching and learning if it was to be during a lockdown and online. – Participant 8*

DISCUSSION

Study findings showed how tertiary educators were able to adapt to, and overcome challenges posed by, the emergency transition to remote teaching due to the 2020 national lockdown. The tertiary educators initially reported a lack of resources, a lack of preparedness to transition to online teaching, a lack of IT capabilities, a lack of work–life balance, and anxiety associated with not knowing how long lockdown would last. Nevertheless, teaching experience, regular and clear communication with supportive colleagues and managers, and trialling specific features of videoconferencing tools to engage students highlighted the tertiary educators' agency in this transition. The tertiary educators also practised resilience and learned about self-care.

For tertiary educators in Aotearoa, and educators worldwide, the shift to remote teaching was not a well-planned systematic transition, but something that resulted from a crisis (Lorenza & Carter, 2021; O'Kane et al., 2020). In a national survey of 2,560 employees, 74% had no experience working from home prior to lockdown, and 8% did not have the right equipment (O'Kane et al., 2020). Many participants in this study also had no experience of working from home prior to COVID-19 and lacked the equipment to do so. The lack of a dedicated comfortable workspace may have affected workers' health and led to distraction, as reported in other national studies (Green et al., 2020; O'Kane et al., 2020). Given many

employers are now permitting working from home, they need to explore how best to provide ergonomic support to their employees (Green et al., 2020).

The transition to online teaching was designed as a temporary response to COVID-19, while face-to-face teaching would resume as soon as feasibly possible. Nevertheless, Green et al., (2020) found that working from home has a number of benefits, including increased job-satisfaction, reduced commute time, avoiding office politics/dynamics, higher productivity and the ability to better manage work and family commitments. However, a lack of organisational preparation and support, loss of social contact, and technological problems are barriers to working from home (Green et al., 2020). The tertiary educators surveyed reported that rather than being isolated working from home during lockdown, 'checking in' on colleagues' wellbeing was a daily occurrence. Such results indicate that informal collegial support and regular online contact could potentially take the place of daily office contact when working from home (Oakman et al., 2020).

Some employers may object to employees working from home as they cannot 'see' their workers' productivity in the same way they can in a physical workplace (Oakman et al., 2020). A lack of manager support has also been cited as a barrier to the successful transition to remote teaching during lockdown (O'Kane, 2021). Regular communication with managers is also necessary for employees to feel supported, but also so they know what work outputs are expected of them (Oakman et al., 2020). The results of this study highlight how managerial support and collegial communication are important in transitioning to remote teaching and maintaining employee's mental health.

The tertiary educators commented that working from home in the crisis phase was difficult due to being unable to separate their home and work lives. Other national and international studies have found that being unable to 'switch off' from work or distractions in the home, e.g., children, have also impacted on people's work–life balance (Longska et al., 2021; O'Kane, 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020). However, at the same time, these tertiary educators also mentioned the importance of self-care and implementing a work schedule, which enabled them to adapt to the online teaching environment, thus highlighting their resiliency.

Educators who have taught for several years have more experience dealing with difficult times (Podolsky et al., 2019). Some participants in this study had teaching experience which enabled them to cope better than new tutors. This is likely because new tutors will need to develop their teaching resources, while more experienced tutors are likely to have a 'back catalogue' of lectures that they can adapt to the online environment. However, experienced and novice tutors alike may lack the necessary skills and course resources necessary to teach online (Rapanta et al., 2020). Through trial and error, these tertiary educators managed to teach online and eventually employed specific features of online videoconferencing tools (e.g. breakout rooms) to better support their learners.

The participants also reported how they took on heightened levels of responsibility for the pastoral care of students during lockdown. Such a finding supports a myriad of other studies that highlight how the upheaval associated with closing campuses, and losing social contact with peers and face-to-face support from staff, negatively impact on students' wellbeing (Burns et al., 2020; Lawson et al., 2021). At the same time, educators may have experienced relationship stress or isolation, and were worried about their own health and that of family members. Planning and preparing, delivering course content and assessments, marking and reporting on student achievements, and adapting teaching to be online is likely to cause extra stress (Godber & Atkins, 2021). Like Lawson et al. (2021), we argue that tertiary organisations need to step into this space to inform students of the support available to them and provide academic guidance on the impact of COVID-19 on their studies.

Tertiary educators of all levels of experience successfully adapted to remote teaching and were able to experiment with tools like breakout rooms. This highlights how these tertiary educators had high efficacy expectations and outcomes, which might have led to their successful transition through Breakspear's three steps of the emergency response to COVID-19. Nevertheless, the tertiary educators in this study, and others, have called for better IT support and more training for staff on online teaching platforms. Institutions can better provide for tutors by implementing training on videoconferencing platforms and invest more in their IT capacity (Alea et al., 2020; Bozkurt, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). After all, educational and IT support is vital to ensuring tutors' ability to deliver online courses (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

This study explored how 14 tertiary educators managed the transition to remote teaching during the New Zealand government's 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. Much of the research on the transition to teaching online in the tertiary sector has been undertaken in universities; however, the impact on vocational training (which may include more interactive and practical courses, such as carpentry and hairdressing) is more scarce. Exploring vocational educators' experiences of the transition to online teaching as a response to COVID-19 is a strength of this study.

CONCLUSION

Some national educational institutions (such as the Open Polytechnic) deliver their courses remotely, while many others deliver some courses online. However, the most common method of teaching has been face-to-face. Some tertiary educators have had little experience teaching online, and were unprepared for the rapid transition to online teaching. But through trial and error, and the support they received from colleagues and managers, they successfully adapted to working from home. Tertiary educators were the ultimate professionals in the face of lockdown, while also having to navigate their own personal challenges alongside their teaching responsibilities.

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