Tertiary Educators' Experiences of Working from Home during the Initial COVID-19 Pandemic

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Background: On 26 March 2020, Aotearoa New Zealand entered lockdown as an emergency response to COVID-19. At very short notice, educators were required to engage in emergency online teaching and work from home. The aim of this study was to explore the impacts of the sudden shift to online teaching on the home lives, work lives and mental health of a sample of tertiary kaiako. Methods: From May to September 2020, five online surveys were disseminated across several national polytechnics. The surveys collected quantitative and qualitative data, which focused on the effects of the sudden transition to working from home. This article focuses on the data from one participating national polytechnic where kaiako completed three survey iterations. A parallel coding and thematic analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken, which was based on the constant comparative method. Results: The importance of regular collegial contact, the necessity of separating home and work life, and strategies to maintain good mental health (e.g. exercise) were identified as important for well-being. To teach effectively, it was also considered essential to have a dedicated workspace and good ICT support. Uncertainty about the future and the potential stress of future lockdowns also emerged as themes. Conclusion: If Aotearoa entered another nationwide lockdown, then factors such as regular collegial contact, a dedicated working space, the necessary ICT resources and support, taking regular breaks from work, strategies for maintaining good mental health and separating personal and home lives would be needed for maintaining kaiako well-being.

KEYWORDS: Coping strategies; COVID-19; online teaching; resilience

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To prevent the spread of COVID-19, on 25 March 2020, Aotearoa New Zealand entered an unprecedented lockdown. People were required to stay home and only interact with those in their immediate household 'bubble' (Baker et al., 2020). Tertiary education and school campuses were closed and, where possible, employees had to work from home.

As a result of the government's emergency COVID-19 response, community transmission of the virus plateaued. However, lockdown also had a negative impact on the well-being of some members of the population in Aotearoa (as it did overseas) (Every-Palmer et al., 2020; McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022). Aotearoa slowly transitioned out of lockdown between April and August 2020 (transitioning through differing Alert Levels) and people returned to work, large public gatherings were again permitted, and the country's borders reopened.

After community transmission was detected again, the country entered another national lockdown on 17 August 2021. Most of the country moved from Alert Level 4 (lockdown) to Alert Level 2 (focused on reducing the spread), where people could return to work and public gatherings were permitted, on 21 September 2021. Due to their elevated rates of transmission, various regions of the country, such as Northland and Auckland, remained at higher Alert Levels. On 2 December 2021, the Alert Level system was replaced by the COVID-19 Protection Framework, otherwise known as the traffic light system. The government implemented the traffic light system when it recognised that the elimination strategy underpinning the Alert Level system was unsuccessful (Cooke, 2021). During this phase, schools and tertiary education institutions were open, but there were different access criteria depending on vaccination status. The traffic light system was abandoned in September 2022 as high hospitalisation rates decreased, most of the population was immunised and the community transmission rates of COVID-19 decreased.

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON TEACHING

Nationally and internationally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns changed the way education had been traditionally delivered (Carolan et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Educational institutions were closed, and tertiary kaiako moved their teaching online. In many institutions, some courses were delivered through online or pre-recorded lectures, interactive online tutorials, webinars and so forth, but other courses with clinical/practical components (such as anaesthesiology, nursing, dentistry and medicine) were suspended (Choe et al., 2022; Sahu, 2020). Some tertiary educators developed creative ways to deliver their courses online (Iyer et al., 2020; McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022; Tabatabai, 2020). For instance, some undergraduate nursing clinical skills were taught using online simulations (Carolan et al., 2020).

A few studies have highlighted how some kaiako lacked the necessary skills and equipment to teach online (Choe et al., 2022; McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022). Some tertiary education institutions may have also lacked the information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure to support educators, especially those in developing countries (Carolan et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Some ākonga have also reported studying was difficult during lockdown as they struggled with ICT, concentration and the lack of contact with classmates, although the degree of perceived social isolation may have been dependent on their personality type (Zhang et al., 2020).

There were some reported advantages of teaching from home. These included having more time to sleep, reduced travel time, more focused meetings and ākonga being perceived as being more self-directed than in face-to-face lessons (Blume et al., 2020; Choe et al., 2022; Mukhtar et al., 2020; McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the drawbacks of working from home were more commonly reported, including that there was no clear delineation between work and home life, with some educators juggling children and work. Alternatively, those who did not have family or flatmates may have experienced isolation (Choe et al., 2022; MacIntyre et al., 2020; McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022). Studies have reported that working from home during lockdown heightened stress and anxiety, which negatively impacted mental health (Every-Palmer et al., 2020; McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022; Sahu, 2020; Wang & Zhao, 2020). The present study aimed to explore how the transition to online teaching during the first nationwide lockdown of 2020

impacted on the health and well-being of a sample of tertiary kaiako, and their work and family lives.

METHODS

Throughout 2020, five iterations of the same anonymous online survey (which contained Likert scale and open-field question options) were distributed to kaiako in five polytechnics (now business divisions of Te Pūkenga). Each institution received ethics approval from the relevant ethics committee. Each time there was a change in COVID-19 Alert Levels, the same survey, with slight adjustments for the changing levels, was distributed across the participating polytechnics (McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022). Although the national data from one aspect of the study has been published in conference proceedings, the large amount of data means that other forms of dissemination are forthcoming (McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022).

This article specifically reports the qualitative responses from one participating polytechnic whose kaiako participated in three iterations of the survey during 2020. The individual institutional data is reported on as the researchers wished to gain insight into those institutional factors that impacted participants' well-being. These factors would ideally inform strategies if future national lockdowns occurred. The total number of participating polytechnics, the number of participants across the educational organisations and the number from the individual participating institution are reported in Table 1. It should be noted that survey responses were collected post-lockdown when participants were back on campus. Consequently, the participants' accounts were retrospective in nature, albeit recent (lockdown ceased in April 2020 for some regions, including where the participating institution was located).

After the national research study data collection ceased, each member of the larger research team was sent their individual polytechnics' raw data on a spreadsheet. The three members of this research team then collated participants' responses into separate Microsoft Word documents, which corresponded with each of the survey questions. Three independent semi-deductive coding processes of the raw data were undertaken. Multiple coders were utilised so that the different research expertise and professional backgrounds of the researchers would enhance the analysis and subsequent research findings (Berends et al., 2005). For example, the first researcher has expertise in education and qualitative research, while the remaining two researchers have expertise in nursing and mental health, respectively.

Each researcher coded passages of text using various coloured highlighters or wrote a list of initial patterns that they observed occurring in and across participant responses. It should be noted that most qualitative responses were brief, in that only a few words or sentences were written at most. These initial lists and codes were compared and found to be primarily consistent (Smith et al, 2018).

Survey date	June 2020	July 2020	Sept 2020
Total number of participating ITPs	4	5	5
Total participants across ITPs	704	464	583
Total participants from the participating polytechnic	207	127	122

TABLE 1: SURVEY ITERATIONS AND PARTICIPANT NUMBERS

Based on the constant method, the first researcher read through the lists and codes, and subsequent themes were identified (see seminal theorists Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). All excerpts that highlighted a particular theme were again coded using a different coloured highlighter. When this process was undertaken, the excerpts were compared and those found to be consistent were grouped, but those that were inconsistent were regrouped into a different pattern and, subsequently, a new theme. Once the data analysis was completed, 16 themes were identified, which were subsumed into five thematic categories that are reported under the subheadings in the following section.

RESULTS

Collegial Contact

The most common theme that emerged across the participants' responses was the importance of collegial contact during lockdown. Numerous participants commented that contact with their colleagues reduced feelings of isolation. For instance, 'Working from home can be very isolating. It would be nice to have more contact with colleagues and students' and 'It would be nice to have more contact with colleagues and management'. Other comments included, '[Workplaces should] have weekly meetings to combat low motivation' and 'I don't think I would have coped without daily contact from my work colleagues'. Another participant advised educators that if another lockdown were to occur then, 'Meet with your team or colleagues on a video call every day, even if it is for ten minutes. A lot comes out of those Zoom/Skype/video calls, and it helps keep you grounded'. A further participant said that online social activities helped them bond with their team members.

> *We had a glass of wine on Zoom together one time and it was heart-warming. Our polytech is like a family, so bonding time had a positive impact on me personally. Perhaps a couple of staff could be in charge of organising something once a fortnight to connect us all.*

Home Offices and ICT Support

A second dominant theme that emerged from the participants' responses related to the practicalities of working from home, such as the necessity of having a 'dedicated workspace' and 'a more suitable office space'. Well-functioning technology was also considered necessary for efficient teaching. For instance, 'Having the technical resources at home already would have improved my working life'. Nevertheless, some participants also stated that the educational organisation 'need[ed] to be equipped with more resources/electronics for staff'. Another participant maintained that the institution needed to invest more time, energy and money to cater for kaiako and ākonga technological needs when working remotely. For instance, '[our] institution provides very poor I[C]T support, which resulted in a suboptimal student lockdown experience'. Another participant elaborated:

> *'[There should be] more [ICT] training and preparation for… students and staff, as well as more investment in ICT [facilities], to support students and staff better to keep in contact and [for] teaching.'*

Separating Home and Work Lives

Many participants stated that working from home was difficult as there was no distinction between work life and home life. Some participants said that they were frequently interrupted, while a number also said that they were constantly surrounded by their partner or children, which made working from home difficult. For instance:

> *Working from home is not the easy road people seemed to think it would be, in my experience. I had unexpected issues to deal with around, for example, non-work interruptions from others in the household, a sense of isolation and disconnection that grew over time.*

> *The lockdown period was not just a period where we were working from home. Working from home means your husband is at his work and kids at school, and you have peace and quiet to do your job. What we have experienced*

> *and survived from was different. There was no distinction of roles and schedules. Everything was happening simultaneously. We were not changing hats. We were wearing them all together at all times.*

One participant also said, 'I look back at those weeks now and I am angry I spent so much time working and not nearly enough with my kids'.

Many participants reported that because there was no distinction between home and work, they had to engage in strategies such as taking 'regular breaks' and 'walking away' from the computer. It was also necessary to work normal hours in order 'to avoid burnout and associated mental and emotional stress' and 'so work [did] not take over my home space and time'. To maintain good mental health and well-being, several participants also said it was important to 'turn the computer off at the end of the workday' and 'keep to usual routines, work during normal work hours [and have] family time after that'.

Health

Other participants talked about the impact lockdown had on their mental health. For instance, the 'psychological effects were totally underestimated'. One participant commented in more depth:

> *There were times of great anxiety, fear, confusion and poor mental health. My work is not easily done from home, so I was concerned about getting paid. I have a serious [health] condition so that was also a factor. If [lockdown] was to happen again, I think I would be better prepared and perhaps a little less stressed. As long as I [didn't] lose my job, I think I would manage.*

'Healthy eating and exercising', 'walking/cycling', and 'getting out of the house daily' were also emphasised as vital strategies for maintaining good mental and physical health.

Uncertainty

Given the COVID-19 lockdown was unprecedented at the time, some participants also gave advice about the need to be prepared if another lockdown were to occur. For instance:

> *Be prepared to quickly move into a new level. I make sure I take my laptop home and my day notebook that has some key information included in it, like my staff list, at the end of the day. Test your home set up to make sure you can access what you need from home, and if not talk to your ICT services before it happens.*

However, another participant explained that the need to be prepared also related to other changes happening in the vocational education sector at the time. For example, 'Plan for uncertainty. This is just not because of COVID-19, but also NZIST'. Now known as Te Pūkenga, the New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology (NZIST) was a reform in the vocational educational sector whereby all national Polytechnics and Institutes of Technology were transitioned into business divisions of the overarching organisation Te Pūkenga in 2022.

DISCUSSION

Results highlight how collegial contact, healthy eating, exercise, and strategies for separating home and work life (such as switching off the computer at the end of the 'normal' workday) were methods the participants enacted for maintaining good mental health and well-being during lockdown. Ākonga have also reported that these aspects were vital to educational success during lockdown (Domokos et al., 2020). Consequently, the participants were self-disciplined in initiating and adopting coping strategies to support their own well-being in a time of national lockdown. At the same time, however, another study shows how people's physical activity decreased during lockdown, while sedentary activity dramatically increased (Gallè et al., 2020).

Studies have highlighted how lockdown had a negative impact on the mental health of various populations – especially those with limited social contact, those living alone, the elderly and people with existing mental health concerns (Ahrens et al., 2021; Merry et al., 2020). Lockdown was also associated with job losses, domestic violence, family and partner disharmony and pervasive feelings of loneliness

and anxiety (Ahrens et al., 2021; Tusl et al.,2021). These feelings may have been heightened for those who feared losing their jobs or those with existing health concerns that may be exacerbated by COVID-19, such as one participant in this study. If further lockdowns were to occur, the government and employers may have to consider interventions for those who risk unemployment (e.g., financial aid packages), workers with a history of depression and anxiety (e.g., positive psychological training including resilience strategies) and those who are at heightened risk of severe adverse health effects if they do contract COVID-19 (e.g., counselling) (Tusl et al., 2021).

Numerous participants in this study, and the larger study on which it draws, reported that they lacked a home office space or the necessary equipment such as a desk to work from home (McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022). This finding is consistent with other national studies where participants lacked a home office and necessary equipment to teach as they had never or seldom worked from home prior to the pandemic (Choe et al., 2022; Every-Palmer et al., 2020; O'Kane et al., 2020). Such comments highlight how the shift to online teaching was not strategically planned but instead was an emergency transition (Choe et al., 2022).

Several participants also felt that their institution did not provide them or their ākonga with ICT infrastructure, resources and support. Reliable internet connectivity is essential for the nation's workforce as more employees are choosing to work from home post-lockdown (for some, if not all, of the time) (O'Kane et al., 2020). Poor internet connectivity can also result in lag or disconnection, thus impacting on ākonga learning (Bhamani et al., 2020). Consequently, the government and internet service providers may wish to invest in sourcing more reliable broadband for their citizens and customers respectively (Mukhtar et al., 2020). However, no guidelines existed on how to support kaimahi and ākonga with ICT during a national health crisis. It is therefore likely that the ICT kaimahi were learning how best to support through trial and error. The ICT department may also have been unable to fully equip educators with training due to budgetary constraints that many tertiary educational institutions are forced to operate with (Pham & Ho, 2020).

Moreover, when the data was collected in 2020, the first lockdown was over, but there was a general unease about future lockdowns, which can be seen in one participant's advice to other educators to be prepared for future lockdowns. Since the governmental interventions designed to prevent community transmission ceased in September 2022, the present study can be considered dated. Nevertheless, severe tropical storm Cyclone Gabrielle necessitated a national emergency response in February 2023. As a result of severe flooding in Hawke's Bay, 11 people lost their lives and numerous others lost their homes and livelihoods. The Taradale campus of the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT), a business division of Te Pūkenga, was damaged significantly, and educators based at this campus have had to shift to emergency online teaching ("EIT's 25 million repair bill", 2023). Consequently, although the study describes the shift to online teaching as an emergency response to COVID-19, findings can also be used to prepare educators for other national emergencies, such as Cyclone Gabrielle.

The American Psychological Association (n.d.) defines resilience as the ability to adapt to challenging, stressful and tough situations. One participant stated that educators needed to be resilient in the face of the restructuring of vocational education and the creation of Te Pūkenga, the largest tertiary education provider in Aotearoa. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 epidemic coincided with the initial stages of the formation of Te Pūkenga. The data collection for this project also occurred during the initial steps of the transitioning process, which was peppered with budget blowouts and leadership problems. A new chief executive has subsequently been appointed and attempts to address budget blowouts are underway. Hopefully, such measures may have eased participants' fears around the shift in vocational education.

At the same time, the closure of our borders led to a dramatic downturn in international ākonga in 2021, and the polytechnic sector lost 62% of their international ākonga revenue compared to 2019 (Gerritsen, 2022). National tertiary education providers are primarily funded based on ākonga numbers, and some kaiako may be at risk of losing their jobs if there is a dramatic downturn in enrolments. New Zealand's borders reopened on 31 July 2022, and international ākonga are returning. However, experts warn that the number of international ākonga enrolling may take several years to return to pre-COVID-19 levels. This study has several strengths in that almost half of kaiako employed at a business division of Te Pūkenga completed the first iteration of the survey. It provides a detailed snapshot of how a group of Te Pūkenga kaiako managed to work from home during the 2020 national lockdown and the steps they put in place to manage their home and work lives, as well as their mental health. However, there are some limitations. The fieldwork was conducted immediately after the initial lockdown of 2020 and the abandonment of governmental strategies for managing the epidemic in 2022. The data can be seen as limited as a second lockdown occurred and the governments' COVID-19 framework has subsequently been abandoned

However, as stated earlier, learnings from this study may be employed when the country faces a national disaster that forces campuses to close, such as Cyclone Gabrielle.

CONCLUSION

The 2020 and 2021 national lockdowns in response to COVID-19 had a dramatic impact on tertiary educators' teaching and home lives. Results of this study are consistent with other national studies that highlighted how educators were successful in shifting from face-to-face to online teaching as an emergency response to COVID-19 (Choe et al., 2022). Nevertheless, like the rest of the world, Aotearoa has learned to live with COVID-19 and its variants. The education and wider national workforces have changed since the national lockdown of 2020, with kaiako now being given the option of, and choosing to, work from home for at least part of their working week. Collegial support and contact, separating work and family life, having a dedicated workspace, and continuing to exercise while working from home are strategies that kaimahi can employ to maintain good mental health. Educational instituions should continue to provide professional development in online teaching tools and provide better ICT infrastructure. Ideally, this will help to ensure that kaimahi and ākonga receive the best quality of teaching and learning respectively, which is necessary to achieve quality education during a crisis.

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