

Reflections on teaching and learning during the omicron wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic inflation

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Abstract

The pandemic and the rising living costs have affected teaching and learning practices. These changes have impacted teaching faculty and students alike. This article is an analytical reflection of our experiences of teaching and learning during the omicron wave of the pandemic and rising economic inflation. This paper highlights some of our key observations. The reflective process has challenged some of our preconceptions. It has also helped highlight some questions and contradictions on teaching and learning in this context which may provide a reference for future research.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, inflation, learning, teaching

1 | INTRODUCTION

New Zealand was spared the worst with the alpha and delta waves of COVID-19, but the outbreak with the Omicron variant has been significant. The first case infected with this variant was identified in mid-November 2021 and since then the number of people infected has been on the trend upwards. It is believed the peak has passed and cases are on the decline now.¹ However, economic inflation has been at a 30-year high. It has risen from 3.3% in July 2021 to 7.3% in July 2022.² The cost of housing, food, energy, and fuel has increased substantially.

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic inflation have transformed the path of many lives, including those of university teachers and students. The ongoing pandemic and other geopolitical events have led to supply chain chaos and inflation. The pandemic since 2020 has been contributing to high anxiety and stress. In addition to dealing with the risks of getting infected with the omicron variant and potentially suffering the consequences of long COVID, the rising costs of living have slowed the momentum for growth not only economically but also scholastically.

The pandemic has forced universities to make changes to the curriculum and its mode of delivery and students and faculty have

mostly adapted to the changes. However, the resilience shown by teaching faculty and students has been tested further by the financial stress that has been brought on by economic inflation.

The purpose of this personal narrative is to share our experiences with navigating teaching and learning activities amidst the Omicron wave of Covid-19 and the rising living costs due to inflation.

2 | REFLECTIONS

We are teaching faculty in the Bachelor of Health Science (Oral Health) programme at the Auckland University of Technology in Auckland, New Zealand. We are sharing our lived experiences of teaching and learning in the first half of 2022. Our focus is on our experience in a non-clinical course in the programme. The non-clinical course included modules on head and neck anatomy, oral embryology, oral histology, and oral physiology.

Through 2020 and 2021, we had moved between online and face-to-face sessions depending on the public health settings in New Zealand. The fluidity of the situation was accepted by students mostly. Our survey of student experiences with online sessions was

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rated as either good or better than face-to-face sessions by 67% of students and 77% of them opined that online sessions were engaging.³ Our personal recollections of the synchronous online sessions in 2020 and 2021 when lockdowns were imposed, were that student attendance to online sessions was high with excellent levels of active participation.

In 2022, the Omicron variant infected a much greater population of New Zealand, faculty and students were similarly affected. In accordance with Public Health advice, all teaching sessions that involved large student numbers were moved online with the recommendation of recording every session and posting it on the online learning management system to allow for flexibility. The student attendance was variable for the sessions at the beginning of the semester; with some students being unwell with COVID-19. This was evident through emails about absence sent prior to the sessions but as the semester progressed, though the COVID-19 positivity rate dropped, the absences increased with the majority not communicating about their reason for absence. On enquiry, it became evident that students were taking up part-time work to meet the high living costs and were hence not attending sessions when they could find shift work. Online tutorial sessions with the intention of creating a learning community were offered but attendance was low, and participation was less than desirable. So also, online discussion forums did not get the response it did in 2020 and 2021. To support students' learning, online formative tests that offer immediate feedback was included in the online management system with flexible access. The participation was not as high as in 2020 and 2021.

With decreasing COVID-19 positivity rates, the option of face-to-face sessions was offered to students, but most students expressed a preference for online sessions and insisted on all sessions being recorded. Anecdotal evidence revealed that factors like fuel and travel costs and the fear that live face-to-face sessions would not be recorded were factors in the students' hesitation to return to campus.

The changes that had to be made to contextualise the modules that were developed in 2020 and 2021 to the current situation meant a greater number of work hours, more anxiety and stress for us while we ourselves had to deal with the trauma of getting infected and recovering from COVID-19. In addition, staffing shortages caused by the unabated omicron surge in the first quarter of 2022, increased our workloads.

In 2020, a decision had been made to assess all learning outcomes that were assessed with written examinations to be assessed with written assignments. It had worked well, and we had been able to achieve assignments that encouraged research, critical thinking, and written communication. The same was followed in 2022. The students were given the assignment questions and informed of the due date for submission at the beginning of the semester. This had worked well in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, despite additional online support sessions, which were attended by a few, more than half the students applied for an extension of the due date and the reason given by many students was mental health issues including stress and anxiety. Nearly a quarter applied for extensions a second time.

However, we noted that overall student performance in the summative written assignment was comparable to that of students enrolled in the previous years. The bell curves for the grades obtained in 2022 mirrored those in 2020 and 2021.

3 | DISCUSSION

In 2022, while still dealing with the ongoing challenges of COVID-19, the burden of economic inflation has added another layer of difficulty.

The online teaching and learning activities began in 2020 in response to the public health measures to reduce transmission of the SARS-COV-2 virus. It allowed continuity and prevented disruption to programmes. That opportunity has resulted in changes to the learning management systems with features to incorporate innovative teaching methods and enhance student engagement. One such feature that is being increasingly used is lecture capture or lecture recordings; live sessions are recorded in a digital format and posted on learning management systems.

The placement of recorded lectures on learning management systems saw a reduction in the number of students attending live sessions and our observation is similar to the findings when data from an undergraduate Science degree programme was analysed.⁴ Student attendance has been positively correlated with student engagement and academic success.⁵ Our concerns about reduced attendance, reduced engagement and reduced interaction are similar to concerns expressed by staff in a study with an online survey and focus group.⁶

Online learning relies on student engagement. Though these tools have been used widely, the role of the student to take ownership of learning, especially with asynchronous online sessions, places considerable responsibility on the student. Learning autonomy can especially be challenging for those students balancing learning with paid employment and social obligations.⁷

So also choosing recorded sessions over live sessions affects knowledge actuation because listening and watching recorded sessions in silo does not allow for the connectivism that happens by actively engaging and participating in a community of learners.⁸ One important factor for success is motivation. In asynchronous online sessions, intrinsic motivation is vital. Only students who are self-regulated and have the ability to set goals and the discipline to manage time can be successful.⁹ Unlike synchronous online sessions, the teacher cannot create situations to motivate students. Moreover, motivation for learning is complex and multifactorial. Social circumstances have an influence on students' motivation.¹⁰ Oral health education programmes are demanding and stressful in relatively normal circumstances, in the current situation they are only likely to be compounded.

The pandemic has impacted people in different ways. Questionnaire-based surveys of students in multiple countries have revealed the impact of the pandemic on well-being of students.¹¹ The student experience is dependent on many aspects including

teaching and learning; physical, social, and psychological well-being; employability and financial stability. Increased financial burden by students was reported during the pandemic.¹² The economic inflation has compounded the financial concerns for students. A study of undergraduate medical students at an Australian Medical School found that attendance requirements impacted negatively on student well-being. The participants reported it as having limitations on time spent in paid employment and with family and friends among other things.¹³ Some of our students may have balanced their commitments to learning with their other obligations and potentially used lecture recordings at their convenience.

Anecdotal evidence from our students revealed that students did not want to return to the classroom initially due to the fear of getting infected and subsequently due to costs. This contrasts with the findings in a study of nursing students in the Philippines.¹⁴ As cases reduced, our students wanted the sessions to remain online and recorded.

Despite low attendance to live sessions, and low participation in formative assessments, our observation was that student performance in the summative assessment was no different to that of students in previous years, potentially due to lecture recordings and the students' ability to take ownership of their learning. Our observation of a lack of participation in formative assessments and discussion forums is as noted by Archibald and Barnes in their reflection on online teaching about the disregard shown by students to activities that promote learning but to which grades were not assigned. Studies on lecture recordings have yielded mixed results with some showing a positive impact, some a negative impact and some no impact on academic performance.¹⁵ In addition, grades are a great motivator for performance.¹⁶

4 | CONCLUSION


The success of technology-enhanced teaching and learning depends on many factors. What is apparent today is that in addition to dealing with the trauma of the pandemic, faculty and students are being challenged by economic inflation and higher costs for food, housing, childcare and energy. The success of teaching and learning practises requires a theoretical and scholarly re-evaluation with all stakeholders to make education equitable, relevant, and contextual. Further research on meeting the challenge to balance maintaining good scholastic standards with student well-being is warranted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Open access publishing facilitated by Auckland University of Technology, as part of the Wiley - Auckland University of Technology agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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How to cite this article: Khareedi R, Ratnaweera PM. Reflections on teaching and learning during the omicron wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic inflation. *Eur J Dent Educ*. 2023;00:1-3. doi:10.1111/eje.12926