

# THE DREAD OF NORMALITY: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS IN TRANSITIONING BETWEEN ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic created a continual fluctuation in day-to-day operations. In August 2021 Aotearoa went into a chapter in its pandemic history comprised of a series of lengthy lockdowns, vaccination campaigns, spread of COVID-19 in the community, and a move from the “Four-level” lockdown system to a “Traffic-light” system. It was also the longest period of continuous online classes for a number of institutions traditionally oriented to face-to-face delivery, including the Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus (OPAIC). In April 2022, however, students and staff returned back to the offices and classes. This period was associated with a number of anxieties, hopes, expectations and worries, and it is important to understand some of the biggest challenges for both staff and students to prepare transition plans for any potential future lockdowns or shifts between online and offline classes. The article presents data collected through a series of surveys and focus groups on campus at OPAIC exploring the biggest challenges and perceived risks identified by the learners. The data was collected during the beginning of face-to-face classes after a long period of online sessions as well as a few weeks into a new study block with mostly face-to-face contact. The analysis discusses existing and potential approaches to managing the challenges. The purpose of the project is to capture and explore this unique transition in the history of the campus to better inform future approaches to delivery models and pastoral care.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

COVID-19 was detected in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Chen et al., 2020) and was already spreading worldwide by January 2020 (Pullano et al., 2020). It has had major effects across multiple industries, social and political life, and the livelihoods of virtually every person around the world. Educational institutions were at the forefront of transformations caused by the pandemic (Assaf, 2021; Farnell et al., 2021) and educational institutions in New Zealand were no exception (Dai et al., 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020; OECD, 2022; Schleicher, 2020). Schools and tertiary institutions in Aotearoa were closed for a considerable amount of time as the government developed and implemented the action plans to control the spread of the virus. At the beginning of the pandemic, the New Zealand Government announced a four-level alert system and implemented it in March 2020. Each level included various measures ranging from closing of the international borders to a national lockdown (Bandyopadhyay & Meltzer, 2020). As COVID-19 community spread increased and fell, the alert levels were raised or lowered in every region. Auckland experienced more days under Alert Level 3 and 4 than any other region in the country which meant that the education institutions were either completely shut down or had to move their teaching online (Beard, 2020; Smart, 2021; Thornton, 2021; Yates et al., 2021).

Aotearoa returned to Alert Level 3 on 27 April 2020 and some restrictions were lifted. Nevertheless New Zealand was experiencing some of the strictest lockdowns worldwide in the effort to eliminate the coronavirus (Baker et al., 2020; Bandyopadhyay & Meltzer, 2020). This required an organisational and

andragogical response from the Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus. Prior to the lockdowns OPAIC courses were developed using resources and activities for face-to-face delivery, which included experiential activities during the in-class sessions and self-directed hours, as well as face-to-face examinations. Some courses were developed around event management or internships (which had to either be cancelled or shifted online). Since Tertiary Educational Institutions (TEOs) including OPAIC responded to the lockdowns by immediately cancelling their face-to-face classes, the old approaches were often impossible to implement. The lecturers took this opportunity to quickly develop the resources and activities for synchronous and asynchronous online learning (Dai et al., 2020; Zhukov & Brendenkamp, 2021; Zhukov & Staples, 2020).

## **TRANSITIONING BACK TO CAMPUS AT OPAIC**

The four level alert system was replaced by the COVID-19 protection framework (traffic light system) in December 2021 (Ministry of Health, 2022). Restrictions like social distancing and limits on the number of people in in-door spaces persisted for a few months but were eventually lifted on March 25, 2022 (Ministry of Health, 2022). After over 7 months of continuous online studies the learners at OPAIC could finally return to campus in April 2022. This move coincided with a number of external events contributing to the stressfulness of the situation. The rise in the number of cases in New Zealand, border restrictions, a growing number of COVID-19 related deaths, international news and many other factors contributed to the anxiety for the learners to come back to the campus.

According to a recent study, the uncertainty (which was one of the defining features of the pandemic) could potentially trigger mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression (Cameron et al., 2022; Dar et al., 2017; Smart, 2021). The coronavirus pandemic led to multiple lockdowns in New Zealand and the most recent lockdown lasted seven months. The resulting social isolation and loneliness have been linked to mental health concerns (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). The current evidence and the previous literature related to the pandemic suggest that mental health issues may manifest only after the peak of the pandemic (Raony et al., 2020; Ren & Guo, 2020). The risk factors affecting the anxiety may include the death or illness of the loved ones, misinformation, loss of peer support due to closures of schools or workplaces, prolonged isolation or being in direct contact with active cases and facing economic burdens (Das, 2020). All of these factors have been prevalent for the learners at OPAIC as students had been subject to all these factors at some point at the time of returning back to campus.

Re-entry syndrome is a well-documented psychological phenomenon that describes the difficulties people face while entering the normal situation after experiencing a long period of absence (Capurso et al., 2020; Cost et al., 2022; Gkatsa, 2021; Mansfield et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021; Weisbrot & Ryst, 2020). Research conducted by Officer et al. (2022) and Poulton et al (2020) mapped the effects of the pandemic on the mental health of various demographic groups based on the mental health recovery plan and recovery framework in Aotearoa New Zealand. Another study by Every-Palmer et al. (2020) on the psychological distress, anxiety and wellbeing in New Zealand due to lockdowns found that younger adults (47.3% of 18-24 years age group) were the most affected. The learners at OPAIC largely fit into some of the most at-risk groups and had been physically separated from their friends, family, and peers for a long time during the lockdown and forced to learn and communicate through screens, while facing the threat of catching and spreading the virus. Psychologists and author Nigel Latta stated that human brains were focused on threats and trying to avoid any situation which could result in psychological, physical or emotional harm, and this made anxiety during major lifechanging events a natural response (ANZ, 2022). The anxieties many people felt as their lives were adjusting to the new normal were understandable and realistic (Hansen, 2022).

The research on the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on higher education internationally and the impacts on mental health in particular, has been fairly abundant (Cameron et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2020; Elmer et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Marinoni et al., 2020; Paredes et al., 2021; Perz et al., 2022; Poulton et al., 2020; Sundarasan et al., 2020). However, it is important to remember that the phenomenon

of the global pandemic and its consequences is still ongoing, and every study adds to the detail and understanding of a very complex situation that may yet have consequences far beyond what we envision today. This research paper seeks to contribute the OPAIC students' perspective on the transition back to campus and to help adjust our current and future educational products to better fit the needs of the learners in shifting to a genuine student-centric model of education. The research explores the issues, anxiety, fear, and challenges that the students encountered and suggests practical steps for improving the experience of the students both on and off campus. The purpose of this article is thus to contribute to our understanding of the transitioning challenges specific to the OPAIC campus and to add the inputs of our students to the collective understanding of post-pandemic tertiary education.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data collection for this study was done through a survey three weeks into on-campus studies and a series of interviews at the end of the first term back on campus in week nine. The purpose of the questionnaire was to understand perceived difference in the experience of the students studying on campus and online. The total number of unique responses was 27 (n=27). The respondents were asked to provide feedback on the elements of on-campus and online studies that they thought were useful and helpful and disruptive and unhelpful. The feedback was summarised through thematic analysis.

The second set of data came from interviews with eight students – two students from each department on the campus. It was important that these students had to have experienced both online and offline studies at OPAIC. All departments had students who fit the criteria, except the English department. We were therefore able to interview students from Construction, Applied Management, and IT departments.

None of the three researchers associated with the project were directly involved with the interview process. This was to keep the study as objective as possible and provide no means for the researchers to influence the students' answers. The interviews were instead conducted by members of the Student Success and Learning and Teaching teams. All students were asked the same six open-ended questions. They were asked about their biggest challenges in studying online and on-campus, followed by their preference between the two study options. The respondents were asked to elaborate what the most important aspects of their studies were and what changes they would like to see made to their studies. The last question asked what additional services they would like to have available on-campus and/or online. The transcripts were then analysed using the thematic analysis method. The expectation was to see what changes in perceptions may have occurred between the beginning of the term and the end of the term and also to obtain more detailed data on some of the themes identified in the survey.

## **SURVEY**

The survey collected 27 unique responses across the departments of Applied Management, Construction, and IT. The majority of respondents were enrolled in a postgraduate Applied Management course (n=20; 74%). It is also important to acknowledge that the majority of the students started their studies in 2021 (n=22; 81.48%). Only two respondents started in 2022. This meant that at the time of the survey the majority of the respondents had been through at least one lockdown, specifically the lockdown that was happening in Auckland in 2021 from August to approximately November. Since the organisation made a decision to complete the rest of the year online, and the preferred delivery method for term one 2022 was also online, the students had ample experience with online studies, but, probably, very little experience with studies on campus.

When asked about the levels of comfort online and on-campus students had approximately the same attitude towards these two settings. 21 students (77.8%) thought that study on campus was comfortable, and 22 students (81.5%) felt that studying online was also comfortable. The result was identical for the question about effectiveness of study on-campus and online. Although the difference between positive and negative attitudes was marginal, it is important to note that for the levels of comfort, students had

much stronger positivity about the levels of comfort of studying online, whereas the negative responses for the relative levels of comfort for study on-campus were noticeably higher than for online studies. While the general attitudes seem to be relatively similar for the question of effectiveness of online and on-campus studies, students definitely felt much more strongly that studying on-campus was effective. This generally supports the hypothesis that students consider studies on campus more effective, but less comfortable than studying online.

It did not come as a surprise that students generally felt that they could organise their time much better when studying online. In fact, this question had one of the more dramatic positive responses for online studies with a total of 41% strongly agreeing that online studies help them organise their time much better. At the same time, nobody felt that they were particularly disadvantaged by online studies in relation to organising their time effectively. Another result was that students on average thought that they could learn well on-campus and 81.5% cases, whereas only 67% thought that they learnt well during online studies. There were also more respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the argument for on-campus studies (68%) than for online studies (55%). As for enjoying online and on-campus studies, a larger proportion of people (81.5%) enjoyed their studies on campus and only 70% of respondents enjoyed their online studies.

Overall, the results were consistent with the hypothesis that students generally found studying online more comfortable, more effective, and well suited to organising their personal time, but they also thought that the learning that they had on-campus was more effective and that they enjoyed studying on-campus more than online.

#### Themes (n=27):

1. **Time and cost management:** This is the most common theme that came up. The main components of the theme include general time saving where there are no specific aspects of studies identified as timesavers. There is also a significant focus on commute as the key factor for time efficiency. Since it was largely embedded in the argument about time and convenience, it is not identified as a separate theme. An important element was flexibility and ability of the students to choose the time when they engage with their studies. Another important component of this theme was the cost of commuting to the city. Whether the students drove or used public transport, the costs of commuting were higher than staying at home and taking the classes online.
2. **Learner performance:** This theme refers to the ability of respondents to concentrate and work on educational tasks effectively. The respondents would talk about potential benefits to their performance and refer to peace and quiet required for them to concentrate and conduct research or writing tasks. When educational performance was mentioned in relation to face-to-face classes, the respondents mentioned relatively higher engagement with courses. While some of the students found it more efficient to study at their own pace and be able to focus on research at home, others found it difficult to engage with materials online, difficult to focus on studies when they were in an informal environment and having very little interest in the subjects that were being studied.
3. **Health concerns:** During the time of the pandemic it was natural to expect people to be somewhat anxious about their health. One of the significant upsides of having non-contact hours in their programme is supposed to be the ability of people to isolate and avoid large groups of people and enclosed spaces. Commute as a risk factor also plays into this discussion of healthcare risks. One respondent was so adamant about the need to minimise health risks that they mentioned it across the board and in all positive and negative factors for online and face-to-face classes. The idea was that there was no number of potential benefits that could outweigh the singular risk of suffering negative health outcomes.
4. **Workspace and resources/recordings:** Many courses rely on research and use of computers, but not all courses have computer labs allocated to them. One of the elements was the ability to use personal desktops or have set ups convenient for students at home, rather than using phones and tablets or

computer labs for students who did not bring their laptops with them. Another significant factor were the recordings of the lectures as there was no consistent culture of recording face-to-face lectures.

5. **Communication and anxiety:** For some of the respondents a significant factor was the possibility that online classes allowed for them not to engage in any direct communications with their classmates or their lecturers. Texting made communications easier, especially for students who were not very confident of their speaking abilities or did not have the confidence. A few comments went as far as mentioning anxiety about having to talk to people in person. Having computer facilitated classes and higher reliance on written communications rather than direct face-to-face communication in class allowed the students time to process the information at their own pace and, potentially, to work with unknown vocabulary through translation software as required.
6. **Socialising/networking:** As would be expected socialising and networking became a major theme mentioned in the survey. For most students the ability to socialise was perceived as an integral part of tertiary education and campus life and they found benefits in talking to their classmates and engaging with classmates and extracurricular activities. Even exchanges with others in relation to the courses were seen as significantly beneficial for understanding the materials. Isolation, on the other hand, resulted in negatively reported mental health states and difficulties with engagement in educational activities. This overlapped with the theme of communication anxiety, but highlighted the importance of peer support in tertiary education.
7. **Responsiveness/tasks:** The theme that came up several times was the responsiveness of lecturers. The comments were mostly about communication, the presence or lack of technical difficulties, possibilities to engage with the lecturers, varying response times, and possibilities for discussions. There were comments about lecturers not being available for comments or to answer questions during online studies because the students did not have direct access to them and could not talk to them while in class or during office hours. There was also a comment that some of the tasks were not designed for online studies and were difficult to perform, since they were intended for face-to-face classes.

**Table 1 – The themes are collated from four survey questions which asked for positive and negative feedback on online and face-to-face classes.**

CONNOTATION		THEMES (N=27)				
Online	Positive	Time and cost management (21)	Learner performance (4)	Health concerns (4)	Workspace & resources/ recordings (5)	Communication and anxiety (2)
	Negative	Socialising/ networking (11)	Learner performance (9)	Responsiveness/ tasks (4)		
Face-to-face	Positive	Socialising/ networking (15)	Responsiveness/ tasks (8)			
	Negative	Time and cost management (17)	Learner performance (1)	Health concerns (7)	Workspace & resources/ recordings (1)	Communication and anxiety (1)

The themes were mentioned in answers to one or multiple questions to denote either positive or negative connotations through which the theme was mentioned. While there were 27 respondents filling out the

comment section, some of them did not provide any information that could be either attributed to one of the categories or recorded separately as a new theme. Some comments contained information related to several themes.

## **INTERVIEWS**

The students who took part in the study all had interesting and diverse backgrounds. Both of our Construction participants were more senior students who had studied at OPAIC for at least 4 study blocks before agreeing to the interview. One of them only experienced a single day on campus before he had to switch to online studies for 3 study blocks. He therefore had a very limited on-campus study experience before sharing his insights in the interview. Our two IT students also had at least 4 blocks of study experience at OPAIC, with one having a similar experience to that of the Construction student described. One was a more senior student and the other in his early 20s. Applied Management, unlike IT and Construction, was split between undergraduate and postgraduate students. This was because it was the only department which offered both under- and postgraduate study opportunities at OPAIC. All four students were in their 20s and had experienced online studies for a large part of their degree. The main themes identified in the interviews included health and wellbeing concerns, learner performance and other aspects of academic achievement, and comfort, including concerns over language challenges.

### **Health and Wellbeing**

The interviews took place near the end of the first study block back on campus which could partly explain lower reported anxiety in the interviewees around the return to on-campus studies. A second likely reason was the sampling method which allowed the students to volunteer for the interviews. It is likely that the participants had lower initial anxiety levels to begin with. One of the respondents mentioned personal worries around catching COVID-19 when returning to campus studies and referred to a scenario where all students and the attending lecturer contracted COVID-19 during one of the classes.

In most cases students started sharing everything they appreciated and missed about on-campus studies. Most of them mentioned increased social interactions as well as how much more convenient it was to get support and make use of campus services. One student mentioned that face-to-face studies improved their ability to concentrate. They said, "if I don't have in-person interaction I find it a lot harder to concentrate on the lesson and get distracted easily". Another student had a different perspective. They stated that some students are introverted and might feel ashamed or embarrassed about not contributing or answering questions in front of other students. At the same time an IT student mentioned that they felt alone while studying online. This feeling of being alone came across as a theme throughout the interviews.

Most of the students highlighted the friendliness of staff and students and said that they enjoyed the atmosphere on campus. One of the IT students mentioned that they enjoyed the hands-on experience that they received in classes and that they always looked forward to the industry guest speakers who were invited to their class from time-to-time.

### **Academic Performance**

The lack of interactivity was a major theme in most of the interviews. Students mentioned that lecturers didn't always answer their questions during online classes. One Construction student said, "When asking questions, I have to wait a long time to get feedback". They found it hard to get proper support from lecturers in online classes. One of the postgraduate Applied Management students mentioned that they found it a lot harder to concentrate on lessons and were easily distracted due to the lack of interactivity, which ultimately affected their academic performance.

Undergraduate Applied Management students highlighted time management as a challenge due to distractions at home. In line with other interviewees, they mentioned a lack of interaction in the class. They

added that many students didn't have their cameras on and had Internet connectivity issues during class. These challenges, from their perspective, were not conducive to an interactive learning environment.

The Construction students had different opinions on their online study experience. One student mentioned that some subjects were a lot easier to do online, while there were other subjects that proved more challenging. The respondent also mentioned that some lecturers were much better at conducting online classes than others. The lecturers who struggled would simply read from the presentation slides and not open up the topic for discussion or bring in any form of interactivity.

Construction students mentioned that having access to class recordings was the only positive aspect of studying online. This seemed to be the case for many of the interviewed students who indicated that recordings helped them deal with language challenges. A Construction student identified challenges with using the required software while studying online.

For the IT students one of the biggest reported challenges was teamwork. They said that being able to brainstorm and collaborate effectively was very difficult online. This was reported by both IT respondents and didn't seem to depend on any age or experience related factors.

### **Comfort and Language Challenges**

The respondents saw more benefits for them to study on campus than to continue online studies, which was a departure from the results of the survey. Once again, a contributing factor could have been the interviewee sample, although some of the previous concerns about shifting back to campus were consistent with the surveys. In most cases students highlighted inconveniences of discomfort associated with time management and commuting like having to wake up early to be in class on-time. Students with self-reported language challenges said that face-to-face study was faster paced and required much faster reaction times which reduced their ability to understand and engage in class activities. Online studies had recordings and they had an option to go back to and make sure they properly understood the lesson.

A comment from the Construction students mentioned that it would be great if the benefits of class recordings could be kept in a face-to-face learning environment. Another student with reported language challenges said that they enjoyed going back on campus mostly because the social interactions helped them improve their language skills.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the experience of the lecturers and formal and informal feedback, the transition back to campus was a very well received event. Despite the logistical challenges, despite individual staff and students struggling with anxiety, despite the affection that we have for our desks at home and the proximity of domestic comforts, the shift back to campus was a very welcome development for the majority of people. Lecturers can judge for themselves what may or may not be their preferred working style, but it is important to understand how the students lived through these transitions. It is likely that Covid lockdowns may not be the last lockdowns that we see in the near future as we consistently notice warnings of the increased possibility of transition of zoonotic diseases to human populations. This is due to encroachment of anthropic activities into natural habitats, climate change, changes in water levels, increasing disruptions in access to clean drinking water, and other major disruptions to livelihoods and ecological systems that are happening today (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015). This means that we have to be prepared for future lockdowns and for future transitions between to online and campus life. We can also use our recent transition as a learning opportunity to extract some of the better features of online studies and transpose them over interactive classes on campus.

The first change that most lecturers can make would be recording their campus classes. There are challenges to making such recordings at the moment, and these challenges are mostly technical. Online classes put us

in front of the computer with the microphone always being close, which allowed the recordings to have a consistent level of quality. All participants had similar setups and thus responses from students were being processed on MS Teams, which made recording the sessions technologically simple. To make a similar level of recordings in class, each classroom needs to have appropriate equipment which includes one or many dedicated microphones that can consistently record the sound in the room while filtering noise pollution. It would also need a high-quality camera that can capture the elements of the class activities that are important for the recordings. This requires some significant investment and, potentially, upgrading the computer systems on campus. This may be costly and difficult to implement in the immediate future but could be added to the list of strategic goals for the organisation, especially as an element that seems to be adding significant value for students with English as a second language. At the current point in time, the lecturers can still record the classes using existing computer infrastructure in the classes. While it may not have the same level of quality, it will still be a useful resource for students.

While the responses from students mostly focused on recordings, it is, probably valuable to make sure that the notes and exercises conducted in class on, for example, the whiteboard, could be captured online. There are multiple ways to do that. It's possible to continue using the digital whiteboards on MS Teams when in class or take pictures of notes on the board and on flip charts and poste them online. There are, of course, other ways to do this. Consistent recording of audio-visual and written materials discussed in class is likely to contribute to better outcomes for students who genuinely want to engage with the classes and dedicate time to self-directed studies. It is also likely to take some pressure off the students and reduce their anxiety in case they fall sick, because they would be safe in the knowledge that there are options to catch up with the materials that they may otherwise have missed. The design of materials for weekly activities and tasks seems to be a contributing factor to the success and satisfaction of students for both online and on-campus courses. Detailed written instructions seem to be a good addition to the recordings and could both help the students in class and assist those who may have missed some of the classes for any number of reasons.

The recent transition also highlighted the importance of support services for the students and the need to help them manage anxiety. Many mental health issues which could have been dealt with personally by the students became exacerbated during the lockdowns and required a concentrated and targeted set of support measures. Future planning in this regard could build on a holistic view of students which does not reduce them to their academic life but recognises that other spheres of their lives are likely to significantly influence their academic performance. This reinforces the importance of such broadly discussed concepts as Fink's taxonomy (Fink, 2013) and multiple other examples of andragogical and heutagogical approaches to student management. It also highlights the need for lecturers to be dual professionals, equally expert in their field of knowledge and in the field of education. But it also highlights the need for responsive and agile student support services which must be equipped to deal with mental health issues. It may even be worthwhile to model some of the practices employed in certain corporate settings, where staff have access to health and well-being workshops, exercises, and activities throughout the year. The form which this may take is not as important as the opportunity to engage with others who may be in a similar position as oneself. A good example from ANZ was a series of workshops provided by a professional psychologist to the employees in order to address some of the anxieties that they may have had in returning back to the office space (ANZ, 2022).

The survey shows that some of the students may be wary of communicating with people face-to-face regardless of the situation with lockdowns, and so it may be a good idea to introduce electronic counselling sessions or to partner with a service provider or a group of counsellors with expertise in provision of online counselling. For an organisation like OPAIC, one of the options could be to take advantage of other parts of the organisation. Future Skills – a partner in the OPAIC institution -- has a campus that prepares, among other qualifications, counsellors, and this seems like a perfect match for a situation where we may be dealing with multiple cases of minor or major mental health challenges. While mental health support must always be provided by fully trained professionals, some of the capabilities of the people going through counselling education may be used to review and identify some of the risks.



It seems that social interactions and networking were some of the major positive factors that overshadowed every other negative or positive feature of campus learning, and thus, providing multiple and varied opportunities for social interactions, various social events, student driven activities, and networking sessions would be highly beneficial for academic achievement, development of language skills, and general mental health and well-being. And, most importantly, it is critical to remember that the educational process should be agile and adaptable to the realities of the world around us. There may be a need for further risk analysis and planning for other unexpected events that may otherwise disrupt the traditional flow of what we see as on-campus or online education. This is a long-term and ongoing ambition which must be kept in focus as we develop our future educational products and support systems. It is now important to work on how we can better engage students in a co-creation of support mechanisms for online and face-to-face classes, for the development of content, and for general improvement of the educational experience and outcomes.

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