

Post-pandemic lessons learnt from student reflections: A case study of diploma-level students at Fiji National University

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The global pandemic led to an expansion of research about education in the new normal. Students' lived experiences were mostly documented through surveys or in-depth online interviews due to movement restrictions. One issue with such approaches is that students are guided by set questions and have limited opportunities to cathartically reflect upon their experiences. With this in mind, a case study approach was used with the overarching aim of exploring the lived experiences of students in Fiji during the global pandemic using an online reflective assessment. As part of their coursework, students were required to complete a reflective assessment based on their pandemic-related experiences. Sixty submissions met the inclusion criteria of the current study and were included based on purposive sampling. Findings from this study support Sustainable Development Goal 4 as it confirmed student experiences, including financial, learning, lifestyle and mental health challenges. Students also reflected upon the notion of 'social distancing versus social disrespect' as, in the case of Fiji, the phrase 'it takes a whole village' is not just a metaphor but literal because the concept of individualism is alien to the socio-cultural context. Positive reflections were also documented, including the revival of traditional systems (veisa (barter system)), strengthening social connectedness using technology, and demonstrating values such as resilience and genuine care. This research also suggests the value of reflective assessments using online platforms to avoid classroom constraints and encourage students to mine their own lives for insight away from a traditional classroom setting.

Keywords: Teaching and learning; reflective assessments; education; pandemic; Sustainable Development Goal 4

INTRODUCTION

Fiji, a hub within the Pacific Island region, with its three major universities and approximately 800 primary and secondary schools, experienced an abrupt and immediate setback due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The only possibility for continuing to deliver education was to transition from typical face-to-face classes to other modes of teaching and learning, specifically via online platforms or other remote learning modes, such as television, radio and so forth, for primary and secondary schools. Crawford (2021) encouraged researchers to consider further work on the impact of the global pandemic and education, contextualising or challenging such research against previous literature. He emphasised that scholars who neglect doing so will 'extend the knowledge gap between research and practice' (p. 3).

With this advice in mind, the current study used a case-study approach to explore the lived experiences of diploma-level students studying at the Fiji National University during the global pandemic. In addition to contextualising students' lived experiences, the research highlighted the urgency of rebuilding and strengthening education in the new normal per Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. Revealing students' lived experiences gives educators an insight into students' lives, learning experiences and perceptions of teaching approaches. Educators

can learn from students in the context of where the barriers of traditional classrooms are gone and through open-ended online reflective assessments. Student reflection may strengthen the teaching and learning processes because educators will have insights into students' lives, priorities and concerns, enabling teachers to appreciate how to more deeply relate in future with those in their care. In particular, students' lived experiences during the global pandemic provide educators with opportunities to transform their teaching approaches and recognise technological advancements in education, which might be worth maintaining post the global pandemic. In essence, this argument encapsulates the thematic focus of 'Revisioning education in Oceania: Walking backward into the future together' of the OCIES 2022 Conference

This paper begins with a review of the literature relevant to teaching and learning and the socio-cultural implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on collectivist societies similar to Fiji. Issues pertaining to the research approach, including participants, data collection, analysis and ethical considerations, will be presented. Findings from the current study will be offered with the support of direct participant quotes. This paper will discuss the implications of the findings, the study's limitations and recommendations for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socio-cultural experiences in collectivist societies during the global pandemic

Since Fiji has a diverse collectivist society, it is important to review literature about similar socio-cultural contexts, that is, among indigenous collectivist societies. Pandemic-related movement restrictions led to challenges that contradict traditional norms and customs in some socio-cultural contexts. Within the African context, Akwa and Maingi (2020) recognised that restrictions on movements prevented families of the deceased from conducting traditional burial rites. Jaja et al. (2020) discussed the spikes in COVID cases due to social practices such as funeral rituals and attending church and prayer meetings. The practice of cultural rituals, such as male circumcision, was referred to as a 'ticking time bomb' (p. 1078) by the authors during this period. Germani and colleagues (2020) indicated that collectivist societies include people who exhibit interdependence and sociability, which leads them to be concerned about their social groups. Individuals with greater social interconnectedness were less vulnerable to psychological distress, whereas those who could not maintain the connectedness exhibited psychological distress.

McLeod et al. (2020) noted that, historically, indigenous people experience greater health disparity, as recognised by the *UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People*, which impact mental health, poverty, domestic dynamics, quality of life etc. The global pandemic exacerbated these issues for indigenous communities, including those in the Oceania region. (Keawe'aimoku Kaholokula et al., 2020). For example, Aboriginal people in Australia tend to move between towns and communities for shopping to reduce food costs, but restrictions on travel during the pandemic have made this impossible (Power et al., 2020). Power et al. (2020) also presented examples of how restrictions to travel caused socio-cultural disruptions for Aborigines, Māori and Torres Strait Islanders because they could not engage in cultural practices and traditions. In Fijian communities, Vave (2021) noted that many funeral gatherings had minimum compliance with movement restrictions protocols in Fiji. Their analyses indicated that, over time, Fijians increasingly overlooked movement restrictions. Rural funerals appeared to have had more reduced movement compliance than urban funerals. The reason could be that law enforcement heavily supervised urban funerals.

Student experiences & challenges: Teaching, learning & health

Many researchers have captured the experiences of students, especially their challenges during the COVID-19 period. For instance, in a three-phase study, Maqableh & Alia (2021) ascertained that students typically used mobile devices to complete learning tasks. Using such devices is not conducive to effective learning, such as attending online classes, perusing online resources and completing assessments. The need for students to use such devices indicates that students, educators and universities were unprepared for the ‘new normal’, a phrase that became synonymous with the pandemic. Other studies highlighting problems with online learning identified low motivation, access to and fluency with technology-based learning and connectivity-related issues, as well as perceived low support from universities. Some students across different levels perceived their study workload increased online compared to classroom-based settings (Almadhi et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2020; Maqableh & Alia, 2021).

Holistic health and well-being were also major concerns for many scholars. Physical health was determined as a significant issue because of an increase in sedentary lifestyle related to movement restrictions, unhealthy diet and increased use of gadgets (Saeed & Javed, 2021). Several studies (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Chirikov & Soria, 2020; Gestsdottir et al., 2021; Saha et al., 2021) identified that the pandemic negatively impacted the mental health and wellbeing of university students in several countries. Psychological distress due to study workload was corroborated in several studies because educators were typically not equipped with strategies to transition quickly and effectively to online teaching. This transition and other factors, such as lack of experience in online learning, technology and connectivity issues, led students to exhibit symptoms of psychological distress (Pang et al., 2021; Tahir et al., 2021; Werner, 2021). The uncertainty regarding online learning and the future was another concerning issue (Moawad, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

For two semesters from 2020 to 2021, diploma-level students enrolled in a mandatory ethics course were required to complete a reflective paper based on their pandemic experiences as part of their coursework. These formed the basis of the data for this study. A few submissions had to be excluded because of issues such as plagiarism, incomplete assessments or did not address assessment guidelines. Following ethical clearance, 60 student submissions that met the assessment criteria of the current study were included based on purposive sampling.

Table 1 summarises the demographic details of participants included in this study. Details, such as the programme the students were enrolled in, have not been included to avoid unintentional disclosure of participant identity. Most of the participants were born in Fiji. In terms of ethnic background, students were classified under their respective ethnic groups, either *iTaukei* (indigenous Fijians) or Fijians of Indian descent. The ethnicity of the participants was validated using the university’s student database, and none of the participants from Fiji had records of dual heritage. The ‘others’ category represents students from other Pacific Island countries such as Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Year Enrolled	Number of Participants	Gender	Ethnicity
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2020 – Semester 2	5	Female	<i>iTaukei</i> (indigenous Fijians)
2020 – Semester 2	37	Male	<i>N</i> = 24 <i>iTaukei</i> (indigenous Fijians)
			<i>N</i> = 2 Fijians of Indian Descent
			<i>N</i> = 11 ‘Others’
2021 – Semester 1	3	Female	<i>iTaukei</i> (indigenous Fijians)
2021 – Semester 1	15	Male	<i>N</i> = 11 <i>iTaukei</i> (indigenous Fijians)
			<i>N</i> = 3 Fijians of Indian Descent
			<i>N</i> = 1 ‘Others’

N = represents the number of participants.

Research approach: Data collection & procedures

A qualitative research approach was undertaken to conduct a content analysis of student reflections and identify themes relevant to the study's overarching aim. The reflective assessment, part of coursework and used for data collection, later allowed students to reflect on their pandemic-related experiences. The prompts listed in Table 2 were open-ended questions aimed at encouraging students to have a free flow of thinking, reflecting and responding about their experiences, lessons learnt and perceptions.

Table 2: Assessment prompts

Personal experiences & challenges	<u>Prompt 1:</u> What have been your personal experiences during this situation?
	<u>Prompt 2:</u> What challenges have you faced?
Moral lessons	<u>Prompt 3:</u> What are some moral or ethical lessons you have learnt at a personal level during this time?

[The above is an excerpt from the course assessment guidelines that were provided to students]

Students enrolled in the course were required to complete this assessment but were included in the study only once they had consented. Participants were informed of the ethical considerations of the study, with particular emphasis on confidentiality, anonymity, their right to withdraw from the study and separation of participation and final grades. Identifying indicators that could have led to the identification of participants were redacted. This research study has received institutional ethical clearance from the Fiji National University, where the study was based.

Data analysis

A general inductive analysis approach was used in the study. The content of student reflections was examined to determine themes. These reflections were tabulated as raw data and were read multiple times for initial understanding and to attain familiarity. Next, codes and sub-categories were inductively identified and generated. These codes then led to the identification of salient emerging patterns and themes, ultimately leading to this paper's findings and discussion. The data analysis process was completed when no new codes and themes could be established.

FINDINGS

The study shows that 100% of participants reported some form of challenge associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent movement restrictions implemented in Fiji. General experiences were divided into three sub-themes: financial challenges, difficulties with learning and teaching and disruptions to social lifestyle and mental health challenges. Participants further reflected upon the socio-cultural challenges experienced due to pandemic-related restrictions, including religious disruptions and loss of cultural values and practices. Finally, participants reflected upon positive experiences and lessons learnt during and following the pandemic. Table 3 provides a summary of descriptive statistics.

Table 3: Summary of Findings and Descriptive Statistics

Themes & sub-themes		descriptive statistics (%)
General Experiences	<i>Financial challenges</i>	87
	<i>Challenges with teaching and learning</i>	67
	<i>Impact on social lifestyle and mental health</i>	47
Socio-cultural Challenges	<i>Religious disruptions, loss of cultural values, traditions, and practices</i>	63
Positive Experiences	<i>Self-reliance, focus on health, value of family, strengthening relationship with God, values of Fijian/Pasifika spirit and also lesser burden due to the ease in respect to socio-cultural obligation</i>	97

General experiences

Financial challenges

Financial difficulties were reported by 87% of the participants. This challenge was related to job losses, pay reductions and the economy collapsing. The following are excerpts from the reflections of students who reported financial difficulties:

Participant 8 (Male, iTaukei): Covid 19 has greatly affected myself and my family. My parents have both been laid off from work. One of the challenges that greatly affected our family was money. This had brought by more difficulties as without enough money it would be very difficult to live life normally.

Participant 13 (Male, PNG): I was faced with financial problems due to the fact that the pandemic affected the economy of most countries, so any money I received from home was well below what I expected because the value of my native Kina dropped drastically.

Participant 56 (Female, iTaukei): My father's yaqona selling business made a loss. No more sales as our customers mostly worked in the Tourism industry. People would not spend on yaqona as families' priority was food. My siblings too suffered a pay cut as their school had closed. We suffered and struggled because of income loss. I worried about my studies as my father would not be able to afford and slowly saw my dreams of studies breaking.

Participant 57 (Female, iTaukei): We [position] were given the option of either to work without pay or to hand in our resignation letter. We, of course chose to work without pay

as looking for another [workplace] of same or of a great tonnage would be difficult given the situation.

These findings indicate that students were affected financially generally due to their parents or family members being laid off from their employment during the pandemic. Working students were forced to work without pay or with reduced pay for fear of losing their jobs. Students whose finances were dependent on the tourism sector were affected either directly through job losses or indirectly due to the drop in tourism. In relation to the student from Papua New Guinea, financial challenges were significant as they were away from home and their families back home were also financially deprived. These narratives highlights that financial challenges are connected to the wellbeing of students as they were burdened with the declining economy, which distressed many of them.

Challenges with teaching and learning

The second most reported general challenge (67% of participants) were associated with online learning and teaching, especially the sudden transition to online learning and lack of technological resources to keep up with online learning. Some examples of struggles reflected by students were:

Participant 6 (Male, Indo-Fijian): [H]ad to attend online classes which made education little bit tough. At times, we have to encounter network problems and at times the concepts are not understood properly.

Participant 7 (Male, iTaukei): It brought about plenty changes and challenges where we had to adapt to in order to survive, our daily routine was totally different from our norm. Being in the highlands where the mobile reception was not good, I had to walk up through the forest and onto the mountain in order to get good mobile receptions just to study online.

Participant 53 (Female, iTaukei): As a student the main challenges that I face was the online classes and Zoom classes with lecturers during the lockdown since school were closed. For some days network is down and there is slow connection. It was confusing to adjust to online learning.

Students typically reported issues with online teaching and learning, especially with internet network disruptions as many of them were back home, away from the main campuses. Students in rural areas especially faced this difficulty and had to physically ‘walk through the forest and on to the mountain’ to attend online classes or complete assessments. Network issues seemingly also led to communication challenges, such as difficulties in understanding what was being taught. Students found it difficult to suddenly transition to online teaching and lost motivation to learn. Lived experiences and challenges associated with teaching and learning highlighted the education crisis during the global pandemic and the urgency to strengthen teaching approaches as aligned with SDG 4.

Impacts on social lifestyle and mental health

Under the category of general experiences, the third sub-theme was related to the impact of changes to social lifestyles and mental health. Forty-seven percent of participants reported being affected by not being able to socialise and be among friends and its consequent mental health implications. As examples, the following student reflections emphasise this sub-theme further:

Participant 24 (Male, iTaukei): Socialising with friends and going out to the nightclubs was my way of de-stress.

Participant 26 (Male, iTaukei): This virus didn't just collapse an immune system it caused a collapse in culture, religion, and the economy. Although there were predictions about a pandemic no one ever thought it would hit us and when it did, it hit us hard. People have lost their jobs, there was not only an economic depression, people were also victims of depression during this period. Some to the extent had tried to commit suicide.

Disruptions to social lifestyle and mental health are linked as social connectedness with friends, community, religious and cultural interactions are important for individuals in this context. The movement directives during the pandemic and subsequent restrictions on social gatherings including but were not limited to family gatherings, *grog* sessions in communities, socialising with friends and work colleagues were distressing for students, including working students. This fits with Crawford's (2021) argument supporting contextualisation of student experiences, as these findings suggest the value of social interactions for individuals in societies such as Fiji.

Social distancing versus socio-cultural disrespect

Sixty-three percent of participants reported challenges that were categorised under the theme socio-cultural disregard or disrespect due to pandemic related movement restrictions. Several factors were mentioned, one of which was related to religion and the inability to go to church and engage in prayer as normal.

The following are some reflections from participants to support this theme:

Participant 27 (Male, iTaukei): Church was like a second home to me; ever since mass gathering was prohibited, I felt my spiritual side of being was affected as a Christian.

Participant 44 (Male, iTaukei): [C]urfew has been made from 11pm to 4am has avert me from youth chain prayers.

Participant 60 (Female, iTaukei): Religious gathering was not allowed.

Religion plays a critical role in relation to social connectedness among most Fijians. Besides its significance for social functioning, religion also provides many individuals in this context with comfort. Religiosity and spirituality strengthen coping and resilience when Fijians face difficulties.

Another recurring sub-theme was the inability to attend socio-cultural gatherings, including family events and funerals, which are a critical characteristic of the Fijian and Pasifika ways of living and culture.

Participant 34 (Male, iTaukei) articulated this sub-theme quite well as he stated:

[A]s a child growing up, we're used to the normal handshake when meeting new people. However, due to the restrictions, this was prohibited. From a cultural perspective, it was seen as a sign of disrespect. Due to the social distancing restrictions, it was hard not attending a close relative's burial and with the economy in crisis, supporting our families proved to be a challenge.

Other participants corroborated this in similar ways:

Participant 9 (Male, iTaukei): Coming from the different cultures, the way we interact and greet each other is beyond the traditional way of hand shaking that is by hugging, kissing, patting and so on.

Participant 55 (Female, iTaukei): Personally, being a Pacific Islander, it is a norm for us to have huge family gatherings, if it's not every Sunday then it's every couple of weeks. So, when the pandemic started, and all these regulations and restrictions were set in place it definitely changed what we considered as normal.

Some participants also recognised that they were aware of the social repercussions of not following pandemic related restrictions. The consequences of disobeying laws typically had two-fold implications for Fijians. One being the potential risks associated at an individual level, such as paying fines and going to prison. Then at a socio-cultural level, the shame and negative impact these risks might have on individual and social reputation. The following reflections support this narrative:

Participant 51 (Male, iTaukei): [W]hen the curfew was implemented in March, I was not at all happy about it everything was kind like cut short, I cannot spend longer time in having *grog* and *talanoa* session with my friends and relatives. And on top of that, if I happen to break the curfew rules, I will be put on fine or worst spend a day at the jail, which I don't want to, and most certainly am not looking forward to.

Participant 56 (Female, iTaukei): I think this is something which we all must take into account. Obeying the curfew restrictions and laws from the government is something that I have learnt during this pandemic. Disobeying the rules and regulations will just get us into trouble with the law and that will make us have a bad report and put a *shame to our families' names*.

Overall, these findings corroborate the challenges associated with more universal experiences of students during the global pandemic. These include financial difficulties associated with unemployment and the economic crisis. In relation to teaching and learning, students typically faced difficulties with internet disruptions as many had to go back to their homes in rural settings, did not have proper electronic devices to engage with online learning and difficulties with adjusting to the abrupt online learning. Students also experienced issues relating to mental wellbeing due to restrictions on their social lifestyle. Moreover, students in this context reported socio-cultural challenges pertaining to restrictions on religious and cultural activities, and concern towards loss of cultural values, traditions and practices.

On the bright side: Positive implications of social distancing & movement restrictions

As part of the assessment guidelines, students were encouraged to reflect upon positive experiences or lessons learnt. There were quite a few themes which emerged and were associated with the 'bright side' of the global pandemic. The most prevalent theme was related to achieving a sense of self-reliance, self-awareness and self-discipline. Fifty-five percent of participants reported this in numerous ways. Some examples are outlined below:

Participant 19 (Male, iTaukei) emphasized the need to prioritize self-care through '[R]egular schedule exercise and the eating a healthy diet. Keeping a safe routine taking time to meditate or pray are all important'. This participant also mentioned that we need to be to 'be gentle with yourself in times like this you'll have good days and bad days. Your emotion in lowest or highest this time, try not to compare yourself with friends on social media feed there is more going on behind the scenes.'

Participant 26 (Male, iTaukei) discussed the value of shared responsibility as 'we don't have to depend on to the mothers to do all the household chores and re-adapting subsistence living as during the crisis, we managed to live happy as we do all those stuff at home. Farming and backyard gardening is one of the main sources of providing the food unto the table during the lockdown, as it is free and healthy too.'

Further, 48% reflected upon how they had acquired a shift in a more positive direction when it came to their health and safety. Most of the participants had discussed this theme in a comparable manner and two anecdotes have been randomly selected as examples below:

Participant 15 (Male, PNG): From this situation I have learned that basic hygiene is very important. Yes, we all know and practice cleanliness but sometimes we overlooked the little things like washing hands regularly, using sanitizers, social distancing etc.

Participant 56 (Female, iTaukei): To take better care of your health. Nowadays newer and newer diseases or viruses are starting to develop, and scientists will need time to make a cure. So, it's better if we just take good care of our body both in a mental and physical way. And to always take note that prevention is better than cure.

Further positive aspects included spending time and bonding with family (43%), strengthening personal faith and relationship with God during challenging times (27%), and demonstrating values of the Fijian and Pasifika spirit of love, genuine care and compassion towards others (25%). The value of family and relationships was something that many students had a realisation of during the pandemic as explained by the following participants:

Participant 43 (Male, iTaukei): [M]ade me realise that family is everything. It has brought me closer to my family because I was always away on work, and I had less of family time. We were all driven together as a family to work with each other during the crisis and help one another.

Participant 57 (Female, iTaukei): During the lockdown period that our nation went through was a time that one could say, was spent on the smallest form of social group, *family*. This was a divine opportunity where family members actually consider home as a place where fight, joy and laughter are the most precious and not just a place where one could just use as a resting spot before getting back up again and start working.

Another positive realisation that some students reflected upon was strengthening their personal relationship with their faith and God. In comparison to the challenges mentioned earlier, some participants recognised that there were other ways to strengthen their devotion rather than just going to church. The following participants explained their personal development in terms of their connection with their faith:

Participant 43 (Male, iTaukei): Another wonderful experience I had to endure during this pandemic was that my personal relationship with God rose to a whole new level. I learnt the importance of praying, fasting, and learning to have faith. Having to learn new things on my own and testing myself became the new normal for me.

Participant 53 (Female, iTaukei): The outbreak of the virus has taught us to trust God and have faith in him. It sure has made us spiritually grow. Indeed, most of us panic when we have the first case in the country but having faith in our God is something that can take away the panic during the pandemic. Churches were closed but that did not stop us from worshipping our God. It has really taught us to always trust God more.

Students also reflected upon the true spirit of being a Fijian and despite the challenges, many Fijians still managed to demonstrate positive characteristics and outlook. Fijians are known for their resilient nature, in addition to other values, such genuine care, kindness and concern for others in the community as described by the following participants:

Participant 6 (Male, Indo-Fijian): Try to be a help to another, not rather being a burden, adjust with the situations as fast as possible. Once a person adapts to a situation fast enough,

he or she is able to control others. Never lose hope, encourage other beings positively. It is said that positive mind brings positive vibes.

Participant 8 (Male, iTaukei): Love and care for one another. Covid-19 has taught us that the only way to live life without worrying much is to always love and look out for one another, especially family. Since we are all affected with this pandemic we must work together and help those in need.

One of the most interesting positive outcomes reported by participants (27%, 16 participants) was the reinstatement of a traditional and cultural practice, known as *Veisa* (barter system) but with a technological twist to it and maintaining social connectedness through technology.

Participant 3 (Male, iTaukei) wrote, ‘the formation of the group on a social media platform, “Barter for A Better Fiji”, which allowed Fijians to acquire basic needs in exchange for something of interest to the recipient. Despite the severity of the economic state Fiji was in, the whole country exhibited commendable shows of resilience and perseverance and moved forward into the new normal.’ **Participant 31** (Male, iTaukei), while discussing job losses mentioned that ‘there can be other means of sources of income to compensate for these issues like turn to agricultural production, as some of the people are doing through social media on Facebook exchanging of goods through barter system.’

In relation to relying to technology to maintain social connectedness, **Participant 59** (Female, iTaukei) wrote, ‘we’ve just stayed at home and been apart during this pandemic. This does not exclude us from assisting one another; I have relatives in the Northern [location], and we also keep in touch with them, updating them on what is going on in the mainland and how the situation is progressing. Even if we are required to follow the government’s rules to the letter, we might be physically apart but at heart, families are important whether in Fiji or elsewhere.’ Further, **Participant 3** (Male, iTaukei) also emphasised the following, ‘I believe that this pandemic has brought citizens closer together, not only as citizens of Fiji but also of the human race. The entire world is at war with each due to racial differences, but Fijians everywhere have come together in the midst of these trying times to help each other in any way possible.’

Another participant shared a rather interesting anecdote, which contrasted with the socio-cultural challenges outlined earlier:

Participant 36 (Male, iTaukei): [L]ockdown for some people has improved their financial status. This can be noted in various customs and traditions of Islanders life involving mostly communal perspectives. This includes a lot of gatherings which involve a lot of money. Through the lockdown and with the introduction of curfew hours, and also limitation to number of people attending a function, in a way I personally feel that it has relaxed burdens that used to exist prior to Covid 19.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to explore COVID-19 pandemic-related experiences of diploma-level students at the Fiji National University. The findings established common challenges experienced by students, which have also been documented in university-context globally (Maqableh & Alia, 2021; Almadhi et al., 2021). These universal or shared experiences across different contexts were related to financial challenges, difficulties with teaching and learning as well as adjusting to the significant change in social lifestyle resulting mental health impacts (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Chirikov & Soria, 2020; Gestsdottir et al., 2021; Saha et al., 2021). Teaching and learning challenges were linked to the inability to effectively cope with the sudden transition to online learning, poor internet connectivity and lack of access to proper

electronic devices (Almadhi et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2020; Pang et al., 2021; Tahir et al., 2021; Werner, 2021;). All these challenges were reported commonly in previous literature and were also ascertained by Fijian students. SDG 4 encourages educators to strengthen their teaching approaches to mitigate these common difficulties preparatory any future catastrophic event.

Moreover, there were socio-cultural experiences more specific to the context of the current study. These experiences included challenges and positive outcomes. Socio-cultural challenges related to Fijians' religious and cultural restrictions and loss of cultural values, traditions and practices. From a positive perspective, students reflected on experiences that strengthened their spirituality and faith, appreciating simple things about life, such as family and relationships, true Fijian spirit and values, reinstating traditional practices using technology to support fellow Fijians and an easing of the financial burdens associated with socio-cultural obligations.

Concerning challenges associated with socio-cultural disruptions, it is important to note that Pacific Islanders have unique traditions and customs that conflict with movement restrictions (Vave, 2021). From a socio-cultural perspective, it is customary for Fijians to shake hands, hug loved ones and greet with kisses on the cheek, all of which were disallowed due to the pandemic. As Participant 34 noted, refraining from such gestures is considered 'disrespectful', and it took a while for Fijians to get used to other forms of exhibiting love, care and respect. Fijians could not partake in traditional rituals and ceremonies, such as those associated with weddings and funerals, as they usually would. This was due to the initial complete lockdown whereby no gatherings were allowed, and later gatherings were allowed in small, constrained groups. For Fijians, the phrase 'it takes a whole village' is not just a metaphor but literal, as the concept of a small gathering is quite alien to this socio-cultural context. As documented by Vave (2021), the collectivist nature of Fijian communities made it difficult for Fijians to fully comply with pandemic-related restrictions.

Further, findings ascertained that people were concerned about their social reputation should they not comply with the restrictions. Vave (2021) noted that Fijians in urban areas were more likely to comply with movement regulations than Fijians in rural areas because of the presence of enforcement officers. As mentioned in student reflections, there was concern about bringing shame to the family if one was caught not complying with movement restrictions. Therefore, regarding socio-cultural implications, Fijians had multiple issues to deal with, including being unable to participate in religious activities and socio-cultural gatherings; if they disobeyed the restrictions, they feared the consequences to their social reputation.

Participants were encouraged to reflect on positive experiences and perceptions. These are related to being more attentive to health and safety, values of and characteristics of a 'true' Fijian or Pacific Islander, social connectedness despite physical distance, and growth in their relationship with spirituality and faith (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Another interesting observation was the revival of traditional systems such as *veisa* or barter system with a modern technological twist. Also, a solution for being unable to attend gatherings resulted in cultural ceremonies being streamed live using social media platforms. These examples demonstrate crucial characteristics of Fijians and Pacific Islanders in general, including resilience and genuine care towards others. Over time, these communities have demonstrated these qualities, be it environmental threats, climate change, political unrest or a global pandemic.

Under normal circumstances, Pacific Islanders must contribute towards the social functioning of their traditional customs and religious obligations. However, pandemic-related restrictions allowed them to step back from these obligations and reduced the financial burdens that they

might have under normal circumstances, as explained by Participant 36. This also corroborates Vavi's (2021) findings concerning unemployment and financial crisis due to the pandemic and how movement restrictions eased the burden of costs associated with socio-cultural events and gatherings. However, Vavi (2021) also noted that being unable to financially contribute towards socio-cultural obligations could 'intensify and prolong grief, thereby affecting closure'. Nonetheless, the positive anecdotes documented by students in the present study are important to consider because it demonstrated the resilient nature of Fijians and Pacific Islanders and that communities in this socio-cultural context will find a way to survive.

In conclusion, findings from this study presented unique perspectives on the lived experiences of Fijian university students. These findings provided valuable insights into enabling the implementation of SDG 4 as it confirmed myriad student experiences, including financial, learning, lifestyle and mental health challenges. It is important for educational institutions to recognise the needs and challenges of students who are not prepared to deal with a new and unique threatening event. However, it is imperative to note that, in true Pasifika spirit, individuals within this socio-cultural context found ways to be resilient and come up with unique ways to survive, whether it be reinstatement of traditional systems in a modern way or seek for the positive during difficult times.

A limitation of this study is that the findings lack a comparative basis for weighing the difference between challenging and positive experiences. Participants were prompted to reflect on positive experiences, but it is unclear whether they would have thought of positive experiences had they not been provided with that prompt. However, this was part of coursework assessment and, as such, provided them with an opportunity to cathartically reflect upon a major incident in their lives.

It will be useful for educators to include reflective assessments in learning and teaching so students can freely share and express their life experiences without the closedness of other assessment formats and disruptions to traditional classroom settings. By gaining insights into students' lived experiences with open online platforms, educators can strengthen teaching approaches, show concern and prioritise the needs of students. Overall, these findings can be used as anecdotal narratives for further research, especially in terms of revising education in Oceania, which is impacted time and time again, whether it be a pandemic, natural disaster, or socio-political uncertainty. Reinstating *veisa* with the use of technology demonstrates that lessons from the past combined with future advancements can positively direct the present. Thus, the reinstatement of *veisa* (past) with a technological twist (present and future) can be viewed as a metaphoric implication for revising education in Oceania.

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