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# The Impacts of the COVID-19 Traffic Light System on Staff in Tertiary Education in New Zealand

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**Abstract:** The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a swift transition in the usual educational mode of delivery from face to face to online. New Zealand established "a traffic light system" after initial COVID-19 lockdowns, and educational delivery adapted accordingly at a tertiary education provider in Te Pūkenga, Eastern Institute of Technology. This study investigates the ramifications of the traffic light system on this institute's staff, employing semi-structured interviews and an inductive semantic thematic analysis. The findings reveal a universal impact on staff, characterized by an augmented workload attributed to students' absences and illnesses. This led to increased support demands of staff for their students' academic progression. Anxiety, stress, and guilt emerged as prevalent emotions linked to student support. Despite the staff adapting to the mandates, a notable challenge arose from the discord between educational and industry directives, causing confusion among the students. While the study indicates staff resilience in navigating the traffic light changes, it underscores the imperative of recognizing the toll on their wellbeing. The research calls for a proactive consideration of future challenges, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding the mental and emotional health of tertiary education staff amidst potential uncertainties in educational delivery.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; mandates; traffic light system; education; pastoral support; wellbeing

## 1. Introduction

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled nations to adopt a variety of strategies to contain and manage the outbreak. New Zealand, in particular, undertook a decisive approach by implementing an elimination strategy in March 2020, leading to a nationwide lockdown [1]. As the dynamics of infection transmission rates evolved alongside increasing COVID-19 vaccination levels and the emergence of less aggressive viral strains, such as the Omicron variant, New Zealand responded by transitioning to a Protection Framework, colloquially referred to as the "traffic light system", in December 2021. This system, which remained in place until September 2022, represented a nuanced approach to balancing public health with societal and economic considerations [2].

In navigating the complexities of the pandemic, tertiary education providers in New Zealand found themselves guided by clear directives from the Tertiary Education Commission, which delineated specific measures for each phase of the traffic light settings [3]. The red setting, for instance, necessitated the facilitation of onsite teaching and learning while diligently managing public health risks. This included stringent vaccination requirements (unless exemptions applied), the meticulous recording of individuals present onsite, and an adherence to capacity limits to enforce one-meter social distancing alongside mandatory mask-wearing protocols.

On 13 April 2022, New Zealand transitioned to the orange setting, marking a significant shift in the landscape of tertiary education. Under this setting, institutions were allowed to operate with public health requirements in place, and notably, government vaccination mandates for the tertiary sector were lifted [3]. However, specific industries, such as health

settings and close-proximity businesses, like hairdressing and beauty therapy, retained vaccination, face mask, and social distancing requirements [2,4].

The COVID-19 Protection Framework concluded on 12 September 2022, removing all requirements for tertiary education institutions, although masks continued to be mandated in health settings [2]. This transition was a pivotal moment, signaling a return to a semblance of normalcy in tertiary education. However, the lingering effects of the prolonged pandemic response and the various traffic light settings necessitate a comprehensive examination of their impact on staff in tertiary education institutions.

The initial response to the pandemic prompted a rapid shift in teaching methodologies globally, with tertiary education in New Zealand transitioning to facilitated learning through online technology [5]. This period of adjustment demanded swift transformations in both pedagogy and assessment methodology for staff [6]. However, with the introduction of the traffic light settings, educational institutions, including the Te Pūkenga, Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) in Hawkes Bay, were granted the flexibility to tailor their delivery methods to best meet the evolving needs of students and programs.

Asamoah et al. (2022) stated that, alongside the shifting educational practices over the traffic light system, a formative assessment is required to ensure adequate student progression over their educational journey [7]. However, teaching staff must adjust curriculum delivery to meet individual student learning needs, which in turn increases teaching time demands but also pastoral support [8,9].

Pastoral support is widely recognized as a key factor aligned with student success both from the students' individual support networks and academic support. Institutions should provide clearly communicated expectations and work in partnership with students alongside providing flexibility and support to assist their academic journeys [9]. Students can also face mental health challenges and be exposed to inequitable experiences that can impact their ability to participate in tertiary education [9]. It is important to note that numerous programs within the Te Pūkenga, EIT portfolio are practical-based and require an extended time for students to acquire practical skills. This characteristic of the programs implies a greater need for support and teaching time to ensure that students can effectively develop and master the required skills.

Additional staff demands during times of change and uncertainty impact staffs' wellbeing. Increased levels of stress due the challenges of teaching and curriculum adaptations during COVID-19 [10,11] impact the connections to the students, work–life balance, mental health, and wellbeing [10,12,13].

Against this backdrop, this research project aims to investigate the nuanced impacts and experiences of the traffic light settings on tertiary education staff at Te Pūkenga, EIT. By delving into the adaptation of teaching methodologies and the broader implications for the post-pandemic tertiary education landscape, this study's purpose is to contribute valuable insights into the ongoing discourse surrounding education and public health in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The School of Health and Sport Science (SHSSc) at the EIT in Hawkes Bay, New Zealand, includes management, administrative, and teaching staff engaged in diverse program deliveries, including Foundation Studies, Health and Wellbeing, Beauty Therapy, Hairdressing, Massage, Sport and Exercise Science, and Health Sciences. A total of 39 staff members from the SHSSc were invited to participate in the study. The primary methodology employed was semi-structured interviews, which allowed an in-depth exploration of the impacts of the traffic light settings and their influence on teaching experiences during the specified period.

Informed consent was obtained from all participating staff members. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 14 June and 15 August 2022 by two lead researchers (L.-A.T. and J.R.), allowing for a comprehensive examination of the participants' perspectives. The interviews were designed with open-ended questions, enabling the participants

to freely express their thoughts and offer detailed descriptions of their experiences within the context of the traffic light settings. The utilization of open-ended questions, as outlined in Table 1, aligned with established qualitative research methodologies [14,15], providing a rich and contextually sensitive exploration of the staff's encounters with the evolving educational landscape influenced by the traffic light system. This approach ensured that the data collected reflected the authentic and diverse experiences of the SHSSc staff, contributing to a thorough understanding of the implications of the traffic light settings on teaching within the tertiary education setting.

**Table 1.** Semi-structured interview questions.

| Category | Question |
| --- | --- |
| Impact Assessment | How did the government traffic light system impact you, your family, or your teaching? |
| Program Changes Evaluation | Were any changes made to the program? <br> If so, what were they? <br> Were they successful and why? |
| Teaching Experience Comparison | If you previously taught during the lockdown—how was this experience different? |
| Adaptation Assessment | How did the staff and staff group/s adapt? <br> How did the students adapt? |

Staff were interviewed in cohorts specific to their program of study, teaching area, and management line. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 min and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All the transcriptions were checked by two researchers (L.-A.T. and J.R.) to ensure rigor and an accurate recording of the information.

Qualitative data was subjected to an inductive, semantic, thematic analysis guided by the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) [16]. This approach allowed for the identification and analysis of emergent themes from the data, eliminating researchers' preconceptions [16,17].

Three researchers (L.-A.T., J.R., and one independent analyst) repeatedly read through the transcriptions and reviewed the information so that they were familiar with the content of the data. Inductive codes were initially generated by individually reviewing each sentence and passage, with the researchers collaboratively discussing and refining these codes to create a comprehensive coding scheme applied consistently across all the transcribed data. The coded data underwent a second round of scrutiny by the researchers, who, after in-depth discussions, organized the relevant codes into classifications based on similarity, subsequently forming overarching themes. A further analysis of these themes facilitated the development of sub-themes, providing a nuanced understanding of the data.

The study adhered to the ethical requirements for participants of informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Eastern Institute of Technology, Research Ethics and Approval Committee (reference number: EA06180522, 30 May 2022).

## 3. Results

Twenty-two staff members, five male and 17 females, were interviewed from the SHSSc across programs ranging from levels 2–8 of study. These programs ranged from New Zealand Certificates (levels 2, 3, 4, and 5), New Zealand Diplomas (level 5), Degree (levels 5, 6, and 7), to Post-Graduate qualifications (level 8). The staff included management (2), administrative (2), and teaching staff (18).

Four key themes emerged from the analysis of information concerning staff with overlapping interconnections; these included mandates, support, workload, and learning. This section was divided by subheadings. It provides a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

*3.1. Mandates*

All 22 staff identified that the Government mandates impacted their roles. The mandates under the red traffic light system required administrative and management staff to record the vaccination status of both potential students and staff. This was put in place by the government without the administrative processes in place for the SHSSc or EIT as an institute.

"I think for us the change of traffic light system it was ensuring the implementation of the administrative processes in order to record vaccine passes and what the requirements were at green or orange for us and how that change impacted".

"To then broadening that to EIT's requirement to have all vaccine passes recorded so I think that that administratively getting my head around what needed to be done and then ensuring that that was efficiently implemented amongst my team knowing that I'm at times when they were incredibly busy that I was adding significantly to their workload with another layer of recording of information".

This created levels of anxiety for the staff that required difficult conversations with either students about their program completion or entry into programs and responsibilities that were outside of their job roles.

"...the prospective student that the implication where a student didn't have a vaccine pass and having to be told that actually they couldn't come and study at EIT that even online fully online study was not a possibility some students who were already in the system; some we're negotiations made to enable them to complete study as they were close to finishing but I think that for the for the students that that was that uncertainty about you know they need to make sure that they have their vax pass ...so the impact from my staff there is supporting those students and encouraging them and getting them to go and have their vaccination pass allay their fears that that look it will be fine just produce the pass will record it and in a sorted but there was there was an anxiety...".

"... to add to the complexity that staff dealing with was it's the anxiety was often from an increased or a sense of responsibility for things that you should never be responsible for so for example—who am I as a staff member to be encouraging a student to get a vaccination so that they can continue their program so that if that kind of extra responsibility or perceived responsibility more anxiety about ability affected staff".

Added to this anxiety was the guilt associated the students who could no longer study due to the mandates. There was also a feeling of inequitable measures. And then there were also staff members who experienced guilt when the mandates were removed and students had to wait until the subsequent intake to undertake their studies.

"I guess do you think too that there isn't a sort of almost a guilt that you have destroyed that students' future to some degree".

"...it was hard and I feel that the system also evolved and people were not necessarily treated consistently".

"...like you had those couple of students we wanted, a severe reaction to the vaccine that hindered (their) studies so hopefully (they) can come back next year".

Due to the variations in the mandate requirements for different professions, this also meant that program staff needed to adapt and be op-to-date with the requirements for educational institutes, but also various industries, some of which were quite different. For example, the individuals in the fitness industry were required to wear masks if personally training a client; however, this was often not enforced and therefore created confusion among students and staff who were trying to maintain industry standards.

"The rules were more ambiguous for both us and the students which made it hard, made it more likely that the students infect each other which led to

more disruption most of our students got COVID at some point so always back and forward then kids getting COVID. I found it harder this time than the first lockdown because of that".

"Part of that policing was actually quite interesting because the [student cohort] really didn't want to wear their masks in a small room and it was constantly going back and saying listen this is what your protection and then our protection as well this is EIT requirement some of them would put it down under their nose and I had to stop the class and say we are all adult and so it's really it's really uncomfortable".

All staff acknowledged the clear link between the mandates and their increased workload across all areas of staffing.

### 3.2. Support

All staff recognized the importance of supporting students and fellow staff members across all the traffic light levels associated with the Omicron variant of COVID-19. Absenteeism due to illness and isolation protocols meant that teaching staff were consistently monitoring the students' attendance and academic progress.

"It was expected that we would do everything for the students every allowance, every extension then we would double teach everything".

"I would say pastoral care was harder to give at least it felt for me, having a higher teaching workload than in the first lock down".

In particular, teaching resources and student assessments needed to be considered in relation to the students' attendance, time taken to prepare for an assessment, and the type of assessment, theoretical or practical, alongside other courses. All the staff, in turn, acknowledged the additional pressures along with the increased staff workload.

"It's hard all that double handling aye, triple, different things changing one thing doesn't just affect your course especially when you don't just teach one course then you have to take into account...Like the student who had a reassessment with that reassessment we had to balance around the other assessments that (student) doing. And that's only one student if there's other students out there that need a different assessment date I can't set that specific date for whole range so this is for you particularly now what are you doing here here's your date yet you want to something different it's just all that double handing".

However, the impact of providing additional support to the students clearly impacted staffing workloads and the recognition of the staffs' own absenteeism due to illness, which then meant that taking time off either resulted in another staff member picking up the workload or it created additional workloads for the returning staff to address. For the majority of the staff, this resulted in staff continuing to work while they were isolating or when they were providing caregiving services for family members who were isolating at home.

"I took one day off really I probably should've taken the whole week off but the impact of taking more time off means the everything thing gets pushed back and that puts more stress on us as tutors because everything starting to get snowballed".

"As well at home you are trying to answer the emails and you trying to do meetings and you've got other people in your house that are sick you're trying to stay away from the other people in the house you know all the kids want to do is hug you because they are feeling really bad and you are telling them to be quiet cause you're in a meeting it's yeah".

While the staff understood that pastoral support was important for the success of the students, it came at a cost.

"We each had to manage differently and then try and be a team and be a team for the students that was really tricky communities have been separated, our community as a (teaching) team have struggled through that, we made it through, and we put our students first but at a sacrifice to our whānau (family) and our own mental health".

"We helped them (students) but it didn't help us overall".

### 3.3. Workload

All the staff acknowledged the impacts on their individual and collective workloads; in all cases, the staff identified that their workloads increased and, in some instances, doubled or even tripled during this period. A large part of this was due to the additional tasks required by the mandates and the pastoral support of students and their programs of study, as previously outlined.

"I think definitely the traffic light system was hard to keep track of everyone especially for me I had 19 students it was a nightmare keeping up with what I told to who because they were sick at different times for isolating and some of them may even have had to isolate 2–3 times so yeah at least with the lockdown although it was hard in terms for me with practical 'cause there's only so much practical you can do...".

"It's hard all that double handling aye, triple, different things changing one thing doesn't just affect your course especially when you don't just teach one course then you have to take (others) into account".

In addition to the guilt associated with the mandates, the staff commented on the impacts of their own illnesses and how they knew it would impact other staff members, which led to staff working while unwell and on sick leave.

"When I was feeling really, really rotten I mean I said I will carry on with my teaching. I'm still gonna teach online stuff sorted out with my students my students know I'm gonna be online so I'm going to keep this job going so I thought no one going to teach my course this is the (title) component of it and it's not fair. I knew other people weren't well and not up to date with everything else".

"It's hard to make those decisions that I'm gonna step back knowing that someone else has to do more you know like people picked up work for me you picked up a whole ton of markings for me you know I still have that guilt that was my work to do it was my decision to do that it wasn't you know I wasn't managed into that decision I made that decision myself and put that on to other people it's difficult".

Furthermore, the staff also commented on the guilt associated with not being able to teach and deliver the programs that they felt would have been best for the students.

"We just couldn't create something, that experience that I feel they deserved, we had to keep waiting or there were disappointments with, you know, the delays".

"I think it is on us like we're kind of higher achievers and wanting to give a certain quality of product then actually it comes back on us and I think maybe it's the personality type as well that if you probably don't care about the quality, you might be OK".

In addition to the workload, all staff members commented on their fatigue levels as a result of the increased levels of pastoral support, stress, and anxiety, and their concern for what might come next.

"I'm tired! I'm at the fatigue (levels) that I would normally be at the end of the year".

"What's coming next and having to be ahead of the game to be able to get through next semester".

The connections between the mandates, pastoral support, guilt, and fatigue that were related to staffing workloads were complex and interwoven; Figure 1 displays these connections.



**Figure 1.** The impacts of the Omicron traffic light setting and staff workloads.

*3.4. Learnings*

Management, administrative, and teaching staff were proud of their ability to continue to adapt to the situation under the traffic light settings. Management had to support staff in terms of understanding the implications of the system and people were dealing with the considerable change.

"What we learned from each other, this is what we learned from ourselves and these are the things we can improve because of these things we learned".

"...felt good about that you know got some reward and of course some things you know didn't work so you learn from it".

Teaching staff increased their capabilities with technology, such as online teaching; however, this was not always the only component to consider.

"Most staff had the capability to teach online it's not a capability issue its the complexity in the moment".

"But no matter where you were on the scale I think everybody learned masses and improved masses and changed and became more flexible using more different tools so whether you already using a lot of tools or almost none I think everybody had the same amount of improvement and expansion of their skills".

During the incorporation of traffic light settings, teaching and program staff were able to manage their own teaching delivery preferences, for example, continue teaching face to face or offer a blended delivery. For those programs that only had one teaching staff member, it was clear that they had more flexibility to alter the program as they saw fit than those who delivered programs within teaching teams.

"It was on only me and yes because I was teaching on my own courses I didn't have to liaise I got a bit of autonomy and I knew I could get through this and move it backwards and forwards that was less of a pressure forming".

Where programs had multiple teaching staff, far more coordination was required for the program.

"We were just continually having to catch up, going this one is off, this one is off, what's happening with your lot?".

With multiple courses and staff, they noted other considerations when planning student classes.

"It's really hard with the petrol cost to come over for one class. Can you put the classes that are on campus, can you put them together? So, then we went and change the timetable for them".

All the staff associated with teaching programs outlined the changes that were made during the enforcement of the traffic light settings. All practical classes remained being taught in a face-to-face manner with additional timetabled teaching to ensure that students had adequate time to prepare for practical assessments that were moved to later in the semester. These practical classes were aligned with the conditions of both the government traffic light requirements for education and the program industry requirements. Theoretical classes were delivered using a mixture of teaching face to face, face to face with synchronous online access, online Zoom or Microsoft teams lectures, or workshops and asynchronous online lectures with an emphasis on key parts. If significant cohorts of students were absent (>50%) due to COVID-19, some programs shifted to offsite delivery for a shortened period (two weeks) as determined by the teaching staff. All programs utilized an online platform or workbook/s as a repository for student resources.

"I got to the point where I would do a teaching delivery, I would then go and voice over the key parts on it so I had a video online because if we had videoed anything from the previous year had other students in it so you can't use that because it's the privacy. I then got to the point where I was actually sending out meeting request to the students that were at home isolating so they actually they could come in (via livestream) so I had my laptop the front of the class".

"I did notice that when I made resources for online if they were 10 min long, they're OK, if there are 20 min long students didn't access them".

All staff had technology recommendations for the future of program delivery in terms of software and hardware for classrooms.

"The tech needs to be there to support that as well. We can do the education stuff but the tech needs to be there. If I was in a VC classroom that would be would have been well easier. We don't have that capability".

Furthermore, the staff felt that, if there was either more flexibility in their workloads or additional staffing resources, then the additional pastoral support, increased workload, and stress could have been reduced.

"The management... could start a year and give everybody 60 teaching hours of capacity because we were so highly work loaded".

"I think EIT should make use of casual positions if they need more people instead of making people 100% work loaded or 120% work loaded".

Overall, all the staff felt that they had learnt, adapted, and shown resilience during this period, but it had the potential to have subsequent consequences.

"I feel like we adapted really well and have done throughout this whole time... we are resilient... I am concerned about how long our resilience can last how long we can be under this stress".

## 4. Discussion

In this study, the impacts of the COVID-19 traffic light system on tertiary education staff in New Zealand were comprehensively explored through interviews with 22 individuals from SHSSc, Te Pūkenga, EIT. Our results identify four key themes: mandates, support, workload, and learning. The mandates, driven by government directives under different traffic light settings, significantly affected staff roles. Administrative and management staff were tasked with implementing administrative processes, such as recording vaccine passes, causing heightened levels of anxiety and challenging conversations with students affected by these mandates.

In the broader context of the global repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, society was forced to alter in a multitude of ways, none more so than in the way we interacted,

worked, and learned. Tertiary education staff in New Zealand found themselves at the forefront of these changes, adapting to government mandates, innovative teaching, and assessment methodologies, alongside providing support to both students and colleagues. In this study, workload was a pervasive theme, affecting all the staff in different roles. Previous research underscores the increased workload and stress levels on education staff during the pandemic, especially with the shift to online education models [5,12]. Thus, our study aligned with the broader literature, highlighting the necessity for pedagogical and assessment shifts, albeit with additional time and preparation demands [6].

Several recommendations to the curricula for educational practices emerged following COVID-19 learnings with the adaptability of the curricula in line with synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods [18]. Interactive and authentic learning virtually were also identified, particularly for experiential learning, models that were previously successful in medical education [19]. However, to implement these methodologies, tertiary institutes must have the available resources, such as time and technology, alongside a good staff capacity and capability.

The increased workload identified by all staff in this study correlated with heightened anxiety and guilt levels, consistent with the existing research highlighting the stress experienced by academics during the pandemic [20]. Mutual support mechanisms were identified as contributors to academic wellbeing during stressful times [21]. The fatigue levels reported by the staff in this study, surpassing the norm for the academic calendar, underscored the added strain imposed by the traffic light mandates, including isolation requirements and stay-at-home messaging if you were unwell. The staff acknowledged that tracking student attendance and progress in relation to their academic journeys created an additional workload in terms of providing further support, particularly related to practical skills. Additionally, the coordination required across a teaching team, as opposed to one teacher being assigned to a cohort, required increased communication and meetings, which, in turn, increased the workload. Previous research identifies students' educational inequalities and, therefore, consideration of the workload and resourcing required to support and address the ongoing implications and consequences of these factors [18,22]. Recognizing the disruptions of the learners' journeys and that challenges will continue to arise need to be taken into consideration [23,24].

Support emerged as a critical aspect, with staff recognizing the importance of providing assistance to both students and colleagues. The complexities of delivering pastoral care during various traffic light levels, coupled with an increased workload, affected their ability to offer comprehensive support. The study highlighted the interconnectedness of mandates, support, guilt, and fatigue levels, underscoring the intricate challenges faced by staff as they navigated the evolving educational landscape.

In addition to considering student cohorts, this study emphasized the importance of recognizing gender differences in pastoral support roles within tertiary education. Female staff, particularly in the nursing sector, often shoulder unrecognized additional pastoral support responsibilities [25]. Acknowledging individual staff, student, and teaching cohort requirements is imperative for effective management.

In advocating for flexible learning and delivery models, this study underscored the need for equally flexible staffing models to address the increased workload and cover for unwell staff. The findings reveal instances of staff working while unwell due to their concerns about workload redistribution, highlighting the need for supportive policies, such as recognizing greater teaching loads or utilizing casual educators [18].

Educational practices should consider the differences between teaching staff and provide targeted support, communication, and polices to recognize these variances [26], thus, in turn, increasing the management workload. Finally, recognizing the challenges faced by teaching staff and encouraging innovations while mitigating stress levels emerge as key considerations in educational practices [26].

The limitations of this research, notably, the predominantly female (77%) representation in the SHSSc, should be acknowledged, urging the consideration of a broader

perspective for future studies. However, this was also a representation of the program staffing within this school during this period. Despite this limitation, the results offer valuable insights that should inform strategic management decisions in tertiary education, especially in the context of ongoing uncertainties and challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5. Conclusions

The impacts of COVID-19 have been profound, especially for teaching staff and the delivery of applied learning. While it is evident that staff exhibited resilience and cultivated their skills to navigate the challenges posed by the diverse traffic light settings, it is equally clear that this adaptation came at a cost. The collective experience of an increased workload, heightened emotional stresses, and fatigue among all staff members underscores the considerable toll of providing additional support during these unprecedented times.

As staff continue to face challenges associated with the impacts of COVID-19, management must consider a systematic approach to the allocation of workload taking into consideration potential government policy changes, the flexibility of the curricula, number of teaching staff, individual student needs, and time requirements associated with students' practical skills development. Investing in staff capabilities and the monitoring of staffs' capacity and wellbeing are paramount to reducing the stress associated with change. Adequate resourcing for staff absence due to illness should be considered to support their wellbeing. As we move forward, careful consideration must be given to the long-term impacts on students' learning journeys. Recognizing and quantifying the additional support contributed by staff should be an integral component of ongoing workload assessments. Teaching staff need to clearly communicate their expectations to students and recognize the individual support required to assist with their academic journeys. The provision of resources in accessible and varying formats could enhance student learning outcomes; however, the institutional technology platforms must be in place to support these requirements.

In essence, our research fulfilled its aim of assessing the nuanced impacts and experiences of the traffic light settings on tertiary education staff at Te Pūkenga, EIT. By meticulously exploring the adaptation of teaching methodologies amidst the challenging landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study highlighted the intricate interplay between government mandates, increased workloads, and the evolving support needs of both students and staff.

The broader implications revealed in this research extend beyond the immediate challenges faced by tertiary education staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This work offers valuable insights that contribute to the ongoing discourse that connects education and public health in the post-pandemic era. As we navigate the complexities of the current educational landscape, the findings of this study stand as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of tertiary education staff. This study not only acknowledges the extraordinary efforts of teaching staff, but also informs future strategies aimed at promoting a sustainable and supportive educational environment in the post-COVID-19 era. These insights are a guide for strategic considerations and transformative practices in the future of higher education.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance to Eastern Institute of Technology Research and Human Ethics policy and ethical approval for this research was obtained from Research Ethics and Approval Committee, Eastern Institute of Technology (Reference number EA06180522, 30 May 2022).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained, and the study adhered to the ethical requirements pertaining to the voluntariness, confidentiality, and anonymity of the participants involved.

**Data Availability Statement:** Anonymized data are available upon request from the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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