

Social Capital is Critical to Perseverance at University during COVID-19: Pasifika Students in Fiji, New Zealand and Solomon Islands Universities

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This study investigated how university students in Pacific Island contexts coped with the shift to remote learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers aimed to investigate the social capital of a group of Pasifika university students in Fiji, New Zealand and Solomon Islands universities during COVID-19 and how they coped with the rapid shift to remote learning. Social capital refers to building relationships and networks to deal with collective issues in the present and future. The researchers used tokstori to collect data from Solomon Islands students and talanoa in New Zealand. Sixteen Solomon Islanders participated in tokstoris and ongoing Pasifika students' talanoa and faikava (kava consumption) to share concerns and challenges to their academic studies and lives. Deductive in nature, the analysis found that communication with fellow students, often via digital media, and interaction with supportive staff helped their success.

Furthermore, getting in touch with the family and following COVID-19 protective practices helped students adjust positively. Being able to 'tap' the social resources within these spaces helped build perseverance, resilience and strong social capital. The research findings show the importance of individuals, student communities and institutions consciously strengthening social networks among students during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: social capital; social trust; social network; social norms

INTRODUCTION

The imposed COVID-19 pandemic requirements, such as physical distancing and lockdowns, risked depleting social capital. In education, digital media has become useful for connecting students and teachers isolated from each other. Ratuva (2021, p. 194) called the mobilisation of the school community and taking collective action in the face of the pandemic the building of 'communal capital' in the Pacific Islands. This study set out to investigate how the existence of social capital influenced Pasifika university students in the Pacific Islands and New Zealand in how they dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated shift to remote learning.

By mid-2022, most Pacific Island countries had officially recorded cases of COVID-19, though, in the Federated States of Micronesia and Marshall Islands, the cases were in quarantine (Australia Pacific Security College, 2022), and Tokelau and the Pitcairn Islands recorded no cases. By mid-2022, most countries had also relaxed their quarantine restrictions and some countries, such as Fiji and the Solomon Islands, had reopened their international borders (Australia Pacific Security College, 2022). Pacific Island countries differed in their COVID-19 pandemic experiences, with some having earlier encounters with the pandemic and more infections and deaths than others. Regardless, the pandemic has had economic, political and social impacts on the Pacific Islands, with the full effects likely still to be gauged (Bell et al., 2022). The education system, schools, teachers and students were not spared the impacts of COVID-19. For example, during the pandemic, Fiji early childhood teachers were concerned about their employment, health, and safety (Dayal & Tiko, 2020). Teachers were also concerned about their students' health, safety and impeded learning. They connected with their students through Viber app groups, Zoom and email. They met with parents and students at the beginning of the pandemic and decided what they would do (Dayal & Tiko, 2020). The meetings were instances of teachers, parents and students working together to find solutions to student learning during a pandemic. Similar meetings would have played out throughout the Pacific Islands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

'Social capital refers to an investment in social relations with expected returns' (Freeman & Condrón, 2011, p. 523). Tzanakis (2013) noted that the scholars Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam had similar views on social capital but differing underlying ideologies on the concept. Bourdieu emphasised durable networks and the potential for accumulating social profit. Coleman views social capital as a collective resource for an instrumental purpose and goal, and a public good. Bourdieu sees social capital as a scarce resource and often a conduit for class reproduction and various inequalities. Putnam defines social capital in terms of the amount of trust and civic engagement. Tzanakis states that social capital involves *bridging*, which entails an expansion of networks and *bonding* and refers to increased cohesion. This study incorporates Putnam's (1994) conception of social capital: 'such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (p. 7). A community with a rich civic engagement history will also have strong networks. A community with rich civic engagement also fosters reciprocity, trust and norms. Social capital is a moral resource for the public good (Putnam, 1994). This study focuses on universities and students and how social capital facilitated their success during COVID-19.

Elgar, Stefaniak and Wohl (2020) used four dimensions of the social capital theory—trust, group affiliations, civic responsibility and confidence in public institutions—to analyse the differences in the spread of COVID-19 in 84 countries around the world. They found that countries that lacked one or more of the dimensions of social capital had more deaths. Social capital refers to having shared social resources due to relationships with mutual acquaintances (Elgar et al., 2020). Song and Lin (2009) surveyed 2,835 Taiwanese and found that social capital is important to social support and helps to avoid depression. Rodriguez-Pose and Berlepsch (2014) surveyed 45,583 individuals across 25 European countries on the relationship between social capital and happiness. They found that social capital influences happiness across the dimensions of trust, social interaction and norms with notable salience of informal social interactions. Mohnen, Volker, Flap, Subramanian and Groenewegen (2015) also found that face-to-face or phone contact with friends and non-household members had a positive

relationship with health. Thus, having a genuine social network during times of crisis, such as those instigated by COVID-19, is important.

Investing in 'true friends' and collaborative partners is salient because 'individuals with greater social capital have better health outcomes. Investment in social capital likely increases one's social capital, bearing greater implications for disease prevention and health promotion' (Chen et al., 2015, p. 669). Chen and his collaborators found that, with increasing social capital, there are lower stress levels, which resulted in better health outcomes. Portela, Neira and Salinas-Jimenez (2013) studied the correlation between well-being and social capital and found that social networks, social trust and institutional trust positively affect one's well-being. They claim that each country has a level of social capital that affects individuals' and institutions' well-being. A country's lack of social cohesion can result from inadequate social capital to hold it together strongly. Countries with strong social ties and trust will be better able to address poverty and lacklustre development (Portela et al., 2013). Cheung and Chan (2010) emphasised that help and services that rely on exchange and reciprocity are desirable. Individuals and institutions draw on exchanges for productivity via formal rewards and benefits. If individuals and institutions invest in social relations, they benefit. Interestingly, Cheung and Chan (2010) found that trust does not seem to influence morale or necessarily ensure the quality of benefits. Reciprocity and exchange, however, do influence social capital (Cheung & Chan, 2010).

Besides the online environment, which was critical during the shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical environment is salient for developing social capital. For example, play parks, collaborative workspaces, or opportunities and spaces for school children to socialise can build social capital. How schools are planned and managed matters, and social and public policies have a role in building social capital in schools and their communities (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004). The virtual environment is also critical for building social capital and can be fostered online through strong, appropriate and consistent online community membership (Solomon, 2013), requiring prompt replies to posts and valuing constructive feedback. A lecturer needs to be proactive in a university setting and initiate ongoing exchanges and conversations. The lecturer must also acknowledge students' participation and engage with them positively.

Dufur, Parcel and McKune (2008) found that the home and school influence children's social capital, with the home being more influential. Investments in social ties reap better social adjustment for children, allowing them to interact effectively with society. Despite spending a substantial time of their day at school, children's behaviour often stems from upbringing at home: 'Social capital, then, explains the mechanisms and processes by which bonds between children and other actors, such as their parents or their teachers, produce desirable outcomes' (Dufur et al., 2008, p. 148). Schaefer-McDaniel (2004) believes that social capital among young people consists of social networks/interactions and sociability, trust and reciprocity, and a sense of belonging/place attachment. To improve students' academic achievements, developing strong social capital at school is vital and can be achieved through robust social relationships between parents, teachers and students. Parents or guardians are too often neglected in their important roles of contributing to positive social capital. A strong school community can be achieved through trust and reciprocity among all. Parents and members of the school community and the networks they create can be considered a resource and collective asset that can benefit student learning and experiences (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004). Schaefer-McDaniel (2004) emphasised the significance of encouraging rather than coercing young people to participate in the activities of organisations and schools. Young people benefit from social capital because it promotes academic success, quality of school environment, reduced stress and development of democratic participation among children (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004).

In another perspective of social capital, Freeman and Condrón (2011) conclude that social capital and social class affect children's performance at school, particularly if there are weak ties. The unequal distribution of social capital based on social class is why children from working-class families often lag in their academic achievement (Freeman & Condrón, 2011). Thus, social capital exists within social relations, and schools can build trust, norms and social networks for better educational outcomes through cordial teacher-student, student-student and teacher-parent relationships (Vandelannote & Demanet, 2021). Vandelannote and Demanet (2021) stress that social capital is a public good, where everyone accruing it can benefit through the social network and resources they all bring to the school. A caring school community fosters a positive sense of belonging. Therefore, strong school-wide social capital can act as a positive mechanism to achieve outcomes that may not typically be achieved.

There are studies from other social contexts on the importance of social capital in students' learning during COVID-19 (e.g., Bartscher et al., 2021; Elgar et al., 2022; Pitas & Ehrer, 2020). Wong and Kohler (2020) reported on the salience of social capital at various levels of society to bolster the COVID-19 response by promoting virtual communities and building trust among the public and health systems. Arachi and Managi (2021) found that the elements of social capital conducive to avoiding COVID-19 deaths are family bonds and security. However, only relying on community interactions and trusting others caused more deaths. However, Fraser, Page-Tan, and Aldrich (2022) argued for the value of social capital in terms of trust, mutual aid and collective action to curb and recover from COVID-19. Therefore, social capital is relevant to policymakers for building population resilience for enduring the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises, such as climate change and natural disasters (Fraser et al., 2022). Wu (2021) points out that the aspects of social capital that were effective in the COVID-19 response were collective action, public acceptance of the protocols, and mobilising resources at the community level.

In the Pacific Islands, Nanau (2020) advocates for building social capital to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 through existing networks in Oceania, such as the *wantok* system, *Fa'a Samoa*, *Faka Tonga* and other similar notions in other countries. Family and relational support are critical to the Pacific Islands facing the challenges brought on by the pandemic. Such aspects of social capital are vital to providing a safety net for families in the Pacific Islands (Nanau, 2020). Ratuva (2021) adds that in many Pacific Island communities, it is important to strengthen social solidarity and the moral economy, especially when many lose employment. There is a need for communities in the Pacific Islands to nurture their 'communal capital' (Ratuva, 2021, p. 194) through kinship and solidarity to tackle COVID-19. This manifests itself in kinship networks, reciprocal assistance and shared land. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in the market economy, and a return to communal capital is a social protection mechanism vital in times of crisis (Ratuva, 2021). In addition, Parc and Spieth (2020) state that the social capital in Pacific communities enabled people to stay on their feet before government and humanitarian assistance arrived. Communal life is an avenue for communal action during the COVID-19 pandemic (Parc & Spieth, 2020). Movono and Scheyvens (2022) found that people have increasingly worked together in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, by engaging in *solesolevaki*, a Fijian term signifying communal work for the collective good with no direct individual return.

Theoretical framework

This study is framed through Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory, which he defined as:

[The] aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, 'a credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (p. 241)

Social capital is built on networks and relationships and maintained via symbolic exchanges within a social space. The volume of the social capital is related to the size of the agent's network of connections. It is important to reproduce social relationships to have durable obligations, respect and friendship (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital encourages shared values in ongoing relationships to garner and solve collective issues. Thus, inherent in a network of friends is access to help in difficult times and being able to access new opportunities. Reciprocity and not taking advantage of each other are important to building strong social capital (Ostrom, 2009).

Harper (2002) agrees that social capital involves reciprocity, trust and having social institutions with support structures. Valuable to social capital are informal and formal networks formed at school, workplace, the local club or with neighbours (Harper, 2002). Social capital entails those who make up a social unit participating in mutual social intercourse and having genuine sympathy and goodwill for each other (Aldrich & Meyer, 2002). Alkaher and Gan (2020) reiterate that critical to building social capital at schools is establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with diverse partners in society. Neira, Lacalle-Calderon, Portela, and Perez-Trujillo (2018) studied the components of social capital, such as trust, social network and norms of civic engagement and their relationship to subjective well-being (SWB) and found that all these dimensions influence the SWB of the person. SWB relies on how individuals evaluate their fulfilment and satisfaction on the three dimensions of trust, social network and norms of civic engagement.

Gittell and Vidal (1998) posited the notions of 'bonding' and 'bridging', and Aldrich (2011) advocated the element of 'linking' as dimensions of social capital. Kay (2006) explains that 'bonding' social capital is developed as a binding force between individuals, groups and organisations. 'Bridging' social capital occurs when an existing group reaches out creatively to other individuals, groups and organisations. 'Linking' social capital connects people of different levels of power, social class and status. Kay further stresses that social capital is the glue that sticks the community together. It is the grease that ensures things happen smoothly in the community. The primary dimensions of social capital that this study used in the analysis of students' experiences are based on the work of Neira et al.'s (2019) concepts of social trust, social network and social norms, as discussed earlier in this section.

METHODOLOGY

This study used the *tokstori* methodology (Sanga et al., 2017). *Tokstori* stems from *tok Pijin*, a language spoken in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, which developed after contact between the islanders and Europeans. Rumsey (2019) notes that Melanesia is the most linguistically diverse region in the world, with about 1,400 languages, making up 22% of world languages. Sanga et al. (2017) also describe the word *wantok*, used by Melanesian labourers who worked in plantations, as showing they are one community with a common basis for social interaction. The concept of social networks existed before European contact, but the *wantok* system underpins elements of Melanesianism. In other words, the *wantok* system is a relational network that attaches to the kin, the tribe or being from the same country. Relationality and reciprocity are key to the *tokstori* and involve an oral tradition in which there is dialogue over issues and

problems (Sanga et al., 2017). Sanga et al. (2017) added that ‘*tokstori*, then, is a Melanesian expression of commitment to togetherness manifest through engaging in *stori*, a shared narrative which dialogically constructs reality’ (p. 8). The *tokstori* is a contextual space to reclaim conversations on education and issues affecting local society. It should gather what people do, make and believe. When someone speaks the language to be used in the *tokstori*, it has the potential to collect information in the cultural and contextual setting and forms of language used, such as people’s metaphoric language (Sanga et al., 2017).

Tokstori involves interactions and relationships in which individuals can learn from each other to reshape their understanding of a phenomenon and make sense of their context. Traditionally, Solomon Islanders are suspicious of one another; thus, when a *tokstori* is organised, trust needs to be built. With trust, responses can be deep and rich. Often, the data derived from a *tokstori* can be plentiful since the sessions are not time bound and are ongoing. However, there is a need to be sensitive to the space, time and information provided (Sanga et al., 2017). ‘*Tokstori* is a form of discursive group communication which is an everyday occurrence in Melanesia’ (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018, p. 11). Even though it is discursive, developing relationships with participants is critical before engaging them in *tokstori*. In funded projects, this is imperative as there can often be a relational imbalance between the funder and recipients.

In the Eastern Pacific, *talanoa* is used. Halapua utilised both the *talanoa* and *tokstori* in the reconciliations of armed conflicts in the Solomon Islands (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018). Vaioleti (2006) states that from a Tongan perspective, *tala* can mean to tell, command or inform. *Noa* means ordinary and nothing in particular. *Talanoa* is a space for important conversations and a source of information from the community that can help in decision-making. It discourages rigidity and hegemonic control but encourages flexible and open adaptation to the context. The *talanoa* should be respectful and reciprocating in the conversations. Both the *talanoa* and the *tokstori* are relational and dialogic. It is important to view locals as experts. *Tokstori* can be viewed as a pedagogical tool, and, in the context of a professional development programme, it should be centred on person-development (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018). A *tokstori* should not only create but maintain relationships. Oral traditions can be found the world over, including the Australian Aboriginal yarning, the Hawaiian *talkstory*, or the *talanoa* in Tonga, Fiji, Samoa and elsewhere (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018). This study utilises a *tokstori* with ten participants in Suva and Honiara and various Pasifika students at a New Zealand University. We obtained consent from participants before beginning, and the *tokstori* took place over food and coffee.

The researchers used *tokstori* with the Solomon Islands students and the *talanoa* with Pasifika students in New Zealand. The features of relationality, connectedness, reciprocity, trust and togetherness are purported by social capital theory. The *tokstori* sessions went for more than an hour. Researchers guided the conversation to gain the information needed, but the *tokstori* continued with food. Those who wanted to leave excused themselves. The informal continuation of conversations often brought more information than would otherwise have been collected through rigid timekeeping.

Similarly, the *talanoa* sessions accompanied kava consumption and took time to finish. The sessions acted as data-gathering avenues and community-building spaces. These were existing *tokstori* and *talanoa* groups, so we asked permission to record the conversations for the sessions we wanted for this study, and the authors transcribed the recordings. Participants were a mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

ANALYSIS: SOCIAL TRUST, SOCIAL NETWORK AND SOCIAL NORMS

This study is deductive in its analysis, using Neira et al.'s (2019) dimensions of social trust to organise information, as opposed to inductive analysis, where codes and categories emerge from the data itself (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). The dimensions of social capital are: social trust, social network and social norms and originate from Putnam's (1994) features of trust, norms, networks and reciprocity. These are considered useful to garner moral resources in times of need, such as the COVID-19:

Social trust

Social trust includes generalised trust, institutional trust and interpersonal trust. The quotes below show the challenges and positive resources students bring into their groups:

Gradually, when tutors were a little more lenient, that gave me more confidence. If they stuck to due dates, I would be in a lot of pressure but there was flexibility on extending assignments so we feel a lot more comfortable. (L1A)

We all know that this issue is one of the newest that we've experienced in COVID-19. It affected the world and it also affects us. In terms of learning, one of the advantages or pros was that I remained at home and focused on my work. I stay at home as everything is online and concentrated on assignments, which is nice. Feedback from lecturers is up to date. You give assignment and they give you feedback quickly. (L2A)

A disadvantage is that it's a new kind of learning. Most of the time, we can go to a lecturer and share our problems but during C19, you don't see the face of the lecturer. You contact through online. So having to go and tell your stories to a lecturer wasn't there. (L1B)

I think, online is good in some ways and you can concentrate on your studies. However, if you are new to the system, it can be hard as well. For those that's new to them, online is hard. But for me, because I know the system, online is fine. (L1C)

I also find it difficult when I emailed my lecturers for assistance and they did not respond to my emails for days. (L1D)

These quotations indicate that students gain institutional trust and confidence that universities will deal with emergency remote learning with flexibility and prompt feedback. On the other hand, institutional trust and confidence become diluted if individual staff cannot deal with students' queries promptly. Since this study involved only students, it is worth noting that staff may also encounter difficulties with the shift to remote learning and possibly the general restrictions that COVID-19 brought.

Social network

Social network includes informal relationships, volunteering, and organisational membership, which may be critical as many students have left their countries, families and friends to study. The personal impact could be telling, especially when COVID-19 brought with it global restrictions:

Two times, you are in a foreign land, purposely to study and you get stolen, it's something I will think about for a while. I couldn't eat. The first time, I reported it to the police, there was no response. For the second time, the whole day and the whole night I couldn't sleep. It affected me. I wasn't able to do the assignments. I was late. It was challenging especially when you are far away from home and in this kinds of situation, you need to be encouraged

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by your immediate family members. The good now is that I see my colleagues, our lecturers, and the interactions we have, has kept on encouraging me to come this far. (L1E)

And the other thing is I always liaise with my family back home so that it keeps me moving although I fear that this may cause us not to go back to the Solomons. So even if they are miles away, I attempt to contact them by phone and so forth. (L1E)

Personally, I would like to acknowledge you guys for your help in driving us forward, in an atmosphere where family are at home, parents are at home, we see you as leaders here, and this motivates us to push harder. The regular interactions we have and stories, have personally had an impact of me. That I have somebody who care for me here on my social and academic development here. So thank you doctors and staff of USP. These situations can be emotional, but your presence has been an encouragement and am sure my colleagues will say the same. (L1E)

I found it difficult at first but one of my wantoks who worked at the SI Telekom assisted me to access the USP website through the arrangement that was made. (L1F)

I cope by seeing online the health tips and follow those health tips and how your personal hygiene should be. All these help me to cope with the situation. And the other thing is I always liaise with my family back home so that it keeps me moving although I fear that this may cause us not to go back to the Solomons. So even if they are miles away, I attempt to contact them by phone and so forth. (L1E)

Having my family around during this COVID-19 period is also not helpful. I find it a bit difficult to focus on my studies because my children are not at school and I had to attend to their needs. (L2B)

It's a new normal and I will speak at the family level. The usual practice with us is, even when the times when things are normal, the family is used to just stay at the home. Therefore, there is no change in terms of experiencing that lockdown. It's just another normal. (L2B)

Three social networks can be summarised from the information above. The first social network involves the students' families. The roles they play are encouragement and impetus to study. The second is *wantoks* from whom students can seek advice and support. The third is through social media not only as a source of information about COVID-19 but also advice about the best way to deal with the new situation.

Social norms

Social norms entail shared norms of civic engagement and civic values, which are integral when students have to help each other cope with the sudden move to remote learning and operating online:

As the vice president, of the student body, I found it hard a little as you need up to date information to inform students from Solomon Islands. This is what's happening. This is what we should do. Plus, you are worried about due dates of the assignments. Things such as these can be difficult. You have to be up to date with information. Know the information yourself and pass those information to students. (L2C)

A good thing I learned from the online experience is it made me to be resilient. My hidden abilities came out. I took my own initiatives to manage my time so that I can be settled. I tried as much as possible to do my assignments, discuss in the forums, during the time frame. I tried to perform at a higher level, to discuss, to share ideas, through the online

mode. So the ability to work hard showed itself. This is a good thing I learned from this pandemic. (L2D)

I decided to return to my village because of this situation and was going to give up on my studies. I went through a period of uncertainty. Then as I reflected on my future when I was in my village, I decided to continue with my studies. I realised that I am responsible for my future and learning and that I must learn to adapt to this new mode of learning with the hope that I will later get used to this mode of study. (L1G)

I thought of getting away from Honiara and go home with my family, but then I thought of my children's education and access to health facilities here in Honiara. Then I listened to all those awareness through the media and through those advisories from the university then I decided to just stay in Honiara and to continue with my studies. Now, I do not feel the same as I did earlier. (LID)

These quotations from participants showed three examples of social norms. The first pertains to civic responsibility towards peers from the same national background. The second relates to uncovering personal abilities and values. The third concerns the participants valuing the needs of others, such as the future of their children.

DISCUSSIONS

This study found that students gain institutional trust and confidence from universities that deal with emergency remote learning with flexibility and prompt feedback. However, trust and confidence in the institution are diluted if staff and the system do not promptly deal with students' queries. Kay (2006) supports the findings of this study by emphasising that trust in the institution is critical to students' success during the pandemic. He explains that trust is vital to any functioning institution. Social capital is intangible and may not be recognised unless made explicit, but its usefulness for a functional community cannot be understated. For example, if a local community lacks significant social networks, does not trust one another or has little mutuality and shared norms to work with, there will be a lack of cohesion resulting in continual social underdevelopment. It is imperative that people form social networks that encourage a sense of community and shared values. Kay further emphasised that trust is the most important element of social capital. There can be social networks and a sense of shared values, but if trust is not present, it will noticeably deplete social capital. However, trust can also be fragile, and mistrust could destroy the social capital built over time and take time to rebuild.

This study found students used three social networks during the quick shift to remote learning due to COVID-19. The first social network involved the family for encouragement and impetus to study. The second was *wantoks* from whom students could seek advice and support. The third was social media, which was a source of information about COVID-19 and the best way to deal with the new situation. Students also noted that with everyone staying at home, it could also be a challenge to have undisturbed time for studies. Pitas and Ehmer (2020) also found that the disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the need for physical distancing and lockdowns have diluted elements of social capital. They highlight the salience of individuals, communities and government institutions to strengthen social networks to curb the pandemic (Pitas & Ehmer, 2020). They also emphasise the importance of social capital to crisis management in situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the protective practices put in place due to COVID-19 have also compromised the social capital in many communities, caused by prolonged isolation, physical distancing, and the lack of face-to-face interaction. Simultaneously, there was a rise in digital communication via phone, chats, email, Zoom, and social media. These

digital mediums produce valuable social capital, but Pitas and Ehmer (2020) made the point that the face-to-face component cannot be neglected, and eventually, both ‘online and offline social capital’ (p. 943) are integral. Social connections within rules are vital to a collective response during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study found that participants evidenced social norms in three ways. The first pertains to civic responsibility towards peers from the same national and regional background. The second relates to uncovering personal abilities and values. The third concerns the participants valuing the needs of those other than themselves, such as the future of their children. These provided impetus for participants during the shift to remote learning to persevere. Bartscher et al. (2021), in an investigation of the health outcomes of Austria, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland concerning COVID-19 and social capital, found that there are health returns for strengthening social capital. Collectively adhering to socially recommended activities, such as limiting physical contact, wearing a mask and social distancing, are forms of social capital (Bartscher et al., 2021). Shared norms, values and understanding, including sanctions for what are not shared values, relate to individual and group attitudes (Harper, 2002). This study found that social norms ensured students had achievable expectations in the context of a swift conversation into online and remote learning.

This study has implications for universities and higher education institutions. The first is the importance of building students’ and stakeholders’ trust in the institution. It is important that universities show they can deal with sudden turbulence and uncertainty rigorously and successfully. The whole university system, including staff, is responsible for demonstrating the characteristics of a strong institutional image, including the staff. Students in this study liked it when staff spent time to *talanoa* with them and displayed empathy but disliked it when their queries were not answered or not replied to on time. Defeyter et al. (2021) termed this ‘recreancy’, which means ‘loss of societal trust that results when institutional actors can no longer be counted on to perform their responsibilities’ (p. 1). Defeyter gave an example about the importance of teaching staff performance, but performance can cover a myriad of areas, from food, housing, well-being, technology, enrolment and support services, to name a few. In other words, ‘social institutions are not trusted because institutional actors fail to carry out their obligations’ (Defeyter et al., 2021, p. 2). Thus, universities should aim to minimise creancy and the risk it brings with lowered trust and social capital. While this paper reports on student opinions, it should be noted that the wider institutional climate can have a major impact on the services of a university, which would also affect staff performance. The University of the South Pacific, since 2018, for instance, has continually undergone leadership and governance issues and rows that have had significant repercussions on the university's financial status (Sen, 2020).

Another implication is that universities in the Pacific should recognise the strength that comes from relying on the family as a source of support in times of difficulties and the *wantok* system (Nanau, 2020) or *Solesolevaki* (Movono & Schetvens, 2022) in Fijian, where work is done to help each other, not for individual benefit, but the common good. Kinships and relationships have always played important roles in the communal capital of Pacific societies, contributing to well-being, food security, and socio-cultural responsibilities. Whether the COVID-19 pandemic or a devastating cyclone, Veitata, Miyaji, Fujieda and Kobayashi (2020) found a strong family network, community cooperation (*solesolevaki*), and community leadership are integral to the social capital of the community, forming a valuable social safety net for the community.

Another finding of this study is that the university can use social media to gain information about COVID-19 or various disasters they might encounter and connect with students and stakeholders via virtual groups. For example, the University of the South Pacific has 12 member countries, and each campus can be a virtual group. Other groups with existing social ties, such as schools, faculties, programs, nationality and subject areas, could also be where virtual networks and social capital can be accrued.

The final study finding is that university students should be considered a vulnerable group during COVID-19 and in other crises—which are regular now—and should be supported to uncover personal capabilities and overcome disruptions. They can demonstrate civic responsibility for themselves, their peers and those who matter to them. Zhao and Watterson (2021) support this idea of civic responsibility by asserting there are three changes that education systems would need to make post-COVID-19:

1. Curriculum that is developmental, personalised and evolving. Students actively chart their own learning pathways and being helped to build capacity to deal with the unknown and uncertain instead of memorising and regurgitating solutions to known problems.
2. Curriculum that is authentic, inquiry-based and purposeful. The world students enter cannot be pre-imposed, which makes it critical to have learning that is authentic locally, nationally and has relevance in the global society.
3. Curriculum that capitalises on the strengths of synchronous and asynchronous learning. Students need to get used to regulate their own learning asynchronously as well at a particular time with the teacher.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly affected social institutions the world over, including universities in Oceania. This study intended to investigate what has helped Solomon Islands and Pasifika students cope with a rapid shift to remote learning due to the COVID-19 and how this relates to notions of social capital. Within our sample, the presence of adequate social capital has helped them cope with the sudden shift to remote learning. High social capital can provide the milieu for social trust and network between students and the institution and among themselves. The presence of social norms and the valuing of civic engagement within the Solomon Islands and Pasifika community produce productive action among members. It is vital that social networks and interaction are encouraged and formed during such crisis as the COVID-19 and remote learning. Inability to form social ties, form trusting networks can have negative repercussions to students' achievement. It is recommended that universities could have policies and strategies that encourage new social behaviour that promote building of social capital among students and the institution. It could be formal and informal engagement of the university community to ensure students and staff access shared resources to succeed. The university online system can be used to promote connections and facilitate access to services. The family, *wantoks*, the social media, played a major role as sources of support. Higher values such as the future of one's family and the drive to succeed during difficult times were also evident. The university and lecturers also need to see that they play a major role as well in the success of students during a crisis. The limitations of the study are that the sample size is small and as a result, should not be generalised to other contexts even though the ideas could be applicable in instances. This study also involves only two institutions and a segment of those universities' population. Nevertheless, universities have a serious role in seeing how they engage with students post-pandemic. The data in this study were gathered during the height of

the pandemic, but now that universities are reopening face-to-face as well as being online, there needs to be formulation of policies and frameworks that build social capital among students and staff at the institution.

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