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# 1 Analysis of University student responses to the pandemic in a formal microbiology assessment

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13  
14 Keywords: education; scientific literacy; coronavirus lockdown; qualitative evaluation; analysis of text; COVID-19;  
15 microbiology education

17 **Abstract**

18 During the coronavirus pandemic, second year students on the BSc molecular biology and genetics degree at Istanbul  
19 Technical University sat an open-ended online exam for a microbiology course in which one of the compulsory questions  
20 asked how the course had helped them during the first phase of the pandemic (April – July 2020). Fifty of 69 students  
21 gave consent for their (anonymous) responses to be analysed in order to discern any key ways in which their knowledge  
22 had been applied. The aim of the study was to investigate whether taking an advanced microbiology course increases  
23 understanding of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and has a positive impact on student behaviours with respect to public  
24 health practices. Findings were divided into four major themes: course content (information), application of course  
25 content to behaviour change (practice), professionalism, and their ‘audience’ while at home in lockdown (family and  
26 friends). Social distancing, wearing facemasks, hand and surface hygiene were described as important behaviours, with  
27 this practice informed by their basic microbiology knowledge. This paper describes a scenario where rote assessment can  
28 be used to assess wider scientific literacy with respect to application in society, providing students with an opportunity to  
29 incorporate and apply their learning into real-life situations, whilst tutors can assess constructivist learning, conceptual  
30 understanding and impact on student behaviour.

31

## 32 Introduction

33 Higher/university education, like almost all levels of education, often follows a one-directional path of learning followed  
34 by assessment. Over recent years, academics have been adjusting assessments away from the closed-book exam format,  
35 which is widely noted for not aligning to the constructivist educational approach - acknowledging that students build their  
36 understanding of science - which is widely considered a fundamental pedagogic theory (Driver, Asoko et al. 1994,  
37 Williams and Wong 2009). However, despite academic preference to expand assessment types, examination of rote  
38 learning is often preferred by students, and may also be utilised to assess understanding, translation/application of  
39 information, and extension of knowledge and experience (Quitadamo and Kurtz 2007, Watters and Watters 2007,  
40 Gikandi, Morrow et al. 2011).

41 In the microbiological sciences, a report by the American Society for Microbiology has called for academic assessment to  
42 focus on conceptual understanding (Merkel 2016). This has been echoed with a call for greater science literacy – with  
43 acknowledgement that other impactful disciplines (e.g. finance) are better understood than those potential impacts relating  
44 to microorganisms (Timmis, Cavicchioli et al. 2019). Over recent years, more focus has been placed on such conceptual  
45 understanding, ranging from the within formal teaching environment, through to educating the public about important  
46 societal impacts relating to microorganisms – for example AMR (Redfern, Bowater et al. 2020).

47 In early 2020, it became clear that what would become the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic would impact course delivery and  
48 assessment of learning, providing significant challenges to educators and University students across the globe, because  
49 many practical courses were stopped, and theory was delivered in online environments (Brancaccio-Taras, Mawn et al.  
50 2021). During this time, scientific literacy relating to microbiology became a highly desirable attribute, a requirement for  
51 understanding government policy and public health intervention and facilitating critical evaluation of media reports. Thus,  
52 the impact of SARS-CoV-2 allowed university students currently studying microbiology and molecular biology to apply,  
53 understand and evolve their learning in a global emergency– and, in comparison to the lay public, the students became  
54 experts.

55 This paper describes how one University, through a written (online) examination question, used the coronavirus pandemic  
56 as a focus for application of microbiology theory into behavioural change and science communication. The aim of this  
57 study is to determine, through self-reporting, whether taking an advanced microbiology course increases understanding of  
58 the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and has a positive impact on student behaviours with respect to public health practices.

59 As one student wrote ‘after the pandemic, we as the world started to live in a live microbiology lesson’ [sic] –  
60 acknowledging the increased scientific literacy the public will have with regards to microbiology.

## 63 Methods

### 64 Setting and sitting the examination

65 In Istanbul Technical University (ITU), undergraduate students enrolled on the Molecular Biology and Genetics B.Sc.  
66 programme study two concurrent compulsory courses in microbiology in their sophomore (second) year, during the

67 spring term. One of these courses is theoretical, and the other is practical and both are instructed in English (Table 1). In  
68 the academic year 2019-20, both courses started at the beginning of the spring term (week of February 10, 2020).  
69 However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, all in-person sessions were cancelled from March 16, 2020. The students  
70 were sent home, and online lectures began on April 6<sup>th</sup>, lasting until the end of the spring term (9 June 2020). Regarding  
71 the Microbiology Laboratory course, the initial introduction session, and the first two experiments on sterilisation  
72 techniques, preparation of culture media, methods for pure culture isolation (spreading/streaking plates), and the bacterial  
73 growth curve took place in-person during the first five weeks of the academic term, but the remaining four experiments  
74 took place via online/video lecturing. The students had had no formal teaching regarding coronavirus. They were  
75 encouraged, during the first online lecture on April 6<sup>th</sup>, to join the free Coursera course on Epidemics and COVID-19 (by  
76 Johns Hopkins University) (Coursera 2020).

77 The final exam for the theoretical course consisted of two parts. Part 1 was a take-home exam where the students had six  
78 days to answer three open-ended questions about microbiology topics covered in the first half of the academic term. Part  
79 2 was an open-book exam where the students had 2.5 hours to answer five questions that aimed to measure their  
80 knowledge on the topics covered in the second half of the academic term. Both assessments were submitted online to the  
81 course instructors. A compulsory question from the open-ended take-home exam questions challenged the students to  
82 explain how their learning of fundamental microbiology helped them and their families during the lockdown period. This  
83 question was designed to enable application and extension of the students' experience of microbiology. Due to the rapid  
84 nature of change, the University did not require assessments to have a marking scheme. As the course was taught in  
85 English, the exam was also written in English.

86 The question was "Please explain in detail how the microbiology information you gained in our lectures about infectious  
87 diseases and their epidemiology, aseptic techniques of microbiology (sterilisation, disinfection, antimicrobial techniques  
88 and agents) helped you during the COVID-19 pandemic. Please give detailed examples of how you used your  
89 microbiology and/or scientific knowledge in helping/informing people in your family and/or your community and/or how  
90 different was your behaviour and attitudes than the others (non-microbiology/molecular biology people) around you  
91 during the COVID-19 pandemics and the lockdown period." The instructors anticipated answers would mention both  
92 scientifically accurate information in addition to personal experience.

### 93 Analysis of student responses

94 Data (student responses) were collected as part of a formal examination at the Istanbul Technical University – and as  
95 such, collection of data was not for the primary purpose of this analysis. Therefore, use of data followed advice regarding  
96 secondary use of data provided by the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational  
97 Research (BERA 2018), which included anonymising data and seeking consent for inclusion in the study following the  
98 completion of the examination. It was explained to students that their responses could be used as part of a research project  
99 and students were asked to provide informed consent in writing if they allowed their response to be included in the study.  
00 Of the 69 students who answered the exam question, 50 provided informed consent to being part of this study.

01 In order to identify whether there were any key themes in the student responses, a qualitative approach was taken for the  
02 analysis (Cohen, Manion et al. 2017, Verran, Redfern et al. 2018). The essays were combined into one document  
03 containing 27,833 words (with an average of 556.6 words per response) and three academics (the authors/assessors) read

04 the essays and independently identified themes that emerged. The separate analyses were compared so that any  
05 differences in staff perception might be identified, and that no important themes might be overlooked (or less important  
06 themes over-emphasised). In addition, occasional stand-out examples of student prose (phrases) were selected to illustrate  
07 their commitment to their studies, behaviour and care for others.

08 This qualitative analysis of student responses was a significant task, but it is not easy to suggest a simpler approach.  
09 Objective quantitative segmentation of the frequency of word was used on occasion (using the Microsoft Word feature  
10 'Find') when qualitative analysis indicated that there might be some value, but the more nuanced opinions, observations  
11 and comments were only discerned through subjective scrutiny.

## 12 **Results and Discussion**

13 When marking this work, the course instructor (ZPÇ) was struck by the commitment of the students to implement their  
14 learning, as demonstrated through changes in behaviour, and by the sense of responsibility they presented in  
15 communicating microbiological principles to their families and friends. As with any set of student responses, there were  
16 some that specifically answered the question, and some that provided information about coronavirus without applying it.  
17 Some provided a significant amount of information on basic microbiology without application. However, in all but one  
18 response (which provided an excellent summary of the pandemic), well-written answers gave sensible recommendations  
19 about behaviour during the coronavirus pandemic.

20 Since the student responses focused on the same topic, the three assessors identified similar themes. Variations between  
21 the assessors derived primarily from the degree of detail extracted from the responses, and thence the number of themes  
22 identified. Author 1 (ZPÇ) produced a comprehensive breakdown of key points relevant to the question that were made  
23 by each student. She also listed many associated themes: for example, 17 different themes in response 1, an additional one  
24 in response 2 and ten more in response 3, and so on. Author 2 (JV) manually grouped these themes into larger categories  
25 (for example themes related to facemasks), and cross-referenced them with 13 wider themes proposed by author 3 (JR)  
26 and her own five behaviour-focused headings (Table 2). A final overview enabled all themes to be categorised under the  
27 following four agreed main sections: course content (information); application of course content to behavioural change  
28 (practice); professionalism; and the students' audience whilst in lockdown at home. Each of these will be addressed in  
29 more detail below. Model answers were not prepared due to time limitation (the breadth of student experience could not  
30 have been predicted as the pandemic unfolded), but our response analysis indicates that there is opportunity to construct  
31 appropriate yet flexible schemes.

### 32 *Course content/information*

33 Of course, much of the scientific information provided in the essays focused on virology and medical  
34 microbiology/epidemiology. In terms of how individual students used this information, the following broad observations  
35 were made: Fundamental information such as 'what is a virus' was typically mentioned first as information given to  
36 family (particularly) and friends. More nuanced detail included the fact that there were no specific treatments yet that  
37 specific antiviral agents were necessary and that it took some time to produce a vaccine. Epidemiological information  
38 included mention of asymptomatic cases the duration of illness and the R value contributing to the shape and likely  
39 duration of the pandemic. Only one student mentioned contact tracing ('filiation'), but this is probably because the essays  
40 were written relatively early in the pandemic. In addition, it was clear that the basic information on disinfection and

41 sanitisation were especially helpful for the students in their attempts to explain scientific principles to their audiences.  
42 Translation of knowledge included information as to why enveloped viruses are destroyed by soap/detergent, information  
43 about aseptic technique applied to hygienic practice, the principles of disease transmission and filters related to the  
44 importance of masks, and the theory of disinfection and sanitization to the use of appropriate antimicrobials.

45 Considering more specific information, the lack of effectiveness of antibiotics, or antibacterial products, and the  
46 difficulties of developing specific antiviral agents were recognised and emphasised by many of the students (69 mentions  
47 in student essays). The inappropriate use of hydroxychloroquine (two students) was also mentioned. Several students  
48 mentioned mutation (18 students) and PCR (seven students), noting in addition that they explained the importance of  
49 mutation in RNA viruses, the potential impact on epidemiology and vaccination, and so on. It is impressive that these  
50 relatively difficult topics were discussed with their families – although of course all of the students were studying  
51 molecular biology and genetics. Using Word ‘finder’ for particular words used in student responses, the words  
52 disinfection/ant and sterilization were each used in the essays 84 times; sanitizers 19 times (Figure 1), demonstrating that  
53 key public health concepts are present in a significant number of instances throughout the student responses. However, it  
54 is important to note that the presence of a word does not indicate appropriate contextual information. (*vide infra*).

### 55 *Behavioural change*

56  
57 The key behavioural changes asked of populations during the pandemic were re-iterated in high numbers in the student  
58 responses (Figure 2): social distancing, quarantine and isolation; the use of facemasks and the importance of hand and  
59 surface hygiene, and to a lesser extent, glove wearing. The students adhered strictly to the rules, and were generally  
60 fastidious in actively ensuring that rules were followed correctly by others. Although this might be perceived as being  
61 ‘obvious’, the fact that all students were relating their microbiological knowledge to appropriate behaviours during a  
62 pandemic is an impressive demonstration of microbial literacy (Timmis, Cavicchioli et al. 2019). Counts of frequency of  
63 relevant words in student essays (for example hand(s), 114(53); mask, 127) again provided data indicating student  
64 awareness on key public health interventions, but they were not helpful in our attempts to understand specific behaviours.  
65 Attempts to sub-divide particular behaviours through word usage was similarly unhelpful (for example home, 57;  
66 quarantine, social distanc(ing), 15(13); quarantine, 18;14 days/2 weeks, 9/3 isolation, 9).

67  
68 It was fascinating for the UK reader to find out about ‘cologne’, a very common traditional fragrance/hand sanitizer (70 –  
69 80% ethanol) used in Turkey that is kept in most households for hygienic purposes and is offered to guests, as a part of  
70 Turkish hospitality. Cologne was in high demand in Turkey during the pandemic  
71 (<http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20200407-turkeys-unique-hand-sanitiser>). One student used their knowledge of the  
72 importance of ethanol as an antiviral agent to purchase aftershave (checking the ethanol concentration) due to a shortage  
73 of cologne. Another made their own disinfectant. There were some interesting additions to the more frequently listed  
74 behaviours, including correct laundry procedures, food sanitation protocols, and, rather vaguely, the importance of  
75 maintaining a healthy immune system.

76 There were several examples given where students explained aspects of coronavirus epidemiology. They were often  
77 asked when the pandemic would end (19 students mentioned this), and also had to dispel the notion that incidence would  
78 fall when the temperature rose, bringing their knowledge of UV irradiation into their explanations.

## 79 *Professionalism*

80 A particularly impressive dimension to the essay responses was the mature way in which the students took on the  
81 responsibility of conveying information about appropriate behaviour to their audiences (Figure 3). By scanning the essays  
82 and grouping sub-themes within the topic of ‘professionalism’, it was apparent that the students’ learning experiences had  
83 helped them with knowledge, understanding and application of relevant microbiology (n=49). They also recognised that a  
84 lack of understanding amongst non-microbiologists affected their behaviour (n=41). As noted above, many students were  
85 confident enough to answer questions and actively inform those who were not following the rules. They were keenly  
86 aware of regulations (over 65s and under 20s confined to home – two students), including self-isolation for 14 days when  
87 they returned home from University (six students) as well as waiting for a few days for airports to become quieter (two  
88 students). Fifteen students overtly recognised themselves to be experts. Five students noted the psychological strain of  
89 living through a pandemic – and an additional three students noted their own anxieties related to their increased  
90 knowledge on the topic. The more quantitative focus on the frequency of word or phrases used reinforced many of these  
91 observations, albeit in a less nuanced manner: for example, the theme of social responsibility was identified on 30  
92 occasions.

93 The theme of continuous learning was evident from many student responses (n=42), with several students noting how  
94 their knowledge had helped them to follow research progress in the area, and to identify reliable sources of information,  
95 which in turn helped them to explain often difficult concepts to others, occasionally through blogs or social media. They  
96 also appreciated the difficulties of understanding complex terminology.

97 Conspiracy theories (n=33) have been rife globally, and the students were very aware of their responsibility in helping to  
98 clarify misconceptions or ‘fake news’. For example about 5G, or bioweapons (‘the disease is a zoonosis’), to emphasise  
99 information pollution or ‘infollution’ (‘yellow journalism’, ‘fake news’, ‘clickbait’), and to highlight the ‘absurdity of  
00 injecting antimicrobials’ or drinking cologne. One student noted:

01 ‘learning the truth becomes harder’

02 A pride in their choice of career became evident as the students practiced their science (six students), along with some  
03 humility in acknowledging their own limitations (one student) – one student sadly felt that they had had ‘no effect’. Some  
04 quotes in the student essays emphasised the more positive points, for example:

05 ‘I realised that society needed people like me more’

06 ‘This pandemic period has improved my view of looking at everything differently than anyone else’

07 ‘...’motivated me to study my lessons more and do more research about my field’.

## 08 *Audience*

09 As they returned home, the students’ main audience for their ‘science communication’ was their family and friends. There  
10 were 133 examples where family was referenced (friends, 31; relatives, 10). This observation was confirmed using a word  
11 search. The theme of ‘public health messaging’ was noted on 160 occasions, demonstrating how the behaviour-focused  
12 practices were implemented.

## 13 *General Remarks*



14 The authors are not aware of any similar study that has presented such an in-depth analysis of student essay responses,  
15 using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Although it proved to be a laborious task, the work has revealed an  
16 impressive demonstration of student knowledge and its translation/application, science literacy and social responsibility,  
17 and we suggest that the practice of qualitative analysis in microbiology be considered more widely in educational research  
18 carried out by microbiologists (of course, social scientists are very familiar with such practices).

19 We believe this paper describes a scenario where rote assessment can be used to assess wider scientific literacy with  
20 respect to application in society, providing students with an opportunity to incorporate and apply their learning into real-  
21 life situations. This approach provides an interesting insight for academics who are looking for innovative modes of  
22 assessment, because our analysis has demonstrated that rote assessment need not be totally dismissed in assessing  
23 constructivist learning, conceptual understanding and impact on student behaviour. Instead, consideration can be given to  
24 constructing rote assessments that use real-world, timely examples (microbiology provides many such examples) around  
25 which students can apply their theoretical learning. Assessments that enable students to interpret their own experiences  
26 within the context of their knowledge base and changing external events provide opportunity for higher level learning,  
27 and this paper supports such a premise.

## 28 **Conclusion**

29 This straightforward examination assignment provides an excellent example as to how student knowledge affected their  
30 behaviour during coronavirus lockdown, and helped them to inform others, thus satisfying our original aim. The essay  
31 responses also, unusually, shed light on human aspects of disease epidemiology, rather than on the pathogen, and show  
32 how human interactions affect behaviours. These more personal dimensions are not usually addressed in students'  
33 scientific essays, and it was very heartening to read of their careful interpretation and application of the science that they  
34 had learned, and how they modified their behaviour and helped to inform and change the behaviour of others. The  
35 exercise could usefully be repeated in other assessment situations, allowing academics to explore the opportunities of rote  
36 assessment in conceptual understanding and constructivist learning, whilst allowing students to apply their knowledge to  
37 real-world events, and consider their own behaviours (scientific literacy).

38 As one student said:

39 'in nature, adaptive and strong creatures will live, so we need to adapt to this situation'

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17 **Figure Legends**

18

19 **Figure 1** – Frequency of word usage in student essays that focused on knowledge-based information that they used when  
20 informing their audiences during coronavirus lockdown.

21 **Figure 2** – Using student essay responses and the detailed analysis of themes, key behaviours that were recommended  
22 during the coronavirus pandemic were noted by students. Behaviours around social distancing, wearing of facemasks,  
23 hand hygiene and surface hygiene have been grouped together. Other common, or interesting observations have also been  
24 included.

25 **Figure 3** – Themes relating to the students’ sense of professionalism and their role as ‘expert’ were identified from their  
26 essays.

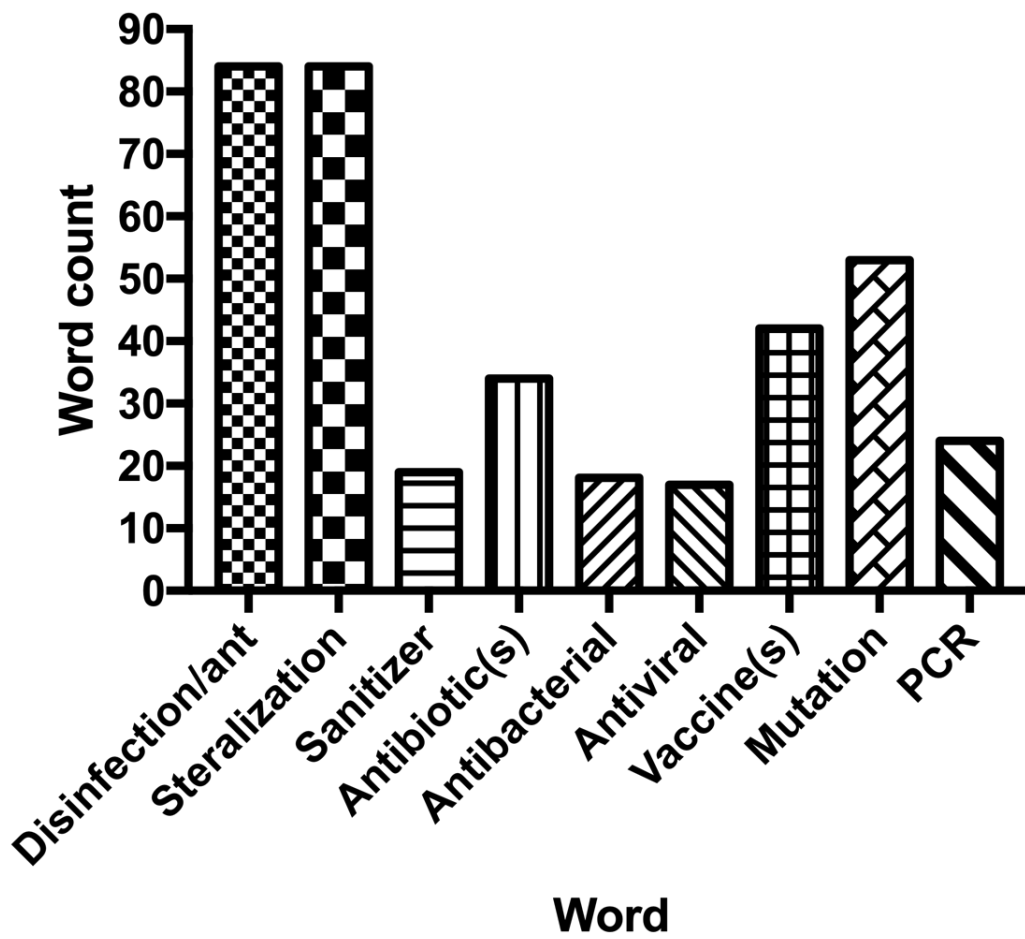
27

28

29

	<b>BIO216E Microbiology</b>	<b>BIO216EL Microbiology Laboratory</b>
Delivery mode	Theory	Practical
Content	Three hours of lecture delivery a week, over 14 weeks	Laboratory classes were delivered every two weeks, covering six experiments and an introduction session (aseptic technique and report writing etc)
Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to microbiology</li> <li>• Scope and history of microbiology</li> <li>• Microscopy and staining techniques</li> <li>• Sterilization and disinfection</li> <li>• Characteristics of prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells</li> <li>• Microbial growth and microbial cultures</li> <li>• Factors affecting microbial growth</li> <li>• Microbial genetics</li> <li>• Applications of microbial genetics</li> <li>• Antimicrobial therapy</li> <li>• Host-microorganism interactions</li> <li>• Applied microbiology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the Microbiology Laboratory: safety rules and guidelines, instructions for laboratory report preparation and submission</li> <li>• Sterilization and preparation of culture media &amp; methods for pure culture isolation</li> <li>• The bacterial growth curve: the role of temperature</li> <li>• The effects of pH and osmotic pressure on microbial growth &amp; quantitative determination of bacterial numbers</li> <li>• Staining bacteria &amp; endospores and spore staining</li> <li>• Screening of Escherichia coli and Bacillus subtilis cells for antibiotic and heavy metal resistances by paper disc-agar diffusion assay</li> <li>• Identification of bacteria through biochemical testing</li> </ul>
Learning objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the Microbiology Laboratory: safety rules and guidelines, instructions for laboratory report preparation and submission</li> <li>• Sterilization and preparation of culture media &amp; methods for pure culture isolation</li> <li>• The bacterial growth curve: the role of temperature</li> <li>• The effects of pH and osmotic pressure on microbial growth &amp; quantitative determination of bacterial numbers</li> <li>• Staining bacteria &amp; endospores and spore staining</li> <li>• Screening of Escherichia coli and Bacillus subtilis cells for antibiotic and heavy metal resistances by paper disc-agar diffusion assay</li> <li>• Identification of bacteria through biochemical testing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn the basic concepts of microbiology such as structure and function of microorganisms, and the principles of microscopy in an applied fashion</li> <li>• Understand the principles of sterilization, disinfection and microbial growth control by experimental applications</li> <li>• Grasp the basics of microbial physiology and the principles of microbial growth by experimental applications</li> <li>• Write scientific laboratory reports in the field of microbiology</li> </ul>

<b>Broad themes</b>	<b>Focused themes</b>	<b>Overall (final) themes</b>
No discussion of how microbiology education helped in the COVID-19 pandemic or how it helped inform others	Student study-specific factors	Audience
No discussion of how microbiology education helped inform others	Behavioural changes	Information/knowledge
Directly mentions discussion with family/friends about global spread of SARS-CoV-2	Behaviour in advising about coronavirus	Applying information (practice)
Directly mentions discussion with family/friends about principles of virology/SARS-CoV-2 (e.g. mutation)	Clarification of misconceptions	Professionalism
Directly mentions discussion with family/friends about the timeframe of the pandemic (likely long duration)	Explanation of specific scientific concepts	
Directly mentions discussion with family/friends about social distancing		
Directly mentions discussion with family/friends about viruses are different to bacteria/antibiotics do not work		
Directly mentions discussion relating to misinformation/incorrect guidance (e.g. face masks)		
Directly mentions discussion with family/friends about hygiene measures		
Personal examples of preventative measures (e.g. keeping distance from family/friends)		
Noted compliance with preventative measures was inadequate in (all/some) aspects of society		
Noted personal compliance with preventative measures		
Noted compliance with preventative measures		



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