



Take AIM and Keep Your Students Engaged

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Abstract

This paper outlines the benefits to distance education teachers of formatting a weekly online newsletter in accordance with motivational learning theory. It reflects on the delivery of weekly AIM newsletters to undergraduate economics students at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand via Moodle. The acronym, AIM, stands for **A**cademic content, **I**nformation for the course and **M**otivation—three critical elements required to meet the challenges of effective course facilitation. The AIM newsletter integrates all three of these key components in one easy-to-use product. The object of AIM is to keep students engaged in economics and reduce the perceived distance from distance education. This article discusses the context, underpinning theory, practicalities, and the way forward for AIM.

Keywords: student engagement, e-learning, teaching, teaching economics, motivation, reusable, practical application, reflection, ako, communication

Introduction

This article is a critical reflection on the use of the weekly AIM newsletter. AIM is an acronym in which “A” stands for “Academic content”, “I” stands for “Information for the course” and “M” stands for “Motivation”. The AIM newsletter is a key component in the online delivery of The Economic Environment (“the course”) at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (“Open Polytechnic”). Initially, AIM was created by the author to meet:

- an increase in workloads due to staff reductions that resulted in higher student/lecturer ratios
- a growing student demand for immediate replies to queries
- an increasing number of requests from students for links between the theory taught and real applications
- a greater uptake of technology and internet access by students
- the increasing requirements for meeting education performance indicators, as outlined by the Tertiary Education Commission (2009).

The AIM newsletter seeks to address the above needs, keep students engaged in economics, and reduce the perceived distance in distance education. The great philosopher and educationalist John Dewey (1933, p. 78) posits: “We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflection on experience”; hence the reflective nature of this article. The article will begin by outlining the environment in which the course is delivered at the Open Polytechnic and the engagement challenge. Following this, the article will contextualise the research that underpins the use of the AIM newsletter. Next, the article will discuss what AIM comprises and the practicalities relating

to its delivery and, finally, the article will provide an overall reflection of the use of the AIM newsletter in the course, including an evaluation of AIM and an outline of future developments.

Context

The course is an introductory economics paper that applies elements of economic theory to contemporary business issues. The course is delivered predominately to business students enrolled in either the Bachelor of Business as a compulsory paper, or in the New Zealand Diploma of Business as a core paper. Because there are no prerequisites other than those prescribed for entry into a New Zealand tertiary educational institution, the course is stand-alone. There are no higher level economics courses offered at the Open Polytechnic. Assignment 1 (worth 20%) is usually assessed in week 5 of a 17-week trimester, assignment 2 (worth 30%) is assessed in week 10, and assignment 3 (worth 50%) is assessed in week 17.

The course is delivered online via the learning management system, Moodle. A learning guide is available to all students on the course page, and contains the course material, activities with feedback, reflections, and additional readings. In addition, the course page has discussion forums, PowerPoint presentations, chats, and formative multiple-choice quizzes. Students are required to have access to the course page to download the assignments, upload their scripts, and receive their marked scripts with feedback. They purchase a textbook, and they are also sent a package of course material (learning guide in hard copy) and can successfully complete the course by working through the learning guide and textbook by themselves. Students do not have to interact with other students but are encouraged to join the community on the course page through AIM. Like many other distant education courses, this course is dominated by mature students, with 74% of all students studying in 2014 being 25 years old or more.

Open Polytechnic (2013) embraces the concepts of *ako*, which is Māori for both “to teach” and “to learn”. *Ako* has three key principles:

1. *whakapiri*: engagement and retention of students participating in the learning process
2. *whakamārama*: enlightenment through teaching and learning that brings transformation in students and our practice
3. *whakamana*: empowerment of students for lifelong e-learning and active citizenship.

Thus the Open Polytechnic perceives learning to have a dynamic relationship with knowledge, resulting in personal growth. The author endeavours to embrace all three of these principles in the AIM newsletter.

The early stages of AIM

In 2010, after a number of changes in the Open Polytechnic Economics section, the author was asked to take over the paper, *The Economic Environment*, during a trimester. Shortly after taking over the course, a large number of similar (but not exactly the same) emails and telephone calls were received from students asking administrative questions about extensions and assignment feedback. Because the emails came directly to the author’s email box rather than through the course page, each email required an individual response. This took considerable time, despite the extensive use of “copy and paste”.

Initially, as an introduction to students, and then to proactively stop answering the same or similar questions multiple times, the author used the bulk email function button on Moodle (the news forum) to inform students of relevant administrative information at irregular intervals when the need arose. Information also included hours of work and helpdesk (computer support) availability. Students are automatically subscribed to the news forum and therefore receive pre-emptive emails from the author.

This information was usually already available on the course page or in printed hand-outs that were sent to students, but was perhaps difficult for some students to find. After bulk emails were sent out via the news forum, the number of administrative questions from students declined dramatically (by approximately 70%). This meant that students had relevant information (perhaps that they did not know existed) presented to them at an appropriate time, in a format that they could read and use. They therefore did not need to request such information, resulting in a decrease in overall workload for the author and the student.

In 2009, Ormond Simpson, a visiting professor on sabbatical to the Open Polytechnic from the Open University, presented material on the importance of motivation in distance education. The author attended several of these presentations and a seed was sown as to the importance of motivational material in weekly bulk emails to students. By 2011, the bulk emails were transformed into what is now known as the AIM newsletter. In Trimester 1, 2014, AIM was sent weekly to the course's 79 students in New Zealand, Australia, and India.

Underpinning theory

The theories that support AIM are motivational theory and motivational design theory. Key thinkers in the field argue that student motivation is a key ingredient in keeping students engaged (Bonk & Khoo, 2014; DeVito, 2012; Guyan, 2013; Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011; Keller, 2008; Moore, 1980; Muilenburg & Berg, 2005; Salmon, 2004; Simpson, 2008a, 2008b, and 2012; and Stravredes, 2011). Simpson (2008a) noted that many distance learners are mature students who may face isolation, as well as additional family and work commitments, resulting in higher levels of transactional distance. Moore (1980) argues that transactional distance is the psychological and communication space that occurs in distance education, and that transactional distance can be reduced through increased dialogue between teachers and learners.

Simpson (2012) posits that student contact needs to be proactive in distance education, with the institution contacting students first rather than waiting for students to contact them. Stavredes (2011) argues that the facilitator needs to help motivate the learner by telling personal stories and demonstrating knowledge and passion in the subject area. Guyan (2013) argues that facilitators need to facilitate the course to ensure that student motivation is maintained. Woods (2002) posits that regardless of frequency, instructor-initiated emails that are outside any required group discussions result in some students being positively affected. Bonk & Khoo (2014, p. 157) argue that without relevance (which includes meaningful, authentic and interesting material) "learners will fail to tune in".

The importance of motivational design was outlined by Keller (1979), who later developed it into his **A**ttention, **R**elevance, **C**onfidence, and **S**atisfaction (ARCS) model.

In brief, we can say that in order to have motivated students, their curiosity must be aroused and sustained; the instruction must be perceived to be relevant to personal values or instrumental to accomplishing desired goals, they must have personal conviction that they will be able to succeed; and the consequences of the learning experience must be consistent with the personal incentives of the learner. (Keller, 2008, p. 178)

The ARCS model has been used to design the AIM newsletter. The effectiveness of AIM can be benchmarked against procedural learning design set out by Keller in his ARCS model and by taking into account the practical guidance provided by Simpson (2012), Mayo-Smith (2003) and others when delivering information in motivational emails. In what follows, the author will explain how Keller's principles can be translated into practice in an AIM-style newsletter.

Attention

Keller's ARCS model posits that motivational design requires the learning material to first attract the attention of the students. AIM's subject line and sender information provide the first opportunity to do this. Mayo-Smith (2003) identifies the subject line as the most important item of any email because it is the key to getting any email read. She argues that the subject line needs to be easily identifiable to entice the student to read it and to prevent it ending up in spam. In addition, the subject line should be unique and logical, so that students can immediately recognise it amongst the myriad emails they receive. They can see it is from a reputable source and that it contains important information about their course.

Once the email is opened, typography is paramount if the student is to read and absorb the contents. Simpson (2012) and (Mayo-Smith 2003) consider personalisation of emails to be very important—it should be welcoming and addressed to the individual student. Larson & Picard (2008) demonstrated that high-quality typography can induce a positive mood, and thus encourage further reading. Mayo-Smith (2003) recommends using boxes and columns with bolded headings, directly followed by information, allowing the reader to skim and then read areas of interest in detail. In addition, she argues that, because students read from the top down, the most important information needs to be at the top of an email.

Length and size of the email are also important components. Mayo-Smith (2003) argues that the emails need to be concise and to the point—less is more, and one page is more inviting than two. This is supported by Simpson (2012), who uses fewer than 400 words in his Proactive Motivation Student Support emails, and advocates using personal stories and humour to keep students engaged.

Relevance

Keller's second element in the ARCS model is relevance. For AIM to be effective it needs to be relevant to the course and the student's interest. AIM maintains relevance by providing connection points between economic theory and real examples in a variety of formats.

Confidence

The third element in Keller's ARCS model is confidence. AIM must be written in a style that provides positive reinforcement to the student, improving their confidence by confirming that they can succeed in the course. Information on ways to learn, where to seek help, requirements of the course, and identifying areas of personal control should be identified so that the student has confidence and continues to engage.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction rounds out Keller's first principles of the ARCS model. AIM needs to provide satisfaction and ensure that the student's perceived benefits outweigh their perceived costs. This will result in AIM being consistently read by all students.

Reflecting on the nature of AIM

AIM is delivered weekly via Moodle 2 to all students in the course. AIM is a proactive motivational support mechanism which draws on and extends Simpson's (2008a) model. AIM opens the conversation between student and author and is designed to engage students and keep them engaged (whakapiri) in the course through weekly communications and connections. Students are often prompted by the AIM newsletter to then email the author or make a posting on the forum with questions about the course. In line with practices outlined by Bonk and Khoo (2014), AIM draws on the author's and students' personalities, activities, course content, and

current events to make the connection between author and student meaningful, authentic, and interesting.

A = Academic content

AIM provides discussion on the current topic, lists appropriate readings, and provides links to economic news—from both mainstream New Zealand media and overseas material—which is relevant to the course and reinforces economic concepts in the weekly module. This provides enlightenment (*whakamārama*) that decisions on economic matters affect all of us in our daily lives, and the course cannot, therefore, be studied in a vacuum. Examples include articles, interviews, and/or video clips which discuss the changing price of milk and petrol, as well as providing statistics and commentary on economic growth, unemployment, and inflation in the appropriate week.

Links provided include media in written form (articles on Stuff or *New Zealand Herald* websites), oral form (interviews or commentaries from Radio NZ or Radio Live), and visual form (TV1, TV3, and YouTube). Using a variety of links is important and designed to meet three of Fleming's four (2014) visual aural, read/write and kinaesthetic (VARK) learning preferences. These links are also selected and highlighted to provide “meaningful choices ... not just options” (Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011, p. 33) to the student. Providing these links also ensures students do not waste unnecessary time searching for validating material.

The size of AIM is an obvious consideration in its production. Because visuals increase the size of the email and are not easily achieved in the news forum of Moodle version 2.3, the AIM newsletter is text only. Visuals also result in longer download time—a concern for dial-up users.

The number of links in AIM varies, but averages five per week. The size of file or length of the clip is identified with a clear indication as to whether it will provide the student with reinforcement of the topic, up-skill students, or extend their knowledge outside the learning outcomes. These links provide encouraging and continuous development for all students now and in the future. Too many links or too large a file will waste the student's time and ultimately demotivate them. Headings such as “Not compulsory but very interesting”, “A light-hearted look” and “If you are having trouble understanding the ... ” attract attention and allow each student to decide on the relevance of the material.

I = Information for the course

AIM provides information on the administration and mechanics of the course. Although this information might be available to students elsewhere on the course page or the Open Polytechnic website, its inclusion in AIM provides the student with accessible, timely, and relevant material to ensure their valuable learning time is not wasted on administrative searches that might ultimately demotivate them. Examples of this information include the current week's readings, when an assignment is due, when assignments will be returned, how to access the marked assignments, and student feedback.

Information is also provided on additional resources that are available at the Open Polytechnic to support students, empowering (*whakamana*) them with knowledge and relevant assistance. In addition, AIM breaks the learning guide into logical smaller weekly units of study that are consistent with a suggested study plan. Flexibility is maintained for the student because they decide when and where they will study. Assignment deadlines are consistently highlighted in AIM; however, options are also noted and links for extensions identified.

M = Motivation

AIM provides motivational material including quotes, personal experiences, and previous student experiences on motivational themes that include struggles and successes. In addition, connections between economics and movies, books, and cartoons are used to reinforce the concept that economics is a part of their everyday life. The concept of including links to movies is not new and was highlighted to the author in Mateer's (2006) book *Economics in the movies*. Examples of links included in AIM newsletters are *Erin Brockovich* (2000 film), with a link to the official trailer; *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness* (2008 book) and a link to the review by *The Economist*; and *The Crisis of Credit Visualized –HD* by Jonathan Jarvis (animated video) link.

The author considers that the students were motivated, at least in some small way, at the beginning of the course; after all, they enrolled in the course and either paid their fees to the Open Polytechnic or took out a student loan. There is perhaps extrinsic motivation as students see successful completion of the course as taking them a step closer to their goal of obtaining a degree or diploma. Hartnett, St. George, & Dron (2011, p. 31) posit that “motivation is not a one-dimensional trait, but is complex, multifaceted and influenced by both person and context.” The author agrees, and notes that the student context is constantly changing. Students may experience amotivation (lack of motivation) due to unexpected events such as death of a relative or personal illness, thus reducing their desire for learning. Time is limited and the opportunity costs of learning are real. An environmental change may result in the marginal costs of study outweighing marginal benefits for an individual in a particular time period. Therefore, to ensure that student motivation continues throughout the course, and to energise flagging students back into the course, regular weekly communication by AIM helps all students to stay engaged. By providing “meaningful and authentic choices” (Bonk & Khoo 2014, p. 157) within AIM, student curiosity may be aroused and their interest may be activated, reactivated, and maintained.

AIM also provides a summary of what has been discussed during the week, reinforcing what has been learnt and looking positively to the future, encouraging all students to join the community on the course page. Students are asked, through AIM, to reflect on their own effort in the assignment and to note what they have learnt—not just focus on their marks.

How is AIM delivered?

AIM is sent via the course page news forum through Moodle 2.3, not through the author's email address. This models behaviour and encourages students to visit the course page and participate in the forums. Delivery through Moodle has several positive outcomes: first, a copy of the AIM newsletter is available on the course page for all students at all times during the course; second, only students who are currently enrolled are sent AIM newsletters because the course page participant list is updated and maintained by Academic Registry. Unfortunately, in Moodle 2.3, the news forum does not allow personalisation of the email as recommended by Simpson and Mayo-Smith. To counteract this deficiency, the author uses generic and timely greetings such as “Kia Ora”, “Good afternoon”, and “Happy Easter”. Such phrases place the author in the student's culture and time zone.

The author uses the course code, week number, and week topic as the subject line for AIM to grab the attention of students and ensure that they recognise it as a valid email. For example, (MC)2014|520/71120|S3: AIM: Week 4: Supply and demand: elasticity. This consistent style ensures easy identification of the AIM newsletter and easy access if students save and file AIM independently. Mayo-Smith (2003) advocates using colour in the emails. This is not currently being used, and is unlikely to be used because of the additional time required in production and the possibility that students could waste costly coloured ink if they print the newsletter. Capital letters were used occasionally in the subject line; however, because this is equivalent to shouting

at someone over the internet (and hard to read), the practice was stopped in 2014. AIM uses a mix of Times Roman font (plain, italics and bold) because these are the only options in the Moodle 2.3 news forum. Sub-paragraph headers are bolded to highlight the path students are to take. Keywords are also bolded to ensure students' eyes rest longer on important information.

In Trimester 1, 2014, the author trialled a reader/printer friendly PDF version of AIM on the course page with a link from the AIM newsletter. The PDF included the same written material, but it was displayed in columns and boxes. The PDF also used different fonts and provided visual material to aid understanding of different economic concepts. Although the adage that 'A picture paints a thousand words' may be true, the time taken to find relevant material and receive copyright approval meant it was very difficult to produce. Statistics from the course page show that 35% of students viewed the reader/printer friendly version twice or more during the trimester. This success has meant that in Trimester 3, 2014, the reader/printer friendly edition has contained at least one visual to support student learning. To compare the two editions, see:

- Appendix A for a recent example of the AIM newsletter sent through Moodle: (MC)2014|520/71120|S3: AIM: Week 4: Supply and demand: elasticity
- Appendix B for a recent example of the reader/printer AIM newsletter with visual material: AIM: Week 4: Supply and demand: elasticity: reader/printer friendly edition.

When is AIM delivered?

AIM is sent out weekly by the course leader to provide a positive environment for the learner, and a regular teaching presence in the course. Monday (before 4 p.m.) was specifically chosen as the best day and time to post AIM because it is the beginning of a new topic and so the author can provide:

- a summary of the previous topic forum discussions
- an introduction to the new topic
- links to current relevant media stories that match theory to practice
- relevant information about the mechanics of the course
- assurance that the posting makes the forum daily digest for students who opt for the one email a day from the Open Polytechnic containing all posts on enrolled courses (Open Polytechnic Moodle 2.3 forum daily digest deadline is set at 5 p.m.).

AIM is a reusable product, although each newsletter is unique in terms of its personality and material. The newsletters from previous trimesters provide a template for drafting AIM in the new trimester (e.g., Week 6 is always Theory of the Firm regardless of the trimester). However, as the course leader role rotates between the two staff teaching economics, there are inevitably some changes required for each offering, including items relating to personality, stories, humour, summaries of discussion forums, and relevant media connections.

Conclusions about AIM

Because composing and posting AIM takes approximately 2–3 hours per week, the AIM newsletter is a relatively low-cost product, regardless of who produces it in the Economics section. The time taken to produce AIM is affected by the size and detail of student discussions on the previous topic, the availability of relevant media content, and other work commitments. The author considers it has resulted in a reduction of 70% in administrative questions from learners asking the same or similar questions, and thus less time is spent on composing and responding to administrative emails; and this must apply to both author and student. In the course evaluations, some students considered that the AIM newsletter was a vital part of the course

(amongst other things), and some students placed AIM in the category “the best thing about the course”. AIM opens a conversation and keeps the conversation open throughout the trimester.

AIM’s content reinforces learning by complementing the learning guide and preparing learners for the week ahead. Economic theory is matched with practice because real examples are used to capture the student’s interest and enlighten them. Extension points, via links, are given to further stimulate learners’ thinking, growing their interest in economics both now and in the future. In addition, links to student support are provided for those students who need or would like remedial material. These strategies signpost relevant help and empower students to find their own solutions. Thus AIM’s proactive communications embrace whakapiri, whakamārama, and whakamana, the Open Polytechnic’s key organisational learning principles of ako.

The author also receives personal satisfaction through her proactive engagement with students, and considers isolation and transactional distance are reduced because students find connection points with material and the author. In face-to-face instruction, the students experience verbal tone, facial expression, and emotions; thus, it is not just what you say but how you say it. In online communication, there is no body language. Therefore visual presentation is critical in replacing the face-to-face experience; and the written tone, including telling stories and humour, is highly relevant.

It is submitted that the AIM newsletter sits very comfortably within the research on motivational theory and motivational design. AIM has proved to be an efficient means of dealing with student queries, and it has provided students with real connection points between economic theory and practice.

Way forward

In the immediate future the author will continue to refine AIM and, in line with the findings of this reflection, continue to provide more visuals within the reader/printer friendly edition as well as attempt to use even more relevant stories and humour within AIM. In addition, in the next trimester the author will trial an oral version of AIM to meet the preferences of different learners. In the long term, the author intends to undertake research into the effectiveness and efficiency of AIM in meeting education performance indicators, and investigate the students’ perspective of the value of this reusable product.

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Biographical notes

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Appendix A

(MC)2014|520/71120|S3: AIM: Week 4: Supply and demand: elasticity.



[\(MC\)2014|520/71120|S3](#) » [Forums](#) » [News, Updates and Notices](#) » [AIM: Week 4: Supply and demand: elasticity](#)



AIM: Week 4: Supply and demand: elasticity

by [Catherine Nash \(99900820t\)](#) - Monday, 1 December 2014, 1:38 PM

Kia ora and welcome to week 4!

Attached is the link to [reader/printer friendly edition](#)

I trust you had a restful weekend particularly as there was no early morning call to All Black rugby. In the weekend I went for my first run in nearly a year. A month ago I signed up for the Cigna Round the Bays run and I have been improving my fitness with walking after work. I know I need to start my training now if I am to successfully complete the whole run. Some days I will be able to do more than others however I know I can't leave it until January or February as there will not be enough time for me to reach the required fitness level. This is a little bit like studying really. Following the study plan, creating a routine and sticking to it should enable you to successfully complete the course.

Assignment 1 is due **9 December**; worth **20%** of your final mark. **An extension of one week is available.** Log into [My Open Polytechnic Frequently Asked questions](#), for information on "**Where do I request an assessment extension**". Assignments will be marked and **returned by 23 December with Feedback**. The Learning Centre is offering **writing support services** for all students, [see Assignment writing link](#).

Week 4: Supply and demand: Elasticity

Great to see the discussion on the forums re elasticity. See reader/printer friendly link above for a pictorial example of the elasticity concept and [course page link for the mathematical](#)

[calculation using the midpoint formula](#) on the “Discussion forum for students”.

Readings: Module 1.2 Hubbard Chapter 4: Feel free to start on Module 1.3 if you have time.

Withdrawal: The last day to withdraw from the course with a refund is **7 December**. [See Withdrawal](#) for further information.

What is in the news? Not compulsory but interesting links.....See **NZ Herald:** [World's biggest chocolate-maker says we are running out of chocolate](#) .

See mjmfoodie on YouTube for an excellent discussion of [Price elasticity of demand](#) (9:35; note in your assignment you need **to use the midpoint method**).

For a light hearted look see Mr Clifford: **EconMovies 4 on YouTube:** [Indiana Jones \(Demand, supply, equilibrium shifts](#) (7:03). Enjoy!

We look forward to receiving your assignment in the near future. As always if you have any questions do contact either Andy Kenah or me through the forums.

*Regards
Catherine*

[Reply](#)

[See this post in context](#)

[Change your forum digest preferences](#)

Appendix B: AIM Week 4 Supply and demand: elasticity: reader/printer friendly edition.

520/71120

AIM newsletter Week 4

Trimester 3 2014

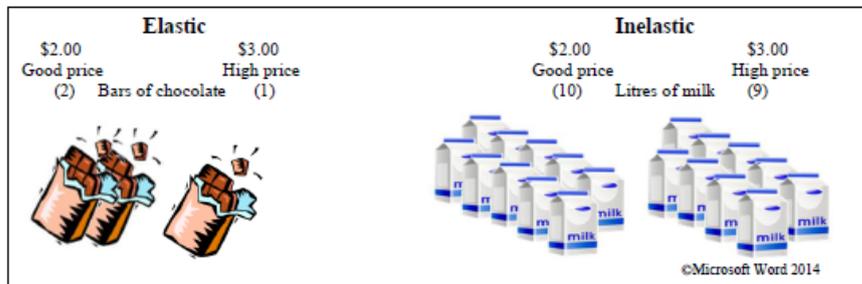
Kia ora and welcome to week 4!

I trust you had a restful weekend particularly as there was no early morning call to All Black rugby. In the weekend I went for my first run in nearly a year. A month ago I signed up for the Cigna Round the Bays run and I have been improving my fitness with walking after work. I know I need to start my training now if I am to successfully complete the whole run. Some days I will be able to do more than others however I know I can't leave it until January or February as there will not be enough time for me to reach the required fitness level. This is a little bit like studying really. Following the study plan, creating a routine and sticking to it should enable you to successfully complete the course.

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Week 4: Supply and demand; Elasticity

Great to see the discussion on the forums re elasticity. See below for a pictorial example of the elasticity concept and [course page link for the mathematical calculation using the midpoint formula](#) on the "Discussion forum for students".



Readings: Module 1.2 Hubbard Chapter 4: Feel free to start on Module 1.3 if you have time.

Withdrawal: The last day to withdraw from the course with a refund is 7 December. [See Withdrawal](#) for further information.

What is in the news? Not compulsory but interesting links.....See NZ Herald: [World's biggest chocolate-maker says we are running out of chocolate](#) . See [mjmfoodie](#) on YouTube for an excellent discussion of [Price elasticity of demand](#) (9:35; note in your assignment you need to use the **midpoint method**). For a light hearted look see Mr Clifford: [EconMovies 4](#) on YouTube: [Indiana Jones \(Demand, supply, equilibrium shifts](#) (7:03). Enjoy!

We look forward to receiving your assignment in the near future. As always if you have any questions do contact either Andy Kenah or me through the forums.

Regards
Catherine

