

## COVID and Your University Experience

As I record this, the fall 2020 semester is drawing to a close. If you are listening to this podcast, chances are very good that you are a university student and that you have not been in a classroom and perhaps not even on campus since last spring.

How are you doing? What have been the consequences for you of the almost total transition of the university experience to Zoom, Teams and other platforms for online education? I don't mean simply do you like it any more or less than what I'll call the traditional model of higher education. I mean, rather, has the educational experience during COVID affected your well-being?

Let me state at the outset that this is very much a political science question. It is, first of all, a question the answer to which might reveal differential impacts on groups in society. It could be that students, in this case university students, have been at greater risk of certain adverse health and financial consequences than some other groups. It is also a political science question because, potentially at least, it involves policies. Have the actions of universities and government policies adequately addressed whatever negative effects have been experienced by university students?

Perhaps we can begin this exploration of how you, as a university student, have been affected during these COVID times by considering the results of a study published on October 23, 2020, in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association*. It was based on a survey of over 69,000 French university students carried out in April and May of 2020. Here is some of what the study found:

*Among the general population, university students appear to be particularly susceptible to the negative impacts of quarantine.... In this study, university students in France reported high rates of suicidal thoughts and severe symptoms of distress, depression, anxiety, and perceived stress while quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic. Protecting the mental health of students is a public health issue that appears even more critical in the context of a pandemic. The results suggest that special attention must be paid to women and nonbinary students as well as students with a history of psychiatric follow-up. It also appears important to maintain contact with students, to ensure they have good quality housing conditions, to provide for their basic needs, to allow them to maintain physical activity and social ties, and to give them adequate information. Measures promoting access to care should be encouraged.*

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2772154>

The researchers point out that the sample on which these findings are based is not representative of the French University population. Close to two-thirds who completed the survey were females and it is very possible that those who participated in the study were more disposed to have existing psychological health issues than those who did not. Nevertheless, the results are worrisome.

The findings of this study of university students in France appears to be corroborated by those of Canadian students. A summer 2020 survey of students and employees at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi found that 89 percent of respondents described the changes necessitated by COVID to be stressful. Sixty percent reported suffering from at least one of the following mental health problems: depression (47 percent), anxiety (45 percent), psychological

distress (42 percent) and post-traumatic stress disorder (30 percent). These problems were more likely to be mentioned by students than by university employees.

[\(http://www.ugac.ca/impactCOVID/\)](http://www.ugac.ca/impactCOVID/)

University of British Columbia president Santa Ono, who has often talked about the mental health challenges that he faced when he was younger, echoes the view that depression and anxiety among university students is one of the very serious public health consequences of the COVID pandemic. In a speech that he gave at the *Times Higher Education* Leadership and Management Summit on November 3, 2020, Ono described post-secondary students as being in a "vulnerable stage between childhood and maturity," experiencing the academic stresses of papers and exams, the financial pressures of "having to work one or two jobs to pay for their tuition," the prospect of significant debts when they graduate, and the psychological pressures related to the use of social media. (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/save-students-COVID-mental-health-crisis-sectortold>)

But evaluating the mental health consequences of the social isolation that has been related to the transition to online learning is not a simple matter. A recent study compared the mental health conditions of a group of about 800 Canadian university students in May 2019, long before the coronavirus was known to anyone other than epidemiologists, and a group of 800 students in May of 2020, roughly two weeks after the suspension of classes across Canada. Here is what the researchers found:

*"Those with previous mental health difficulties showed either little change or even improvements...It seems that what is likely to be contributing to this, is that for those without mental health difficulties before the pandemic, COVID-19 resulted in them having greater social*

*isolation AND social isolation was a significant contributor to their poor mental health outcomes after the beginning of the pandemic. But those with prior mental health difficulties were more likely to have the same or better social circumstances post-COVID-19 than they did before it. In effect, by being isolated pre-COVID, those with prior mental health difficulties were well positioned to weather COVID-19!"*(quoted at

<https://educationnewscanada.com/article/education/category/research/100/857049/social-isolation-causing-psychological-distress-among-university-students.html>; full study at <https://doi.apa.org/fulltext/2020-66840-001.html>)

The economic consequences of COVID are less ambiguous and already have been the subject of many studies. A survey carried out by Statistics Canada about 6 weeks after the suspension of university classes in mid-March of 2020 found that the employment consequences of COVID for students were devastating, as they were for many other groups in the labor force. About 6 out of ten of those surveyed said that they were very or extremely worried about losing their job and two-thirds indicated that they were very or extremely worried that they would not have job prospects in the near future. "Without jobs or prospects," the Statistics Canada report states, "many returning students were worried about how to pay for future education-related expenses, in addition to their current expenses."

(<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200512/dq200512a-eng.htm>)

A survey conducted by Abacus Data at about the same time found that about 7 in 10 students expected that their summer employment, on which most depended to pay at least some of their university-related expenses, would be negatively affected by the lockdowns and other measures required by governments during the COVID pandemic. (<https://cfs-fcee.ca/wp->

<content/uploads/2020/05/Abacus-Data-Topline-Results-for-Release-1.pdf>) Already in 2014 a Statistics Canada study found that about half of post-secondary graduates had student debt, averaging about \$26,000 in the case of university graduates and roughly \$15,000 for college graduates. (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/141114/dq141114b-eng.htm>) In recognition of the short and longer term financial consequences that students faced as a result of the loss of employment opportunities during the COVID pandemic, the federal government offered support through the Canada Emergency Student Benefit and the Student Work Placement Program. But if you are a university student and listening to this podcast in the autumn of 2020 or winter of 2021, and if you depend on employment to help pay your bills and keep your debt down during your university years, you likely have noticed that you have fewer hours and less income than before the onset of COVID.

Finally, there is the quality of your educational experience. Students have reacted quite differently to the transition to the online learning model, some finding that it hasn't made much or any difference in their learning experience and some even finding that they prefer this model to the classroom. A survey of McGill University students found that the vast majority did not experience negative impacts in terms of such things as access to a reliable computer and to videoconferencing platforms, or to the university's online library and other information resources. At the same time, however, about half said that they did not have access to a quiet place to study, about 7 out of 10 said that they had difficulty focusing or paying attention, and about the same percentage reported personal stress related to the transition from the classroom to the online learning model. (<https://www.mcgill.ca/student-services/about-us/COVID-19-student-impact-survey-results#about-the-survey>)

Perhaps I might be allowed a rather personal reflection on how COVID has affected the quality of the university experience. I have directed a study abroad program for about a dozen years, during which time about 220 Canadian and international students have traveled to Belgium during the month of May to study the European Union and European politics. The suspension of such opportunities for students since March 2020, a suspension that appears likely to continue until the fall semester of 2021, has been a great loss. There are hundreds of such study abroad opportunities offered by universities across Canada. For many students their window of opportunity to participate in such a program will have disappeared by the time they graduate. And then there are the volunteer, athletic and social activities that matter greatly to many students and that are an important part of their university experience, and that have been suspended or offered in some virtual manner that may not, and probably for most students do not, represent a real substitute for what has been lost during these COVID times.

University students do not usually come to mind when we think about the groups that are most vulnerable to negative effects related to the COVID pandemic.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/vulnerable-populations-COVID-19.html>)

And indeed, to be frank, many Canadians are likely to think of university students as a comparatively privileged group whose problems, including those brought on or exacerbated by COVID, are comparatively minor. But if you are a university student, the experience is yours and the mental health, financial and other consequences that you may have experienced, are certainly real for you.

Have you been asked by your university, your professors, counselors, administrators or others, how you have managed during these unusual times? How would you assess your own

experience since the suspension of in-class teaching in March 2020? Is this likely to be a blip on the radar screen of your years at university and as you transition to life and work after graduation, or do you think the consequences will continue after the lockdowns and social isolation have become memories?