

A Qualitative Examination of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Wellbeing of Undergraduate Students in Ontario

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Abstract : Aligned with the growing interest in the impact of the pandemic on academic experiences of university students, this study aimed to examine the challenges Canadian undergraduate students experienced during the university closures due to COVID-19. Using qualitative methodological approach, the study utilized semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 undergraduate students enrolled in an Ontario university to explore their thoughts and experience regarding online learning during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, from January 2021 to March 2021. The interviews yielded four major themes with the following associated subthemes: Personal Challenges Associated with Adapting to the Pandemic (Change in the Type of Stress Experienced, Unique Impact on Certain Groups of Students, Decreased Motivation, Crucial Role of Resilience), Social Challenges Associated with Adapting to the Pandemic (Increased Loneliness, Challenges Faced while Communicating, Perception of Group work, Role of Living Conditions), Challenges associated with Accessing University Resources (Crucial Role of Professors, Perception of Virtual Events, Importance of Physical Spaces). Overall, the analysis showed that the COVID-19 pandemic fostered resilience and psychological flexibility amongst all students. However, the mental health and social wellbeing of students deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic and they reported experiencing chronic stress, anxiety and loneliness. International students, first year and final year students experienced a unique set of challenges. It was hard for participants in our study to make strong new connections with their classmates and maintain existing friendships with their peers. The importance of professors in facilitating learning was amplified in the online environment due to the lack of in-person interaction with other students. Despite these challenges, most participants reported that they received high grades during online learning. The findings from this study could be helpful for organizations and individuals working towards fostering the wellbeing of undergraduate students. They can also help in making post-secondary institutions more resilient to future emergencies by creating contingency plans regarding online instructions and risk management techniques.

Keywords : Canadian, COVID-19, university students, wellbeing

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