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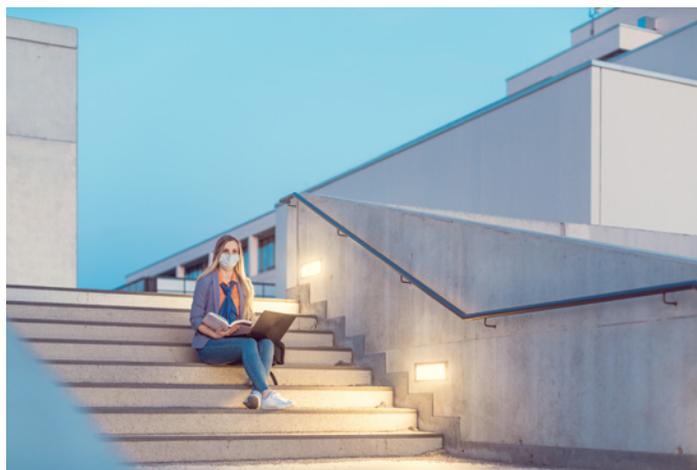
COVID-19 Pandemic: Academic impacts on postsecondary students in Canada

by **April Doreleyers** and **Tamara Knighton**

Learning disruptions widespread among postsecondary students

As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of colleges and universities across Canada, postsecondary students experienced rapid changes to their academic environment with courses moved online or postponed and, in some cases, cancelled.

A recent Statistics Canada crowdsourcing data collection completed by over 100,000 postsecondary students from April 19 to May 1, 2020 provides insight on how their academic life was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Readers should note that crowdsourcing data are not based on sampling principles. As a result, the findings reported below cannot be applied to the overall postsecondary student population in Canada. However, given the large number of participants, the results offer valuable insights on the experiences of participating students (see methodology section).



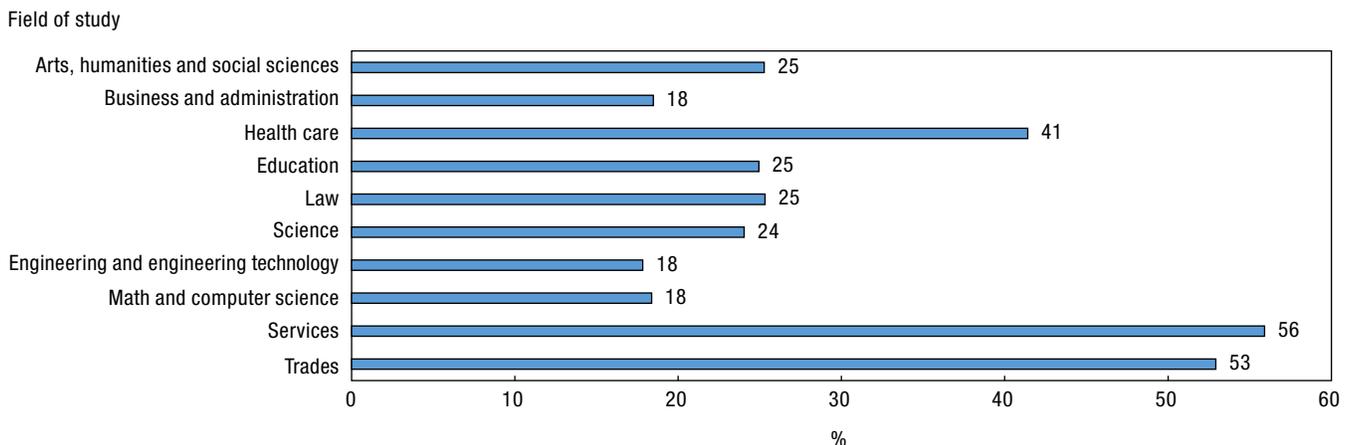
Results from this crowdsourcing indicate that more than one-quarter (26%) of participants had some of their courses postponed or cancelled as a result of the pandemic. This proportion was similar among those pursuing a college or CEGEP diploma (25%), an undergraduate degree (26%) or a master's or professional degree (28%). It was lower among doctoral students (14%), where typically there is less coursework and more of a focus on research.

This type of academic disruption varied widely by the field of study and was highest for those studying in services (56%), trades (53%), or health care (41%). These fields of study are more likely to include job placements or course work such as labs, applied learning and hands-on instruction that cannot be delivered online.



Chart 1

Proportion of participants reporting having some courses cancelled or postponed this term, by field of study



Source: Statistics Canada, Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary students.

The closure of academic institutions due to COVID-19 resulted in a shift toward increased online learning. Almost all participants had some (17%) or all (75%) of their courses moved online. A small proportion had none of their courses moved online (2%) or were not taking courses (e.g., working on a thesis, work placement, 6%).

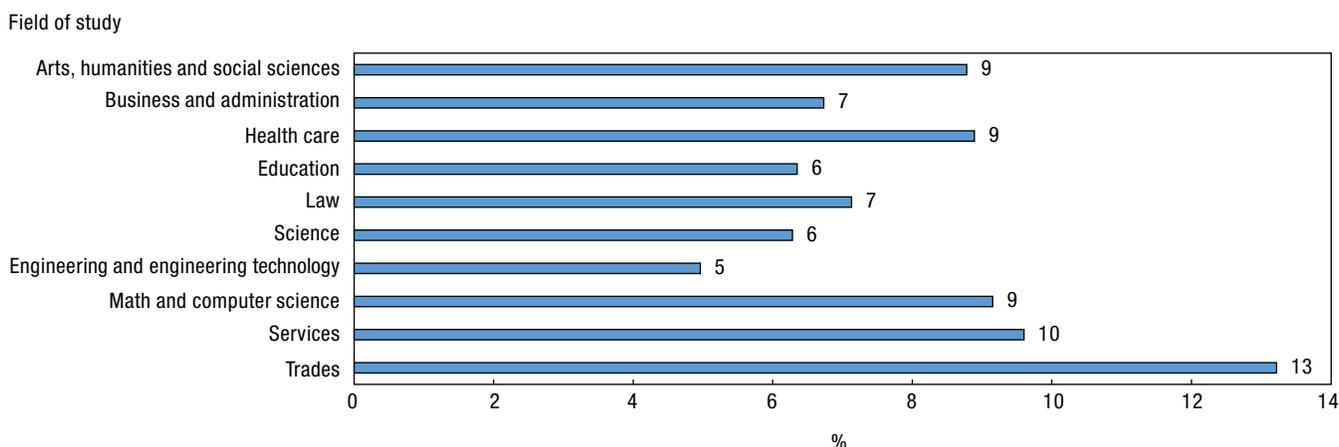
For many students, the transition to online learning provided them the opportunity to continue their coursework and complete their classes. At the same time, the rapid change to online instruction could pose challenges for students who were not equipped to adjust to this method of learning, either because they learn better in person, they lack the appropriate tools or they do not have a suitable home environment for learning online. Additionally, adjusting to online learning could be impacted by the added stress of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among participants who reported that all of their courses had moved online, almost one in ten (7%) reported they were unable to complete some or all of these courses. This proportion was slightly higher for students pursuing a college or CEGEP diploma (9%), compared with those pursuing a bachelor's degree (7%), a master's or professional degree (6%) or a doctorate (6%). This proportion also varied by field of study ranging from 5% for participants studying engineering and engineering technology to 13% for participants studying in the trades.



Chart 2

Proportion of crowdsourcing participants unable to complete some or all courses that were moved online, by field of study



Source: Statistics Canada, Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary students.

Crowdsourcing results have shown that not only have the studies of postsecondary students been disrupted with classes postponed, cancelled or moved online, students also have concerns about their academic future. These range from concerns about grades, the ability to complete their credential as planned, or that their credential would not be equivalent to those not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Infographic). Other papers in this series will examine the effect of the pandemic on work placements and explore their financial concerns.

Methodology

This article is based on a crowdsourcing questionnaire completed by over 100,000 postsecondary students from April 19 to May 1, 2020. Readers should note that unlike other surveys conducted by Statistics Canada, crowdsourcing data are not collected under a sample design using a probability-based sampling. Data was benchmarked to the number of students by province or territory of study, level of study, and gender based on data from the Postsecondary Student Information System. Results are subject to potential bias due to the fact that responses from participants may not represent the non-participants. Therefore, caution should be exercised when interpreting the findings, and no inferences about the overall postsecondary student population in Canada should be made based on these results.