

Research Snapshot

Closure of universities due to COVID-19: Impact on education & mental health

What is this research about?

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to the postponement or cancellation of events around the world. Universities have taken drastic measures to protect students and staff members from the COVID-19 pandemic, including closing and moving courses online. As of March 25, 2020, post-secondary schools in 150 countries had closed due to COVID-19, impacting over 80% of the world's student population.

When post-secondary schools are required to close to prevent the transmission of infectious diseases, there are a number of consequences for students, faculty and school administrators. This research highlights the impacts of colleges and universities closing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What did the researchers do?

The researcher reviewed peer-reviewed literature and news articles published since 2010 on the closure of educational institutions to reduce the transmission of infectious diseases.

What did the researchers find?

The researcher identified the following challenges for students and staff as a result of universities closing due to COVID-19:

- **Shifting classes to online formats.** Online classes do not work for all subjects and require students and faculty to have access to, and comfort using, online technologies. In addition, many universities do not have the necessary technological infrastructure or resources to quickly and seamlessly implement online learning.

What you need to know

The author examined some of the challenges faced by students and faculty as a result of the pandemic, including technological issues with online courses and assessments, lack of housing and supports for international students when campuses close, travel restrictions and lack of support for mental health and well-being. The author also identified a number of measures that colleges and universities can implement to reduce these impacts, including creating a pandemic taskforce, upgrading technology, providing clear communication to students and enhancing mental health resources. Making the health and safety of students and faculty the main priority is essential.

- **Changing methods of student assessment.** Faculty are challenged with creating new criteria and formats for tests and exams that make cheating difficult and that do not risk confusing students' technical abilities with their knowledge of the subject matter. In addition, lab tests, practicums and performance tests cannot be assessed online.
- **Travel restrictions.** Students and faculty members cannot return to their home countries or attend meetings and conferences due to the closure of international borders.
- **Supporting international students.** When campuses close, many students are left without housing or food sources, along with financial difficulties resulting from involuntary extended stays in their host

country due to border closures.

- **Mental health.** Many campuses are ill equipped to address the high-rates of stress and anxiety that students and staff experience in the context of a pandemic, including those related to health, safety, family well-being, career prospects and the global recession.

The researcher suggests a number of measures that universities can implement to mitigate the impacts of these challenges:

- **Create a pandemic taskforce.** Comprised of faculty, students and staff from facilities management, human resources, student affairs and health services, the task force should meet frequently to address the evolving situation.
- **Upgrade campus technology infrastructure.** Encourage students and faculty to stay connected through technology and provide training to allow for effective online courses and exams.
- **Create flexible student assessment guidelines.** It is important to accommodate students for illness and technological challenges.
- **Communicate clearly to students.** Ensure students are aware of updated exam and assignment procedures to ease fears and anxiety about grading and graduation.
- **Enhance resources for mental health support.** This could include increasing counselling services and providing online resources related to stress management.

- **Support students with financial stressors.** For example:
 - Allow students to stay in campus residences.
 - Consider financial support for the living expenses of international students.
 - Support graduates with pursuing further degrees.
 - Work with banks, government, and student loan agencies to suspend student loan payment requirements.
- **Revise admission procedures.** Provide online applications and flexible admission processes to accommodate student needs.

Limitations and next steps

As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, more research will be required to determine the long-term challenges and the implications of these challenges on post-secondary education and student and staff well-being.

About the researcher

Pradeep Sahu, Medical Education and Simulation, Centre for Medical Sciences Education, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

Keywords

Coronavirus, COVID-19, outbreak, pandemic, education, mental health, universities

How can you use this research?

This research outlines measures that college and university administrators can implement to support students and faculty safety and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Research Snapshot is based on the article, "Closure of Universities Due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on Education and Mental Health of Students and Academic Staff," which was published in *Cureus* in 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.7541>. This summary was written by Emma Firsten-Kaufman.