

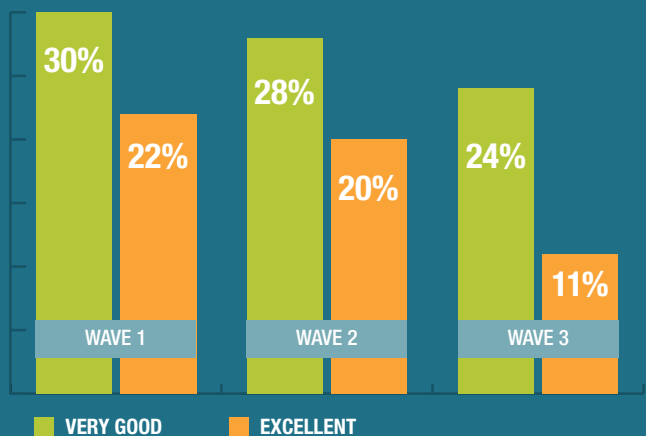


# The impact of COVID-19 on post-secondary institutions

Post-secondary institutions across Canada are facing challenges with student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include seeking clarity on students' mental well-being and how best to support them. This information sheet highlights the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on post-secondary student mental health, the learning environment and financial concerns. It also highlights how campus communities have pivoted, adapted and grown in response to these challenging circumstances.

**EVEN BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS WERE EXPERIENCING HIGH LEVELS OF MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS.** Mental health challenges tend to emerge during young adulthood, or from ages 16-25, when individuals typically enroll in post-secondary studies.<sup>6</sup> The Mental Health Commission of Canada reports at least 75 per cent of mental illnesses emerge by young adulthood.<sup>6</sup> This age group faces challenges with their mental health at the best of times and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these concerns.

PERCENTAGE OF ONTARIANS RATING THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AS "VERY GOOD" OR "EXCELLENT"



## MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT ON ONTARIANS

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted individuals living in Ontario. A nationwide poll by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) found Ontarians are experiencing more anxiety, stress, sadness, depression, substance use and suicidal thoughts than respondents in other provinces.<sup>2</sup>

There has also been an increase in domestic violence calls since the start of the pandemic. Compared to 2019, Canadian police received an 8.2 per cent increase in calls related to domestic disputes from March to October 2020, along with a 12 per cent increase in mental health-related calls.<sup>11</sup> Canadian victim services also report 54 per cent of agencies have seen an increase in domestic violence victims served.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, a series of polls commissioned by CMHA Ontario found that overall, the percentage of Ontarians rating their mental health as "very good" or "excellent" is declining as the pandemic lingers.<sup>3</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives of all Ontarians. However, some groups are more likely to report declining mental health:

- Young adults aged 18-24<sup>2,3</sup>
- Indigenous peoples<sup>2</sup>
- Individuals belonging to 2SLGBTQ+ communities<sup>2</sup>
- Individuals who use more substances<sup>3</sup>
- Female-identifying individuals<sup>2,3</sup>
- Those with pre-existing mental or physical health concerns<sup>2,3</sup>

In another Ontario-based study, Hawke et al. found almost 60 per cent of youth respondents aged 14-28 were concerned about disruptions to school and to their career path.<sup>5</sup> These findings on the mental health of youth in Ontario have important implications for the post-secondary student population, as a large proportion of this population consists of young adults.

## MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS ON POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

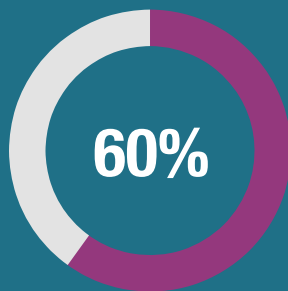
Early in the pandemic, Dr. Tayyab Rashid of University of Toronto Scarborough and Dr. Lina Di Genova of McGill University surveyed Canadian campus administrators regarding their perceptions of student mental health. They found there were increases in<sup>8</sup>:

- Student anxiety
- Learning issues
- Perceived discrimination

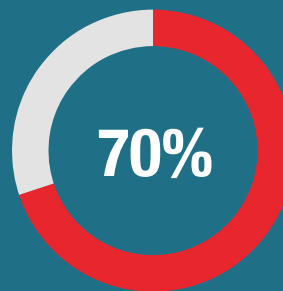
These issues were revisited at the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH) conference in November 2020, with the following also emerging as key concerns<sup>8</sup>:

- Depression
- Relationship issues
- Suicidal behaviour
- Trauma

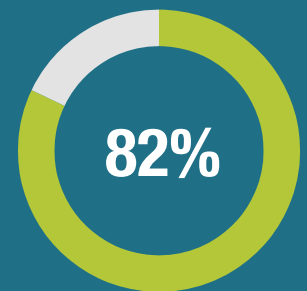
In their survey on Canadian post-secondary students in May 2020, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) also found:<sup>1</sup>



OF STUDENTS REPORTED FEELING WORRIED ABOUT THE PANDEMIC



OF STUDENTS REPORTED FEELING STRESSED, ANXIOUS OR ISOLATED



OF STUDENTS REPORTED FEELING WORRIED ABOUT THEIR FUTURES

\*International and BIPOC students reported higher levels of worry

Mental health concerns are also becoming more prevalent among K-12 students. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) found since 2017, there has been a 20 per cent decrease in the number of students expressing happiness and hopefulness.<sup>13</sup> The TDSB also found<sup>13</sup>:

**40%**  
of students are experiencing loneliness

**50%**  
of students are nervous or worried

**60%**  
of students are under a lot of stress



Campuses will likely have to respond to increased mental health concerns among students beginning their post-secondary studies in the fall 2021 semester, as well as those returning to in-person learning.

## LEARNING ENVIRONMENT DISRUPTIONS

Ontario campuses were required to quickly shift classes online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While online learning can be a positive experience for many, a poll commissioned by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) found 62 per cent of students and 76 per cent of Ontario faculty members believe the **CURRENT STATE OF ONLINE LEARNING HAS HAD A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THE QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION.**<sup>7</sup>

An international study that included British Columbia's Okanagan College found similar results.<sup>4</sup> Students appreciated the opportunity to attend classes from home, cut their commute and watch recordings of lectures.<sup>4</sup> However, there were many areas of difficulty with the shift to virtual learning:

- Lack of interaction and engagement with instructors and peers<sup>4,7</sup>
- Difficulty with focusing/distractions at home<sup>4,7,10</sup>
- Lack of motivation<sup>4</sup>
- Financial strain<sup>7</sup>
- Social isolation<sup>4,7</sup>
- Accessibility<sup>1</sup>
- Poor internet access<sup>4</sup>
- Inadequate technology<sup>4,10</sup>
- Stress and anxiety<sup>7</sup>
- Burnout<sup>7</sup>
- Concerns about access to support services and extracurriculars<sup>1,7</sup>
- Online education viewed as less valuable than in-person learning<sup>1,7</sup>

The current online learning environment also presents unique difficulties for international students. Many international students decided to stay in Canada due to travel concerns, despite being isolated and away from their families.<sup>4</sup> Others returned home during the pandemic but are often expected to attend live lectures and complete assessments based on the Eastern Time Zone.

**76%**  
OF FACULTY AND

**62%**  
OF STUDENTS

believe the current state of online learning has had a negative impact on the quality of university education.



## FINANCIAL AND LABOUR MARKET CONCERNS

In early March 2020, 68 per cent of students reported having firm employment prospects in place for the summer.<sup>9</sup> However, by May 2020, less than a quarter of students were continuing work as planned.<sup>9</sup> A survey by CASA also found:



A large-scale survey by Statistics Canada found almost 80 per cent of students were concerned about finances in spring 2020.<sup>9</sup> This number decreased slightly with the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) and delays on Ontario Student Assistance Program loan repayment, but these initiatives ended at the beginning of the fall 2020 semester. Even while these initiatives were in place, 75 per cent of students surveyed were still concerned about finances.<sup>1</sup>

**80%**  
Percentage of students concerned about finances (before CESB)<sup>9</sup>

**75%**  
Percentage of students concerned about finances (after CESB)<sup>1</sup>

Going into summer 2021, there is limited financial assistance available to students or those with student loan debt, and summer job opportunities continue to be scarce.

## ONTARIO CAMPUS RESPONSE

In addition to quickly shifting student support services and classes online, campuses have also come up with innovative solutions to these unprecedented issues. Below are just some examples of these innovations:

### **UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH - MENTAL HEALTH COOKING CLASSES:**

University of Guelph originally partnered with Nourish by 10 Carden, a local community kitchen, to organize in-person group cooking sessions coupled with roundtable conversation on mental health. This initiative was moved online, with ingredients sent to students. Online classes include interactive cooking lessons followed by mental health-themed breakout rooms where students can share a meal while discussing mental health topics.

### **WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY - ESSENTIAL SELF-CARE AND RESILIENCE COURSE:**

Wilfrid Laurier University is offering a free module to help students support their mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Learn more about this initiative [here](#).

### **SHERIDAN COLLEGE - VIRTUAL SPEED FRIENDING SESSIONS:**

Sheridan College has been using Hopin to create a virtual space for students to connect one-on-one with other students and peer mentors.

### **L'UNIVERSITÉ DE HEARST PEER MENTORSHIP PROGRAM:**

The Université de Hearst's peer mentoring program offers students guidance and support in their adaptation to university life, academic learning, safety and well-being. Mentorship team members receive training in effective communication, counselling, sexual consent and suicide prevention. The regular contact established with all students, especially during the lockdown, allows students to develop a relationship of trust and to detect elements of distress, which proved extremely useful during the pandemic.

### **TRENT UNIVERSITY - TRENT SUMMER WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAM (TSWEP):**

In response to the COVID-19-related employment and finance challenges faced by students, TSWEP provided funding support to Trent University departments to create employment opportunities for students over summer 2020. To be eligible, students had to be returning to school in fall 2020 and have financial need. You can learn more about this initiative [here](#) and [here](#).

### **HUMBER COLLEGE AND CONESTOGA COLLEGE - DISCORD SERVERS FOR STUDENTS:**

Some schools, like Humber College and Conestoga College, have started Discord servers for students to connect virtually.

### **ONTARIO POST-SECONDARY ESPORTS LEAGUE (OPSE):**

Many schools are getting involved in OPSE, a student- and volunteer-run organization with an aim to bring esports to Ontario campuses. There was also \$24,000 in scholarship money to be won. You can learn more about this initiative [here](#).

