

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC & THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE



**SFSS RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT
STUDENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC**

Introduction

The Simon Fraser Student Society (SFSS) is a student-led non-profit organisation that represents and advocates for over 25,000 undergraduate students across the three campuses of Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, Vancouver and Surrey, British Columbia. Our mission is to support students in reaching their full potential by providing resources that represent, connect and benefit our membership. The SFSS works to ensure the financial health, wellbeing, and engagement of our members.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to the entire world. Post-secondary students have been hit particularly hard by this crisis. From February to March 2020, the number of post-secondary students in the workforce, aged 15-29, decreased by 28%¹. Post-secondary students have had to quickly adapt to changing circumstances, and are worried about the effect of the pandemic on their ability to continue their studies, find and maintain stable summer employment, afford expenses such as rent and food, and pay tuition in the fall. Students nearing graduation may face difficulty in finding employment in their field of study, reducing the value of their education over the long term.

The SFSS applauds SFU's efforts to mitigate negative impacts of COVID-19 on students through the provision of new resources, services and accommodations, including:

1. Prioritizing student safety by cancelling in-person classes and events,
2. Offering COVID-19 support through new Health and Counselling Services programs,
3. Emergency bursaries from SFU Financial Aid and Awards like:
 - a. The General Emergency Assistance Program that was available until April 30,
 - b. The Emergency Technology Assistance Program to help students purchase technology that will support their move to remote work,
 - c. The Aboriginal Emergency Assistance Program to support Indigenous students,
4. Offering Pass/Fail options for courses until at least May 30, 2020 (with no Fail grades counting towards the Spring 2020 GPA),
5. Piloting an alternative course materials delivery program through VitalSource to help save students money on course materials,
6. Temporarily suspending fines and fees associated with overdue library resources, and
7. Providing a summer semester tuition deadline extension.

In April 2020, the SFSS administered a survey (the "Survey") to all undergraduate students at SFU and received 2,474 responses. This survey asked a series of questions to better understand how the SFSS can support and advocate for students during this time. The results of the student survey indicate that despite the accommodations that have been offered, there is more to be done at SFU to support students and ensure their academic, professional and personal success and wellbeing. Nearly **9 out of 10 students** reported that they would like to be consulted with on major decisions made during the pandemic.

The following report will summarise the results of the survey and present recommendations to SFU to ensure the continued success of SFU undergraduate students and recent graduates.

¹ Department of Finance Canada, "Support for Students and Recent Graduates Impacted by COVID-19," *Government of Canada*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2020/04/support-for-students-and-recent-graduates-impacted-by-covid-19.html>

Background

The federal and provincial governments have made many policy decisions to assist Canadians and British Columbians who are under serious financial stress due to COVID-19, including students. Post-secondary institutions across the country have made the swift but difficult decision to move classes online, with many professors having to learn a completely new way of teaching. The stress of these changes and many others associated with the pandemic has caused increased levels of anxiety and depression in many Canadians². The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted students financially, academically, and mentally. The following sections will explore these impacts on SFU undergraduate students.


Financial Relief


The COVID-19 pandemic will have long-term financial implications. Projections from Deloitte forecast a 4 to 5% contraction of the Canadian economy in 2020, leading to a recession³. During the last recession beginning in 2008, many recent university graduates struggled to find work in their field of study, leading to lasting consequences such as under- or unemployment. Chronic unemployment or underemployment may cause specialized skills gained in university to fade, increasing the chance of wage losses in the long term⁴.

Among students aged 15-24, unemployment in Canada has reached 32%⁵. To help ease this burden, domestic students can now receive the Canadian Emergency Student Benefit, providing them up to \$1,250 per month, and \$2,000 for students with disabilities or dependents. International students are not eligible for this funding, and despite the introduction of the benefit, many students are still experiencing hardships. At SFU, 35.7% of undergraduates reported that their current financial position is preventing them from enrolling in summer semester classes. Delaying enrolment could result in students graduating later with more debt.

According to the Survey, 16.2% of SFU undergraduates have incurred travel expenses of \$500 or greater due to COVID-19; with 4.5% students completing their studies outside of the province or country as of April 2020. International students that have had to move back home for financial reasons are struggling to attend live classes that may occur in the middle of the night for them, and some are at risk of losing their student visa. Moreover, 32.4% of students have incurred additional costs to upgrade their study space to support remote learning, with 12.9% of those students having costs over \$200. Not all students have proper ergonomic supports such as an adjustable chair (49.6%), separate monitor (26.4%), mouse (47.4%), and separate keyboard (28.2%). Just over 20% of students have also incurred additional costs associated with upgrading their internet to support remote learning.

Students graduating
in a recession face...

Chronic 
unemployment and
underemployment

Fewer job
opportunities to
apply skills
gained in post-
secondary
education 

Lower wage
growth than
peers



² Dickie, J., "CMHA Offers Tips to Support Mental Health Amid Concerns of COVID-19 Pandemic," CMHA Ontario, March 13, 2020, <https://ontario.cmha.ca/news/cmha-offers-tips-to-support-mental-health-amid-concerns-of-covid-19-pandemic/>.

³ Alexander, C. "Pandemic and Oil Shock Trigger Deep Recession," *Deloitte Insights*, April 15, 2020, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/economy/americas/canada-economic-outlook.html>

⁴ Agopsowicz, A., "The Recession Roadblock: The Long-term Career Consequences of Graduating into a Downturn," *Economics*, RBC Thought Leadership, November 12, 2019, <https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/the-recession-roadblock-the-long-term-career-consequences-of-graduating-into-a-downturn/>

⁵ Statistics Canada, "COVID-19 and the Labour Market in April 2020," Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, May 8, 2020.

Academic Accommodations

An Australian study found that while university test results may be similar for online and in-person classes, students prefer to have discussions and are more engaged in their studies through face-to-face learning compared to remote learning⁶. Furthermore, remote learning requires more self-discipline and self-guidance, and research shows that scholarly instruction with minimal guidance is less effective than teaching with strong guidance, even for students with considerable prior knowledge⁷. Remote learning can also disadvantage students with learning disabilities. For example, online-based courses often require more reading than in-person courses, which can be more difficult for those with reading-based disabilities⁸. While these challenges alone can deter some students from remote learning, having to complete online courses in an environment where a large proportion of the population is staying home can be even more challenging.

While 84.0% of Survey respondents reported to have a work/study space at home, many commented that their space was shared with other family members or housemates and only 35.5% reported having a space free from excessive noise and other distractions, with the living situation of 30.8% of students impairing their ability to attend live classes or write live exams. Students noted that they preferred to study on campus where it was easier to focus and more comfortable. Some students must deal with unreliable internet connections (14.4%) and inadequate lighting (24.3%), while only 54.4% of students reported having the necessary software to complete their courses.

In terms of course delivery, although 23.6% of Survey respondents reported that their course workload remained the same since moving to remote learning, 47.9% reported it had increased. As for the fairness of grading in this new course delivery model, 71.2% of students responded that they believed their instructors had changed the weighting of their grades in a way that was very fair or somewhat fair. Concerningly, 12.9% of Survey respondents indicated they had received requests from instructors that made them feel unsafe, uncomfortable, or in violation of their rights as a student since moving to remote classes. Comments about this question revealed that the requirement to have webcams on during exams was viewed as a violation of privacy by students.

The Survey revealed that 43.6% of students did not feel well-equipped to finish the semester, and 6.5% had withdrawn from classes. As SFU prepares for two more semesters of remote learning, these concerns should be taken into consideration.



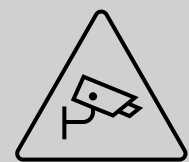
35.5% of students have a study space free from noise/distractions



54.4% of students have the necessary software to complete their studies



47.9% of students experience a heavier workload with remote learning



12.9% of students report feeling unsafe, uncomfortable, or violated by an instructor's request

⁶ Kemp, N., & Grieve, R., "Face-to-Face or Face-to-Screen? Undergraduates' Opinions and Test Performance in Classroom vs. Online Learning," *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, no. 1278. 2014, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01278

⁷ Kirschner, P.A., Sweller, J. & Clark, R.E., "Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-Based, Experiential, and Inquiry-Based Teaching," *Educational Psychologist* 41, no. 2, (2006): 75-86. doi: 10.1207/s15326985ep4102_1

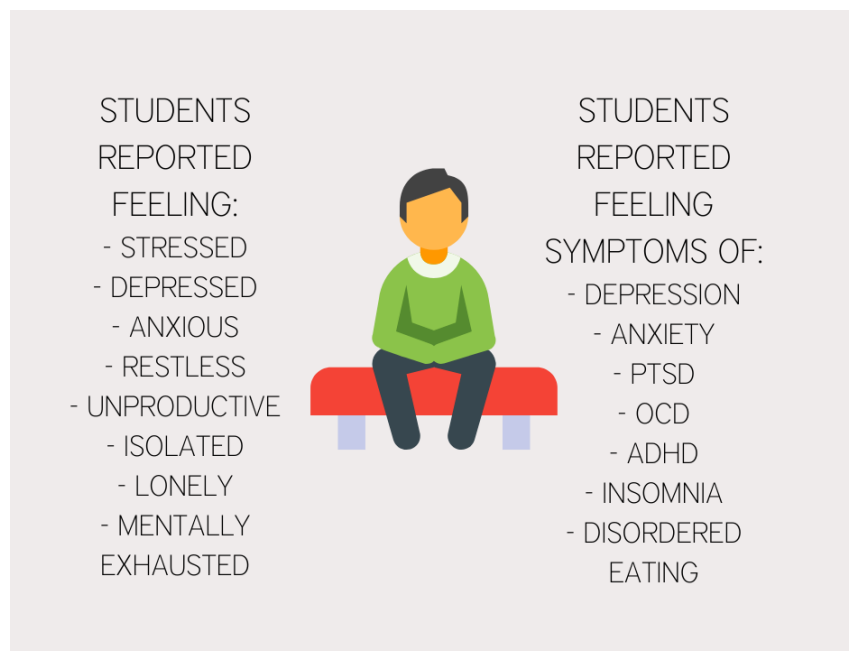
⁸ Case, D.E., & Davidson, R.C., "Accessible Online Learning," *New Directions for Student Services* 134, (2011): 47-58. doi: 10.1002/ss.394

Mental Health Support

The financial and academic challenges students face because of the COVID-19 pandemic further compound the existing mental health challenges they face coping with a pandemic and more social isolation than most Canadians have ever known. Social isolation is linked with many adverse health effects, including mental illnesses such as depression⁹. Experts have noted that we are still in the active trauma phase of the pandemic, but residual stress, financial pressure, and learning how to re-engage with the world will lead to more severe mental health impacts once social distancing measures lift, especially for those already suffering from mental health issues¹⁰.

While SFU has provided mental health and wellness resources for students during the pandemic, including those jointly provided with the SFSS like My SSP and through the Studentcare health benefits, students are still struggling. In the Survey, 48.9% of respondents reported that they are experiencing mental health issues due to COVID-19, with many commenting that they were already experiencing mental health challenges that have worsened over the last two months. Students that had recovered from or were previously managing mental health illnesses such as anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder and eating disorders are now finding themselves in precarious positions. Furthermore, 17.6% of students reported that instructors have conducted themselves in a way that is not considerate of student health and wellbeing.

While 75.4% of students are aware of the mental health resources available to them through the SFSS and SFU, just under 10% of these students have accessed these services. Survey comments indicate that students are not fully aware of what these services offer. Some students even revealed that they experienced delays and/or inadequate service from My SSP. Others commented that no matter the mental health and wellness services offered by SFU, without fundamental changes to the grading system and student success support from instructors, the pressure of post-secondary education will negatively impact mental health and wellbeing.



⁹ Novotney, A., "The Risks of Social Isolation," *Monitor on Psychology* 50, no. 5, (2019): 32, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>

¹⁰ Connolly, A., "Mental Health Effects of The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Be 'Severe,' Expert Warns," *Global News*, last modified May 10, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6922614/coronavirus-mental-health-impacts/>

Recommendations

The following recommendations are organised by theme: financial relief, academic accommodations, and mental health support. The SFSS encourages SFU to gather further feedback on the options presented before making any major decisions.

The SFSS is asking SFU for the following:

1. Further financial relief for students, including:
 - a. suspending late enrolment penalties, and other fees and fines,
 - b. decreasing tuition fees to reflect the change in educational quality,
 - c. freezing tuition costs in the coming year for both domestic and international students, and
 - d. extending the General Emergency Assistance Program into the summer semester.
2. More academic accommodations, including:
 - a. requiring asynchronous course delivery for courses, recognizing the challenge of working from home,
 - b. prohibiting the use of invigilation software, room scans, and other practices that violate students' privacy,
 - c. providing greater academic accommodations for students with disabilities (including mental health disabilities), and
 - d. extending pass/fail grading options through the summer semester.
3. Improved mental health support, including:
 - a. increasing promotion and sharing of the mental health resources available to students,
 - b. encouraging course instructors to be accommodating, compassionate and lenient with students, and
 - c. improving the process for checking in with and responding to students who may be in distress.

Conclusion

Students are currently facing many challenges, including negative financial, academic and mental health impacts. Many are appreciative to have been given a platform to share their thoughts. According to the Survey, 89.3% of SFU undergraduate students believe that SFU should consult more with students before making big decisions on topics such as grading options and instructor requirements. However, there were many positive comments in the survey commending the work that SFU and the SFSS has done to support students, including specific professors that have made the transition to remote learning during the pandemic easier. We must all work together to improve the lives of students during this unprecedented time.

Please contact the SFSS President, Osob Mohamed, at president@sfss.ca with any questions or concerns about this report or the survey mentioned in this report.