

The psychological impact of COVID-19 on students - an Aspire member's response to *The Trials of the Class of COVID-19*

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The psychological impact of the lockdown period has become a high-profile topic in the general public, with students in particular facing uncertainty surrounding future plans and increasing economic strain. Students at schools and universities all across the world have been greatly disrupted with the majority of examinations and celebrations being cancelled or postponed. The cancellation of social events such as the leavers parties and summer holidays has increased the negative effect. Such events are typically looked upon as a concluding milestone of school life and help people prepare to take the next step be it College, University, employment or taking a gap year. For some people, the disappointment of not achieving closure on school life can have a psychological impact many school leavers feeling that their future prospects are much bleaker than anticipated.

A study in Anderson Anderson & Brown Consulting's paper, *The Trials of the Class of COVID-19*, found that 38% of school leavers have made changes to their after-school plans, with many students feeling there is a lack of clarity surrounding universities plans to operate. As a result, there has been a greater number of school leavers deferring their entry as they want to ensure they get the most out of the experience, both academically and socially. Moreover, prior to the pandemic around 1 in 4 students were reported as having mental health issues, increasing concern for the mental wellbeing of students with less opportunity to socialise and network at university due to current restrictions which will increase the feeling of isolation in an unfamiliar environment.

As a current undergraduate student, I feel relatively calm regarding the impact that the pandemic is having on my education. Whilst I am still worried about the devastating impact of the disease on people's health, the shift to a more online based teaching approach has been well communicated from my university. As I am about to enter my final year of study, I feel comfortable with the fact that teaching will no longer take place in large groups, but instead smaller groups possibly creating a more interactive learning atmosphere. This may even encourage a positive change in the education system and university teaching in the long run. For many universities it is already common to post lecture recordings online so this may be considered as an extension of current teaching methods. My open-minded approach to the current situation may be consequence of my familiarity with university lifestyle. In addition to my great group of friends, I am familiar with my accommodation and surroundings and I am comfortable talking to lecturers and university staff. I feel assured that my university will provide as safe a working environment as possible and I believe that the university campus provides a more stimulating environment for student learning as opposed to working from home. Moreover, students have already been notified of changes such as increased sanitation stations and limited building capacity will be in place on campus along with other new measures under consideration. These measures along with additional help services are in place to help to minimise the psychological impact of COVID-19 on students. Constant communication in the form of regular update emails and social media posts are being used to highlight key points of interest and show how the university plans to achieve as close to normality as possible.

Although I have a generally positive outlook on my university experience going forward, I can understand the potential psychological impact that COVID-19 can have on others who have not received the same support and communication from their university. From my personal experience, I am aware of how daunting university life can be. There are many factors to be considered for many people as it is likely to be their first time living away from home and almost everyone is worried about fitting in, making friends and the many other new challenging experiences. This is in addition to the busy timetable of higher education and day-to-day challenges that it brings. As previously mentioned,

I believe communication is key to minimising the psychological impact that the pandemic is having on students and although I feel relatively well informed by my university, I am aware that other universities lack such clear communication of the proposed measures. In my opinion, new students will be most impacted by the pandemic as they do not have the comfort of familiarity and having a social network. Many universities appear to be failing to provide information on ensuring that accommodation adheres to guidelines and lacking in supporting those who feel vulnerable and uncomfortable about the easing of lockdown. Therefore, in order to minimise the psychological impact of COVID-19 and reduce mental health concerns, it is crucial that universities offer clear advice and regular up to date information to students whilst following government restrictions.