



Challenges and opportunities for graduate students in public health during the COVID-19 pandemic

Kristina Jenei¹ · Chenoa Cassidy-Matthews¹ · Punit Virk¹ · Bethel Lulie² · Kalysa Closson¹ 

Received: 1 May 2020 / Accepted: 20 May 2020 / Published online: 4 June 2020
© The Canadian Public Health Association 2020, corrected publication 2020

Dear Editor:

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly interrupted educational activities around the world. While these responses are necessary, the speed and scale of which these interruptions occurred cause negative psychological and economic consequences for students and damage career trajectories.

We commend the steps taken here in Canada by federal and provincial governments, universities, and affiliated research institutions to aid students. However, there are additional challenges graduate students face, especially in health sciences, which are amplified among international and Indigenous students. In this letter, we reflect on our own experiences as graduate students in public health during these unprecedented times. A large proportion of the literature has been dedicated to medical students on the frontline, while little is known about the experiences of public health students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What are students dealing with?

Research activities are impacted across Canada which threatens academic and career progression. As students in public health-related fields, many of our projects have been suspended while our supervisors and colleagues are pulled into frontline and organizational responses. Many of us want to help in the response, but face barriers and competing demand. One federal response was the establishment of the National COVID-19 Volunteer Recruitment Campaign; a central registry of volunteers able to

assist in case tracking and data collection (Government of Canada 2020b). However, at present, roles and responsibilities have not been delegated to applicants. Furthermore, it necessitates unpaid work and program derailment, which is impossible for many students during an economic downturn.

The COVID-19 pandemic places students in challenging financial positions as many are unequipped to manage unforeseen expenses due to extended timelines. The federal government announced additional student support (Prime Minister of Canada 2020), including \$291.6 million to support trainees funded directly through Canadian Institutes of Health Research programs (Canadian Institutes of Health Research 2020), and a \$305 million Indigenous Community Support Fund (Government of Canada 2020a). While we recognize the importance of these funding streams, only a small percentage of students will be able to access these funds; thus, we raise questions about how students who do not meet competition criteria will be supported.

International students—who comprise a large demographic of Canadian graduate students—are especially vulnerable financially as many do not meet requirements for federal benefits such as the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB). In response, the government removed work-hour restrictions for international students. Moreover, students who have lost work can apply for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). However, many international students were not working prior to the COVID-19 pandemic as they were studying full-time (Study International 2020).

Millions of learners around the globe are facing uncertain futures and experiencing high levels of anxiety and fear about the future of their academic and professional careers. Before COVID-19, one in five post-secondary students experienced one or more mental health conditions (Auerbach et al. 2016). International and Indigenous students away from their families and communities are particularly at risk and feel the burden of completing their studies while shouldering constant fear of the impacts back home (Zhai and Du 2020). Some Indigenous students face tradeoffs between staying near school and

This article was updated to correct the spelling of Chenoa Cassidy-Matthews' name.

✉ Kalysa Closson
kclosson@cfenet.ubc.ca

¹ School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

² Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada

returning home to their communities (where they risk introducing COVID-19 to their communities—many of which are ill-equipped to handle a serious outbreak) (Global Citizen 2020).

What can universities do to support students?

Graduate students in public health across Canada represent an untapped resource in public health responses to COVID-19. Although we experience many disruptions, we believe there are new opportunities to leverage our skills.

Despite the unprecedented multisectoral challenges posed by COVID-19, these challenges are met with an upsurge of innovation and collaborative research. As students, we spend years studying the fundamental epidemiology and biostatistics involved in a public health response. Yet, many of us are not mobilized to our full capacity. We are eager to apply our skills while we are sidelined from our own endeavours but also stress the importance of paid opportunities to offset financial challenges. This is an opportune moment to support applied research in real time while building capacity for a strong public health workforce in the future.

The stress from suspended research projects, uncertain timelines, and missed learning and career opportunities is exacerbated by upcoming tuition deadlines. These payments loom over many of us who face uncertain economic situations. We urge universities to decrease or suspend tuition fees in the upcoming terms as we are forced to work remotely without the same calibre of academic, mental, and financial supports (Canada Federation for Students 2020).

What can students be doing to support themselves during this time?

COVID-19 introduces many challenges for students but also enables many novel opportunities. Students who desire to become involved in COVID-19 responses should actively seek ways to contribute. For support, a range of virtual mental health services are offered in many provinces for students and the general public (BC Ministry of Health 2020). Many health-benefit plans at universities include access to year-round counselling services through the Employee and Family Assistance Programs. We encourage students to communicate with their program administration and explore available services if they find themselves struggling.

Last, the COVID-19 pandemic might be an opportunity to slow the pace of academic culture and focus on our institutional communities to foster an “ethics of care” (Corbera et al. 2020). In our experiences, we have enjoyed faculty-wide virtual meet-ups and presidential updates with musical performances (The University of British Columbia 2020). These unprecedented times allow us to reflect on how the culture of academia might change after the crisis ends and could be an opportunity to shift our cultural norms.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges that will have long-lasting effects. However, it also offers many novel opportunities for public health students to learn and contribute. Although institutions will likely benefit from the range of innovation during the pandemic, students will likely suffer many consequences. It is essential that challenges for public health students are acknowledged and that the students are mobilized in meaningful ways.

References

- Auerbach, R. P., Alonso, J., Axinn, W. G., Cuijpers, P., Ebert, D. D., Green, J. G., et al. (2016). Mental disorders among college students in the WHO World Mental Health Surveys. *Psychol Med*, 46(14), 2955–2970. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0033291716001665>.
- BC Ministry of Health (2020). *Virtual mental health supports during COVID-19*. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/mental-health-substance-use/virtual-supports-covid-19>. Accessed.
- Canada Federation for Students (2020). *Open letter: graduate students and COVID-19*. <https://www.cfs-fcee.ca/open-letter-grad-students-and-covid-19/>. Accessed.
- Canadian Institutes of Health Research (2020). *Government of Canada announces two critical research funding programs - message from the President*. <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/51943.html>. Accessed.
- Corbera, E., Anguelovski, I., Honey-Rosé, J., & Ruiz-Mallén, I. (2020). *Academia in the time of Covid-19: our chance to develop an ethics of care*. <http://www.wpl.scarp.ubc.ca/academia-in-the-time-of-covid-19-our-chance-to-develop-an-ethics-of-care/>. Accessed.
- Global Citizen (2020). *COVID-19 in Canada: fears mount that Indigenous communities could be left behind*. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/covid-19-in-canada-indigenous-communities/>. Accessed.
- Government of Canada (2020a). *Indigenous community support fund*. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1585189335380/1585189357198>. Accessed.
- Government of Canada (2020b). *National COVID-19 Volunteer Recruitment Campaign*. <https://emploisfp-psjobs.cfp-psc.gc.ca/pdrs-srpf/applicant/page1800?toggleLanguage=en&poster=1437722>. Accessed.
- Prime Minister of Canada (2020). *Support for students and new grads affected by COVID-19*. <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2020/04/22/support-students-and-new-grads-affected-covid-19>. Accessed.
- Study International (2020). *CESB vs CERB: what's the difference and are international students in Canada eligible for both?* <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/cesb-cerb-international-students-canada/>. Accessed.
- The University of British Columbia (2020). *COVID 19 update*. https://president.ubc.ca/letter-to-the-community/2020/04/03/covid-update-april-3/?_ga=2.107596230.512931149.1587994982-402854166.1583901527. Accessed.
- Zhai, Y., & Du, X. (2020). Mental health care for international Chinese students affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. *Lancet Psychiatry*, 7(4), e22. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30089-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30089-4).

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.