

Impact of COVID-19 on Students

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ABSTRACT

The social distancing measures taken by the authorities in response to Covid 19 have had major economic and psychological consequences on the population. In particular, students were subject to major disruption. Social science research has shown that students constitute a fragile social category, more prone to anxiety than the rest of the population and thus particularly exposed during major upheavals such as the Covid 19 epidemic.

Memorandum 3 : overview of the studies and projects registered on WPRN database

The social distancing measures taken by the authorities in response to Covid 19 have had major economic and psychological consequences on the population. In particular, students were subject to major disruption. Social science research has shown that students constitute a fragile social category, more prone to anxiety than the rest of the population and thus particularly exposed during major upheavals such as the Covid 19 epidemic. Several studies carried out or in progress highlight the impact of measures against Covid 19, in particular containment, on the mental health of students. More studies should now focus on the medium- and long-term consequences for students, in particular the consequences of educational changes at university and the economic and social consequences of the current crisis.

Students: a social category particularly prone to mental health problems and external stressors.

The mental health of students has been the subject of considerable research. As this [study](#) in the World Pandemic Research Network database shows [students](#) are more prone to mental health problems than the general population. In particular, 1 in 4 students have symptoms of [depression](#) and 1 in 10 have suicidal thoughts. Several stress factors have been put forward to explain this phenomenon: academic competition with their peers, the need to adjust to new geographical and social environments, uncertainty about the future or financial insecurity for some of them.

In addition to these elements, research has shown the impact that external events can have on mental health. The [SARS epidemic](#) in 2003, for example, is estimated to have had a very negative impact on the mental health of the population in Hong Kong. Thus the coronavirus epidemic and the measures taken by the authorities to respond to it may constitute an additional stressor on a population already more prone to anxiety than average and requiring special attention.

Early studies point to a complex link between Covid 19 and student mental health

Students have had to adapt to two types of public health measures taken in response to the Covid 19 epidemic: general measures of social distancing affecting the general population but also measures specific to the academic sphere. Two studies in the WPRN database have analysed in detail the impacts of the containment and physical closure of universities on the mental health of cohorts of students.

A [Swiss study](#) compared the psychological state of students during the first two weeks of confinement and during similar periods prior to the epidemic. The majority of the students remained socially integrated, but a minority of individuals, already vulnerable and experiencing social difficulties, found themselves further isolated. Students perceived negative but also positive changes in the situation. The majority were more depressed, anxious, stressed and socially isolated. However, some felt free from the social pressure and stress of competing for academic success. A similar [Dutch study](#) found no change in the mental health of the students in the sample analysed. On the contrary and surprisingly, the study seems to show a decrease in the feeling of loneliness, which could be explained by a strengthening of strong (family) bonds and a sense of common belonging in the face of adversity.

The findings of the study encourage the authorities to implement better support focused on the most isolated students. Universities are encouraged to develop more study groups, mentoring and psychological counselling. Preventive measures to monitor students should also be put in place beforehand during periods when an external stress factor is identified, as also recommended by a psychiatry [study](#) assessing with more hindsight the psychological impact on Chinese students.

These studies are need to be completed. They focus on the early period of confinement, but the mental health of the students requires long-term monitoring. Several ongoing studies in the WPRN database should provide a more global understanding of the phenomenon. In particular, this large [study](#) which will analyse the consequences of Covid 19 on the mental health of students in 27 countries, this study which focuses on the this [study](#) which looks at the prevalence of mental health disorders in France, and this [American study](#) which aims to evaluate the impact of environmental modifications and Covid 19 on the well-being of students.

The medium- and long-term consequences for students, including educational disruption at the university and the economic consequences of the crisis created by Covid 19 require further study.

Social distancing measures at the university have led to educational disruption. Courses are taught entirely at a distance, exchange semesters abroad and many internships have been cancelled. Uncertainty predominated during the period, putting students in difficulty. An [Ifop survey](#) shows that the effectiveness of the new teaching measures is questioned by 61% of the students. As these measures seem to become long-term, their effects need to be analysed in more detail. The French pedagogical «discontinuities» [study](#) available on WPRN aims at highlighting the consequences of the pedagogical modifications caused by Covid and could provide leads for understanding.

The economic consequences of Covid 19 on students seem to be insufficiently studied for the moment. The loss of jobs and student summer internships, and the difficulties for the integration of young graduates in a context of recession must be better quantified.

The issue of social inequalities between students created or increased by the Covid 19 epidemic (unequal conditions of remote work, increased financial and cultural inequalities in educational success) should be studied further. Several studies focus on the analysis of educational inequalities related to Covid 19, but data are lacking on inequalities between students.

The theme of intra- and inter-state mobility could also be a relevant subject of study. A pronounced relocation of places of study close to their geographical origin of students seems to be expressed in the choices of high school students, suggesting important consequences for universities.

In short, the confinement measures appear to have had a moderate impact on the mental health of students, although an already fragile minority of students appears to be experiencing increased isolation. Current studies focus on the well-being and mental health of students. Many more studies are needed, some already underway, to analyze in detail the consequences of educational changes at the university and the economic and social consequences of the Covid 19 crisis. University authorities are encouraged to follow the results of these future studies closely, to increase their monitoring of the most vulnerable students and to set up upstream prevention systems to deal with future external shocks, whether epidemic or of another nature.

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