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RESEARCH BRIEF 2024
Chandaria Research Centre

The Road After: A Longitudinal Study of the Lives and Early Careers of Alums

SEMESTERS IN SOLITUDE:
POST-SECONDARY LIFE INTERRUPTED BY COVID-19

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As students and educators know all too well, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly and profoundly altered the educational landscape for several years. The consequences of these changes on students' learning and well-being are just starting to become clear. This research brief explores both the negative and positive impacts of the pandemic on academic performance, social relationships and personal well-being of graduates from Branksome Hall, a girls' independent school[1], who were enrolled in post-secondary education at the time the pandemic began. A number of recommendations aimed at post-secondary institutions, parents and students are provided to help support student resilience.

A large volume of research has been published in real time on the evolving relationships between COVID-19 disruptions and learning loss (Hammerstein et al., 2021), emergency online learning (Cameron & Presley, 2021; Cognia Innovation Lab, 2020) and youth mental health (Cost, et al., 2022; Thombs et al., 2020). Media outlets have declared youth mental health a pandemic of its own (e.g., Roxby, 2020; Wan, 2020), and some researchers pointed to school closures in particular as the cause of the decline in youth mental health (Cost et al., 2022). However, numerous and significant methodological challenges have been pointed out with regards to these studies, particularly since experts have been warning about a youth mental health crisis well before the pandemic (CBC Radio, 2019). A more recent meta-analysis of 137 studies, however, suggests that most youth were not at an additional increased risk of mental health problems during the initial years of the pandemic (Sun et al., 2023). The most notable negative effects of the pandemic on mental health were a marginal increase in depressive symptoms in women or those that identify as female (Sun et al., 2023), suggesting further study is needed into the experiences of this demographic group. Now that some time has passed from the onset of the pandemic, it's possible to begin reflecting on what unfolded during its early phases, while acknowledging that the situation is ongoing and fluid. Taking a nuanced approach to understanding pandemic-related challenges and experiences, this research brief explores the positive and negative experiences of female and gender minority post-secondary students in the areas of academics and personal and social well-being during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences were captured in *The Road After,* the Chandaria Research Centre's longitudinal study tracking Branksome Hall graduates' development into young adulthood.

[1] *Branksome Hall affirms the complexity of gender identity, acknowledging its non-binary nature in today's world. While it is a girls' school, Branksome includes students and alums who identify as cisgender girls/women, transgender, as well as the broader spectrum of gender diversity.*

THE ROAD AFTER – STUDY OVERVIEW

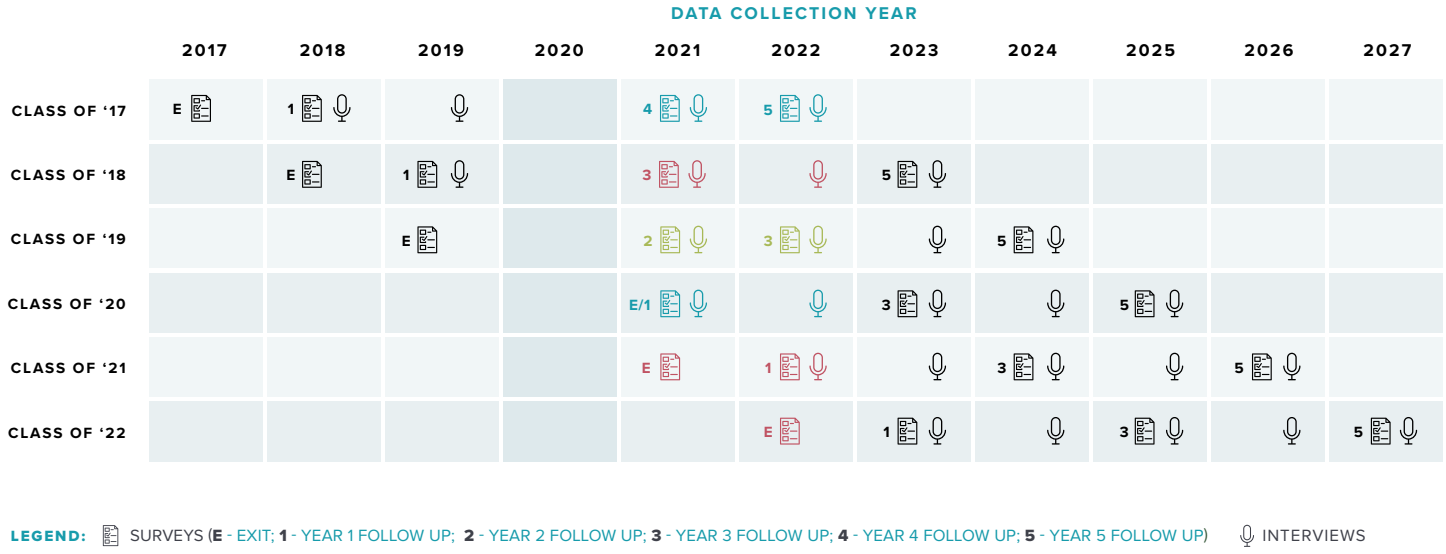

Figure 1. *Research methods and study timeline*

Note: This research brief focuses on data collected from all cohorts (Class of 2017–Class of 2022) in Spring 2021 and 2022, indicated in colour. No data was collected in 2020 due to COVID-19.

The Road After study documents Branksome Hall graduates' perceptions of their lives over a five-year period after high school. Branksome Hall is an independent Kindergarten to Grade 12 International Baccalaureate school for girls in Canada. The study explores the experiences of young women during the transition from high school to post-secondary education, their interests and developmental experiences during their post-secondary studies and their transition to early careers.

The study is guided by the following research question:

What are young women's experiences as they transition into post-secondary education and/or adulthood?

To answer this question, we involved multiple cohorts of young women (starting with the Class of 2017 and ending with the Class of 2022) in this ongoing longitudinal study. The study uses a combination of surveys and individual interviews to help us understand student experience, as illustrated in Figure 1. Participants are asked about their academic and well-being experiences, and for their reflections on their development of leadership and international mindedness. Each cohort is surveyed at the time of graduation from high school, at the end of their first year of post-secondary education or gap year (Year 1), midway through their programs (Year 3) and upon graduation from post-secondary institutions (Year 4 or 5). Up to ten students within each cohort also participate in annual interviews that probe more deeply into their experiences to gain additional insights. Due to pandemic disruptions, no data were collected in 2020. In the Spring of 2021 and 2022, we attempted to reconnect with the 2020–2022 cohorts to hear about their transitions to post-secondary education during COVID-19, and with the 2017–2019 cohorts to learn about how the disruption felt for students either in the midst of their studies or about to graduate (see Fig. 2).

WHO ARE THE PARTICIPANTS?

63 participants from 2017–2021 graduating cohorts participated in the 2021 survey	**49 participants** from the 2017, 2019, 2021 and 2022 graduating cohorts participated in the 2022 survey	**18 interviews** from 2017–2021 graduating cohorts were completed in 2021 and 2022	The most highly reported fields of study in post-secondary education were Liberal Arts/ Humanities, Health Sciences and Business	**8.5%** of participants changed their field of study in 2021 or 2022 (not including those transitioning to graduate school)	Approximately **50%** of participants identified as visible minorities; 98% identified as women or girls, and 2% identified as non-binary or trangender

Figure 2. *Participant demographics for 2021 and 2022 data collection cycles*

Studying in a Time of Disruption

During the pandemic, both secondary and post-secondary institutions experienced disruption to in-person learning, the length of which varied according to location and local public health directives. In general, in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic first began, both high schools and universities transitioned to a fully virtual learning environment to complete the last three months of school. During the following school year (September 2020–June 2021) students in secondary and post-secondary institutions participated in hybrid learning models (i.e., education that blends in-person and virtual learning) adapted for social distancing when attending school in person or remote learning from home. Students engaged in remote learning either synchronously (i.e., engaged in virtual learning with a teacher in real time) or asynchronously (i.e., completing tasks or watching recorded lectures independently). Many boarding/ international students who otherwise would have lived on campus instead attended schools virtually, while those who did live on campus experienced a variety of restrictions. By January 2022, many educational institutions have returned to fully in-person learning (Abdrasheva et al., 2022).

Impact of COVID-19 Disruption on Grades

The transition from secondary to post-secondary education often involves an adjustment to higher academic expectations, even for the best-prepared students. International Baccalaureate alums are accustomed to academic rigour and grade point averages (GPA) that reflect that. As such, when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared and post-secondary institutions began to adapt their learning approaches, many students experienced new challenges related to academic success.

An analysis of GPA by school year and cohort suggests the following (see Fig. 3):

In their first year of university, the 2020 and 2021 cohorts had the lowest average GPA (80% and 85% respectively) as compared to the average GPA of older cohorts during their first year of study (95% and 89%).

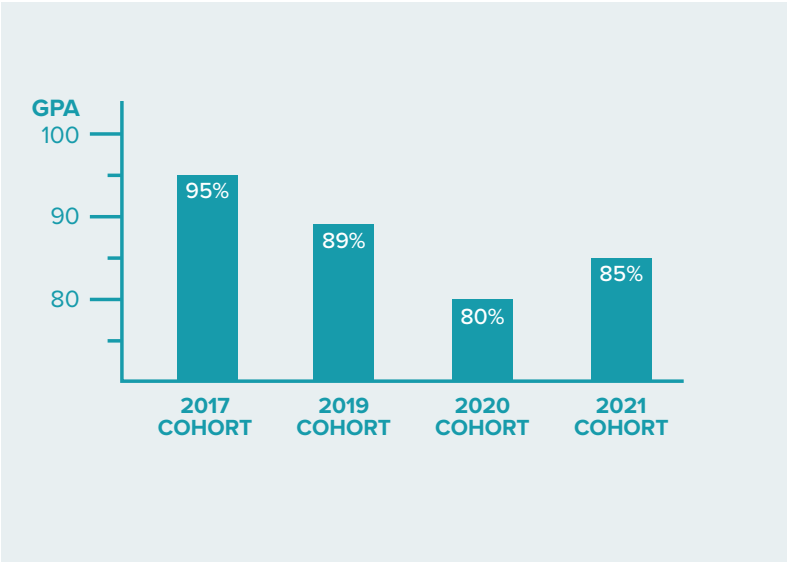

Figure 3. *GPA in first year of university*

In older cohorts, we also observed a drop in average GPA between the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 academic years (see Fig. 4):

- a drop in average GPA from 95% to 89% for students in their fourth or fifth year of study (for those who took an extra year of study); and
- a drop in average GPA from 92% to 89% for students in their second or third year of study.

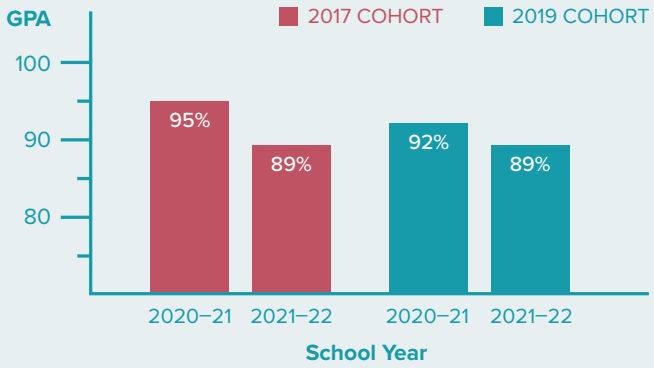

Figure 4. *Changes in GPA for students at midpoint and end of university program*

As these results highlight, the observed decrease in GPA was not drastic, but was nonetheless a new experience for some high-achieving students. For others, the impact was more profound. For example, one alum reported falling behind in her program because she switched to part-time learning during lockdowns as she wasn't making much progress. Although she is now on track to graduate one year "late," she is hoping to catch up by taking summer courses.

Overall, our results suggest that although the disruptions affected students of various cohorts differently, most students were able to maintain relatively stable (albeit slightly lower) grades. However, our study participants tend to be of generally higher income: 67% of study participants reported that they were quite or very well off. Other research suggests that, while students who were financially better off, were generally able to maintain their grades, high performing students with lower income were more likely to experience a drop in GPA, and were more likely to not complete a course (Rodríguez-Planas, 2023).

Results suggest that although the disruptions affected students of various cohorts differently, most students were able to maintain relatively stable (albeit slightly lower) grades.

Despite the general resilience in their academic performance, students had much to say about the delivery of online and hybrid education, and the way it impacted their motivation to learn.

Online and Hybrid Learning

We asked interview participants about their academic experiences during COVID-19. Of all the comments gathered, 44% were negative, 34% were positive, 12% were neutral and 10% were mixed (both positive and negative).

Many of the negative comments referred to the initial campus shutdowns when COVID-19 first began. Participants noted that in-person classes stopped abruptly, leading to "frantic" (Kiki, 2019) attempts to move classes online. At times, students and professors experienced "confusion" (Kiki, 2019) and "chaos" (Ghost Islander, 2018), which added a burden on students to learn course content independently.

A number of students expressed their frustrations with the resulting lack of connection or ability to reach out to professors, teaching assistants and other students. Noah, from the 2019 cohort, described this candidly:

> "Online [learning] is like mail-order school, like there's no heart in it at all. I've described it before as if you have this box, and the box spits out assignments, and then you send them back and then the box says nothing."

Students' challenges with online learning have been well documented in other studies (Day et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Walters et al., 2021). In fact, despite the logistical and pragmatic benefits offered by remote education overall, studies conducted during the pandemic suggest that most students preferred in-person learning to online. In our study, multiple participants, like Adrienne (2018 cohort), commonly noted the challenges with emergency online learning and a lack of preparedness for technological accommodations:

> "So, then all of our lectures turned to recordings, and we had to sort of independently teach [ourselves] the remaining course load from that semester, which was a lot because that was a big chunk of the curriculum that got sort of pushed online. It was like, nobody even knew how to do online lectures. [...] Definitely took a big adjustment."

In addition to the radical changes in education delivery, participants talked about how their entire lives suddenly switched to online formats, which was isolating and made it difficult to develop any kind of schedule, structure or connection with others:

> "I was pretty much by myself with a computer screen in front of me or with my phone in front of me, so it's a lot of boredom. And that kind of led to a decrease in mental health I would say, where, because there was so much time to myself, there was a tendency to overthink a lot of situations." (Kait, 2018 cohort)

Science majors in particular reported that their labs took on a virtual format, which was detrimental to developing practical lab skills. Science students reported writing lab reports based on videos of professors conducting the experiments, without having done the labs themselves. Some reported that they did not have an opportunity to gain those important concrete skills the following year either; rather, they were expected to have previously acquired them.

More generally, students preferred class structures that encouraged synchronous and collaborative work. For example, some professors put their lectures online and students had to complete a quiz at a specific time, which encouraged students to watch lectures during class time and interact with others through a group chat. Another participant reported that their class format switched to group work, with synchronous class time used to work on their project. This helped students adhere to a schedule and ensured they developed connections with others, preventing isolation.

Students preferred class structures that encouraged synchronous and collaborative work.

Additionally, there were aspects of the online/hybrid model that students appreciated and found more inclusive than a fully in-person experience. For example, Spina, from the 2018 cohort, told us that having convocation online actually worked well for her because she was attending her program remotely from her home country outside of North America; her whole family watched and celebrated her convocation on Zoom. Participants also felt that during this time, their professors were a lot more understanding, empathetic and flexible, that workload was reduced, and that assessments changed from final exams to open-book tests and

group projects. Several students reported they were able to maintain or even improve their grades and have their learning needs accommodated.

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Some students noted that, despite the ways COVID-related shutdowns interfered with their access to traditional learning opportunities, online learning offered new opportunities that were not available pre-pandemic. For example, Ghost Islander (2018 cohort), a student in a music program, was unable to record her own composition for her portfolio with an in-studio band. Instead, she had the opportunity to send her composition to the Auckland Jazz Orchestra, who ultimately recorded her song. She marveled at this opportunity, saying:

> "And it's part of my portfolio which is great now. And that opened up my eyes because now I could say, my work's been performed in Auckland because of this remote work. I could say, my work has gone from being performed in the Western Hemisphere to the Eastern Hemisphere."

Other students also noted that because so many post-secondary and graduate programs became available online, they were able to remotely attend universities from around the world and access programs that would normally be out of reach. Some students even participated in global research initiatives about the pandemic response in different countries and learned about epidemiology, public health and government.

In summary, students' experiences with online and hybrid learning largely depended on how well their post-secondary programs were able to attend to safety, pace, schedule and assessment, and whether they provided relationship-building opportunities.

By contrast, the return to campus has been a source of confusion for many, offering few options for students feeling unwell and wanting to protect others. The experience of Kiki (2019 cohort) was typical for many participants:

> "We're back on campus fully now, which is kind of nice. Some courses are still offered online, which is better because if you get sick at all, you don't want to go in because it could be a cold, but it might not be. But some courses aren't recorded or offered online at all. So it's—you go in sick, or you miss the class and you're behind."

Other students talked about the risk calculations they routinely made around returning to normal activities, getting sick, and trusting that no one would knowingly come to class ill.

> "I think if you're a student at university, you would have to be a horrible person to go and give someone COVID at an event... So, that's also something in the back of my mind. When we're networking, we kind of engage the person and [assess] 'Oh, would this person be the type of person to go to an event with COVID?' And kind of, the way people talk, their demeanour and stuff like that. It's a lot of judgment calls." (Malika, 2017 cohort)

In summary, students' experiences with online and hybrid learning largely depended on how well their post-secondary programs were able to attend to safety, pace, schedule and assessment, and whether they provided relationship-building opportunities.

Pandemic-Related Challenges Outside the Classroom

In addition to disruptions to young adults' academic schedules, goals and results, the onset of the pandemic surfaced significant challenges outside of the classroom. Among the survey excerpts that discussed the impact of the pandemic on participants' well-being, 46% of the comments were negative, 28% were positive, 23% were neutral and 4% were both positive and negative.

Higher levels of relative stress were reported in Spring 2022, suggesting that the ongoing nature of the pandemic compounded students' stress over time.

To explore some of the pandemic-related challenges, study participants were asked to rate how much general stress they experienced at the end of the 2021 academic calendar (i.e., stress experienced Fall 2020–Spring 2021) and during the same time period in 2022 (i.e., Fall 2021–Spring 2022). Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale to indicate their level of stress from *very low* to *very high*. Higher levels of relative stress were reported in Spring 2022, suggesting that the ongoing nature of the pandemic compounded students' stress over time (see Fig. 5). The most widely reported stressors in 2021 were health anxiety related to contracting the virus, the continuous influx of negatively framed media, and managing feelings of boredom and low productivity. In the first year back to in-person learning (2022), respondent concerns shifted to academic stress. This makes sense: academic expectations were reduced in the first year of the pandemic but bounced back to normal the year after. However, high levels of pandemic stress also remained.

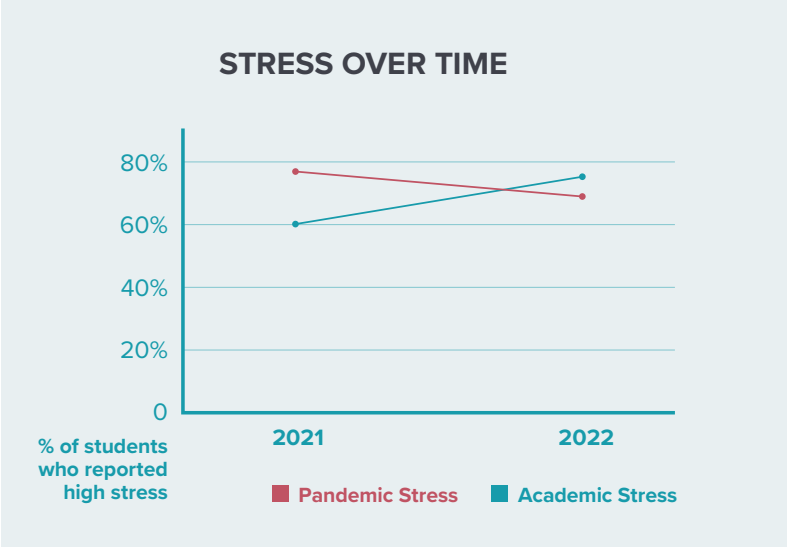

Figure 5. *Student-reported main stressors during the pandemic*

It is also worth noting that the pandemic occurred at a pivotal period in post-secondary students' social development and transition into young adulthood. Many post-secondary students arrived at school planning to participate in clubs, volunteer organizations and intramural sports. However, the pandemic led to the cancellation of most in-person events, presenting a significant barrier for students in need of socialization. Many respondents discussed feelings brought on by pandemic isolation:

> "I think the hardest part is just trying not to feel depressed and even anxious about social interaction and stuff like that because you're always thinking about like, 'Oh, the cases are bad, I have to be careful when I go do groceries,' or 'I can't see my friends' and it's hard to just be alone constantly." (Talia, 2018 cohort)

> "Sitting at home because it was during COVID that I did co-op. So I'd just close my laptop and that's me going home from work. And then it would be daylight outside and I remember in the first couple months I would sit and I would be like, 'What now? Like, what do I do?' And I had this crisis where I was like, I don't know who I am. Who am I? What am I doing? And it was such a surreal feeling to have." (Malika, 2017 cohort)

In some cases, participants reported symptoms of social anxiety and a strong reluctance to return to social settings:

> "But something that did feel like a challenge especially coming from COVID, I just went completely internal socially, and I started feeling more social anxiety. So, something that felt like a challenge was throwing myself back into a restaurant environment where I'm constantly having to interact with strangers." (Veronica, 2018 cohort)

As their experiences here clearly suggest, these young women were challenged by social isolation, identity and life transitions, among others, during the pandemic.

Mental Health, Coping and Finding Silver Linings

Despite the numerous challenges faced during the pandemic (Mucci-Ferris et al., 2021), some participants began to identify some silver linings as time progressed: 28% of alums discussed benefits from COVID-related changes. Similar to the findings in this study, the largest meta-analytical study to date on COVID-19 and mental health found that, contrary to predominant media narratives thus far, the pandemic did not have a lasting negative impact on the mental health of the general public, nor on young people in particular (this does not include those who were already high risk; see Sun et al., 2023). Rather, most people experienced an initial shock but were well-equipped to self-regulate during times of stress and uncertainty, including post-secondary students (Hjorthøj, 2023). That said, it is important to acknowledge that rates of poor mental health among adolescents in general are concerningly high and do need to be addressed (Wiens et al., 2020). The meta-analysis did also find a slight increase in depressive symptoms among young women in particular (Sun et al., 2023). As the situation is ongoing and solutions are complex, researchers are continuing to watch these trends closely.

Most people experienced an initial shock but were well-equipped to self-regulate during times of stress and uncertainty, including post-secondary students (Hjorthøj, 2023).

One subtheme frequently voiced in interviews was the opportunity to become closer with certain family members and friends (i.e., those within their "bubble"). For context, when the pandemic began, many participants were living independently for the first time, often in new cities. The physical pause from campus life disrupted this step into independent living but offered them cherished moments to reconnect with loved ones:

> "So we're eating great during the pandemic and my dad's cooking every day. I'm cooking some days, my sister's cooking. So we're having two meals a day with each other, which is great. So I think that really brought us together." (Ghost Islander, 2018 cohort)

And although the pandemic caused many participants to experience social isolation, they also used this time to decide which of their personal relationships were worth putting effort toward:

> "The biggest impact on my well-being has been sort of showing me who deserves to be in my space. And [...] just becoming more in tune with myself and my personal wants and needs." (Adrienne, 2018 cohort)

Considering that 70% of participants reported social support as the most frequently used coping method, its importance cannot be overstated. Compared to other forms of coping, fewer young women in this sample reported using strategies such as physical activity, nutrition and mindfulness (49%, 41% and 23%, respectively). Measured against previous waves of data collection in this study, it appears that coping strategies did not change as compared to prior to the pandemic, suggesting that participants drew on coping strategies they already had in their toolbox, and did not necessarily try new or additional strategies.

Students who were further along in their post-secondary programs may have had more difficulties coping because they were closer to graduation and were more uncertain of their post-graduation futures.

Cohorts that reported the lowest number of coping strategies were those who graduated from high school before the pandemic. A study by Kecojevic and colleagues (2020) noted a similar trend, with first-year post-secondary students reporting less anxiety than their older peers. Students who were further along in their post-secondary programs may have had more difficulties coping because they were closer to graduation and were more uncertain of their post-graduation futures. For example, Malika (2017 cohort), who was finishing her undergraduate program when COVID began, found the transition out of post-secondary education difficult and chose to pursue a master's degree:

> "I was hoping that I could do a full-time [job] after I graduated, but getting a job was pretty tough... I just decided to do the master's because I thought it was a good opportunity to figure out what I wanted to do as a career."

Some participants described feeling psychologically safer at home than at their academic institutions, a finding corroborated by other studies (Gill & McQuillan, 2022). Remote learning offered some students an environment free of discrimination: approximately one third of LGBTQ2S+ students reported that their gender and sexual identity were affirmed at home (The Trevor Project, 2021), whereas other studies suggest that over 80% of LGBTQ2S+ students feel unsafe at school (GLSEN, 2021). These students appreciated the pause from in-person learning because they were removed from non gender-affirming environments (e.g., environments with gendered washrooms). Some participants in this study reported similar experiences during periods of remote learning. It should be noted, however, that educators can be an important source of support for LGBTQ2S+ youth, providing them with safe space to discuss issues and directing them towards affirming resources (Gill & McQuillan, 2022).

Additionally, the pandemic provided participants with time to reflect on larger issues and gain new perspectives. Respondents reflected on their identities, assessed their long-term goals and considered the importance of developing productive habits. For example, Veronica (2018 cohort) described her own personal growth in understanding larger societal issues:

> "I would say it feels like I've grown up a lot over the last two years and I'm not sure if that's just my age or if that's the pandemic and just getting a different perspective on the way that the world works in terms of the healthcare response, and just who was more impacted and just having those inequalities revealed like that."

In sum, despite undergoing a radical shift in their lives during a time of great uncertainty, some participants showed moderate to strong levels of resilience. Post-secondary students in our study and elsewhere undoubtedly experienced unique hardships during the pandemic, but their ability to adapt and salvage positive experiences was likely underestimated by many of the adults around them (Broner et al., 2022).

That said, it is important to acknowledge that most Branksome Hall graduates felt relatively privileged in terms of resources and frequently acknowledged how lucky they were to be in a safe and stable situation at such a volatile time. A comment from Talia (2018 cohort) illustrates the general sentiment, noting: "I don't have to worry about money, I don't have to worry about housing or anything like that. So taking that into consideration, the pandemic was relatively easy for someone like me, in my position."

Implications and Practical Recommendations

With the findings from this report and supporting literature in mind, stakeholders involved in the development and well-being of young adults should consider several things. First, post-secondary institutions should pay careful attention to lost experiences among specific cohorts, such as first-year students missing orientation ("frosh") week, or graduating students' anxiety about entering a volatile job market. Educators might consider adding to students' coping toolboxes to help them build stronger resilience skills, while simultaneously increasing institutional supports, such as studying and time management workshops, and access to affordable housing and mental health resources. Students should be routinely involved in diverse learning approaches as well as opportunities to enhance their physical, mental and social well-being, following a developmental assets approach (Lerner et al., 2005).

Below are some actionable recommendations for school and university stakeholders:

- Educators should commit to ongoing professional development in remote and hybrid learning pedagogy and continue to offer courses in a variety of formats to increase flexibility.
- Institutions should provide targeted support such as financial aid or access to online learning to lower-income students who are more likely to experience a large drop in GPA.
- Students should be provided with ample resources to support their learning using multiple modalities (i.e., in-person, online and hybrid).
- University and college faculty and staff should assess what fundamental formative experiences and skill-building opportunities were missed for each cohort (e.g., labs, practice, frosh week) and address those gaps.
- Students should be provided with accessible opportunities to meet and interact with their teachers and professors to normalize co-created learning experiences (e.g., project-based learning, flipped classroom approach, and in-person or virtual office hours).
- Student unions and school staff should offer opportunities for social interaction and mentorship to mitigate lost socialization and career exploration.
- Students would benefit from ongoing workshops that support building a variety of healthy coping skills, so they can lean on these already honed skills during difficult times.
- Students' needs related to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility should be considered throughout transitions between remote and in-person learning environments.

Limitations

The participant sample in this study consisted of 98% women and 2% gender minority participants; therefore results are not generalizable to male post-secondary students. Further research is needed to understand the role of gender differences in the experience of the pandemic disruptions.

Additionally, the study sample consisted of graduates from a single high school that is generally more affluent than the general population. Results may not be generalizable to low-income students who may experience additional barriers that may impact their academic success and well-being.

CONCLUSION

This research brief explored the academic and well-being experiences of young female and gender minority post-secondary students during the first three years of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many participants, the onset of the pandemic coincided with major life transitions, such as high school or post-secondary graduation. The study explored the challenges and successes of emergency online learning, the impact of moving into adulthood during a period of widespread upheaval, the difficulties of maintaining well-being and relationships, as well as personal growth as a result of the pandemic. Participants developed adaptive coping skills and found moments of gratitude in undesirable situations. However, our study also found that student stress increased over time, as pre-pandemic academic expectations returned to normal without institutions fully addressing student health and safety or the skill gaps created by the disruption. It is also imperative to consider students' academic stage (i.e., first year, midpoint, last year) in relation to the pandemic, as these subtle differences had meaningful implications for participants.

In this study, participants often reflected on their emerging understanding of how the world works, the growing inequities that they observed and their position in the world. We look forward to exploring these themes in our next research brief on international mindedness and leadership development.


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