

The Long-term Effect of Covid-19: Understanding how the covid-19 related policy exacerbated the inequality problem from the Perspective of Political Science & Data Science

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Abstract

Due to the covid-19, the government has introduced a series of public policies to curb the spread of pandemic. In response to that, universities and other educational institutions have been closed for almost 1.5 years, changing into virtual learning. However, not every student has the resources and suitable learning environment to adapt to the New Normal. This does not only impact their mental well-being and academic performance, but also creates long-term impact, such as a widening knowledge gap for students who are not able to learn in virtual learning mode. Although HKU has finally resumed to the F2F mode, these impacts can be long-lasting. The research hopes to provide potential solutions to the existing problems, which would help to eliminate the inequality problems in universities and society-in-large. Through the survey (N = 237), in-depth interviews (N = 21) and the art jamming projects, we find that the policies have impacted the HKU students financially, mentally and socially.

Introduction

There have been five waves of pandemics in Hong Kong from January 2020 to March 2021. Thus, the Hong Kong government has introduced policies including mandatory vaccination, mandatory testing, and mandatory use of the app LeaveHomeSafe, etc (HKSAR Government, 2022).

Research finds that COVID-19 enhances inequality among the rich and the poor in society. In Hong Kong, people with lower socio-economic backgrounds suffer more than those with better-off backgrounds in terms of education (Siu, 2021). Studies also find that policies could exacerbate inequalities. Policy measures in EU countries, namely Bulgaria, Finland, France, and Poland, significantly increase the Gini index (Almeida et al., 2021). As Law Chi-kwong, the Secretary for the Labour and Welfare department, HKSAR suggested, the pandemic caused disruptions to a range of economic activities and boosted the employment rate, which soared to 4.5 per cent as of March 2022 (The Standard, 2022). Besides, 7.9% of the population lived in poverty in 2020 under government intervention policies, including cash measures, according to the Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2020 (2021). Apart from the issue of income, university students' learning opportunities are also deprived under COVID, which will impact their cultivation of social capital for future careers (Rios-Aguilar and Deil-Amen, 2012). Thus, the COVID-19-related government policies would unfortunately exacerbate the inequality among university students in Hong Kong. Many students have lost their income and chances to accumulate their social capital, including opportunities to expand their networks and broaden their international horizons. These issues would affect their current studies, or even potentially deter their future career prospects and social mobility.

Bibliography (APA):

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HKSAR Government. (2022). *Covid-19 thematic website, together, we fight the virus, home*. COVID-19 Thematic Website - Together, We Fight the Virus - Home. Retrieved March 24, 2022, from <https://www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/index.html>

Methodology

**The reserach is divided into 3 components:**

1) Survey 2) In-depth interview 3) Art Jamming Project.

We invited 237 HKU students paticipants to complete the survey. Then, we recruit 21 students for in-depth interview and paricipate in the art jamming project.

**The survey consists of 4 sections:**

The demographic background of the respondents, which includes respondents and respondents' family members financial and education background) ; Recall learning experience from 2020 January to 2021 September ; Recall learning experience after physical class resumption (from 2021 September to December) ; Recall learning after physical class resumption (from 2021 September to December)

**The in-depth Interview:**

It covers questions about the students' reaction the latest covid situation, and their opinions about how the policies imposed by the HKSAR government affect their career prospects and daily life.

Survey Results

Among the 237 valid responses in total, we have 163 undergraduates (UG), 53 taught postgraduates (TPG) and 21 research postgraduates (RPG).

**Faculties of each level of study**

	Arts	FBE	Dental	Edu	Engin	Law	Sci	SoSci	Medic	others
UG	13	17	4	8	15	14	27	20	39	4
TPG	4	5	0	9	3	5	3	12	8	4
RPG	4	0	3	4	0	0	2	2	6	0

**What kinds of opportunities did you lose during the pandemic?**

	Internship opportunities	School life (e.g. ocamp, chances to meet new friends)	Exchange opportunities	Learning opportunities (e.g. in-person learning opportunities)
UG	49%	94%	73%	90%
TP	46%	90%	83%	90%
RP	93%	95%	92%	85%

Given that TPG and RPG adopt other learning styles compared to the UG students, which may result in different opinions on learning in the pandemic, while the majority of the respondents are UG students, we decided to focus on UG students for this research project.

**What kinds of opportunities did you lose during the pandemic?**

Internship opportunities:49%; School life (e.g. ocamp, chances to meet new friends): 94%; Exchange opportunities: 73%; Learning opportunities (e.g. in-person learning opportunities): 90%

Rios-Aguilar, & Deil-Amen, R. (2012). Beyond Getting In and Fitting In: An Examination of Social Networks and Professionally Relevant Social Capital Among Latina/o University Students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 11(2), 179–196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536192711435555>

Siu. (2021). Health inequality experienced by the socially disadvantaged populations during the outbreak of COVID-19 in Hong Kong: An interaction with social inequality. *Health & Social Care in the Community.*, 29(5). <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13214>

The Standard. (2022, March 17). *Hong Kong's unemployment rate rises to 4.5 percent*. The Standard. Retrieved March 24, 2022, from <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/4/188249/Hong-Kong's-unemployment-rate-rises-to-4.5-percent>

In-depth Interview

*“I want to go on exchange during my studies, but I have to consider a lot of factors, quarantine policies, COVID-19 situation, vaccination policies... this stresses me out ! “*

Student A (Local Student, Faculty of Law)

*“I am taking a gap year now with the goal of focusing my ECA, now I am forced to stay in my dorm 24/7, I don't get why I take the gap year then. “*

Student B (International Student, Faculty of Engineering)

*“I understand the online learning mode is probably the only thing we can do now to protect both teachers and us, but I still have to admit that I am very disappointed as I know I gonna lost precious opportunities of meeting new friends, explore my horizons, and preparing for my future career ! “*

Student C (International Student, Business School)

*“My parents lost their job under the pandemic and the whole family is dependent upon my sister and I. However, I got sacked by the tutorial centre I worked for just because I had to accopany my brother for his quarantine at Penny's Bay. “*

Student E(Local Student, Faculty of Education)

*“I got depression because of the required quarantine coming back and forth from mainland to Hong Kong. So I had to take a gap year to take care of my mental health. “*

Student D(Mainland Student, Faculty of Education)

Discussion

We found that non-local students might get frustration or even mental illness due to the mandatory quarantine. Espeically when the school announces remote learning after they arrive HK. Moreover, students with a out-of-classroom plan (e.g. internship, project or exchange program) would have to adjust or even cancel their plan because of the changing policies, which aggravate their frustration.

From the results we got from the survey on students' financial conditions (results hidden due to privacy) and how they feel the pandemic affects their learning opportunities, we have discovered that students with disadvantages, for example the recipients of TSFS, in financial backgrounds encountered more challenges in learning and school activities in the pandemic. A correlation between academic performance and family's financial conditions can be seen through the survey results.

Although more than half of the UG students admitted that they gained opportunities including more time to focus on interest and study, and near 50% of the students reflected that they had more time for career preparation, it is important to note that more students cared about the opportunities lost.

Discussion

These learning opportunities, including overseas exploration and internship opportunities. Even though some in-depth interviewers explained that they would attempt to use internship experiences to compensate their 'weakness' of CV (not having international exploration), some interviewees concerned that not getting to make local and international friends in campus would affect their social network expansion and social capital cultivation in long run.

While students also reflected that they had to stay at home for long and not being able to exercise when the dancing/ sports centres were forced to close by the goverment. This led to physical and potential mental health problems of the interviewees and their students. While some interviewees also reflected that their parents lost their jobs because of the pandemic so they had to work extra hours to financially support the families, while working hard to adapt to remote learning (problems include not being able to focus on test because of the unavoidable background noise at home)

It is crucial to note that this research might not fully reflect the policy impacts on HK students since it focused only on HKU students with 11% of the respondents are government subsidies recipients. Other universities with more students in a less fortunate financial background might be even more severely impacted.

Art Jamming Project

We invited our interviewees to draw a picture with the provided Nagomi Art starting kit.

The topic is “your feeling with online learning and covid related regulations’. Drawing help them to relieve stress at home, but also help us to understand HKU students' feeling under the pandemic

