

Student and Faculty Experiences of the Coronavirus Shutdown

Written by E-International Relations

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E-International Relations is staffed with an all-volunteer team of students, academics and practitioners/professionals from around the world. As the coronavirus issue grew into a pandemic and our team experienced the shutdown of their universities and workplaces, we collected some vignettes that we hope you will find useful when adding to your own experience. Each reflects a personal account of how things have changed, either from their point of view as a student, or as faculty.

Tanya – student: “Our university has shifted to online lectures too. It is convenient, however, I am still concerned about the pending evaluations of presentations and other submissions. I don’t think there exists an alternative that supercedes this one. For the time being however, the gravest concern is posed by the rising number of cases in Maharashtra (the state of my home city – Mumbai). But with the postponement in examinations, especially for students in their final-year of graduation, panic has already struck with regards to further studies’ applications and prospective jobs. It’s a double whammy.”

Bárbara – student: “My university issued a statement last Sunday cancelling every on-campus activity – classes, seminars, book releases, lectures, etc – until the 31st of March, with a very real possibility of prolongating the quarantine. They had the decency to cancel everything before the virus infected any of the students, professors, or staff. They moved all classes from the undergraduate classes and postgraduate classes to an online platform in order to avoid “loosing” the semester. I haven’t got my access as of yet, but the platform allows for live streaming, as well as lectures uploads, as well as the application of tests, exams, and essays so we won’t stop with our activities. To be honest, I won’t complain about the extra time that I have to dedicate to my dissertation, but in hindsight, I think we tend to loose productive class discussions in online classes. I’m also very relieved to have some semblance to my usual schedule, and to keep busy during this crisis.”

Andrew – PhD student/TA: “Friday the 13th of November I was at the Centre for International Policy Studies Graduate Student Conference at the University of Ottawa and it was this day that the emails, push notifications and news alerts really began rolling in with cancellations. Our University began by cancelling classes the following Monday and Tuesday and communicated that after that they would be moved online. Since this initial scramble most of the rest of the University has subsequently shut down as well. This began of course as a bit of a disconcerting scramble for many. I was in a lucky enough situation that the courses for which I TA already had online assignment submissions and I am a research assistant which I do mostly virtually as well. Beyond that I had just returned from Namibia where I completed the fieldwork for my dissertation. I have always worked from my home office as much as possible and was already planning to try to engage in a form of social distancing myself over the coming year to write my dissertation – though obviously no where near to this standard. For me I am in a lucky enough position that the University closures will not greatly affect me. I feel confident in the way the University has handled things by rolling out the shutdown in stages rather than all at once, yet nonetheless in an effective and timely fashion. The University has also been very effective in its daily communications and this has certainly made the process both smoother and clearer – both absolute keys in these trying times. Institutions of higher learning must set the bar at this time and continue to put the health and well being of students, faculty and communities first as mine has effectively to this point.”

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Alexandros – faculty: “My university, provided sufficient flexibility to lecturers, good initial support and inadequate adjustment time. Firstly, we weren’t bogged down by unnecessary forms for quality control. Universities should trust their teachers, like UCLan did, and give teachers the flexibility to teach in the best way they can! Secondly, Information Services and its people have been exquisite in providing great instructional videos to teach us how to use the new software accompanied by a chat service for additional support. Moreover, the university was helpful in opting for a software that was user-friendly. However, some of us had only 48 hours to make the transition from face to face to e-teaching, and learn how to use the new software. I did it and other colleagues did it too, but we were cutting it close. The other issue I want to communicate is the issue of mutual dependence. This experience demonstrates how closely interdependent university, teachers, and students are. Universities cannot do everything perfectly well, and depend on teachers’ own initiative, just like I did with an extra Q&A document I prepared for my students. But of course universities, if they ever acknowledge this, they will also have to acknowledge that their future does not hang on new buildings and newly refurbished libraries (ironically) but keeping their teaching staff content and ready to go above and beyond... Students also depend on teachers, and teachers on their students, by virtue of the increased need to communicate clearly and with empathy to students the situation in order to nurture a mutual understanding of how teaching and learning will look like in the foreseeable future, so that students get their degrees. This is the essence of interactive teaching. Not just teaching interactively in class, but teaching in a way that helps develop a shared understanding between students and teachers. To be able to make the most of teaching when new contingencies arise, like now, and to do this be relying on our students’ responses. Nobody should give up on anyone. We depend on each other. However, for those of us in precarious contracts that end in a few months, this virus makes our lives, subsistence, and dreams dangerously uncertain.”

Zahoor – student: “My university, has suspended all academic activities till 31st March. The state of distress is such that students have been asked to leave hostels and return home. The mess services in hostels have been stopped. From the university administration, intimations about the future of academic activities is awaited. If the graph of unfortunate deaths recorded in Italy having good health infrastructure has gone exponentially high, then it is unfathomable to think of India with such burgeoning population amid poor health infrastructure. The problem is people are not realizing how fatal coronavirus is, and that is precisely the reason people are avoiding precautionary measures to prevent from this pandemic. My hypothesis is that if sufficient measures are not taken at the individual, collective and national level, with enforcement stringently adhered to, my predicament is that India will be new prospective hotspot for coronavirus cases.”

Akshaya – student: “So we were on spring break when we got the email from college saying that it would be shut for a month, also warning us to be prepared for a much longer shutdown. We’ve moved to online classes, assignments, presentations and most professors have been very kind about the situation, looking to adapt the syllabus and assignments to the circumstances. There’s also talk of switching to a Pass/Fail/No record system. Academically it’s been hard to shift to working from home with the same rigour that I was able to in a university setting. However, what hurts the most is the fact that we mostly won’t have a proper graduation, that we couldn’t say goodbye to each other, and that I definitely wasn’t ready to say goodbye to college two months earlier than I had to. I’ve dreamed about throwing my graduation cap so many times this semester and doing a bunch of ‘lasts’ with my best buddies around campus but all of that seems like a distant dream, and that frankly feels very disappointing ”

Alia – faculty: “My university started implementing distance learning on March 16. However, the campus e-learning site went down soon. Before, only some lecturers used that, and it was usually blended with in-class learning. Most senior lecturers were more comfortable having all in-class learning. Currently the digital native younger lecturers are trying out other available learning and meeting platforms to find the most efficient for all. However, we soon found out that most students don’t stay at home. At home, they have to use their mobile data, which adds to their expense. Therefore, they prefer to use campus or other public Wi-Fi facilities. It prompted the dean to restrict students in the campus buildings. So we teachers have to consider designing methods that consume less internet data. While adapting to the changes of learning methods, I have to admit that this situation forces me to think many things at once; my health, my classes, and the impact on academic discoveries. Only weeks ago, I introduced in my Globalization class the convenience of this global era; the open movements of goods, people, and information. Now nations shut borders, and I come to the realization that all this time the e-learning is not widely used in my university, and students cannot afford large data plan. I am currently evaluating my students’ Globalization assignment made

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before the changes, while preparing to adjust my learning materials with the current phenomenon, while we still haven't seen the end of this. I know that adopting the newest social changes to lessons in class is always the case in social sciences, but I think major and fast changes like this happen only once in a while."

Fernanda – student: "I am in Brazil. My university has suspended all on-campus activities and classes have been canceled for two weeks at first. So far, we have not had any news about the possibility of online classes or another way to keep our activities. If an online solution is not found, we will have serious delays in terms of graduation and defenses of thesis and dissertations. I was supposed to qualify (the Ph.D. halfway exam) in July but now I am not sure how that will go. Meanwhile, I take the time to work on my thesis and other academic articles. It is important to remember that Brazilian public universities (which are the best universities in the country in terms of scientific production) have suffered severe budget cuts recently and that still there are undergrad students that do not have access to internet. Besides these issues, the emotional impact of what we are living affects our ability to keep writing and producing academically. In Brazil, there are conflicting political discourses that have an impact on how serious people take this pandemic to be. While the federal government does not take it seriously, the individual state governments are the ones taking the lead on the measures that would help control the spread of Covid-19 in Brazil. This makes us anxious and worried that the return to normal life will take a lot more time to happen."

Emanuele – student: "We have moved to online teaching and assessment. I thought it was an appropriate measure, given the contingency. I can not really provide a scientific assessment of the situation as at the moment emotions prevail. For us in the UK, generally, it is a difficult moment. But perhaps this gradual implementation has avoided mass panic as it happened in Italy, for instance. Not saying that the graduality was in the plans, obviously. Seminars and lectures have moved to Zoom and the system allows to have your classes almost as if you were actually at university. Obviously this is quite a change in the way we debate, but it is not creating problems in the learning process. I am a bit concerned about the exams, as I still don't know how that is going to work."

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