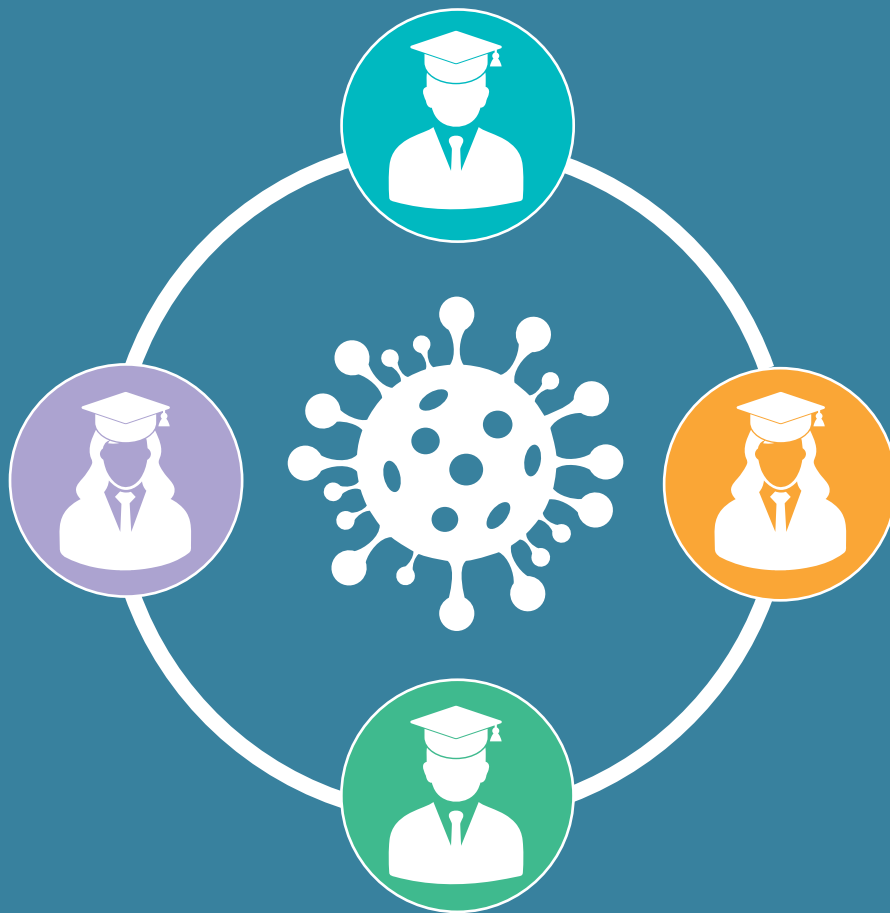# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON POSTGRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS

KARL HOFMEYR, GAVIN PRICE, & KERRIN MYRES

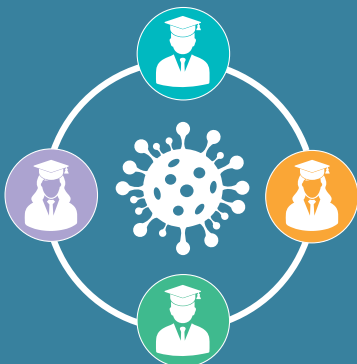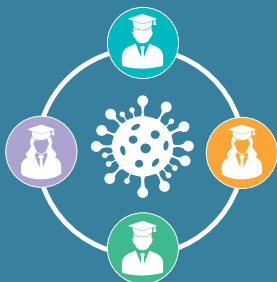**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
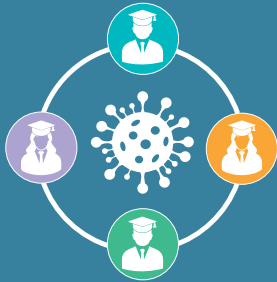University of Pretoria
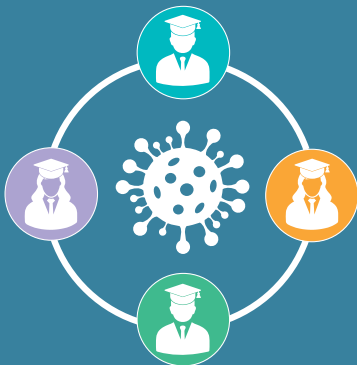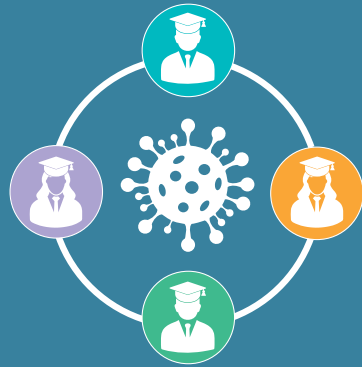
GIBS

Contents

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AUTHORS

PROF. KARL HOFMEYR   **PROF. GAVIN PRICE**   **DR KERRIN MYRES**

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant changes to the way organisations operate – not least the business schools that educate tomorrow's leaders – and it seems unlikely that this disruption will be reversed in the short to medium term. This white paper presents the findings of a study concerning the study and work experiences of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) Master of Business Administration 2020 cohort, based on quantitative and qualitative data gathered from students who used the opportunity to express their concerns, needs, and expectations for the future. Based on the data, the authors suggest ways in which work and study conditions can be improved.
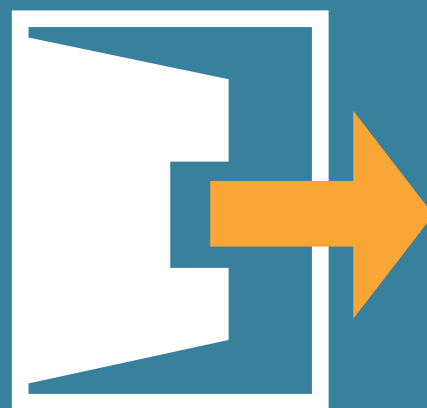
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a once-in-a-generation phenomenon that has dramatically affected almost everyone's lives (Hall, 2020). It has forced new ways of working, and individuals and organisations have had to reimagine how they operate (Boland, De Smet, Palter, & Sanghvi, 2020).

While the pandemic has disrupted countless areas of people's lives, it has had a particularly harsh impact on the lives of students at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). The focus of this paper is to develop an understanding of how COVID-19 has affected business school students, who typically have employment and family responsibilities over and above their role as students. With this focus, the purpose of the study is to provide insight into the lived experience of students in the current circumstances and to better understand how the institutions they are studying through could assist them in their endeavours to cope. Therefore, the study highlights issues that need to be considered when designing programmes and courses at a business school, providing insights and recommendations that other institutions may also benefit from.

COVID-19 has impacted both academic and professional staff at universities, requiring them to pivot to new ways of teaching and assessing students. It has prompted a move to forms of blended learning, which are likely to continue past the current pandemic (Mahaye, 2020). Moreover, this has led to a need to change quality assurance and governance systems (Brammer & Clark, 2020).

Method and sample demographics

Method

The data for this study was collected from current postgraduate students at a single business school operating in South Africa, namely GIBS. As is the case in other parts of the world, South Africa has been hard hit by the pandemic, with the COVID-19 control measures impacting both the economy and the social dynamics of its citizens.

A request to participate in a survey was sent to all 853 of the postgraduate students enrolled at the business school. A total of 290 students responded, representing a response rate of 34%. The survey questionnaire, which comprised 30 statements, was administered online during August 2020. In addition, the participants were invited to complete open-ended questions about their lived experience of working and studying during the pandemic. This qualitative data was analysed and is presented in this paper to enrich the quantitative survey data.

Sample demographics

Several questions in the survey were posed to elicit insight into the nature of the student body and the circumstances in which they found themselves as a result of COVID-19. Typical of postgraduate business school students, a significant majority of respondents indicated that they work in the private sector (77.2%), with the rest working in the public or other sectors. Most of the respondents (84.9%) also indicated that they work full-time, while a small proportion (4.1%) reported being presently unemployed. This low proportion is noted in the context of observing that over a quarter (25.7%) of the respondents also reported that the organisation they work for had retrenched staff as a result of the impact of COVID-19. Most students (62%) work for large companies employing more than 250 employees, while 15.5% stated that they work for medium-sized organisations with 51–250 employees. Twenty-nine respondents reported that they work for a small company with 11–50 employees, and 20 for companies with less than 11 employees.

Findings

The quantitative findings of the study are presented and supplemented with respondents' qualitative feedback. Key themes were extracted and insightful suggestions are incorporated to explicate quantitative results.

Organisational insight

Two thirds (67.6%) of the respondents rated their organisations' concern and caring about issues that they had to deal with concerning COVID-19 as being good or very good, while 11.9% indicated that it was below average. Understandably so, **employer care and concern** emerged as a dominant theme in respondents' open comments. For instance, one respondent stated:

> *My organisation did very well in ensuring everyone was set up to be able to work from home. They provided the necessary support to ensure everyone was connected, accessible, and able to collaborate online. Besides, the organisation made efforts to check in on people's general mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing.*

Respondents called for greater compassion and care in their organisations, noting that people were working harder than ever, were required to be continuously available, and felt under increased pressure to perform. Furthermore, the view was expressed that employers should be more aware of the feeling of not being included: "Disconnected employees are more likely to be forgotten. Managers need to touch base more often than usual, and gestures of acknowledgement are definitely more important than before."
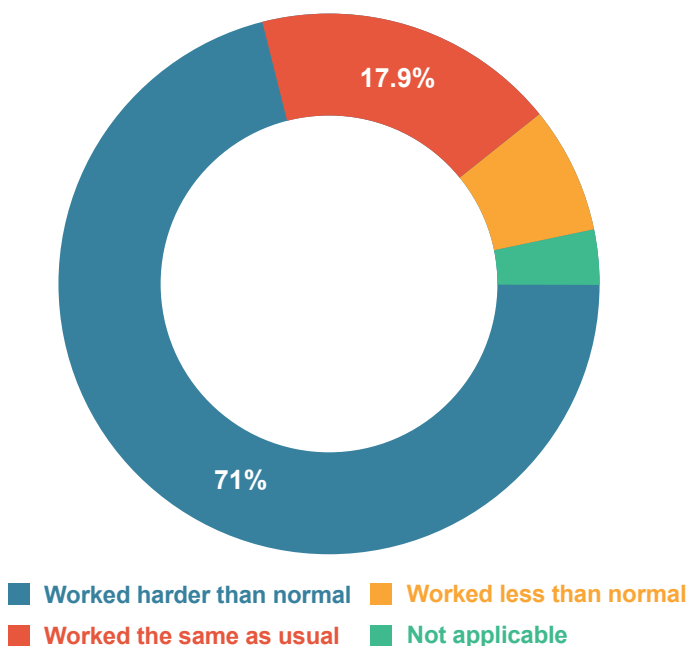

- Worked harder than normal
- Worked the same as usual
- Worked less than normal
- Not applicable

17.9%
71%

Figure 1: Respondents' workloads for their companies/organisations during lockdown

Family responsibility

The lockdown appears to have increased responsibility and workload for the student body, with 58% of the respondents reporting that they were looking after children and/or parents, which had put significant pressure on them. It is concerning that only about a third of the respondents (37.5%) felt they had been able to find a reasonable work-life balance during the lockdown. Another source of anxiety is the reported inability to "show up" and perform during the lectures, as is evident from the following comments:

> *Having the whole family at home all day, especially my child, has made working and studying extremely difficult. I'm dealing with everybody and their emotional state, which is exhausting. I've never felt so exhausted and emotionally drained, even though my salary has not been cut.*
>
> *I have increased responsibilities to take care of my mother who is old, sick, and staying alone. During lockdown, I could not see her due to some of the unreasonable restrictions by our leaders. I, therefore, need every support emotionally and academically... I need mentorship support as I cannot talk to my syndicate members because I am not taken seriously as I am seen as a failure and not contributing to the syndicate as expected.*

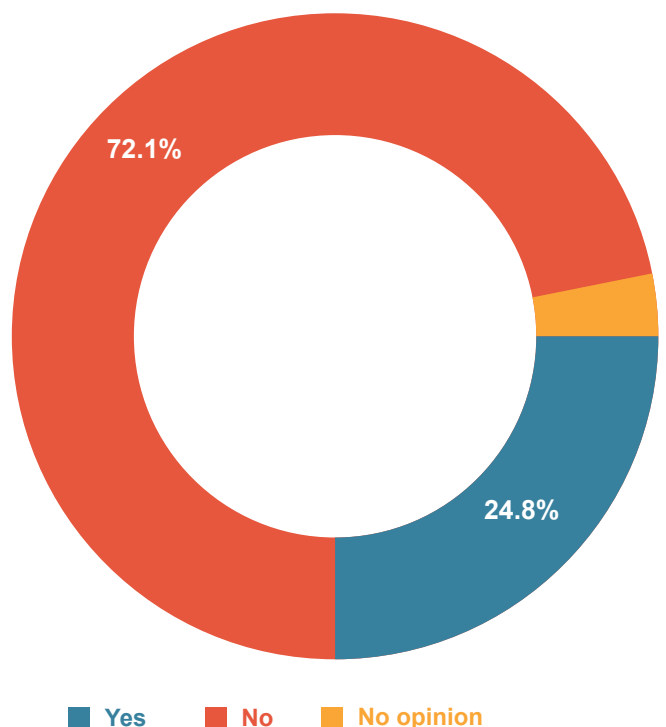Many of the students who took part in the study reported how much they miss face-to-face engagement at work.

- Yes
- No
- No opinion

72.1%
24.8%

Figure 2: Intention to return to working from the office post-COVID-19

Mental and physical health

Most respondents (84.3%) reported feeling nervous, restless, or tense at times as a result of the pandemic. Three quarters (75.1%) of the participants stated that they had experienced difficulty concentrating.

Experiencing **unfair pressure** surfaced as a pervasive theme in students' open comments, particularly pressure arising from increased responsibilities at home, such as homeschooling, more responsibilities at work, and general anxiety caused by the pandemic. It is noteworthy, that amid the pressure, a large proportion of the study's participants (71%) reported that they were working harder than normal. One respondent commented, "We are barely managing to remain sane. We are working long hours, expected to manage homeschooling for our kids, and also meet deadlines."

The respondents indicated that business schools can influence the extent of these pressures by being more empathetic and flexible, particularly in terms of deadlines. A call was made for more flexibility and openness to the granting of minor extensions without the need for evidence, such as doctors' notes. The pressure students experience could also be reduced if more notice of schedules and course structures was given to allow for more advanced planning. The lack of adequate preparation time ahead of courses was a concern. Respondents also mentioned the need for more psychological support, suggesting that there be increased availability of life coaches, course mentors, and after-class access to the faculty. Other suggestions to reduce stress included more regular check-ins by the administrative staff and faculty.

Concerning their outlook of COVID-19 almost half the respondents (42.5%) felt that the country is over the worst and that things will start to improve, while approximately a third (36.9%) believed that the situation would stay the same, and near one in five students (19.1%) felt that the worst was still to come. Fortunately, the majority (63.8%) were confident that their jobs are secure, and 71.2% reported that their salaries had not been reduced. Although respondents revealed mixed findings as to how the government was handling the COVID-19 pandemic, three quarters (76.5%) were positive, rating it very good, good, or average.

Very good
Good
Average
Poor
Very poor
No opinion
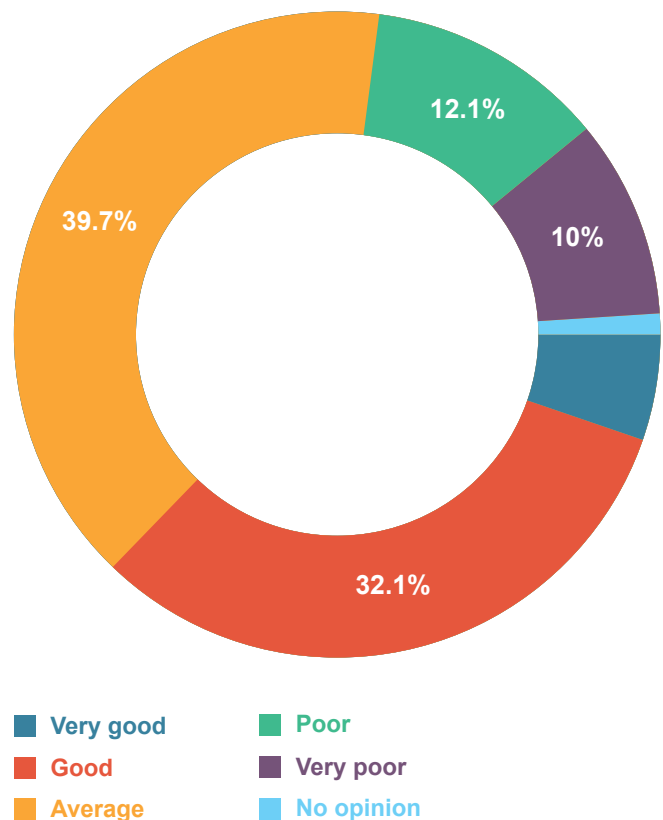
Figure 3: Respondents' ratings of Government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic

On the upside, the pandemic has impacted the students' perceptions of their own resilience positively, with 71.7% reporting that they were more resilient than before. Moreover, of the 30 respondents who reported being smokers, eight indicated that they had quit smoking as a result of the South African government's highly criticised ban on the sale of cigarettes during the first three months of the lockdown.

Financial security

Although it is comforting that a large proportion of the respondents (71.4%) stated that they continued to receive their normal salary during the COVID-19 period, a sizable percentage (20.3%) either reported that their salaries had been reduced, or that they were receiving no salary (8.3%). The latter coincides with 8.6% of respondents who indicated being self-employed or freelancers. Consequently, unsurprisingly, 36.2% of the participants admitted that, because of the implications of COVID-19, it had been difficult to keep up with payments and expenses. Therefore, when allowed free comments, the respondents' reference to **study fees** was to be expected. Concerns were raised about the amounts payable and the available repayment options/schedules. This theme was related to the wider call for empathy and understanding on the part of the institution and an understanding of the challenging financial circumstances some of the respondents find themselves in.

Job security

Within organisations, job security is generally associated with good performance. When prompted, almost two thirds of the respondents (63.8%) seemed confident about remaining employed, while 16.2% were unsure, and one in five respondents (20%) doubted their job security. Nearly half (54.5%) of the respondents felt that their organisations would change for the better in the forthcoming year or so; opposed to 20.3% who did not expect any changes; and slightly more (25.2%) who were either unsure or expected things to change for the worse. Overall, students indicated mixed feelings about the conditions in their companies in the future, signifying feelings of discomfort and stress amid all the other pressures that had already impacted their lives. Given their experiences, many students (72.1%) did not expect to resume their duties at the office in the same way as before. This perception is probably fuelled by the fact that many (16.9%) had previously spent more than an hour commuting to and from work every day.

Study issues

Study issues were expressed in terms of a number of themes, as indicated in this section. As an academic institution, the pandemic's effect on students' **academic progress** was of particular interest in this investigation. It is encouraging that most students (78.9%) reported that they could be productive while working and studying remotely. Considering the importance of data connectivity to keep up with academic work and interaction among students and lecturers, the majority of participants (65.4%) fortunately reported having access to good Wi-Fi connectivity. However, for 6.5% of the students, Wi-Fi connectivity was highly problematic, with some even indicating that they had no Wi-Fi at home. Thus, respondents' concern about digital connectivity and their plea for free data provision or enhanced infrastructural support that would allow them to attend remotely from the campus is understandable. Near half of the students (48.1%) found studying **manageable** throughout the lockdown, with confirmation that 43.4% have found the revised online lectures to be engaging. It is noteworthy that, although two thirds of the students (66.5%) intended to return to class as soon as they are able to, almost the same percentage (67.9%) maintained that programmes should be taught using a blend of face-to-face and online methods post-COVID-19. Only 27.2% preferred to revert to the original face-to-face form of instruction.

67.9%

27.2%

- ■ **All face-to-face**
- ■ **All online**
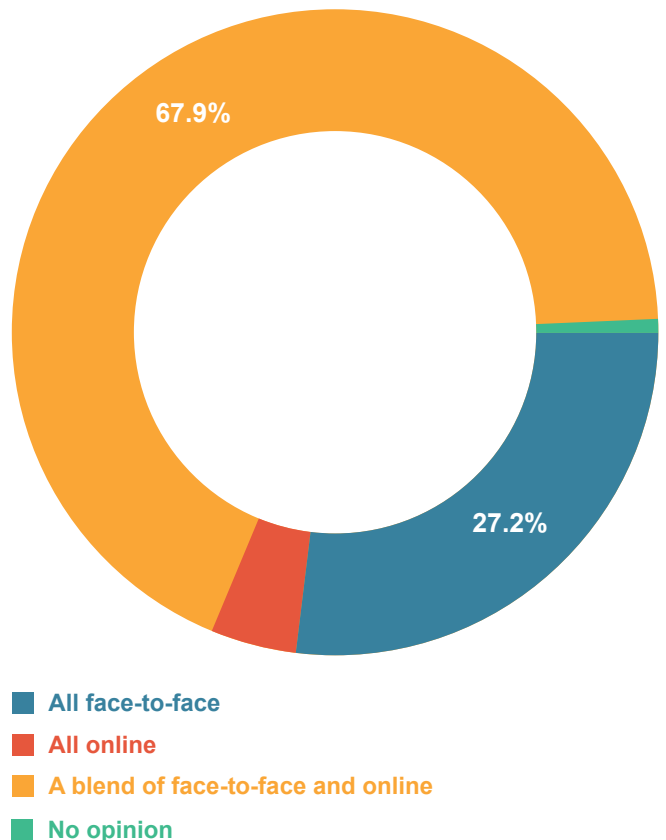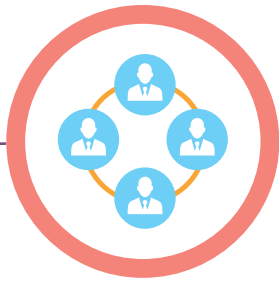- ■ **A blend of face-to-face and online**
- ■ **No opinion**

Figure 4: Respondents rate how GIBS programmes should be taught post-COVID-19

The ability to be on campus and **network face-to-face** represents several benefits for business students. It provides an opportunity to network and have robust, dynamic debates, both formally in class and informally during breaks and mealtimes. Given the opportunity, many students voiced frustration at not being able to experience the full benefit of campus life. A typical sentiment expressed was that studying for a master's degree has the benefits of networking and building business relationships. This frustration was related to the lack of inter-cohort and inter-syndicate networking as well as faculty accessibility, which students missed out on as a result of the study-from-home format. Requests to provide more opportunities for these were made. The lack of networking opportunities was lamented by some respondents, who suggested, besides more classroom time, that structures and opportunities be created for more networking to occur. For example, some respondents stated:

It is difficult to do this online while we are at home, and at the same time trying to balance our roles, mom, teacher, etc. For us to get "bang for our buck", we should be allowed to go back to GIBS as soon as possible. I feel cheated out of the experience and the online lectures can be compared to learning on LinkedIn.

I work for a co-working business. I can't tell you how many people I talk to (before COVID-19) that worked from home and couldn't handle it anymore and so they came to work in our buildings. WFH (working from home) isn't as sustainable as a full-time option.
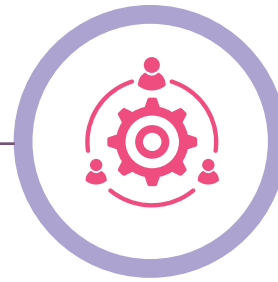
The issue of **course material** seemed significant among the respondents with many, for example, requesting that e-books be accessible and made available on time, especially for out-of-town students. However, many students indicated that they would welcome a hard-copy version of the material – textbooks and other prescribed material – to overcome screen fatigue and experience content (pre-reading and classroom content) in a format other than purely digital. Inarguably, extensive time in front of a laptop can take its toll on eyesight and concentration.

Syndicate dynamics emerged as another significant theme in students' comments. Among the challenges mentioned were issues about effective communication, despite admitting their appreciation for the reduction in travel time to attend meetings. Students found the syndicate dynamic less efficient in terms of delivering their assignment requirements and requested structures and support to ensure syndicate accountability and performance. Many study participants noted their frustration in the inconsistency of contribution from syndicate members and the apparent lack of potency in being able to hold their peers accountable. The request was for either more structure (consequence for non-performers) or less work, more coaching, and insight into how to work more effectively in remote groups. Therefore, being able to hold syndicate members accountable, emerged as a significant challenge, and one respondent even commented:

Some people in syndicates are just being carried along whilst doing next to nothing. When holding them to account, they are hypersensitive due to COVID-19 pressure, and this results in people threatening to drop out when they are held to account. In essence, now people are being coddled through the programme.

Many respondents expressed the need for more effective adaptation in terms of course design. Some of the study's participants even vented their frustration at the lack of flexibility.

Course structure emerged as a pertinent theme, considering that COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of alternative communication and collaboration platforms. Consequently, mindfulness on the part of the institution as to the potential prejudice that digitally focused programme designs may create is important as some students may be compromised inadvertently. The respondents admitted that they missed the classroom with its opportunities for engagement and networking, the deeper analysis that occurs during breaks, as well as the content and thoughts of faculty that appear to occur more readily in class than online.

Admittedly, the move to **online delivery of content** has brought both challenges and benefits. One benefit is respondents being able to view and review voice-over PowerPoint Presentations in their own time, although it was counterbalanced with the need for content to be delivered with high-quality video and audio. The delivery of online content is related to respondents' call for **sufficient, non-cost-compromising connectivity** across the board. Respondents recommended the availability of voice-over PowerPoint Presentations as an alternative to some reading material. Noteworthy recommendations that can be tied to the theme of pressure and the need for increased flexibility and more empathy on the part of the institution is respondents' wide call to rather focus on the quality of prescribed reading material, than the quantity.

Exams appeared to be a substantial challenge for many of the respondents. Their frustrations related to the duration of exams and the lack of time to complete them, given their typing proficiency levels:

> *The transition to digital and blended learning hasn't been the best, but one is grateful that we managed to continue learning amidst all the disruption globally. Online exams are also not the best, the time allocated enables one to start waffling and some of us are better at writing our thoughts than typing. Being in a structured and controlled exam room is much better than online exams with additional time.*

Communication emerged as a dominant theme, with respondents expressing a need for more regular communication and engagement, particularly emphasising promptness. The participants specifically referenced replies to queries, feedback on assignments, and the release of results. Employees who were more negative about the changes that had taken place (66 comments) were generally concerned with the difficulties associated with communication between employees. The respondents felt that communication was poorer because of the inability to observe facial and body language cues. They indicated that miscommunication and misinterpretation were more common, leading to strained relationships and reduced personal connection between colleagues. For example, one respondent highlighted:

> *Senior members of my organisation have struggled with accepting remote working as a new normal. This has created trust issues, as senior people do not trust others to get on with work remotely. A second issue is that calls without video do not give you the full spectrum of language in communicating (e.g., you cannot see facial expressions or body language), which can result in miscommunication and negative feelings.*

Poor communication negatively impacted debate and participation of employees, leading to greater feelings of isolation and alienation from the organisation. Respondents also noted that online meetings seemed to last much longer than face-to-face meetings and could be overwhelming, leading to lower levels of personal productivity. One of the study's participants explained that, "Miscommunication is big and creates a lot of problems. People can't read body language so it creates tension. Trust is low. Teaching is extremely low so growth is almost gone"; while another said, "To manage people, you have to trust more, else you end up checking up on them, which is unproductive. Communication has escalated with no boundaries. I often find myself exhausted from all the emails, online meetings, and WhatsApp."

Experience in digital working was mentioned in an array of comments that described students' experience of digital working and how they believed that COVID-19 and the lockdown had impacted their organisations, their teams, and themselves. At the organisational level, respondents were more often positive (88 comments) than negative about the changes that had taken place in their organisations. For instance, the participants cited better internal communication, improved integration, and faster decision-making as key benefits of the transition: "Making decisions has improved – able to get all key decision-makers into the 'same room' more easily, it is easier to put information on the screen and make decisions."

The move to a digital way of working had generally happened very quickly because the organisation was "forced" to do things differently and this had resulted in reduced costs and increased productivity:

We have seen cost reductions. Before the lockdown, we were busy relocating our head office, and due to the digital working experience, we are now considering to reduce the size of our head office as we will introduce "hot desks" and people will be allowed to work from home for certain days of the week.

Some respondents were ambivalent about the changes that had occurred (22 comments), noting that there were both positive and negative consequences. For example, while the costs associated with face-to-face office work had been reduced for the organisation, the costs of technology and personal protective equipment had increased. Similarly, the respondents observed that conditions had increased the need for innovation, but that strategy formulation had become more mechanical, which made innovation more difficult.

At the **team level**, the majority of the respondents were more negative about the changes (34 comments), noting that managing a team was significantly more difficult in the remote work environment. Students attributed problems associated with communication difficulties to working online, as well as the complexities of holding employees accountable when they are being managed remotely. One of the statements included:

Teams have drifted apart, everyone is highly stressed, less engaged, and dealing with a lot of pressure. There was no room to prepare teams for this transition and as such the management of change has been non-existent. The volume of work has increased, teams are stuck in long back-to-back conference calls, inundated with emails and the personal human touch is lacking.

However, some respondents believed that the move to a digital way of working was "a breath of fresh air" and that communication between team members was "better than ever".

At the **personal level**, respondents were almost evenly split between those who felt positive (22 comments) about the changes and those who felt the changes had had a negative (28 comments) personal impact. The participants who were positive about the changes felt more connected, productive, and focused. On the contrary, the respondents' negative commentary related to an increase in working hours, poor work-life balance, and more stress, expressed in statements like:

I work harder, longer, and more continuously.

The demands of an always-on digital environment have proven exhausting – work-life balance is almost impossible to achieve under the current circumstances.

I am working longer hours and there are little boundaries between our personal lives and work – I tend to skip lunch and forget to take breaks.

As my home has become my office, there are no boundaries. There is an expectation from my employer that I will avail myself to respond to emails or complete reports in the evening. I've received emails at 19:30 requesting my urgent attention and there is no respect for my personal time anymore.
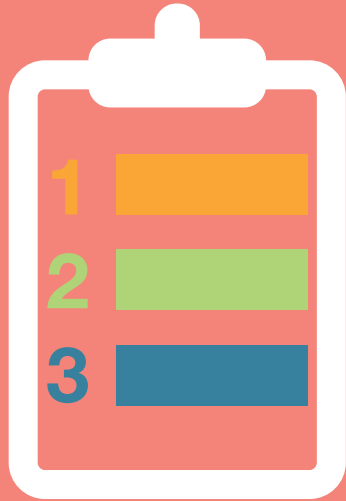
Summary

Students' responses to questions concerning their experience of the disruptive period that introduced itself as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic provide invaluable insight for academic institutions' interactions with their students, as well as their future strategic planning. The respondents shared their impressions about challenges relating to academic, work, and family responsibilities.

While it is encouraging that about two thirds of the respondents experienced their employers as empathetic, the vast majority indicated that they were working harder than before even though they had experienced job and financial security during the prevailing crisis. Notwithstanding, one in five respondents' salaries was reduced or completely halted. Evidence of additional pressure on students during their studies indisputably affected their mental health, contributing to the vast majority confessing to feeling nervous, restless, or tense. Aggravating circumstances contributing to respondents' lack of concentration are many employers' lack of support, an inability to juggle work and family responsibilities while working from home, implications of salary cuts that many had to endure, and apparent negativity in that more than half of the respondents believed that the situation would either stay the same or further deteriorate in the foreseeable future.

Amid all the personal- and work-related challenges, most of the students seemed to have managed their academic responsibilities well, remaining productive, specifically indicating that revised online lectures were engaging. Unfortunately, students who struggled with good WiFi connectivity were less fortunate and expressed a need for enhanced infrastructural support so that they too could join the academic conversation remotely. Despite the advantages associated with online, remote learning, the majority of students would like to return to the formal classroom when possible and recommended the implementation of a blend of face-to-face and online learning for the future.

COVID-19 action items for business schools

The year 2020 and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic sensitised institutions in that they would not like to be caught off guard again. Useful recommendations that came to the fore in this survey, are:

- Be empathetic towards the additional stress and anxiety that students are facing.

- Communicate more often and reduce response times to queries.

- Redesign lesson plans to ensure simultaneous engagement in the classroom and online.

- Revise course content to ensure relevancy and parsimony.

- Revise deadlines, exam durations, and other evaluation criteria to ensure reasonableness and appropriateness.

- Create "around the coffee machine" opportunities for informal interaction between students as well as between students and faculty.

The way forward for organisations

Despite the title of this white paper, this study is not just about GIBS master's students and how they have adapted to studying online. Typically, our students are middle managers in large, established private-sector corporations; as such, this data provides some insight into how businesspeople cross the country are coping. In response to the pandemic, organisations have pivoted their operations with great speed and apparently to good effect. While the savings and the costs of this shift are evident in the bottom lines of corporate South Africa, we are only just beginning to understand the human costs.

Our managers may have been released from the drudgery of a long commute, they may be receiving their normal salaries, and are generally expecting their jobs to be secure. Nevertheless, they are working harder, experiencing an increase in workload and responsibility, and struggling to find an effective work-life balance. They are struggling to build effective relationships with their teams and learn the new managerial skills that remote work requires. The managers are stressed, anxious, have difficulty concentrating, and are somewhat pessimistic about the future. In short, they see the benefits of digital work for their organisations, but are less clear about the personal benefits. This suggests that even more organisational care and concern are necessary, which are likely to be recognised and appreciated, and in so doing create more engagement and more loyalty in the tough times ahead.

Some thought starters for action include:

- **Use smaller teams to encourage warm, empathetic contact between employees and managers and to enhance trust.**

- **Draw clear boundaries to protect the well-being of already stretched staff members, as the lines between home and work are blurred. For example, no email or WhatsApp between 18:00 and 06:00 on workdays and limit the length of online meetings to a maximum of 45 minutes.**

- **Use the flexibility that available technology gives to enhance collaboration, speed up decision-making, and stimulate innovation.**

- **Look for fresh ways to engage and include your best talent. Recognition does not have to only be face to face.**

- **Offer support for managers to find new ways to manage virtual teams in the online context. What worked before might not work now.**

- **Accept that you are experimenting; you will make mistakes. The whole world is learning to adapt to a post-COVID-19 reality.**
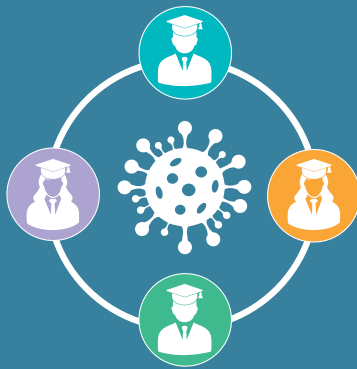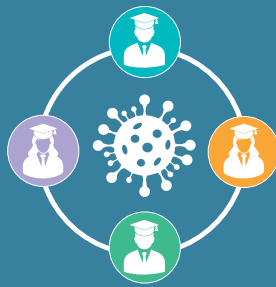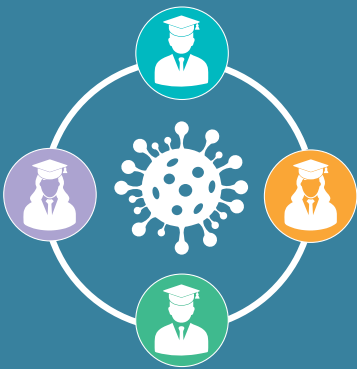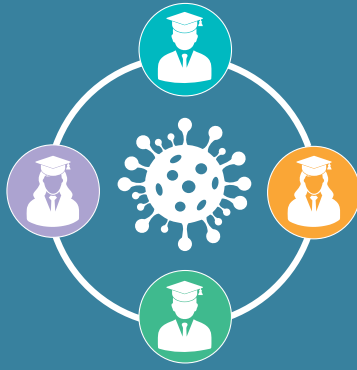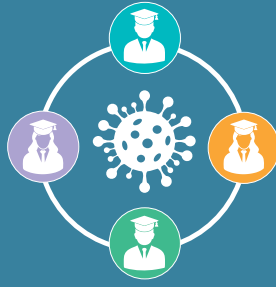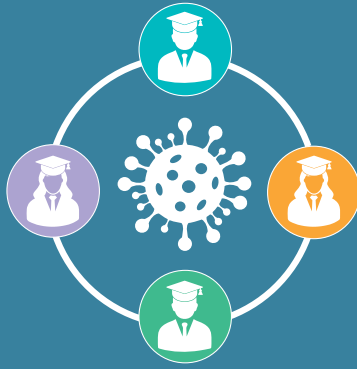
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