

# The educational, social and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on University graduates transitioning to the workforce in Hong Kong (C7086-21G)

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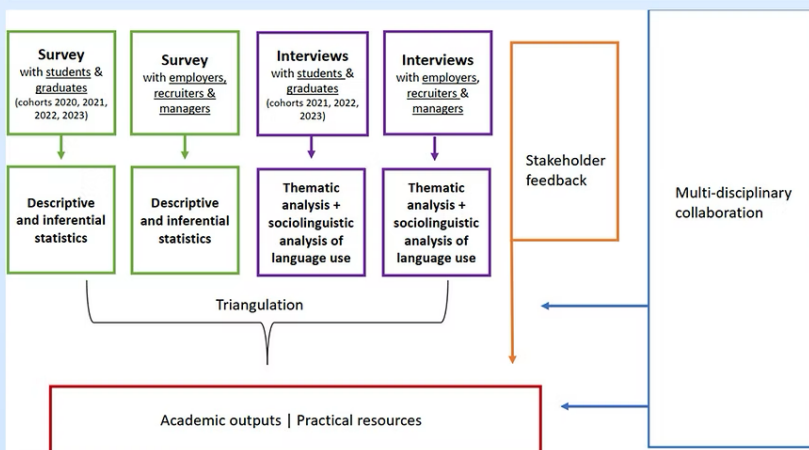
### Project at a glimpse

This project examines the educational, social and health impacts of COVID-19 on university graduates transitioning to the workforce in Hong Kong. It focuses on four cohorts of graduates from 2020-2023. The impacts are examined through the interdisciplinary lenses of sociolinguistics (workplace/ professional communication, digital literacies, education) and psychology (workplace and youth mental health), with insights from human resource management, public health and economics. University graduates are an increasingly vulnerable workforce demographic group as they face a suppressed job market, layoffs, and the advent of a new 'skills set' required by workplaces after COVID. Their workplace transitions are an important societal issue as unsuccessful transitions incur huge financial and social costs, including the cost of poor mental health (Zayts-Spence et al., 2023). By providing graduates with evidence-based tools and creating resources for new digital and interpersonal skills required by workplaces, our project aims to ameliorate the adverse effects of the pandemic on workplace transitions. The project utilizes a mixed-methods approach to interview and survey students, graduates, employers, and university staff. We identify the skills and competencies that students are expected to have as they transition into the workforce during and after this era.

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Examine educational, social and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on university graduates' workplace transition experiences and to develop evidence-based support strategies and solutions to enable successful workplace transitions and to reduce long term negative impacts.
2. Identify the health and wellbeing needs of young adults as they enter the workforce, the newly required skills and literacies and the impact of new 'work orders' on successful workplace transitions.
3. Identify the skillset and need from the perspective of employers. Evidence will identify areas of agreement and misalignment and help develop resources to help graduates secure productive, sustainable employment.
4. Provide advocacy for young adults, a vulnerable demographic group in the workforce, as they deal with the aggravated impacts of the pandemic on workplace transitions
5. Develop the Digital 'Workplace Transitions' Hub to provide tools and resources on career influencing choices, activities and successful workplace transitions to students, universities and employers.

### PROJECT METHODOLOGY



### MAIN FINDINGS THUS FAR

#### Scoping Review

We conducted a comprehensive search, mapping and examination of existing research on mental health outcomes and experiences of graduates during their university-to-work transition (Zayts et al., 2023). We identified the following:

- An absence of studies in Asia Pacific and South America.
- Concept of mental health is not well theorized in its own right.
- Concept of transitions is not clearly uniformly defined across studies.
- Period of transition can be of varying lengths (Edmonds et al., under review)

We need to accurately theorize, define and measure the concepts of mental health and transitions to ensure reliable and valid results can be implemented successfully. We also need to understand that issues of mental health and university-to-work transitions are context-specific, and we must take into account the social context of Hong Kong when defining such concepts.

#### Open access

#### Protocol

**BMJ Open** Mental health of new and recent graduates during the university-to-work transition: a scoping review protocol

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### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that the mental health resources and support provided to students are widely publicized and accessible.
- Be aware of students' needs such that the resources and information provided is tailored to their demands.
- Carry out regular investigations on the effectiveness of student support services and make necessary adjustments.
- Consider student mental health and career needs within different disciplines and tailor the support and resources provided accordingly.
- Departments should seek out and establish collaborations with businesses and organizations— these can be leveraged for internship opportunities, which provide students with concrete skills for the workplace and practical application of classroom learning.
- There is a discrepancy between different university faculties, departments and programs in the level of workforce preparation that students receive. Departments that offer non-professional programs should consider transferable skills required by the job market and work closely with career advisory services to incorporate these skills into the curricula.
- Employers should ensure that efforts are directed towards the creation of supportive environments where employees feel able to discuss and potentially disclose mental health concerns without fear of stigma. All employees, especially those entering the workforce, should be made aware of access to confidential support systems, such as an Employee Assistance Program.
- It is important to ensure that those working with graduates are aware of potential mental health concerns and able to direct them to appropriate support. Specifically, managers, HR teams, and those involved in recruitment may wish to consider appropriate training to ensure staff are both confident and able to have conversations on mental health and to ensure that graduates feel supported upon entering into the workplace.

### CONCLUSION

Students and graduates entering the workforce report concerning levels of poor mental health. Yet, they also do not appear to be comfortable talking about their mental health with others. Both students and university staff hold negative views towards the resources and support systems provided by tertiary education institutions. It is therefore important to build and improve supportive structures for help-seeking to facilitate graduates in their university-to-work transitions. Outside of support systems however, university staff differ in views about whether institutions are ultimately responsible for student career preparation. Our findings also suggest that both hard and soft skills are required for soon-to-work graduates. Despite this, COVID and remote working have been detrimental to graduates' 'soft skills,' which are required to succeed in post-COVID workplaces. Universities and workplaces should therefore collaborate to build the required soft skills with graduates. Internships are also viewed as a valuable route into the workforce.

### Essential skills that graduates need in the workplace

We interviewed 40 employers and 69 graduates in Hong Kong to find out the skills that employers and graduates see as important to have in the workplace as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Edmonds et al., forthcoming). Our findings suggest that the pandemic consolidated the need for graduates to be well-equipped with both hard skills and soft skills. The pandemic has resulted in an increase in the use of technology in the workplace, and graduates are expected to be adept at communicating with colleagues remotely.

Our interviews also point out that soft skills can be improved via training, which counters with some of the theoretical claims made in existing literature. Notably, the employers who we interviewed have expressed that they believe interpersonal skills can be developed and improved on the job.

### Graduates' mental health

We disseminated a survey to university students and graduates from the class of 2020 to 2023.

Our findings suggest that 21.5% of students and graduates demonstrate symptoms of severe or extremely severe depression, 29.4% of students and graduates demonstrate symptoms of anxiety and 16.5% of students demonstrate symptoms of stress.

Participants who graduated from 2021 scored the highest in terms of depression, anxiety and stress levels.

	Depression (%)	Anxiety (%)	Stress (%)
Normal	45	36.4	50.7
Mild	10.8	17.2	13.9
Moderate	22.7	17	18.9
Severe	10	11	12.2
Extremely Severe	11.5	18.4	4.3

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Depression	5.4932	7.5890	5.5068	5.7794
Anxiety	4.6301	6.7123	5.3973	5.9598
Stress	6.8767	8.9452	7.0822	8.0402

Depression, anxiety, and stress symptom levels for respondents as measured by the DASS-21

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