

Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Struggles of International Students

COVID-19 is an epidemic that changed all of our lives. Have you ever wondered how were you four years ago from now, how was your life when the pandemic hit, and how is your life now? How has your life changed over the last couple of years?

Will not be so surprising if someone says that their life turned upside down or just moved 180 degrees.

While COVID-19 had affected almost all of our lives and left us changed from our earlier version of ours, there was this one demographic of our population who was always left out. About whom we never thought to talk about how coronavirus has changed their lives, what struggles they had been faced and/or still facing.

Who are they? INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, one-sixth population of our city and almost half of the student population of Thompson Rivers University.

Living in a different country where you have no family, relatives, or close friends, is already hard. And while already living in such a condition, dealing with a global pandemic would have been much harder than any of us could ever imagine. But yet, we did not think about discussing their mental ailment till now.

Now as the coronavirus time has come to an end, how our international students are dealing with this post-pandemic situation?

“When COVID hit I struggle a lot financially. Paying my tuition fees, and the rent was the hardest part of that time, especially in Fall 2020”, said Naved, an international student at TRU from Bangladesh. “My dad is a businessman back in my country, and because of COVID, his business was not going well. I got laid off from my job and could not apply for CERB as I did not meet the requirements. As a result, I ended up applying for several credit cards, and using them for paying my tuition.”

So, how is he dealing with this financial crisis now? He answered this with a heavy tone. He said that though COVID is gone for good now, his money problem did not. He feels grateful that he has a stable job now and not having any more trouble paying his tuition and rent. “But paying off those overdrawn credit card bills is killing my paychecks. I work part-time and do not get any scope to save any money. And I do not have a single clue on how to get rid of this problem.” But he hopes that coming November 15th, working full time might give him a way to deal with my debts.”

Another student from the Middle East said she is still having social anxiety as an impact of COVID-19. She stated that she was never fond of staying inside the home. She was always outgoing and loved to travel. But soon after coming to Canada, she and her friends all got locked inside the house and lost the connection to the outside world. “Staying inside the home for the last two years and not having any physical contact with people had made me socially anxious which I did not have before,” said Samantha.

She also added, “I struggled a lot when everything moved back to on campus. I stopped coming to the classes after attending the first week. I went to TRU Wellness Centre as I felt awkward and lightheaded whenever I was surrounded by many people.”

And how successfully she maintains these social anxieties now. “No, no, no, I am still not fine talking to people.” She still finds it hard to maintain eye contact with people while talking. “I remember, at the beginning of September, I had an interview for a job as a salesperson with a renowned Canadian brand. But they rejected me because I failed to maintain eye contact during the interview, and my answers were too narrow.” Now, she is afraid of public speaking, and even presentations in her classes also scared her, which was never a problem for her before.

Nafis Farhan, a student from Pakistan also shared his struggles with understanding his class materials. He started TRU in the Winter of 2020, and after just two and a half months of attending the classes, everything went in locked down. Everything moved online till Fall 2021. Considering English is not his first language, he was having issues understanding the class materials in online classes.

“As I took all thousand level courses during that time and failed to understand the course materials successfully, now I am having a hard time coping with my upper-level courses,” said

Farhan. He also told that, in some of his two thousand and three thousand level courses professors give references from the thousand level prerequisite courses, which leaves him completely blind.

He took a deep breath and keep saying, “those two years were the worst for me. I just started my university by hoping to learn so many new things. Instead, I ended up being confused, and roaming from one google tab to another to understand my course materials better.”

“Nothing is more frustrating than graduating a year later than your expected graduation date,” said Tazin Oishi, a graduate student of TRU from India. While bursting with anger she kept saying, “I was supposed to finish my graduation in Fall 2020, where I took my convocation in Fall 2021, virtually! And it took one year from me and left my plans waiting for the time.”

“I wanted to move to Vancouver and start to live with my sister after graduation,” she added. “I had plans to start my career on jobs related to my field of study, but instead I got stuck here. Now my sister moved to Toronto because of her job and look at me, I am still here dying for finding a job.”

“I thought I would do co-op when COVID hit, and everything went into lockdown. But I could not do that as I was too close to my graduation. I tried to find a better job related to my career. Again, I could not do that because of the lockdown. Once the pandemic was coming to an end, I thought about moving to Vancouver or Toronto. But I was too broke to take the step. Now, I am trying to get into a university in Vancouver or Toronto to do my Master’s, but most the university requires at least a couple of years of work experience related to the field of study, which I do not have”, she finished her sentence while feeling so muted about her entire experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic already had changed the course of our lives. All of us are somehow affected because of the pandemic; some were physically, some mentally, and some financially. But it must have been much hard for our international students who are living here without their families, all by themselves.

Though it is beyond our imagination what struggles they had gone through, we surely can not do anything to forget the memories of their hard times. But there are resources available for international students at TRU that they can reach to deal with their struggles.

TRU has financial aid and bursaries available for students to help them with their tuition fees. The wellness center and counseling services at TRU are open 24/7 for students who are struggling with their mental health. There is always help available at the writing center and math helping center for students who need help with their assignments and class materials.

For the last two years, it often felt like this was the end of the world, and we were never getting outside our homes. But finally, that feeling has also come to an end with the risks of COVID getting less day by day. Now in this post-pandemic era, we need each other more than ever. After maintaining six feet of social distancing for the last two years, it is the time when we feel empathetic toward each other and look out for each other. Being empathetic or offering some kind of help to the people who are still struggling can at least demonstrate that COVID did not take our humanity from us.