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Theresa (Therri) A. Papp et Michael Cottrell

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Résumé de l'article

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Post-Secondary Educational Leadership Working Remotely During a COVID-19 Pandemic in Saskatchewan, Canada: Exploring Best Practices, Experiences, and the *New Normal Post-Pandemic*

Theresa (Therri) A. Papp¹ & Michael Cottrell²

¹Saskatchewan Polytechnic & ²University of Saskatchewan

Abstract

This mixed methods research design focuses on post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan, Canada, its employees' experiences of working remotely, and the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on school leadership. Presented are the perceived challenges as well as the benefits of the *new* workplace since the COVID-19 crisis. Administrative and instructional leadership had changed dramatically. Most identified their quality of work as better or the same because of having fewer distractions, interruptions, and less wasted time at the workplace. The participants' interviews and survey responses describe the necessary adaptation, flexibility, mental health and wellness, accountability, workload intensification, and future expectations of the workplace and leadership once the pandemic is over.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, post-secondary institutions, working remotely, leadership

On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Director-General presented a media briefing and characterized the COVID-19 virus as a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). I had just travelled to attend a conference at the University of British Columbia when the news broke. The conference was immediately cancelled, and flight changes were quickly arranged to return to Saskatchewan. The following day the Government of Canada reported 138 confirmed COVID-19 cases with one presumptive case confirmed in Saskatchewan. At that time, the Government of Canada had noted the overall health risk to Canadians remained low. As of today's writing, Canada has reported 3.27 million COVID-19 cases and Saskatchewan nearly 126,000 (Health-Infobase, 2022). Within days, public health authorities and government officials were putting into place health considerations and the post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan were evaluating alternative program delivery methods in efforts to reduce person-to-person contact. Senior leadership team members from all the post-secondary institutions and regional colleges met with Saskatchewan's Chief Medical Health Officer along with representatives from the Ministry of Advanced Education. Under the leadership of the Ministry of Advanced Education, the University of Saskatchewan, University of Regina, Saskatchewan Polytechnic, and representation from the Association of Saskatchewan Regional Colleges all agreed to move in unison.

The primary principle guiding the decision-making during this crisis was safety concerns for the learners, faculty, and staff. Communication from the administrative leadership for both institutions was crucial at this time and was direct, organized, and delivered effectively and efficiently from either the President or representative and the Campus Safety and Security Department. Faculty and staff were made aware of updated policies and procedures via emails and the institutions' websites that provided direction and guidance. These changes were put into place rapidly. In these unprecedented times, the administrative leadership teams worked tirelessly around the clock as faculty and staff were kept apprised

of the unfolding pandemic situation affecting all workers and emails were received in the early hours of the morning to as late as 10 pm. This cascade of information at one institution included email templates for faculty and staff to use to pass along vital information accurately and in a consistent manner to all the learners and other staff members. Regular remote town hall meetings were held with all levels of faculty and staff at one institution to address questions, issues, and concerns and then the feedback was passed along to senior administrators for future decision-making. The remote town hall meetings also provided the opportunity to dispel myths, reiterate the direction of the institution on a personal level, and to remain transparent in this time of crisis. The other institution reported that meetings were no more than the usual amounts. Information provided was focused on preventative actions for staying safe, links to COVID-19 information, and resources to assist the transition to online learning. Initially, the short-term focused to get through the winter academic term amidst the uncertainty of the impact of the pandemic. As the pandemic continued, both institutions experienced some frustration with the lack of information and long-term planning and remained in a *holding pattern* because of the uncertainty of the impact the pandemic would have on the education system. Administrators were uncertain how long the pandemic would persist and how much it would intensify.

After the pandemic was announced, the following events transpired chronologically in Saskatchewan. On Monday, March 16, 2020, it was announced that in partnership with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, classes would be suspended for the remainder of the week and staff were notified to put into place alternate methods to perform their duties starting March 23, 2020, and courses were to resume online or by an alternative delivery method on that date. On Wednesday, March 18, 2020, the Government of Saskatchewan declared a provincial State of Emergency. Direction was issued by the institutions that on Monday, March 23 only key services would be offered on campus and there would be limited access and services available to students, faculty, and staff. On March 26, 2020, the Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Advanced Education issued the official order to suspend classes of all private and public post-secondary institutions (BLG, 2020).

The impact of the global pandemic changed the education system with incredible speed and scope. Within days face-to-face communication vanished and long-time routines and protocols were eliminated. These radical changes demonstrated that within a few days multiple decisions needed to be made swiftly by the administrative leadership teams and be communicated institution-wide, implemented, and managed. As faculty, employees, and administration at the post-secondary institutions stepped up to the challenge, many employees were thrust into leadership roles to autonomously transition quickly and effectively as everyone had to do their part to meet the institutions' directives. One institution was mandated to deliver classes remotely at the same frequency as if the students were in the classroom and face-to-face. The other institution was encouraged to provide remote classes through synchronous methods; however, many face-to-face classes were delivered asynchronously. The instructors varied in their contact from near no contact at one institution to 10 to 15 contact hours per week. While a considerable number of classes were already online, this made for a smoother transition whereas other online classes were empty shells with no content that needed to be migrated or developed for the students. Clinicals and hands-on learning continued at both institutions in a modified format and personal protective equipment (PPE) that included masks, gloves, and eye shields were mandatory. In many cases, theory was taught online followed by in-class learning where class sizes were altered into smaller groups to allow hands-on learning and application while maintaining social distancing and wearing PPE (personal communication).

Harris and Jones (2020) stated, "school leadership practices have changed considerably and maybe irreversibly because of COVID-19. As a result of the pandemic, school leadership has pivoted on its axis and is unlikely to return to 'normal' anytime soon, if ever at all" (p. 245). Although their research alludes to "young people" (p. 244), the discussion and shared insights apply to all levels of education and ages of students. Leadership must now operate within uncertainty and unpredictability in uncharted territory. At the time of this writing, COVID-19 is over two years a part of our life. What do educational leaders see the *new normal* to become once COVID-19 becomes a memory of a far distant past? Hattie (2021) stated, "COVID-era teaching may lead to a revolution in schooling, provided we take the opportunity to rebound – to bounce back *even better*" (p. 17) and embrace an opportunity to "break free of long-stifling practices" (p. 14).

It should be noted that this research is in the context of Saskatchewan. Other provinces in Canada

and other parts of the world may not have taken the same approach as other post-secondary institutions. The Government of Saskatchewan has applied these guidelines to post-secondary education and not the K-12 schools and explained that neighbourhood schools were seen as a lower risk of COVID-19 compared to post-secondary institutions that “typically serve students from multiple communities across a city, the province and potentially the world” (Saskatchewan, 2021).

The purpose of this study was to document and understand the impact of the pandemic and how post-secondary institutional administration and employees experienced working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saskatchewan, Canada. The challenges and benefits of the *new workplace* and the instructional and administrative leadership roles that emerged are presented. Using a mixed-methods research (MMR) design, surveys and interviews were conducted. The quantitative purpose of this study was to compare the relationship of variables such as gender, age, mental health and wellness, work efficiency, and the future expectations of the workplace once the pandemic is over as to what the *new normal workplace* will look like including the preferences of employees moving forward. Also, the qualitative component provided further depth to the findings as various quotes are provided within this manuscript. Although this introduction describes the swift changes to educational administration and educational policy to respond to the initial crisis of the pandemic, more in-depth findings will be presented. A review of the published literature on COVID-19’s impact on educational institutions and learning in terms of the variables are followed by the methodology for this research design, the research questions to be answered by the survey and interviews, and an explanation of how this research contributes to the existing literature. This manuscript will provide a description of the participant information, a presentation of the findings and quotes from interviews, finishing with a discussion and concluding comments on the return to the *new normal*.

What we Know About the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Education Systems

In a literature review provided by Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) they stated that “the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners across the globe” (p. 133). They presented data from a United Nations survey conducted in July 2020 that reported 98.6 percent of learners were affected by the pandemic worldwide. As most countries, including Canada, health measures were implemented such as social distancing and restrictive movement policies. Traditional educational practices, especially the face-to-face delivery of instruction and normal academic routines, were profoundly impacted. They further stated that closures of learning institutions impacted more than 94 percent of the world’s student population (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). COVID-19 placed the education systems in an undeniable pandemonium (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 caused initial widespread disruption and in some cases chaos across the post-secondary education sector in Canada and many other countries. Research by Statistics Canada (StatCan) (2020) in May 2020 revealed the extent of early disruptions. StatCan COVID-19 reported data collected through crowdsourcing from over 100,000 postsecondary college and university students indicated that 26 percent had courses postponed or cancelled at the onset of the pandemic although doctoral students experienced only 14 percent disruption due to a lower level of coursework required and being more focused on research. Statistics Canada (2020) also reported that specific fields of study that required clinical labs, applied learning, or hands-on learning was affected much higher in the instances of disruption especially the trades at 53 percent and health care at 41 percent. Similarly, in the United States, students experienced disruptions as well as observations were noted that disadvantaged students with disabilities, students of colour, and low-income backgrounds were affected profoundly and there was a sharp drop-off of enrollment in 2020 (Department of Education, USA, 2021). Day et al., (2021) presented the findings of experiences from six institutions across three countries that further the residual effects of the COVID-19. These post-secondary institutions ranged from small to large and were representative of North America and East Asia. Day et al., (2021) also stated that COVID-19 contributed to disruptions in learning but also bring forward the inequities of transitioning from in class-learning to virtual spaces and the lack of devices, technology, and supports and as a result these institutions experienced a decline in enrollments and lockdowns.

Schleicher (2020) reported on behalf of The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Develop-

ment (OECD) further to note the COVID-19 affected international student mobility, loss of instructional time, teacher unpreparedness for digital learning, lockdowns for vocational education, to name a few. Disruptions were also experienced by faculty, administrators, and support staff. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) is the national representative for 72,000 academic staff and professionals, librarians, researchers, and general staff at approximately 125 universities and colleges across Canada. Over 4,300 academic staff from all ten provinces in Canada participated in a survey conducted in mid- to late-2020 (CAUT, 2020). Respondents' top concerns included challenges of remote teaching, increased workloads, negative impacts on health, and deteriorating safety and job security (CAUT, 2020). The following are key findings from the CAUT study: 84 percent experienced higher stress levels, 68 percent were concerned about the challenges of remote teaching, 66 percent were researching less because of restricted access, 33 percent experienced an increased workload expressed as an additional 10 or more hours per week, and 25 percent felt excluded from the decision-making process (CAUT, 2020).

Harvard University and the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) conducted a similar survey focused primarily on identifying benchmarks on leadership, governance, and decision-making that echoed some of the findings of CAUT (Polsky, 2021). According to COACHE, establishing faculty trust was a key focus for institutions to move forward during the pandemic. The Harvard association identified that trust was built through shared governance and providing clear expectations and transparency during the process (Foster, 2020). Although the survey indicated a high rating in leadership and academic governance at the beginning of the pandemic, within six months this rating dropped and could be attributed to the immediate response to the emergency being very effective; however, after the transition, faculty felt they were not included in the decision-making processes when such decisions were applicable to their programs, job security, closures, or finances (Foster, 2020).

Netolichky (2020) noted: "In a time of crisis, leaders must act swiftly and with foresight but also with careful consideration of options, consequences, and side effects of actions taken" (p. 392) as the pandemic was both unprecedented and unpredictable and there was no certainty of the best solutions and actions to take. Harris and Jones stated, "school leaders are walking a tightrope without a safety net" (2020, p. 244). Netolichky (2020) further identified a school leader in a time of crisis will make "careful decisions about how to best serve his/her communities, foster trust and distribute power and agency . . . consider[ing] each individual as well as the wider organization and the greater good" (p. 393). Furthermore, he stated "in a time of global crisis, grief, trauma, and instability, we need to consider Maslow before Bloom" (p. 393). Maslow's hierarchy of needs is based on meeting the physical needs as being the most basic followed by safety and security, then love and belonging, esteem and recognition, and finally, the highest motivator is self-fulfillment (Braun et al., 2016). Alternatively, Bloom's taxonomy of learning "represent the importance of balancing physical and psychological safety with learning and academic rigour" (Netolichky, 2020, p. 393). On a positive note, another survey conducted by Reimers and Schleicher (2020) of educators across 59 countries in the early onset of the pandemic revealed "remarkable resilience, flexibility, and commitment to education" (p. 3). Hattie (2021) stated, "70 percent of the educators claimed that the strategies put into place for COVID teaching were well-planned and well-executed, and most claimed that the plans were *not* designed from the top-down but by those closer to students, particularly teachers and school leaders" (p. 14).

Kezar (2020) identified the gender inequalities in higher education and identified that women experience more disparities particularly in leadership roles and are most impacted by career ranking and family situations. Kezar indicated that "the current pandemic appears to be quite different in terms of its pronounced impact on women, and economic data appear to show impact immediately on women" (p. 11). Furthermore, gender trends "identified that women's employment is 1.8 times more vulnerable in this crisis than men's employment. Women make up 39 percent of global jobs but account for 54 percent of overall job losses" (p. 11) and more specifically in the US, women are overrepresented in part-time roles. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Buckee, 2020) between March 2020 and August 2020 there were 360,000 part-time jobs eliminated. It is also noted that women account for 75 percent of the world's unpaid care work that includes childcare, elderly care, and housework (Kezar, 2020).

A library search indicated that the most research to date has focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the K-12 school systems, and a smaller body of research was slowly emerging that explored the pandemic effects in the post-secondary sector. Major themes in these inquiries included the implications of the shift to online teaching and learning on pedagogical and assessment approaches; technological issues, espe-

cially uneven internet connectivity accompanying this shift; the impact of remote teaching and learning on instructor and student wellbeing; and the effect of COVID-19 on existing inequities among students and staff (World Bank, 2020).

Research Design and Methodology

A university library search utilized selected search filters that focused on the effects of COVID-19 and tertiary educational institutions. This search yielded a total of 67 peer-reviewed articles of which the majority were exclusive to the COVID-19 pandemic or medically related. Only 15 were focused on education. This research will contribute in a meaningful way to the available literature on the COVID-19 topic and education.

This research aligns with the interpretivist paradigm and constructivist worldview seeking multiple participants' meaning while garnering an understanding through social construction. Constructivism explains that "knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experiences as much as possible from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221). A constructivist design "focuses on the perspectives, feelings, and beliefs of the participants" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 237). Ontologically, the research aligns this knowledge to try to understand individuals' meaning of the phenomenon of COVID-19, their personal experiences, and the socially shared meaning.

The theoretical lens selected was social science theory which provides the framework that drives the purpose of this research. Social theory was defined "as a system of interconnected abstractions or ideas that condenses and organizes knowledge about the social world" (Neuman, 2003, p. 42). Neuman also explained that social sciences "involve the study of people—their beliefs, behavior, interaction, institutions, and so forth" (2003 p. 7).

This research has adopted the mixed methods research (MMR) design approach. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), "research designs are procedures for collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting data in research studies" (p. 53). They further explained that the design or methodology integrates both quantitative and qualitative data into a single study of inquiry. This is an explanatory sequential MMR design where "not only [the objective is to] obtain quantitative results but to explain such results in more detail, especially in terms of detailed voices and participant perspectives [qualitative results]" (p. 151). In so taking this approach, the data collected seeks to understand the lived experiences of the participants of this study.

Two post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan, Canada were selected for case studies to provide an intensive MMR design. A case study is focused on a social phenomenon, such as the post-secondary institutions and their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. When more than one case is to be studied this is called a collective case study. Dr. Stake provided this explanation of collective case study:

I use the term "collective" or "multiple" case study when I gather several single cases together (several schools or several teachers) to study some commonality or generality across them. I may be interested greatly in some of the cases but instead of doing several individual case studies, I have chosen to do a single collective case study that has some grand theme or theory or phenomenon in all of the cases, perhaps in rather different ways. Each of the single cases has its unique issues but at least one issue is shared by all the cases. (Personal correspondence Dr. R. E. Stake, June 23, 2020)

By exploring multiple case studies, the data garnered is rich, detailed, and provides depth within the context studied. This collective case study is described as instrumental. An instrumental case study approach focuses on a specific situation, in this case the phenomenon is the COVID-19 pandemic, to provide insight of its impact and "we start and end with issues [being] dominant" (Stake, 1995, p. 16). He further stated that "issue statements will sometimes appear as *cause-and-effect* relationships" (emphasis in original, p. 18).

Surveys were distributed at two post-secondary institutions. Both institutions offered within the surveys the opportunity for respondents to provide responses to open-ended questions which provided further rigor. Administrators and employees were also interviewed to delve deeper into their experiences

and challenges. One institution had contracted an external vendor to distribute the same survey quarterly on this topic, and to avoid research-fatigue at one institution, the data was shared. In both instances the survey data was collected mid-2021. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and provided to the participants to member-check that the information collected was accurate. Both the survey and interview questions served as a coding template to analyze the responses and develop the themes that emerged.

Research Questions

The following were the questions that guided the crafting of the survey questions and the interview questions with the self-appointed volunteers:

1. What percentage of employees are currently working from home?
2. What are the demographics of the employees and what are the effects and experiences of working remotely?
3. What is the quality of your work while working remotely explaining why it is such?
4. What does the *new normal workplace* look like?
5. Have you experienced any anxiety, health concerns, or any other adverse effects because of the pandemic and did you seek supports or medical care?
6. What was your experience with technology while working remotely?

Participant Information

A survey was distributed at two post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan and there were 312 respondents from one institution and 1758 responses from the other. The respondents of the larger institution were 1160 female (66 percent) and 583 males (33 percent), and the remainder preferred not to disclose. The other institution had 217 (70 percent) female and 90 males (29 percent), and the remainder preferred not to disclose. The institutions had a 20 percent and 30 percent response rates respectively of which 88 percent of the respondents were full-time employees with the remainder part-time employees (12 percent). At the time of the survey, 82 percent of the respondents were working remotely. There were also self-appointed respondents that offered to be interviewed to explore the topic further.

The participants were mainly from the age group of over 40 years of age representing 74 percent and 66 percent respectively for each institution. The majority represented 88 percent participants that were born in Canada and 81 percent Caucasian. The participant's households were mainly comprised of living with a partner or spouse at 35 percent and living with a partner/spouse and children at 41 percent. Of the respondents, 78 percent identified as being parents with 36 percent having their children grown and now adults. Those respondents that responded represented 53 percent instructors or faculty, 38 percent administration, and the remainder was support staff.

Findings

This research will provide new educational-focused information and contribute to the literature by presenting the following information on these topics:

- Saskatchewan context
- Work quality and work-life balance
- Challenges to remote instruction and work
- Experiences of female administrators and instructors
- Provincial educational policy approach
- Mental health and wellbeing effects of the pandemics on workers
- Worker efficiency during the pandemic
- The future expectations and preferences post-COVID

Work Quality and Work-Life Balance

When describing the quality of their work, 46 percent and 56 percent of the employees believed their work quality was better and 34 percent perceived their work was the same quality while 20 percent and 35 percent respectively felt they were less productive, or their work was of lower quality. For those respondents that felt their work quality was better, their reasons for improvement were attributed to fewer distractions, more flexibility, and improved communication between co-workers by way of using remote

meeting software.

A respondent remarked, “it is easier to reach staff in other cities via zoom, [the] team has connected better with more remote meetings. [We are] more cohesive and collaborative.” One respondent stated, “I am much more productive and focused in home. I also have found a better work-life balance that allows me to feel calmer and less rushed all the time.” Another comment was “I am more efficient because I have less distractions.” This included sentiments that the employees felt more in control of their work time. Another commented, “flexibility and reduced commuting times are HUGE contributors to quality of work [emphasis in original comment].” It would appear from the responses that getting to and from work and the bustle in the offices, once removed, had lowered the employees stress levels, and improved the quality of work and some identified that “I’ve used less sick time due to physical and mental health issues caused by the office environment.”

Another administrative respondent gave insight into preparation for work saying:

I don’t have to take two hours to get ready every day and pack a lunch, etc. I am less tired and have more energy. I enjoy connecting via remote meetings as I am a people person and see more co-workers this way. This has been a great opportunity for me, and I hope I can continue working from home. In addition, I am a provincial supervisor and feel it is fairer for me to think of my team as one big team instead of the one in Saskatoon only etc. Our team is stronger now and I think it has to do with the ability to be fair to all.

One respondent stated, “I have found working from home quite relaxing; for the most part, it has been quite stress-free and that is why I believe the quality of my work has improved.”

One instructor explained that working remotely contributed to the success of the transition and stated, “I was determined not to miss a beat in my course delivery. I would never have done that if I was one hour away from home working in my office on campus. I believe I have a greater sense of ownership and responsibility to my courses and my students because of what we went through and having the ability to do this all from home.” In the transition another participant felt the quality of work improved and commented the reason being was “I have been forced to think outside of the box and have created new teaching resources. I work more efficiently now, with fewer distractions from the office environment.”

Challenges to Remote Instruction and Work

Instructors have commented:

Teaching online is very challenging, exhausting, and brings little reward. I put in more work to try to make lessons active and engaging but often have little participation and don’t know if students are learning. This makes me feel sad and depressed and unmotivated. I also don’t talk to colleagues, so I don’t get ideas or suggestions from them about things that work well.

In the same trend, another respondent stated:

Working remotely has increased the workload to the point that it is unfeasible to stay on top of everything in a timely manner. This could be because we were not prepared to deliver remotely ahead of the pandemic and are still scrambling to piece together quality programming without adequate preparation. Perhaps the workload would become feasible with enough time under our belts in this environment.

Instructors have expressed concerns regarding their students’ participation in the remote classroom. Specifically, “it’s much harder to get feedback on how well students are understanding material, and much harder to help struggling students. Evaluation is unreliable - I have no way to decisively know who is answering questions.” Online learning is available for post-secondary education and over the past decade proctored exams have gone by the wayside and have been replaced with timed access to online exams and quizzes. The previous comment is contradictory to the online learning; however, in-class teachers may not be aware of the online processes. Another instructor commented that:

Students were present for most of my [remote classes] but they did not turn their cameras on, and many didn't engage when prompted. So, the screen showed that they were present, but I don't believe that they were focused on the instruction.

In some programs the "attendance for our courses is mandatory, but I had significant issues getting students to speak, turn on video, or participate in activities." One instructor provided the following insight:

The students also did not sign up to be online students and most are frustrated with being on a screen all day (we, as instructors, then can't be surprised when the student's check-out or are not engaged - it's not normal to be online all day). Students also believe that because classes are remote, they don't have to attend, and many will opt to work instead. So, it's challenging to lesson plan effectively when there's low or inconsistent attendance.

In some instances, instructors preferred a mixture of remote work and on-site instruction. This ranged from the reasons of wanting the social interaction with students and fellow workers to being in an instructing position where there were clinicals or labs necessitated by the program. One respondent stated, "I would like to teach classes in person and do my prep and marking from home". In finding that balance, one instructor stated:

We were successfully delivering a hybrid model of education with some labs held on campus one day a week. The fall schedule currently exists with two days on campus for lab activities and three not on campus. I believe this is the correct balance and one that will allow us to continue to develop our remote delivery skills. It would be such a shame to not have that opportunity.

Experiences of Female Administrators and Instructors

Female participants that were working remotely in particular noticed an increase in stressors particularly when they had pre-school or school-age children. One commented, "If my kids are at school my work is the same quality. If they are sent home with school closures which has happened on numerous occasions, my work has suffered." Another female participant shared, "Many factors come into play but if the children are in school, I have fewer distractions at home and have better work-life balance as my work breaks can be productive with my home life/tasks that need to be done." Other women utilized daycare services; however, commented that "Being home 100% of the time is too much. It has been a very difficult time to be a parent to young children." In some instances, females were concerned for aging parents' health, restricted hospital visits, deaths (not COVID-19 related) where unable to support the grieving, surgeries postponed, and the exposure to anti-vaxers and anti-maskers. One female participant commented that they "miss my children and grandchildren and had to wait longer for elective surgery."

Mental Health and Wellness: Health Concern Barriers and Experiences

Participants experienced the complete spectrum of very negative to very positive experiences while working remotely. Compartmentalization and balkanization because of COVID-19 constraints and restrictions which resulted in the necessary gravitation to online learning in many instances, have placed educators into barren isolation. Disconnected from co-workers, although earlier cited by participants as distractions, appears to provide a double-edged sword. Antonova et al., (2021) stated "the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered mental health problems in people without previous history of mental illness, as well as worsened the symptoms in those with pre-existing psychiatric diagnosis" (p. 1) expanding the COVID-19 concerns to a global mental health crisis "suggesting long-lasting effects for the mental health issues" (p. 2) long after COVID-19 is part of the distant past. Also reported by Antonova et al., (2021) are problems that included fear, anxiety, depression, and sleep problems.

The positive reports of work being more productive and more efficient are counterargued that alternatively the negative reports lead to mental health and wellness concerns due to a lack of community and

imposed segregation for many workers. One respondent commented:

I have less distractions from coworkers and students coming into my office without an appointment. I can prioritize my e-mails as I see fit and respond according to priority. I can focus more and am a lot more comfortable at home.

In several instances (49 percent), respondents experienced anxiety, health concerns, depression, and other adverse effects because of the pandemic including anxiety about how and what is going to be the future of the institution and the *new normal workplace*. One respondent admitted that:

I have gained 30 lbs in a year. My computer is unreliable, and IT does not have the ability to repair or replace it. I'm presently consuming double the amount of alcohol as previously. I have no stress in my personal life.

Yet other participants had personally experienced the COVID-19 virus or had their immediate family members be hospitalized or fall ill to the virus. Another respondent indicated, "I have had issues with fear and anxiety all throughout the pandemic related to me, my spouse and my children getting sick." One respondent provided a plethora of health concerns such as:

Increased stress in the form of depression and anxiety. Consistent tightness in chest, trouble sleeping, sore body from teaching over zoom (no standing desk, no walking around in classroom, etc.). Workload has increased and social/community time has decreased. I feel disconnected from coworkers, supervisors, and students. I feel that everyone is less respectful in their communication because they can say whatever and not have to see the person at work that day (i.e., hiding behind virtual environment).

One comment was they experienced "SOME anxiety and I believe that is because of the isolation caused by the pandemic, i.e., not only working from home but also because of much less interaction with family and friends."

Despite nearly half of the respondents expressing concerns for their wellbeing, the findings indicated that very few employees sought assistance or supports for their emotional and physical health. One interview respondent felt they were so busy transitioning and preparing for remote work that they did not have the time or not make the time to seek assistance for their anxiety and this was due to them feeling an elevated sense of obligation and responsibility to their work. Other respondents noted that their anxiety was related to their uncertainty if the students were learning or understanding the materials presented in class. One respondent commented, "I shared in the collective anxiety our society felt with the risk level of contracting a potentially deadly virus. I felt unsafe in clinicals and that contributed to my anxiety. I felt far less anxious when working remotely."

In some cases, support from the institutions were used; however, the supports were limited. One respondent noted, "I have used supports before and in my case, it was a referral, and because of the money issues were left hanging, which only ADDS to the problem [emphasis in original comment]." Support is offered to employees but within limitations of financial reimbursement limits or the number of visits with a medical professional. One participant shared a mixture of concerns that included:

Stress of ensuring we are following up-to-date rules, dealing with exposure, and testing and isolation, homeschooling on a whim. We had COVID, so we had illness in our home alongside difficult custody arrangements. Anxiety related to limited social situations and not being able to leave the home in cold weather months.

Compared to the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) survey reported in May 2020, at that time 84 percent experienced higher stress levels versus the findings of this research, dated May 2021, that reported 49 percent. These high levels in 2020 may be explained to be higher because the survey was taken shortly after the official onset of COVID-19 in 2020 versus the mid-2021 survey

for this research after more than one year of adapting to the COVID-19 protocol. Participants now have had nearly 1.5 years of adapting to the changed workplace versus 2 to 4 months at the time of the CAUT survey.

School Reopening

Some faculty and staff are bracing for their school reopening. For example, at one institution, two departments with similar functions, were under different leadership. One department was able to remain working remotely while the other department was mandated to return to the campus. As can be expected, there were mixed reviews by the employees. At both institutions, the survey revealed that 56 percent preferred to work remotely and wanted to remain working remotely once the pandemic was considered over, and 17 percent were undecided. The remainder of respondents preferred either a mixture of onsite and working remotely or fully working onsite. A phasing in approach was mentioned and a participant indicated “I hope I will be allowed a ‘blend’ of working at the office and working from home.” One participant stated:

I am torn right now. I really like working from home but building relationships with students is harder online than in person. So, I would like to see a mix somehow. I’m not exactly sure what that would look like right now.

Others indicated returning to work the way things were before “with the added utility of using online platforms for supplemental learning/tracking of grades.” As earlier mentioned, because of the need for clinicals, two days on site for the labs seemed reasonable with the remainder to be working and marking from home.

Another perspective that was raised was that the institutions were using the pandemic to save money. The concern broadened with the comment “I think our institution is looking at the cost savings and may choose to make more of our programs online which will be not beneficial for many students, and I won’t enjoy it.” It is uncertain how costs have been reduced by the closure of the schools and no face-to-face interaction, as students still require instruction and instructors continue to be paid as well as all the support staff are still performing their duties. Although the buildings are relatively empty, they still require the rent and taxes to be paid, overhead is still paid, and they are maintained.

In most cases, 60 percent of participants, reported co-workers, clients, and students to be patient and understanding, and 23 percent felt their attitudes were the same as pre-COVID-19; however, 15% felt intolerance from the people they worked with. One participant recommended that the institutions “implement workshops throughout the institution to practice respectful and clear communication. This is a culture shift I think we are in desperate need of considering the ‘intolerant’ behaviour I have observed.”

COVID-19 and its Effects on Professional Identity

Pre-COVID-19 an employee asking to work from home would likely be met with suspicion and the belief that the work would not get done unless the employee was watched by supervisors and each move monitored to be deemed that they are *working* and doing their job. Prior to the pandemic, employees’ professional identity would be embellished by attending conferences, and participating in profession development activities with co-workers to build skills and comradery. Other pre-pandemic themes regarding professional identity were influenced and focused on community-driven commitments, self-pride in his/her work, and socially driven interactions (Ponting, 2021).

This pandemic, for the wellbeing and safety of all students, faculty instructors, and staff, in most cases forced most employees to teach and work from home. The outcome, as previously presented, indicated that most employees perceived their quality of work to be better (46 percent) or the same (34 percent) while the remainder felt they were less productive or did not work remotely. Depending on the educators’ career experience, the pandemic would most likely have varying effects on his or her professional identity. For example, emerging educators, would likely experience a diminished or lower professional identity due to the inability to be in the classroom with students and less likelihood to build their confidence or pride of their teaching abilities. Alternatively, experienced educators would possibly not have been affected as much or have experienced a somewhat less deflated professional identity and although their

networking would have been affected.

In March 2020, most types of work became remote and that included most means of professional development in the forms of conferences, workshops, and training were at first completely cancelled for the first year of COVID-19. Slowly, virtual conferences and remote training were re-introduced. Most employees were isolated from their colleagues and networking became only a virtual activity unlike the past face-to-face gatherings. From an instructor's point of view, the relationship between the students and the instructor-student relationship were reduced significantly. Remote teaching resulted in uncertainty of student engagement and an instructor's sense of leadership in the classroom was lost. In the past, the instructor could monitor attendance, student activity, and participation. Instructors have experienced a loss of power in the classroom. With few students turning on their video camera, it is unknown by the instructor if the students are in the class or if they just logged in and left. When the students' physical presence in a classroom was not permitted at the post-secondary level at the time of this writing, except for clinicals and hands-on instruction, students do not have the obligation to attend class. They may choose to do other things deemed more important such as getting a job to pay for their education.

Concluding Remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the most disruptive in education history. All levels of education were spinning into mass chaos as extreme changes to teaching and learning had to be transformed within days as well as all support services were also transformed to remote implementation and communication. As a result of the transition to a remote workplace, some workers are experiencing increased workloads, negative mental health concerns, and higher stress. It became apparent that considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs required faculty and staff to focus on their basic needs of physical wellbeing and safety for all workers and students.

This research was conducted in mid-2021 and explored multiple case studies and collected data by way of a survey and conducted interviews with administrators and employees to delve into their challenges and experiences. This past year, with the emergence of COVID-19, a fog was created that has now begun to present some clarity towards a better post-secondary learning experience. Through the evidence-based responses, respondents presented a community that has been innovative, adaptive, and resilient while working remotely. It was also revealed that while the COVID-19 pandemic affects both genders, women have been impacted more than men as they are more susceptible to job loss, and their workload extends beyond the workplace to include childcare, eldercare, and housework.

Many post-secondary leaders have become role models for their co-workers and instructors have provided leadership to their students. The learners' experiences will become a new generation influenced by these experiences and will also be more resilient. Employees have functioned and completed their workloads autonomously and at a level of efficiency described as better or the same as pre-COVID-19 times due to less distractions, interruptions, and removed commute times. While highlighting the challenges posed by COVID-19 to the traditional delivery of quality post-secondary education, studies also suggest that the innovations necessitated by the pandemic are likely to continue post-COVID-19, with a positive transformative potential across the K-12 and post-secondary sector (Hattie, 2021). The future of the education system has the opportunity, through the COVID-19 experience, to transition to an improved working, learning, and teaching environment.

Author Note

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