

STUDENT LIFE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: UNCERTAINTY, TRANSFORMATION, FRAGILITY

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Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, the president of France announced on Saturday 14 March 2020 that all educational institutions would be closed. This closure vastly changed the conditions of student life, and new forms of teaching and evaluation had to be put into place. University services, such as student restaurants, libraries, etc, were also shut down, upending students' daily routines and social life. Most businesses and corporate sites also closed, disrupting work-study programmes, jeopardizing student jobs and freezing plans for internships. Border closings quashed students' hopes for international study and exchange. The lockdown measures were in place up to 11 May 2020. It was further decreed that the universities would not open before September, and even then distance learning probably would be maintained. All these measures have had a profound impact on the higher education

paths and perspectives of students.

How have the pandemic crisis and the lockdown period affected students' academic progress, their living conditions and financial resources? How have they lived through this period? To answer these questions the Observatoire national de la vie étudiante (OVE) followed up on its 2020 Living Conditions survey, and recontacted 6,130 students enrolled in 2019-2020 at university or in preparatory courses for *grandes écoles* (CPGE), engineering schools, business schools, art and architecture schools or *Grands établissements* in the spring of 2020. (Box). This survey queried students on their family situation, changes in their paid work, the upheaval in their studies, and health issues. The respondents revealed major transformation of their living and study conditions during lockdown. For some of the student population these changes

engendered various sorts of fragility, as their circumstances grew more precarious and they had trouble keeping up with their studies. The long-term effects could be felt well after the end of the health crisis.



BOX – SURVEY METHODOLOGY

This survey of Student Life During Lockdown on which this article is based was conducted with students who agreed to a second round of questions following up on the earlier 2020 Living Conditions survey conducted by OVE. Close to 45,000 students were canvassed, to obtain a national sample of respondents enrolled in universities, *Grands établissements*, preparatory courses for

grandes écoles (CPGE), engineering schools, business schools, arts and architecture schools in the spring of 2020.

The survey was conducted between 26 June and 8 July 2020. Students were contacted by email and invited to participate in the study by replying to an online questionnaire (via computer, tablet or smartphone connection).¹ To ensure that the sample was sufficiently

representative, the raw data obtained were weighted on the basis of student registration data centralised by the Ministry of higher education, research and innovation.

The findings and analysis presented here are based on exploitation of 6,130 completed questionnaires.

FAMILY: A REFUGE OR SOURCE OF CONFLICT?

In ordinary times one-third of students live with their parents and two-thirds have left the family home (2016 Living Conditions survey). The COVID-19 pandemic and public health crisis modified the housing situation of students. Close to one-half (44%) of the student respondents report that during the lockdown in the spring of 2020 they left the lodgings they habitually occupied during the week when schools were in session. The family – mainly parents, and to a lesser degree siblings or spouse – became a refuge during the crisis: over three-quarters of students who changed lodgings, most of whom had left their family home before the crisis, moved in with at least one of their parents during lockdown. Furthermore, among the reasons given by students who left their habitual residence, 63% cite the

desire to be closer to their family. This reason ranks slightly after the desire to not be alone (66%) and just before the desire to have larger quarters (62%), and well ahead of the desire for a better internet connection or improvement in appliances (24%) or the need to save on rent (13%).

Confinement in shared living quarters, whether due to lockdown or not, was also a source of conflict during this period: 34% of students report they had strained relations with people with whom they shared lodgings (44% for students who had moved in with a parent). The proportion is higher for women (38%) than for men (29%).

Among students who had not changed lodgings, 53% explain that they had not

wanted to move, but 35% state that they had not had the possibility to make a change. Foreign students more frequently report that they had not moved than French nationals (74% compared to 53%). For some, distance was a factor (31% vs 13%), others had material and financial difficulties (24% vs 6%), notably due to border closings imposed by a number of countries.

¹ The fact that these respondents were able to fill out an online questionnaire suggests that it is likely that the best digitally equipped students are over-represented in this sample (see Henri-Panabière Gaëlle, Mercklé Pierre et Goasdoué Rémi, "Interroger des étudiante-s confiné-e-s : un questionnaire impossible ?" in Bonnery Stéphane and Goasdoué E. (eds.) *L'Éducation aux temps du coronavirus*, La Dispute, 2020). The impact of internet and equipment problems is undoubtedly underestimated due to the online survey administration mode.

TABLE 1: REASONS FOR CHANGING OR NOT CHANGING LODGINGS (IN %)

Why did you move to different lodgings?		44
So as not to be alone		66
To be near my family		63
To live in larger quarters		62
To have a better internet connection or appliances		24
To save on rent		13
Other		15
Why did you not move to different lodgings?		56
I didn't want to		53
No opportunities or other housing options arose		35
I was afraid of spreading the virus		21
My parents live too far away		17
I had work obligations		13
I didn't have the means (material or financial) to move back home		9
Other		5

Source: Student Life during Lockdown survey, OVE, 2020.

Field: All respondents (n=6,130), broken down according to whether or not they changed their place of residence during the lockdown period.

Whether they had changed lodgings or not, students were globally satisfied with their housing conditions during the lockdown period: 84% say they were satisfied or very satisfied with their housing conditions, compared to 76% during a "normal" academic year (2016 survey). Students who had left their habitual lodgings during the lockdown are the most likely to express satisfaction with their housing conditions (90% satisfied or very satisfied). By contrast, students living in student accommodation during the lockdown are somewhat less likely to express satisfaction (78% of satisfied or very satisfied). The type of housing also

had an incidence on the satisfaction level. Students who spent the lockdown period in a house were in a large majority satisfied (95% satisfied or very satisfied), compared to 78% of students who lived in flats. Housing conditions also influenced the way students came through the period generally. Overall, half of the students said they had experienced feelings of isolation or solitude during the lockdown. Not surprisingly, those who suffered the most were those who had lived alone during the lockdown: 76% as compared to 41% among those who had spent the period with their parents, and 38% of those who had lived with friends. Foreign

students are also more likely to report having suffered from isolation or solitude during this period: 61% compared to 50% for the sample as a whole.

A BRUTAL INTERRUPTION OF PAID WORK

During a "standard" academic year slightly under half of students (46%) hold paid jobs (2016 Living Conditions survey). The public health crisis drastically altered the landscape: during the lockdown 58% of students who had paid jobs were put out of work, had reduced hours or changed jobs. Among these students, 36% stopped working. This interruption was more frequent among the youngest students (58% of those under 20 years old, compared to 25% of those over 26) and among women (40% compared to 31% of men). For those who stopped working the estimated average income

shortfall was 274 euros per month. Foreign students and those over 26 years of age incurred the greatest losses, respectively 426 euros and 414 euros per month, on average. In addition, among the students who stopped working, 27% were beneficiaries of partial unemployment support payments. The forced paid work stoppage had consequences for these students' economic and financial circumstances: 44% report that they had experienced financial difficulties during lockdown, while this was the case for only 24% of those who continued working. In parallel, the students who had been

obliged to stop working are also those who most likely to have received financial aid (41% compared to 26% of those who had continued working and 36% of the entire group of students).

TABLE 2: CHANGES IN PAID ACTIVITY DURING LOCKDOWN (IN %)

Was your paid activity modified during the lockdown?	Across the entire student population	Among students who reported paid activity (33%)
Yes, I worked more	5	15
Yes, I worked less	7	21
Yes, I stopped working during the lockdown because I couldn't work any more	10	30
Yes, I stopped working during the lockdown because my employer terminated my contract	3	8
Yes, I changed jobs	2	5
No, nothing changed	9	26

Source: Student Life during Lockdown survey, OVE, 2020.

Field: All respondents (n=6,130)

For those students who were able to stay employed during the lockdown, their working conditions were in many instances greatly altered. For instance, 5% of students who had no paid activity before the lockdown say they started working during this period. Likewise, 15% of students who held jobs before the lockdown say they had worked more hours during this period. These changes in student employment have had consequences beyond the lockdown period: among the students who stopped working, 37% did not return to paid work when the

lockdown was lifted, 9% changed jobs and 13% went back to the same activity but with fewer working hours. Students who had to reduce their working hours are more often foreign students, while students who did not return to work after the lockdown are more numerous in the youngest age group (28% of those under 20 vs 14% of those aged 23-25). The lockdown period also caused 44% of students to change their plans for summer jobs. In this group, 64% were not able to work during the summer as they had planned, 15% decided to work whereas they had not

planned to do so before the lockdown, and 17% decided to work more than they had originally planned.

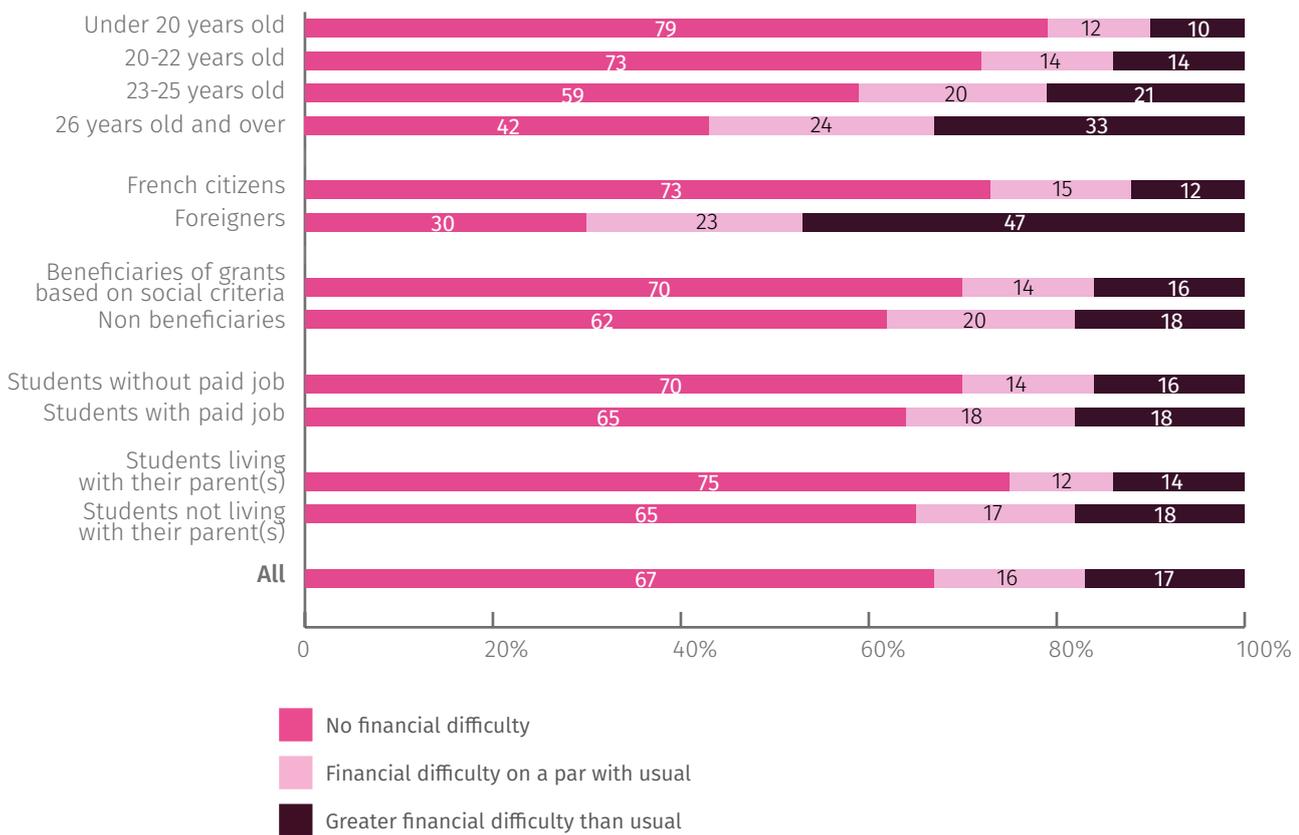
AGGRAVATED INSECURITY

One-third of students state they had encountered financial difficulties during lockdown, and one out of two in this group (17% of the whole sample) found these difficulties to be greater than usual. The students who were the most independent of their families were those most affected. In addition to students whose paid activity was interrupted (see above), foreign students, who are typically far from their families and the material and financial aid they may be able

to provide, are those who encountered the greatest hardship due to the lockdown. One out of two foreign students declare they had experienced greater financial difficulty than usual. The incidence of financial problems also increases with age: while only 10% of students under 20 said they had more financial problems than usual, 21% of those aged 23-25 and 33% of those over 26 report greater financial difficulty than usual.

Food expenses were the main source of difficulty for these students: this category of expenditure is mentioned by 56% of students who had financial problems. Once again, older students and foreign students were more likely to have problems meeting food expenses (62% and 60% respectively). In addition, one-quarter of students whose financial circumstances worsened during lockdown say they had not always had enough to eat, for financial reasons. This

GRAPH 1: FINANCIAL DIFFICULTY DURING LOCKDOWN BY STUDENT PROFILE (IN %)



Source: Student Life during Lockdown survey, OVE, 2020.

Field: All respondents (n=6,130)

Nb: Conditions of employment and housing refer to the students' circumstances prior to the lockdown period.

was true for only 6% of the student sample as a whole. Although food expenses are the problem most frequently cited, students also found themselves falling late in rent payments, or not able to pay rent at all (38% of students with financial problems). Some also found it hard to acquire the equipment needed for distance learning (34%). Regarding equipment needs, university students were those with the most problems (13% of all university students, as opposed to 6% of CPGE students and 5% of students in engineering programmes).

Some students were aided by their families or institutions, to help them address their problems. Overall 36% of students reported they had received financial aid during lockdown (52% of those who said they had financial difficulties) and 19% had received material aid (24% of those with financial difficulties).

Foreign students, who were most severely affected as we have seen, are also those who most often report they had received financial assistance (51%) and material aid (28%).

In general the aid provided came from family or friends (22% of students received financial aid from these quarters, and 13% material aid). In second position are the CROUS student services, who provided financial aid to 11% of students.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES AND GENERAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF THE CRISIS

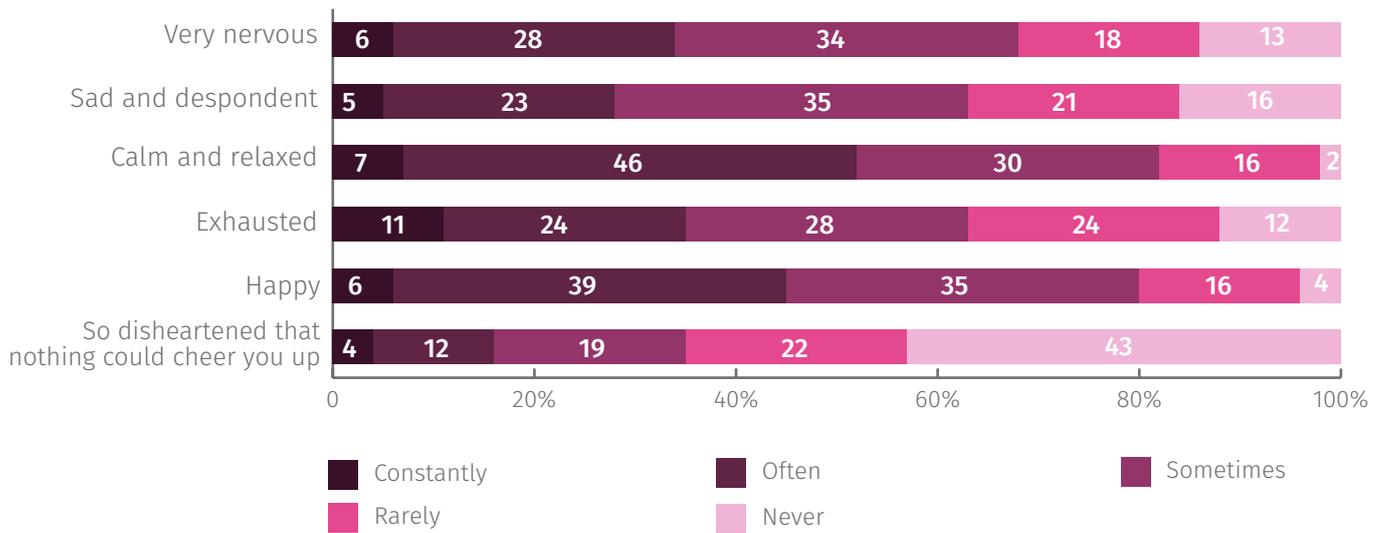
The singular circumstances of the lockdown period had effects on students' moods, feelings and well-being. Close to one student in three (31%) noted signs of psychological distress during lockdown, as opposed to 20% in the 2016 survey.² The symptoms reported are nervousness (34% of students say they were often or constantly very nervous), sadness and apathy (28% often or constantly) and discouragement (16%

often or constantly). Three categories emerge as particularly fragile: students with financial problems (46% reporting signs of psychological distress, as opposed to 24% of those without financial problems), foreign students (43% compared to 29% of French nationals) and women students (36% compared to 25% of men students). Loss of a loved one, a circumstance confronted by 7% of students, and health problems, mentioned

by 12% of students, are also associated with a higher incidence of psychological distress.

² These two surveys cover different fields and time periods. The Health survey (2016) questioned respondents on signs of psychological distress during the four weeks preceding the survey, and was addressed only to students enrolled in university. The Student Life during Lockdown survey covered university students, students in preparatory classes to *Grandes écoles* (CPGE), *Grands établissements*, business schools, engineering schools, art and architecture schools, and referred to the entire lockdown period that lasted eight weeks.

GRAPH 2: PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAGILITY OF STUDENTS DURING LOCKDOWN (IN %)



Source: Student Life during Lockdown survey, OVE, 2020.
 Field: All respondents (n=6,130)

Faced with these symptoms of psychological distress did students seek health care more often than usual, in the overall context of health care services overloaded due to the pandemic? In the survey 19% of students say they saw a doctor or received treatment, and 10% say they did not see a doctor or receive any treatment, even though they needed care. In this last group 43% hoped things would get better on their own. The other principal reasons given for not seeking treatment are fear of exposure to and contagion by the COVID-19 virus (38%) and long waiting times to obtain an appointment (27%). Financial considerations rank only fourth (23%) among the explanations given by students, and apply to only 2% of the student sample as a whole.

The lockdown period also had an incidence

on students' eating habits and alcohol consumption, in different ways depending on their lockdown living conditions. For 35% of students their diet was better than usual during confinement. This sentiment is often found among those who spent the lockdown period with their parents, doubtless because meals were often provided and prepared by the family. Inversely, 24% of respondents, especially those who were alone during lockdown, felt that their diet was not as good during lockdown as it had been before. Alcohol consumption by students also differed during lockdown from habitual patterns; while one student in two say they did not consume alcohol at all during lockdown, 30% report that they consumed less than usual, and 14% consumed more. Students living alone during lockdown report the highest level of excess consumption: 10%

say they drank alcoholic beverages every day, compared to 5% for the entire sample, and 1% in ordinary circumstances (Health survey, OVE, 2016).

TEACHING AND STUDY METHODS TRANSFORMED

Traditional teaching practices (onsite classes) were modified for the vast majority of students during the lockdown period; only 2% of the students surveyed report that their institution made no adjustment, either formally or informally, during this period. More than seven out of 10 report that they had received information from their university or school; they also report having exchange and communication with teachers, as well as receiving documents and course materials. Nearly as many students (69%)

had opportunities to follow lectures or working groups in videoconference. A large majority – 87% – also engaged in exchange with other students in their discipline during the lockdown. The forms of contact maintained with students were diverse, depending on the type of institution. Fewer students in preparatory classes (CPGE) and in university received information from their schools than did students in engineering and business schools – 72%, 78% and 86% respectively. CPGE students stand out from

other groups in terms of exchange with teachers and video courses and meetings; 96% of them were able to exchange with their teachers, and 94% attended courses or meeting via video conference, compared to 81% of students in engineering schools and 63% in universities.

TABLE 3: STUDY PRACTICES DURING LOCKDOWN (IN %)

Which of the following correspond to your experience? [multiple responses possible]	
Exchange and communication with your teachers	77
Exchange and communication with other students in your discipline	87
Documents and/or course materials made available to you	73
Class and/or working group meetings via videoconference	69
Information from your university or school	80
None of the above	2
What equipment was available to you? [multiple responses possible]	
A personal computer or tablet	92
A computer or tablet shared with other users	7
A personal work space (isolated and quiet)	58
A good internet connection	64
None of the above	2

Source: Student Life during Lockdown survey, OVE, 2020.
 Field: All respondents (n=6,130)

Generally speaking 39% of students found the teaching offered during lockdown was satisfactory or very satisfactory. Inversely 25% found the teaching to be unsatisfactory or inadequate, and 36% found it to be only moderately satisfactory. These proportions vary widely depending on the students' lockdown circumstances: 42% of students without a personal computer, 34% of those without a quiet work space and 33% of those without a good internet connection were rather dissatisfied or not at all satisfied with their educational experience during lockdown. This is also the case for 34% of those students who had to care for a sick

child or family member, and 40% of those students who reported personal health problems.

The problems most often cited among the educational difficulties encountered during the lockdown period are time organization and personal work assignments, areas in which 51% of students report difficulties. Next come inadequate internet connections (39%), just ahead of lack of interaction with other students (39%), followed by absence of a quiet working space (28%), difficult access to documentation (20%) and trouble using the digital tools made available to

them (17%). A non negligible proportion of students also mention health problems (10%) and the obligation to care for a sick child, friend or family member (8%) among their difficulties. Only 14% of students report that they had encountered none of these problems. The range of difficulties cited provides an explanation for the fact that one in two students (51%) declared they devoted less time, or much less time, to their studies during lockdown, compared to 30% who felt they had devoted more time to study than previously.

TABLE 4: EDUCATIONAL DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED DURING LOCKDOWN (IN %)

What difficulties did you encounter in the course of your studies during the lockdown period? [multiple responses possible]	
Problems organizing my time or my personal work assignments	51
Inadequate internet connection	39
Lack of interaction with other students	39
Absence of quiet work space	28
Difficulties in accessing documentation	20
Trouble using the digital tools at my disposal	17
Health problems	10
Obligation to care for a sick child, family member or friend	8
Other	7
None of the above	14

Source: Student Life during Lockdown survey, OVE, 2020.
 Field: All respondents (n=6,130)

ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND THE IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN CONDITIONS

In addition to the material conditions of their academic work, students' concerns focused on difficulties they encountered at the time of end-of-term examinations and remote evaluation processes set up in many schools.³ Overall, 42% of students say they were satisfied or very satisfied with the ways evaluation was adapted during the lockdown period, and 50% say they had not had problems at the time of the second semester

exams. But others reported problems related to their working environment: noise and uncomfortable conditions cited by close to 25% of students, inadequate internet connection mentioned by 23%, and problems connecting to the examination server or platform for 16% of students. Cheating was also mentioned by 11% of the students in the survey. Students who report they had met with at least one problem are more likely

to feel that the lockdown might have had a negative effect on their grades (24% of this group, compared to 10% of students who reported no difficulties).

TABLE 5: DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED WITH REMOTE EXAMINATIONS DURING LOCKDOWN (IN %)

Did you experience any of the following situations during your second semester exams? [multiple responses possible]	
Working environment – noise, uncomfortable conditions	25
Inadequate internet connection	23
Problems connecting to exam server or platform	16
Equipment problems (computer, camera, audio, etc)	13
Fraud or cheating by some students	11
Difficulties accessing documents, examination materials	10
Problems related to remote surveillance	3
None of the above	50

Source: Student Life during Lockdown survey, OVE, 2020.

Field: All respondents (n=6,130)

The proportion of students who feel that they did better on their exams due to lockdown (19%) is almost identical to the proportion of those who think they performed less well (17%). The largest group is the proportion of students who feel that lockdown had no impact on their results (26%). Once again, these proportions vary depending on the conditions experienced during lockdown.

The students who report they did not have a personal computer are more likely to think their academic results were poorer due to lockdown (28%), as are those without a good internet connection (22%) and those without a quiet work space (23%). Students who were confronted with personal health problems or illness among friends or family are also more likely to think that lockdown had a

negative effect on their performance (27% and 28% respectively). *In fact*, the students with the poorest material conditions or who confronted illness (personal or among friends and family) were less likely have received credit for their academic year.

³ As recommended by the Ministry of higher education (Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur, de la recherche et de l'innovation : <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid151353/epidemie-de-covid-19-organisation-des-examens-et-concours-dans-l-enseignement-superieur.html>).

A FUTURE CLOUDED BY GREATER UNCERTAINTY?

The 2016 Living Conditions survey found that on average 58% of students pursue a workplace internship in the course of their academic year. Due to the lockdown in 2020 78% of students who had plans for an internship were not able to complete it as planned (whether they had found a host company, or even started the internship before the lockdown, or not). This group breaks down as follows: 23% were able to complete their internship with some

adjustments; in 17% of cases the internship was postponed, and for 38% the internship was cancelled. Among the latter, 57% feel that the lockdown will have a negative or very negative effect on the future of their academic studies, as opposed to 45% across the entire sample. In the same way, 72% of students who had made plans for study or other experience abroad were not able to go through with their project. Likewise, 57% of this group consider that their academic

career will be negatively impacted by this lockdown period. Close to one student in four has decided to change their academic orientation as a result of the lockdown: 8% want to change disciplines or field, 4% do not want to continue with their studies, and 9% plan on longer academic studies, probably because they think it will be more difficult to find employment in the current situation.

TABLE 6: EFFECTS OF LOCKDOWN ON FUTURE ACADEMIC STUDY (IN %)

Did the lockdown period have an impact on your decisions regarding your academic career?	
Yes, I have decided to drop out, or I am thinking of doing so	4
Yes, I have decided to change disciplines or professional field, or I am thinking of doing so	8
Yes, I have decided to pursue my studies, or I am thinking of doing so	9
<i>For international students: yes, I have decided not to continue my academic studies in France</i>	1
No, I am going to continue my studies as planned	67
No, I have finished my studies	11
Do you think the lockdown will have an impact on your future academic career?	
Yes, a very negative impact	6
Yes, a negative impact	39
No, no impact	35
Yes, a positive impact	10
Yes, a very positive impact	1
Does not apply, I do not plan to continue my studies	9

Source: Student Life during Lockdown survey, OVE, 2020.

Field: All respondents (n=6,130)

Looking beyond the lockdown period and their academic year, many students have little confidence in their chances for transition to professional activity: 21% think their chances of finding employment in France are poor, or very poor, and 31% think they

have little chance abroad. These proportions are sharply higher than in the 2016 Living Conditions survey, when they stood at 14% and 21% respectively, and are particularly marked among students who are at Masters' degree level. In this group 31% think they

have poor or very poor chances in France, and 39% express this view for work abroad.

CONCLUSION

The Observatoire national de la vie étudiante (OVE) carried out this survey to learn how students lived and what they experienced during the lockdown period in France in the spring of 2020. It shows that the pandemic crisis had a significant impact on their living conditions. Many, in particular the youngest students, chose to move in with their parents and family. This provided most of them with more material help and living conditions that were in general better than what they had elsewhere. This forcible return to living with the family due to the pandemic did not always ensure that all was well, however, and some students found themselves embroiled in conflicts, or obliged to care for sick people in their entourage. These situations could potentially have a negative outcome for their academic studies. Psychological distress, alcohol consumption and failure to seek medical care were all more prevalent than usual in the student population during this lockdown period.

The distance learning protocols set up by most institutions revealed a new set of inequalities among students. With the switch to remote teaching and learning, access to a personal computer, a good internet connection and a quiet working space are all variables undoubtedly linked to social origins, and factors that are acutely essential for academic success in higher education. Foreign students, who live far from their families, with living and working conditions that are more precarious than for most other students, are the segment that has suffered the most from the pandemic crisis. Loss of jobs or work hours, cancellation or postponement of internships, interruption of study abroad have also upended students' lives and plans, and exacerbated already precarious situations among the most fragile students. These transformations in turn generated anxiety that was particularly high among students near the end of their studies, and some have been pushed to modify their field of study and employment targets. The effects of the lockdown in the spring of 2020 were still perceptible when the academic year began in the autumn and could well be felt for a long time to come in the student population in France.

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