

2021 Canadian Student Wellbeing Survey

Research carried out by Angus Reid
May 2021

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Foreword



Dear Colleague,

The past two years have forced us to grow in ways that may otherwise have taken years. It has allowed us to create new flexibilities to support our employees and new tools to help us optimize. This situation presents an opportunity to accelerate cultural change and transformation to create resilience for the future. For us as individuals, and as universities, the challenge has been in learning how to survive through this uncertainty. The opportunity is to learn how to thrive.¹

This report contains the results from an independent survey of over 1,000 Canadian students to understand the perspectives and educational experiences of current postsecondary students.

Results find that Canadian students are stressed: 86% feel stressed at least weekly, and 54% are feeling stressed daily. And with many peer support and tutoring services disrupted or discontinued during the pandemic, 61% of students say their struggles studying alone have made them consider dropping a course. Perhaps even more worrying, 35% of full-time students and 53% of part-time students have even considered dropping out of college or university altogether. So, whilst institutions pivoted at a monumental pace shifting to online learning, it is clear that we must evolve further in order to redress this imbalance.

However, within these survey outcomes there are some clear indicators to what can help reduce study anxiety for Canadian students. We hope these insights are able to assist you and your institution on your own journey to re-imagine the student experience as we progress through the academic year and beyond.

We look forward to hearing your feedback and comments. To contact us, please email hello@studiosity.com.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Judyth Sachs". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Professor Judyth Sachs
Chief Academic Officer, Studiosity

Former Deputy Vice-Chancellor,
Provost Macquarie University and
Former Pro Vice-Chancellor Learning
and Teaching at Sydney University

¹DeSpain, B. (2020). "Transforming A Work Culture During A Pandemic". Forbes, 11 December [online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2020/12/11/transforming-a-work-culture-during-a-pandemic/?sh=6be938f35eec> (Accessed: 3 Aug 2021)

Introduction

Background:

Universities and colleges around the world partner with Studiosity to provide academic writing and core skills support 24/7, connecting students to subject specialists online, on-demand. They currently work with 75% of universities in Australia, 16 universities in the United Kingdom, and have recently started providing support in Canada. As of 2021, over 1.6 million students worldwide have access to Studiosity services.

In May 2021, Angus Reid was commissioned by Studiosity to conduct a survey to current postsecondary students studying in Canada.

The survey ran from May 17, 2021 - May 26, 2021 and gained a total of 1,004 responses.

Participants:

- The sample frame was balanced to ensure representation of those identifying as male and those identifying as female in proportion to their overall share of the Canadian postsecondary student population (56% female, 43% male), as well as to ensure statistically significant representation from different regions of the country.
- The sample was composed of 82% full-time students and 18% part-time students.
- The survey was conducted in English and French.

Objective:

- To understand the perspectives and educational experiences of current Canadian postsecondary students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.



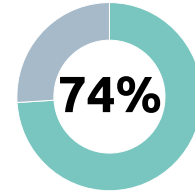
Executive summary

After 2020/2021, postsecondary students want a new student experience

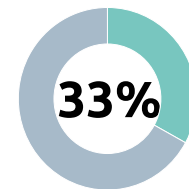
With three-in-four Canadian postsecondary students saying the past two years had a negative impact on their college or university experience, there is a clear need for both additional academic and emotional support for students. Beyond the classroom, these negative impacts appear particularly pronounced for full-time undergraduate students, whose social lives and support structures have been severely disrupted. Three-in-five students say their struggles studying alone have made them consider dropping a course. One-third of students even say they have seriously considered dropping out of college or university altogether.

These results are not surprising; institutions are being pulled in various directions, with focus being placed on change management related to virtual course delivery and safety protocols. Yet the rate of technological adoption enabling virtual learning shows the dedication of those across our higher education sector and the focus being put on improving student wellbeing.

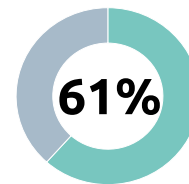
Around-the-clock academic resources have become an increasingly popular solution for helping students succeed. Currently, about one-in-five say they have access to a 24/7 online study support service. Among those who do not, two-thirds say they would use this type of service if it were available to them, showing the need to embrace technology to provide more academic support for students not in the classroom or on campus. With the uncertainty of returning to fully in-person learning, digital transformation shows promise to address these challenges faced by students.



...say the pandemic had a negative impact on their university experience.



...feel supported by their university.



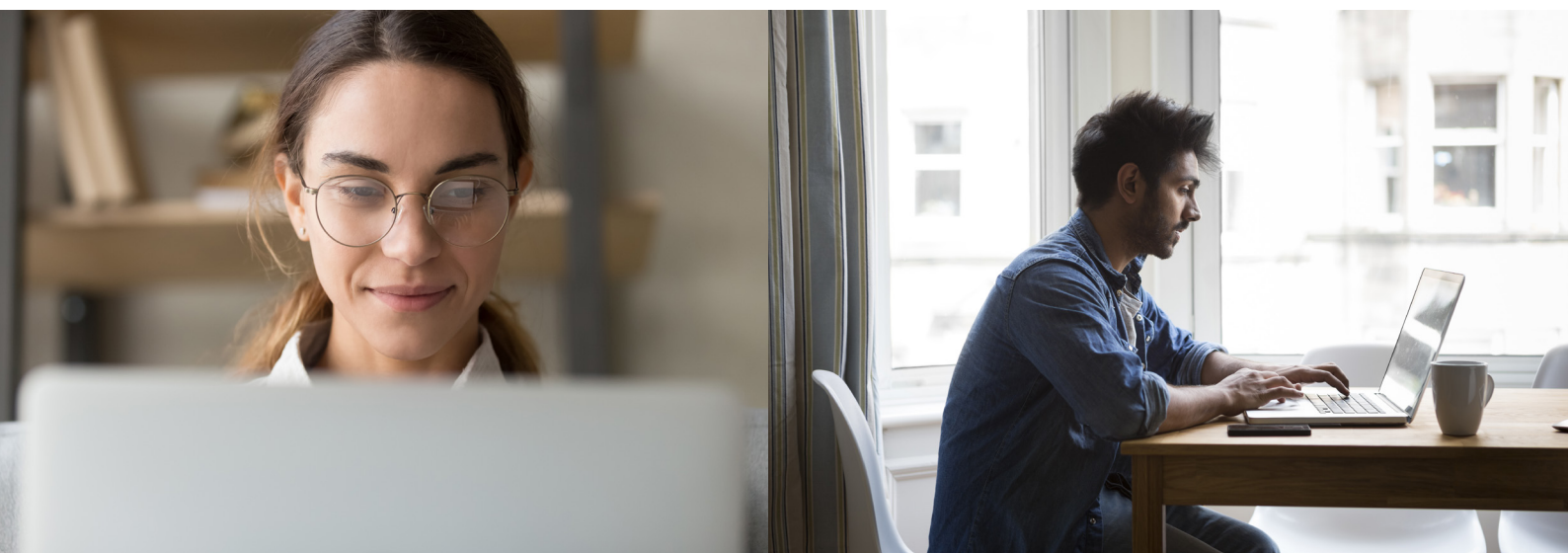
...say they have thought about dropping a course as a result of struggling with studying alone.

35% ...of postsecondary students have seriously considered dropping out of university.

Key findings

4 themes to understand current postsecondary student perspectives

- 1. Higher education during COVID-19:** Three-in-four (74%) Canadian postsecondary students say the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has had a negative impact on their college or university experience. Students commonly report having their courses moved online and significantly less face-to-face contact with professors. They also struggle to make friends or meet new people. These negative impacts appear particularly pronounced for full-time undergraduate students, whose social lives and support structures have been severely disrupted by the pandemic.
- 2. Post-graduation employment outlook:** Despite postsecondary students' generally negative educational experiences during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, three-in-five (62%) remain optimistic about their job prospects once they graduate. This is driven in large part by those who are already working full-time or part-time jobs in addition to their education, whereas only half (52%) of currently unemployed students feel optimistic about their situation.
- 3. Stress & schoolwork:** The vast majority (86%) of postsecondary students say they feel stressed by their coursework at least weekly, with more than half (54%) saying it happens every day. With many peer support and tutoring services disrupted or discontinued during the pandemic, three-in-five (61%) students say their struggles studying alone have made them consider dropping a course. One-third (35%) even say they have seriously considered dropping out of college/university altogether, including half of part-time students (53%).
- 4. 24/7 study support:** With most Canadian postsecondary students saying they've had to pull all-nighters to get through their course load or meet deadlines, round-the-clock academic resources have become increasingly popular for helping students get through late nights. Only about one-in-five (21%) say they currently have access to a 24/7 online study support service. However, among those who do not, two-thirds say they would use this type of service if it were available to them.





"As a sector, we recognize that student expectations are changing. There is a world of instant access to information, whether for communication, service delivery, or entertainment. There also are multiple demands on students' time, and striking a balance between life, work, and study seems to be increasingly challenging (Gair, 2018). Education needs to keep pace if we are to optimize the likelihood that our students will succeed in their courses, enjoy their learning, and enter the workforce as successful graduates and proud ambassadors of their alma maters."

- Jack Goodman, Founder and Executive Chair, Studiosity



Embracing Technology to Improve Equity

"EdTechs are focusing not just on growth and customer numbers, but also on ways to improve the equity of learning outcomes through technology. As it is often technology itself that creates barriers to equitable education – whether this is due to affordability, accessibility or digital literacy – it is technology, and the EdTechs that develop it, that have the greatest potential to drive equitable access and outcomes in a future of digitally-enabled and digitally-delivered learning."

(Deloitte and EduGrowth, 2020)

Gair, S. (2018). "It's not just you. Balancing work and study is getting harder in Australia." Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/juggling-study-and-work-harder-than-5-years-ago/9335716>

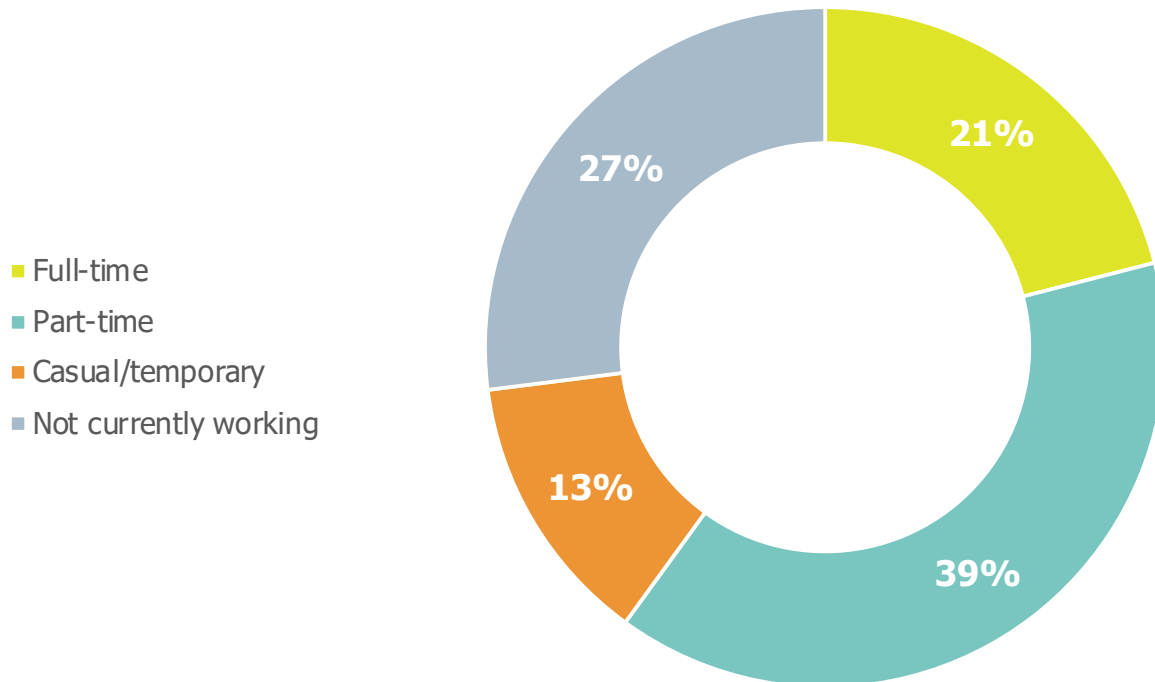
Deloitte and EduGrowth, (2020). "The Australian EdTech Market Census." Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/public-sector/articles/australian-edtech-market-census.html>

Study findings

1. Work study balance

Q. Are you currently working, in addition to your studies?

More than a year after the start of COVID-19, about three-in-four (73%) Canadian postsecondary students report working in addition to studying. This proportion jumps to four-in-five (80%) in Quebec and 84% among graduate students.



In practice: Supporting all students

“By collaborating with students, universities have gained greater insight into the services and support mechanisms that students desire. One such avenue that can be explored in this new territory is how online platforms and/or study options can amplify flexibility for students and perhaps better align to their lifestyles and/or preferences of learning.”

“While online study support services may not replace face-to-face support in the near future, online support may appeal to a certain subset of students, for example those studying in remote locations, or those who have employment or family commitments that make traveling to campus during business hours difficult.”

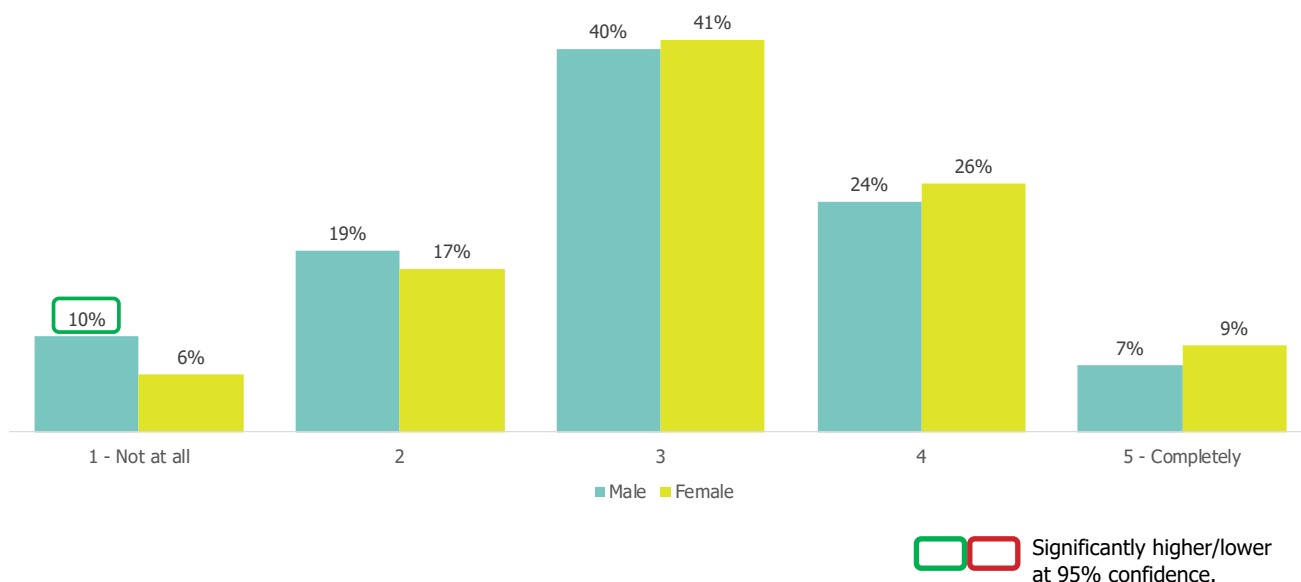
“If universities, for example, want to support non-traditional students (such as mature age, part-time, and studying from distant locations) it is likely critical that 24/7 online support services also be made available.”

Dollinger, M., Cox, S., Eaton, R., Vanderlelie, J. and Ridsdale, S., (2020). “Investigating the Usage and Perceptions of Third-Party Online Learning Support Services for Diverse Students”. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2020(1), p.14. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/jime.555>

2. Support from colleges or universities

Q. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “completely,” how supported do you feel by your college/university?

Canadian postsecondary students are divided on how supported they feel by their college or university, with a third (33%) saying they feel mostly or completely supported and a quarter (26%) saying they receive little or no support.



Q. By region: On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “completely,” how supported do you feel by your college/university? (Small sample size; interpret results with caution)

Postsecondary students in British Columbia appear most satisfied with the level of support they’ve received from their college or university, while those in Saskatchewan and Manitoba are most likely to give their schools low marks in this regard.





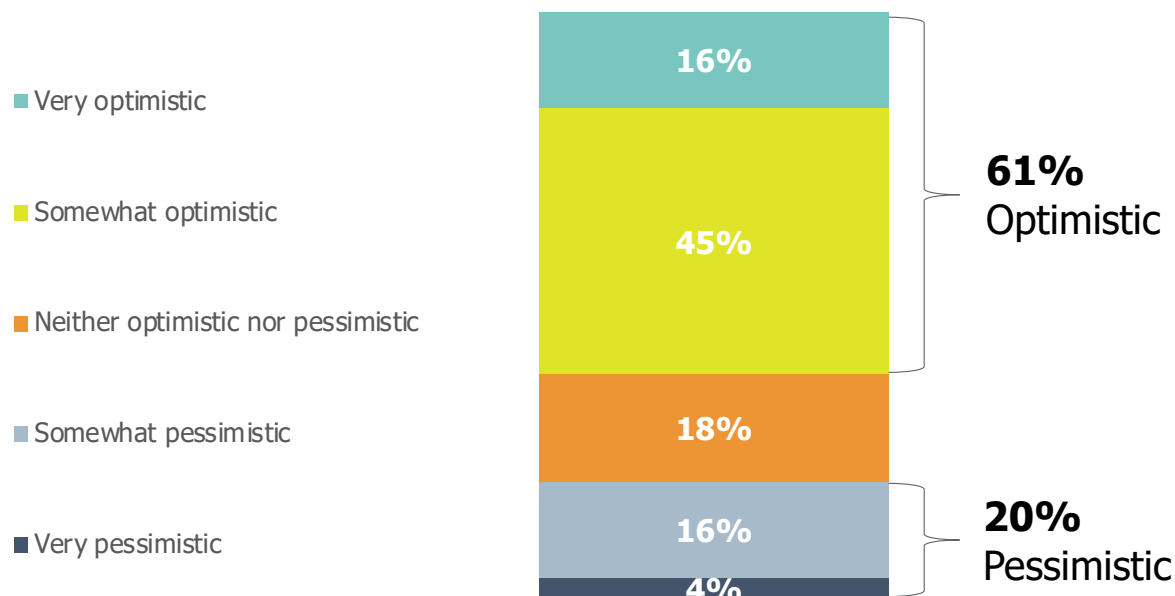
**“Extremely helpful. Non-judgmental.
And equipped me with tools that I will
use again.”**

- Canadian postgraduate university student on using Studiosity's services
September 9 2021 at 4:45pm

3. Post-graduation job prospects

Q. Thinking about the future, how optimistic or pessimistic are you about your job prospects after leaving college/university?

About three-in-five Canadian postsecondary students remain somewhat optimistic about their employment outlook after college or university, though only one-in-six describe themselves as “very optimistic”. There are clear divisions between those who already have full-time or part-time jobs and those who do not.



Optimism is higher among those with full-time (71%) and part-time (67%) jobs.



Students not currently working are twice as likely as those with full-time jobs to be very pessimistic about their post-graduation employment prospects (26% vs. 13%).

In recent news: “I feel left behind”

A 2021 Financial Times survey reveals the intense competition and arduous assessments facing those entering the workforce.

“A vast majority of respondents felt there were fewer job opportunities available for graduates. Many of their personal experiences highlighted a hyper-competitive jobs market, which can be demoralising and demotivating. Many also felt they had not found a job that met their career aspirations, and had to take a position with a lower salary than expected. About half felt that the pandemic has set back their early career prospects.

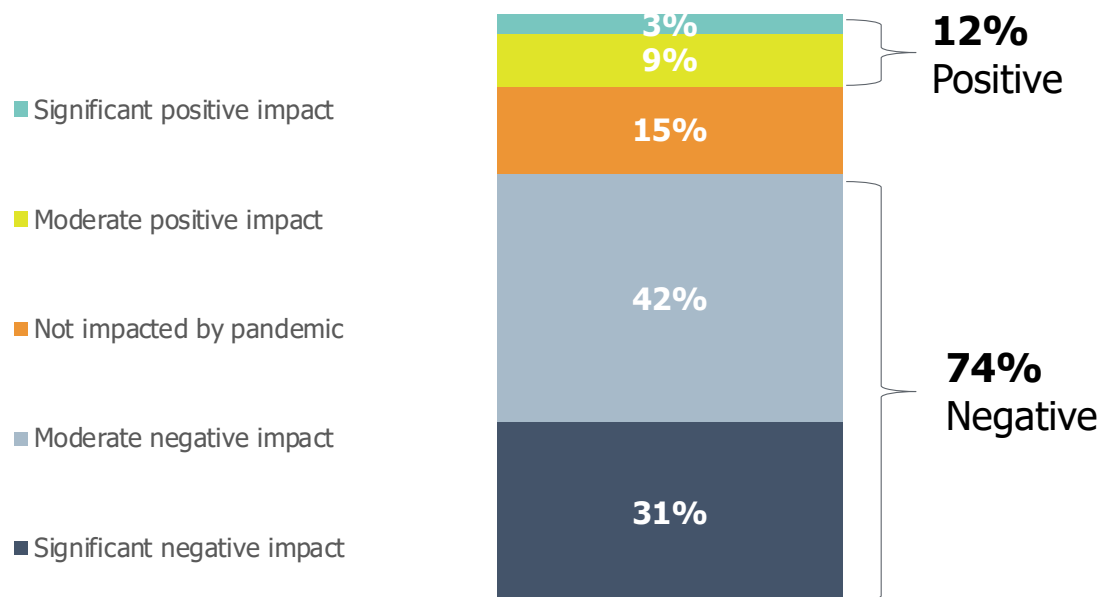
However, while more than a third felt they had been forced to change the direction of their career as a result of the pandemic, they thought the outcome was not necessarily a negative one.”

Conboye, J., Warwick-Ching, L. (2021). “I Feel Left Behind’: Graduates Struggle to Secure Good Jobs.” Financial Times, 27 June 2021. Available at: [ft.com/content/2fc4e1f4-a5e8-4cbd-9bd8-f51a43b01417](https://www.ft.com/content/2fc4e1f4-a5e8-4cbd-9bd8-f51a43b01417) (Accessed: 6 Oct 2021)

4. Impact of COVID-19 on the college and university experiences

Q. What impact, if any, has the coronavirus pandemic had on your college/university experience?

Three-in-four Canadian postsecondary students say COVID-19 has had a negative impact on their college or university experience, with those in undergraduate programs most likely to report a significant negative impact.



Part-time students are more than twice as likely as full-time students to say COVID-19 has not impacted their experience (26% vs. 12%).

Groups most likely to say COVID-19 has had a significant negative impact on their college or university experience include: Atlantic Canadians (45%), males (36%), students aged 18-19 (39%).

Q. How has COVID-19 negatively impacted your college/university experience?

Whether academically, socially, or personally, COVID-19 appears to have hit younger students (18-23 years-old) especially hard.

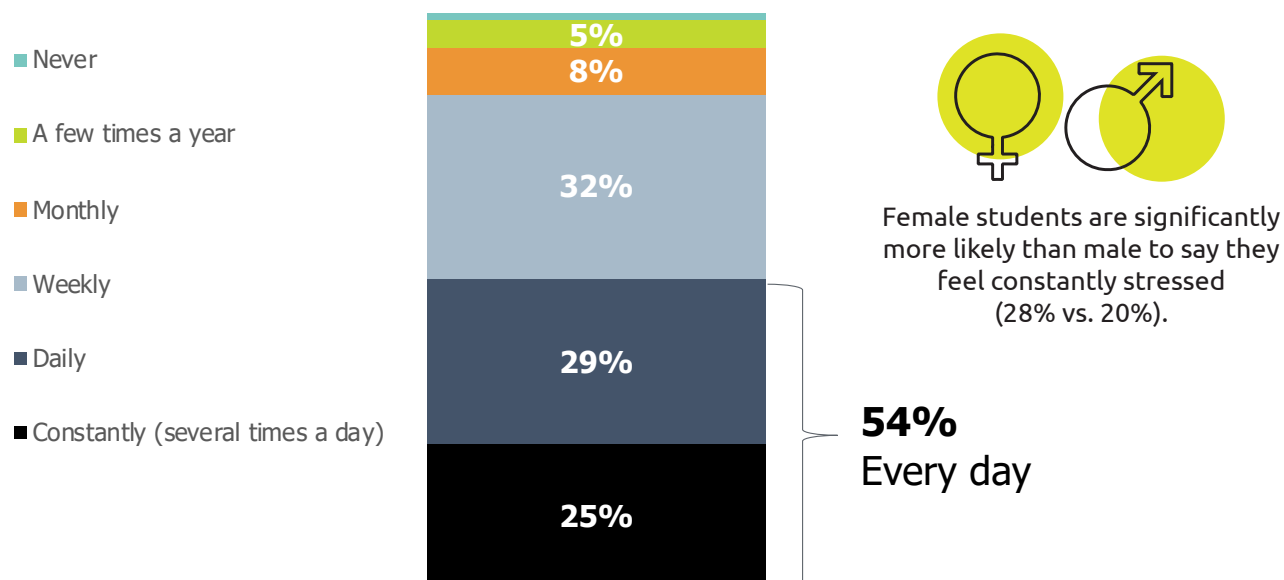
Among those expressing negative impacts

		Male	Female	18-19	20-21	22-23	24+
Most or all of my courses have been moved online	79%	77%	81%	85%	79%	81%	62%
I've had significantly less face-to-face contact with academics	77%	77%	77%	81%	75%	80%	65%
I've struggled to meet new people/make friends	69%	67%	70%	77%	69%	67%	54%
I've spent significantly less time on campus	68%	68%	67%	67%	67%	73%	56%
I haven't been able to participate in the extracurricular activities that I want to	59%	60%	59%	63%	60%	63%	44%
I've struggled to get adequate academic support	36%	37%	37%	38%	36%	37%	30%
I've struggled to get adequate mental health support	34%	30%	36%	36%	32%	38%	25%
I've lived at home when I hadn't planned to	27%	27%	27%	25%	31%	28%	16%
I've struggled to get adequate health services	15%	11%	18%	13%	14%	19%	12%
I've stayed in university accommodation when I hadn't planned to	3%	5%	3%	3%	4%	3%	4%

5. Stress and schoolwork

Q. On average, how often do you feel stressed by studying/schoolwork?

While nearly all postsecondary students experience stress at least occasionally, there are stark differences in frequency between younger and older students: 57% of those aged 18-23 say they feel stressed by studying or schoolwork every single day, compared to 37% of those 24+ who say the same.





6. Most stressful parts of the postsecondary experience

Q. What do you find are the most stressful parts of your college/university experience?



The amount of studying required for their program tops the list of postsecondary students' sources of stress, driven in large part by those 18-23 years-old (92% of whom are in a diploma, certificate, or undergraduate program).

		Male	Female	18-19	20-21	22-23	24+
Amount of studying required	57%	54%	59%	61%	56%	63%	45%
Balancing work/social commitments with schoolwork	53%	47%	57%	48%	53%	60%	46%
Transition to online learning during the pandemic	47%	44%	48%	52%	46%	48%	42%
Paying for college/university	43%	41%	44%	38%	45%	47%	40%
Academic subject matter is challenging	37%	33%	40%	37%	36%	42%	33%
Dealing with more responsibility on my own	35%	26%	42%	43%	35%	38%	23%
Making new friends	34%	33%	34%	41%	33%	37%	23%
Not knowing where to go for support if I have problems	28%	27%	29%	31%	26%	28%	29%
Referencing sources correctly in my academic work	27%	24%	29%	30%	28%	27%	23%
Feeling alone when I have to study at night	24%	20%	27%	28%	22%	27%	19%
Being away from friends/family	22%	20%	23%	27%	22%	23%	16%

  Significantly higher/lower at 95% confidence.

Across many of the most common issues postsecondary students experience, international students and those in graduate programs tend to express significantly less stress than domestic students and those in diploma, certificate, or undergraduate programs.

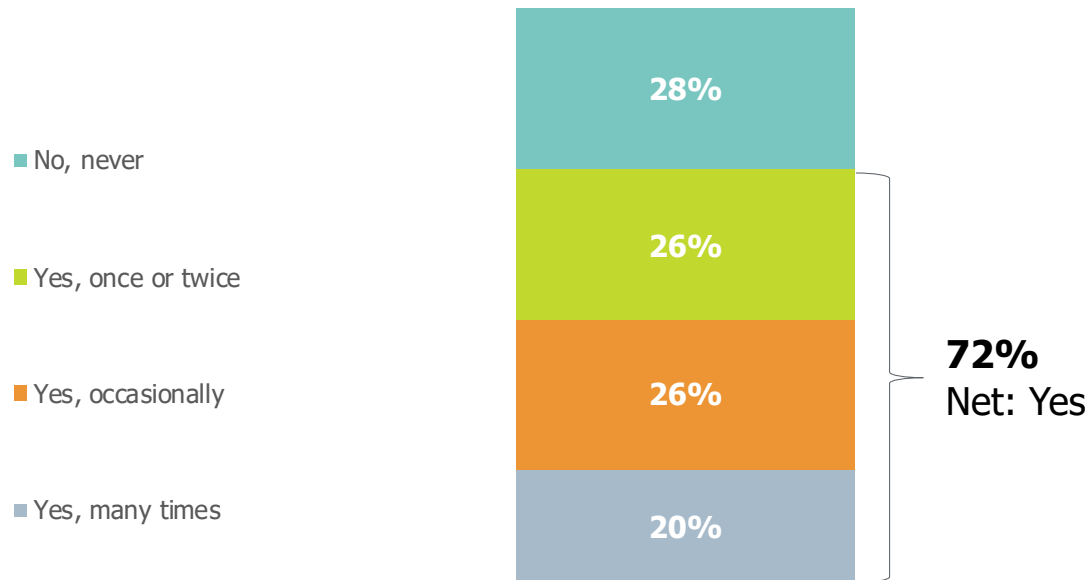
		Domestic	International	Diploma/ Certificate	Undergraduate	Graduate
Amount of studying required	57%	59%	39%	56%	59%	46%
Balancing work/social commitments with schoolwork	53%	54%	38%	48%	55%	49%
Transition to online learning during the pandemic	47%	48%	33%	45%	50%	38%
Paying for college/university	43%	43%	46%	39%	47%	34%
Academic subject matter is challenging	37%	38%	30%	30%	40%	34%
Dealing with more responsibility on my own	35%	35%	36%	38%	36%	22%
Making new friends	34%	34%	30%	33%	35%	29%
Not knowing where to go for support if I have problems	28%	28%	29%	29%	29%	22%
Referencing sources correctly in my academic work	27%	27%	25%	27%	29%	20%
Feeling alone when I have to study at night	24%	24%	23%	27%	23%	22%
Being away from friends/family	22%	21%	31%	20%	23%	22%

  Significantly higher/lower at 95% confidence.

7. Burning the midnight oil

Have you ever had to study all night without sleep (pull an all-nighter) to get through your course workload or meet a deadline?

Nearly three-in-four (72%) postsecondary students say they have had to study all night without sleep at some point to meet a deadline or get through their course workload, with one-in-five (20%) saying it happens regularly.



Among those who have pulled all-nighters, common reasons cited include:

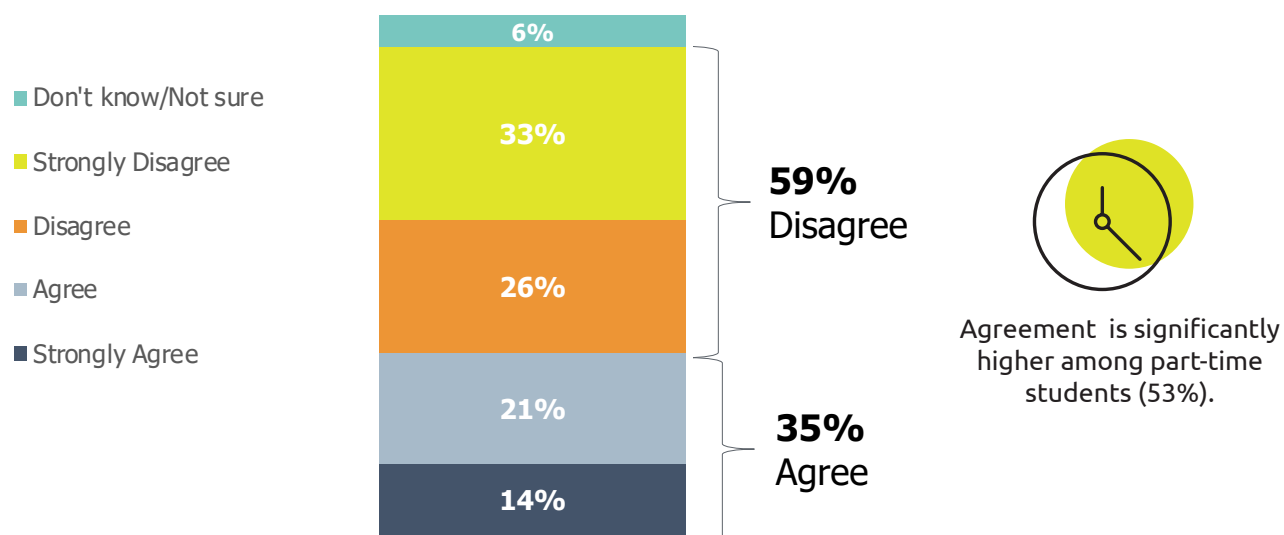
- Overwhelming course workload (56%)
- Struggles to manage one's time (54%)
- Struggles to balance personal life with school (50%)



8. Withdrawing from postsecondary

Q. Agreement - I have seriously considered dropping out of university

With most (61%) Canadian postsecondary students saying they have thought about dropping a course as a result of struggling with studying alone, many have even considered more drastic measures. One-third (35%) have seriously debated dropping out of university altogether, including half of part-time students.





"Regret is a powerful emotion that can profoundly affect one's willingness to persevere with a course of action. When a decision involves something as important as a career path - and associated university degree - results in regret, it can rapidly descend into a loss of motivation. Educating students on the importance of making choices based on issues like study support, value for money and access to extracurricular activities, in addition to considering a university's reputation or where their friends are going, is absolutely essential."

- Professor Chris Tisdell, Professor and Director, Scientia Education Academy, University of New South Wales and Studiosity Australia Academic Advisory Board Member



In practice: Reducing attrition

One main factor to reduce attrition is keeping students engaged throughout their degree. Some ways that have proven to increase engagement and performance were reducing the size of lectures to allow more personal interaction with the lecturer, and improving academic support to provide help for students around their work-life-study demands. (Brooks and Duty, 2017; Edwards, 2016)

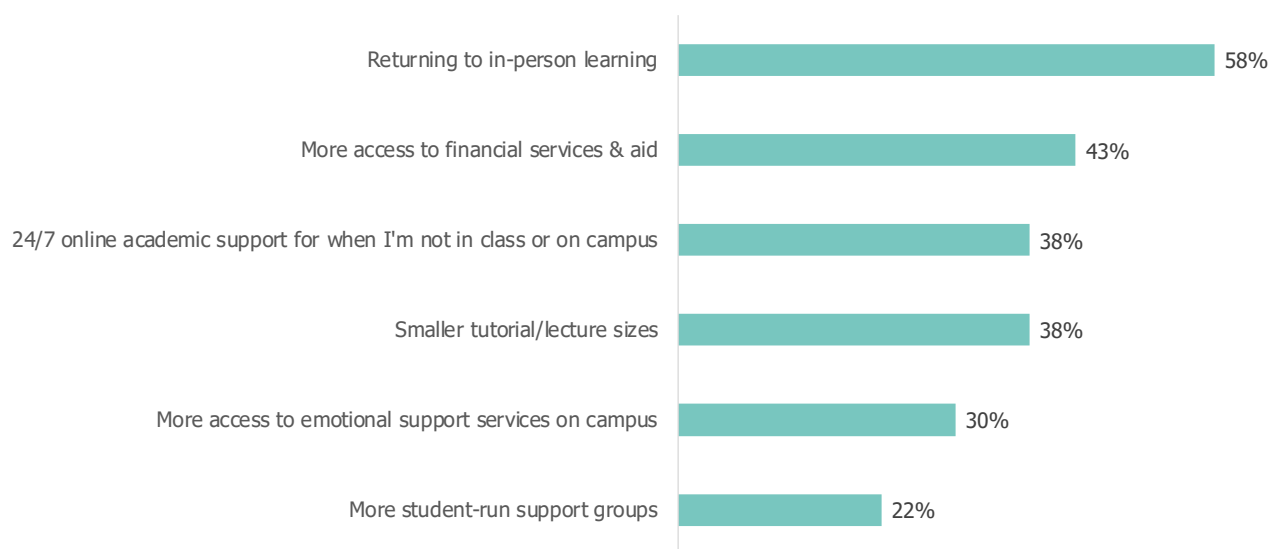
Brooks, R., Duty, D. (2017). "This is how to stop students dropping out of university." Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/this-is-how-to-stop-students-dropping-out-of-university-83250>

Edwards, D. (2016). "Better academic support for students may help lower university attrition rates." The Conversation. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/better-academic-support-for-students-may-help-lower-university-attrition-rates-66395>

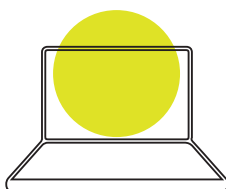
9. Solutions to combat stress

Q. What do you think could help combat many of these issues?

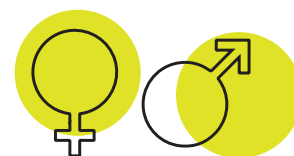
While students propose a variety of initiatives and changes to help manage stress, the most widely proposed solution is a return to in-person learning after this past year's largely online experience. Male students (63%), undergraduates (62%), and full-time students (61%) appear especially anxious to get back into the classroom.



'Return to in-person learning' is significantly higher among male students (63%, vs. 54% of female).



'24/7 online academic support for when I'm not in class or on campus' is significantly higher among female students (43%, vs. 32% male).

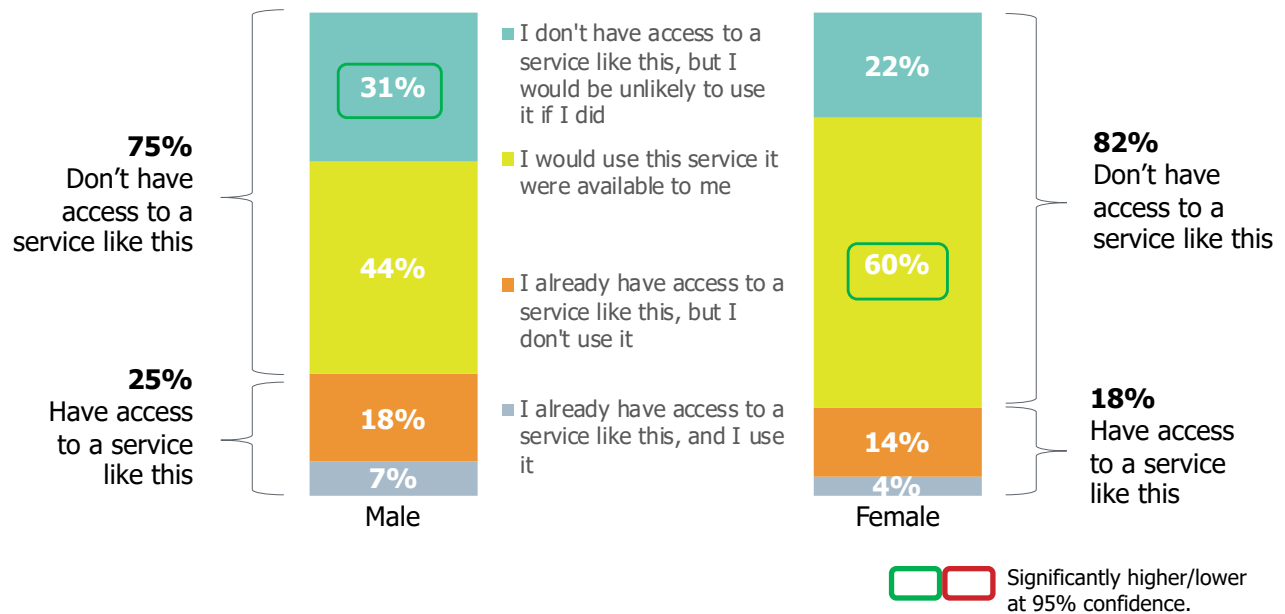


'More access to emotional support services on campus' is significantly higher among female students (36%, vs. 22% male).

10. 24/7 online study support

Q: How would you feel about on-demand, 24/7 online study support from a real person?

Over three-quarters (79%) of postsecondary students do not currently have access to a 24/7 online study support service, yet two-thirds (67%) of those without access say they would use it if it were available to them, including nearly three-quarters (74%) of female students.



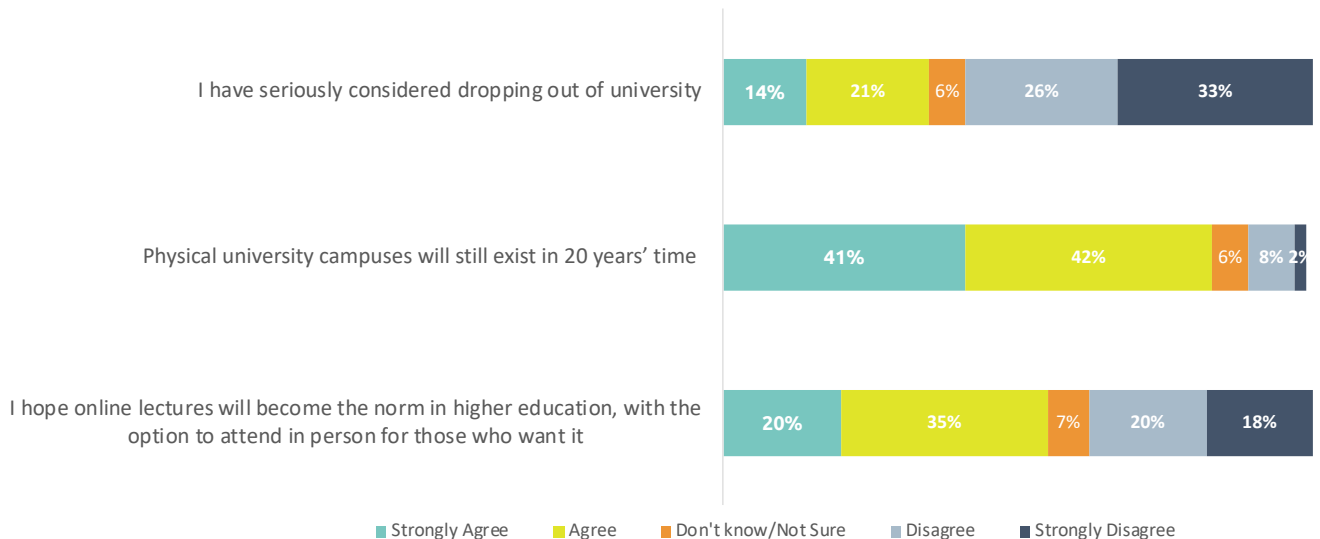
Future-proofing universities

Students are looking for change in the form of flexible, digital learning opportunities

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- I have seriously considered dropping out of university.
- Physical university campuses will still exist in 20 years' time.
- I hope online lectures will become the norm in higher education, with the option to attend in person for those who want it.

While 35% of students have seriously considered dropping out of university, only 10% of students think physical universities will not exist in 20 years' time. 55% of students hope online lectures will become the norm in higher education, with the option to attend in person for those who want it.



Conclusion



Now, more than ever, postsecondary students need our support and our sector continues to innovate because every student deserves the chance to achieve their best.

Despite the student struggles identified, there are solutions within this study to combat stress and reduce study anxiety. While the timing of a large-scale return to in-person learning is uncertain, more access to financial services and aid, coupled with 24/7 online academic support for when students are not in class or on campus, has been identified as a promising solution. There is a need for higher education institutions to continue to lean into digital transformation and change the way services and resources are offered, especially in a blended virtual and in-person learning environment.

While this study focuses on current student wellbeing and their postsecondary experience, we have all felt the impact. What may have seemed near to impossible just a few short years ago became suddenly essential - digital ways of learning and virtual education plans and projects were implemented within days. The dedication of deans, professors, library and support staff, and senior leaders at our institutions across Canada shows how the higher education sector is striving to do what is best for students.

Let's continue to build on this momentum by listening to our students, doing our best to normalize help-seeking, and providing equitable study help, anytime, anywhere.

Chris Helsby
Vice-President & General Manager, Canada
Studiosity

For more information contact
hello@studiosity.com

“ To avoid pandemic fallout, equity must prevail in the post-secondary student experience. Free on-demand services that foster financial, social and academic equity can help universities improve student morale and retention.

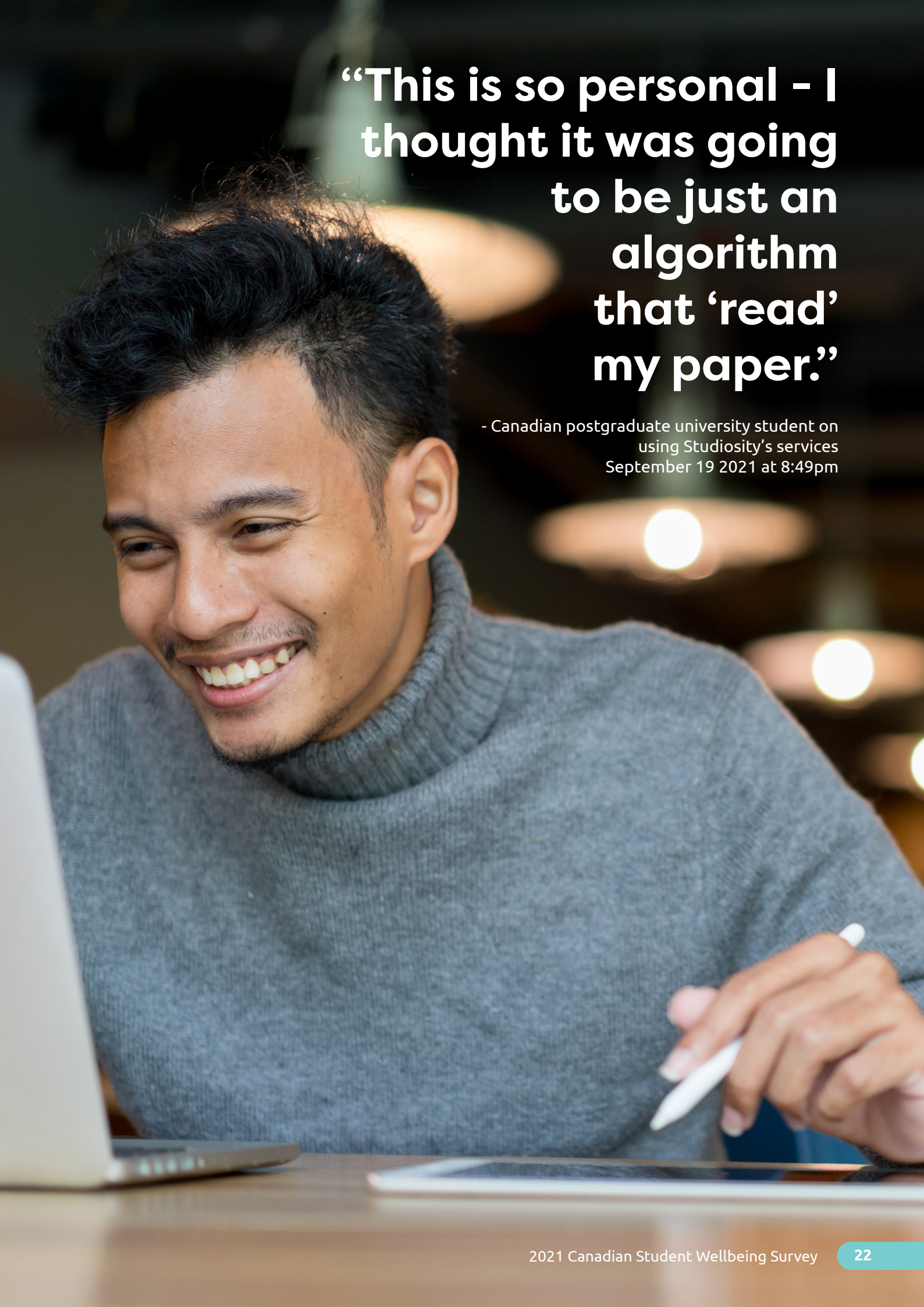
The good news for Canadian institutions is that the pandemic has given them a head start. For one thing, those that pivoted successfully to online learning have the proven digital infrastructure in place to reach a receptive audience. For another, one of the unexpected benefits of the pandemic was that equity-deserving students were able to access digital learning spaces and experiences that were not previously available. Now it is up to Canadian institutions to build on this momentum by using digital channels ” to foster equity and community.

Dr. Mamdouh Shoukri, Past President and Vice-Chancellor of York University and Studiosity Canada Academic Advisory Board Member

“ There is no doubt that the last academic year has been incredibly challenging for university and college students across the world, and it comes as no surprise that students have felt anxious and have not found remote learning easy.

As we contemplate both the return to campus and the longer term prospect of growth in blended learning, universities will be looking for innovative ways to support their students, to rebuild their academic confidence and provide additional learning support when students need it most. This research is a timely reminder that students do not lead nine to five lives and are looking for online academic support that is available when they need it. Such support can and does transform the learning experience for students, ” as I have seen in my own university.

Professor Rebecca Bunting, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive of the University of Bedfordshire and Studiosity UK Academic Advisory Board Member



**“This is so personal - I
thought it was going
to be just an
algorithm
that ‘read’
my paper.”**

- Canadian postgraduate university student on
using Studiosity's services
September 19 2021 at 8:49pm



Acknowledgments

Research report: Studiosity Canada & Angus Reid

This survey was conducted on the Angus Reid Forum panel among 1,004 current postsecondary students in Canada. The sample frame was balanced to ensure representation of men and women in proportion to their overall share of the Canadian postsecondary student population (56% identified as female, 43% identified as male), as well as to ensure statistically significant representation from each region of the country. For comparison purposes only, a sample of this size would yield a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The survey was conducted in English and French.

For further details about this report please contact:

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