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## The Impact of COVID-19 on Undergraduate University Students with Part-Time Jobs

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Sociology

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# **The Impact of COVID-19 on Undergraduate University Students with Part-Time Jobs: Challenges and Inequalities**

## Abstract

This study explored how the pandemic and the shift to online learning impacted university students' experiences of learning and working, and how students' capital and other resources impacted their university experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eighteen undergraduate students who had paid employment in the last 12 months were recruited. In interviews participants were asked about their experiences with work, schooling and balancing the two with the pressures of the pandemic. Students cited financial concerns, as well as challenges with difficulties with online learning, motivation, and isolation. Importantly, this study found that students experiences differed in accordance with their capital and resources. Those with family capital and support, had an easier time balancing working and learning during the pandemic than others. No one was untouched by the pandemic but the resources at students' disposal heavily impacted what challenges they faced and the severity of those challenges.

## Keywords

Post-Secondary Education, University Education, Online Learning, In-person Learning, COVID-19, Pandemic, Lockdowns, Student employment, Work-School Balance, Economic Capital, Social Capital, Qualitative

## Summary for Lay Audience

This study explored how the pandemic, and the shift to online learning, impacted university students' experiences of learning and working, as well as, how capital and other resources impacted undergraduate students' university experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic disrupted people's daily routines and how we interact with each other. For many students, education was moved to an online delivery format, moving away from in-person interactions. These changes have forced students to navigate technology challenges, limited social supports and isolation. Students who were or are employed in order to pay for their education may have been impacted differently based on the field they worked in. Some fields saw an increase in work (and increase of risk from working), while others saw a reduction or even layoffs.

For this study, I recruited 18 undergraduate students at Western, who have had paid employment in the last 12 months. Interview participants were asked about their experiences with work, schooling, and balancing the two with the pressures of the pandemic. Students frequently cited concerns over living and school expenses, and highlighted how the transition of university into a digital medium brought on an increased workload, a social disconnect from their fellow students and challenges to motivation.

This study found that students' experiences varied in accordance with the financial well-being and family support. No one was untouched by the pandemic but the resources at students' disposal heavily impacted what challenges they faced and the severity of those challenges. Social interactions were also limited during parts of the pandemic limiting the potential for the expansion of social networks. These finds help shed light on how students adapted or struggled during the pandemic. The findings also show how individual and family resources can influence adaptations to major events such as a pandemic.

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

COVID-19 shut down the world and changed the lives of everyone in it. University students were among those affected. In the normal chain of events, the labour market is challenging for students who often need to make due with low-paying and often precarious jobs. With the high cost of living in many Ontario cities, the minimum wage increase to \$15 dollars did very little to help (Sharp, 2020a). When the pandemic happened, youth were especially impacted: unemployment skyrocketed to 26.5 for full-time students in September of 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2022). During pandemic lockdowns employment in retail and food services diminished; this was a major hit to students since these are areas where youth employment tends to be concentrated (Sharp, 2020b; Smith & Patton, 2013). Some students lost two summers of employment, depending on their circumstances. Those youth who were gainfully employed during the pandemic often struggled to get sufficient hours at work.

The loss of employment and work hours is significant for university students, as many rely on summer employment, and part-time employment during the school year, to finance their education and pay their living expenses. Even in the best of times, university students may not earn enough from their low-wage jobs to cover all of their expenses (Ouellette, 2006). Government loans can help bridge the gap, but loans are intentionally designed to supplement students' existing resources (Ouellette, 2006). Students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds may benefit from family support through difficult times, but working-class students, and those without family support face difficulty (Waithaka, 2014; Brosnan et al., 2016; Starobin et al., 2016). Those without financial means may find they need to prioritize work over school in order to finance their education (Hassel & Ridout, 2018).

The loss of work opportunities has other impacts for students too. Summer and part-time employment provide valuable work experience for students, and enable them to forge connections that could enhance employability after their post-secondary education

is completed (Lehmann, 2012; Trower & Lehmann, 2017). Work experience helps students gain more self-awareness about their interests and work preferences (Kantar & Bouckennooghe, 2021). Moreover, working provides opportunities for students to acquire skills that they cannot gain through school curricula. Such skills and opportunities appear more important than ever in light of credential inflation in the labour market. Employers are demanding higher qualifications and more experience from university graduates. These expectations not only encourage students to obtain higher education (and even multiple degrees), but they also encourage students to work. However, students end up competing for the right kind of work since not all experiences are seen as equal (Lehmann, 2012).

In this manner, youth can be caught in a cycle where they need to work to fund advanced education, and they need to pursue advanced education in order to establish a career. While work is essential for many pursuing higher education, the irony is that working pulls students away from studying. Post-secondary students may struggle to balance the pressures of work and school. These pressures are particularly acute for students experiencing economic and financial hardship, limiting their ability to establish a good balance between work and school (Robotham, 2013). The pandemic intensified students' challenges combining learning and working.

The pandemic not only exacerbated everyone's financial challenges (Brodeur et al., 2021), but the shift to online learning altered student social networks, and impacted how students learned (Boys, 2021; Edmunds et al., 2021). Online learning has been associated with a loss of important resources for students like emotional support and study group related connections (O' Shea et al., 2015). Students may have also faced productivity challenges with the shift to online, due to the mental and psychological effects of feeling isolated (Kanupriya, 2020; Brodeur et al., 2021).

Existing research on students' challenges with balancing working and schooling is not extensive. Nevertheless, this is an important issue to study since students' early job experience and their post-secondary school success can set them up for labour market success or struggle after graduation. Research conducted prior to the pandemic has

highlighted the importance of class background and financial resources to students' experiences of working and learning. The pandemic, however, has disrupted university students' work and their schooling, making it more important than ever to examine students' experiences, and their challenges with making ends meet. This raises questions about how class, family, and available resources can help students cope, and how the uneven distribution of resources creates an unequal playing field for more disadvantaged students.

This thesis sets out to explore the challenges undergraduate university students faced as they balanced work and online education during the pandemic. Qualitative interviews were conducted with undergraduate students who also worked, with a focus on their financial and educational challenges, and their well-being.

The next chapter, Chapter 2, presents existing literature on university students' experiences of working and learning. Key concepts from Bourdieu and other scholars, including economic, social, cultural, and family capital are introduced. Chapter 3 details the methodology used to conduct the research, and describes the characteristics of study participants. Chapter 4 presents study findings, highlighting key themes that emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts. Particular attention is paid to how family and economic capital shaped students' experiences of learning during the pandemic, and students' experiences of isolation. Chapter 5 links these results back to the literature to situate what the findings mean in broader context. This final chapter also provides some policy recommendations.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Literature Review

It is no secret that the pandemic impacted everyone and created new challenges that university students prior to the pandemic did not have to deal with. To give context to the challenges students faced, in this chapter I first outline important theoretical concepts and ideas. I explore the importance of resources and class to students' experiences. Then I examine why students choose to work while in school. To round out the chapter, I describe how the pandemic impacted students' education, their jobs, and students' ability to combine the two, paying particular attention to the impact of the pandemic on students' social networks, the role of technology, and labour market trends.

#### 2.1 Theorizing the Student Experience

The theories of Pierre Bourdieu help to advance our understanding of education and work. Bourdieu (1986) explains that there are many kinds of capital, but they all represent either physical or non-physical resources that a person has gathered through their life and relationships (Starobin et al., 2016). Bourdieu talked about how the social class a person comes from can impact what privileges, power, and resources an individual has access to. A person's social class can be defined in terms of their socio-economic position, but these positions also shape values, beliefs and culture. People from higher class backgrounds have more capital, and hence more resources and opportunities for labour market, cultural and social success, while those from lower-class backgrounds are continually disadvantaged (Starobin et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2018).

Capital takes many different forms including economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital consists of a person's income or other financial resources they have access to. Social capital can be seen as the relationships and networks a person forms or is a part of. Cultural capital is a mix of a person's education and knowledge (Martin et al., 2018; Brosnan et al., 2016). Education plays an important

role in the transmission of capital, since it is a source of knowledge, shapes networks and relationships, and because education can contribute to labour market success. I discuss each form of capital, and its relevance for post-secondary students, in more detail below.

Economic capital is one of the most easily recognized forms of capital. This form of capital consists of the wealth or monetary resources an individual has access to. Financial concerns are not uncommon among students, but the level of economic capital a student has access to can impact other forms of capital such as a person's social capital. Having more economic capital gives a person more time and ability to expand their social networks or engage in activities that would allow them to gain more cultural capital. A simple way to think about economic capital is it gives people options. Some students have economic capital passed down to them by their parents, but others must work to obtain it: this is why students, especially those without many economic resources, are likely to work part-time jobs (Brosnan et al., 2016). The more economic capital one has, the more likely one can pay for rent, food or social activities to fit in better with certain social circles. Something as simple as a student living with their parents could allow a student to allocate economic capital elsewhere to further their acquisition of other forms of capital which they will need in order to be successful in the workforce (Brosnan et al., 2016).

Cultural capital can be acquired in the family and through social interactions, but is also imparted within the school system. Social capital can also be acquired at school, with people from elite backgrounds connecting with other members of the elite. People with high levels of cultural and social capital can use this capital to achieve labour market success by drawing on their knowledge and connections to land good jobs, and enhance their economic capital. The role of cultural and social capital in this process can be hidden, as some assume success was earned through education and effort rather than through capital (Starobin et al., 2016; Brosnan et al., 2016).

Social capital represents the potential or actual resources a person has access to, based on their relationships with others or their position within a social network. Those with more social capital may be able to obtain jobs when they are scarce, or may be more

successful in navigating online learning environments, which some experience as isolating (Starobin et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2018). Social capital can be useful to access social support or find opportunities. Not only do students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds have less social capital, but they may be less willing than their higher SES peers to access it for social support. Research finds that students who are first in their family to attend university are less willing to ask for support. When it comes to this type of capital having family connections can impact how it is used (Brosnan et al., 2016). This last point is important to remember for economic capital as well: as students move through the education system, they are not just drawing on their own resources, but also the capital provided by their families (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015; Lareau & Cox, 2020).

Economic and social capital shape a person's identity and experiences, as one progresses through university. These types of capital can even impact what school a person ends up attending, who they make friends with and what jobs a student ends up getting. One's employment can, in turn impact the acquisition of additional economic and social capital (Martin et al., 2018; Lehmann, 2012). Having access to one type of capital can facilitate access to other types of capital. For example, having a lot of economic capital does not guarantee a lot of social capital. However, having a lot of economic capital does allow a person to have more opportunities and an easier time to accumulate social capital (Brosnan et al., 2016). This will become important as we discuss student social networks and how the pandemic altered the way students interact.

### 2.1.1 Family Capital

Scholars have expanded on Bourdieu's original discussion of the forms of capital to identify additional forms of capital. One that is particularly valuable in understanding the experiences of post-secondary students is *family capital*. Family capital is the combination of economic, social, and cultural capital a family will invest in family members to enhance the family's position, well-being or functioning (Waithaka, 2014). Parents with capital invest in their children to ensure they develop sufficient capital of their own to get into university (Lareau & Cox, 2020). In the student context this is important because it means the capital a student or a young person draws on is not just their own, but includes capital from family members who have had time to accumulate more capital. The more capital within a group, in this case family, the more resources and connections a student has to draw on (Lehmann, 2012). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have less accumulated family capital to draw on than students from wealthier backgrounds.

Thus, once family capital is factored in, students' economic capital is expanded beyond what they can personally accumulate, to include family savings, property and cars. Cultural capital is heavily impacted by the habits, attitudes and knowledge children acquire in the family. Moreover, social capital is not limited to a student's personal social network, but is also augmented by family networks and connections (Waithaka, 2014). The web of close and weak ties grows exponentially larger when an adult who has had decades to cultivate connections can help a student to develop their own networks. Social capital within the family context could also involve social support through the various networks to lend material resources and other resources including emotional support, expectations or validation – all of which contribute to a student's physical and emotional wellbeing (Waithaka, 2014). These family networks can be very important to students, providing them with more stability in uncertain times (Reay, 2018; Worth, 2018b), for instance, by facilitating a student's access to a loan (Belley et al., 2014; Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015). Loans are a crucial resource for low-income students, enabling them to undertake post-secondary education (Belley et al., 2014; Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015).

## 2.1.2 The Impact of Capital on University Students

What all this amounts to is that the different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and family) matter and have a massive impact on young adults. Notably, they impact students' working and learning experiences. The capital students accumulated before university impacts their ability to attend university, their ability to adapt in university, and potential opportunities after university (Brosnan et al., 2016; Starobin et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2018).

Students with economic and social capital – whether acquired individually or through their families – may be able to invest more time and effort into their education, since they do not have to worry about acquiring more funds to pay for tuition and living expenses (food, housing, etc.). Without needing to invest time in work, these students can take advantage of opportunities like unpaid internships that give experience for higher paid jobs after graduation (Waithaka, 2014). Students without capital, must spend more time working, and hence may be able to devote less time to school, networking, and unpaid activities that might provide valuable skills. In this way, students with capital may have more opportunities for upward social mobility and job opportunities after graduation than do students who do not have access to a lot of wealth (Reay, 2018). There is another component to this equation alongside capital for the working student experience: “fit”. How well a student can fit in with their peers in a university environment and potentially their working environment as well is important to their experiences and opportunities. It is not uncommon for students from different backgrounds to worry about fitting in, especially when they are introduced to a new environment. Bourdieu's concept, “habitus”, illuminates these processes (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016).

The value of adopting a Bourdieusian approach is that it highlights how structured social inequalities shape opportunities in subtle ways that are often obscured. Although prevailing cultural attitudes suggest that hard work and education are all that are needed for success, the research reviewed above sheds light on how students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disadvantaged as they enter and proceed through post-

secondary education, and these disadvantages can accumulate to impact opportunities. Working-class or low-income students will have fewer options available to them. Looking at a student's access to the different forms of capital can give us an understanding of the struggle between agency and structural constraints students deal with (Reay, 2018).

## **2.2 How family class influences students' ability to navigate university**

From our upbringing we acquire norms and preferences through learned experiences that impact how we understand the world. In turn, our understanding of the world impacts how we interact with it and how we understand our place within it. Habitus varies by family background, class, and upbringing, and some students will have a habitus that is more compatible with the university environment than others (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Family and capital shape students' educational trajectories, for instance by influencing a student's desire to attend university and the availability of finances to support them doing so (Belley et al., 2014; Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015; Foley, 2019).

Once at university, one's upbringing further shapes how well one fits in, as well as what connections one can make while in university, impacting employment after graduation (Lehmann, 2012). University can be seen as a way that a student can gain capital necessary to compete in the job market. Some might see university as democratic in this sense, providing equal capital and opportunities to all. The problem with this conception that some researchers have pointed out is that we do not have a meritocratic system that always matches skilled and competent individuals with jobs. What ends up happening is that education and capital act as a form of closure to keep certain people or groups out of some positions or fields (Lehmann, 2012).

These processes begin from an early age. Some research has indicated that the level of parents' education can directly impact how much they invest in their children's

education. This can take the form of reading more to their children or providing them with more educational resources. Parental income can even affect the quality of schools a student attends prior to university, what neighbourhoods the family lives in, and who students interact with (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015; Lareau & Cox, 2020). There is some debate about to what degree family income influences a child's desire to attend university. Research has suggested that lower-income families with less access to key resources may find it harder to support children with university aspirations (Belley et al., 2014; Lareau & Cox, 2020). This is why some research supports the idea that governments should offer more financial support to students in high school because the grades and resources offered to that group directly impact if a student can even get into university (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015). With all this said it stands to reason that the amount of support a family can or cannot give influences whether a student needs to work and how much time they may need to devote to work over school.

Students' efforts to navigate post-secondary education can be likened to a "game" (Reay, 2018) – an analogy that was introduced by Bourdieu when describing how some classes used their social, economic, and cultural capital to maintain or advance themselves while in school (Bathmaker et al., 2013). If a student has enough capital they may learn the unspoken rules of this "game" and by extension be better able to navigate university and access to opportunities. The rules of this game are closely tied to middle- and upper-class values, and those who understand the rules and command resources are more likely to be successful (Reay, 2018). The socioeconomic position a student inherits through their family connections not only gives them a certain amount of capital, but it also impacts how they understand or use it to navigate their environments (Lareau & Cox, 2020). It is not always enough to have capital; one must know how to use it to play the game.

With that said it would be a mistake to consider working-class experiences as being "incompatible with the university environment" (Loveday, 2015, p. 572). Loveday (2015) finds that working-class students' success can be impacted by how elite the institution they attend is, and how willing a working-class student is to accept middle-class values to gain social mobility (Loveday, 2015). These points are especially

important for students who are trying to move into a higher social and economic class (Reay, 2018). Thus, people have free will as they navigate these fields characterized by inequalities in capital and opportunities. Also, some students may be fully aware of how capital influences their ability to succeed in the game, while others are less aware of the mechanisms advantaging or hindering their success (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

To this point I have focused on how capital shapes students' opportunities for success in school, but it is also important to highlight the value of parental safety nets. Parents can counteract student precarity by offering housing or financial support. In school, the safety net can help students pay bills or provide additional financial or other support when a student needs it (Worth, 2018b). After graduation the parental safety net can provide graduates with connections helping them to secure their first jobs. This safety net can have a profound psychological effect for young people, providing them with security in precarious times. It cannot be stressed enough how important social class background and types of capital are in shaping students' experiences before they enter university, during university, and after. Capital not only shapes students' opportunities, but in the face of uncertainty can provide a safety net for them (Reay, 2018; Worth, 2018b). Experiences while in school shape opportunities after school. Some students once they graduate will simply have more advantage in finding work and high paying jobs based on resources and influences that could have been built up before they were even born, from previous generations (Lehmann, 2012).

Limitations imposed by one's family of origin, and the resources available to help one succeed, reinforce a form of social reproduction. From an early age, pathways can be open or closed based on a family's income (Kamanzi, 2019; Lareau & Cox, 2020). Family resources can shape how and when a family will get involved to help their child succeed, and how likely their interventions will be successful (Lareau & Cox, 2020). Parents who went to university themselves can help guide students through unfamiliar territory (Trower & Lehmann, 2017). Family influence is not absolute. Public policy and the structure of the education system can help or hinder student success. Nonetheless, it remains the case that students are impacted by their families' resources (Kamanzi, 2019). In this manner, there is a transmission of intergenerational inequalities.

Family background can also influence where students live. Before the pandemic, it was a lot easier for people living in urban environments to become university students than their more rural counterparts (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). During the pandemic, living arrangements took on a new importance with online learning. Some living environments are more conducive to studying and learning than others. From student housing to living with their parents the environment may not be free enough from distractions to learn effectively (Edmunds et al., 2021). Furthermore, studying from home can have negative mental health consequences stemming from being isolated.

When students are able to continue living with their parents while at university, it may benefit them by reducing their living expenses. This is a direct way for families to support their children going through university. However, not everyone can benefit from such direct family support. If there is no local university, or if one needs to attend a university away from home for a specific program, they may not be able to live with family. The same holds for students who must travel for education-related job placements. In some programs or fields, it might be a sign of status or a way to gain social capital if a student is able to take a placement that is overseas (Brosnan et al., 2016).

To summarize, family background can influence students' experiences of education, providing them with knowledge, support, and resources. Family resources may be particularly important for students coping with crises, providing them with a safety net. Those without resources or family capital, may experience more challenges.

### **2.3 Why Do Students Work?**

To understand working students' experiences, it is helpful to review the literature on why students work. Answers in the literature suggest that students work both to pay for their education and to pay for their living costs while in school. However, students might also work to acquire experience and skills. As the previous section's discussion of capital makes clear, some students face greater pressures to work than others. For

example, a student who has a lot of family capital may be more likely to work for experience rather than to pay tuition.

### **2.3.1 Working to Support Post-Secondary Education**

The simplest and most direct answer to why many students work is that students need money to fund their education. This was not always the case historically, but in the present, it is the reality most students face. To give a rough timeline, in 1979 less than 30% of university students had to work while being university students (Neill, 2015). The traditional model for a young adult who planned to pursue a university education was to go directly from high school into university. These students would typically rely on parents to fund their education, only working outside of school to a limited extent (Mounsey et al., 2013). Those with fewer family resources might work to save money to fund their education, but not work while in school. By the mid- 2000s over 45% of university students needed to find some sort of employment to pay for their education (Neill, 2015).

The entry cost of going into university can be very high for low-income students. Students who fall into the lower income group and who are also first-generation students need to overcome more than their higher-income counterparts. When a student is a first-generation university student and does not have many financial resources to draw on, they face more challenges adapting to social, academic and cultural situations. Their challenges are exacerbated when students need to move to attend school, when they accumulate debt, and when students have family obligations (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). In these situations, students will likely need to find employment to help offset the costs of post-secondary education. Working does not necessarily solve their challenges, however, because the jobs most students can access do not necessarily provide enough income to cover all their costs (Ouellette, 2006).

Precarity leads some students to pursue “side hustles” to gain more resources (Worth, 2018a). This can take many forms, from having a regular part-time job, to self-

employment, contract work, or freelancing. This could be further complicated if a student needs multiple jobs based on need or has responsibilities to care for others that could impact their schedules (Worth, 2018a).

Depending on the degree of financial difficulty a student faces, they may feel the need to prioritize working while in school in order to, paradoxically, continue to be in school. This can affect performance in school as students may skip lectures in order to attend shifts at their job (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Nonetheless, working may not create enough revenue to cover all student expenses (Ouellette, 2006).

Students may rely on other sources of income to fund their education including borrowing money or leaning on family supports. In some cases, credit restraints could force a student into taking on a job to make ends meet (Neill, 2015). Access to credit is influenced by students' family resources, and some students might find that they do not have access to loans, even though their families cannot fund their education (Robotham, 2013). In these situations, students are forced to work. Students might also work to reduce the amount of debt they acquire.

This highlights an important fact about the role government loans are expected to play within the context of funding a student's education. A government loan is expected to help supplement other financial resources. Loans are not designed to cover all costs. This is why most loan applications inquire about students' personal savings, income from employment and other money coming from family or spouses (Ouellette, 2006). When students are able to borrow money, they can pursue an education they may not have the resources for otherwise. With that said, some literature has expressed concern over the negative financial state students are put in when their education is financed through loans (Smith & Patton, 2013).

Universities may try to address disparities between students of different socioeconomic backgrounds by providing financial aid. These kinds of resources may not be as successful at helping lower-income students in more prestigious universities because lower-income students may choose to go to more affordable institutions or skip post-secondary education altogether. Instead, the resources put in place to help lower-

income students may be utilized by middle-class students who have enough of the different forms of capital to get into a high-ranking university (Martin et al., 2018). These students can use their capital and knowledge to take advantage of these programs even though the programs may not be targeted specifically for them. The important takeaway from this is that students from lower-class backgrounds may skip going to university because of the perceptions of how high the costs are (Martin et al., 2018).

A commonality across many students is that they cannot rely on only one form of income in order to pursue their education. Often utilizing multiple sources together is necessary to manage, especially for programs that are more expensive. It can be challenging for students to find a source of income that will allow them to cover all costs associated with university and living expenses. Even if you isolate matters to school-related expenses usually any one source of funding accessible to students is not enough to completely cover the costs (Ouellette, 2006).

### **2.3.2 It is a Good Opportunity to Build Up Experience**

Up to this point I have talked about the financial concerns that may force students to work and some of the negative consequences. Now I would like to highlight some of the benefits of working for students, including experiences and different types of capital. In the current labour market having a university degree is a good start, but it may not be sufficient to stand out in a competitive job market (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021; Bathmaker et al., 2013). Employers may look for work experience and volunteer experiences that give students additional skills, including interpersonal skills or other “soft skills” (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021). Students from all over the world are increasingly competing against one another in the international labour market, which makes it even more of an imperative to find ways to stand out (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021).

It should be pointed out that a lot of the experiences that help a student stand out are not built into educational program curricula, meaning a student has to seek them out.

With that said, extracurricular experiences can be of great benefit to students, potentially helping them figure out future careers and their own work preferences. Students may also gain insight into effective job-hunting strategies, and what transferable skills are in demand (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021).

It cannot be understated how useful these lessons are, especially in unstructured environments that are outside of school (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021). Extracurricular activities can be diverse: including volunteer activities, student employment, clubs, and sports. Students who have the time and resources to engage in multiple activities will gain a wider range of experiences than those who only engage in one type of extracurricular (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021). Here again, socioeconomic status and family support can make a big difference or set limitations on how much capital and experiences students acquire (Kamanzi, 2019; Lareau & Cox, 2020). If a student is focused on paying all their expenses themselves, they may not have the time to do extracurricular activities that do not fund their immediate needs.

Travelling abroad is one form of extra-curricular activity that can enhance students' capital, and help them stand out in an increasingly competitive job market after graduation. Personal capital can be thought of as the combination of studying at elite universities, being able to travel to a university, or prestigious internships that combine with other forms of capital to give a student a competitive edge. Although culturally enriching, such travel requirements can create disparities between those who have more economic capital and those who do not (Brosnan et al., 2016). Thus, extra credential experiences differentiate people of different socioeconomic backgrounds; it is predominantly the privileged that can benefit from them (Trower & Lehmann, 2017). From a personal growth angle, the more diverse extracurricular experiences a student is able to have the better they may begin to understand themselves. This increases self-awareness and can help a student become more aware of their strengths, weakness, and values (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021). Working can achieve the same ends.

Employment can also help ensure students do not lose skills they have gained. Data from Statistics Canada found that youth who were unemployed and not in school

saw skills they had acquired erode (Statistics Canada, 2021). This is important to point out in the discussion of benefits because working does not just give a student different type of skills or capital, but it also helps retain and enhance these skills.

### **2.3.3 Work Experience: Internships and Part-Time Work**

Historically, balancing work and school was not the norm. In some parts of the world early work experience would be in the form of full-time employment (Smith & Patton, 2013). Researchers argue that credential inflation is driving the demand for internships and work placements prior to securing full-time employment (Richardson, et al., 2009). Career-related experience through internships and volunteering is preferred by employers to other forms of part-time employment (Lehmann, 2012). These “extra-credential experiences” are impacted by what forms of capital a student has access to (economic, cultural, etc.) (Lehmann, 2012; Trower & Lehmann, 2017). Some of these experiences are unpaid, or low-paid, however, meaning that only some students – those who do not need to work to support themselves – can take advantage of them (Robotham, 2013).

Students working for financial reasons are more likely to pursue part-time jobs, and student workers are in-demand with certain employers, who value their flexibility and willingness to work extended hours (Richardson, et al., 2009; Neill, 2015). The expectation and demand for services to be provided 24/7 in areas like the retail sector has created a demand for part-time positions to be filled (Richardson, et al., 2009). Although not always ideal, these jobs may provide students with valuable experience that will help them secure future employment.

It is precisely these jobs, however, that were cut back drastically during pandemic lockdowns leading to unemployment or underemployment. The pandemic-induced recession impacted lower-income students especially, leaving them with fewer resources to fund their post-secondary education. Graduates who were just entering full-time employment when the lockdowns occurred, were also affected and may experience long

lasting scars from the pandemic (Blundell et al., 2020). Moreover, these jobs placed student workers at a higher risk for illness, since they require interaction with the public (Blundell et al., 2020).

## **2.4 COVID-19 Pandemic Disrupts Work and Schooling**

At this point in time, it is safe to say that COVID-19 had a major impact on university students' lives. Students from all backgrounds, fields and areas of employment have felt the effects of the pandemic while trying to complete their education. Before the pandemic, there was concern about students' ability to balance working with learning. For those with limited financial support especially, the need for student employment combined with the low wages in many student jobs, pulled students towards working, limiting their time available for schooling, and full participation in the university experience (Richardson, et al., 2009). The impact of the pandemic on this balance appears to have been complex.

Traditionally, the post-secondary education experience and many other forms of learning occurred in-person. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made in-person gatherings dangerous, forcing both students and instructors to adapt to the online classroom (Fawaz & Samaha, 2020). Online learning may have provided students with more flexibility for working, but it brought other challenges, creating new pressures that students needed to navigate.

### **2.4.1 Online Learning and Social Interactions**

The rapid switch to online learning was probably the most radical change to a university student's educational experience during the pandemic. One impact of online learning was its effect on social interactions. A second was its impact on learning. These impacts are connected: how we interact with people shapes what we know, what we do with our knowledge, and even our mental health. The learning process is characterized by

an exchange of information between individuals and groups. The expansion of online education, then, can have a profound impact on an individual's learning and how they develop through their degree (Kang & Im, 2013).

With in-person learning, students have multiple opportunities for social interaction and group learning through study groups, and interactions with classmates, which can help students get through a difficult class (O' Shea et al., 2015). Some studies indicate that high interaction leads to higher satisfaction and higher perceived learning outcomes. With that said, a student's perception, although useful, should not be conflated with a positive correlation between interaction and learning results (Kang & Im, 2013). Learning online limits opportunities for social interaction, and hence, may negatively impact learning.

Online learning during the pandemic led to feelings of isolation from social networks (Kanupriya, 2020; Brodeur et al., 2021). Social networks are a collection of relationships that emerge from social interactions. Networks can be comprised of people we work with, go to school with, both or neither. However, not all the relationships in a network are of the same quality. Moreover, some networks vary in how open they are to outsiders. A major advantage of having a strong and diverse network is that you have more people around you sharing information. This, in turn, improves your own personal knowledge base and enhances the information you may be able to share with others (Kay, 2018). Social networks can, in this manner, enhance learning through the exchange of information.

Social networks are also connected to social capital, to the extent that networks can provide resources that individuals can leverage for information and opportunities. The switch to online learning constrained student interactions, thereby potentially limiting students' ability to build connections, enhance their networks, and ultimately build social capital for future success.

## 2.4.2 Technology as a Medium for Learning

Technology should be included in any discussion about online education during the pandemic. During the lockdowns, technology enabled students to continue their education and to have social interactions with others outside of their households. Even before the pandemic, technology was playing an increasingly bigger role in our lives. Technology-mediated education, however, has created concerns for university students. The learning process typically is an exchange of information between two or more individuals within the classroom. This can be done by a student interacting with their professors or a student interacting with other students around them. Online, people cannot interact with each other as they would in person, leading to feelings of division and isolation (Kang & Im, 2013).

There are some advantages with online learning. For example, there are potentially fewer financial barriers as online learning reduces the cost of travel, needing to relocate or change jobs. Online classes make it possible for students to engage with the same content at different times, potentially in different regions (O' Shea et al., 2015). Technology may facilitate students' ability to balance school and work, if they do not need to leave a job to relocate for school; reduced travel means more flexibility when trying to schedule work shifts around classes. Nevertheless, there are disadvantages with online learning as well. For example, depending on where a student lives, the quality of their internet access might be insufficient. Also, learning online can limit students' access to resources on campus that contribute to their success (Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

Disparities in students' access to technology can impact the quality of their learning experiences. It is no secret that good technology is not cheap. Financial barriers create an unequal playing field for doing online courses and accessing resources. Simple things like the reliability of one's electricity or internet network can have a significant impact on one's ability to learn online (Fawaz & Sanaha, 2020; Boys, 2021). Depending on the quality of the network a student could face having to log-in repeatedly if connections break down when classes are running, losing data or having your connection completely lost during a key event like an exam (Fawaz & Sanaha, 2020). Getting your technology to operate reliably may be something completely out of your hands due to

your circumstances. Finances and technology challenges, then, can have a major impact on one's ability to participate in online learning (Fawaz & Sanaha, 2020).

Access to technology is not simply a matter of convenience or finances, but it also has implications for safety. An American study found that higher-income regions had better access to reliable high-speed internet and hence had a higher chance to comply with social distancing (Brodeur et al., 2021). This means the technological divide between higher- and lower- income individuals could impact how much risk individuals are exposed to during a pandemic. This topic connects back to student employment because low-income workers are more likely to be front-line workers or retail workers who have fewer options to work from home (Brodeur et al., 2021).

Technology intersects with inequalities to shape experiences of working and learning, as well as health and wellbeing. Forcing students online, although necessary from a health point of view, has pushed educational inequalities into the spotlight (Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

### **2.4.3 The Student Labor Market During the Pandemic**

As mentioned earlier, the pandemic disrupted the student labor market. This section presents labour market statistics related to student employment; however, it must be noted that data about student employment are not plentiful. To compensate, statistics concerning youth employment are sometimes presented.

Young people typically face high unemployment rates, and often work in low-wage jobs. As a result, they are often financially vulnerable. Minimum wage in Ontario was at \$14.35 dollars an hour in 2020, but it was increased to 15 dollars an hour in 2021. The high cost of living in many Ontario urban centres means that this wage does not stretch far. In terms of unemployment, immediately prior to the pandemic, the unemployment rate for full-time students was 10.9 percent (Sharp, 2020a). In September of 2020 full-time student unemployment hit high point of 26.5 and only briefly dropped from the 20s once in December of that year to 18.2. After that the full-time student

unemployment rate went back into the 20s and did not drop consistently until October 2021, with an unemployment rate of 8.8 percent. In January 2022, unemployment returned to double digits (15.9 percent), and remained high as of April 2022 at 10.8 percent (Statistics Canada, 2022).

These statistics show how tough it was for students pursuing post-secondary education full-time to find a job during the pandemic. These statistics also show how turbulent the labour market was during the pandemic with several highs and lows. Data on youth summer unemployment indicate a rate of 28.8 to 22.9 during the summer of 2020 (May to August), and a rate of 15.1 to 11.7 for summer 2021 (May to August) (Trading Economics, 2022). Combined, these statistics demonstrate the poor state of the youth labour market during the pandemic.

In effect, some students lost two years of summer employment, which is problematic because many students need to work in order to fund their education; some work over the summer while others work all year long (Neill, 2015). The loss of summer employment is of significant concern because this employment helps many students to cover their expenses for the rest of the year (Sharp, 2020b). Beyond this, some sectors where students commonly work – such as retail and restaurants – have been hit harder than others (Larue, 2020; Sharp, 2020b; Smith & Patton, 2013).

Although data on youth employment trends include those who are university students and those who are not, they can shed light on students' experiences. Statistics Canada (2021) has reported that, in 2019, 54.4% of young Canadians were working at least 30 hours per week in full-time jobs with no set end date. Compared to their older counterparts, young Canadians are less likely to have a permanent position (Statistics Canada, 2021). Rather, youth are more likely to have part-time jobs that are not permanent. The differences between the two groups shrinks if you remove full-time students from the equation. The long-term trend for youth has been a decline in full-time employment since the 1980s. Rather, youth are staying in school longer and engaging in part-time work. After graduation young Canadians who have a degree are far more likely

to have stable full-time jobs in comparison to those with only a high school degree (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Younger workers on average make less than older workers (Statistics Canada 2021). Full-time students are often employed part-time, and part-time jobs often pay less. Younger workers have less experience and qualifications in comparison to their older counterparts, which contributes to lower incomes.

A look at unemployment and income rates for youth demonstrates that they tend to be disadvantaged in the labour market generally – experiencing high unemployment, precarious and part-time jobs, and lower wages. Labour market precarity was exacerbated during the pandemic, as students faced higher unemployment, making it difficult for many to make ends meet. Economic challenges can increase stress, ultimately leading to negative health outcomes.

## **2.5 Bringing These Ideas Together**

At its most fundamental level the relationship between education and student employment is a balancing act. For those attempting this balance with fewer resources, it can be difficult. Add in a pandemic and the situation became impossible for many. Post-secondary education provides a crucial foundation for labour market success, providing students with skills and knowledge, as well as access to social capital that facilitates their transition into the labour market. The pandemic, however, disrupted learning and working, potentially impacting students' ability to acquire capital. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have been particularly impacted, due to their lack of economic, social, cultural and family capital. A lack of capital not only impacts future success, but in the shorter-term it impacts students' ability to learn. For instance, students with fewer resources may have poorer technology and internet access limiting their ability to learn online. They may also face more pressures to work, limiting the time available to learn. For disadvantaged students, working may be a necessity if students are to pay tuition and meet their living expenses (Smith & Patton, 2013; Mounsey et al.,

2013). Thus, disadvantaged students may find it difficult or impossible to pursue a post-secondary education without employment.

As students attempt to balance the competing demands of school, work, and financial pressures, they experience strain and stress (Stallman & Hurst, 2016). Some stress can lead to personal growth and motivation. However, stress can also have negative consequences for health and wellbeing. The pandemic added new stressors and challenges that forced students to adapt quickly and put stress on their available resources. Too much stress can lead to negative performance in school (Stallman & Hurst, 2016).

This thesis explores students' experiences of learning and working during the pandemic, paying attention to the role of resources and capital in shaping these experiences. The core research questions are as follows:

- 1) How did the pandemic, and the shift to online learning, impact university students' experiences of learning and working?
- 2) How did students' resources or capital shape their experiences?

In the next chapter, I present the study methodology used to answer these questions.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Methods

The primary goal of my research was to explore how the pandemic affected undergraduate students with jobs. When this study was started, the pandemic was only a year into its run. There were still large gaps in the literature about how the pandemic was affecting people and, although quickly growing, the literature on the Canadian student experience was still small. As I discussed in the literature review the working student experience is a balancing act, characterized by inequalities in access to capital and opportunities. Few studies have explored students' experiences during the pandemic from a qualitative perspective. Even though the literature has grown significantly since I began my research, this thesis still contributes to the literature.

#### 3.1 Overview of the Study and Sample

The study sample was comprised of undergraduate students between the ages of 18-24 who were currently enrolled in a program at Western University. Ethics approval was given for this study on (March 25, 2021) by Western's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board. Once approval was given, recruitment commenced; recruitment concluded in December 2021. Students from any faculty at Western University were welcome to participate and no distinction was made on whether they were currently living in London, Ontario or attending remotely. However, a requirement for participation was that the participants had to speak or write in English. The study's goal was to answer the research question: How did the pandemic, and the shift to online learning, impact university students' experiences of learning and working?

Study participants came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, university programs, and part-time jobs. Thus, participants differed in terms of capital and resources at their disposal. Their experiences also differed by program and the types of jobs they held during the pandemic.

This study was exploratory given how little this topic has been covered in the literature. This is why I chose to use qualitative interviews to gain a better understanding of what students experienced. Other studies have used surveys that incorporated diagnostic tools to help assign a numeric value to a given variable such as anxiety for students impacted by COVID-19 (Dhar et al., 2020). In contrast, my study aimed to understand how students are feeling, and why they feel the way they do.

### **3.1.1 Research Questions**

This study explored the following research questions:

- 1) How did the pandemic, and the shift to online learning, impact university students' experiences of learning and working?
- 2) How did students' resources or capital shape their experiences?

### **3.1.2 The Researcher's Role**

In qualitative research the researcher is often the primary instrument for data collection. With this in mind it is necessary that I point out that the contributions of this study and the recording of data are shaped by personal values, biases and assumptions. I am a 27-year-old Canadian-born, male-identifying, Western University masters student who comes from a family background that is a mixture of white- and blue-collar workers.

I have an undergraduate degree in Sociology and Psychology and have previously volunteered at a distress center for two years. I have participated in multiple mentorship roles and have worked in retail. This, combined with the fact that I am one of the first in my family to attend graduate school, may shape how I interpret the results of the interviews and how I value the importance of education. I believe my background will give me a unique perspective and insight to how students have been impacted.

### 3.1.3 Data Collection: Interviews

To examine what factors affect undergraduate students with part-time jobs, I conducted 18 interviews via the video chat app Zoom. Initially, recruitment was done solely through social media groups on Facebook that Western University students used. A request for participants was communicated through a recruitment poster that was posted in these groups. Although semi-effective, it was necessary to expand recruitment methods. Subsequently, a revision to the recruitment strategy was submitted to Western's non-medical research ethics board. Upon approval, different departments across the university were contacted including ones that employed students for part-time work. Convenience sampling was adopted as the primary recruitment design because only participants who were willing and had experience related to my research could participate. This method of collecting participants can be described as "opportunistic" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Once the sampling strategy was modified, recruitment greatly improved. As a result, the initial goal of 10-15 interviews was exceeded, and ultimately 18 interviews were conducted. Each interview was semi-structured to ensure some consistency across interviews and each interview was expected to take 40 minutes to 60 minutes, although most interviews were around 50 to 60 minutes in length. In the interviews, students were asked questions about how they felt the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their employment and schooling (See Appendix A).

The semi-structured interview approach had three benefits: it first allowed participants some conversation prompts, but also allowed participants to highlight important events unique to their experience. The semi-structured approach also gave the interviews a general level of organization that helped in the analysis of interview data. Questions asked fell into 4 broad categories: (1) education, (2) work, (3) use of technology in school, (4) the pandemic's impact on work. Within each of these areas, students were asked about their unique situation, and how the pandemic impacted these areas and shaped their experiences.

Given the focus of the study, how the pandemic had changed and impacted each of these broad areas was discussed. This included if students had noticed any major differences with their education, balancing work and school or how their employment was impacted by the pandemic. Generally, interviews started with a discussion about what program a student was in and how they felt the pandemic impacted their studies. These questions were followed by questions on how the use of technology for school changed, and a discussion of their work before and during COVID. Often unprompted, money was a recurring theme.

### **3.1.4 Description of The Sample**

As mentioned before, participants who made up my sample were all currently enrolled at Western university in various programs. Although recruitment was open to all students, the final sample did skew towards upper year students. The programs the students were in varied greatly. The category “customer service/ retail” covered all kinds of jobs such as serving food, selling clothing, books, etc. This is an important detail because based on the specific job a student held it might impact how a student coped with the challenges of the pandemic. The category “customer service/ retail” is kept deliberately vague to reduce the chance of disclosing identify information when paired with a student’s program. All students who were interviewed had employment within the last 12 months.

Below, Table 3.1 provides an overview of what year of study, program and area a student worked in. The number of hours each student worked varied greatly from week to week, depending on a number of factors related to each specific job. Some jobs only got busy at certain parts of the year; for example, retail works saw an increase around Christmas. Retail and other jobs saw fluctuations depending on pandemic restrictions. When hours worked per week varied widely, this is indicated in Table 3.1 by the phrase “variable based on demand.” If a student held multiple jobs during the previous 12 months, but the jobs were not held at the same time this was denoted by the phrase “not at the same time.” This phrase was also used if the student engaged in seasonal

employment during certain times of the year, while holding other jobs during other parts of the year.

**Table 1: Participant Biographical Information**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Undergraduate Program</b>	<b>Year of Study</b>	<b>Time of Employment</b>	<b>Number of jobs</b>	<b>Number of hours</b>	<b>Did work demands interfere with balancing school &amp; work?</b>	<b>Part Time Job Within the Last Year</b>
<b>1</b>	Social Science/ Nursing	4th	Temporary for one year	1	24h per week	yes	Customer Service
<b>2</b>	Social Science	4th	Summer/ Winter Holidays	2	Variable	No	Barista & Customer Service
<b>3</b>	Science	1 <sup>st</sup> year of second undergra duate degree	Full/Winter Semester	1	8h per week	Yes	Teaching
<b>4</b>	Social Science	4th	Full Year	2	Variable, but increased demand because	Yes	Server

					of the pandemic		
5	Social Science	1st	Full Year	1	Variable with contract renewed every 3 months based on demand	No (on EI at time of interview)	Non-profit
6	Disability Studies	4th	Full Year	2 (not at the same time)	One job was requesting 30 h per week, Participant left for a new job that was 10h per week	yes	-Retail & Customer Service
7	Science	3rd	Full Year	2	Variable based on demand	yes	-Retail & Customer Service
8	Medical Science	2nd	Part time at customer	2 (not at the same	Full time hours in	yes	-Barista -Customer

			service job during the school year, full time at Barista job in the summer	time)	the summer, Part time during the school year		Service
9	Education	1st	Full Year	2	Variable based on demand (roughly 6-12h hours per week when things were slow)	yes	-Teaching  -Retail & Customer Service
10	Science	4th	Full Year	2	One job had variable based on demand, the other had flexible hours	no	-Retail & Admin  -Work /Study position
11	Social Science	3rd	Full Year	1	variable based on	no	Retail & Customer

					demand		Service
12	Health Science	2nd	Full Year	2 (not at the same time)	variable based on demand	Yes (late shifts impacted school)	-Retail & Customer Service -Hospital admin
13	Social Science	(Did not want to disclose)	Full Year	2	variable based on demand	Currently balancing, but at the start of the pandemic there were issues	Retail & Customer Service
14	Social Science	3rd	Full Year	2	variable based on demand, but less than pre pandemic hours	No and was concerned about how long they could continue at current pace	Retail & Customer Service
15	Social Science	3rd	Full Year	2(not at the same time)	15-30 hours per week, but currently was able	Yes	Retail & Customer Service

					to get reduced hours to balance with school		
16	Health Sciences	4th	Full Year	2 right now, possibly looking at getting a 3 <sup>rd</sup> job	variable based on demand. Less hours during lockdown, but when things opened up sometimes got 25h per week	Yes	Retail & Customer Service
17	Information and Media Studies	3rd	Full Year	1	variable based on demand, but cited an increasing demand	yes	Computer & Customer Service

					for hours		
18	Arts and Humanities	2nd	Full Year	1	variable based on demand, but roughly 10-15 hours per week	no	Retail & Customer Service

### 3.1.1. Interview protocol

Each interview started with the researcher reviewing information about the study including the purpose of the study, and the securing of verbal consent from interviewees. The letter of information outlined what the study was about, how information would be used and that participation was optional. The introduction of the interview also outlined the basic structure that the interview followed and before the interview started it was made clear that should the participant feel uncomfortable at any time, or wish to withdraw consent, they could do so, up to the point of publication. At the end of this section the participant was given a chance to ask any questions.

The opening question of the interview was an icebreaker to put the participant at ease (Such as, how has school been going?). Details about the interview schedule were recounted above, and can also be found in Appendix A. Specific questions were revised as the interviews progressed, but the interviews still followed a semi- structured format. This was to make sure key themes were addressed, while at the same time giving participants room to talk about what they wished to. Probing questions were used where appropriate to gain key insights.

Closing instructions involved thanking the participant for their time, giving time for the participant to ask any final questions. Participants were given the option to leave their email so that the abstract of the final study could be sent to them.

## **3.2 Data Analysis**

Once data were collected, the recordings and written notes were transcribed and typed into Microsoft Word. During the transcription process data were analyzed for themes that reoccurred across interviews to gain a better understanding of participants' experiences (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). The semi-structured nature of the interview made it easier to identify major themes while coding and even helped with organization. The first stage of analysis involved reviewing all data to get a general sense of themes and ideas that emerged in the data, while paying special attention to how participants were saying things and the context in which they said them.

Coding involved grouping key quotes and similar ideas together. Mental health, transitioning to an online format and student employment were anticipated codes, as these topics structured the interview guide. As coding was done the researcher was also careful to identify any unanticipated codes that emerged inductively. Once coding was completed on all interviews, codes were reviewed to generate themes or categories for analysis. When this was completed, the themes were used to build a narrative that shows how the various codes and themes interconnect to capture participants' experiences.

### **3.2.1 Rigour**

Reflexivity was practiced throughout the study, and effort was made to reflect on how the researcher's biases may have shaped the interpretations of the findings. Discrepant information and results were included alongside confirmatory information found in the data. Real life is comprised of many perspectives, and hence it is important

to include perspectives that conflict or deviate from the dominant themes presented. These strategies were important to enhance the accuracy of the findings.

### **3.2.2 Ethical Considerations and Limitations**

Physical danger due to participation was minimal since interviews took place over Zoom. There was no risk of participants or the researcher contracting COVID-19 from participation. The study was a qualitative study drawing exclusively from Western University for participants; whether these students differ from others at Western or at other universities is impossible to determine. The questions related to the study could touch on emotionally sensitive topics (such as potential unemployment). There was always the risk that strong emotions could be brought to the surface causing the participant distress. To prepare for this the researcher had a list of resources available to Western students. Nevertheless, none of the participants became distressed during the interview.

One major limitation of the data collected is that undergraduate participants were skewed towards the upper years. This means that these students had more time to familiarize themselves with university resources and to have experience completing course work prior to the pandemic, unlike those who had more recently started post-secondary education. The students' status was also an advantage, however, because it meant these students were able to comment on how the pandemic changed their university experience.

Study findings are presented in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Results

This chapter explores the themes that emerged from the interviews with 18 undergraduate university students who were either working at the time of the interview, or who had held employment within the last year. Here I explore the impact of the pandemic and the shift to online learning on students, and on students' experiences of working and learning. I also examine the role of resources and capital on their experiences. While it is common for university students to experience challenges and stress, study participants claimed that the pandemic had a negative impact on their education and well-being. Nonetheless, interviewees demonstrated resilience in the face of adversity, and many developed interesting solutions to make the best of a difficult situation.

Several themes emerged from the data analysis. With respect to working, students reported several challenges respecting work intensification and the availability of work. With respect to schooling, students reported challenges with technology, reduced motivation, and decreased social contact, negatively affecting their learning environment and mental health. In terms of balancing learning and working, students reported challenges with competing demands during the pandemic. Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted the importance of finances in shaping their experiences. Those with family capital to fall back on experienced less anxiety about finances, and more opportunities to advance their social capital and opportunities, than those who were financially dependent on their work earnings to fund their living and school expenses. In this chapter I look at each of these themes in turn.

#### 4.1 Working During the Pandemic

Participants' work patterns varied considerably. Some worked part-time jobs year-round while some only engaged in seasonal work. There were also variations in how many jobs an individual had, and for seasonal students, which season they worked in (usually the summer, but some did find temporary work around the winter holiday). In

the summer, students may not have classes, so they could work full-time hours, and earn a considerable amount of money. Those who had to work year-round generally reported more challenges combining learning and working.

Students reported changes to their work during the pandemic. Some lost jobs and reported financial difficulties. Those who continued to work often mentioned changes to what they did, and to their working hours. Participant 14 was one participant who lost work, leading to some financial difficulties.

Yeah, so during the pandemic, I was laid off. And because of the amount of hours that I had worked, I was eligible for the CERB, like the government benefits. And so at least I wasn't, well, I personally wasn't too concerned about it. My mom was, and so that was an added stress. But let's say that at least my personal experience was that during the pandemic, I was able to cover my, my expenses. Then once the province started to open up again, there was still very little hours. And they were still terrible, because what ended up happening was, I began working again. So I couldn't ask for the CERB anymore. But then the number of hours that I was being given, did not cover the expenses that ... I was having a bad time. -  
Participant 14 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Social Science)

CERB provided a safety net, but when the student starting working again, the hours were not sufficient to cover living expenses. Participant 4 also relied on CERB after a period of job loss.

The response benefit that kind of happened near the beginning of the pandemic was very helpful, because when I was like, fully out of work, I had something to kind of support myself. But uh, the past month, it's been a little a little difficult just kind of adjusting to school and trying to keep as many hours as possible to kind of just pay off what I can. -Participant 4 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science)

Like participant 14, participant 4 found it challenging to return to work, continue with their education and pay their bills. CERB was helpful, providing them with

sufficient funds to support themselves. However, when participants returned to work they often experienced reduced hours, making it difficult to cover their expenses.

Other participants experienced cuts to their working hours, leading some to engage in pluri-activity or multiple job holding. Participant 9 describes their experience:

I wasn't getting like a ton of hours. Because [my employer's] hours last year were like really limited, like it was only open, like 12 to four, Monday to Friday. So it's like hard to get hours, especially after the rush. And then it was it was hard to find a job after that, and eventually, I started working at xxxxx. That was [an] online tutoring business. And that was a godsend, because it was online. So it never stopped. Because the other thing that happened was when we went into the third wave, or whatever it was in January of 2021, [my original employer] closed again, because of the pandemic, and so that I didn't have that job again. So I was literally only working like six hours a week tutoring online. And it was like barely, it was barely enough -Participant 9 (1<sup>st</sup> year, Education)

These students who relied on their work incomes to support themselves, had difficulty making ends meet. This situation was very stressful for them.

A few students had a different experience, reporting more work hours. These comments are from participant 4:

I think it was working a little more because there was a shortage of service staff. Just in general, we kind of had issues finding people who were able to come in for shifts or just a good staff in general, that was available at all times, we didn't have too many people on full time -Participant 4 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science)

Some employers made the assumption that since school was online their staff could work more which added to students' strain and stress. Some participants were given the option to work more, but others simply had the expectation to work more.

Some participants reported work intensification: COVID-19 protocols required they do more during a shift than was required pre-pandemic. Participant 16 explained how the extra cleaning required at their work, meant they had more work to do.

But we have to do it in a normal day shift. So a normal like a normal, like, if I'm doing a three to seven shift or whatever, like or three to six or whatever. That's like a short shift, right. But the last hour, we're doing a full hour of cleaning what they would do overnight, basically. And we're getting paid to do the same, but it's more stressful because we have to clean the bathrooms all the time, we have to clean all the door handles and all that stuff. And so like we're so used to it now, but I remember when that first started, I was like fully sweating, because we're sweeping, mopping doing it all in like one hour. And I'm like, they expect us to do this all the time, like Jesus. So that's one example of that is like expecting us to do more work than before. -Participant 16 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Health Sciences)

Students also reported concern over the potential health risks associated with their work. Some participants faced a difficult decision, weighing their need for money against their desire to stay healthy during the pandemic. Their decisions were shaped by the extent of their resources, as well as their work opportunities. Participant 15 explains how this dilemma played out for them.

So, um, I, obviously, I need the money to pay the bills. So that was the primary reason as to why I decided to work, even though there was a concern of the pandemic. And obviously, you know, getting COVID, it's, it's, you need to be super careful when you are working, because with the role of my job, I do have to interact with a lot of different people. But at the end of the day, like, you need to pay the bills need the money. And so, I just decided, you know, like, the need for, for, you know, for the financial situation that I was in, the need was too great, you know, over the safety of myself and my family members. -Participant 15 (3<sup>rd</sup>, Social Science)

Thus, some participants faced too little work, which caused financial strain. Others faced demands for more work – either working extended hours, or working harder during a regular shift. They too faced stress from working harder, or working longer, which

pulled them away from their school work. Some were concerned about the health risks associated with working.

The amount of stress students faced from working varied, depending on their financial situations. Students with access to family capital and resources, were not concerned with no or little work hours:

You know, for me, I'm not really ... like, my parents are paying for my tuition.... I don't get a job necessarily for my own personal money..... It's usually for my like, for something that I can put for my resume. -Participant 11 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Social Science)

I'm lucky enough that my parents are mostly like paying for everything and I have an education fund. So it was largely unaffected by the pandemic, because my parents jobs and like my living situation wasn't affected -Participant 18 (2<sup>nd</sup> year, Arts and Humanities)

In a similar vein, participant 2 worked during the summers, earning enough that they did not need to work during the school year.

I wasn't really working throughout the semester, and now I come home for the summers, ... so I'm living with my parents. So my living expenses aren't....um, which is great. Like that's, I mean, that's the only way really, though, that I can afford to be a student is coming home and not having living expenses also, or will I make money, and then going back to London, and having that money for my living expenses the upcoming year. -Participant 2 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science)

Participant 2 and Participant 16 both mentioned that having a good or personal relationship with a previous employer acted as a sort of safety net if other jobs were not available. This social capital became extremely useful to draw on when the pandemic impacted employment options:

I'm coming home I want to make some money. It was perfect. It worked out pretty well. Um, and yeah, that's like that's just I don't work it very much anymore, but it's just kind of one that I have in my back pocket in case I don't really have other

options. Like I'm really close with all the managers and stuff. So if I needed hours or if I wanted to work a shift, that would be a feasible thing for me to do. -

Participant 2 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science)

When things were like getting a little bit back to normal I went back to my [old job] that I worked at when I was in high school .... And that was the only job I could get. So, I worked there, and I'm still there, like on just on Sundays, but I work there more often because it was like, quite literally the only job I could get at that time. Which is a scary thought. -Participant 16 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Health Science)

This situation is something to take note of because it demonstrates how the relationships and networks a person has with others, impacted working experiences during the pandemic, and how these connections can shape financial resources. Both Participant 2 and 16 had a secondary job they could fall back on when times were difficult. Also, in participant 2's case having a low-cost place to live, expanded work opportunities. In this manner, social support and family capital benefited some students more than others.

Others depended on their incomes, working hard to save money to support themselves while in school. This was the case for participant 3:

When I was in my [previous full-time] job, I ended up saving quite a lot of money, because, like, I couldn't travel anywhere, and the life I had was just working every day. So I was in a fortunate position where I was able to save enough to fund my living expenses, even if I haven't worked during my study. But in saying that, now that I have a part-time teaching job, I guess I, I would prefer to have a full-time job somewhere -Participant 3 (1<sup>st</sup> year of second degree, Science)

Participant 3 was an older student who was returning to university. This student was able, through full-time work, to have enough savings to cover their return to school. Nonetheless, the participant would have liked more hours.

Other students reported more financial struggles. Several participants needed to take on extra work to make ends meet.

Quite literally, I work to pay rent, and not lose money. My rent is expensive and we pay utilities as well. And just like, all the bills, obviously are the most important thing. I've needed to work more and more just to pay it and like stay afloat and everything. -Participant 16 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Health Science)

Some participants not only worked to support themselves, but their families as well. This was the case for Participant 14:

I come from an immigrant family, single mother, two children, who are both very single and to be in university. And so ever since I came to Canada, I had to help provide for my family, like, like, what was my family income, right. So I've been working ever since I was in high school. And it's not something where I really have a choice. It's, it's either work, or we can't cover some expenses. And either work, or I can't buy my textbook for university like that type of thing. So that's why I decided to keep on working. -Participant 14 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Social Science)

Participant 14's family responsibilities meant additional pressures to earn money and additional stress. Participant 14 had to cut back on their course load because they could no longer afford it. Cutbacks in student loans meant that the cost of school was out of reach:

I stayed in one class and worked, because I felt like I needed the money because I got a lot of OSAP cuts. -Participant 14 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, International Relations)

When the topic of capital and networks is brought up in the context of students it is assumed that most of the resources flow towards the student. Participant 14 shows that sometimes students may need to generate capital to flow towards their family. In this manner, the resources and capital a family has can impact the flow of resources going towards or away from students. This in turn impacts if a student needs to seek additional ways to fill resource gaps (Brosnan et al., 2016). In this context resources are another way of saying economic and social capital that directly impacts a student's ability to afford school and living costs.

A lack of income can force students to cut back on their schooling, and even pick up extra work. CERB helped some financially, but the benefit was temporary. Most participants did not have sufficient savings to help cover expenses. The rising cost of living during the pandemic made the situation even more challenging for them. Overall, those students who had financial support from parents, or who had worked to acquire savings had a safety net and were able to devote more time to their schooling. However, those without parental support and low economic resources were in dire straits. This was particularly the case with those with additional obligations on top of their own needs, driving them to work while being a student. For many, not working was simply not an option. This is worth highlighting since the pandemic has made student employment more precarious, directly affecting the number of hours students are able to get (Sharp, 2020a). The pandemic put pressure on students' existing resources and in some cases eliminated some sources of income. CERB helped some, but only for a short period of time.

Most participants had varying degrees of bad experiences when it came to the pandemic and employment. However, one participant was able to give an example of something positive that came out of the COVID-19 situation experience and some were able to earn enough during the pandemic to support themselves and gain valuable experience:

I don't think I would have job because they received additional funding, and I wasn't in school full time because of COVID. So, if it wasn't for the pandemic, I wouldn't have the work experience I have, I wouldn't have the money I earned from that job, and I wouldn't be where I am today. So, I would say that I gained from the pandemic, if we looked at it professionally. -Participant 5 (1<sup>st</sup> year, Social Science)

Due to the pandemic this participant saw their place of employment get more funding to help meet the increased need brought on by the pandemic. This participant may not have had their contract renewed if it was not for the increased funding and need, which influenced the resources they would be able to accumulate for school.

Overall, interviews found that students' work changed during the pandemic, leading to more or less hours. Working was a source of stress for students, as some had more work than they could easily balance with school, while others faced financial difficulties from insufficient incomes and a lack of family and personal economic capital. The pandemic constrained resources to such an extent that many students experienced lower levels of economic and social support. Very few reported positive experiences of working during the pandemic.

## **4.2 Learning During the Pandemic**

The shift to online learning was a struggle for most study participants. They reported struggling with motivation, technology, and social contact, and expressed anger towards their professors and the university. Still, a few did discuss advantages to online learning, including their ability to balance their various activities without needing travel, and the flexibility of asynchronous courses. For instance, participant 7, although critical of some aspects of online learning, put a positive spin on the experience:

I would say it gave me the ability to be more independent, I guess, create my own schedule of when I would do the coursework and when I would complete assignments, because there weren't really specific times to go to class, and it was all just asynchronous. So being able to create my own schedule, gave me like flexibility, as well. -Participant 7 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Science)

In a similar vein, participant 3 (1<sup>st</sup> year of second degree, Science) mentioned that their friends had positive experiences: "I know some of my friends are like really enjoying the online because, you know, they can pace their own study speed and all that." Participant 9 (1<sup>st</sup> year, Education) also pointed to a silver lining: spending more time at home allowed them to get some "kittens and not have to worry about destroying the apartment because you don't have to go to class in person."

Most participants, however, reported that the experience was a negative one. In the following subsections, I focus on students' struggles with online education.

### 4.2.1 Motivation

Motivation was a struggle for many students who just found it harder to learn and be self-motivated to drive their own learning during the pandemic. Participant 16's description of their own experiences, resonated with those reported by others:

You lose a lot of motivation; you lose a lot of like contacts and like willingness to learn as well. It's harder to feel that motivation to ask questions as well. So not only are you ... just like more easily distracted or less motivated, but you ... like it feels like even though it's less effort to actually ask the question, it feels like it's more effort and stuff to actually connect because you have the screen in between you. You're not in person. -Participant 16 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Health Sciences)

Over the lengthy course of the pandemic, this waning motivation could impact students' performance. Decreasing social networks (and potentially by extension social capital) was a key contributor to this declining motivation, as participant 16 explains.

As a strategy to keep students engaged, courses required numerous small assignments from students, but this added up to a near impossible workload for many.

So ...trying to just give little assignments everywhere. But when you have little assignments everywhere, for all your courses, it was so overwhelming. And sometimes I just for one class, I would just say, I don't have time to learn the information to write this post this week. And that is not like me at all, to just not do something. -Participant 1 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science/ Nursing)

It was like, we would have these small, stupid things like every week that were worth 3%. And they're worth such a small amount, but it adds up over the course

of the semester. So it's like, you can't not do them. But it's like, an easy three hours of work per week per class that you wouldn't have otherwise, like, on top of all regular course material. -Participant 2 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science)

Moreover, asynchronous online learning required students to engage with posted material, and this could take a long time.

So then it almost fell to the amount of material they had, like for readings on top of, they expected you to prepare the lecture yourself almost. So they might have like 80 slides and assume, Oh, this would take me an hour and a half to get through. But for someone like me, it took me like four hours. -Participant 6 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Disability Studies)

The workload was heavy with the increase in assignments, combined with needing to review lecture materials, and do readings. Most participants commented on the large increase in small assignments. The effect was overwhelming, impacting student motivation.

Reduced social contact and feelings of isolation also contributed to lowered motivation during the pandemic (Fawaz & Sanaha, 2020). Online learning led to a state of detachment that diminished motivation further:

Oh, I found it a little bit tough just in terms of self-motivation, because it was kind of hard to get on your laptop every day and do things through kind of your own volition. Like, I feel that kind of going to classes and like sitting in a lecture in front of the prof kind of gets me going more and gets me thinking about the assignments and whatnot a little earlier. -Participant 4 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science)

Participants also tied their decreased motivation with decreased mental and overall health:

I felt very unmotivated. And I felt my mental health take a toll as well, because I didn't have that many emotional interactions due to the pandemic and the limitations of that. I used to go to the gym a lot, and I didn't do that either. So I

just felt a really big toll on my mental health, my physical health, and then just felt really drained by the end of it. – Participant 7 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Science)

Participant 8 reflected on the noticeable difference returning back to in-person learning had to their university experience and motivation. It is worth noting in these quotes how social interactions impacted motivation.

The biggest lesson I learned was how important it is to have people around me while I'm doing school, like people who are going through the same thing as me, because like, during the pandemic, that was impossible. But now like that, I'm back in contact with friends and making friends and realizing how much motivation that gets me to do work. And yeah, yeah, having that social interaction every day, probably. -Participant 8 (2<sup>nd</sup> year, Medical Science)

To be honest, seeing the other students does kind of like motivate us. Like, I'm not the only one in this pandemic [who] is having a crisis. All these other people seem in crisis too. -Participant 12 (2<sup>nd</sup> year, Health Science)

With the return to in-person learning at the time of the interviews in the Fall of 2021, students were feeling more motivated and engaged, because they could share the experience with others around them. Having social contact and interacting with others – and recognizing that they were not alone in their struggles – really helped these participants feel better, and improved their motivation. These findings resonate with the literature highlighting that networks can be valuable resources for people (Fawaz & Sanaha, 2020). As a side note, economic capital also plays a role here because students who need to work to pay living expenses, have less time to interact with others and expand their social networks and hence social capital (Brosnan et al., 2016). This can impact their motivation and ability to learn.

As participants returned to in-person learning, they developed a new appreciation for learning with others, and realized how in-person learning not only helped them mentally, but also helped motivate them to be more productive. Moreover, in-person learning helped students realize that others shared their own experiences.

## 4.2.2 Technology

One issue that came up repeatedly in interviews with participants was access to the internet. With schooling moving online, access to or the ability to afford good Wi-Fi was crucial for students' ability to learn:

I was waiting for like slow loading times and stuff to get into zoom lectures. And like glitches and whatnot like occasionally you'll see here obviously, it'll, like stop for a sec if connection goes out a little bit. -Participant 4 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science)

Well, my internet was rough. So not so much adapting, it was more so really happy to hope that your profs were understanding. We had ... our internet was down for three days at my house. And so it was three days before final projects were due. -Participant 6 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Disability Studies)

Yeah, we got to invest in better Wi-Fi, eventually, a faster Wi-Fi just because we experienced a lot of lag as well. -Participant 10 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Science)

It is important to keep in mind that many students live in shared accommodations where they need to share Wi-Fi with others within their households. Fellow students, siblings and parents also needed Wi-Fi for school or work. Their ability to have dependable Wi-Fi could depend on the internet plan and bandwidth available.

And I did have a lot of issues with Wi-Fi. Because I was at home, my younger brother, who's in elementary school also had to do online school as well. So I guess, when they told us we try to use the internet at the same time, sometimes it would slow down the internet, when I would take an exam, they would take longer to load the next page. [It] was really frustrating. And with the Zoom calls as well, when we would have office hours, sometimes the internet connection would be unstable. So we'd miss some of what the professor's saying during office hours. -Participant 7 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Science)

There's also four people trying to use, like, it's me, my sister on Zoom, my dad on Teams, and then everyone on Google Docs, like, we're all using these, like, I don't

know how tech works, okay, like, I'm a social science student, but like, like, it's obviously like, we're all using these apps where like, multiple people are coming on at once to work remotely together. Like, I'd be on a Google Doc, sometimes just like 20 people. And then my dad would be in on a PowerPoint presentation with his whole team. And then my sister is on a Google Doc with three people and a zoom call with 28. And then I'm on the Zoom, gone, my dad's on a call. And then it's like, sometimes it was like all the bandwidth, like we'd hog the bandwidth a bit, and then the Wi Fi would be slow. And then everybody can't work because everybody's trying to work. And just like stuff like that. -Participant 13 (Year Undisclosed, Social Science)

Limited Wi-Fi impacted students' learning experiences and their ability to perform in class. Lags and being kicked out of zoom rooms due to poor internet limits students' ability to keep up with what is being discussed in class. Students could lose key information. This issue is a challenge because there is no clear solution when everyone using the internet has a good reason to be using it at the same time. Prior to the pandemic, there was less constant pressure on home internet during normal working hours, as many would be at work or school. During the pandemic, everything changed and, in many cases, more people were sharing the same space and the same internet resources.

Wi-Fi is not the only resource that students had to worry about. Wi-Fi connects computers to the wider world, but the hardware (the physical computer) can be just as important. To help with a student's ability to perform in school or to make the educational experiences smoother, some students bought new technology.

Yeah, I used my computer a lot. I also invested in an iPad because I found that it was easier to sort of download the lecture slides onto my iPad and write on them. As I watched the lectures. I found just writing everything on paper and notebooks is very time consuming and with over an hour lectures for each course it was really hard to manage. So using an iPad really helps with that. -Participant 7 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Science)

I primarily use my laptop, and my tablet to do my studying. That was also kind of hard because I locked up, my laptop was really outdated. So they couldn't properly do the programs that I needed for class. And I ended up having to get a new laptop during the semester. So that was kind of a rough patch. -Participant 8 (2<sup>nd</sup> year, Medical Science)

Participants 7 and 8 are examples of students who updated the technology they owned as a way to adapt to the changing learning environment. Participant 8 in particular faced external pressures to buy a new computer in order to participate. This student needed certain software that their old computer could not run.

With respect to internet and computer technology, students' and – especially for those living and working from home -- their families' resources were very important. Some students had the resources to upgrade their technology to facilitate their learning, like participants 7 and 8, while others reported struggling, but seemed to be unable to afford new technology or Wi-Fi. Students with economic capital typically had better technology resources. Participant 15 lived at home and because of that they had the extra capital to enhance their Wi-Fi to a degree they may not have been able to if they had to cover all their living costs on their own:

Oh my gosh, yes, like, I got a new modem, because I live with my parents. And so I pay for the internet. So I'm like, I don't care I'm going to pay for, I'm going to make sure that we have our super strong modem, I'm going to like when the technician from like Rogers came on, like, you need to like, this is my room. This is like the main area, I don't care if the internet goes to the TV or not, I need to, I need you to make sure that I get really, really good Internet connection up to my room where I do my exams and where I do my evaluations. So I made sure that you know, in terms of the internet connections, I would like remove that fear and remove that stress that would come from like a potential internet connection issue. -Participant 15 (3<sup>rd</sup>, Social Science)

Participant 7 was fortunate to have family members reduce their own Wi-Fi use to free up bandwidth so that the participant could do school.

my parents and my brother did not use [their] electronics that required Wi Fi, just so I would have. I don't know if that actually helps. But I think it reduced my stress of, you know, wondering, oh, my God, is my internet going to cut off? Am I going to have to rush again, to kind of relieve my stress a bit. -Participant 7 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Science)

This shows how families allocate limited existing resources to facilitate participants' success. Not all families had the ability to simply buy better Wi-Fi, but students benefitted when this was the case. Even from a psychological stand point this benefitted students, providing emotional support, as participant 7s quote shows.

With that said, poor Wi-Fi connections negatively impacted students' ability to interact with others online, thereby limiting social interactions and potentially social capital. In this manner, the ability to afford good internet plans and up-to-date computer equipment had implications for student learning. Those who did not have such resources had to make due with systems that may not be sufficient to meet course demands.

Participant 7 elaborated on how having access to technology like an iPad was extremely helpful. This was not mandatory to buy for school, but it gave them a clear advantage. The price tag on such devices renders them inaccessible to many:

I still find it easier to use an iPad. I guess with online school, you could sort of pause the lectures and go back if you miss something. But in person, if you miss something, you can't really go back unless you ask us to repeat what they said. So using an iPad really helps, because you can quickly scribble down what you need to but you can also like it, because I'm in biology, we have a lot of diagrams. So being able to directly draw on the diagrams is helpful too. Which I wouldn't be able to do is just pencil and paper, because then I'd have to draw the diagrams, but then also try to like Link, professor saying the diagram, if that makes sense. - Participant 7 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Science)

The disparities created by the technological gap can impact more than just watching lectures. Some participants also did group studying online and the quality of their internet could impact how smoothly this went.

I made like, maybe like two or three close friends online from school. So we did a lot of like, Zoom studying, whether that was about like the only social interaction  
-Participant 8 (2<sup>nd</sup> year, Medical Science)

As was discussed earlier having more of a certain type of capital can help a person gain more of another. In this instance, having good (personal or family) economic capital, provided opportunities to enhance social interactions (Brosnan et al., 2016). These social interactions, in turn, can positively impact students' performance and mental health. Participant 9 gives an example of the many resources one could access online from a single class. If a student had to deal with slow load times or lag, accessing these resources may not be harder and more time consuming

Like she had all the slides posted, like on a schedule, like immediately like without missing a beat. Like as soon as we were moved online, she had like all the slides posted. She had like subtitles going for, like all the size and like voiceovers that you've recorded lectures, like over the slides for everything. And I was like, how did you get all this done? Like so immediately and like so quickly. And she was like, emailing us like every day and reminding us like if you need to, like zoom conference with me for like anything. If you have any questions like she was, she had all the time available. And she was like reminding us. So that was awesome. -Participant 9 (1<sup>st</sup> year, Education)

Participant 10 adds to this issue, highlighting that the software and platforms were not always reliable due to high demand. There were issues both within and outside a student's control impacting their education.

Zoom didn't always work. Wi-Fi, my Wi-Fi has gone down a couple times which affected my online lectures, especially the ones that were synchronous. Yes, there was a lot, definitely a lot more technical difficulty. And by nature, that's expected

to happen because again, you're using a lot more technology that is bound to break down one way or another. How do you adapt? I'm just pray to God; my Wi-Fi doesn't go down. Like most of the problems were the zoom. So it was not really something that I could control. And the profs understood that obviously. [The classroom platform] has definitely got a lot more traffic, and it's gone down a few times during my learning. But again, it was something that was not really on my it was out of my control, really.-Participant 10 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Science)

To summarize, students struggled with technology with the shift to online learning, but those without economic or family capital struggled more. That is, with less resources or capital were disadvantaged in terms of internet and computer equipment, which in turn negatively impacted their ability to learn. In an online learning environment, when social interactions are online, a lack of access to good technology could also impact the development of social networks, and hence, ultimately impact the acquisition of social capital. In this manner, the shift to online learning exacerbated social inequalities.

### **4.2.3 Social Contact**

Human beings are social by nature and the lack of meaningful interactions can make a person feel isolated (Fawaz & Sanaha, 2020). The pandemic, however, altered students' social interactions and their ability to develop their social networks and forge connections with others. Social interaction is not only important for mental health and social support, but as discussed in chapter 2, social networks can provide opportunities that benefit students later on. Moreover, education involves the transfer of information and the sharing of ideas among people. Pandemic lockdowns disrupted this transfer of information by limiting social interactions. Reduced social contact, then, had many implications for students and their learning.

In interviews, most students reported social isolation during the pandemic, although some were impacted more than others. Participants demonstrated a clear preference for in-person learning:

I love the setting of interacting with new people, you know, seeing my professor in person, and it's always better to see lectures happen in real life, rather than virtually because with online lectures, you kind of just hear the voice recording, so it gets kind of boring, but in person, you get to see how passionate the professors are. And, you know, you get to meet new people as well, which was great. And I really missed that.” -Participant 7 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Science)

In fact, many emphasized that the quality of their education was higher when in-person.

So, half of the class would be online and talking about things and half of the class would be in-person doing things. And it was just hard because ideally, the way you learn are is by doing it. Not talking about doing it, I guess. -Participant 18 (2<sup>nd</sup> year, Arts and Humanities)

So it was a shift from online to in person, actually, now that I'm in an in-person environment, and you know, collaborating with classmates, rather than working alone and learning alone. So it's definitely a shift, but I am enjoying the shift in back to normality. -Participant 5 (1<sup>st</sup> year, Social Science)

Students demonstrated a preference for hands-on education where they could collaborate with others, rather than learning alone, and in a more passive manner. Participant 18 made it very clear that hands-on learning was more of a benefit than just watching someone do it. Participant 5 emphasized the benefits of collaboration for enhancing their learning experience. Participants were excited to return to in-person learning – what participant 5 refers to as a “shift in back to normality.” I am drawing attention to this specific phrasing because it sums up nicely and directly the sentiment many of those interviewed had: the online experience is not the typical experience and it was viewed as substandard.

Online learning came in three distinct forms which were synchronous, asynchronous or a mix of both. Although not bringing students physically together, synchronous classes still required students to log on and share the same digital space. Asynchronous learners do not meet at the same time, but have access to the same content. Both online learning formats impacted students' opportunities for social connections and interactions. Asynchronous learning was identified as extremely problematic because students have virtually no contact with their classmates, other than possibly viewing messages on an online discussion forum. A synchronous class might not be much better, if you only see other students as boxes on a computer screen.

I feel like the best way of learning is always you know, both direction of communication rather than just information being hammered into you. But I feel like with online learning, that kind of aspect is quite often impossible. Unless it's like a synchronous learning where you're in a Zoom meeting, but even then, like you know, you are in a computer box with hundreds of other students so yeah, I think it's just a bit different. -Participant 3 (1<sup>st</sup> year of second degree, Science)

We had a group project. So lots of interaction through that. But also all of my classes were asynchronous. So that was really difficult. So you didn't even get to really see any students while you were doing. -Participant 1 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science/ Nursing)

Participant 1 and 3 both talk about the challenges related to online learning especially asynchronous learning where there is very little social interaction. A group project in one class provided participant 1 with an opportunity to interact with other students online. Both of these students missed the opportunity to engage in conversations with others about course material.

Beyond schooling, students also reported isolation due to the loss of extracurricular activities, and opportunities for socializing. This is important to consider because a person's mental health could impact other aspects of their life and shows how important a person's social network is for their day-to-day life.

Like, I do marching band, and that was like a huge component for me. And then to have nothing related to that, it was just like, okay, I have no interaction in school, and no interaction of opportunities outside of school. And you notice that that's how you kind of balanced your like, mental health in a way was doing like those clubs. And it's like, oh, well, everything is online. -Participant 6 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Disability Studies)

Many of those interviewed already had pre-existing social connections at Western. They were able to keep up some of their social ties while in school:

Like I was living in London throughout the year and at the student house with three of my friends. So, I maintain good social connections with them, I guess. Um, and I have like a friend who lived across the street from me that I saw pretty frequently. But aside from that, not really, I'm a very social person, like, I thrive and like meeting new people, and, you know, going out and doing things in big groups, etc. So, it was a very big shift when that wasn't an option anymore. - Participant 2 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science)

It became difficult for students to maintain relationships beyond a small group of close friends and people they lived with. Even though participant 2 had social contact with others, the limiting of their social circle to a handful of people was difficult for them. Participant 2 shows how the expansion of one's social network was slowed by the pandemic, but also how the relationships in one's immediate vicinity had the potential to be strengthened. Those students who were newer to the university or city, struggled even more:

I didn't know anybody in London, I didn't have any friends that came to Western. So understanding how to, you know, make friends and have conversation with strangers again, was definitely a new thing that I had to relearn, mainly, because when I was in [city in another province] all of my friends were legacy friends. - Participant 5 (1<sup>st</sup> year, Social Science)

Many students' experiences are summarized by participant 8:

I'd say my social connections probably dropped from like an 80%, to like, solid 10% During COVID, because I, I didn't really go out when it was, you know, at an all-time high. So I think I maybe went to study with some really close friends, maybe two, three times during the entire year, there was a lot of just studying on my own. -Participant 8 (2<sup>nd</sup> year, Medical Science)

The decrease in social interactions led to social isolation which negatively impacted students' mental health and quality of life. In this context of social isolation, deteriorating mental health, and disappointment with online learning, students became frustrated with their professors.

There was one student who highlighted positives associated with online learning in this respect, complaining about constant distractions and interruptions with the return to in-person learning:

You bump into somebody and then you have conversation, there's a lot more distractions, it kind of interferes with what I was used to just being alone and being able to kind of just work, whereas now there's more interruptions throughout the day. -Participant 5 (1<sup>st</sup> year, Social Science)

Participant 6 also noted that online learning brought flexibility, but highlighted the decline in social interaction

I mean, there's the convenience of like, kind of like, you can make your own schedule for some of it. So there's that, but I'm a very social person. So I think I took more negative approach to it, because I lost any social interaction possible. - Participant 6 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Disability Studies)

Social capital is the network of relationships a person builds up over time (Martin et al., 2018; Brosnan et al., 2016). Students expressed concern that they had few opportunities for social interaction with online learning. The lack of social interaction narrowed their social networks, and impacted, they believed, their school performance and learning. These narrowed social networks also limited the acquisition of social capital.

#### 4.2.4 Students' Frustrations with Professors

Asynchronous learning required students to motivate themselves and become self-directed learners, but many lacked motivation, as we have seen. In this context, many grew resentful of professors who they perceived to be disengaged, slacking, or not doing their job.

The single most negative experience was feeling that professors didn't care anymore. It was, like you could, I don't know, at least to me, I perceived the change in how committed they were to delivering lectures. Suddenly, they were just like ramble on and on wasn't material, but they didn't really have the types of conversations that I was used to, like, in first year, of the very beginning before the pandemic like struck. It seemed to me that they were just kind of throwing material for us to interpret and digest interiorized what I was not getting explanations for it, I was not getting a lot of guidance and how to complete assignments. -Participant 14 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Social Sciences)

As noted earlier, this was particularly the case in asynchronous classes, as participant 2 explained:

I had a couple of my classes that were asynchronous, like no scheduled zoom calls or anything where completely, you're doing it all on your own, like you have no interaction with a professor at all. There's no zoom calls, there's no nothing if you like, are struggling with the material and you need help, you would email the prof and that's it. That's the only interaction you have. They like post their lecture videos every week, and they post the readings, but there's no real like consistent interaction with the profs. Um, compared to my synchronous classes, where it's like, you're in discussion forums, you're in zoom calls, you're having like one-on-one meetings with the prof more often. So it was kind of like an all-or-nothing type situation was how I experienced it. Like profs were either really, really focused on making sure students were engaged, or they were like, you're on your own, just figuring out.

Participant 3 also viewed asynchronous learning as requiring no real effort from professors. They felt abandoned and like they had to learn on their own.

But like, it's quite often to find my friends or people saying, like, they feel like some lectures or some courses, you know, instructors are slacking off just because they can post whatever online and then just give everything to the student. And then, you know, just like on the guise of self-guided learning. -Participant 3 (1<sup>st</sup> year of second degree, Science)

These quotes make clear that students felt isolated from their professors, and found it hard to engage when they believed that professors were not engaged. The learning environment for university students involves relationships with professors (as well as fellow students), and many had difficulty forging relationships with professors, especially in online learning. Not meeting physically impacted the bonds among students, and between students and their professors.

In the literature there are two takeaways from this. First some research has indicated that there is a causal relationship between the perceived level of interaction students feel they are receiving and their learning outcomes. Second the learning process is a give and take of information between individuals and groups (Kang & Im, 2013). The professor in this relationship gives information and guides, the students respond and give information back in the form of question or answers. Students found it was harder to learn in online environments, because it was harder to stay engaged.

Participants also complained about a lack of communication, especially in the context of the initial university closures in March of 2020. Participant 9 had a negative experience:

I remember, like one of my classes, one of my philosophy classes we didn't hear from the prof for, like, weeks, once we found out we were going online. He didn't post like any new material. He didn't like, tell us what was going on. And he didn't say anything about the final exam, until, like, two days before when the final exam would have been if it was in person. And then he was like, okay, so

you're gonna write a, like, 20 page paper for the final exam. And it's due in like two days. And I literally remember like, not thinking I was gonna finish the course. I was like, I don't know how I'm going to do this. -Participant 9 (1<sup>st</sup> year, Education)

Participant 9's experience was one of the worst reported by a student dealing with learning in an online environment. The participant was aware of other people who dropped the course because of the environment and choices the professor made about how the end-of-course assessment would be structured. The lack of communication between the professor and the students created barriers and a sense of isolation from each other. Participant 9's experience underscores how important communication is between students and their professors. This sentiment was repeated by many participants as we have seen.

#### **4.2.5 Students' Frustrations with the Cost of University Education**

As many student participants struggled with online learning, they began to question the expense of online education. Students felt they were getting a poorer educational experience and wondered why they were paying so much for online learning, especially asynchronous courses.

I think my issue with it is like, like what I want, I'm paying so much money to like, connect. And like, with a professor, I want them to teach me I want it to be interactive. Like, that's how I learn. If someone's just talking to me, I'm like, oh, like, I'd rather just listen to an audiobook. If someone's just like, again, it depends how interesting it is. Um, but after a while, I'm not a I'm not really an auditory learner. So after just like listening to someone, and like staring at a screen, and my brain was like, What is this doing? -Participant 16 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Health Sciences)

Participants 2 and 6 argued they were not getting full value for money from asynchronous learning, which was more self-directed:

All these all asynchronous classes where they would post their lectures, and half the time, the lectures would be like half an hour or less. And I'm like, if you do the math, I'm paying like \$500 for this class. And the only instruction I'm receiving is a 20 minute lecture video, where it's like, you're going slightly deeper than what I would read in the textbook and then assigning the readings. -

Participant 2 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Sciences)

No, like, that's basically the summary. Like, like I said, I made the choice. I couldn't justify paying money to a course that I was teaching myself, if that made any sense, because it's just like, all I'm doing is I'm reading from the textbook -

Participant 6 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Disability Studies)

If student learning was largely self-directed, participants believed professors were putting in no effort, and hence students should not have to pay for the privilege of learning on their own. The 'product' they were getting was not worth the price. Student tuition covered all courses whether asynchronous or synchronous, and participants believed asynchronous courses should cost less. Participant 3 had an interesting insight to how online learning felt more self-directed and how it impacted their stress level:

It's quite interesting. I, I tried to be a lot more productive when it's online, just because in person, I would just follow the course speed itself every time I go to school, but as its online, like, you have to pace your own pacing, I start to panic knowing that I'm a procrastinator. -Participant 3 (1<sup>st</sup> year of second degree, Science)

Some frustration about online leaning related to student-professor communication. With no communication, neither side can understand what the other is experiencing. As a result, the quality of exchange and learning is diminished. Without a strong line of communication, it could leave feelings of resentment to fester. These findings are consistent with the literature, which finds that online learning has higher attrition rates than in-person learning (O' Shea et al., 2015; Czerniewicz et al., 2020) and that a student's perception of their class can impact their performance in it (Zhu et al., 2020).

Overall, students reported many frustrations with online learning – lack of motivation, challenges with technology, social isolation, and frustrations with course content and heavy workloads, which led to dissatisfaction with professors and the university more broadly. All of these challenges combined with the challenges with the changing nature of work mentioned earlier in the chapter to exacerbate students' difficulties balancing school and work.

### 4.3 Balancing School and Work

As we have seen, students found the shift to online learning stressful, and they documented increases in their workloads. Some students also reported stress related to working, finances, and work intensification. Balancing both of these stressful endeavours was a challenge for many study participants. Indeed, some reported a spillover effect where work demands and stresses impacted schooling

It is a lot harder to sort of do school and attend school because like [I work] a fair amount of hours a week in my job, and it's like, really hard to sort of, like do schoolwork and keep up my work demands and do other things that I'm involved with. So it definitely is, like, very busy and it does kind of make it harder to sort of do like school related stuff sometimes. -Participant 17 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Information and Media Studies)

As silly as it may sound, finding, like having the motivation and the self-discipline to like, because I, I don't know, I think it's different just getting up and having to have the motivation or discipline to wake up and then start doing schoolwork. But it's another thing to wake up at 3:45 in the morning, go to work, and then come home and still do school. -Participant 1 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Social Science/ Nursing)

Both participants explained that school and work brought competing demands that were taxing to balance. Everything takes time to do and one thing after the other begins to

wear a person out. With few social outlets, some felt like they were working all the time, without meaningful breaks:

I feel like definitely like the lack of motivation ... has made it stressful to sort of balance like school and work definitely cuz I feel like I'm just so busy in the first place like definitely adding on like the lack of motivation to do schoolwork and different things like that is also like really stressful on top of like, the amount of hours that I work in my job and it just feels like especially like I'm either doing work or school so then it's like, there's not really that much time to sort of like take a break or relax or do something that like, I know my mind needs because it's just like a lot of just talking constant work -Participant 17 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Information and Media Studies)

Overwork impacted not only mental health but physical health. Participant 14 had a particularly poor experience:

I'm sleeping an average of four and a half to five hours per night. Caffeine dependent and I don't even just mean coffee I mean like energy drink caffeine pill dependency and like I'm feeling so close to like a major permanent but I can't give myself like that. You know, I can't give I can give myself that allowance. Like I have to keep on going at least until we finish first semester. So yeah, I can't keep going at this pace. I'm hoping that I can do some changes and that next semester will be better right because like, at this point, I'm a full time student, I have two jobs. And then I'm involved in a bunch of extracurriculars. -Participant 14 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Social science)

This participant was a highly motivated individual, but had responsibilities to their family, multiple jobs, school and extracurricular activities. This participant wanted to be a lawyer someday so on top of school they needed extracurricular accomplishments to be competitive. However, they also needed to work to cover their own and their family's living expenses. Participant 14 felt they could not sustain this pace forever.

Some students have a further complication when trying to balance work with school, in the form of mandatory, unpaid practicums. Participant 9 (1<sup>st</sup> year, Education) faced this situation:

I'm in a unique situation right now where I'm on practicum. So I'm working like 40 to 50 hour weeks for no pay at a school, and then I'm working on the weekend at my part-time job. So I'm like really tired. But this is only for four months, or not four months. Oh my god. I'm tired, as you can see. It's for four weeks. So it's only four weeks. And then I'm back to like normal school- work balance, as opposed to full- time job and part- time job balance.

Participant 9 was not the only one in this situation. Their experiences illuminate the challenge of combining school, unpaid work required to complete training, and working for pay. Depending on the program, practicum requirements can happen multiple times, and the length of time they take can vary. Participant 9 was looking at multiple points where they needed to reduce their hours at their paid job in order to do the practicum so they could graduate.

Participant 9 was fortunate that they could continue with their work-placement, but others, like Participant 6, saw these placements deteriorate during the pandemic.

Well, and it's also just my degree is very dependent on interactions with people in the community. So it's hard. Like I'm in a class where we actually partner up with a community partner with an intellectual disability. And so classes like that can't run on an online format because it's really hard to gain that connection through like zoom. When maybe they can't get the access to zoom or get on Zoom. -  
Participant 6 (4<sup>th</sup> year, Disability Studies)

Participant 6 had a course-related placement working with individuals with special needs. It was impossible to do this placement, as building a rapport online was difficult, and figuring out how to use online tools can be a challenge.

Not everyone struggled balancing work and school. In fact, some felt that balancing the two helped them manage their procrastination.

It's been really evenly balanced. I think it mostly because I am part time, I don't get too many hours. You know, I'll maybe get like 10 to 15 a week. So, it's been really easily manageable. -Participant 18 (2<sup>nd</sup> year, Arts and Humanities)

Honestly, for me, personally, I really struggle with procrastination. And so with working on the weekends, and knowing that I won't have time to do my schoolwork on the weekends, allows me to really get a grip on, you know, managing my procrastination and working on my time management, as well. - Participant 15 (3rd, Social Science)

Students' ability to balance working and learning depended on a number of factors, including how much they worked, the kind of job they did, and their financial situation. Whether a participant depended on their incomes to fund their education and living expenses, and whether or not they had a social safety net was very important. These considerations are explored in the final section.

#### **4.4 Final Thoughts on the Safety Net Created by Capital**

As discussed in chapter 2, and earlier in this chapter, economic capital is an important resource that provides security and options. Simply put, having access to capital enables one to advance within fields of power and inequality and achieve one's goals. In the context of university, students' jobs and family connections can give them access to economic and social capital and provide them with opportunities. Those without capital, who have to juggle multiple jobs just to make ends meet, will find it more difficult to acquire human capital and social capital, necessary for advancing in the labour market.

It was economic capital, however, that was most emphasized by participants. Those participants with the least economic capital, felt the most pressure to work, and they reported more work-school conflicts, longer total work hours, and the most stress. Those who worked for experience, spending money and opportunities, reported less conflicts with school. Those with more resources were able to deal with technological

challenges, by upgrading their internet during the pandemic, or buying a new computer. These investments further increased their ability to keep up with their school work, in a way that those students experiencing financial strain could not. Students without resources or a family capital safety-net faced the most challenges.

The value of a family safety net was nicely explained by participant 14, who was burning themselves out from long work hours and heavy school and extracurricular responsibilities:

I think a good support network could make a world of difference. So I mentioned before that, like, I'm the daughter of a single mother, who also has a younger brother. And so I feel like if my family could afford paying for some of my expenses, then I wouldn't have to have two jobs. And I would have more time to study. Or if I feel like if perhaps my mother wasn't a single mom, I wouldn't have to spend so much time at home, doing like parental roles with my, with my brother. Right? I think that is, maybe we had some family in the city that could help my mom with certain tasks, I wouldn't have to be with her constantly for activities that other students don't have to, accompany their parents for. So my mother, she's landed immigrant from six years ago, and she speaks English. But she, you know, sometimes she doesn't feel comfortable to go to a doctor's appointment by herself.... And so I have to take time out of my schedule to also care for my family's needs. And I think that other students that don't have to do that, also get that extra time. -Participant 14 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Social Science)

Throughout this chapter, participants have seen how participants emphasized the importance of economic capital in shaping their work and schooling experiences. Social capital was another prominent component of a student's university experience. During the pandemic social networks were heavily strained affecting both a student's school life and work life, and in turn impacting students' mental health. Participant 18 summarized what a lot of participants interviewed were feeling:

A lot of my friends actually moved away before the pandemic, to go to university. So none of them were in London. So it was hard to meet up with them in person,

obviously, because of the pandemic, but also, it was hard to contact people, I think, because even when you do contact people, like people have different comfort levels on being on the phone versus being in person. Versus texting, and everybody seemed to be really burnt out, especially me, I was really burnt out with friendships. So I really struggled to maintain communication with a lot of my friends. -Participant 18 (2<sup>nd</sup> year, Arts and Humanities)

Earlier in the chapter, we saw how online learning revealed technology inequalities. Those with economic capital had access to better technology, which improved their ability to engage in online education, and facilitated their social interactions. Those with less economic capital struggled more with schooling and this negatively impacted their social interactions, and hence their social capital as well. Students were unable to form networks as they normally would, and missed interactions with classmates and professors.

Participant 11 had some family in the country but their social circle was small and their parents were in another country:

For me, the what happened was my parents went back to Korea so the only person and living in my house in Toronto was my sister, which, you know, we're not close, so I just stayed at London was the time when most people weren't here. So I would say no, I didn't have that much connections. Yeah, I think I knew like two people in London and that was it. -Participant 11 (3<sup>rd</sup> year, Social Science)

Thus, participant 11 had no social safety net or social support to see them through. Their experience also underscores the importance of social capital and networks to students' experiences of working and learning during the pandemic. The lack of social interaction and decreasing networks likely inhibits students' acquisition of social capital.

Overall, most student participants in this study struggled with working and learning due to the pandemic, but it was clear that those with financial pressures struggled more. While their struggles pre-dated the pandemic, changes to work – shifts in work hours and work intensification – and changes to learning – including problems with

technology, motivation, isolation -- exacerbated the challenges experienced by students with less economic and family capital. In light of the established link in the literature between schooling, economic capital and future career prospects, it is possible that pandemic outcomes will be unequally distributed and disadvantaged students could face repercussions for years to come.

The next chapter links study findings to the literature and discusses the implications of students' difficulties with balancing school and work, for their longer-term labour market success.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Discussion

The influence of the pandemic was far-reaching. Evidence of its impact is still being uncovered. This thesis explored the impact of the pandemic on university's students' experiences of working and learning. Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted to hear about and document students' experiences. Students at one Ontario university were invited to participate, as long as they had some form of part-time employment in the year prior to the date the interview was held. The findings I collected will help fill gaps in the literature in regard to what students went through during the pandemic. The experiences shared by students provide an opportunity to better understand their challenges from their own perspectives.

This study focused on university students' experiences of learning online, while also balancing part-time employment. There were two main research questions. First, how did the pandemic, and the shift to online learning, impact university students' experiences of learning and working? Second, how did students' resources or capital shape their experiences?

#### 5.1 Summary of Findings

The pandemic impacted university students' experiences of working and learning in several ways. In interviews, students reported many changes at work: some initially lost work hours or were temporarily laid off. A few reported intensified work hours. Those who were working found the content of their jobs changed as they had to work differently – for instance, they had intensified cleaning. In terms of schooling, participants struggled with the shift to online learning, generally. While some noted positive aspects to learning online – including increased flexibility and greater ease of combining school and work – most focused on the negative. Participants found online learning demanding, isolating and they missed in-person contact with classmates and

professors. Many reported difficulties with motivation. Students were not as engaged with their schooling, and felt they had to learn on their own with little support. This led many students to be frustrated with their professors and with the high cost of education. They believed they were not getting value for the money they were paying. Despite the flexibility that online learning brought, several students reported challenges with combining work and school. Those who were financially dependent on work, in particular, reported that their need to work interfered with their education.

In answer to the second research question, participants' experiences of working and learning differed by their economic capital. Those who had parental support reported less stress and difficulty. For them, working provided experience and extra spending money. As a result, they were not too worried about a decrease in hours. Those with resources also typically had access to better technology, which enabled them to navigate the online learning environment successfully. It also facilitated their social interactions and acquisition of social capital. In contrast, participants without economic and family capital really struggled to support themselves given the unpredictable working environment during the pandemic. They experienced more conflict between work pressures and school demands, and sometimes sacrificed school for work. They had more difficulty with technology and keeping up with their coursework. Findings also suggested that most students had more narrow social circles during the pandemic, negatively impacting their social capital and social support. Those with few opportunities for social contact were isolated and reported less well-being. Overall, these findings are consistent with the literature and theory which guided this study, as discussed in the next section.

## **5.2 Capital, Resources, and Work-School Balance.**

Economic capital is important because having more economic resources can give a person more choices and time to accumulate other forms of capital. Some people are fortunate enough to have this form of capital passed down to them from their families, and those that do benefit at work and school (Brosnan et al., 2016). In the interviews it was not uncommon for participants to talk about how financial support impacted their

choice to work. Going further, participants also talked about how financial support helped to cover their living expenses. Findings are consistent with the literature that financial support from family or external sources can provide a safety net. This is no small thing because it gives a student stability in uncertain times and, depending on the amount of support, frees one from worrying about their basic needs (Reay, 2018; Worth, 2018b). Social capital and social class were also important in this study. Social class impacts students' economic capital, as well as their cultural capital, social capital and their opportunities (Martin et al., 2018; Brosnan et al., 2016). First generation students from low-income backgrounds may lack capital that helps them succeed (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). In this research, students were isolated during the pandemic, reducing the size of their social networks. This has implications for their social capital, and may impact them as they eventually seek full-time jobs since social capital is valuable in the labour market. Cultural capital was not typically raised in the interviews, and hence was not discussed.

Students with limited economic capital feel more pressure to work. It is noteworthy that the number of students seeking employment while in school has been steadily increasing (Neill, 2015). The problem is that few jobs available to students provide enough income to cover all of a student's costs (Ouellette, 2006). Several participants held multiple jobs: some simultaneously, while others rotated through different jobs throughout the previous year. The pandemic may have exacerbated this volatility, but several students mentioned that this was the norm for them.

As mentioned above, students with less economic capital and little family capital (or family safety net), felt more pressure to work. Some students can augment their own capital by relying on the capital and resources of their family members (Waithaka, 2014). For these students, job loss might be an inconvenience, leading them to lean on their parents' resources a little more. However, for students with less financial means, the reduction of hours or loss of work could be more than an inconvenience. For them, losing employment could mean they can no longer afford to attend university (Smith & Patton, 2013). Regardless of capital, students reported negative experiences during the pandemic; however, those with less economic capital experienced more negative consequences.

They struggled with technology, such as reliable internet connections (Fawaz & Sanaha, 2020; Boys, 2021). In this manner, those with less economic capital may have found it more difficult to succeed in school.

Moreover, students with fewer resources also have difficulty balancing school and work. Hassel & Ridout (2018) talked about the catch-22 that is the balancing act between work and school. Students who need to work to fund their schooling can end up devoting more time to employment and have less time for school. During the pandemic the challenge of balancing school and work became more difficult for some participants, who said their employers assumed that online learning required less hours, so students could devote more time to work. In actuality online learning often required more hours than the traditional in-person learning.

Social capital and networks were also helpful for students during the pandemic. Some participants had a good or personal connection to an employer. This meant that in some cases when their other job fell through, they could easily get another job until they could find a new job somewhere else. Two participants even had the ability to pick up hours whenever they had time or needed the extra money. This flexibility was useful because it gave students some stability, and opportunities to earn money when their schedules allowed.

At the same time, many students reported being isolated during the pandemic. In the pre-pandemic world, students built networks in their classes, providing them with access to more information from the larger the network than they could cultivate on their own (Kay, 2018). During the pandemic, students experienced a loss of personal connections, negatively impacting their motivation (Kanupriya, 2020; Brodeur et al., 2021). The decline in social interactions also negatively impacted students' mental health (Kay, 2018).

Research shows that both economic and social capital can be valuable for students after graduation. Networks can help with finding and securing good job opportunities (Starobin et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2018). People with more economic capital may be able to be patient to find the right job, rather than taking the first job available. In light of

the pandemic's impact on university students, it is difficult to predict the future for this cohort of students. It is possible that the decrease in social capital, and students' struggles obtaining economic capital during the pandemic, could have longer lasting implications for their school-to-work transition. At the same time, students could have picked up valuable work and educational experiences during the pandemic that could help them in the future labour market (Kanar & Bouckennooghe, 2021; Bathmaker et al., 2013). This is a topic for future research.

### **5.3 Limitations and Future Research**

No study is perfect and therefore it is important to recognize this study's limitations. Although recruitment was open to all undergraduates the samples still was heavily skewed toward upper-year students. A few first-year students were interviewed, but more participants were in their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years. On the one hand, this meant that many participants had experience of both pre-pandemic and pandemic education. On the other hand, experiences likely differed substantially across year of study, but with such a small number of participants, I was unable to explore these variations. Also, it should be noted that my entire sample is from one university in one city. Students' experiences likely varied across locale. Students at universities with different student demographics, physical location, and different costs of living, may have had different experiences. Local job markets also vary cross-regionally and variations in job availability would impact students' experiences with balancing their education with work. Different provinces had different lockdown timing and lengths, and different COVID-19 restrictions which could have altered how students across provinces managed school, work, and other resource-based concerns.

Another limitation is the difficulty in examining participants' cultural capital during the pandemic. In interviews, students rarely discussed cultural capital, and they were not directly asked about it. Previous research has highlighted that cultural capital can be gained through education and social interactions, and that individuals can draw on cultural capital to elevate their success in the work force (Starobin et al., 2016; Brosnan

et al., 2016). It is not clear from this research how the pandemic impacted students' acquisition of cultural capital, or whether those with more capital had advantages that students without capital lacked. This is an important topic for future research. It is important to consider how cultural capital has been impacted by the pandemic, and how students will be impacted as they transition into the labour market.

This study did not ask direct questions about economic or social capital (networks) either. These themes emerged organically through the data and became clear during data analysis. Had these forms of capital been probed in more detail, an improved understanding of capital's influence on students during the pandemic would likely have emerged. Future research should explore the impact of all forms of capital, more explicitly, on the student experience.

Future research can build on this study, and explore students' experiences across time and place, with a larger number of students, in different years of study. This would provide a broader picture of the pandemic's impact on university students in Canada. In addition, more research needs to be conducted both on the lasting impact the pandemic had on students and the capital they accumulated as we go back to the new normal. This would include doing research on how the pandemic impacted students who graduated and the challenges they faced in the workforce as a consequence of having done their education during a pandemic. This would be a good place to look at how cultural capital that was supposed to be learned while in school may or may not have been picked up and what effect that has on a graduate's employability. Doing this would hopefully help us understand what could be done better next time and what problem areas need to be addressed.

## **5.4 Policy Recommendations**

The research findings have policy implications, and therefore I would like to suggest several policy recommendations. First, previous research and my study findings point to the importance of family resources for students' success (Belley et al., 2014;

Lareau & Cox, 2020). The literature backs the idea that governments should offer more financial resources to students to help offset the high costs of education. This could begin in the upper years of high school, since resources shape decisions about attending university (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015). The way student loans are set up they help to supplement students' costs, but they do not cover everything. This is why loans enquire about personal savings, income and family support (Ouellette, 2006). There is concern in the literature about students' ability to borrow and how the current system puts a student into a deep negative financial state in order to fund their education (Smith & Patton, 2013).

Based on my interviews a few things related to student funding need to be reworked. First, students from low-income groups are still at an extreme disadvantage even with loans. There should be additional government loan supports so that students do not need to take multiple jobs just to be able to eat while also attending university. This leads into another point: government policy should address supporting students so that they can focus on their studies and not prioritize work over school just to be able to attend. The Provincial and Federal governments should also consider how to better manage how much debt students accumulate while gaining an education since more and more jobs are requiring a degree as an entry requirement.

It might be worth considering for both provincial and federal governments to make practicums that require large amounts of hours to be paid or have a living stipend. Since unpaid practicums, based on participant information, require a large number of hours, students may have to cut back on paid work hours; however, their earnings are required to cover their living expenses. This may be particularly the case for students in professional programs (as in this study), and hence is an issue for these programs and their accreditation bodies. Some mandatory unpaid work might be edging towards exploitive, especially for low-income students. It may be time for the government along with regulators and institutions that require practicums to consider how mandatory unpaid work is impacting students.

More generally, it would be worthwhile for the government, university and industries to come together to figure out work experience programs to offset the loss of economic, social and cultural capital. Many participants struggled with job insecurity that directly threatened their school performance or their ability to attend university during the pandemic. Mentorship programs would be another thing to consider in this line. It was difficult for students to build social capital during the pandemic organically. More networking and professional events to help students build up their networks would be welcome. Even as things open up, some of these measures should be implemented because students were not able to build up the same level of capital they would have had if the pandemic did not happen. Figuring out how to make up for lost time would be important because as students on an international scale are increasingly competing against each other for jobs (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021).

Universities might consider partnering with industries to figure out what marketable skills graduates need. Then they could produce online learning modules students could do at their own pace alongside their regular classes, or can do in the summer. Perhaps a certificate of completion can be given to add to one's resume. The main point is to help students acquire skills that will help them in the workforce, especially skills that might not be easily acquired through existing classes. Modules like these would also serve to make students aware of what types of skills they need to build up and might help inform them of what jobs or volunteer opportunities they should be seeking out. It is important to remember that working and volunteering can be beneficial to student to gain skills to be competitive (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2021; Bathmaker et al., 2013). To be clear, I am not advocating that students should not work while in school -- that would be not financially viable for some, and it would deprive students of beneficial experiences. I am simply putting forth the ideas that institutions across government, education, and relevant industries work together to make sure that students have the resources to be successful, and have a better balance between school and meeting their cost-of-living needs.

Based on talking to participants, programs like CERB helped a great deal and in some cases helped students gain more money than they would have gotten from a regular

minimum wage job. The problem was that with the increased cost of goods, students were in financial difficulty once these programs ended. Perhaps next time the government could boost university funding temporarily with the express purpose of temporarily reducing school costs as students get back on their feet.

I can understand reluctance to enact a few of these suggestions because of the costs involved, but if even a few suggestions are put into action, it would mean workers entering full-time work with more skills and less debt to get there. Ultimately this results in more spending power and financial stability once a student has graduated into full-time employment. Financial literacy might be something universities should consider as a mandatory elective across all programs so that students are better equipped to manage their money. As well as better prepare students to know how to manage their resources in a major event like a pandemic.

As we move forward, we need to consider how our education system is shaped and how class inequalities can be addressed. It is a common adage for education to say children are our future and this holds true for university students even though they are adults. Supports for students are necessary to allow students are able, through their own hard work, to make a better life for themselves. My research shows that students are struggling with rising costs in virtually every area related to day-to-day living. Without supports, some might fall through the cracks. My interviews show that there are hard-working and intelligent individuals that despite their challenges are doing their best to overcome what they can and my study should be seen as a call to those with decision-making power to do their part.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, it was the goal of this study to give a voice to students who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic while also needing to work, and to explore the impact of the pandemic on students' ability to balance work and school. The literature on student experiences during the pandemic is still expanding and my contribution will

address some research gaps, especially within the Canadian student context. One of my most important findings from my results reinforces the idea that family capital can support students in times of crisis, providing a safety net. Students without capital have more challenges. Capital is extremely important, and its uneven distribution creates an uneven playing field for students, that could reproduce inequalities post-graduation. These inequities should be addressed.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Start:

- Acknowledgment of having read the letter (REVIEW KEY POINTS WITH PERSON)
- Consent to be recorded
- Program
- Year of study (How long have you been in your program?)

Education:

- How have you been finding the shift to online learning?
  - What have been the most positive experiences about accessing your education primarily online?
  - What have been the most negative experiences about accessing your education primarily online?
- Do you think you will prefer to continue with online learning or have the university use a mixture of in person and online?
- IF NOT A FIRST YEAR: what has been the biggest differences you have noticed between attending university before the pandemic versus during the pandemic?
- Have you been able to maintain social connections during the pandemic? How?
- What has your workload looked like when school was in person/online/ hybrid?
  - How accessible were your professors across the different stages?
    - Across the different stages did you feel your professors were putting more or less effort as the pandemic happened/changed?

### Technology school

- What kinds of technologies did you use during the pandemic to do school? (Computers, phones, Facebook, Instagram etc)
- How has the use of technology impacted your education?
  - Did your engagement with your courses change over time while being fully online?
    - Has there been any change with engagement now that there are more in person classes?
    - with online classes did you have any trouble maintaining focus?
  - Did you experience any unexpected problems? If so how did you adapt?
    - Issues with wifi or being able to log into key sites for example

- What was the primary way you received information about the pandemic?
  - Has your use of technology changed during the pandemic?
    - Burnout
      - Effect on school
  - Has it created any new challenges you have not experienced before?
- What has your social media activity looked like during the pandemic?
  - Has the information you received from it about the pandemic impacted your educational experience?
  - Has it impacted how you dealt with the pandemic?

#### Work:

- In the last 12 months what job or jobs have you had?
  - Why did you choose to work while in school?
  - Was it hard to find a job?
  - If you had to find another job what challenges do you think you will face?
- How have your experiences of working changed during the pandemic?
  - probe for finding work, what is being done, and how, hours, employment opportunities)
- How has your current level of work impacted your living expenses
  - Has your current level of work impacted your ability to attend school?
- How has the pandemic impacted your ability to balance work and university?
  - Do you feel you can maintain the current pace?
  - What do you feel is the most important factor to maintain the work/school balance?
- In your opinion what has been the most significant change you had to deal with when managing school and work during the pandemic? How do you think that will impact your future university experience?
- What kinds of resources did you typically use to help fund your education and did those change during the pandemic?
  - Were you able to get any support financial or otherwise from friends or family to help continue your education or to make ends meet?
- If you were forced to make a choice between school and work which, would you prioritize and why? If you had to go as far as leave one to focus on the other which, would you choose?

#### Technology work

- Has social media impacted your work experience during the pandemic?
- Has the increased use of technology during the pandemic impacted your work/school balance? Why or why not?

- Is there anything from your experiences during the pandemic that you will want to carry forward with you?
  - Lessons, experiences, etc

After interview:

- Any outstanding questions?

## Appendix B: Ethics Approval 1



**Date:** 25 March 2021

**To:** Dr. Tracey Adams

**Project ID:** 118383

**Study Title:** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students with part-time Jobs: Challenges and inequalities

**Short Title:** Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students with part-time jobs

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** 09/Apr/2021

**Date Approval Issued:** 25/Mar/2021 11:37

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 25/Mar/2022

Dear Dr. Tracey Adams

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. **All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.**

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
The Impact of COVID-19 poster	Recruitment Materials		
The Impact of COVID-19 poster	Recruitment Materials	19/Feb/2021	1
Bernard Bravo Letter of Information and Verbal consent - Feb 19	Verbal Consent/Assent	19/Feb/2021	1
Bernard Bravo Interview Questions Feb 19 2021	Interview Guide	19/Feb/2021	1

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

 NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Miguel Bernard Bravo

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** Mount Royal University  
Calgary, Alberta, Canada  
2013-2020 B.A.

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2020-2022 M.A.

**Honours and Awards:** Inspiring Minds  
2021

MAPS Peer Mentorship Award  
2019

**Related Work Experience** Research Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2021-2022

Teaching Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2020-2022

**Publications:**

Bernard Bravo, M. (2022). The Impact of COVID-19 on Undergraduate University Students with Part-Time Jobs: Challenges and Inequalities. Presented at the meeting of the Canadian Sociological Association, May 2022

Bernard Bravo, M. (2022). How the Pandemic has impacted Undergrads. Western University. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/inspiringminds/208/>