

UNIVERSITY TO WORK TRANSITIONS

STUDENTS' AND GRADUATES' EXPERIENCES DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN HONG KONG

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

The COVID-19 pandemic has had wide-reaching economic and socio-cultural impacts in Hong Kong. One particularly vulnerable demographic has been university students and graduates, as they seek to move into the workforce during such a crisis. This report presents preliminary findings from a large-scale project on the impact of the pandemic on graduates' university-to-work transitions in Hong Kong. The report presents quantitative findings from a survey with 418 students and qualitative findings from 100 total interviews with students, graduates, and employers.





FINDINGS

Students and graduates that are entering the workforce in Hong Kong reported concerning levels of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. They also reported low levels of confidence in talking to those in their workplaces about their mental health problems.

There appears to be a mismatch between graduates and employers regarding workplace expectations. Namely, graduates reported that they know what a full-time job requires. However, employers felt graduates have little knowledge of the workplace.

We also found disparate perceptions in regards to graduates' communication skills. Graduates themselves reported that they were strong in this respect, but, employers highlighted their deficiencies in personal and interpersonal attributes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that businesses foster workplace cultures that promote a safe and non-stigmatizing environment in which new graduates feel empowered and comfortable in sharing their mental health struggles with others.

Employers may need to consider communication skills training as a specific component of workplace inductions.

Businesses should provide new graduates with clear information about the work arrangements and expectations of the workplace upfront and during any promotional activities.



BACKGROUND

Over the last three years, the COVID-19 pandemic has radically reshaped so many aspects of our lives and world. University students and fresh graduates in Hong Kong have faced innumerable challenges including prolonged periods of remote learning and working from home. In addition, the various restrictions exacted by the pandemic have further compounded the difficulties for graduates in securing jobs and advancing their careers. Understanding the experiences of university students and graduates during these challenging times is necessary not just to help support them now, but also to equip future cohorts with the skills to navigate the labor market during crises. In addition, we need to ensure that future generations are equipped with the skills to successfully adapt to changing workplaces.

This report presents interim quantitative and qualitative findings from a large-scale study of the educational, health, and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Hong Kong graduates as the move from university into the workforce. We have surveyed and interviewed students and graduates as well as employers, human resource professionals, recruiters, and university staff.



THE SURVEY AND INTERVIEWS

The findings in this report are based on an online survey of 418 Hong Kong students and graduates between 2020 and 2023. Our survey utilized a range of well-validated and widely used scales such as the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), the WHO-5 Well-being Index and the Career Futures Inventory-Revised (CFI-R). [1,2,3]

We measured variables including mental health, psychological wellbeing, career plans and preparedness, financial satisfaction, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here is a broad snapshot of our survey respondents:

- **64% were women and 33% were men.**
- **Their average age was 22.7 years.**
- **82% identified as Chinese and 8% as Asian (non-Chinese).**
- **Around 53% of respondents graduated between 2020 and 2022, with around 47% to graduate in 2023.**
- **55% of respondents had taken an internship at some point between 2020 and 2023.**

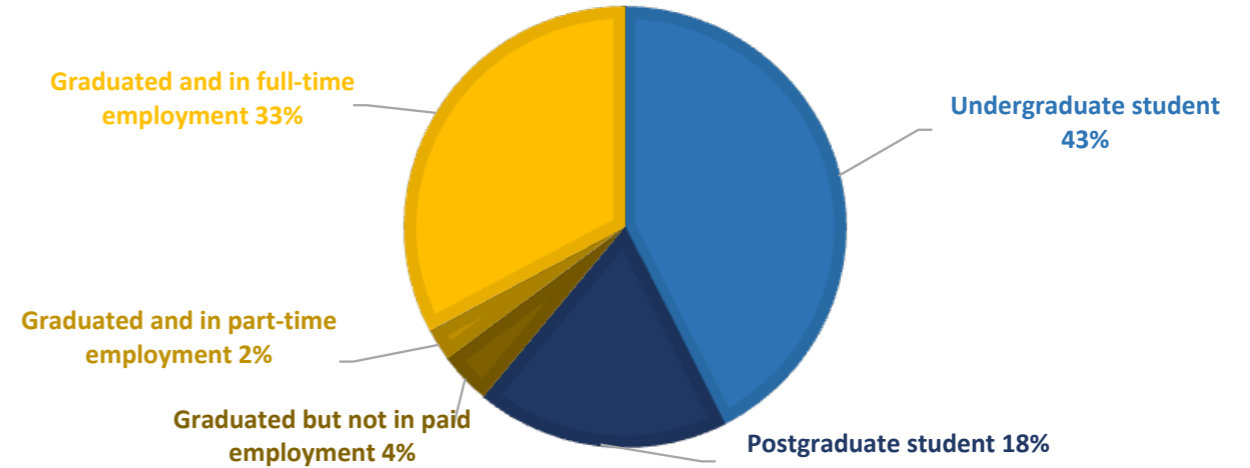


Figure 1. The study and work status of our survey respondents.

61% of respondents were students, with 35% being graduates in some form of employment.

This report also incorporates qualitative findings from interviews with students, graduates, and employers. We have interviewed 34 employers, including anyone who manages or is responsible for recruiting people in the workplace (data collection ongoing). We also interviewed 66 current students and fresh graduates.

[1] Lovibond, S., & Lovibond, P. (1995). Manual for the depression anxiety stress scales (2nd ed.). Psychology Foundation.

[2] Topp, C., Østergaard, S.D., Søndergaard, S., & Bech, P. (2015). The WHO-5 Well-Being Index: A systematic review of the literature. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 84, 167-176.

[3] Rottinghaus, P. J., Eshelman, A., Gore, J. S., Keller, K. J., Schneider, M., & Harris, K. L. (2017). Measuring change in career counseling: Validation of the Career Futures Inventory-Revised. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 17(1), 61-75.

MENTAL HEALTH

The survey first measured symptoms of poor mental health and psychological wellbeing.

Students and graduates in our sample reported concerning levels of symptoms of poor mental health. For example, 21% reported symptoms on the depression scale that can be classified as 'severe' or 'extremely severe', while 29% reported severe/extremely severe anxiety-related symptoms (see figure 2).

The "severe" and "extremely severe" levels of depression and stress in our sample appear to be higher than in the broader population of university students in Hong Kong.^[4] The high number of respondents reporting these symptoms is concerning, so the second phase of our project will investigate these in more detail.

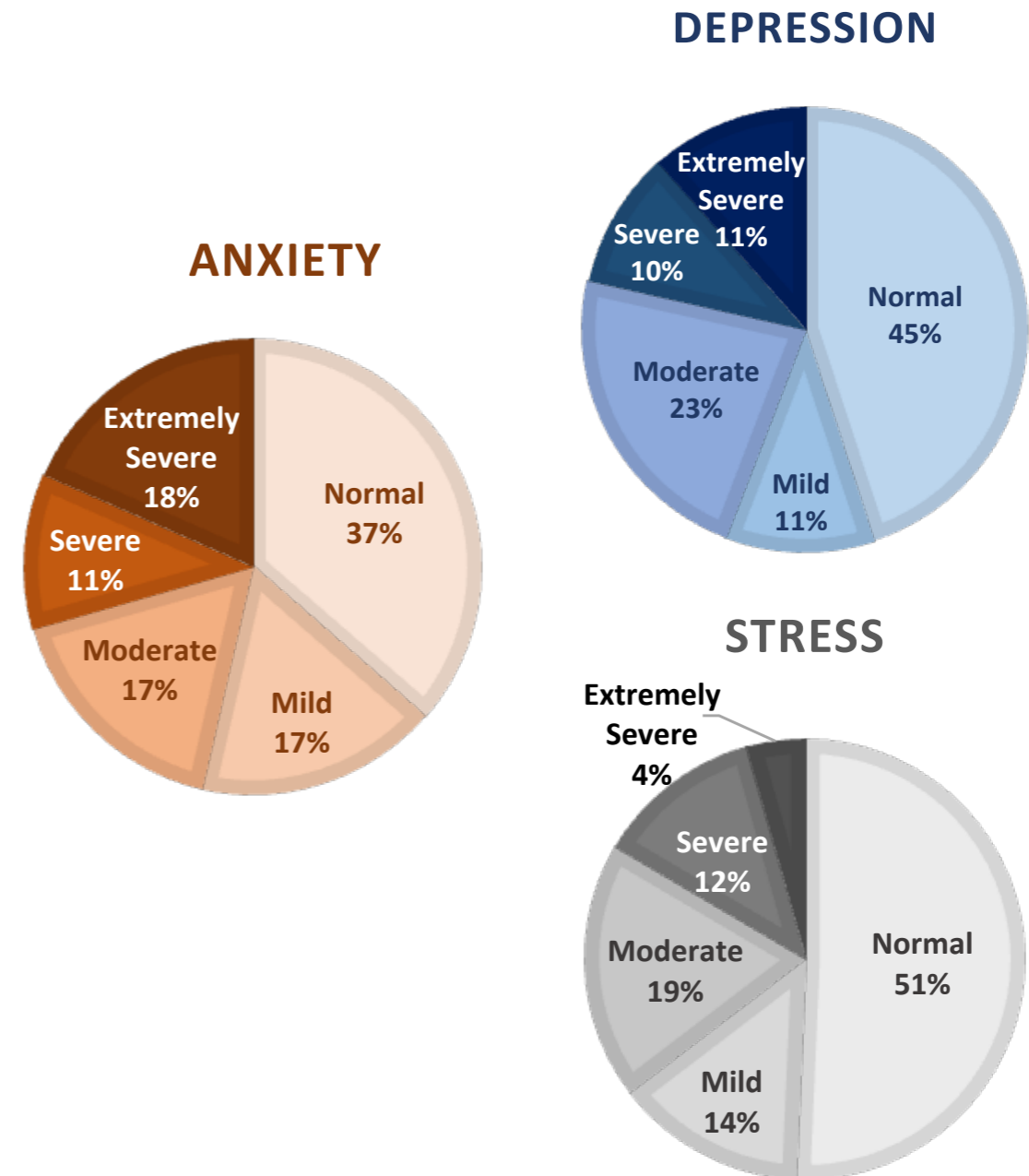


Figure 2. Depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms

[4] Xiang, L., Shek, D.T.L., & Shek, E.Y.W. (2021). Psychological morbidity among university students in Hong Kong (2014–2018): Psychometric properties of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) and related correlates. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18.

MENTAL HEALTH

Nevertheless, these concerning levels of depression, anxiety, and stress do not appear to correlate with levels of diagnosable mental illnesses. Indeed, 85% of respondents reported that they were not diagnosed with a mental illness in the last year. Our project will examine this in more detail as this may be linked with awareness of mental health, access to help and support, or may suggest other trends, such as recent changes in participants' mental health.

We also assessed the positive aspects of psychological wellbeing using the WHO-5 Well-being Index. In this scale, positive psychological wellbeing is measured from 0 to 100, with higher scores meaning higher levels of wellbeing. Respondents indicated a mean score of 48 ($SD=5.10$). This score appears to indicate poor psychological wellbeing amongst graduates and students in our sample as scores a score below 50 is indicated for depression screening. Data also suggests the levels in our sample are below other population norms.^[5, 6, 7]

Finally, we also asked respondents about their confidence in talking to people in their lives, universities, and workplaces about their mental health.^[8] The graph below (Figure 3) shows that 55% of the respondents were not at all

or only slightly confident in talking to their colleagues about their mental health; only 7% were extremely confident.

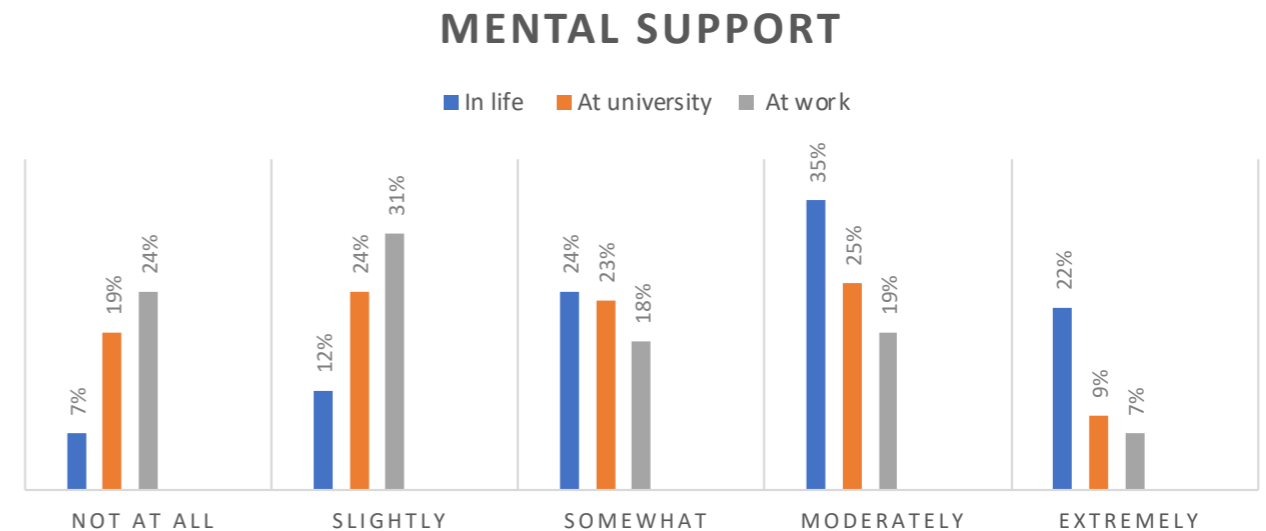


Figure 3. Self-reported confidence in talking about mental health to other people.

By comparison, 9% were extremely confident in speaking to someone at university while 22% were confident that they had someone in their life they could speak with.

Confidence in speaking with someone at work about mental health is therefore low, with slightly higher levels at university.

[5] See footnote 2.

[6] Ellervik, C., Kvetny, J., Christensen, K.S., Vestergaard, P., & Bech, P. (2014). Prevalence of depression, quality of life and antidepressant treatment in the Danish General Suburban Population Study. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*, 68, 507-512.

[7] Bech, P., Olsen, L.R., Kjoller, M., & Rasmussen, N.K. (2003). Measuring well-being rather than the absence of distress symptoms: A comparison of the SF-36 Mental Health subscale and the WHO-Five well-being scale. *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research*, 12, 85-91.

[8] Reino, V., & Byrom, N. (2017). Graduate mental wellbeing in the workplace: A report on graduate mental wellbeing for Student Minds. Student Minds. https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/graduate_wellbeing_report_full_interactive.pdf

MENTAL HEALTH

The quantitative data are also supported by the interview findings. Graduates often reported that they lacked effective support for their mental health from their employers. Various reasons were put forth to explain this lack of support, including a lack of guidance from superiors and no options or systems being put in place. The graduate below states that employers may not be able to provide effective support for mental health problems because of the difficulty in identifying such problems. Furthermore, this graduate also highlights the centrality of such support in helping new hires succeed in the workplace.

- *“I will also agree that perhaps mental health ...or personal health [...]are the things that employers should put more emphasis on. [...] Employers may not have too much experience or knowledge upon on mental health or...may not be able to recognize some of the signs that may tell that an individual who is really stressed now in their*

transition period or any other any other period during their working period. So I think that employers should put more emphasis on perhaps on mental health because I think that mental health is one of the affecting factors that can lead to the success of adaptation and transition from students to fresh graduates.” (Graduate 28)

At the more extreme end of the spectrum, some graduates reported on what can be considered ‘toxic workplaces’, where the culture regarding mental health was not at all supportive. As one graduate stated.

- *“They [bosses] would curse, they would blame, they would publicly shame. I saw everyone, but there were some really nice individuals, but there were also some people in leadership that didn't offer the support you would expect.” (Graduate 63)*

WORKPLACE EXPECTATIONS

Graduates in our study have expressed a range of defined expectations including ideas around how they should work and the norms of the workplace. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the changes to the labor market because of the pandemic, new graduates expect that their employers will allow them flexible working arrangements.

- *“I'm aiming for flexibility. For example, I would like to work a flexible working schedule, [it] doesn't have to stick with nine to six every Monday to Friday. And also, I want to work from home, which currently not many jobs I can find that provide a lot of flexibility.” (Graduate 6)*
- *“I would like to have some more time to work from home because I'm adapted to that.” (Graduate 43)*

In addition, graduates are also under no illusions that they will need to integrate themselves into the organizational culture of their firm. In other words, they expect that it will take some time for them to grow accustomed to the norms and expectations of the workplace.

- *“I guess it's like during on boarding. Because there is like a transition between a student and a civil servant, and throughout the process, you have to figure out what is their culture, work culture? What is the style of working they prefer, and in a systematic manner with lot of procedural guidelines to refer to and how to have to sort of remove my student mindset.” (Graduate 23)*

While graduates say that they are aware and confident in understanding the expectations of the workplace, employers tell a different story. First, employers perceive graduates as not having a clear focus on their position within the company.

- *“But on the other hand, there are some students who know nothing about what they are going to do with the company or they have no idea on their directions. So I think it would be better for students to identify directions for themselves and then they have to do some research on the area they are going to work in so that they could show to the employers that they have passions and they are very interested in the job.” (Employer 31)*

SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Graduates understand the importance of communication skills in the workplace. In particular, they are aware of the necessity for them to be able to effectively communicate with a range of people, including beyond their immediate colleagues.

- *“So I need to collaborate with quite a lot of different stakeholders... So that is my work nature. So definitely I have to ask more time to really socialize and to communicate with all these stakeholders at one time.” (Graduate 43)*

While graduates identify themselves as possessing strong interpersonal skills, employers identified a range of weaknesses in such abilities.

- *“These two aspects. In terms of attitude, they need to gear up to be even more open minded, they need to be even more proactive when doing work or dealing with others, and also to strengthen their communicative capabilities. Don’t be so closed off.” (Employer 12)*

In addition, employers also noted that new graduates possessed weak personal and cognitive capabilities. They often attributed these weaknesses to graduates’ lack of real world experience as is shown in the extract below.

- *“My wish is that we could move more towards sort of independent thinking and independent work. When students work with us, they are very sheltered... they can't go wrong. But what we of course observe is that some are more independent than others. And although this is sort of a cushy first step into the real world, if you like... But one thing that we discuss occasionally is that in first jobs in the real world out there, workers are more self-organized.” (Employer 21)*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

- Students and graduates transitioning from university to the workplace are reporting concerning levels of symptoms of poor mental health. For example, 21% and 29% report severe or extremely severe levels of depression and anxiety.
- A supportive mental health environment is of clear importance to students and graduates and may be an important component for their selection of an employer. However, most new employees do not feel confident in discussing mental health concerns in the workplace.
- Upon transitioning into the workplace, graduates feel that they are aware of the need to understand and learn about a company, although employers feel that they lack awareness and knowledge of the workplace.
- Within the workplace, graduates value flexibility and understand the importance of communication skills. However, employers report that communication skills are lacking in new employees.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensuring that workplaces are psychologically safe environments is important to young people entering the workplace and a salient component of talent recruitment and retention. Employers should ensure that efforts are directed towards the creation of supportive environments where employees feel able to discuss and potentially disclose mental health concerns without fear of stigma. This recommendation is especially important in light of the percentage of students and graduates who are experiencing symptoms of poor mental health, and the low numbers who feel able to access support. All employees, especially those entering the workforce, should be made aware of access to confidential support systems, such as an Employee Assistance Program.

- It is important to ensure that those working with graduates are aware of potential mental health concerns and able to direct them to appropriate support. Specifically, managers, HR teams, and those involved in recruitment may wish to consider appropriate training to ensure staff are both confident and able to have conversations on mental health and to ensure that graduates feel supported upon entering into the workplace. Graduates should also be provided with appropriate training and awareness raising for mental health during induction programs, and where appropriate, supported with mentoring or buddy schemes.

- Communication skills are valued within the workplace and yet there appears to be a mismatch between the preparation felt by graduates and the experience of employers. This mismatch extends to preparation for the workplace with employers concerned that graduates are not ready for the workplace. Employers may therefore wish to consider the role of communication skills within their recruitment strategies in universities and within training and on-boarding programs. For example, ensuring that students and universities are made aware which types of communication skills are important within the workplace and the ways in which these can be nurtured and developed to enhance successful employment. Employers may also wish to consider specific skill enhancement schemes during internships programs.

- With the need to be job aware, employers may also wish to consider providing more education about the work environment. For example, flexibility is valued by graduates and yet with different working structures implemented by workplaces as a result of COVID-19, graduates may be less aware of the nature of the office and what is required.

CONTACT US

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This report forms just one part of the project. We are also in the midst of developing an online hub called Graduate Mindmap: www.graduatemindmap.com (currently under development) which will contain a wealth of resources for all stakeholders to help improve the university-to-work transitions of Hong Kong graduates. We also hope to further collaborate with businesses to provide tailor-made and empirically grounded resources to help support new graduates entering your workplace.

If you are interested in research or training opportunities with us, please contact us at: riich@hku.hk

You are cordially invited to participate in this meaningful study and share your valuable perspectives by taking a 3-minute survey. If you are an employer, human resource professional, or recruiter, please scan the QR code below to access our online survey.





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