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Indigenous Post-Secondary Learners and the COVID-19 Pandemic

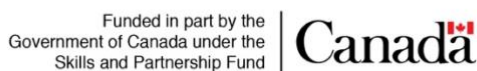
About Indspire

Indspire is an Indigenous national registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada. With the support of its funding partners, Indspire disburses financial awards, delivers programs, and shares resources with the goal of improving educational outcomes for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. Through Indspire's education offerings, we provide resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success for Indigenous youth. In 2019-20, Indspire awarded over \$17.8 million through more than 5,124 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside the federal government.

About Research Knowledge Nest

The Indspire *Research Knowledge Nest* is the first Indigenous research program of its kind in Canada. With data analysis skills rapidly becoming critical to economic success, the *Research Nest* is poised to seize this exciting opportunity to foster Indigenous engagement and leadership in quantitative research and data science roles. The program will be guided by an Advisory Committee of researchers, leaders, and key stakeholders who will provide direction and input on the development of this important initiative.

Founding Supporters



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic hit post-secondary learners hard in the Spring of 2020. In the final weeks of their term, faculty members were suddenly required to pivot to online learning. Students who relied on on-campus supports and IT facilities were scrambling as services were shut down. In the Fall of 2020, Indspire continued to hear from Indigenous learners that the pandemic was affecting them in unique and acute ways. Facing extra costs, delays in administrative processes, and shifts in access to supports, Indigenous post-secondary learners were navigating a new system in an already complex experience of pursuing post-secondary education.

Impacts on Indigenous Post-Secondary Learners

Indspire reached out to the Indigenous learners it supports in December of 2020¹ to understand how their post-secondary studies have changed and to enquire about the challenges and opportunities COVID-19 has brought to them. We asked participants to indicate if they had encountered a series of COVID-19 related experiences, including fundamental physical challenges, such as lacking Internet access or a place to work, as well as the mental and emotional impacts of the pandemic. The result of these shared experiences is reported in **Figure 1**.

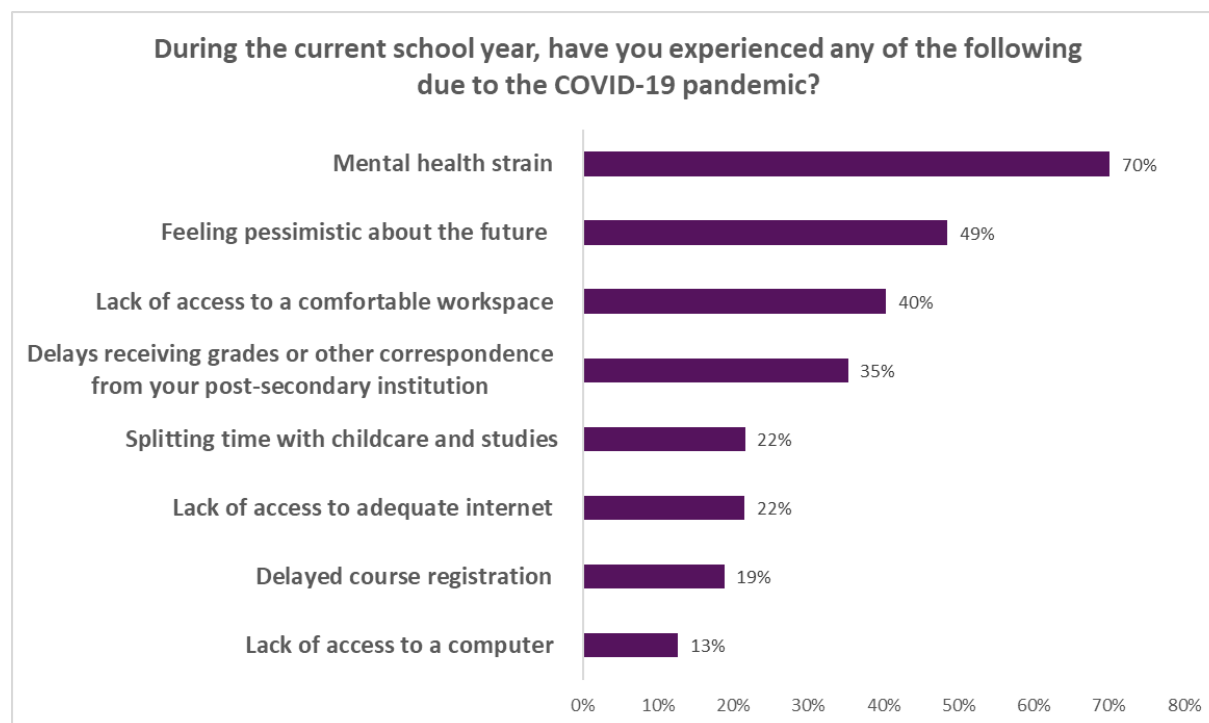
Alarming, 70 percent of Indigenous learners reported experiencing mental health strain related to the pandemic. Within the written responses received, many of the respondents described experiencing loneliness, anxiety, and depression. “It has been very difficult being high risk, working from home, attending school full time, and taking care of my two small children. Because of the pandemic, they are not in daycare.” Further, more than one-fifth reported the struggle to balance childcare while attempting to complete their studies. Additionally, half of the respondents indicated that they had a pessimistic outlook on the future (49 percent). “During the current school year, I have experienced loneliness and lack of desire to continue on with my schooling. I miss the interaction and support of family and friends.” The uncertainty and challenges caused by the pandemic are having dramatic effects on mental health for everyone, but especially Indigenous learners. “During the COVID-19 pandemic, I wish I had more opportunities to participate in ceremony with some of my Indigenous classmates and have the means to connect and form bonds with them.”

¹ The *Following the Path* survey was conducted between December 2020 and January 2021. This survey was designed to assess how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced Indigenous post-secondary students' experiences. Previous and current applicants to the *Building Brighter Futures: Bursaries, Scholarships, and Awards* (BBF) program at Indspire were offered the opportunity to participate in this survey. A total of 3,195 responses were received and have informed this report.

Many of the respondents revealed that they also were facing tangible challenges related to the new requirements of online learning. Two-fifths had a lack of access to an adequate workspace (40 percent) at home. Nearly a quarter did not have access to the Internet and 13 percent did not have access to a computer. Prior to the pandemic, many Indigenous learners used on-campus resources for study space and to meet their technical needs. Computer labs, campus wifi, and Indigenous student centres provided much of the physical support a learner needs for success. These challenges are affecting students' ability to learn and to remain motivated in these demanding times.

Over one-third of Indigenous students who responded had experienced delays in receiving grades or other correspondence from their post-secondary institution (35 percent) and delays in course registration (19 percent) (**Figure 1**). Difficulty accessing key documents from post-secondary institutions can affect students' continued progress in their studies, application for employment and Work Integrated Learning, or, importantly, accessing more post-secondary funding.

Figure 1: The impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous post-secondary learners (n = 2517).



Making Ends Meet: Financial Stress during COVID-19

As we know, Indigenous learners face substantial financial barriers to post-secondary education (Indspire, 2021; Ottmann, 2017). One-third of Indigenous students who responded stated that they have had delays in receiving funding during the pandemic (**Table 1**). When one component of application material or one decision on funding is delayed, there can be compounded effects for Indigenous learners. Their ability to pay for their post-secondary education, but also their living expenses, becomes more challenging. When participants were asked if they had unexpected and significant expenses because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 63 percent indicated that they had. Being unable to predict expenses while on a tight budget further challenges students to continuously find new funding opportunities, rather than focusing on their studies.

Table 1: Funding for education experiences of post-secondary students that responded to the “Following the Path” survey between May 2020 - January 2021

Education Funding Experiences of Post-Secondary Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic					
	Yes	Yes %	No	No %	Total
Unexpectedly lost funding for education	652	27.8%	1692	72.2%	2344
Unexpectedly gained funding for education	1078	45.7%	1282	54.3%	2360
Experienced delays in receiving funding for education	892	33.3%	1790	66.7%	2682
Experienced ease in transferring funds to their institution	2042	79.1%	539	20.9%	2581

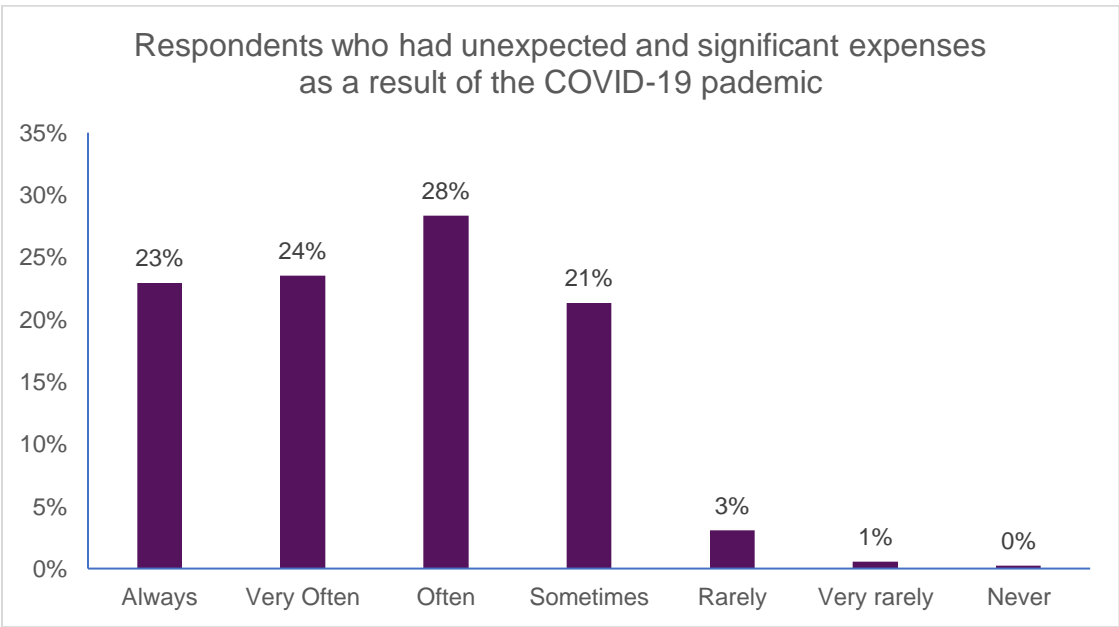
We further examined the frequency of these unexpected and significant expenses (

Figure 2: Proportion of frequency of unexpected and significant expenses because of the COVID-19 pandemic (n = 1753). While this figure only examines those respondents who indicated having unexpected expenses, it shows that a quarter report facing unexpected expenses “always” with half experiencing it “often” to “very often”. This repetition of incurring unexpected expenses likely relates to the significant mental health challenges many students report as students balance their schoolwork and financial obligations during COVID-19. One

quarter indicated that they unexpectedly lost funding for their education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, Indigenous learners also shared good news. Nearly three-quarters of respondents had managed to maintain their funding sources during this time. A little more than three-quarters had no issue with transferring funds to finance their education. Almost half had unexpectedly gained a new source of funding during the pandemic.

Figure 2: Proportion of frequency of unexpected and significant expenses because of the COVID-19 pandemic (n = 1753).



Accessing federal pandemic supports

The Government of Canada and many jurisdictions are responding to the pandemic by providing financial supports to those sectors of the population that have experienced financial stress as a result of pandemic restrictions.

On March 25, 2020 the Government of Canada announced the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) which provided up to \$2,000 a month for up to four months for workers who lost income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

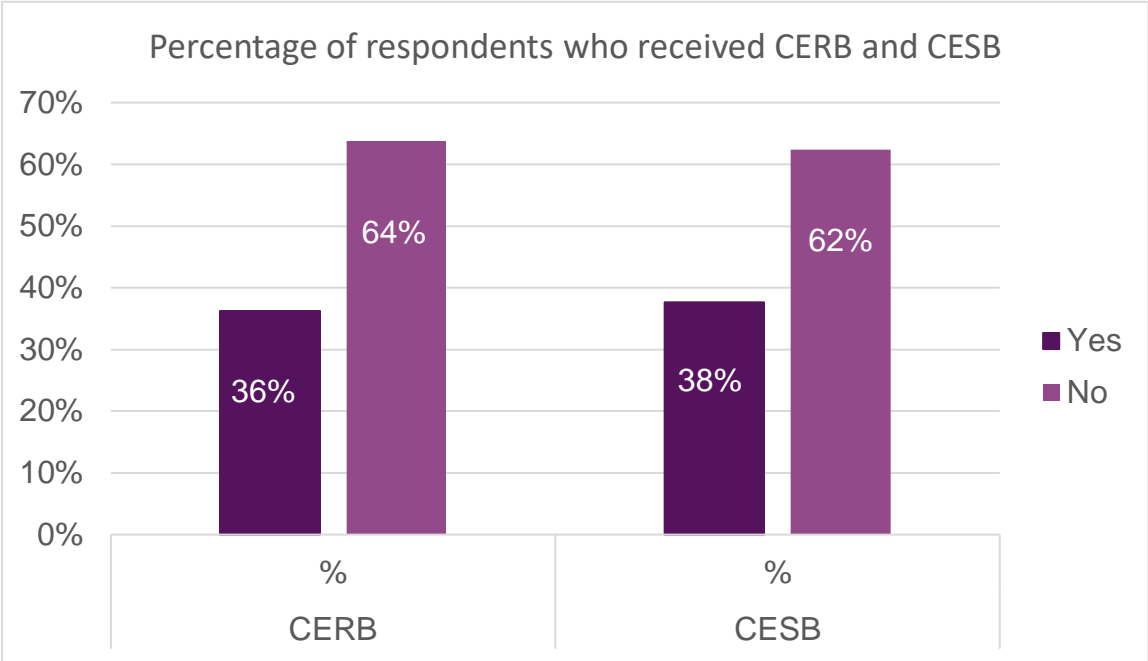
On April 22, 2020, the Government of Canada announced several measures to support post-secondary students, specifically including Indigenous students. The Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) was designed to assist post-secondary students whose employment prospects

were impacted by the pandemic in the summer of 2020 with a monthly benefit of \$1,250 per month or \$1,750 per month for those with dependents or disabilities.

As of October 2020, a total of 8,899,170 Canadians had applied for CERB, and \$81.64 billion was issued by the Canadian government (Government of Canada, 2020A). Additionally, a total of 708,440 Canadians applied for CESB, resulting in \$2.94 billion being issued by the Canadian government to assist students unable to secure employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Government of Canada, 2020B). However, data was not available on First Nations, Inuit or Métis beneficiaries’ access of CESB or CERB.

The Indigenous students surveyed were asked if they had benefited from the COVID-19 related relief benefits offered by the Canadian government (CERB or CESB). Of 2,804 responses, 1,016 (36.2 percent) Indigenous learners indicated that they had received CERB (**Figure 3**). A similar trend in responses was received from respondents indicating if they had or had not claimed the CESB. Of 2,870 Indigenous learners who responded, 1,079 (37.6 percent) respondents indicated that they had claimed CESB, while 1,791 (62.4 percent) had not.

Figure 3: Number and percentage of respondents to the Following the Path survey who indicated whether they had received CERB or CESB CERB (n = 2,804) and CESB (n = 2,870) respectively.



Conclusion

This report highlights some of the experiences that Indigenous post-secondary students have encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicate that a small proportion of students did apply for CERB or CESB during the pandemic. Many students were able to maintain their funding sources during the pandemic. However, a proportion of students lost funding they would normally use for their education because of the pandemic. Employment outcomes for Indigenous students have also been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A considerable proportion of students reported they were unable to gain employment during the pandemic. Further, many reported frequently incurring unexpected expenses.

Altered course delivery is impacting the success of many Indigenous students since the pandemic was declared. For now, courses are only offered online, and many students indicated they do not have an adequate workspace at home, which would require a computer, internet access, and a quiet space to focus on their studies. In addition, Indigenous students are experiencing extremely high levels of mental health strain. Some students are experiencing elevated levels of anxiety, depression and pessimism about the future.

As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, post-secondary closures continue to significantly impact the lives of many Indigenous students. Given the frequency of unexpected expenses, the barriers to accessing course content, and the extensive financial stress students are bearing related to the pandemic, Indigenous students are particularly and especially strained. Nearly 90 percent report mental health challenges. Over 60 percent are pessimistic about the future. At times like these, the support of organizations like Indspire becomes even more critical.

Indspire's programming must continue to support Indigenous learners as they strive to make achievements for themselves, their families, and their communities throughout even greater adversity. As they continue their studies, at times away from home and without reliable Internet or the means to stay consistently connected to family and community, we must act to support them. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, we must consider their needs when making decisions that can ultimately alleviate these burdens.

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