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Special Issue

Hong Kong university students under COVID-19 pandemic

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EDITORIAL

Psychological well-being in Hong Kong university students under COVID-19

Daniel TL Shek^{1,1*}, PhD, FHKPS, BBS, SBS, JP, Xiaoqin Zhu¹, PhD, Diya Dou¹, PhD, and Joav Merrick²⁻⁵, MD, MMedSci, DMSc

¹Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, PR China

²National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Jerusalem, Israel

³Department of Pediatrics, Mt Scopus Campus, Hadassah Medical Center and Faculty of Medicine, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

⁴Kentucky Children's Hospital, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA

⁵Center for Healthy Development, School of Public Health, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges for people in different life stages, particularly university students. With social distancing and school lockdown, the learning modes of university students have changed tremendously. With almost sole reliance on online teaching and learning, students have to learn at home, which may not be the best place to study. With reduction in interaction with peers, social support may also diminish. In the reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic, Shek (1) pointed out 12 reflections associated with the pandemic, including problems on digital divide and poverty. In another paper examining the responses to the pandemic, Shek, Leung and Tan (2) highlighted the importance of examining the mental health of people under the pandemic.

With specific reference to Hong Kong, university students faced many challenges under the pandemic. First, as mentioned above, changing learning mode was a big challenge. This is especially the case, because the flats in Hong Kong are small and students may lack privacy, when they attend the online lectures. If there are several children at home, they also compete for computer and Wifi resources. Second, because of city lockdown, the social life of university students was much affected, which may lead to reduced social support and increased conflicts

^{1*} **Correspondence:** Daniel TL Shek, PhD, FHKPS, BBS, SBS, JP, Associate Vice President (Undergraduate Programme), Chair Professor of Applied Social Sciences and Li and Fung Professor in Service Leadership Education, Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hunghom, Hong Kong, PR China. E-mail: daniel.shek@polyu.edu.hk

with the family. Third, for many university students, they had to take up part-time work to support their living. Under the pandemic, such part-time work opportunities (such as working as private tutors and sales) were reduced substantially, hence creating an economic burden for university students. If their parents also lost their jobs or they have reduced income, these constituted additional stressors for the students. Finally, the pandemic severely restricted the offshore learning opportunities for the students, such as going outbound for work-integration and student exchange programs.

In view of the challenges faced by university students under the pandemic, there is a need to understand the psychological well-being of university students under COVID-19 (3-5). Besides, it is noteworthy that there are several gaps in this field. First, there are few studies studying psychological well-being in university students in Hong Kong. Second, few studies include measures of both psychological morbidity and positive mental health in a single study. Third, few studies have examined both risk factors and protective factors in a single study based on an ecological perspective. In particular, how positive psychological constructs (such as resilience and emotional competence) can help to “protect” university students under the pandemic has not been systematically examined. Fourth, there is not much work on service utilization and views on the service provided by the University under the pandemic.

In view of these research gaps and with financial support from the University Grants Committee (UGC), we conducted a study on the psychological well-being, needs, risk factors and protective factors in university students from January to June 2021. Besides collecting survey data ($N = 1,648$), we also collected qualitative data via focus groups from students ($N = 111$ in 23 focus groups) and teachers ($N = 26$ in 5 groups). We attempted to answer several research questions as follows:

- Research question 1: What is the psychological well-being (indexed by mental health symptoms and positive

mental health attributes) of university students during the pandemic?

- Research question 2: What are the inter-relationships among COVID-19 stress, intrapersonal factors (e.g., resilience), interpersonal factors, and developmental outcomes?
- Research question 3: What are the needs and perceived stress of university students during the pandemic?
- Research question 4: How do university students perceive university services during the pandemic?
- Research question 5: What are the inter-relationships amongst need satisfaction, difficulties encountered in different life domains, evaluation of services, and the mental health status of students?
- Research question 6: What are the experiences of students and teachers during the pandemic?
- Research question 7: How do the different service providers evaluate their service?
- Research question 8: What are the recommendations regarding how to support students during the pandemic?

In this special issue, we document the background and research gaps in the literature, research questions, methodology, results and theoretical as well as practical implications of the study. We earnestly hope that the study can help to build up theoretical models on the adjustment of university students to the pandemic and develop practice directions in promoting psychological well-being of university students.

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