

# Student mental health ‘holding up’ during pandemic

Australian surveys, focused on Melbourne in lockdown, uncover surprisingly upbeat findings

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Students’ spirits have not slumped as the pandemic has progressed, Australian research suggests, with successive surveys showing little sign of a mounting mental health toll.

[Monash University](#) psychologists have found that students’ average scores for stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, sleep impairment and social isolation remained “steady” over three waves of their study, even as conditions in Melbourne – easily Australia’s worst struck city so far – deteriorated markedly.

The surveys, which have attracted between 1,000 and 1,500 responses each, started in late May when Covid restrictions were being eased across Australia. But the second round in mid-July occurred about a week after Melbourne’s resurgent coronavirus caseload had triggered a level three lockdown, with people banned from receiving visitors and only allowed to leave home for limited reasons.

The survey's third wave came a month later, about a fortnight after the implementation of two months of level four restrictions. An overnight curfew had been introduced, a state of disaster declared and even tighter restrictions imposed on exercise and shopping.

Mental health indicators remained largely unchanged through this period. They spiked slightly in the survey's fourth round in early October, as the state government prepared to ease the restrictions – a finding the researchers attribute to “looming assignments or exams”.

Study leader Kim Cornish said the results contradicted reports of an extreme mental health toll on students, suggesting their situation was little different from people in other walks of society and other parts of Australia.

“Students are confident they will get through semester two [now that] they realise they can get their grades online and perform well. There are issues, of course – elevated stress, elevated anxiety – [but] they're not all suffering and they're really resilient.”

The results suggest that students were more worried about their mental than physical health. Fears about infection peaked in July but have waned since then.

Students also reported feeling progressively more engaged, motivated and capable in their studies. Their biggest concerns were practical matters such as accessing stable internet and quiet places to study.

“We've not seen an inordinate rise of psychological problems,” Professor Cornish said. “If anything, students have been more bothered about their families and friends than themselves.

“Particularly, students seem to be bothered about Australia and the world next year – what jobs they will have, the ability to travel again. Their greatest concern appears to be what the world is going to look like.”

She said the study was thought to be the only longitudinal research into student well-being so far during the pandemic. Universities had surveyed their students at “one time point” or investigated particular aspects of mental health or social connectedness, but none had tracked general welfare factors for months.

“While [Covid has] been devastating, it has given us this unique window to survey students while they're at home. We would never have had that data, which is why we're very keen to continue collecting it.”

The study grew out of work Monash was [already doing](#) to help students monitor and maintain their well-being, using a digital portal and smartphone app modelled on a [Harvard University initiative](#). When Covid struck, the team adapted it for housebound students.

The survey has been tailored for Monash's indigenous, residential and Malaysia branch campus students as well as the general Melbourne population. Another round is planned in December.

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