



Digital Outreach to Post-Secondary Students During Covid-19



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Introduction

Since March 2020, universities across Québec have shifted their classes to online platforms as a result of COVID-19. Since then, digital outreach to students has become a focal point for universities. In the first nine months of the pandemic, there were many underlying obstacles that minimized the efficiency of online outreach and the teaching methods that have raised discussions about accessibility and engagement. Many post-secondary students are struggling to maintain their focus while studying from home for a variety of reasons.

Context

There are a couple of specific barriers influencing the effectiveness of digital outreach or online classes for post-secondary students. Issues with mental health, accessibility, and cost are impediments to pursuing educational goals. According to [CBC News](#), burnout is affecting students across Québec, affirming the challenges of staying motivated and engaged while learning from home.

Regarding mental health, young adults are already an age group with higher probabilities of dealing with mental health and issues of stability ([Montreal Gazette, 2020](#)). COVID-19 and life in lockdown have accentuated these struggles. [Montreal Gazette](#) explained that half of university students in Québec are experiencing signs of anxiety, major depression and post-traumatic stress. This psychological distress prevents people from pursuing their studies and regardless of how well digital outreach might be done, mental health factors will be a barrier for academic success. Therefore, to guarantee real engagement with online schooling, mental health has to be a top priority for universities in Québec.

When considering accessibility to online education, outreach is only effective when students have a reliable wifi connection, a calm space to study and own a device to work from. Housing situations vary drastically among post-secondary students. In the current situation, most people in households are

working remotely at the same time so there is a need for high speed internet connection to ensure that people can continue in school and utilize online methods of education. The digital sphere allows for adaptation and adjustment and universities should use this to their advantage in order to make classes and communication more malleable and adaptable to individual schedules and needs. In addition, the government has to ensure that accessibility is equal through the province; students in some areas of Québec are unable to stay in school because of faulty wifi connection.

Canada had roughly 642,000 international students in 2019 ([Macleans, 2020](#)) and many universities are seeing a significant drop in international student enrolment ([CTV News, 2020](#)). Tuition has not been lowered even though the experience available to students has been cut down. In addition, international students often return to their home country and are required to study at unusual times because of the difference in time zones. Communication between teachers and students is harder at the moment and frustration has become a big factor in students and professor's realities. Accessibility should increase instead of decrease if the tools provided by online teaching were used effectively. Universities are forecasted to lose up to CA\$ 3.4 billion this year and a significant amount is due to the drop in international students, who make up to 7.5% of their revenue ([CTV News, 2020](#)). The cost of tuition is not only affecting international students, a third of local cegep and university students are also considering dropping out because they see no justification on the maintenance of price considering the financial stress students are under ([CTV News, 2020](#)).

Suggestions

Although digital outreach methods have improved since the beginning of quarantine in Québec, they have not been sufficient enough to keep the post-secondary youth engaged. Universities have a big part to play in the solution. They are responsible for clearly defining what platforms will be used in

the courses, like moodle and zoom, and informing teachers and students on how to properly navigate them. A training program at the start of the semester would be beneficial for everyone involved. Many teachers have not been able to adapt to the technology necessary and some have kept the same curriculum and method of teaching. There is an urgent need for efficient training ([Wotto, 2020](#)). Although traditional teaching methods have worked in the past, teaching methodologies must adapt to the digital environment to guarantee educational quality and retention.

The first step is to unify and clarify what platforms will be used. The second step would be for teachers and students should go through a training session on how to navigate those platforms. In addition, teaching methods must be adapted to the digital environment. By organizing these aspects, the burn out effect will not completely disappear, however, it can be minimized if people feel like they are in control of their tasks and feel they have a sufficient degree of understanding to complete them.

Mental health issues affect many university students and post-secondary institutions should invest in better accessibility to therapy and counseling. Although many universities and cegeps offer counseling services to students, the professionals are commonly understaffed for the high demand ([Grégoire et al., 2018](#)). Mental health programs in universities need reinforcement and specialized treatment focused on preventive measures that are in accordance with student's needs ([Grégoire et al., 2018](#)).

Many students are asking for lower tuition. Concordians, for example, are voting for a pass or fail system to relieve pressure during troubling times and a reduction on tuition fees. The drop out numbers could decrease with lower tuition fees which would be beneficial for both the university and its students. The fact that many people are dropping out to re-enrol once classes are presencial again mayl create mass applications in the future, making it harder to enter university as the minimum grades rise with competition ([CTV News, 2020](#)). This indicates that reducing tuition fees would be beneficial for the people who have to pay, for the

university who will have a lower drop-out rate and future students who could possibly have an elevated competition level.

Accessibility to online content has to be reinforced across the province. Students must have a high speed internet to be able to access the content of classes and attend online meetings. There can be many people working and studying online simultaneously in the same household, therefore internet access must be strong enough to allow multiple people to browse through online platforms at the same time. Québec's government could cooperate with private companies/internet providers to guarantee that the students from areas that are most affected by the lack of internet access are still able to successfully complete school.

Conclusion

Digital outreach has become a focal point for universities since the majority of classes transitioned to online platforms. These are troubling times for many people, and universities across Québec have the opportunity to work towards providing a more direct and less stressful routine. Pre-existing issues that have been accentuated with COVID-19 and isolation can be dealt with by educational institutions. The suggestions listed above would be beneficial for the universities in Québec; they must have a more proactive approach to guarantee the maintenance and quality of life of all their employees, current post-secondary students and future students in the province.



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