

Graduate Students: Your Feelings are Valid, You are Not Alone

I don't think anyone could have predicted the whirlwind of events that have transpired over the past few months. Yes, it is a lot to handle, and personally, I've never felt more inclined to turn off news channels and remove myself from social media platforms just to take a step back and prioritize my mental health. As a PhD candidate, I was supposed to implement my dissertation, defend, and graduate months ago. The global pandemic significantly altered my school and post-school plans, and the great uncertainty of my future, along with the fear of becoming infected or a family member becoming infected by the coronavirus, has only added to the pre-existing stress I've imposed upon myself as a graduate student researcher. My stress and related feelings about my current status and future are valid, and so are yours.

Why We Are Writing

The Division of International Special Education and Services (DISES) surveyed 19 graduate students on an international scale (i.e., United States, England, Turks and Caicos Islands, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Australia, and Canada) to better understand how their research (e.g., doctoral student dissertations or theses) have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. This article is not intended to be another heartbreaking message to push aside or delete from your inboxes, but rather, a notice of recognition for graduate students across the globe--that yes, we do hear you, yes we acknowledge your struggles, and no, you are not alone.

What We Found

We asked several graduate students, on an international level studying and supporting students with disabilities, to tell us about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their research and post-school endeavors. From Australia to Zimbabwe, from the Turks and Caicos Islands to the United States, graduate students reported how graduations and conferences were cancelled, research studies delayed, funding lost, and how hiring freezes halted job searches altogether. One student from Australia actually decided to alter their career path as a result of the pandemic, explaining "I am now planning to work in industry or the public service rather than academia as there are no jobs and the sector is collapsing." Mental health is also a concern for graduate students across the globe. For instance, one student from Turks and Caicos Islands reported that "Mentally, it has been tasking, this period," with another from Nigeria also pleading--"I wish the pandemic to stop."

How You Can Help

If you are a university employee, we ask that you reflect upon how you are personally addressing your graduate students' wellbeing. How can you support us professionally and personally? If you are a graduate student, talk to your advisors about back-up plans. Be prepared to have a plan A, plan B, and even a plan C. Also check-in with your colleagues, because they may be struggling too but are afraid to vocalize their concerns out of fear of being "the only one to feel this way." Believe me, you're not. We must all support each other during this critical time, because we are all in this together, even if we're six-feet apart.

Written By: **Katherine R. Brendli**, PhD Candidate
DISES Communications Committee