

Original Paper

COVID and Me: Taiwan University Student Experience during the 2020-2021 COVID Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper examines university student experience during the COVID epidemic in 2020 and 2021 in two universities in Taiwan. The paper's content is based on a questionnaire with 17 questions distributed to 35 students at National Taipei University of Business and National Taiwan University of Science and Technology in the fall 2021 semester. After an introduction that describes my experience teaching online in Taiwan in 2021, I allow students provide initial comments about their experience at school, home, and in normal life in the city of Taipei during the epidemic. From there I moved into methodology and theoretical background on the meaning and impact of the crisis. I then Provide additional information, including a look at behavior, emotions and practical measures taken during the epidemic. I then comment on the Taiwan government response to the epidemic, and the measures taken to ensure safety in Taiwan. There is then student evaluation of the broader view of the international impact of COVID. The paper then concludes with comments from teachers, and a look at the present and into the future, possibly post-COVID.

Keywords

COVID, epidemic, Taiwan students, Taiwan government, family and personal life, school, online/distance learning, loneliness, adaptation

1. Introduction

I have written about Taiwan university students and my teaching during the COVID pandemic in other publications, but the following paper will go into much greater detail and analysis. This time in teaching has been very challenging, at times frustrating, and has introduced new aspects of teacher/student interaction and communication. I am an associate professor at the National Taipei University of Business (NTUB) and have taught English subjects in colleges and universities for 20 years in Taiwan. Prior to this I taught at several other schools, including Shih Xin University and

National Taipei University of Technology during the SARS strike in 2003. And so, I have had experience with students, 18-24 years and older, during times like this.

To make a long story short, in 2020 and beginning in 2021, Taiwan faced few of the problems that were common around the world during the COVID pandemic. The nation received global recognition for its excellent handling of the crisis, there were few cases and deaths, and virtually no businesses or schools were closed during this time. Taiwan implemented strong mechanisms to combat the crisis, including border controls, new data and technology to identify cases, quarantine measures, extensive contact tracing, information to the public and combatting misinformation, contact and exchange with other countries (Taiwan was given great credit for providing medical materials to other countries, and several have in turn provided Taiwan the same), formulation of policies toward schools and childcare, and voucher economic relief to citizens and businesses (wang, 2020).

This all changed in May 2021, when the viral epidemic broke out in force in Taiwan. Hundreds of local cases and many deaths were documented daily, and the danger level spiked to a near emergency level. At this time, all schools in Taiwan were closed and distance learning became the only outlet. I held all of my classes at NTUB and National Taiwan University of Science and Technology (NTUST) remotely using the Line application, and remote, distance learning became the “new normal” in Taiwan education. Fortunately, by late July the crisis had subsided, and the Taiwan Central Epidemic Command Center (ably led by Chen Shih-chung, 陳時中) had regained control of the virus. It was announced that schools would open normally in September (primary and secondary schools were under some restrictions, while colleges and universities were to mostly open normally). I began to prepare to return to the “old normal” (with face mask on at all times)—but this changed by late August, when it was announced that schools would not reopen, and that online/distance classes would be required for at least the first four weeks of the fall 2021 semester.

Certainly, COVID issues and education were very much on the mind of Taiwanese students and parents during this time. A poll conducted by the Taiwan Youth Association for Democracy and several non-governmental organizations in August, 2021 found that of 4,024 people, 88 percent felt that school days should start later, with 33.8 percent of respondents supporting delaying start times to 9:30 am, and 32 percent saying that classes should start between 8:30am and 9:30 am (classes normally start at 8:00 am in university, and sometimes earlier). It also showed that 26.6 percent supported non-compulsory attendance at autonomous study periods that take place before classes start, as well as additional extracurricular activities outside of school. Of the respondents, 63.7 percent were high-school students, 26.1 percent were students at elementary or junior-high schools, 5.6 percent were university students and 3.3 percent were parents (from Hsiao, August 19, 2021).

I felt my online teaching at NTUB and NTUST during the serious strike in May and thereafter would be fairly easy, but that did not prove to be true, and in fact, online teaching requires a good bit of exertion. I normally used a PPT shared with students to enable my teaching, and be sure, nursing these PPTs into shape took a great deal of time and effort. Using materials like this in online classes was a tad

unsophisticated, almost static in approach, and although students can learn new things this way, combined with the lack of communicative value seen in online teaching, this caused problems. On this note, online classes truly do reduce the interaction and contact of students and teachers. This was problematic, but not the worst possible outcome, and I was still able to teach students, using PPTs, handouts, films, and other materials. Online classes have their own distinct feeling in terms of connection between students and teachers. This is, there is a given “technical connection” less apparent than in-class learning, but which does have a certain appeal. Some students, and perhaps even teachers, actually enjoy the space created in online learning, it can be relaxing in its way, and a number told me it was simply more convenient.

As noted, in late summer 2021, it was believed that universities and most other schools would open normally in September (in fact my daughter’s pre-school had opened, and students were allowed to attend, in July). I looked forward to this but it was not to be, and so I launched my distance learning methods again in September, this time using the Google Meet app. The feeling was about the same as in May and June—one was able to conduct classes, but the distinct feeling of not truly being in contact with students continued. Through all of this, students and I again felt the impact of the epidemic on education and life.

Let me turn to the comment that there may be a given “novelty” that this paper might employ or indicate. I did not set out to write anything “novel” in this paper, my aim was a credible, sound report on the factors and facts that I have and will discuss. There is some uniqueness, in that I think this is just about the first complete examination in an academic sense of the COVID pandemic in Taiwan, particularly its impact on college-age students—this is nearly a first. The pandemic has certainly had a great impact on life in Taiwan, not least in universities where I teach. I have written about this aspect in other publications, see “Teaching during Epidemics: New Models,” *European Association of Taiwan Studies, News* No.19, January 2022, pp. 27-29).

Briefly, this has been my experience teaching during the pandemic in Taiwan, with additional commentary on the structure and content of this paper. Let’s hope the future holds better, and that we can get back into classrooms soon, talking and interrelating with each other.

2. Initial Observations and Methodology

The focus of this paper is to look at what NTUB and NTUST students felt and experienced during this crisis. In terms of my methodology, I distributed a questionnaire with 17 questions to 35 students covering aspects of their experience during this time (see Appendix 1, my questionnaire with numeric answers). In order to limit and control response to the extent possible, I limited most answers to three specific choices. I also asked for comments from students on their experiences in the questionnaire, and also performed email interviews. I will focus on these findings and commentary in this paper, while referring now and again to external sources of opinion and commentary.

My questionnaire was not overly complex, though I would not call it “simple.” I asked questions

ranging across feelings and opinions about the COVID epidemic and its impact on individuals, families and schools; various preferences and predilections in terms of behaviors exhibited during the epidemic; opinions across local, national and international topics; and attendance to varied factual information. As noted, in addition to my questionnaire, I conducted email interviews with a number of respondents. My statistical analysis is simply the formulation of the averages of responses across the population I do not perform more high-level statistical analysis, and believe that the design of my questionnaire is reasonable and sound, and thus I do not need to delve into various statistical or random survey errors—the results can reasonably speak for themselves. I can judiciously say I have reached a specific and representative sample of respondents (students) that can be seen in terms of the range of Taiwan's universities (specifically “national” as opposed to “private” schools). All in all, I have sensibly addressed the identities of the sample respondents, dealt with certain difficulties like hard-to-reach or reluctant-to-respond respondents, selected favorable modes for posing questions and collecting responses, dealt with interviews rationally, checked data for accuracy and consistency, and adjusted any estimates in appropriate ways.

To get right into the main focus of this paper, observe here comments made by students about COVID, life and leaning, to see just what they felt during the last 1.5 years. (Note 1) Hannah Lai (NTUB, age 16) noted that “I feel lonely during the pandemic because I am the only child, and no one chats with me at home from Monday to Friday,” conveying a not-uncommon feeling of a lack of communication and connection, and loneliness, during the pandemic. “I think online classes are not as effective as school in real life, since there really is no one knowing if we are actually listening or not,” said Zoe Lin (NTUB, 16), commenting on another common concern. Jessie Lee (NTUB, 19), an exchange student from Vietnam, informed me that she was, “Anxious. I received information that I passed the school in May, but at that time Vietnam began to quarantine, people were limited to going out and Taiwan was also closed. I'm afraid I won't be able to go to Taiwan to study with everyone this year.”

Reflecting on the changes in May 2021, Catie Tseng (NTUB, 16) said that “Unexpectedly, the epidemic in Taiwan was getting worse and worse. Seriously, almost everyone started to be alert and did not dare to go out, because it was dangerous, so I slowly got [used to] this idea.” Indeed, “getting used to” the epidemic was a constant challenge faced by people worldwide. Nikki Lin (NTUB, 16) expressed appreciation that the government had generally done an excellent job of combatting the virus (more on this below), but then noted,

The whole virus situation has been pretty serious everywhere in Taiwan. This forces us to stay at home more and take online classes. Thus, we can't really go out to have fun or see our friends. Also, I can't go dancing in dance studios, either. Another inconvenient thing now is that we have to scan QR codes before entering stores, shopping malls and even on public transportation.

To be sure Lin spoke correctly about QR-code contact tracing, which has been widely used in Taiwan and identified several potential emergences of the virus in the public. On a more positive note, although she felt anxious because she could not see friends as often, Lin went on that “I [was] grateful because

staying at home provides me more time to spend quality time with myself. I can get to know myself a bit better and enjoy my hobbies.”

Jacqueline Lin (NTUB, 16) was “stressed,” and said that “I was very sad, because I couldn’t see my best friends and we couldn’t have a nice lunch together.” One student, Sandra Shih (NTUB, 16) saw both the good and the bad, commenting that “Because of the pandemic, most of the people change[d] their lifestyle and...stay[ed] at home, the government also need[ed] to deal with many different problems.” She then went on more hopefully that “Because of the pandemic, most of the people change their lifestyle and prefer to stay at home, the government also need to deal with many different problems, although I sincerely hope the pandemic could end soon, but I look forward to the changes that pandemic brings us, especially the improvement of the Internet and technology.” Her comment here might be particularly directed toward new developments in online/distance learning. Shih, saw a positive in distance/online learning, saying that

Although I like to stud[y] in school, stud[ying] from home is more convenient, you can deal almost everything with having a computer with you, and you don’t have to carry books around or go to different classrooms to take various classes. Having class online means we don’t need to spend time on transportation, and I can have more free time for my hobbies or to relax, I think stud[ying] or work[ing] online would be a good option for me if something like this happened again.

Most students did not feel this way, finding distance/online learning somewhat challenging and difficult. Susan Lin (NTUB, 16) said that “...although the online class is convenient, I can’t meet our classmates and teachers,” conveying this common belief during the crisis.

3. Background

Let’s look now at some contextual considerations. Students everywhere have wrestled with the constraints upon them, and needless to say, schools have closed around the world. When they were open at all, there were many doubts and questions about wearing masks, social distancing, general safety, the necessity of vaccinations, the value of distance learning and online teaching, and the impact this all had on students and their communication with teachers. The Brookings Institution (a nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington) reported that “there is uncertainty about how school closures last spring impacted student achievement, as well as how the rapid conversion of most instruction to an online platform this academic year will continue to affect achievement. [Making] informed decisions about whether and when to return to in-person instruction remains difficult. Even now, education leaders must grapple with seemingly impossible choices that balance health risks associated with in-person learning against the educational needs of children, which may be better served when kids are in their physical schools” (Kuhfeld, 2020). Brookings went on to note that “Amidst all this uncertainty, there is growing consensus that school closures in spring 2020 likely had negative effects on student learning” (Kuhfeld, 2020). From there, the group asked, “Have students made learning gains since schools physically closed, and how do these gains compare to gains in a

more typical year?” and answered by saying “In almost all grades, the majority of students made some learning gains in both reading and math since the COVID-19 pandemic started, though gains were smaller in math in 2020 relative to the gains students in the same grades made in the winter 2019-fall 2019 period” (Kuhfeld, 2020). So far, so good it seems, but Suzanne B. Goldberg of the U.S. Department of Education went on to list numerous aspects of a “developing story” in education at various levels during the pandemic, including the following. These answers have been edited and abbreviated.

- The pandemic has negatively affected academic development, and appears to have deepened the impact of disparities in access and opportunity in education, especially for students of color in public schools.
- For many learners, the abrupt shift to learning from home amid the challenges of the pandemic has made the struggle even harder.
- For many students with disabilities, COVID-19 has significantly disrupted education and related aids and services needed to support their academic progress.
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer students are at an increased risk of isolation and abuse from unsupportive or actively hostile members of the public.
- Nearly all students have experienced some challenges to their mental health and well-being during the pandemic and have lost access to school-based services and supports.
- Many institutions of higher education that serve students of color and students from low-income backgrounds have seen declines in enrollment since the pandemic began (2021).

To be sure all of the above indicates how citizens, and not least students, are feeling tremendous stress due to the pandemic. Tina Lo (NTUST, 21) reflecting on the impact to her technical education (which she will comment on again below), wrote that “I felt stressed because I can’t know the semester grading for every homework and tests (most of courses didn’t announce the homework and test grade online), that is important for a research institute recommendation.”

The *Taipei Times* reported on September 6 that almost half of the population of the country was experiencing stress due to COVID-19. The National Suicide Prevention Center and the Taiwanese Society of Suicidology conducted a poll, asking 2,219 people aged 15 or older whether the virus had affected them emotionally. Just over 45 percent said that they had felt stress due to the virus. Taiwanese Society of Suicidology director Lee Ming-been (李明濱) urged those feeling pressure due to the pandemic “not to ignore its emotional effects and seek medical help, as long-term stress can have adverse effects” (Staff writer, *Taipei Times*, September 6, 2021). We will see that this is very much true with the Taiwanese students examined in this report. A second report on September 30 reported that fully 13.3 percent of students were “very anxious” about returning to school, and 11.8 percent were “extremely anxious” (see Hsiao, *Taipei Times*, September 30, 2021).

It was later reported that the social media site Twitter had “introduced in Taiwan a mental health feature that seeks to prevent self-harm or suicide.” The work was done in concert with Taiwan Lifeline

International, a mental health organization in Taiwan. “People are experiencing anxiety and depression mainly because they have lost control in their lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the drastic changes throughout society,” said Taiwan Lifeline International president Huang Chun-sen (黃俊森) (Staff writer, *Taipei Times*, October 10, 2021).

All of this gives us a larger look at the impact of COVID in life, education and people’s psychology. Now let’s look at additional analysis, and include commentary on what students in Taiwan are actually thinking and feeling.

4. Additional Analysis

To be sure, students have been a primary focus of people and governments during the pandemic. As *Bostonia Magazine* said in its review of youth, schools and the pandemic in the summer 2021 issue (referring to the rock band The Who), “THE KIDS ARE—*stressed, anxious, lonely, struggling, learning, grateful, adapting*—ALRIGHT” (Moskowitz, 2021; 39). Although this article was discussing very young students, under college age, university students in Taiwan were concerned in similar ways during the crisis. And indeed, students responded to one of my questions, which asked about these factors. Hannah Lai answered that “I feel lonely during the pandemic.... In the beginning, I didn’t used to be alone at home from Monday to Friday, so I spent a period of time to get used to it. Finally, I am used to being alone at home now.” Kevin Xue (NTUB, 16) said simply, “I think I’m lonely, because I can’t meet the classmates.” Regis Jourdan Sena, an Indonesian exchange student in Taiwan (NTUST, 19), expressed gratitude and a touch of dissatisfaction, saying,

I was grateful for the online schooling, as it allowed me to study at my own pace which has helped my academics greatly. It has also made my family time more abundant seeing as it cut down on traveling times to and from the school. It has made it harder for me to meet friends and socialize but we can’t pick and choose the situations we’re held up against, all we can do is make the best of it.

Henry Wu (NTUST, 23), very much felt these emotions, and also noted the impact on teaching, saying, The feeling I experienced the most during the pandemic is lonely. As mentioned above, my work changed to teach students by the laptop, and can’t see their face. This made me feel so alone, in my opinion, the best teaching way is face to face which I can see the emotion and judge how should I teach them. So, during the pandemic, the most feeling I...experienced was lonely.

Sandra Shih also felt that “During the pandemic, I often felt lonely, because I couldn’t go anywhere except staying at home; my parents were both busy with their work, and I can only chat with my friends when they’re online.” Cindy Lee (NTUB, 16) said “To be honest, I feel strongly lonely. I still have to get used to it someday no matter there is a pandemic or not.” When asked if she felt anxious, depressed or lonely, Lee said simply, “Yes, a great deal.” We see here that loneliness was clearly a prominent emotion during the crisis, (Note 2) although Mickayla Moffat, an exchange student from South Africa at NTUB (age, 20), also felt “Grateful, grateful we are all healthy.” Also more positive, Thomas Lin (NTUST, 19, going on 20, he tells me), expressed some thanks for all that had happened,

saying,

Interestingly the pandemic let me have the chance to slow things down, and I can find my passion. Another thing is I had a good time with my parents. During this summer, we know each other more and had more connections. If it were not for the pandemic, I couldn't have close relationship like now.

Vivian Xu (NTUB, 18) answered that "Adapting [to] the environment and situation I am in, we can't choose what barriers we are going to face. So, if we are good at adapting we can live happier" (several students wrote of adaptation to the crisis, and this is likely a function of a given pragmatic quality in many Taiwanese people). Nikki Lin felt anxiety at not being able to meet as often with friends, but on a more positive note observed that "I choose grateful because staying at home provides me more time to spend quality time with myself. I can get to know myself a bit better and enjoy my hobbies."

We see in these comments many of the challenges and difficulties faced by Taiwanese students during the pandemic. I will endeavor to continue to examine these factors and problems in the following, and heed student remarks on all of them. The same *Bostonia* article notes that "kids—and families" have been "really resilient" during the COVID epidemic (Moskowitz, 2021; 45). We have seen this already in the comments from my students.

5. The Crisis in School, at Home, and in Ordinary Life

At the highest level, first question in my questionnaire asked, "What was the: "Impact on ordinary life in the city;" "Impact on jobs and work;" and "Impact on the people and government of Taiwan." (I would later ask a question about impact on personal and family life.) Answers here ran across "Very serious impact," "Somewhat serious impact," "Not terribly serious," "Not at all serious." The following answers were given (not all students provided these specific answers, and some instead offered commentary, and thus I will not break these answers down into percentages, as the full 35 did not answer all the questions).

Table 1. Impact of COVID and Views of COVID in Government

Impact on ordinary life in the city.	Very serious impact—9
	Somewhat serious impact—5
	Not terribly serious—6
	Not at all serious—1
Impact on jobs and work.	Very serious impact—6
	Somewhat serious impact—7
	Not terribly serious—2
	Not at all serious—6
My view of the impact on the people and government of Taiwan.	Very serious impact—7
	Somewhat serious impact—6

Not terribly serious—7

Not at all serious—1

It is interesting, and perhaps not surprising, to note that there are very few “Not at all serious” answers, although there are a number of “not terribly serious.” Impact on ordinary life was quite serious, with 14 of 21 respondents ranking it “very,” or “somewhat serious.” You could say the same about impact on jobs and work, and the views of impact on the people and government are rather serious. We should note that rather than jobs and work (which only a few students are engaged in), the effect on schooling and education (not shown above) was more important, and in this respect, in answer to the question “How did the pandemic disrupt your schooling during 2020 and 2021?” the impact in 2020 was generally “Not very disruptive” (54 percent of respondents, not surprising), and in 2021 was “Very” or “Somewhat” disruptive” (91 percent, also not surprising). In the same answers, in 2020 45 percent found the impact “Very” or “Somewhat disruptive,” and in 2021 eight percent found the impact “Not very disruptive.”

Note that Mickayla Moffat’s view of the impact on people and government in the above questions was in her home, South Africa, and they were “not very helpful.” To move ahead a bit in terms of our analysis, she went on that the

South African government is not very helpful in any situation, our government does not take care of our people and does not spend (tax) money wisely. People don’t obey the rules and do not wear masks. Almost everyone I know has had COVID (friends and family) and we had some deaths. My life has been impacted a bit, I was in lockdown for 2 years and really struggled to get into Taiwan. I spent 2 years in my house because everything is online.

Moffat has outlined some problems that we will see again in this analysis. We will look at student response to the Taiwan government handling of the COVID crisis below.

The impact of the crisis at school has been commented on extensively by students thus far. Sherry Huang (NTUB, 18) observed that online/distance learning “reduces the fun of learning,” which may have been a common response from all students, and was certainly one of the challenges of these methods.

As noted, in 2020 the impact in school was not awfully disruptive, while with the advent of the epidemic in Taiwan in May 2021, the impact was deemed quite disruptive (I could say the same myself). Susan Lin observed simply that “the pandemic in Taiwan had become more and more serious, so we couldn’t go to school,” while Jun Ruan (NTUB, 21), an exchange student from Vietnam, stated that “My ordinary life has been effected very impact, I have to study from home, afraid go out.” Jacqueline Lin said “I hope the epidemic will get better so I can go back to school and have a nice lunch with my friends.” Duke Tsai noted that “We couldn’t go to school during the pandemic, so we took online classes. The online classes are convenient, but it’s too easy to [be distracted].” On a similar note, an abstracted Kevin Xue said that “I have the classes online, and I think it’s very boring.” In terms

of the COVID affect in school, Sandra Shih wrote that “I prefer to study in school, not only because I miss my buddies but I also like the atmosphere in classroom, it [helps] me concentrate more,” and also that “we have class online, so I could spend less on transportation and spend less time for going to school.” Sherry Huang spotted the changes in school when she commented that “There are many events that cannot be held. Some exams were also affected and stopped. Can’t have lunch with classmates.” Tina Lo found her education in science at NTUST impacted, writing that “Some of practice classes need to do in laboratory, so we were forced to stop classes and couldn’t finish the experiments,” and that “some of classes were replaced by asynchronous course (pre-recorded class), so they may be longer than the original time of classes, we need to take more time to finish the classes.” Thomas Lin articulated annoyance, writing that “We turned into online classes, some teachers used online meetings to have real time classes, and some decided to record videos and let students watch by themselves. It’s harder to concentrate, and the teaching quality wasn’t that good, either.”

One of the most prominent issues in terms of students and COVID in school was whether students should be required to wear masks during class. The World Health Organization advises that children under five do not need to wear masks, children 6-11 should follow local mandates, (Note 3) and that children over 11 should wear masks—which of course means all college-age students. Voices on both side of this issue have spoken out. One prominent editorial, endorsing masking, appeared in *The New York Times*—“We Studied One Million Students. This Is What We Learned About Masking,” by Kanecia Zimmerman and Danny Benjamin Jr. (August 11, 2021). This editorial stated that “Universal masking in schools can save lives,” and that “Masking...is one of the best, most readily available methods to protect [students] from the disease, with universal masking being one of the most effective and efficient strategies for preventing SARS-CoV-2 transmission in schools.” A second editorial, in *The Wall Street Journal*, took an opposing view, and discouraged masking—“The Case Against Masks for Children,” by Marty Makary and H. Cody Meissner (August 8, 2021). Simply put, this second article stated that “Authorities in many places took the cue to impose mandates in schools and elsewhere, on the theory that masks can’t do any harm. That isn’t true,” and “The possible psychological harm of widespread masking is...[a] worry.” These are the two sides of this issue. What do students in Taiwan students think?

On my questionnaire, I asked one question about mask wearing, which was, “What is your opinion of wearing masks in school?” with three possible answers: “1. I often refrain, 2. I sometimes refrain, and 3. I never refrain.” My questionnaire found that, surprisingly, many students “Often refrain” (37 percent), and 43 percent “Sometimes refrain.” Only 20 percent “Never refrain.” (Note 4) Although Hannah Lai replied that, “School did not ask us to wear masks at school compulsorily,” I myself observed students not wearing masks in school, and heard one story of a student who was suspended for refusing (“When I saw some classmates who didn’t wear their masks or didn’t wear them properly, I felt a little upset,” said Cindy Lee).

On the other hand, to be sure masks became much more prominent after the virus broke out in May 2021,

and virtually everyone in the country wore a mask at all times after that, well into the fall. “Everybody has to wear mask when they’re out of their house” said Kevin Xue, while Jacqueline Lin added “Everyone must put a mask on their face when they go out,” and Cindy Lee said “I always wear my mask,” and then added “I think wearing masks is not a big deal.” Zoe Lin commented that “I always wear a face mask in public, not only because it is required by the governments, but also as one of the most effective ways to protect ourselves from others who might carry the virus.”

Some students made efforts to help others during the crisis. Jessie Lee answered that “I have donated a small amount to charity in my country [Vietnam], and also send encouragement to those affected by the virus.” Jenny Chen (NTUB, 18), wrote that “I have encouraged the medical staff on the Internet, and thanked for their help.” At a smaller level, Cindy Lee said, “I have taught my grandmother how to scan the QR codes.” Jun Ruan said that “When I was a student at Tamkang University Chinese languages center, [I] help my friend to receive the Taiwan government supporting” (which may mean the government vouchers, or various other assistance activities, such as the provision of quarantine housing). Catie Tseng shared that “I gave my aunt some drinks and food during her quarantine,” while Hannah Lai, doing her small part, said that “I usually post some encouraging words on Instagram such as “Don’t feel panic, even though the pandemic condition is getting worse in Taiwan now. Believe in ourselves, we can defeat the pandemic successfully.” In one pragmatic take, Zoe Lin said “I did my best to help my family stop thinking too much, also getting stressed by the idea of having COVID. I often change the topic of the conversation in order to shift their attention from the fear and make sure my grandmother doesn’t wash her hands too much. I think one of the best, easy, and effective ways to support people who contribute in the pandemic like the frontline medical workers, is to follow the rules and reducing the risk of contracting the virus.” Sherry Huang said simply “I will always care about the mood of friends who stay at home for a long-time due to the epidemic, and see how well they are at home,” and Matthew Abalos (a Taiwanese-born Filipino in NTUB, 18) offering a bit of true comity, said that “Some friends of mine sometimes get depressed or feeling lonely, I would talk to them and simply cheer them up!” As Sherry Huang said, “we must not only protect ourselves, we must protect others.”

Mickayla Moffat, said “Yes I had to take care of my parents and some of my friends and my grandparents. (they all had COVID including myself).” Only a few others knew people who had contracted the virus, but at times there were tragic results. The writer of this paper and his family members did indeed contract the virus, though none seriously.

In an additional question, at home and in their personal lives, students had views including that the impact of the pandemic was “Significant” (31 percent), “Somewhat significant” (57 percent), and “Not significant” (11 percent). Jacqueline Lin had a positive view at home, noting that “Maybe family relationships will get better” during the epidemic. Duke Tsai noted in terms of his family, “My parents need to work at home, and me and my brother have to take online classes,” and that “We can’t eat outside, many people cook by themselves at home.” Jean Hong (NTUB, 18) commented that she cooked at home, and “I used Foodpanda and Uber Eats”—ordering out and taking delivery, which became very

widespread during the epidemic. Similarly, Thomas Lin “stayed at home most of the time, and ordered Uber Eats a lot.” On a less positive note, Zoe Lin commented that “from May-June 2021, since everyone stayed at home, my family members and I clashed a lot. Therefore, I struggled a lot in this specific period.”

This writer’s mother and other family members contracted the virus, but fortunately the cases were mild and no one was seriously impacted. The impact in my home in Taipei was fairly serious, and we were on constant guard, cleaning regularly, disallowing any others from entering our home, rarely leaving, and ordering food out often.

In terms of work and jobs, most students viewed this at a distance, but note above that six of 21 saw a “Very serious impact,” and seven a “Somewhat serious impact.” Two found the impact “Not terribly serious,” and six “Not at all serious.”

Kevin Xue noted that “Some people lost their job, and some people had to work at home.” Jacqueline Lin added that “If the epidemic won’t get better, the company or street vendor business will not be good. A lot of people will lose their jobs.” Street vendors—no doubt a primary consideration of many Taiwanese people in Taiwan! Henry Wu, found his work disrupted, saying, “I have a part-time job in cram school near Taipei Main Station. We couldn’t meet the students face to face, but [used] distance learning. Facing to a machine [made] me feel upset. Thus, the pandemic very serious[ly] impacted on my work.” Kevin Hu (NTUB, 16) noted that “Because of the epidemic, my part-time job was suspended,” and Kevin Xue opined “Some people lost their job, and some people had to work at home.” Sanny Xu (NTUB, 16) saw the larger impact on work, saying “Some people have lost their jobs because of the epidemic, especially those in the catering industry, and many stores have closed down,” and Yu-chen chiu (NTUB, 16) said “I think lots of Taiwanese people lose their jobs, it’s really bad thing.”

The following percentages about personal behavior and actions during the epidemic clearly show how significantly the epidemic impacted students’ daily lives, and altered their conduct.

Table 2. Percentages of Sample in Various Areas

35 (100%)	Worn a face mask, washed hands frequently, kept social distance from those outside.	27 (77%)	Canceled or postponed school activities, social activities, doctor’s appointments or other actions.
34 (97%)	Worked or studied from home.	26 (74%)	Avoided some or all restaurants, and ordered out and had dinner delivered home.
21 (60%)	Stockpiled food or water and/or stayed at home more.	30 (85%)	Avoided public or crowded places, and possibly affected people.

Sanny Xu tells me that “I have a friend whose relative is infected, and they have eaten together, so my friend is very nervous. I told her not to be afraid, and to isolate herself at home first, and go for screening if he feels uncomfortable.” Sydney Hu (NTUB, 16) tells me that “I know [one person] contract the virus. When I knew he contract the virus, I very shocked. Because I don’t know why he contract the virus, I thought this thing for a long time. Some people contract the virus, that’s because they didn’t wear the mask and follow the rules. I think they deserve it.” Ziyun Wang (NTUB, 16) said that a “brother” in school had contracted the virus, and he had reached out to him. “I think the people who contract the virus in the pandemic should cheer up as soon as possible,” he said, “and I hope all Taiwanese people can survive this epidemic.”

Personally, Jessie Lee may have been impacted most severely during the virus, and she told me, sadly, “Yes, many people, friends and relatives [were seriously impacted]. Including my grandfather who passed away a month ago from the virus, it affected me greatly, I have been grieving for a long time. There’s been a lot of people who did contract the disease, this is terrible.” Our sympathies go out to Miss Lee during this tragedy.

6. The View on Government Response

In terms of all we are examining, no doubt government response was a key during the epidemic (many governments have been criticized for failing to encourage safety measures, or faultily approving and administering vaccinations; I need hardly mention the U.S. response in this respect, and needless to say the impact there has been devastating). My questionnaire asked about student response to Taiwan government measures, and found that 25 percent felt it had been “Very helpful,” 66 percent “Somewhat Helpful,” and only eight percent “Not very helpful”. Freya Chen (NTUB, 16) said of government mechanisms battling the epidemic, “I think it’s a good policy to completely ban on indoor dining, but I think it’s even more important to block the border to prevent people from overseas who want to enter Taiwan.” In these lights, Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung announced on October 8, 2021 that four factors had to be addressed before Taiwan would open its borders fully to foreigners, including sufficient COVID-19 vaccines, essential protection for communities including masks and hand-washing, the capacity of hospitals and medical staff to fight outbreaks while caring for infected people, and sufficient medical supplies (from Chien *et al*, 2021).

Another question asked about the view on the “impact on the people and government of Taiwan,” we see above that seven of 21 found a “Very serious impact,” six a “Somewhat serious impact,” seven “Not terribly serious,” and only one “Not at all serious.”

In a follow-on question, “Has COVID impacted your trust of people and government?” 23 percent said “Yes, a great deal,” and 57 percent said “Not a great deal,” and fully 20 percent said the epidemic had not impacted their trust on these entities at all. We see a certain balance here.

A few students commented on the value of the government vouchers aimed at providing relief and improving economic activity that were distributed to all citizens and a number of foreign residents in

Taiwan (a second round of vouchers was distributed in fall 2021). All of this probably should not surprise us, as the Taiwan government received global recognition for its effective handling of the crisis through 2020, and to May 2021 and thereafter. Viewing both of these sectors, Zoe Lin stated that “The Taiwan government actually did a great job most of the time in my opinion. At the very beginning, there wasn’t much impact on Taiwanese people since the government handle COVID with the experience of SARS. I thought everything was going to be normal, until the second stage hits Taiwan.” On a very practical level, Jessie Lee informed me that “the Taiwan government helped facilitate and informed help me to arrange a quarantine place in advance.” There was still a trace of danger in the air in August and September, so in-class meetings were delayed, and distance/online learning was required—but on the whole citizens were feeling pretty good, and not inordinately in danger. One external commentator, C. Jason Wang (2020), writes that “Taiwan is an example of how a society can respond quickly to a crisis and protect the interests of its citizens.”

Regis Jourdan Sena, the NTUST Indonesian student mentioned, extolled both the people and government of Taiwan when he said, “Well the discipline of the citizens of Taiwan is impressive to the extent that most if not all businesses closed instantly. So, it’s pretty admirable that they uphold the needs of the many. The government was also fast and efficient at handling the distribution of vaccines.”

Some students did express reservations, with Duke Tsai (NTUB, 16) saying “Taiwan government did a good job at the beginning, but I don’t think they [did] do a good job at vaccine.” Jacqueline Lin mirrored this, saying “Government didn’t strive for vaccines so people always accuse the government.” Thomas Lin also expressed some irritation, saying “I felt a little frustrated. The lack of vaccine slowed down the process. Due to this perhaps I’ll have to stay aware much longer until there are enough people have vaccine.”

7. The Big Picture

In a larger sense, without question the epidemic’s greater effect in an international sense on politics, life, society, the economy, and the environment has had a monumental impact, and not for nothing do some say we have been through a World War III. When asked this question, fully 77 percent of respondents answered of a “Significant impact” internationally, while 22 percent said a “Somewhat significant impact.” Zero respondents said there was an “Insignificant impact.”

Sandra Shih took a broad view of the origin of the pandemic, saying that “I think the main reason is because other countries and WHO decided to ignore the warning at the beginning, so we can’t stop it from spreading to other countries, and it became a serious global problem.” Catie Tseng wondered why “some countries did not think this would spread to the whole world at first,” and why they “thought that it was a small virus and would not be contagious.” In a perhaps common view, Duke Tsai observed that “I think China has to take part of the responsibility, because they didn’t tell the world immediately that they found a new virus in their country.” Similarly, Jacqueline Lin said that “I think the birthplace is China,” and Vivian Xu too said “if the China government took it seriously, everything might be different.” “Tina

Lo, in no uncertain terms, wrote that “I think it should be blamed on China and WHO. If they take action in advance, the COVID pandemic may be not so severe now.” Freya Chen also said, “China. It’s all because China created this virus, which has caused such a serious impact on the world.”

Matthew Abalos found that,

Every country in the world has some unfortunate chances of having an outbreak, which is not their fault, but what actions are made after is the key. In this case, China really did a very terrible job (being objective). They did not report to WHO immediately after their discovery of the virus, after it spread throughout the country, they didn’t close their border to keep the virus within, even blame other country for the outbreak, thus causing this pandemic worldwide.

Vietnamese student Jun Ruan asked, “was it the result of the actions of many countries, who allowed the disease to spread and did not take effective measures?” Ruan went on that he,

felt struggle...because during this period of time, my visa is expired, I do not know [whether] I should come back [from] Vietnam to change my visa or what should I do, I cannot buy ticket. I arrived the National Immigration Agency to ask something related to my visa, I expected they can help me or give me some measures to handle this problem.

Sandra Shih found that “Lots of people blamed China for this situation, some people even said China made the virus, but I don’t think it’s wise to blame someone without the evidence, I think it would be fair to judge when investigation is done.” She went on that “I think the main reason is because other countries and WHO decided to ignore the warning at the beginning, so we can’t stop it from spreading to other countries, and it became a serious global problem.” Kevin Xue noted similarly that “[various] countries governments did not take effective measures.”

Nikki Lin was thoroughly fair-minded, saying “I don’t really blame on any countries,” and Cindy Lee added “We shouldn’t blame each other. Our purpose is to fight the virus, educate the country or people who allowed the disease to spread.” Jessie Lee stated that “No, I do not [blame others]. No one expect[ed] this happen, I cannot blame anyone or any country in the world.” Very broadly, Hannah Lai found that “I don’t blame on a particular country or people who allowed the disease to spread and did not take effective measures because I still believe that “Everything happens for a reason.”

Zoe Lin observed the spate of fake news and disinformation that emerged during the epidemic, saying “I don’t really place any blame on a particular country, but I do think a minority of people who said COVID-19 was a conspiracy from the government and was being extremely uncooperative definitely was not helping the situation.” Mickayla Moffat put the blame on “maybe social media. If we had no social media I believe this wouldn’t have been a world pandemic. People wouldn’t have known and fear wouldn’t have been spread.”

These are all intelligent personal student takes on the COVID crisis.

8. Conclusion

Before I conclude, let me note here that probably just as much as students, teachers were embroiled in

this crisis, and we had similar concerns about teaching and learning. I could offer my own view onto COVID, but I think I have probably said enough so far here, and will instead include comments from my NTUB co-workers below. I may be the source of the “WW III” claim above, and that is how I have felt during all of this. A fairly major holocaust has taken place around the world, and the disruption of life, and not least teaching, has been astonishing.

Henry Wu, who has already spoken of this, said, “During the pandemic, all the class and final test[s] had to be online.... The way that teacher[s taught] us, as well as the way we learn changed much during the pandemic. I therefore spoke to a few teachers, to get their insight into the threat (and possibly promise) of COVID.” And good for Henry seeing any potential promise in all of this. Let’s now look at two teachers’ views. I include comments from my colleagues, Assistant Professors Chenghao Yang (楊承豪), and Chenwen Hong (洪倩文) at NTUB.

“Distance teaching is a new and challenging experience for most teachers in Taiwan,” said Dr. Yang, expressing something this teacher has very much felt during the last year. “We manage to take advantage of Google Meet and other online meeting service platforms, prepare digital materials, think of fresh methods for online interaction, and come up with news ways to assess student’s learning,” and Yang goes on that “I do have practical ways to evaluate student’s learning. For instance, for my literature class, I have the students prepare a five-minute recording in which they will recite a sonnet by Shakespeare and share with me how they appreciate this poem, including the analysis of the images and the inspiration they have from the poem. This is very much like a radio program on a well-known poet we listen to. This is practical in the sense that students will imagine themselves as a radio host sharing their favorite poems with listeners. I would say the result is pretty satisfactory.” Hats off to Dr. Yang for developing these new distance-learning methods.

Dr. Hong offered that there were both good and bad aspects in terms of teaching life during the pandemic. At the highest level, “the impact of COVID 19 probably means the switch from a traditional classroom setting into online teaching or even new normal conditions of working from home,” and she went on that although “COVID gives huge personal space at work,” more negatively, “this little virus greatly freezes the heated discussions that used to erupt everywhere on campus.” Unlike some teachers, for Hong “working from home is not a feasible option,” and in fact for her, working from school “highly increases my work efficiency.” She noted that “While one may feel secluded working in an isolated space, I consider this an ideal haven for producing high-quality research work.” So, these were positives for Hong, and yet more positively, “the first day of school in the classroom [when the pandemic had somewhat receded in Taiwan by early September] registers a new page of life on college campus. I saw students chatting merrily and discussing vehemently in class with their eyes crinkling hard with huge smiles.” Hong told me that she had asked students if they preferred studying in the classroom and “most of them replied with a loud ‘yes.’” Hong went on that “Students enjoy face-to-face conversations with their peers,” and “certainly, COVID didn’t shatter warm hearts that wish for social support.” So, things worked out reasonably well for Professor Hong.

And now for my final conclusion: Observers have noted, and needless to say, that COVID caused a widespread economic and humanitarian crisis. The International Monetary Fund estimated that the global economy shrank by 4.4 percent in 2020 due to COVID. KPMG International Limited (an Anglo-Dutch multinational professional services network), said that COVID-19 is “arguably the most significant global crisis in 75 years.” It is estimated that there have been 639.4 million COVID cases, and 6.6 million deaths worldwide (7.9 million cases and 13,441 deaths in Taiwan) (this data provided by *Worldometer* in November 2022). All of this data indicates the importance, globally, of this crisis.

Ultimately, by the beginning of October, students were receiving vaccination shots (I received a double dose in August and October 2021), and soon thereafter schools for the most part reopened in Taiwan. I returned to in-class work with my students by fall 2022, and you could say that life began to return to the old normal.

None of this is to suggest, however, that this is really all over yet. The arrival of several “variants of concern” of COVID has caused great anxiety, and endangered many people (from Burki, 2021). Many analysts feel the crisis will continue into 2022 and well beyond, and I am one observer haunted by this possibility. It has all been stunning in its ferocity and endurance, and so, my prayers are with every reader out there as they prepare for “the worst” (and to be sure, something better) in our future together. Mickayla Moffat said, simply and no doubt expressing a hope we have all had, “I want the pandemic lifestyle to go away, I wish life was back to normal.”

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Appendixes

Appendix 1. The Pandemic's Effects on Students

Questionnaire and answers

1. What was the impact on your life in these areas during the pandemic. Answer questions using these replies: "Very serious impact," Somewhat serious impact," Not terribly serious," Not at all serious." I will ask a further question on impact on home life below.

Impact on ordinary life in the city.	Very serious impact—9
	Somewhat serious impact—5
	Not terribly serious—6
	Not at all serious—1
Impact on jobs and work.	Very serious impact—6
	Somewhat serious impact—7
	Not terribly serious—2
	Not at all serious—6
My view of the impact on the people and government of Taiwan.	Very serious impact—7
	Somewhat serious impact—6
	Not terribly serious—7
	Not at all serious—1

Note: Rounded numbers may not equal 100 percent.

2. What is your opinion of wearing masks in school?

I often refrain—13 (37%) I sometimes refrain—15 (43%) I never refrain—7 (20%)

3. Has the Taiwan government been helpful in your life during the epidemic?

Very helpful—9 (25%)	Somewhat Helpful—23 (66%)	Not very helpful—3 (8%)
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4. Explain how or how not the Taiwan government has made life during the pandemic easier or more tolerable. How has your ordinary life been impacted?

5. How did the pandemic disrupt your schooling during 2020 and 2021? Give two answers, from February 2020-April 2021, and from May-June 2021. Provide one answer each.

February 2020-April 2021

Very disruptive—1 (2%) Somewhat disruptive— 15 (43%) Not very disruptive—19 (54%)

May-June 2021

Very disruptive— 19 (54%)	Somewhat disruptive—13 (37%)	Not very disruptive—3 (8%)
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6. How was your life at school impacted during the pandemic?

7. How did the pandemic affect your personal and home life?

Significantly—11 (31%)	Somewhat significantly—20 (57%)	Not significantly—4 (11%)
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8. What changes have you made in response to the pandemic at home, both short and long term?

9. Have you felt anxious, depressed, lonely or hopeless during the pandemic?

Yes, a great deal—12 (34%)	Not a great deal—11 (31%)	Not at all—12 (34%)
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10. How do you feel about the greater impact, in an international sense, of the pandemic on politics, life, society, the economy, and the environment?

Significant impact—27 (77%)	Somewhat significant impact—8 (22%)	Insignificant impact—0%
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11. Has COVID impacted your trust of people and government?

Yes, a great deal—8 (23%)	Not a great deal—20 (57%)	Not at all—7 (20%)
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12. Have you done anything to help others during the pandemic, such as by volunteering, providing charity or other needed items, or simply encouraging and supporting others (possibly some who had direct contact with the virus).

13. Did anyone you know contract the virus? What was this like and how did it effect you? How have you felt about the many other Taiwanese who did contract the disease?

14. Which of the following measures have you taken in response to the pandemic? Select all that apply.

Do you plan to continue any of these limitations in the future? Check your answers.

35 (100%)	Worn a face mask, washed hands frequently, kept social distance from those outside.	27 (77%)	Canceled or postponed school activities, social activities, doctor's appointments or other actions.
34 (97%)	Worked or studied from home.	26 (74%)	Avoided some or all restaurants, and ordered out and had dinner delivered home.

21 (60%)	Stockpiled food or water and/or stayed at home more.	30 (85%)	Avoided public or crowded places, and possibly affected people.
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15. Offer any explanations you like for the above answers.

16. Do you place any blame on a particular country or people for the advent of the COVID pandemic? Or was it the result of the actions of many countries, who allowed the disease to spread and did not take effective measures?

17. In one article about students and the pandemic, it was noted how students felt stressed, anxious, lonely, struggling, learning, grateful, and adapting during the pandemic. Choose one of these factors, and explain how you experienced it.

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Notes

Note 1. Note that I will make small grammatical changes to some student comments, while leaving others as is. Due to the volume of replies received, I will limit the total number of comments that I include, as it would be too lengthy to include all of them.

Note 2. Note, however, that in contrast to some personal comments that spoke of difficulties and worries, when asked whether they had felt anxious, depressed, lonely or hopeless during the pandemic, 34 percent of students answered "Not at all," and 31 percent answered "Not a great deal"—while 34 percent said "A great deal." We will see more such variation below—probably a function of the answers coming from young students, who often have fluctuating and changeable views about life, given their own mutable and developing views of life and the world.

Note 3. The WHO also advises students to safely and appropriately use a mask when possible, obtain adequate adult supervision, note awareness of the potential impact of wearing a mask on learning and psychosocial development, and seek control of specific settings and interactions with elderly and those with other underlying health conditions (from WHO 2021).

Note 4. Though we see a good bit of refusal to wear a mask here, a second question asked about personal responses taken during the epidemic and whether students "Wore a face mask, washed hands frequently, kept social distance from those outside." Fully 100 percent of respondents answered this question affirmatively. We probably see a given tendency to remove masks at school here, but in general they were worn regularly. (See the answers to this and other questions below, and in Appendix

1.)