

Experiences of the Coronavirus Shutdown: Three Months On

Written by E-International Relations

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/06/16/experiences-of-the-coronavirus-shutdown-three-months-on/>

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JUN 16 2020

E-International Relations is staffed with an all-volunteer team of students, academics and practitioners/professionals from around the world. As the coronavirus issue grew into a pandemic and our team experienced the shutdown of their universities and workplaces, we collected some vignettes that we hope you will find useful when adding to your own experience. Each reflects a personal account of how things have changed, either from their point of view as a student, or as faculty. This is the second post in this series. The first was compiled in late March.

Daniel – PhD student in Brazil:

It was early Friday, 13th March when my friends and I learnt that top-tier universities from São Paulo had suspended all activities due to the coronavirus crisis. We knew then it would only be a matter of time until university campuses in Rio de Janeiro took a similar stance. And so it was. For a fortnight all activities at the International Relations Institute and at PUC-Rio as a whole were suspended. Seminars, lectures, student meetings, everything cancelled. Then, from early April on, classes have migrated to the now ever-present Zoom platform. In organisational terms, things have got along well in spite of the terrible health crises that surrounds us all.

At least one postgraduate student and one former faculty member have lost their loved ones, and that has been shattering for all of us to witness. Intellectually speaking, we share a general feeling that being confined for so long has definitely set our bars much lower. Concentration and focus have been particularly hard to achieve, especially when there is a general sense that your family and friends are in constant danger. And the political instability that has engulfed Brazil only adds to that feeling of unrest. Overall, “do what you can” has become our motto. Public universities, on the other hand, have mostly decided to cancel activities altogether: many students simply lack quality internet access and the most basic studying needs.

What was at first seen as a tragedy equally affecting the population has in fact exposed the stark inequalities pervading Brazilian society and which are overtly reflected in its university system. As in normal times our first semester would already be heading towards its final weeks, classes are not expected to resume before mid August, when the second academic semester usually starts. But with infection rates still escalating in Rio and São Paulo – and the disease getting momentum in inner parts of Brazil – it would be all but unwise to rule out Zooming our way along yet a few months to come.

Andrew – PhD student in Canada:

I have felt particularly lucky during the ongoing COVID-19 lockdown. While campus has remained closed I have been able to move everything I was doing online. I am in the writing phase of my dissertation, teaching assistant duties have moved online, as has my research assistantship. While I had a number of academic conferences canceled this Spring and Summer, I recently participated in one that was fully online. While it cannot quite replicate some of the advantages of in person conferences, there were several perks and overall it went very well. Having had the extra time at home and less time commuting, in meetings and at social events has also been endlessly beneficial for my productivity and I have done more solid work in this short time than in any other in my life.

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Pat – student in the UK:

As a masters student in the UK, I am currently finishing my term 2 essays and about to begin focusing solely on my dissertation. I have not encountered too many difficulties transitioning online, however, at a point I was faced with very little physical living/working space. My girlfriend came to visit from London to Bristol in very early March prior to the government lock down. To our surprise, her trip lasted an extra few months as we made the decision to stay put in my dormitory until some restrictions were lifted. As we are both masters students, we had to drastically adjust our work routines around the limited space we had. We were able to somewhat comfortably share a desk, but ran in to frequent problems with overhearing and distracting each other while on zoom calls.

It wasn't until late May, when my dorm reluctantly offered refunds to students who wanted to leave and some restrictions were lifted, did we feel it was okay to return to London. Since then, I have been enjoying the additional work space (the dinning room table) and am happy to be living in a larger space. I consider myself somewhat lucky, but more so incredibly privileged to have this option as many of my cohorts did not and are still in university housing.

Muskan – student in India

As a student entering the final year of law school, I have had a mixed experience in terms of learning and exploring opportunities during the pandemic. While my university had been quick in the transition to online means, it hasn't been very effective. We had online exams and other evaluations that posed myriad difficulties mostly in terms of internet access and grading largely on the basis of online evaluations. Moreover, while many organisations are opening up to adjustments in the current scenario, some have retained their ways of operating by cancelling or postponing scheduled events like summer schools and internships. Having said that, this time gave me the space to reflect and consider my prospects post graduation, and I believe it was essential to have had room for this introspection. I am very grateful to have had the resources at hand to make good use of this time.

Fernanda – graduate student in Brazil:

I've been quarantined for 85 days. We have avoided leaving the house as much as possible, going out mostly for grocery shopping. My university classes have been suspended during this period. As one of the top public universities in Brazil, our students are from very diverse social backgrounds, and not everyone has the necessary means to attend online classes. The university is studying the possibility of retuning classes online, especially for the graduate programs. The departments are doing social questionnaires to assess whether this will be possible and thinking of ways of aiding the students that do not have the necessary means to attend online classes.

For the undergraduate students, the return of classes, even online, seems very slim. 2020 may be a lost year for them since classes had begun for only two weeks at the time quarantine was imposed. What is more disturbing is the national context we are in. Brazil is now the epicenter of the pandemic, the number of daily deaths is still increasing, we are already the second country with more COVID-19 cases in the world. We all know someone who lost someone to COVID-19, if we haven't lost someone ourselves. We have not had a health minister for almost a month. Our democracy is constantly under threat of military intervention led by the president. There is a constant tension between the federal level, preoccupied with the return of economic activities, and the state level, where governors and mayors are trying to maintain the quarantine policies.

There have also been scandals involving corruption in the purchase of health equipment by governors. The result is that economic activities are returning in states like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo despite the growing number of daily deaths and new cases. These two states also record the highest numbers of cases and deaths. The scenario in Brazil, right now, is of uncertainty and fear. What we know for sure is that the COVID-19 crisis is far from ending here while the rest of the world is getting ready to get back to the new normal.

Marianna – PhD student in the UK:

Lockdown for has been a journey in itself. It took me a while to fully realize the lockdown's impact but I can now say

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with certainty that it has had severe impacts on my PhD thesis, my work and my mental health as well. Our University closed in March a little before the UK went into full lockdown and our work moved online and off campus. My thesis is based on fieldwork which I had to postpone this year and this could potentially take me one year behind. I also had to change my research design to a large extent and from a purely ethnographic design it has been transformed to a mixed methods. Such a change is not necessarily negative of course but it will certainly be much more challenging.

In addition, my workload increased in the sense that when you work from home it is difficult to follow certain working hours, and even though working from home is something I am very familiar with this time it felt different. Finally the uncertainty that the lockdown has created and the ill-thought changes that my University is trying to introduce for next year have impacted my mental health to a large extent. Being self-funded, with no financial backing behind me while taking a break from my job in order to focus on my research means that I highly depend on teaching seminars in my department. It is already June and we do not know whether we will be teaching in September, no one in the University's management provides any clear answers and it feels like your researchers like me are left with 'thoughts and prayers' that the University offers — without any backing or support.

Alia – faculty in Indonesia:

Nothing much has changed in my university since March. We still implement distance learning, as the campus is still shut for classroom activities. Most of my students, who come from other smaller towns and regencies, chose to return home as it will be financially more affordable if they stay with the parents. This makes things more difficult for online learning due to the digital gap between regions in Indonesia. I have to make my lessons reachable particularly for students living in remote areas. On the other hand, webinars are booming among lecturers and some students. There are webinars almost every day, which are in fact not only among faculties but also professionals in other fields from medical staff to motivators.

For the Covid-19 cases, Indonesia has not seen the curve flattening, while the government is reopening the economy, which is met with disappointment from some. Parents particularly protested the initial plan to reopen schools in the beginning of the school year in mid-July, therefore the government is now considering starting on-campus activities in December. It is also quite difficult to make people stay at home, as most lower income Indonesians "live for the day"—we call it—which means they work in informal sectors such as street vendors, who depend on daily earnings. Staying at home means they don't get money to survive the day. However, the middle class is also expected to go out in public as malls are reopening. This is unnerving since it might mean that number of cases will soar.