

## Notes and Reports

## The COVID-19 pandemic and learning outcomes: in what ways did the pandemic impact students in Japan?

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On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the WHO Director-General declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic<sup>1)</sup>. By the start of the school year in April 2020, around 90% of Japanese universities had postponed starting regular classes, and in July 2020, they had implemented distance learning classes<sup>2)</sup>.

By the spring of 2023, most institutions resumed face-to-face classes while maintaining social distancing and utilizing hybrid teaching methods. During this time, a questionnaire was created to investigate how students were affected by being isolated during the pandemic and whether their learning was affected by online learning from 2020-2023. This questionnaire was administered to both SMU students and Kawagoe Girls' High School students in 2024 to gather their views concerning the academic and social effects of distance learning.

Before administering the questionnaire, the authors predicted that students would view the educational environment during the pandemic negatively. However, the questionnaire respondents shared not only negative aspects of studying during the pandemic but positive ones as well. Furthermore, their views highlighted how distance learning had improved their learning after the pandemic was lifted.

This study is especially pertinent for educators, as the students involved with distance learning are currently in our classrooms, and their learning styles need to be considered. Therefore, the information provided by this study has implications for classroom teaching and student learning.

*J Saitama Medical University 2026; 52(2): 63-70*

(Received August 8, 2025/Accepted August 13, 2025)

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, learning outcomes, teaching methods, distance learning, mental health

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the WHO Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic as it spread globally<sup>1)</sup>. Like other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected several facets of Japanese life. Not only were the health and economic sectors in Japan impacted, but also the education and social sectors. By the start of the school year in April 2020, around 90% of Japanese universities had postponed starting regular classes, and in July 2020, they had implemented distance learning classes<sup>2)</sup>.

Distance learning created challenges for students and educators alike. Teachers were required to embrace technology, revise lessons and curriculum goals, and put in extra hours to create materials that would enhance learning online. Further

exacerbating the shift to online learning, technology was not strongly utilized by some of the educational community. As Obe & Okutsu pointed out, "Japan was at the bottom of the league, with about 80% of students saying digital technology is not part of their classroom experience."<sup>3)</sup> Traditionally, primary and secondary schools' approach to teaching and learning has an emphasis on paper-based learning materials, which runs counter to many higher education teaching practices<sup>4)</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a profound social and psychological impact on the global population. Up to one billion people worldwide were estimated to have been under lockdown or quarantine by the spring of 2020<sup>5)</sup>. Being isolated during the pandemic from friends, family, school, and work affected the quality of life. Miranda et al. confirm this, stating,

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“The COVID-19 pandemic...resulted in a mental health crisis due to the rise of negative psychological effects.”<sup>6)</sup>

Unlike countries in Europe or the Americas, Japan only implemented voluntary lockdowns. However, even under this kind of restriction, being isolated had negative repercussions. As stressed by Yamamoto et al., “During the first mild lockdown, a significant increase in psychological distress and depression was reported [in Japan] despite the lack of legal enforcement of self-restraint.”<sup>7)</sup> In August 2020, a web-based questionnaire by Midorikawa et al. was conducted in Japan to investigate the impact of the Covid pandemic<sup>8)</sup>. Reflected in the results of this survey, females were reported to have experienced COVID-19–related stress the most, while in age groups, “COVID-19–related stress was the highest among respondents in their 50s, severe mental distress was the highest among teenagers, and anxiety symptoms were the highest among people in their 20s.”<sup>8)</sup> Stress levels in young children and their families were also elevated. There were remote learning inequalities due to the digital divide and parental workload in helping their children be independent learners<sup>4)</sup>, as well as increases in suicide<sup>8,9)</sup> and domestic abuse<sup>10)</sup>.

Saitama Medical University (SMU) is a private medical university with an attached hospital. As students were completing their clinical rotations during the pandemic, the university was cautious about returning to face-to-face classes. As a result, students had a longer period of online learning compared to students at other Japanese universities.

In the spring of 2023, the university resumed face-to-face classes with masks and utilized hybrid teaching methods. The students appeared less interactive in the classroom, had trouble understanding content, and some had poor attendance. Were these students affected by distance learning, or was this perception imagined by educators? To gain further insight, we set out to deepen our understanding of the effects of distance learning on students by utilizing the following guiding questions: Did distance learning have an effect on student learning? Were there consequences to being socially isolated? Once face-to-face classes resumed, were there any adjustments needed by students to resume their learning?

In the spring of 2024, the study’s authors discussed the possible effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on students. The points mostly focused on the effects of isolation on social skills and how the experience of online learning caused difficulties with face-to-face instruction. As a result of this discussion, and with the aim of better understanding students’ current learning styles and applying those insights to improve educational practices, a questionnaire was authored consisting of ten questions in both English and Japanese (see Appendix). This questionnaire was used to gather better insight into students’ views about their academic performance, social/mental health,

study tools, and study habits both during and after the pandemic. This questionnaire was administered to two groups: high school and medical university students.

On June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the first set of questionnaires was administered to seventy-four high school students at Kawagoe Girls’ High School (KGHS) in Kawagoe, Saitama. Four years prior, these students were at the end of elementary school or the beginning of junior high school.

Afterward, on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, nineteen SMU fifth-year students given the same questionnaire (11 female and 8 male students). The sample group of 11 female SMU students were used in this study. These students were taking part in the university’s student exchange program in 2024, a program in which students undertake a one-month overseas clinical training at partner institutions around the world. Although this sample group was small, they are unique in that they were the first students to take part in distance learning at SMU in 2020.

Before administering the questionnaire, the authors predicted the outcomes of each question. After, the students’ scores from KGHS and SMU were documented and averaged to the nearest tenth. Also, the students’ comments were noted and later translated from Japanese to English using a free version of ChatGPT.

With the questionnaire data, a cross-section of Japanese school life ranging from late elementary to university education was offered. Tables 1 and 2 show the results of the questionnaire for students with a scale ranging from 1 = very much to 5 = not at all.

The ten questions from Tables 1 and 2 examine the following four categories:

#### 1) Influences on Academic Performance

D1. How much did the transition to online learning affect your academic performance?

A1. Do you think that returning to in-person learning has worsened your academic performance?

A5. Do you think that the experiences during the pandemic affected you mentally and intellectually with your current and future academic challenges?

#### 2) Social/Mental Health

D2. To what extent did you feel isolated from your peers during the pandemic?

D3. How much did the pandemic impact your mental health and well-being?

A2. Is it difficult to connect with your peers now that in-person learning has resumed?

#### 3) Learning Tools

D4. Was it difficult to use remote learning tools and resources provided by your school?

A3. Do you think that the new hybrid learning models (a mix of in-person and online) implemented after the pan-

**Table 1** Being a Student During the COVID Pandemic

D1. How much did the transition to online learning affect your academic performance?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 2.5 MED = 3 VAR = 1.673	AVG = 3.5 MED = 4 VAR = 1.085
D2. To what extent did you feel isolated from your peers during the pandemic?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 3.1 MED = 3 VAR = 1.291	AVG = 4.0 MED = 4 VAR = 1.164
D3. How much did the pandemic impact your mental health and well-being?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 3.6 MED = 4 VAR = 1.255	AVG = 3.3 MED = 3 VAR = 1.247
D4. Was it difficult to use remote learning tools and resources provided by your school?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 4.0 MED = 4 VAR = 0.6	AVG = 4.0 MED = 4 VAR = 1.085
D5. Did you have difficulties balancing your studies with other responsibilities (e.g., work, family) during the pandemic?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 4.4 MED = 5 VAR = 1.455	AVG = 4.4 MED = 5 VAR = 0.658

**Table 2** Being a Student and Learning After the Pandemic

A1. Do you think that returning to in-person learning has worsened your academic performance?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 4.7 MED = 5 VAR = 0.419	AVG = 4.8 MED = 5 VAR = 0.564
A2. Is it difficult to connect with your peers now that in-person learning has resumed?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 4.5 MED = 5 VAR = 0.473	AVG = 4.5 MED = 5 VAR = 0.622
A3. Do you think that the new hybrid learning models (a mix of in person and online) implemented after the pandemic are ineffective?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 3.4 MED = 3 VAR = 0.855	AVG = 3.4 MED = 3 VAR = 1.397
A4. How much have your study habits and routines changed since returning to in-person classes?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 2.7 MED = 3 VAR = 2.219	AVG = 3.3 MED = 3 VAR = 1.441
A5. Do you think that the experiences during the pandemic affected you mentally and intellectually with your current and future academic challenges?	
SMU	KGHS
AVG = 3.2 MED = 3 VAR = 1.164	AVG = 3.5 MED = 4 VAR = 1.385

demarc are ineffective?

#### 4) Study Habits

D5. Did you have difficulties balancing your studies with other responsibilities (e.g., work, family) during the pandemic?

A4. How much have your study habits and routines changed since returning to in-person classes?

With the results, Godfrey and Oida, who are both educators at SMU, had their predictions about student life during the pandemic either confirmed or denied. They pictured learning from home and social isolation having a greater impact on all students than what the students reported, particularly with D1 “...transition to online learning...” (AVG 2/much), D4 “...to use remote learning tools...” (averaging 2.5/much-moderately), and D5 “...balancing your studies...” (AVG 3/moderately).

In contrast, Kitazawa, who was both a high school and an SMU medical student during the COVID-19 pandemic, understood the stresses of distance learning from a student’s per-

spective. In her personal comments, she asserted that “although my grades [in high school] did not change that drastically, however, I struggled with concentrating on schoolwork at home.” She further explained, “I felt isolated from my peers since there was no way of talking to them in person. Moreover, since I like to discuss parts of the lecture I didn’t understand with my friends and, I couldn’t do that during online lectures. I had struggled to understand the material.”

With (1) The Influences on Academic Performance, the SMU scores (AV 2.5/ VAR 1.673) reflected more challenges compared to KGHS (AV 3.5/ VAR 1.085). Some SMU students commented that they were less affected by the transition to home learning and reported the benefits as well. (*I was able to progress with my learning at my own pace, and it was very fulfilling; I became able to pause the video and think about parts I didn’t understand.*) This opinion was also supported in a 2021 MEXT survey of Japanese university students, reporting that almost 60% of the respondents were “satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with online learning during the pan-

demic<sup>11</sup>).

The KGHS students shared both the positive and negative impacts. Positively, they reported adaptability and independence with home learning, with minimal effects on learning. (*People who could study on their own improved their academic abilities.*) However, they also wrote about the struggles of home learning, including concentration issues, a lack of physical activity, a work-life imbalance, and technology issues. (*It was hard to maintain a work-life balance when studying at home.*)

After resuming face-to-face classes, KGHS students mentioned the positive outcomes (AVG 4.8/ VAR 0.564). They reported satisfaction with the learning environment, (*In-person was easier for me; It became easier to ask questions compared to online learning, and I think my grades improved.*) while making adjustments (*Everyone was wearing masks, so communication became a bit more difficult.*) Some high schoolers even mentioned that the pandemic gave them opportunities to improve their use of technology and strengthened their mental health (*After experiencing the "pandemic," I became mentally stronger.*)

Concerning (2) Social/Mental Health, the KGHS students offered a range of views. On the positive side, they commented that they enjoyed distance learning (*Rather, I was happy to stay at home.*) and used tools to cope with isolation (*I didn't feel lonely because I continued messaging and talking on the phone [smartphone].*) Despite a score of 4 on question D2, feeling isolated from their peers, the comments about the negative impacts outweighed the positive ones. In general, they shared about the loneliness due to being away from their friends and having their home be their learning environment (*I couldn't meet my friends, and life at home felt cramped.*) For some SMU students (AVG = 3.1/VAR = 1.291), coming from an array of backgrounds, the distance from their school had a social impact (*My house is far from the university, so I couldn't meet my friends.*) Although being in the SMU student exchange program, which may have made them appear as independent, students still exhibited a desire for face-to-face interactions.

With the return to face-to-face classes, KGHS students reported they could resume friendships (*I can still quickly get along with people as before.*) while others wrote of difficulties (*I get nervous when I have to talk to others when the new term begins.*) About this point, although SMU students had similar scores to KGHS students, they did not share any comments.

Regarding (3) and (4), Learning Tools and Study Habits, what some educators felt was a hindrance during the pandemic had several positive takeaways for KGHS students including adaptability (*The tools are similar to smartphones. I use them*

*every day; I can study everywhere.*), using social media as a coping outlet (*I was fine because I had social media.*), and self-reliance (*Once I learned how to use it [a learning tool], I could use it quickly.*) One downside was that SMU and KGHS students reported having issues with Wi-Fi connectivity as one SMU student reported. (*The home Wi-Fi was bad, so the remote connection didn't work well.*) As Uchiyama et al. (in Gerard), confirmed, problems with technology like having proper Wi-Fi were a challenge for learning online in Japan<sup>12</sup>.

After in-person classes resumed, the KGHS students reflected on the change favorably. Despite the convenience of online learning reducing travel time and enabling classes during school closures, a number of students commented that they did not find online learning as effective or engaging as in-person classes. (*Returning to in-person learning improved my academic ability.*) KGHS students expressed the personal changes they needed to make when face-to-face classes resumed (*It became busier after returning to in-person learning.*) SMU students (AVG 2.7/VAR 2.219) scored slightly lower than KGHS students (AVG = 3.3 /VAR = 1.441) KGHS students reported changes (*I needed to get up earlier.*) As both distance learning and in-person classes have their pros and cons, some students shared the value of the structure, opportunities, and engagement that in-person learning brought after experiencing the challenges of online education (*It's not interesting unless it's an in-person class!!!*)

This study's findings offer insights into both the educational and social experiences of Japanese students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though distance learning resulted in social isolation and posed some significant learning challenges, students demonstrated adaptability and resilience. Based on the data, students developed increased skills like self-reliance, technological proficiency, and independent study habits—traits that are important in modern educational contexts. In addition to this, regardless of the disruption caused by the pandemic, certain aspects of distance learning contributed positively to student development. The most essential of these being a greater sense of student autonomy.

On the other hand, this study revealed some of the difficulties in returning to academic routines and social connections after the pandemic. The lack of classroom engagement by some students at Saitama Medical University raises concerns about potential effects of prolonged online learning on students in terms of motivation and social skills. Furthermore, the inequalities in access and usage of technology highlight the need for digital literacy training and infrastructure support.

From an educator's perspective, the findings help to show the importance of flexible, student-centered teaching environments, ones that can blend in-person and online methods. In addition to this—particularly in light of future pandemics

where distance learning is necessary—mental health support needs to be strengthened, particularly during long periods of transition.

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size—especially at the university level. In addition, there was gender imbalance with the participants and the data. For future research, incorporating a more diverse group of participants across both genders and academic disciplines is needed.

In conclusion, even though the pandemic disrupted the traditional educational environment, it also pinpointed for educators the changes in both how content is delivered and experienced. By analyzing the challenges and successes of distance education during the pandemic, educators can prepare for the future and help support the development of more adaptable learners.

#### Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Mr. Yoshida and the staff at Kawagoe Girls High School for their support.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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## COVID-19 パンデミックと学習成果： パンデミックが日本の学生に与えた影響

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2020年3月11日、WHO事務局長はCOVID-19の世界的流行をパンデミックと宣言した。それに伴い、2020年4月の新学期開始時点で、日本の大学のおよそ90%が通常授業の開始を延期し、同年7月には遠隔授業を導入した。

2023年春までに、ほとんどの教育機関が対面授業を再開したが、ソーシャルディスタンスは維持され、ハイブリッド型の授業方法も利用された。本研究では、パンデミックによる隔離が学生にどのような影響を与えたか、また2020～2023年のオンライン学習が学習にどのような影響を及ぼしたかを調査するためのアンケートを実施した。このアンケートは、2024年に埼玉医科大学と川越女子高校の学生に実施され、遠隔学習による学業面・社会面の影響について調査した。

アンケート実施前、著者らはパンデミック中の教育環境について学生が否定的に捉えていると予想した。しかし、実際の回答では、パンデミック中の学びに対する否定的な側面だけでなく、肯定的な側面も観察された。さらに、遠隔学習の経験がパンデミック後の学びの改善につながったことも示された。

本研究は、現在まさに対面で講義を受けている学生達の学習スタイルがどのようなものであるのかについての重要な示唆を与えるものである。したがって、本研究で得られた情報は、今後の授業運営や学生の学びについて、教育者に大きな示唆を与えるものと思われる。

## Appendix

### Survey: Being a Student During the COVID Pandemic/調査：COVID パンデミック中の学生生活

High School University Inbound University Outbound	Male Female
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1. How much did the transition to online learning affect your academic performance?

オンライン学習への移行は、あなたの学業にどの程度影響しましたか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった ④ Slightly - わずかに影響した ③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	② Much - かなり影響した ① Very much- 非常に影響した
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Comments/ コメント

2. To what extent did you feel isolated from your peers during the pandemic?

パンデミック中に仲間からどの程度孤立していると感じましたか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった ④ Slightly - わずかに影響した ③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	② Much - かなり影響した ① Very much- 非常に影響した
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Comments/ コメント

3. How much did the pandemic impact your mental health and well-being?

パンデミックはあなたのメンタルヘルスと幸福にどの程度影響しましたか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった ④ Slightly - わずかに影響した ③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	② Much - かなり影響した ① Very much- 非常に影響した
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Comments/ コメント

4. Was it difficult to use remote learning tools and resources provided by your school?

学校が提供したリモート学習ツールやリソースを使うのは難しかったですか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった ④ Slightly - わずかに影響した ③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	② Much - かなり影響した ① Very much- 非常に影響した
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Comments/ コメント

5. Did you have difficulties balancing your studies with other responsibilities (e.g., work, family) during the pandemic?

パンデミック中、学業と他の責任（例：仕事、家族）を両立させるのに苦労しましたか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった ④ Slightly - わずかに影響した ③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	② Much - かなり影響した ① Very much- 非常に影響した
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Comments/ コメント

**Survey: Being a Student and Learning After the Pandemic/ 調査：パンデミック後の学生生活と学習**

1. Do you think that returning to in-person learning has worsened your academic performance?

対面学習に戻ることで、あなたの学業は悪化しましたか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった	② Much - かなり影響した
④ Slightly - わずかに影響した	① Very much- 非常に影響した
③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	

Comments/ コメント

2. Is it difficult to connect with your peers now that in-person learning has resumed?

対面学習が再開した今、仲間とつながることは難しいですか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった	② Much - かなり影響した
④ Slightly - わずかに影響した	① Very much- 非常に影響した
③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	

Comments/ コメント

3. Do you think that the new hybrid learning models (a mix of in-person and online) implemented after the pandemic are ineffective?

パンデミック後に導入された新しいハイブリッド学習モデル（対面とオンラインの混合）は効果がないと思いますか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった	② Much - かなり影響した
④ Slightly - わずかに影響した	① Very much- 非常に影響した
③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	

Comments/ コメント

4. How much have your study habits and routines changed since returning to in-person classes?

対面授業に戻ってから、あなたの学習習慣やルーティンはどれくらい変わりましたか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった	② Much - かなり影響した
④ Slightly - わずかに影響した	① Very much- 非常に影響した
③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	

Comments/ コメント

5. Do you think that the experiences during the pandemic affected you mentally and intellectually with your current and future academic challenges?

パンデミック中の経験が、現在および将来の学業上の課題に精神的および知的に影響したと思いますか？

⑤ Not at all - まったく影響しなかった	② Much - かなり影響した
④ Slightly - わずかに影響した	① Very much- 非常に影響した
③ Moderately - ある程度影響した	

Comments/ コメント