

Stakeholder Summary

Report reveals negative effects of university labour strikes on students

Labour disruptions at postsecondary institutions can lead to high levels of stress and confusion among students, finds a new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). *Understanding the Student Experience of a University Labour Strike: Identifying Strategies to Counter Negative Impact* identifies the various negative effects of university work stoppages on students and highlights the need for better communication strategies during a strike. It also identifies interventions that would improve students' experiences in the event of future strikes and makes several recommendations for university administrators and faculty members to ease the burden on students.

Project description

The authors conducted three studies designed to gauge the effects of labour disruptions on students. Using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the researchers studied the impacts on students of three strikes. The first study analyzed data from a longitudinal survey assessing changes in students' emotional responses to a strike by teaching assistants and contract faculty at York University in 2008–2009. The second and third studies used focus group interviews and an online survey to assess the impacts of two strikes also by teaching assistants and contract faculty in 2015, one at the University of Toronto and the other at York University.

Findings

All three studies confirmed that university work stoppages have negative effects on students. Students reported high levels of stress, anxiety and worry resulting from their concerns about how the work stoppage would affect them academically and financially. While initially grateful for the opportunity to catch up on coursework, students reported feeling a general apathy or laziness as the strikes wore on and a disruption in their study habits. Confusion was also common among students; many wondered if they should bother keeping up with their studies. Subsequent to the strikes, students indicated a concern that they had not learned as much in their courses as they should have. The financial impact of the strikes was also a concern for many students.

Students reported feeling poorly informed and highly confused about the status of the labour dispute. The studies indicated that students had sought strike-related information during the labour stoppages

from multiple sources. Faculty members were a particularly important source of information. However, the researchers note, there is a need for university administrators to better communicate with students. “Presumably, students want to know as much as possible about the status of negotiations, and more importantly, the impact of the strike on their semester and their studies,” the researchers write. “In the absence of a strong voice from the university’s administrative team, students rely on information from outside university channels including gossip and rumour from fellow students spread by word-of-mouth and social media.” A lack of information and understanding about the collective bargaining process also contributed to students’ confusion and stress.

The study found little consensus among students regarding which remediation strategies were most helpful following a strike. Therefore, it is important that administrators and faculty members provide a diversity of options at both the classroom and university level to ease the burden for students, the researchers conclude.

“Together the three studies highlight the stress and confusion experienced by students and the strong desire for increased communication during a work stoppage,” they add.

The report makes several recommendations for university administrators and faculty members in the event of future strikes. They include:

- Before a work stoppage begins or in the early stages of one, faculty members should provide students with contingency plans outlining possible effects of a strike on coursework and how these will be addressed.
- Faculty members should allow for student input into the development of remediation strategies following a strike and allow students the flexibility to select the one that suits their personal needs.
- University administrators should reach out to students and, as much as possible, provide them with status updates regarding the strike via email, social media and university websites.
- Administrators should consider introducing remediation initiatives at the university level such as the possible extension of course-drop deadlines, a tuition credit and ensuring a review of course material in senior-level courses immediately following a strike.
- Administrators should also consider providing students with basic information about the collective bargaining process and legislation governing labour disputes.

The authors of *Understanding the Student Experience of a University Labour Strike: Identifying Strategies to Counter Negative Impact* are Christine M. Wickens, from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the University of Toronto; and Cathy Labrish, Azar Masoumi, Lisa M. Fiksenbaum and Esther R. Greenglass, from York University.