

# **Developing an Empirically Driven Undergraduate Mental Health Course During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Prof ARAT Gizem, Assistant Professor of Department of Sociology and Social Policy

The health of undergraduate students has a crucial function, particularly in higher education, as universities are expected to create safe spaces and personal development. Especially in East Asia, for example, in Hong Kong, high levels of mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety) that could trigger suicide or suicidal ideation were reported among undergraduate students (Law & Shek, 2016). The suicide rate for those aged between 15 and 24 increased from 7.7 to 8.5 per 100,000 individuals based on the numerical data between 2000 and 2009 (Law & Shek, 2013). Existing studies conducted among undergraduate students enrolled in territory education (e.g., Lun et al., 2018) also found a high prevalence of depression and anxiety.

Given the unpleasant circumstances that Hong Kong has endured with the COVID-19 pandemic, university students are expected to manage hybrid teaching (both face-to-face and online modes), which could worsen their mental health due to social distancing, limited face-to-face communication, or a lack of social activities. Therefore, universities must be informed about the feasible ways to identify factors to promote the positive mental health of students facing the COVID-19 pandemic. An empirical means to understand the mental health experiences and potential protective and risk factors among university students is through empirically driven evidence and teaching.

COVID-19 poses challenges regarding undergraduate students' mental health outcomes and teaching and learning environments. A mental health course to equip students with skills in promoting positive outcomes is needed. This study aims to a) examine the overall mental health of undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic and b) develop an empirically driven undergraduate course on mental health in a Hong Kong university that could further equip students with skills in promoting positive mental health. A quantitative research design was adopted to run online surveys to measure mental health and well-being pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 among 318 (n =232 female, n =86 male) undergraduate students aged 18–25 between August and September 2021. Based on the results of the online surveys, an online pilot undergraduate course was run, and its effectiveness was measured using an uncontrolled pre-post evaluation [pre-(N =44) and post-(N =33) surveys]. The study findings showed that further empirically driven mental health courses could focus on cultivate long-term mental health promotion for undergraduate students at Lingnan University.