

Spectre of long Covid as unis come to life

Social life is resuming in universities in the endemic Covid-19 phase, but students still have reason not to throw caution to the wind.



Ng Chia Wee

Every time I have lunch at the National University of Singapore (NUS), I am momentarily transported to a pre-Covid-19 campus.

Mask off, breathing with my nose and mouth unblocked, I revel in the nostalgia of a distant world, one with fresher air and freer movement.

After two years, that world is now on its way back. From March 29, masks were no longer mandatory outdoors. Group size limits had doubled, rising to 10 people.

The easing of restrictions builds upon the streamlining of safe management measures on March 15.

Since that day, safe distancing was no longer required in mask-on settings. Capacity limits were also lifted for mask-on classes with up to 1,000 participants – effectively all of them.

At NUS, where I am pursuing my studies, this has enabled the university to continue resuming face-to-face classes wherever possible and appropriate.

Subject to prevailing guidelines, more sports activities can also resume, and live campus performances will make their long-awaited return.

Welcome to the age of the Covid-endemic university.

GREAT CAMPUS EXPECTATIONS

Like many university students who yearn for greater normalcy, I welcome the moves by local universities to shift towards greater Covid-19 resilience. For many students, this will be the closest their institution has come towards what it was always promised to be.

Growing up, they looked forward

to getting to university and having the time of their lives.

But prolonged Covid-19 restrictions all over the world have denied this generation of opportunities of a campus experience that earlier cohorts took for granted. The pandemic has also negatively affected their mental health, especially amid lockdowns.

While the easing of measures since the circuit breaker has improved the psychological well-being of university students here, continued restrictions on the complete resumption of face-to-face classes and social events have continued to take a toll on them.

With the latest easing of restrictions, will students finally begin to experience university life at its fullest and make the memories they missed out on?

UNCERTAIN COST OF COVID-19

The promise of the Covid-19 endemic university beckons – but it likely remains an uncertain one for now. This is because between catching and not catching the virus, the latter remains the better option. That may seem obvious, but it may be easy to forget at a time when Covid-19 has become endemic.

In a recent *Straits Times* article, National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) executive director Leo Yee Sin said that it is “important that we exercise reasonable precaution against getting (infected)”.

Separately, in a webinar organised by the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine in February, NCID’s Associate Professor David Lye warned against actively seeking out infection.

He said that while vaccination reduces the long-term side effects of infection, it does not eliminate them altogether.

These long-term side effects – such as extreme tiredness,

To move to an endemic Covid-19, there must be robust systems in place to cope with post-infection side effects – and the university is as good a place to start as any... Universities here should put in place dedicated long Covid support services too. This would go beyond current accommodation that focuses more on helping students when they test positive for Covid-19.

shortness of breath, problems with memory and concentration (“brain fog”) and joint pain – are often called “long Covid”, with some doctors seeing more such cases recently.

There is some good news. According to Dr Barnaby Young, head of the Singapore Infectious Disease Clinical Research Network at NCID, most Covid-19 patients will recover from their symptoms within four weeks after their infection.

But that is bad news for university students in a competitive education system, where even one week of not being at one’s best is way too long.

A coursemate who came down with Covid-19 said she still suffered from fatigue and brain fog a week after recovering. This has interfered with her ability to study and function properly.

A friend similarly reported having symptoms days after recovering. This has also made group work slightly harder for him.

Although I have not caught the virus, I hesitate to take part in

some social activities, as I worry about the risk of suffering from long Covid if I get infected.

After all, the university treadmill does not stop for anyone; in a competitive education system, just a few days of compromised productivity could cause one to fall behind.

For students who have officially recovered but are still feeling fatigued, would special considerations be granted for their assignments if they are not able to perform properly? If so, what sort of proof would they need to provide?

And while some professors may be lenient, it is hard to imagine long Covid excusing students from poorer performance during interviews for internships and jobs.

In a competitive society, not catching Covid-19 could become a competitive advantage.

LIVING WITH LONG COVID

None of the above suggests that there should be a return to living in fear of the virus, and there is the confidence in vaccinations reducing the risks of any long-term effects.

To move to an endemic Covid-19, there must be robust systems in place to cope with post-infection side effects – and the university is as good a place to start as any.

In the United States, a taskforce on long Covid, made up of disability services professionals in higher education, published a workbook suggesting possible questions universities can ask students to determine how Covid-19 has affected their lives and studies, and what special accommodation might be appropriate.

Teesside University in England is worth studying. Its Long Covid Support Service links students suffering from long Covid to a student well-being adviser, who then keeps in touch with them.

With more people now infected

with Covid-19 and the risk of new variants emerging in future, universities here should put in place dedicated long Covid support services too.

This would go beyond current accommodation that focuses more on helping students when they test positive for Covid-19.

Furthermore, setting up long Covid support offices can help standardise such accommodation – such as deadline extensions or longer exam durations – within and across universities, allowing for greater fairness.

Implementing such initiatives will give students greater peace of mind to resume social activities on campus, as they know they will be able to bounce back to their studies even with long Covid.

Such offices can also serve as pilots for future long Covid support services in the community and for human resource practitioners assisting employees with the after-effects of the virus.

Finally, universities and students must recognise that the endemic Covid-19 university is not the pre-Covid-19 university – and take precautions on hygiene and testing to avoid being infected and infecting others.

As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong advised in his March 24 speech on the easing of restrictions, do not throw all caution to the wind.

All Singaporeans should heed this advice, but more so those of us who are students, as we face the most crucial academic hurdles of our lives.

• Ng Chia Wee is a final year undergraduate in the philosophy, politics and economics programme at NUS. He co-hosted an online series made for NUS students titled Learning To Learn Better Back To School Edition.

• We welcome contributions to the Sunday Views column. Write to us at stopinion@sph.com.sg