

# Post Secondary Students Concerned About Work Placements Impacted By Coronavirus

By Jennifer Walker - January 25, 2021



KAWARTHA LAKES – The university experience changed drastically for Cassie Page after the pandemic began and her plans to become a registered nurse came to a halt.

Page started her four-year program at Ontario Tech University in 2017 in hopes of graduating this past December but the coronavirus thought otherwise.

“Before Covid my experience as a student with OnTechU was a generally positive one, similar to what I expect most university experiences to be,” said Page. “Once Covid hit my university experience changed drastically. The school implemented new guidelines following government instruction and my classes were moved to an online format. Unfortunately, this greatly impacted our clinical hours, which is the general focus in fourth year.”

In many programs, including nursing, clinical hours or “work placement” is imperative for graduation and in order to gain the hands on experience required to hone their skills. According to a survey done by Stats Canada, of the students who responded, about 35 per cent have had a work placement postponed or cancelled because of the novel coronavirus.

Page had chosen to fast track her program and finish her four-year program in a three-year time frame but due to the circumstances she is just starting her placement this week at the Ross Memorial Hospital in Lindsay.

“In a normal world my first semester of final year would consist of 300 preconsolidation hours and my final semester would consist of 420 consolidation hours,” she said. “I feel as though my school handled the pandemic well and took direction quickly and effectively. To the same point I am disheartened at the lack of clinical hours as that is what ultimately prepares me for the real

nursing world.”

Page noted that her first and second year consisted of many hands on labs where students learned nursing interventions such as catheterization, wound care, and medication administration.

“The mix of in person labs and in person theory classes helped to solidify my knowledge and skill in these procedures and more,” said Page. “To my understanding now, these labs are being taught online due to Covid restrictions.”

Page has missed out on 420 hours entirely due to the pandemic but on January 11 a new semester has begun and she will have the opportunity to complete 300 hours, which is based on the nurse’s schedule that she will be working with.

“Some students have been already and some not yet depending on when their nurse works next, some students are completely on hold until outbreaks at their facilities end,” she explained.

“Over the course of fourth year, I was supposed to have 720 clinical hours, 300 preconsolidation and 420 consolidation, OnTechU has divided our year into cohorts who complete one online semester with 180 hours of simulation and one semester with 300 clinical hours.”

According to Page, students have been randomly assigned a placement at various facilities and can attend in-person based on whether outbreaks are present. Students in long-term care homes cannot attend the facility with an active outbreak and must wait until the outbreak clears, she added.

Thankful and optimistic, Page will be heading to the Ross to complete her current placement requirements.

“I am really excited to be in a hospital again and obviously at first I was a little nervous about the virus but their PPE use is impeccable,” she said. “It’s up to the hospital if they kick students out or let them stay during an outbreak as far as I understand.”

Students cannot graduate until all 300 in person hours and 180 simulation hours have been completed. The contingency plan for the school is to complete any outstanding hours in the spring and summer semester, Page noted.

“Navigating this pandemic as a student whose program requires specific placement hours has been very difficult. I understand that this pandemic is difficult for everyone and I know the nursing program faculties are trying hard to deliver the necessary content,” she said.

“Unfortunately, losing clinical hours makes developing and demonstrating proficiency in both hands-on nursing skills and the competencies set out by our governing body, the College of Nurses of Ontario, very difficult.”

According to Trent University, since the summer of 2020, placements have been carefully arranged to meet public health guidelines, often run remotely with some in-person placements in specific areas of study such as Nursing and Biology.

“For instance, final-year Nursing students were able to continue with their preceptor placements, working for 300 hours one-on-one with a nurse in the field,” they said in a written statement. “In cases where placements had to be put on hold, the University made special efforts to develop alternate learning opportunities to ensure Trent students did not lose credit.”

The school officials also noted that prioritizing health and safety has been a key component for the University during the Pandemic.

"Trent has enhanced education modules for workplace health and safety, and provided support on conducting interviews remotely as well as professionalism and ethics in a remote world," they said. "For example, the School of Education pivoted to deliver a Virtual School of Education experience, where small groups of teacher candidates delivered lessons to their peers, gaining transferable skills for the online and in-person classroom setting."

The Trent/Fleming School of Nursing has focused on supporting all final-year students in securing placements for the final two semesters, each with 300 hours of preceptor practice, the statement continued.

According to Trent, putting students needs first at a challenging time is crucial. Many Trent programs have altered the sequence of courses, or allowed students to substitute other courses for placement courses to meet degree requirements.

"To ensure uninterrupted learning, the majority of classes have been delivered remotely in the fall and winter terms at Trent, with a small number of in-person classes, labs and field trips on each campus," they said. "A diverse range of wrap-around services continue to be available to all Trent students through newly introduced Student Hubs, the collegiate system, even virtual athletics, to support students' academic success, wellbeing and mental health."

All programs at Trent have also followed the Trent Forward plan, which was developed in response to the pandemic and updated as conditions have changed. Professional programs including the Trent/Fleming School of Nursing and the Trent School of Education have specific placement practices due to the nature of their programs and requirements of the professional bodies governing their training.

"With differences in programming and regions, Trent and other postsecondary institutions consult about the pandemic together through our provincial and national organizations, but operate autonomously," the school explained. "This allows Trent to work closely with our local public health officials, to operate the University, and serve the needs of our students and partner organizations in ways that respond to COVID-19 conditions in our community. We take pride in the resilience of our students, faculty, staff and community partners and thank everyone for finding the right balance between a safe and healthy campus and the Trent student experience."

According to Scott Clark, Press Secretary for the office of the Minister of College and Universities, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced postsecondary institutions to implement modified curriculum to comply with all public-health measures and keep students in Ontario safe.

"We recognize experiential learning opportunities at Ontario's publicly assisted colleges and universities provide valuable experiences for students," he said. "However, each college or university is ultimately responsible for their academic and administrative policies including developing and delivering their curriculum, in line with the program requirements from the regulatory body, and the requirements for placements."

Clarke noted that as the pandemic in Ontario continues to develop and change, the government will continue to work closely with the province's colleges and universities to ensure students receive the exceptional education and training they need to obtain rewarding careers.

"We encourage institutions and sector partners to work together to ensure students meet their

program requirements and keep the health and safety of the population in mind," he said.

Kawartha411 reached out to Fleming College but they declined to speak on the issue.

And while the pandemic has greatly affected her plans, Page remains optimistic about the future.

"As someone who would be already done school and ideally working as an RN right now, this pandemic has affected my timeline greatly and has been accompanied by many, many tears," she said. "Yet, it is not lost on me that this pandemic has forced me to roll with the punches and take things as they come, which ultimately will only help me grow as a nurse."

Some names in this story have been changed due to concerns around employment.

### **Jennifer Walker**

Jennifer decided to study journalism after having a life long passion for writing. She began her career as a reporter for the Uxbridge Times Journal and moved on to freelance work for various publications after her and her husband welcomed their daughters. She has been published in various Durham Region newspapers, the Durham Parent Magazine as well as Equine Wellness. Jennifer continues to follow her dreams as a wife, mother and journalist and is so excited to join the team at Kawartha411.