

Being a PhD Student in the Age of COVID-19: Reflections from the 2019 Faculty of Education Cohort of the University of Ottawa

Elise Guest, University of Ottawa, Canada
Sarah McGinnis, University of Ottawa, Canada
Xingtian Cao, University of Ottawa, Canada
Rachelle Lee-Krueger, University of Ottawa, Canada
Golshan Mahjoub, University of Ottawa, Canada
Kelly McKie, University of Ottawa, Canada
Lauren Morse, University of Ottawa, Canada
Sima Neisary, University of Ottawa, Canada
Hembadoon Oguanobi, University of Ottawa, Canada
Monsurat Omobola Raji, University of Ottawa, Canada
Lanqing Qin, University of Ottawa, Canada
Daphne Varghese, University of Ottawa, Canada

Abstract: In March 2020, the University of Ottawa, like many other universities across Canada and the world, transitioned to online learning in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This shift resulted in confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty as students had to adjust their schedules, their study habits, and, for some, their living situation. Within the Faculty of Education, the 2019 PhD student cohort¹ wondered how the shift to online learning would affect their work and their research. This paper outlines the experiences of 12 members of this cohort between March and August 2020. By writing this paper, we hope to not only share our feelings with other scholars, but to validate the feelings of other students across Canada. Although this paper is intended for graduate students, we feel that the sentiments and experiences expressed here may also offer valuable insight for both University and College administration.

Keywords: Online Learning, PhD Students, COVID-19

Introduction

In mid-March 2020, at the University of Ottawa, a bilingual university in eastern Ontario, Canada, over a dozen PhD students came together for a session of EDU 8106, one of two mandatory courses for PhD students at the faculty. This course was designed to prepare us for our academic journey and was titled Contemporary Issues in Education. When we registered for this course, we had no way of knowing that we ourselves would have to live through a contemporary issue in education: a global pandemic.

In late 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission posted to their public website information regarding a ‘viral pneumonia’ that was being tracked within its jurisdiction. By January 9, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the events as an outbreak of a new form of the coronavirus, known thereafter as the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Throughout January, February, and early March, the WHO traced the spread of the virus from Eastern China to various regions across the globe, prompting the organization to declare a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020).

March 13, 2020 was the last face-to-face class that our cohort had together. By the end of class that day, we had received an email from the university’s Registrar confirming what many of us suspected was coming: with three weeks left in the semester, all classes would move online for the foreseeable future. The question on many of our minds that day was: ‘What does this mean for us with regards to our study program and lives?’

Despite being in the beginning stages of our advanced degree, we were unsure how COVID-19 would impact our work and research. Some of us had coursework to complete, others wanted to complete comprehensive exams or work over the summer. With so many unknowns, we, the 2019 cohort from the University of Ottawa’s Faculty of Education, felt a need to collect and share our experiences from the end of the 2020 Winter semester to the subsequent

¹ While we consider ourselves to be the 2019 cohort, it should be noted that we are all on different trajectories and points in our studies.

Contact. Elise Guest (jgues088@uottawa.ca)

summer. The hope is that this paper can bring a sense of community to other PhD students. As we are living through our own contemporary issue in education, the goal is to share experiences and to detail how COVID-19 has affected our work and research plans. Although this reflection piece cannot fully depict how each of us has been affected by the pandemic, we feel this paper will provide insight on our individual lived experiences, which are representative of where many graduate students find themselves today.

Literature Review

Due to the time frames associated with undertaking research and subsequent publication in peer-reviewed journals, articles on the impact of COVID-19 on university students are just beginning to appear. What can be found to date is the publication of early research findings in grey literature or as research updates.

Shortly after the start of physical distancing recommendations from public health officials, advice for students began appearing. For example, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (n.d.) suggested that students commit to the following five components of self-care: build and keep a new routine, eat healthy foods and exercise, avoid excessive use of alcohol and other drugs, connect with others, and set boundaries with email, social media, and media consumption in general. Zheng (2020) advised that “parents, teachers, and family members ... provide physical and virtual support to students in digital learning” (p. 8). However, being socially supported is not necessarily a possibility for students who live alone, which is more likely to occur among PhD students than with students at primary, secondary, or undergraduate levels.

While longitudinal studies into the impact of the pandemic are in their infancy, following a survey conducted by the National Education Union in June 2020, the authors came to the conclusion that once schools reopen, the top priority of teachers needs to be the “mental health and well-being of returning pupils” (Jones, 2020, p. 238). This finding corresponds with the results of research conducted at the Université de Sherbrooke where 6,215 students responded to a survey expressing an overwhelming need for mental health support. The main contributing factors to deteriorating mental health were cited as isolation and workload. Even though many students reported that they felt they were struggling, when asked, only 26% of students expressed a desire to return to their studies completely in-person. Some students indicated a preference for a hybrid system, that is, a mix of in-person and online courses. As identified by Usher and Sullivan (2020), this survey was fielded several months after the beginning of the pandemic, making it difficult to determine if answers were connected to the fear of COVID-19 or reflected changes in the higher education market.

With regards to doctoral-level education, a joint report from the American Educational Research Association and the Spencer Foundation (2020) highlighted many of the challenges expressed by our cohort, specifically as they relate to the impact on our research. The authors of the report used 12 focus groups to discuss with students how disruptions and delays have impacted their work, and what adaptations have taken place since the start of the pandemic to support their research. Many focus group participants noted that they have felt disconnected from their institutions throughout the pandemic because of issues similar to those highlighted in the sources discussed above and in more detail in our reflections below.

Methodology

This project was conceived as a reflection piece by the two primary authors listed in this article, but the desire to be inclusive and representative required the input from as many as our cohort colleagues as possible. The purpose of a reflection piece is to provide authors with a venue to explore their personal response to a specific event or theory and to explore how they have reacted to the same (University of New South Wales, 2019). Since its inception, the intent of this project was to shed light on the individual experiences of authors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to understand the experiences of our cohort, a group email (blind copying was not used) and a post to the cohort’s private Facebook group were sent, both of which included a description of the proposed project and a link to a Google Form with a series of writing prompts to focus input from the authors. The distribution list included individuals who had enrolled in at least one of the core courses of the University of Ottawa’s PhD in Education program in the 2019-2020 academic year. To ensure transparency in the process, colleagues were asked to forward the information to anyone that may have been inadvertently excluded from these two methods of distribution.

The writing prompts listed in the Google Form fell into two categories: demographics and perception questions on being a PhD student in the age of COVID-19. There were three questions in the second category:

1. How did you feel about the switch to online learning as a PhD student?
2. How do you expect your thesis research/topic to change in light of COVID?
3. How did your research plan change in light of COVID?

Colleagues who were interested in participating were asked to complete the Google Form within 20 calendar days. Sixteen people were invited to participate and 14 people did (representing an 88% response rate). Following the first round of input, the principal authors met to review the input of the other authors and realized there were some follow-up questions that could be asked to add clarity to our understanding of the initial responses. As such, individual emails were sent to each respondent asking them:

1. To clarify any previous response that was unclear, as required.
2. To identify what kind of work they were engaged in and how, if at all, it has been impacted by the pandemic, as required.
3. To provide any other thoughts, not covered by the previous writing prompts, that they had on their experiences. (The primary authors had realized belatedly that an open-ended writing prompt had not originally been provided.)

Colleagues were given an opportunity to respond to these additional questions and all but one of the original 14 authors provided additional information.

Following this second round of input, the principal authors met once again to plan the next steps and writing activities. Once the principal authors were comfortable with a draft of the article, it was distributed to all authors for review. Authors were presented with two options: to have their information anonymized or, if they were uncomfortable with how their information was presented and/or overall unsatisfied with the article, to have their input(s) removed. Given the small sample size, the primary authors decided that anonymization would occur for all authors if even a single author made the request. During the review process, two authors requested their information be anonymized, therefore pseudonyms were applied to all narratives in the finding section below. After anonymization, two members of our cohort chose to withdraw their information.

A finalized draft of the article was then sent to an external copy editor for final review before submission to this publication. This article represents the voice of 12 members of the 2019 PhD in Education cohort at the University of Ottawa.

Findings

Lisa, a 46-year-old Canadian working as a part-time professor and research assistant within the faculty, found that the switch to online learning in March did not impact her materially as a student, as she was already finished with her coursework. However, the switch did impact her as a professor. The course Lisa was teaching involved hands-on, collaborative mathematics teaching and learning, which was challenging to translate to an online delivery model. Moreover, the closure of the campus had a further impact on Lisa as a student, as she used to rely on the space on campus to work without the distraction of family obligations. As a mother of two teenagers, public school closures caused by the pandemic impacted her progress in preparing for her comprehensive exams; with all family members at home, finding private time to prepare was challenging. At the time, Lisa did not expect the COVID-19 pandemic to impact her research plans, but she was seeing an impact in her research work with the faculty. Lisa was attached to two research projects; one with a classroom component that was (necessarily) interrupted, while the second could be undertaken in an online format. Taken as a whole, this pandemic had far-reaching personal, professional, and educational impacts on Lisa. Added pressure brought on by family obligations during physical distancing was common among the cohort.

Another mother in our cohort, Nasha, a 39-year-old permanent resident of Canada and dual citizen of the United Kingdom and Nigeria with a background in intellectual property law and access to medicine, found the transition to online learning challenging given her dual role as a parent and student. Despite these difficulties, Nasha felt that the faculty and students rallied to face the challenges created by campus closures, and that the online environment became

a safe and supportive learning environment. Responding to the novelty of the current global situation, Nasha helped teach a course during the spring semester for the Faculty of Education related to education in a time of crisis; the course helped Nasha situate her experiences of teaching and learning during a pandemic. Given that her research topic involves issues of public health and education, Nasha expects COVID-19 will impact her work and will likely result in her pursuit of a new approach to her inquiries. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that her thesis topic has changed. She saw this change as more of an organic growth as people write about things that affect them and that they care about. While challenging in many ways, Nasha felt that her time as a student during the pandemic, regardless of unexpected changes, has been a positive experience.

As with Nasha, Evelyn is a member of our cohort working in the area of medical professional education. Evelyn is a 27-year-old Canadian citizen, originally from Alberta and now residing in Ottawa. She felt the shift to an online learning environment had both pros and cons, but in the end, it did not inhibit her ability to finish her semester successfully. Evelyn's thesis is focused on educating family medicine practitioners and she felt the nuances of her work were likely to change as a result of the pandemic, specifically she expected to broaden the scope of her research. In addition to her studies, Evelyn was employed as a research assistant at a university-affiliated research institute. While her primary project with the institute was put on hold, she continued to assist with other projects. Transitions made in response to COVID-19 have been personally challenging for Evelyn due to medical and personal family reasons. At the same time, Evelyn believed that not all changes resulting from COVID-19 were negative (e.g., work-related relocations), especially those that supported both her and her spouse's professional commitments in mutual ways. Overall, COVID-19 has presented challenges and opportunities for Evelyn, all of which she is addressing as she continues with her doctoral work.

Many members of our cohort will have to grapple with the issue of how the medical professions are changing in light of the current pandemic. For example, Charlotte is a 34-year-old Canadian citizen working full time outside of academia (her pursuit of a PhD was inspired by her professional career). Her thesis topic relates to the accreditation of university nursing programs, which are currently being stress-tested in a variety of ways. She expected COVID-19 will have an impact on both her research work and overall thesis. Although she was still a year away from starting her research, knowing the pressures that schools of nursing were experiencing with regards to resourcing, she suspected some of the changes wrought by COVID-19 may be detrimental to her efforts to collect data. Regardless, she was hopeful that these changes may present new solutions to the issues that she expects to explore with her thesis. As a whole, Charlotte felt it was too early in her doctoral work to understand whether the impact(s) of COVID-19 will be neutral (at best) or negative on her remaining course requirements and eventually her field work. Charlotte had the majority of her coursework to complete as of March 2020, and as such, felt it was too early to know if the changes in program delivery would have a long-term negative effect on her, but viewed the transition in March to be positive and not inimical to completing her courses at the time.

Hao, a 25-year-old Chinese national studying in Canada, has had a similar experience to Charlotte in that she did not find the transition to online learning in March 2020 detrimental to her learning experiences. At that time, she was nearing the end of her coursework and only had three class sessions left. Moreover, given the nature of her research, which will involve document and textual analysis within the field of English language teaching, Hao did not expect the COVID-19 pandemic would affect her thesis topic, nor her research plan. What she did foresee, however, was a delay in progress caused by the pandemic, specifically in finding faculty with the time to sit on her comprehensive exams committee. The major influence of the pandemic on Hao was the anxiety created by having to balance the impact of an unknown infectious disease spreading at home (in China), if it threatened the lives of her family at home, not knowing how it would impact Canada, and the need to maintain a "normal" life as a doctoral student in a foreign country. Thus, having managed a high level of anxiety throughout January and February 2020, moving into March, Hao was already mentally prepared for what a pandemic response would look like in Canada. It is in this sense that one could say, at the moment when this project was conducted, the pandemic had a limited impact on Hao, but had the potential to interrupt the flow of her doctoral work in the future.

Isabelle is a 25-year-old Canadian citizen with a background in anthropology and education (specifically critical policy, equity, and leadership studies). She was currently working full-time as a research assistant for her thesis supervisor and has become much more involved in this work since the switch to online learning. Isabelle felt the biggest impact in the switch was with the social components of being an actively engaged graduate student, particularly meeting face-to-face for her summer class. Isabelle did not find the move to online learning difficult but found the lifestyle switch challenging as it eliminated activities she very much enjoyed, such as working in her office,

seeing friends, as well as getting physical exercise at the university recreational centre. Staying physically active is an important aspect to her overall well-being, and the pandemic denied her the ability to work out at the gym. This was a common feeling among our cohort. As Isabelle was not at the data-collection phase of her studies, she was unsure how COVID-19 would impact that work.

Tayo is a 38-year-old permanent resident of Canada, originally from Nigeria, who is currently working as a research assistant in the Faculty of Education. Thankfully, her work was not greatly affected by COVID-19 as her research assistantship has been able to continue online. Up until the spring of 2020, Tayo had only ever taken one online course throughout her studies. As with Isabelle and some other members of the cohort, Tayo enjoyed online learning but did not like the feeling of working in isolation and missed having face-to-face interaction with her classmates. Conducting virtual interviews was always part of Tayo's research plan, in case there were limited opportunities for physical interviews, so it is likely no surprise that, when the switch to online learning occurred, Tayo found the experience to be positive overall. Generally, she prefers face-to-face learning and recognizes that, as a PhD student, physical interaction is important and feels that it improves one's sense of belonging and participation in activities. At the time, Tayo's thesis topic was not being affected by COVID-19 because her conversations (interviews) with teachers could be conducted online over a video platform. These conversations investigate how teachers have practiced assessment in schools rather than how their present experiences affect their practices. As such, her research plan remained intact, and she was planning to move forward with her study as planned.

Ester, a 36-year-old international student from Iran, is a full-time student with a background in English translation. As a mother, the switch to online learning gave her more time to manage her personal and educational responsibilities instead of spending her time commuting to campus. She spent the summer and fall preparing for her comprehensive exams and thesis proposal, and did not foresee any obstacles because she was able to access most of her sources online through the library. As with Tayo, Ester had already considered conducting online interviews with the subjects of her research, so if physical distancing restrictions were still in place when she reached the data collection stage of her thesis, she would not need to change her plans to conform with public health guidelines. At the time, Ester was a research assistant for a project within the Faculty of Education and most of her responsibilities remained centered online, such as email management, online interviews, and interview transcriptions. The in-person support from her team members was what she missed most; however, they were still holding team meetings through online platforms. Unfortunately, Ester's situation was not congruent with her friends, many of whom lost their jobs and, as international students, could not apply for funds to support their families.

For Leilah, a 30-year-old international student also from Iran, switching to online learning was quite challenging. By March, when the lockdown began, she had only been in Canada for six months, and she felt like she had learned how to thrive in a North American lifestyle; dealing with COVID-19, she felt like she had lost the gains that she had achieved. Being new to Canada, without social or financial stability, participating in actual classes gave her a chance to meet people, look for related jobs, and learn new skills through workshops and meetings. Face-to-face classes allowed her to benefit from the new educational setting that she had travelled so far to be a part of. Online learning prevented Leilah from being able to separate work and study from her personal life and resulted in her feeling isolated and caused her difficulty with concentration. Like many of her colleagues, she had trouble keeping herself motivated. Luckily, this was improving over time. Leilah's research topic and plan remained unchanged – a fortunate consequence of her being in the early stages of her research. In terms of teaching and research assistant work, Leilah felt that the nature of the jobs was different in the spring and fall than the winter as these roles then required more preparation.

Similarly, Willow, a 27-year-old Canadian citizen, found the switch to online learning in March frustrating because of the structure of online presentations; it was very difficult for her to feel a connection with her classmates when the online interaction was so limited. She was working part-time as a teaching assistant while battling unstable internet connection at her home outside of the city as well as learning to navigate new online communication platforms. At that point in time, the specifics of her research topic (the validity of standardized tests) had not been finalized so there was room for change. This year, most large-scale assessments like EQAO and state tests were canceled because of COVID-19, so next year will be the first year "back"; this could prove to be very interesting data, and she looks forward to seeing what education systems do in response to COVID-19. Willow knows she will still be looking at large-scale assessments and accountability systems in both Ontario and New York, but her data collection could potentially focus on more document analysis and online interviews than previously expected. Willow felt that it is important to remain flexible with how the data collection and analysis process unfolds for her research going forward.

Wen, a 29-year-old permanent resident originally from China, also felt like his research plan remained unchanged but recognized the possibility of needing to modify the data collection approach as face-to-face interviews may no longer be appropriate. While not at the proposal stage yet, his topic was and remains Chinese Canadians' sense of belonging. Wen felt demotivated by the switch to online learning and found that he needed to motivate himself as he no longer had access to the library to study, nor the ability to meet with friends in person. While the concept of online learning was well known to him, there was a sense that online research was unfamiliar to Wen. Overall, Wen yearned to travel – to see his family outside the country, or even friends on campus. He accepted the new “normal” out of necessity even though he felt trapped in his apartment. Fortunately, Wen was able to keep his jobs (both with the university and off-campus). His work for the university was unchanged by the shift to online; however, Wen originally felt scared working part-time in public transportation due to the contact with the public, but felt safer when personal protective equipment protocols changed.

The difficulties Wen expressed with regards to his ability to work were mirrored by Sophie, as both were preparing for comprehensive exams over the summer. Sophie, a 26-year-old Canadian, was also employed by the university during this period. She had to learn about the technology services available but was able to look up answers or ask her professor for help. In terms of preparing for her comprehensive exams, Sophie appreciated being able to make her own schedule. The added flexibility and changes to daily life as a result of public health directions related to physical distancing did have a cost however – her sleep schedule was greatly impacted. Feeling tired due to her disrupted sleep schedule, it was no wonder that Sophie found it difficult to be happy some days; not being able to go outside and socialize did not help her mood. In response to the global pandemic, Sophie's topic continued to evolve alongside society's response to COVID-19; she is currently looking at virtual health professional education.

Discussion

Responses to the writing prompt show that feelings on the shift to online learning were split; approximately 40% of the cohort found it was a positive experience, 40% found it to be a negative experience, while 20% found it to be a neutral experience. Those who enjoyed the change found the reclaiming of personal time to be the primary benefit, whereas those who did not like the change reported far more serious consequences, chief among which was a sense of social isolation. Regardless, as a cohort, we have spent the majority of our learning experiences since childhood in a system based on in-person interactions; the need to ‘re-learn’ how to learn has been very real. For those of us who had coursework to complete, the situation was difficult to predict as the three weeks we experienced in March gave us no real experience for what online doctoral classes would be like in the fall. The uncertainty surrounding our studies is an added stress to the self-paced nature of a PhD program.

In response to the writing prompt “How do you expect your thesis research/topic to change in light of COVID-19?” there was an overwhelming sense of uncertainty. Half of our cohort did not know what change, if any, COVID-19 would have on their research topic; only a handful felt the pandemic would or would not have an impact. Among those who were unsure, several indicated that they have yet to finalize the details of their topic, so it remains to be seen if and how COVID-19 will be a major or minor factor, or if it will be a factor at all. A similar level of uncertainty can be seen in the response to the writing prompt regarding the possible change to research plans as a result of COVID-19. As one of our colleagues noted, there are natural changes that come when developing a research plan, so the direct impact of COVID-19 remains to be seen. This writing prompt encouraged our colleagues to look into the future of their time as doctoral students, and many provided information on their progress towards completing comprehensive exams and their thesis proposals. The general sense was that COVID-19 would delay these processes as faculty resources are redeployed to address the shift to online learning and/or the necessary changes to their own research plans.

What emerges from our cohort's response to the writing prompts is an undeniable reality: uncertainty and adaptability reign. COVID-19 has brought unprecedented changes to how we work, how we learn, how we research, and how we live our day-to-day lives. Pursuing a PhD was never going to be easy, but none of us expected to have to face these additional challenges. As a result, the need to rely on each other for professional and personal support is very real.

For all the challenges and opportunities that COVID-19 has presented, Nasha had an optimistic view of the situation:

The concept of PhD student's "resilience" was something that struck me during the pandemic. PhD students are incredibly resilient, and I found this to be the case with how my classmates and professors came together to work collectively and support each other. In every sense, the online environment became a safe and supportive learning environment. This is something I take away as a positive experience.

This view of the transitions for us all, as caused by COVID-19, is a learning opportunity for our cohort.

Conclusion

As the University of Ottawa shifted to online classes in response to COVID-19, the 2019 cohort from the Faculty of Education came together to write a reflection paper on their experiences. We wondered: what does this change mean for us? In this paper we outlined how the shift to online learning has impacted our research plans and our work. Many of us also shared various personal anxieties or struggles that we faced. These feelings are not unique to our cohort as there are thousands of students worldwide who are experiencing similar feelings of isolation, lack of motivation, and decreased levels of concentration. Although many of us are at the beginning of our doctoral careers, there have been very real impacts on our lives as a result of COVID-19. We expect more changes to come as our careers continue to evolve alongside the global pandemic.

As we are all struggling with a sense of uncertainty, it is no surprise that there is little knowledge of what the future will bring. A possible future project, revisiting the writing prompts with the cohort in a year, would hopefully demonstrate that we have all conceptualized a clearer way forward for our doctoral work. Keeping with the philosophy of academic research, we will have to keep an open mind and wait until the evidence is clear.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Xingtian Cao is a PhD student in the Language, Education, and Society concentration in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. His research interests are citizenship education for new immigrants to Canada, comparative and international education, and the philosophy of education. He is the current Program Chair for the Citizenship Education Research Network (CERN) of the 2021 Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) Conference.

Elise Guest is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. The focus of her research is on the dual quality-assurance requirements (approval and accreditation) for Nursing education programs in Canadian post-secondary institutions. She is also interested in program evaluation theory and change management practices as ways of supporting accreditation-driven improvements in professional university programs.

Rachelle Lee-Krueger is a PhD Candidate in the Health Professions Education program at the University of Ottawa. Her research addresses the role of clinical preceptorship between physicians and clinical trainees in virtual healthcare settings. Her research program also examines the facilitation of clinical feedback and coaching, as well as technology-based learning approaches in the field of medical education.

Golshan Mahjoub is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. The focus of her research is on science education and the underrepresentation of women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM).

Sarah McGinnis is a PhD candidate in the Leadership, Evaluation, Curriculum, and Policy studies program at the University of Ottawa. The focus of her research is educational accountability and improvement with regards to the impact of large-scale standardized assessments in New York State and Ontario. Her research sets out to prove that using standardized tests for accountability purposes undermines educators and educational improvements.

Kelly McKie is a PhD candidate and part-time professor at the University of Ottawa in the Faculty of Education. Her SSHRC-funded research focuses on mathematics teacher collaborative professional learning, specifically she seeks to

gain a clearer understanding of the complexity of teacher learning, how initiatives can support teacher learning, and how this learning can be sustained and diffused across the larger mathematics education community.

Lauren Morse is a graduate student in health professions education (HPE) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Her research is focused on the use of gamification and serious games in HPE. Further research interests include the involvement of technology in the education of health professionals and exploring the professional identity of trainees in the health professions.

Sima Neisary is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. The focus of her research is digital inequalities, particularly for second language learners. As a former EFL/ESL teacher, she seeks to give voice to ESLs and present educational opportunities to reduce the digital divides for those who are left behind.

Hembadoon Iyortyer Oguanobi holds a doctorate in Law from the University of Durham, England, an LLB from the University of Cardiff, an LLM from the University of Hull, England, and an MA in Education from the University of Ottawa. She is a Barrister and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Nigeria. She is working on her second doctorate within the field of curriculum studies at the University of Ottawa. She teaches at the Department of Law and Legal Studies, University of Carleton, Ottawa. She has published in the *Journal of World Intellectual Property, Education Journal - Revue de l'éducation* and *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry*.

Lanqing Qin is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Her research is focused on the native speaker construct in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), especially in the context of China. She is interested in representation studies and critical discourse analysis.

Monsurat Raji is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Her research broadly covers teachers' classroom assessment practices, teacher professional development, teacher education, as well as conceptions of assessment. Her doctoral research is focused on the connection between teacher educators' conceptions of assessment and the assessment they practice with teacher candidates in Nigerian teacher education programs.

Daphne Varghese is a PhD student from the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Her research interest is on the social innovation in higher education, especially with regards to the influence of private foundations on social innovation initiatives in Canadian universities. She has been involved in research that maps the leadership practices of social innovators in Canadian universities, as well as examining the progression and influence of social innovation initiatives in Canadian universities.