



## Students' Experiences of Wearing Face Masks During Teaching and Learning at Health Tutors' College Mulago

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### Abstract

*The Centre for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO,) recommended that due to the dominant strains of COVID 19 infection, all students, teachers, staff and visitors in all education institutions wear face masks consistently while indoors regardless of their vaccination status as they return to face to face learning. This study sought to establish the experiences of students wearing face masks during the teaching and learning process at Health Tutors' College Mulago in Uganda. Specifically, the study sought to identify the types of standard operating procedures being observed; establish the benefits and challenges of wearing face masks among students during the teaching and learning processes at Health Tutors' College-Mulago. This was a qualitative study employing a phenomenological design and the purposive sampling technique was used. A group of 12 participants from different medical backgrounds pursuing the Post Graduate Diploma in Medial Education course were interviewed. Data were analyzed qualitatively using themes and categories in line with the specific objectives. The findings indicated that wearing masks, social distancing and hand hygiene were rated highest among the SOPs being observed; the benefits ranged from protection from the virus and dust to increased attentiveness, while the challenges included poor audibility and physical symptoms resulting into incorrect and inconsistent mask use of face masks. Wearing face masks, social distancing and hand hygiene were rated highest among the SOPs being observed at Health Tutors' College-Mulago. The benefits of wearing face masks ranged from protection from the virus and dust, to increased attentiveness, while the challenges included poor audibility and physical symptoms resulting into incorrect and inconsistent mask use of face masks. The study recommended that there is need to devise ways to mitigate the identified challenges of wearing face masks and to encourage all members of school communities to adhere to the recommended SOPs against COVID-19.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, experiences, face masks, students

### INTRODUCTION

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, face masks were mostly limited to operating rooms and construction sites (Bukuluki & Kisakye, 2022). Nobody had to wear a mask during remote learning but today, face masks have become part of everyone's everyday outfit following policy guidelines to protect oneself and others against COVID-19 infection especially in rooms with poor ventilation (Zoe, 2021). The centers for disease control and prevention recommended that due to the dominant strain COVID-19 Delta variant, all students, teachers, staff and visitors wear masks indoors regardless of their vaccination status as they return to face to face learning (WHO, 2021). Similarly, the American academy of pediatrics also recommended all children above 2 years wear masks besides other SOPs when they return to school and the district leaders are

incorporating that guidance into their institutional reopening plans.

The world health organization recommends correct and consistent wearing of face masks while in public places during the pandemic (WHO, 2020). To reduce the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus variant (COVID-19) and to minimize transmission within school settings, governments worldwide have introduced new school guidelines for using face masks (Spitzer, 2020). These increased measures aim to reduce the spread since the data shows that the coronavirus is highly transmissible. For instance, governments have developed standard operating procedures among which is the mandatory wearing of face masks by students during teaching and learning processes made it mandatory for students to wear face masks (Krishnaratne et al., 2020). Relatedly, the African Union with its agenda 2063 goal of “developing Africa’s human and social capital” acknowledges the innovation on the development of a new non-invasive respirator, face shields and protection masks. Similarly, the Ugandan government in 2021 developed a policy on mandatory face masking and the Ministry of Health procured and distributed a total of 5,225.854 face masks to the districts of Kampala, Wakiso and Mukono during the lock down period (Aceng, 2021). However, a considerable number of people in Uganda do not wear face masks even in public places (Bukuluki & Kisakye, 2022).

Mask-wearing being a new concept for many learners, the correct and consistent usage is affected hence wearing their masks on top of their heads chins or might let them dangle from one ear or shove them in their pockets (Linda, 2020). In a study conducted by Mwesige (2021) on mask usage among 423 students in selected secondary schools in eastern Uganda, he established varied responses where only 33% were knowledgeable about using face masks, 1.1% wore masks due to the fear of COVID-19 infection, while 90% believed that they were not vulnerable and wore masks due to fear of security personnel and missing class, while 62% of students didn’t wear masks correctly and consistently.

However, several challenges regarding mask usage in the classroom have been reported. For instance, according to a study conducted in the university of Zurrich by Aguzzi (2020), masks block emotional signaling, creating a sense of false safety and favors risky behavior between the teacher and learner, teaching for up to eight hours in a mask affects instruction and difficulty in creating rapport with new learners who needed to see the teacher’s face and visual cues (Aguzzi, 2020). While according to Hall (2020), face masks impair verbal and nonverbal communication resulting into problems in understanding speech drawing learners closer interfering with social distancing and exposing them to the infection. These existing challenges keep interfering with correct and consistent use of the mask even in a classroom setting and there is no published literature about experiences of health tutor students wearing masks in the classroom despite the school being located in an endemic area.

However, there is lack of data regarding the experiences of the students wearing face masks during the teaching and learning processes at institutions of higher learning in Uganda. Therefore, the current study sought to explore the experiences of students wearing masks during the teaching and learning processes at Health Tutors’ College-Mulago.

## METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study employing phenomenological design by investigating students lived experiences of wearing face masks in the classroom setting, which

helped the researcher to understand their subjective experiences, describe in depth the students' experiences of wearing face masks during teaching and learning. The study was carried out at the Health Tutors' College Mulago in Uganda among tutor students undergoing training for the PGDME. Purposive sampling was used and saturation was reached after interviewing 15 PGDME students, who were interviewed by the researcher using a semi structured interview guide. The interview data collected were transcribed and large numbers of transcripts were produced and read several times, in order to form themes and develop categories which were coded according to the study questions and interpreted to make meaning.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Standard Operating Procedures Used at Health Tutors' College Mulago**

The findings of the study indicated that the Mulago Tutors College has put in place several measures to control the spread of COVID-19 during the teaching and learning processes. The SOPs being observed among students at Health Tutors College included; being subjected to temperature taking at the entrance, wearing of nonmedical face masks, carrying and using hand sanitizers whenever necessary and frequent hand washing. These Standard Operating Procedures are in line with the WHO Guidelines, Ministry of Health Guidelines and Ministry of Education guidelines. Respondents described the measures put in place as follows:

Wearing face masks all the time while at school and in class. Students were urged to ensure that the masks are fitting well to cover the mouth and nose area to avoid frequent adjusting. Carrying a hand sanitizer and using it often when you touch public surfaces. Hand washing facilities had been installed in buildings with water and soap. Water points for hand washing were provided at various points starting at the entrance of buildings within the College. These points have clean water and soap. All students and college staff from homes or outside the College are subjected to temperature measurements on a daily basis. Anyone found with a temperature of above 37.5C is quarantined to establish the cause of the fever including Covid-19 test.

These findings show compliance with the World Health Organization recommendation of SOPs to prevent infection and spread of the COVID-19. However, putting on masks, social distancing and hand hygiene either by use of water, soap or by using a sanitizer was rated highest among the key standard operating procedures adopted by students and teachers to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during the teaching and learning process at Health Tutors' College Mulago. This finding is in agreement with those of other recent scholars such as Mboowa et al (2021), who assessed knowledge, attitude and practices towards COVID-19 and face mask use among high-risk groups in Kampala, and concluded that respondents had good knowledge, optimistic attitudes and adequate practices towards prevention of COVID-19. Moreover, being medical professionals, the PGDME students in the current study were themselves involved in the promotion of the aforementioned SOPs against the spread of COVID-19, thus exhibiting a high degree of compliance with the WHO recommendations.

### **Students' Perceived Benefits of Wearing Face Masks During Teaching and Learning**

Results indicated that the major benefit of wearing face masks while at school was to reduce the spread of COVID infections and other diseases, followed by protection from dust and dust entry. Other benefits reported by the PGDME students were increased learners' attentiveness and reduced chances of catching flu. These findings implied that the participants, being medical professionals, were perhaps adequately aware and

sensitive to the preventive functions of wearing face masks against the spread and infection of covid-19 and other related infections. These findings were compliant with the WHO (2020) and Government of Uganda (2020) guidelines which stipulate that wearing face masks will reduce the spread of Corona virus among students and wider population. Further, the findings are congruent with those of Spitzer (2020) who concluded that wearing face masks is one of the most effective preventive measures people can take to protect themselves and others from becoming infected with the corona virus. Similarly, the students' commendable attitude towards the use of face masks is in agreement with the findings of Mboowa et al (2021) whose study attributed the positive attitude to good sensitization of the public through numerous media campaigns and very strict measures such as the lockdowns instituted by the government of Uganda.

### **Students' Challenges of Wearing a Face Mask During Teaching and Learning**

According to the study findings, participants reported challenges such as increased difficulty in breathing among mask users, inability to understand and listen clearly to the speaker (teacher or fellow student), while others mentioned the increase in temperature around the face. Others noted that it sometimes causes suffocation and poor audibility of the speaker. The following quotes are illustrative:

*“while wearing a face mask during the teaching and learning, it causes suffocation”*

*“masks cause breathing difficulty and also breathing problems, while breathing a lot of heat is produced which makes learners sleep in class”*

*“when I as a student is explaining a point, am not loud enough, but given a microphone. It can be better”*

*“Masks change the pronunciation of the learners which finally affects the transmission of words to the audience”*

These findings are in agreement with those of other scholars elsewhere, such as Spitzer (2020), who established that despite the benefits of mask-wearing during teaching and learning, there are health concerns and disadvantages. Common physical health concerns with mask-wearing are bilateral headaches, perioral dermatitis with rashes and redness, false security leading to less compliance with infection control measures, and unintentional closer contact due to speech incoherence increasing infection risk (Spitzer, 2020).

### **Students' Perceptions of the Voice, Tone, Pace and Sound of the Teacher**

The study further sought to illuminate students' perceptions of the voice, tone, pace and sound of the teacher wearing a face mask during the teaching and learning process. Different responses were made as follows;

*“Masks present challenges when speaking. They muffle sound, making it difficult to understand high frequency sounds. High pitch consonants such as ‘s’, ‘f’, ‘th’, and ‘sh’ are impacted when our face is covered. Masks also make it difficult for us to read lips and fully see facial expressions. We rely on these when trying to understand someone who is speaking to us”.*

*“Masks hide teacher's various emotions. That is with masks on, teachers lose the ability to interpret and use specific facial expressions to emote. Yet the face is a primary means for communicating feelings and emotions. As a result, a classroom with a teacher wearing masks might feel like one*

*does when interacting with someone with a blank facial expression -- they appear emotionless, strange and confusing”*

*“Masks stifle speech and sound. The inability to hear becomes even more of a problem in larger classrooms. And mask wearing is an accessibility concern: students who are deaf or hard of hearing can no longer read lips when masks conceal people’s mouths”*

In agreement with the current study findings, other scholars argue that problems that may arise from mask-wearing are impaired face recognition and identification, impaired communication and blocked emotional signaling (Spitzer, 2020). According to Darwin (1998), facial expressions are important cues to one’s emotions but when the teacher’s or fellow learner’s face is concealed by a mask, their emotional expressions which may be important in teaching and learning are missed out. Additionally, a face mask markedly impairs face recognition and identification, and interferes with social interactions; this is why burglars and thieves wear them (Reynolds & Roth, 2018).

## **CONCLUSION**

The study sought to explore students’ experiences of wearing face masks during the teaching and learning process at Health Tutors College, Mulago. The following conclusions can be made.

There was a relatively high level of compliance with the WHO and Ministry of Health guidelines and the SOPs that were being observed at Health Tutors’ College Mulago included all the recommended SOPs for preventing the spread of COVID-19, but mostly social distancing and hand hygiene either by use of water, soap or by using a sanitizer were reported to be most highly observed. Several benefits, as well as challenges, of wearing face masks during teaching and learning were identified. The benefits ranged from protection against the corona virus and dust to increased attentiveness in class, while the challenges included poor audibility and physical discomfort resulting into incorrect and inconsistent mask use among some individuals.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Government’s standard operating procedures, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education guidelines concerning students wearing masks on school premises should be followed. If wearing of masks by students in physical lessons is mandated, we recommend the following pedagogical modifications.
- Compulsory wearing of face masks should be encouraged and enforced by all teachers and learners in education institutions.
- School administrators and teachers need to adopt blended learning strategies to reduce students’ physical presence, especially at higher institutions of learning.
- The Ministry of Education and Sports, together with Ministry of Health, should endeavor to equip education institutions in terms of training and materials towards enforcing the recommended SOPs to prevent infection and spread of COVID-19.
- Such recommendations mentioned above complement the general guidelines recommended to avoid virus spreading, such as regular hand washing and social distancing.

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