



LEVEL
YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM



Mental Health Support for International Students

JACKIE OBUNGAH

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The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓ əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), & səliilwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

ABOUT THE LEVEL INITIATIVE

LEVEL is a youth-engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth population in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL CONSISTS OF
THREE PILLARS OF
WORK TO ADVANCE
RACIAL EQUITY:



ABOUT THE LEVEL YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized Newcomer youth are disproportionately impacted by certain public policies and are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the hən̓d̓əmin̓əm̓-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tseil-Waututh peoples, and of the sn̓íchim-speaking Skwx_wú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

1 <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>



JACKIE
OBUNGAH

Jackie Obungah (she/her) is a Black African femme living and working on the unceded territories of the **xwməθkwəy̓əm** (Musqueam), **Skwxwú7mesh** (Squamish), and **səl̓ilwətaʔt̓/Selilwitulh** (Tsleil-Waututh) Peoples.

She is currently pursuing her B.A in International Development at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and planning the Afrocentrism Conference 2019: Decolonizing Academia. She is an integral and supportive member of the SFU Women's Center collective. She is devoted to learning and understanding the complex ideas and processes of decolonization, as well as putting it into practice.

Jackie is deeply passionate about the inclusivity of Afrocentric schools of thought in academia, and in her practice of community work. She loves exploring African literature, poetry, film and photography and expresses her undying gratitude to Indigenous peoples for their continuous relationship to the land. She is committed to working in solidarity to Indigenous peoples to dismantle colonial structures globally.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this work is to highlight the importance of mental health support for international students in Canada and to present strategies to provide intersectional and decolonized approaches to solve the problems that currently exist.

BACKGROUND

Mental health under the description provided by the Government of Canada is defined as: “The capacities of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections, and personal dignity.” (Government of Canada, 2006)²

Mental health, therefore, is essential to students’ academic success as well as their ability to fully and meaningfully participate throughout all aspects of their lives and throughout their lifespan. Empowering students, especially international students, to actively participate in maintaining their well-being, as well as addressing mental health issues, sets the foundation for increased ability to sustain well-being throughout their lives.⁴

It is widely accepted that the broader organizational context has an impact on the wellness of those within it. Institutional structure and policies contribute to its culture by reinforcing certain values, beliefs, and behaviors while discouraging others. How a post-secondary institution is structured and its strategic goals, policies, and practices therefore impact student mental health, which in turn impacts student learning.⁶

International students are more reluctant than other students to seek mental health counseling for a wide variety of reasons, including stigmatization of mental illness in their home countries and common myths that seeking treatment could result in a notation on their university transcript, language barriers, the revocation of their visa, and institutional racism etc.³

Recognizing the resilience of many international students to study abroad requires them to leave their safety net and comfort zone; they are away from the familiarity of home, friends and family, and in many cases entirely delving into a new way of living and perceiving the world.

These extra pressures are adding to what is already considered to be a stressful period during a young adult’s life. Increasingly, there are students with diverse gender, cultural, and religious identities on campuses, with different experiences and understandings of mental health and illness, dis/ability, and help-seeking.⁹ While university is a rewarding and enjoyable experience for students, bouts of depression and loneliness are not uncommon during a time that will see them make new friends, wade their way through piles of coursework, as well as living away from home for the first time. In fact, a study done by Ryerson University and The Toronto Star in 2018,



of more than 43,000 Canadian university students, 66% of surveyed international students reported feeling “very lonely” in the past year. Furthermore, a shocking 44% said they felt “so depressed that it was difficult to function” within the year of the study. The need to suddenly adapt to completely new environments, routines, and stressful situations can cause underlying mental health issues to rise to the surface.⁶

According to Global News Canada, more and more students line up each year for care on campus at health and counselling services, which is good news.³ Stigma appears to be decreasing, more students are seeking help earlier, and campus services are usually easy to find and typically more responsive and appealing to students. Determining who needs what, when, and where requires continuous navigation. Still, the students who often need the services most are the least likely to seek and find the care they need. Bottlenecks are common, given the decades of underfunding of mental health and addiction services for children, youth, and emerging adults at the federal and provincial levels. Thus, students keep flowing through the doors to campus services, but rarely (and slowly) flow out of those same doors to seek other services, even if they have severe and persistent mental illness.³

To best determine how to provide effective care and support-to-support students, it is important to conduct research that includes student’s feedback and that it is based on the evidence of individual and communal needs. Sometimes international students would like to connect with someone from a similar cultural background or who has similar language skills. At the same time, universities should avoid making assumptions that international students always want to work with a counselor who has a similar cultural background.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATION AND NEXT STEPS

- Pushing for an intercultural understanding as a strategic priority for integrating international students, while recognizing and celebrating diversity between both domestic and international students is key. It is also extremely important to, incorporate Indigenous peoples' knowledge of wellness methods into a greater model, to ensure that international students receive well-rounded support for their mental health. Within the framework of the "Medicine Wheel," mental illness cannot be reduced to the presence of a physical disorder, it is the interconnectedness of mind, emotion, spirit, and body (A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health, 2011)⁷. The Aboriginal wellness model involves the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of a person in connection to extended family, community, and the land⁷.
- Establishing a process that reviews campus policies and procedures through a mental health lens and informed by established principles such as accessibility, student autonomy, flexibility, and equity is required. Established processes are also needed for program evaluation and continuous improvement of offices, departments, services, and resources that include criteria related to fostering student well-being. There should be built in accountabilities for staff and faculty to support student mental health. Policies and practices that effectively address disruptive and threatening behavior in a manner that is sensitive to mental health concerns are necessary, as are campus policies and practices that operationalize legislation related to the accommodation of students with mental health issues. And finally, campus policies and practices that address the role of faculty and mental health services in academic accommodations with regards to mental health difficulties and documentation are required.

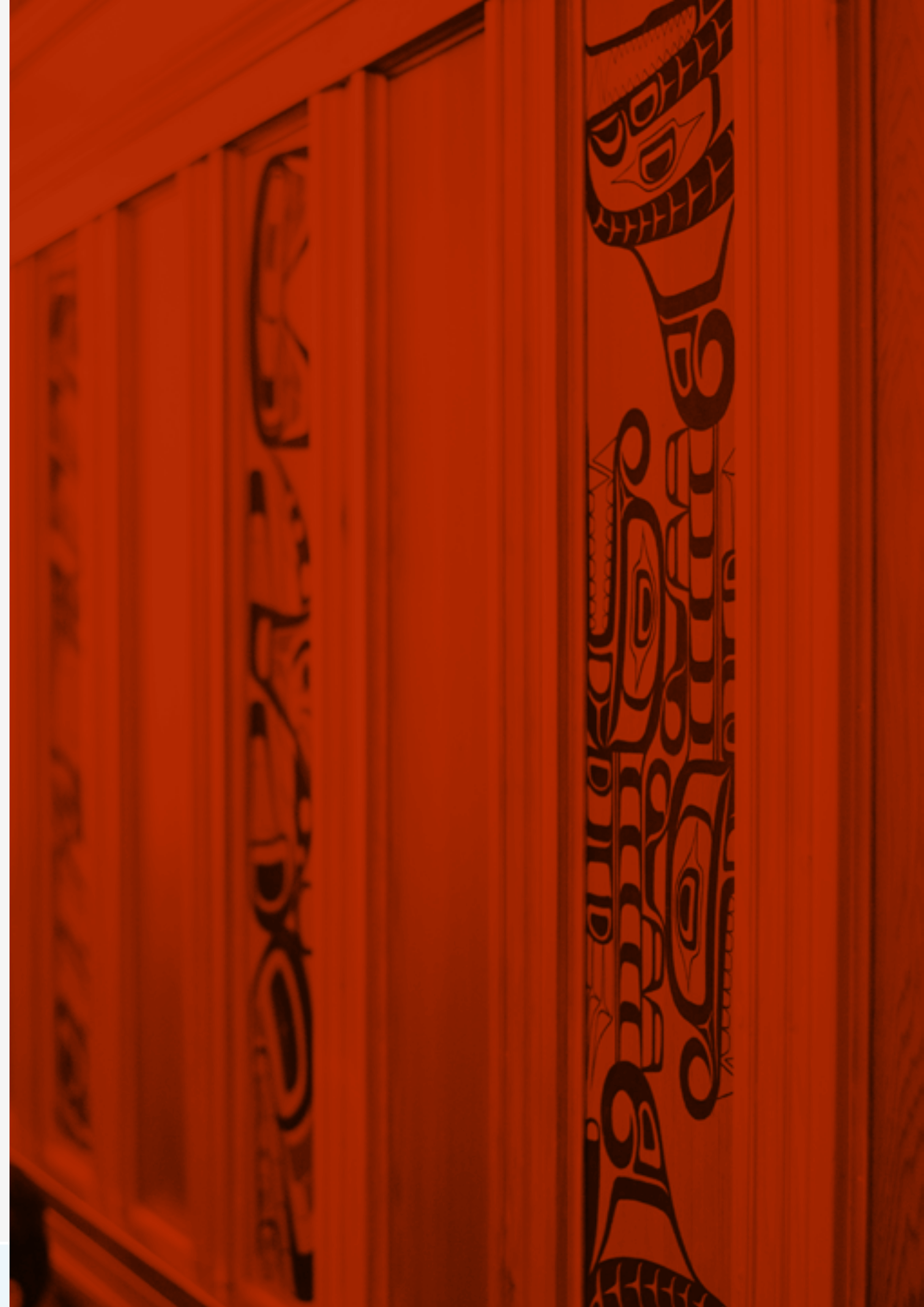
CONCLUSION

Due to the difficulty in finding data and adequate information on the exact statistics, existing policies, and specialized mental-health support for international students, this policy ask focuses on key recommendations and insists on the changes that can be made on preexisting practices in universities. It also highlights the critical aspects that result in international students needing support. On a systems level, choosing to examine the health and education systems that function as colonial and oppressive systems, which also expect international students, specifically those who identify as racialized, to play into them.

Allowing international students to play a key role in shaping their health outlook here in Canada will be beneficial, as there is clear evidence of more international students choosing to settle and becoming Permanent Residents. This ensures that Canada does not have to bear the cost of adding a demographic that requires institutionalized care for mental health, instead Canada can foster and create inclusive and intersectional communal-care frameworks in communities and universities.

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ABOUT VANCOUVER FOUNDATION

Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.



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