



Society for
Students with a
Disability



March 31, 2022

Submission to the BC Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

Re: Hate Inquiry and increase of hate incidents on the UVic Campus during the pandemic

Overview

The University of Victoria Students' Society (UVSS) is a social justice based non-profit organization, for students and run by students. We represent over 19,000 undergraduate students at the University of Victoria. In addition to providing services and events for students, we provide advocacy. The UVSS hosts five advocacy groups that serve particular constituencies: Students of Colour Collective, Gender Empowerment Centre, Students with a Disability, UVic PRIDE, and the Native Students' Union. The UVSS is run by an elected Board of Directors made up entirely of undergraduate students.

The UVSS, as student-centered and student-led organization, is committed to seeking out more information about hate incidents happening on campus, responding to these incidents and helping students as much as we can through the supports we offer as well as advocating for structural changes.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the UVSS has seen a rise in hate incidents on campus. Specifically, anti-Asian discrimination has been higher, as well as other forms of racism, transphobia and transantagonism, and ableism, according to those who have experienced these occurrences.

We urge the BCOHRC to note that we lack robust data to cite as evidence, as both reporting mechanisms and reporting bodies are not widely trusted by the general public. The data we are sharing is primarily from personal interviews and reported incidents from students and faculty. Throughout our formal surveys on equity on campus and informal outreach we consistently hear that formal reporting systems are not culturally appropriate, do not centre the survivor, have abysmal conviction rates/minimal consequences, and if reported to the police, those reporting face a threat of litigation for slander. With such barriers in reporting, it is no wonder then that people who experience hate on the basis of gender, ethnicity/race, ability or sexuality, do not seek institutional support.



Increase in hate incidents

Anti-Asian discrimination

Anti-Asian discrimination and racism have reportedly increased at UVic during the course of the pandemic. In summer and early fall of 2021, as UVic was preparing to have students return to campus and in-person learning, the UVSS designed and distributed a survey on Anti-Asian discrimination, which was a part of our anti-discrimination campaign, Shift Our Campus. The UVSS had heard from some students about their concerns in returning to campus (in some cases, returning to Canada from other countries), and we wanted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges students are facing in order to advocate for better supports.

While many members of the UVic campus community were eager to fill out this survey, having witnessed an increase of anti-Asian discrimination as a bystander, we limited our analysis to respondents who identified as Asian (including East Asian, South East Asian, and South Asian) or who could be perceived as Asian and therefore directly subject to experiencing anti-Asian discrimination and racism. The survey was open to students (undergraduate and graduate students) as well as other members of the campus community, including recently graduated alumni, staff, and faculty members.

Of the 194 respondents included in our analysis, **about one-third (32.5%) reported having experienced anti-Asian racism and discrimination since the onset of COVID**. An additional 17.5% answered that they were unsure. Only about one-quarter (26.3%) of respondents said they did not experience anti-Asian and discrimination during the pandemic so far.

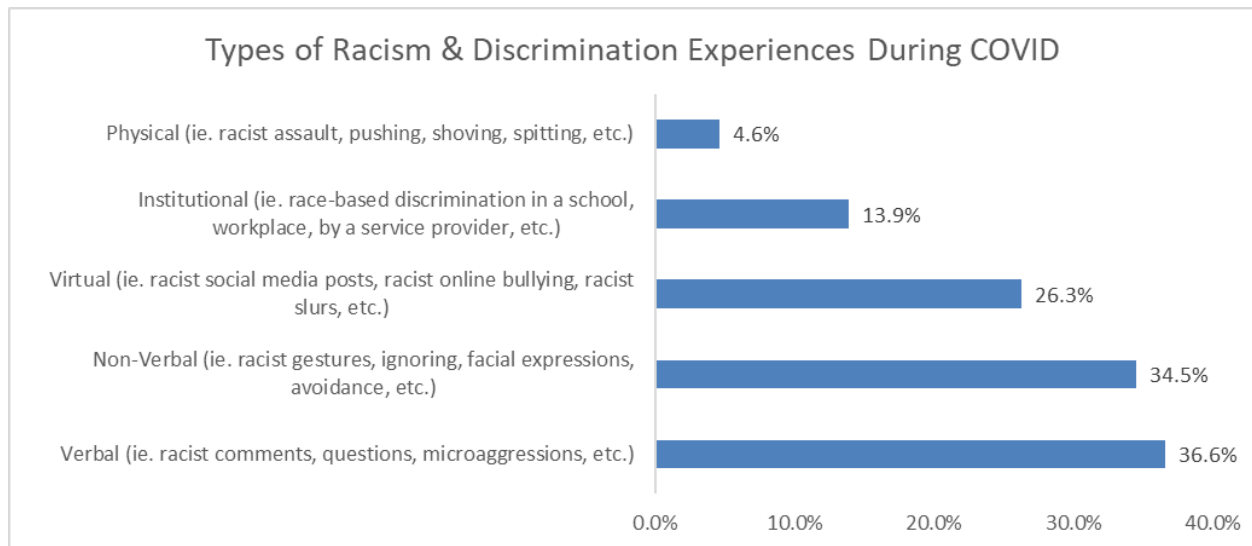
There was a higher rate of experiencing anti-Asian racism among those students who identified as East Asian. Nearly half (43%) of the 114 respondents who identified as East Asian reported experiencing anti-Asian racism and discrimination during COVID.

In terms of an increase in the anti-Asian racism since COVID, when respondents were asked to select their level of agreement with the following statement: ***"I have experienced an increase in anti-Asian racism since COVID,"*** a worrying portion of respondents indicated this was **the case**: over half of East Asian respondents agreed (24.8% Strongly Agreed, and 26.6% Agreed), and over one-third of Asian respondents in general agreed (16.5% Strongly Agreed, 23.2% Agreed).

In terms of the types of racism survey respondents reported experiencing verbal racism the most (ie. racist comments, questions, microaggressions, etc.) at 36.6%. Non-Verbal expressions of racism (ie. racist gestures, ignoring, facial expressions, avoidance, etc.) was at 34.5%. Virtual expressions of racism (ie. racist social media posts, racist online bullying, racist slurs, etc.) was



at 26%. Institutional expressions of racism (ie. race-based discrimination in a school, workplace, by a service provider, etc.) was at 14%. Physical expressions of racism (ie. racist assault, pushing, shoving, spitting, etc.) was reported at 5%. From the survey results, both non-verbal and verbal abuse that take place in physical settings are key concern for UVic students.



There was also worry expressed among many survey respondents that the University was not doing enough to combat anti-Asian racism when planning for back to campus in the fall 2021 semester. Some students also shared concerns about violent and racist incidents affecting their studies and feeling like they could not ask for extensions on work because white professors would not understand.

In regards to locations and spaces, we asked the individuals in our survey if there are certain places that they feel particularly uncomfortable in, and we found that many public locations posed a sense of risk -- some locations much more than the UVic campus. Nearly a third of respondents (31%) reported they felt uncomfortable walking down the street, 29% felt uncomfortable in crowded places, 25% felt uncomfortable on the bus or at bus stops, 16% felt uncomfortable in recreation spaces (gyms, community centers, outdoors sports & recreation spaces, yoga studios), 15% felt uncomfortable at work (coworkers, bosses, customers), 10% felt uncomfortable in their housing situations (finding housing/roommates, living with roommates, neighbors, etc), and 8% felt uncomfortable being on campus.



Other forms of racism

In September 2021, [it was reported](#) that the chair of the English department at UVic used the n-word in one of their classes. Only one student in the class called out this behavior and reported the incident, and although the professor later apologized little action was taken by the university. The student that reported the incident said they were asked what should be done about the situation, instead of the faculty and university taking responsibility and having mechanisms in place to deal with it.

Transphobia and transantagonism

Transphobia and transantagonism have become increasingly visible at UVic during the pandemic.

Students have reported encountering an increasing number of transphobic messages online, especially on platforms informally associated with UVic (but not actually managed by the University). These comments have ranged from inappropriate questions, comments undermining the validity of trans identities and experiences, to blatantly aggressive and hostile comments. University has done little to respond to the transphobia perpetuated by members of our campus community in these online spaces.

In January 2022, the transphobic sentiments became visible on campus through a series of anti-trans graffiti found throughout the UVic campus. This caused much harm to trans-students, and increased their fear of experiencing personal verbal or physical attacks. The UVSS released a statement to echo these concerns upon learning about the transphobic and transmisogynistic graffiti, and to offer support to those in our community that needed it.

We hesitate to share individual stories, out of privacy concerns for those who are already vulnerable to experiencing hate incidents. It is important to note, however, that there have also been violent physical attacks linked to transphobia that have resulted in life altering injuries. This is extremely troubling in itself, and the response from institutions ostensibly meant to assist in incidents like these has added to harm rather than offering support, according to those who have experienced it. We have heard that both campus security and municipal police have responded in a victim-blaming manner. We have heard that students feel the University resists allowing accommodations. This cements the overall feeling that University-based supports are there to protect the institution rather than supporting the student.

We have now also heard about the horrific homophobic hate incident at an off-campus party related to Vancouver Island University.



Experiences of ableism in relation to COVID-19

For parts of 2019 and all of 2020, classes, labs, lectures and tutorials were rapidly shifted to online formats. This allowed students, specifically the most vulnerable – immunocompromised, mature, and disabled students to continue their higher education without risk of COVID-19 infection, a potentially life-altering or -ending occurrence.

However, starting in the fall 2021 semester, classes were no longer required to be hosted in online formats, despite the continued and overwhelming presence of COVID-19. While some classes continued to be delivered online, this was left up to the individual professor's good will. For many students, classes were delivered solely using in-person methods, which meant that students who were sick had to choose between sacrificing their academic grades while quarantining or risking virus transmission to (potentially immunocompromised) others by attending classes.

Disabled and immunocompromised students are especially at-risk because of the lack of online education access in the best of times, much less during a global pandemic. Many students who would be safer with online access to higher education were unable to have continued online delivery of classes, lectures, tutorials, and labs come fall 2021. Moreover, the Center for Accessible Learning (CAL) only provides class recordings for those who are able to attend classes *in-person*. The failure to provide mandatory and continued access to higher education in online formats is a form of structural ableism, as disabled, mature, and immunocompromised students are disproportionately affected by viral illnesses.

UVic's lack of transparency and discontinuation of mandatory online access shows that UVic decision makers do not value students with disabilities as much as those without.

How the UVSS has responded and challenges we've faced

Based on the data we collected from our Anti-Asian Discrimination survey, our ongoing discussions with students, and support work through five identity-based advocacy groups, the UVSS has observed a rise in the frequency, visibility, and impact of hateful incidents since the pandemic. We have supported students through acts of racism and xenophobia, transphobia, and ableism. We have had to adapt our advocacy and support accordingly, and we have faced challenges to being able to effectively support students through these issues.

Systemic and institutional gaps only make responding to these already difficult occurrences more challenging. The UVSS as student-centered and student-led organization is committed to seeking out more information about hate incidents happening on campus, responding to these incidents and helping students as much as we can through the support we offer. However constantly responding to these various forms of hate takes a mental and emotional toll on our



board representatives, staff and advocacy groups. The simple fact is, we should not have to help students face these attacks because they should not be happening, but they are happening, they are real, and we must take strong action to change the systems and institutions that reinforce this hate, oppression, and violence.

Issues with reporting systems and formal adjudication bodies

In terms of responding to this increase in hate and supporting those affected, we have observed a deep mistrust of reporting systems and formal adjudication bodies. Students are unwilling to file formal complaints, whether through UVic's Equity and Human Rights Office, the on-campus Ombudsperson, and much less with local police, or the BC Human Rights Tribunal. Students have observed minimal support offered to survivors, an unwillingness of arbitration bodies to issue consequences if the incident occurred online, and a lack of transparency in the reporting process. We feel many of these mechanisms that exist in our community to report hate incidents are insufficient at supporting the needs of our community. Consequently, students prefer to speak openly about their experience in an effort to warn, educate, and offer social support to other survivors.

Due to this, the UVSS has instead opted to offer mental health support workshops, issue statements in order to document incidents and educate our community, and walk with survivors through the reporting process they feel most comfortable with.

Access4All Campaign

One example of this work, is the #Access4All campaign established and managed by the Society for Students with a Disability (SSD), a UVSS advocacy group. This campaign was started with UVic's announcement of a full return to in-person classes for fall 2021. Many students, staff and faculty uncomfortable or unable to return to full-time in-person classes for a variety of reasons. The demands of the campaign are to have hybrid access to classes, tutorials, and labs for those unable to attend in-person, that UVic overtly work with the #Access4All committee in advocating for funding from the provincial government to ensure hybrid access to course, lecture, tutorial, and lab materials in a way that professors and students feel supported, and to ensure that students who are ill or self-isolating will not have marks deducted for doing so, whether or not a medical note is provided. After #Access4All committee members tirelessly met with local MLAs, Parliamentary Secretary Dan Coulter, and UVic executive including President Kevin Hall, as well as participated in the revision and renewal of Policy AC1205 (the policy outlining academic accommodations at UVic) they did not receive any tangible or meaningful actions that address access barriers at UVic. As a result, the #Access4All campaign held a student walk out on Wednesday, February 16th 2022 and will be holding a second one on April 7th, 2022.



Recommendations

Recommendations for the University of Victoria:

- UVic needs to provide more supports to address the needs of students at higher vulnerability to hate incidents such as Asian students, Trans and Non-Binary students, and students with a disability.
- Supports such as improving the wait times to see a counselor at the Student Wellness Centre, hiring more diverse counselors, providing better hybrid learning options for students, and providing clearer information on what supports are available to students experiencing hate.
- Reporting systems needs to be overhauled to foster a sense of trust and more effectively respond to concerns, including the Equity & Human Rights Office, and the Office of the Ombudsperson
- Student serving organizations, like the UVSS, need access to better and more reliable data about the the level and nature of hate incidents that occur in our campus community. We will be unable to effectively respond, or know whether things are getting better or worse, without this data.

Recommendations for the BC Government:

- The BC government must provide greater support to post-secondary institutions so they are able to provide these resources.
 - This could look like increasing funding given to post-secondary institutions to provide better mental health and physical health services as well as increased peer support.
- Restore the mask mandate. The UVSS has heard from Asian students and students with disabilities about how mask mandates make them feel safer, and less likely to be ridiculed in public for choosing to wear a mask. The recent provincial rollback of mask mandates poses a threat to Asian students experiencing increased verbal assaults, as well as signaling to students with disabilities that their safety and wellbeing is secondary to able-bodied students.
- Ease provincial funding limits for post-secondary. Currently, there's a limit on how much money a university can borrow each year; easing those limits would allow universities better access to resources to respond to student needs
- Overhaul hate incident reporting and response bodies and mechanisms. Provincial reporting and response bodies to hate incidents, including and especially Policing organizations, face a lack of trust by the communities who are most likely to face hate incidents. If those who face incidents are discouraged to report, due to lack of trust and systemic issues, accurate data and opportunity to respond are both lacking.