

UBC Student Dialogue on Poverty Reduction in BC



A report on the issues, impacts, and proposed solutions identified by students, for students

March 2018

In partnership with:



THE UNIVERSITY
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Centre for Community
Engaged Learning
Student Development
& Services



Student Society
of UBC Vancouver



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federation of students





“The visibility of student poverty needs to be addressed and not normalized.”

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Introduction

Since October 30, 2017, the BC Government has solicited feedback from communities across BC to inform the development of a province-wide poverty reduction plan. This report responds to this request by sharing the results of the UBC Student Dialogue on Poverty Reduction in BC that occurred on March 7, 2018. The dialogue convened 30 students at the UBC Point Grey Campus. It was organized by the UBC Centre for Community Engaged Learning in partnership with the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, Raise the Rates, Check Your Head, the BC Federation of Students, and the Alma Mater Society of UBC.

The purpose of the event was to gather student perspectives on poverty through guided focus group discussions. During the dialogue, participants spoke about the issues that concern them personally, as well as those that impact their friends, families, the student body, and other communities with which they identify. Four themes emerged out of these discussions: post-secondary access, housing, employment, and access to services. This report describes these four issues in terms of their impacts on students' lives and the solutions proposed by participating students. These issues are typically exacerbated when students face oppression based on gender, race and Indigeneity, sexuality, class, disability, age, and any intersections thereof.

Methodology

The event was open to all UBC students. An invitation was shared broadly and several announcements were made weeks in advance through listservs, social media, and direct emails to campus groups and courses. Targeted promotions were made to Indigenous students, single mothers, LGBTQ2S+ students, students with disabilities, and newcomer and former refugee students. Promotions also included information on how to submit feedback directly to the BC Government for those unable to attend the event. A total of 30 students attended the dialogue. They were distributed across seven tables, with 3–5 participants at each table, as well as one designated focus group facilitator and one designated note taker. The event began with presentations from the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition and Raise the Rates, outlining the realities of poverty in BC. Next, participants were invited to engage in two focus group discussions. The first discussion focused on identifying the issues facing students and their communities. The second discussion focused on exploring solutions and targeted interventions for the identified issues. (For focus group discussion questions and guide, see [Appendix A](#).)

Demographics

Of the 30 student participants, 21 completed an optional demographic survey (the results of which are provided in [Appendix B](#)). The majority of participants identified as women, heterosexual, and either white or Asian. It is notable that Indigenous students and students of African descent are not represented in the demographics of this consultation. This gap in representation may be due, in part, to barriers to participation, such as the 2.5 hour time commitment required of participants. This gap also reflects the broader underrepresentation of Indigenous students, students of African descent, and other marginalized groups within the UBC student body. Socioeconomic status, age profile, and other descriptive statistics were not gathered.

**“There are people who should be here but
aren’t because they can’t afford to be
students.”**

Issue 1: The Cost of Education: Tuition, Students Fees & Additional Costs

Post-secondary expenses, including tuition, student fees, and additional costs, create short- and long-term financial insecurity for students. UBC students are not only obligated to pay tuition, but are also faced with fees for the Alma Mater Society (AMS), athletics and recreation, and the AMS/GSS Health and Dental Plan. Participants emphasized that such expenses are in addition to the exorbitant cost of living, including housing, food, child and dependent care, and more. Participants also indicated that on-campus housing and meal plan programs have hidden or added fees, and that textbooks remain expensive – programs like Textbook Sellback do little to mitigate student expenses. Numerous financial constraints create barriers to post-secondary education, retention, and experience. There were also concerns expressed about universities increasing international student fees in order to supplement inadequate government funding. One participant linked decreased educational funding to a shift in ideologies over the past 10 years, identifying funding cuts for many educational programs, including adult education programs and high school upgrading. These types of programs enable access to post-secondary education and allow students to complete high school prerequisites required for admission. Education provides an important path to economic security, but the realities of student debt are overwhelming students.

Impacts

- The high cost of tuition and student fees means that UBC is not an option for many; others make the choice to go to school, but have to leave part-way through their studies because of cost
- High international tuition rates contribute to poverty among international students, as well as fractures and tensions within the overall student body
- Students who do not qualify for student loans have to acquire bank loans with normal interest rates, which exacerbates the financial burden of post-secondary education
- Students living in UBC residences such as Totem Park, Orchard Commons, and Place Vanier are required to buy meal plans, which raises their cost of living while limiting their food purchasing options
- Students have to pay for numerous amenities through their student fees (e.g. the Student Clubs Benefit, Athletics and Recreation Fees, and various AMS fees) but many cannot access these programs because of work, family, and other obligations

Proposed Solutions

- Offer free post-secondary education to all students in BC
- Increase funding from the provincial government to support the operating costs of post-secondary institutions
- Create alternative fee structures for students related to the overall costs of their studies, including tuition and student fees
- Raise awareness and increase accessibility of available AMS fee subsidies
- Reduce or eliminate the difference between international and domestic student tuition
- Increase transparency at UBC regarding funding decisions and distribution
- Increase the number of needs-based grants and create more varied scholarships that are not just merit-based; simplify the process of applying for loans, grants, scholarships, and bursaries to improve accessibility
- Create loans through financial institutions with lower interest rates for students that do not qualify for student loans
- Support programs that make post-secondary education accessible to marginalized groups, including Indigenous, refugee, and new immigrant populations, e.g. the recently cut Aboriginal University Transition Program at SFU

“[We need] the possibility of a higher ed degree without crippling debt. Take away the fear [of debt]!”

Issue 2: Housing Affordability and Availability

Housing is one of the most pressing issues facing students in BC. Affordable housing is scarce, both on campus and off. At UBC, on-campus housing is not guaranteed except to first-year students, and waitlists are long. Low rental vacancy rates create conditions where students expend a great deal of time and energy looking for housing. Students who live off campus in market rental properties face housing insecurity, including the threat of eviction, renoviction, and demoviction. Some students experience homelessness during their post-secondary education. Many students are unfamiliar with their rights under the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) and the BC Human Rights Code. Participants called on the Province to not only create affordable student housing, but to solve the housing crisis more broadly. Participants reminded each other, “We’re not going to be students forever,” and expressed serious concerns about residing in Metro Vancouver for the long term.

Impacts

- Students living in poverty are often forced to choose between paying rent and continuing their studies
- Some students experience homelessness, which may look like sleeping on friends’ couches, living in cars, or camping in the University Endowment Lands
- Living on campus is unaffordable for low-income students, and rental housing close to UBC is more expensive than elsewhere in Metro Vancouver; this means many students face long commutes
- Landlords take advantage of the fact that housing is scarce; participants described landlords asking for their SIN and other personal information

Proposed Solutions

- Provide free housing to all post-secondary students in BC
- Invest in non-market housing across the province, including social housing, co-op housing, and student housing
- Fund massive investments in non-market housing through corporate and wealth taxes
- Develop a student-specific definition of housing affordability
- Take a stand against privatization, including public-private partnerships and private development on campus
- Introduce strong rental regulations aimed at improving affordability, security, and transparency for renters such as overhauling existing legislation including the RTA; introducing new regulations such as a rent freeze; and ensuring all rental regulations apply to on-campus student housing
- Take action to end homelessness by providing affordable, appropriate, and dignified housing for all homeless and precariously housed residents of BC; ensure housing is tenant-run and protected under the RTA, not “supportive” housing, which strips residents of their rights and subjects them to surveillance and control
- Work with municipal governments to put a stop to gentrification, which contributes to the loss of low-end market rental housing



Totem Park Residence at UBC

Issue 3: Employment and Wages

Participants expressed concerns over low-wage employment, precarious employment, lack of knowledge about workers' rights, and the burden of working while attending school. Many students have low-wage jobs that do not correspond to their educational or professional interests. Often these jobs are non-unionized and do not provide adequate breaks, vacation time, or benefits such as MSP coverage or extended healthcare. Participants also expressed concerns about minimum wage, indicating that the current rate of \$11.35 is much too low and the proposed increase (\$15.20 by 2021) will not keep up with inflation. One participant described working 20–30 hours per week while studying full-time; she recounted: "my professors would say things like 'we're all busy,' which covers up the different degrees of stress and responsibility that students experience; some students live at home, have tuition paid for, and can focus on their studies, while others have to work and might have other responsibilities as well, like caring for a child or elderly parent." Students expressed concerns about not being aware of their own rights and employers' obligations, sometimes leading to exploitative situations. Employment may offset some costs of post-secondary education, but it can also harm vulnerable workers who are subject to precarious working conditions but reliant on the income.

Impacts

- Students who work part-time or full-time may have to extend their degrees to complete requirements; working can impact students' grades, which can in turn affect their ability to qualify for "merit" based scholarships and programs
- Students working "non-regular" or part-time jobs are often given the least desirable shifts, such as working short-staffed shifts, late nights, or slow shifts in the food service sector where tips are vital
- International students are particularly vulnerable in the job market as a result of unfamiliarity with provincial employment standards and regulations as well as discrimination from employers, which may lead to international students being stuck in low-wage jobs that do not contribute to their professional development

“Even if you work full time, [you] cannot afford what is considered ‘affordable’ in Vancouver.”

Proposed Solutions

- Raise the minimum wage to reflect a living wage, recognizing the connection to other issues such as housing, food security, and health benefits
- Create more student-specific job and training opportunities that are relevant to students' fields of study and professional interests, such as more co-ops or paid internships
- Provide more robust education about workers' rights, especially targeting international students
- Investigate the possibility of introducing a basic income program in BC

Issue 4: Access to Services: Health, Food, Childcare, Transportation

Participants identified several areas for improvement, including health care services, food access, childcare, and transportation. Mental and physical health services fared particularly badly in terms of what is available, costs, and accessibility. Students also expressed concern over the fentanyl crisis and lack of supports for drug users. Participants described difficulties accessing nutrient-rich, affordable, safe, and culturally appropriate food on a consistent basis, as costs are prohibitive and grocery stores close to campus are particularly expensive. Charitable food options, such as food banks, offer services at inconvenient times or too infrequently; these options are also stigmatized and the food available is sometimes seen as unsafe given the age and quality of donated food. For students who are also parents, childcare can be a barrier to pursuing post-secondary education. Post-secondary class schedules rarely work with elementary school hours and single parents, in particular, are impacted by long waitlists for childcare facilities on campus. Access to transportation services is critical both for students who live within Vancouver and for those who commute to campus from other parts of the Lower Mainland. For many students, particularly international students, navigating these available resources and services is very difficult and rife with barriers.

Impacts

- UBC students are offered the lowest coverage compared to students at other BC institutions, rendering medications and medical services unaffordable
- Participants lamented issues with health services: long waitlists, the high cost of counselling, failure to meet cultural competencies, and lack of sexual assault support services
- Lack of access to childcare limits the educational opportunities for those with children, which largely affects women, who are often expected to be the primary caregiver
- Not having consistent access to nutritious food compromises mental and physical health and their ability to have active lives on campus and in their communities
- Difficulty accessing health services and other resources further compounds the effects of an overall lack of affordable housing, low-wage jobs, and cost of post-secondary education

Proposed Solutions

- Increase access to a wide range health services, reduce waitlists, and increase the affordability of medication; decriminalize narcotics
- Improve training for health care providers and frontline workers, with a focus on person-centered, trauma-informed, culturally-competent care, especially for Indigenous individuals accessing health services
- Address lack of transparency in terms of health plans offered to UBC students and increase awareness of available health benefits for students
- Increase the minimum wage and social assistance rates so that students can afford the food they need
- Lower childcare fees, increase availability, and provide more staff training in Early Childhood Education and for children with disabilities
- Increase bus service to UBC and along busy routes; offer free transit for children up to age 18; implement a subsidized transit pass for low-income individuals (in addition to the subsidized passes for seniors and people with disabilities)
- Increase funding to community organizations that serve immigrants, refugees, and individuals who face multiple barriers, such as trauma, substance dependence, mental health concerns, and homelessness

Conclusion

The UBC Student Dialogue on Poverty Reduction in BC was an important opportunity for students to lend their voices to the BC Poverty Reduction Strategy. Although post-secondary school affords graduates greater access to secure employment and fair wages, many students make significant sacrifices in order to pursue post-secondary education. They may live in precarious circumstances for years, due to unaffordable housing and inadequate income. They may not be able to access resources, such as health supports, because of high costs and oblique bureaucracies. Many students relay feeling forgotten or ignored by the institutions meant to serve them, including UBC as well as government bodies. Students feel that their feedback may be sought, but ultimately forgotten or ignored.

Strikingly, many students connected the issues they face to broader issues, beyond the Point Grey campus, including neoliberal policies that result in cuts to education and other services, visible and invisible poverty across BC, and precarious employment as a trend in the labour market. Students also highlighted how their peers may be subject to exploitation if they are not familiar with key laws, such as the BC Human Rights Code, the Residential Tenancy Act, and the Employment Standards Act. Students do not exist exclusively within the institutions in which they are enrolled; rather, they belong to diverse communities and networks, and they see their own issues as ingrained in sociopolitical and economic trends across the province, Canada, and the world.

An aerial photograph showing a vast, dense forest of evergreen trees in the foreground. In the middle ground, a small town or village is visible, nestled among the trees. The background features a body of water, likely a bay or fjord, and distant mountains under a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

“People voted for the NDP – are they going to get what they wanted?”

Appendix: Facilitator Guide

Discussion Part 1: Identifying Issues

Purpose

To surface responses to issues that participants, and the communities they are connected to, are facing. To personalize both the day to day and the immediate future in order to ground the conversation in the real and less the abstract.

Instructions

Begin with a round of introductions (gender pronouns, organization/program of study, clubs/ student groups/ communities they are a part of)

Reminder of community agreement and offer opportunity to customize for their table

Pose a guiding question to group and allow time to the group to answer. You may decide to go around in a circle so everyone has an opportunity to speak (with the option to skip). Use the guiding questions when you would like to refocus the dialogue or if you need another way to frame the question.

The moderator will signal for when to wrap up this dialogue. You will then have 10 minutes as a group to decide on 2–3 top priorities/issues from a response standpoint. You can ask the note taker for help by referring to their notes. Identify a spokesperson to share back to the full group.

Guiding Questions

Thinking about yourself and the various communities you belong to. What would you say are the most important issues? How does this affect your day to day activities?

What are your concerns about living and working in Vancouver? What would you most like to see changed?

Another way to surface the issues is to think about your life in the next 5 years. What do you think will be the biggest challenges that you will face?

Another way to approach this is to ask more specific, situational questions: Have you ever worried about paying next month's rent? What was that experience like? What barriers did you face and what helped you get through it?

Discussion Part 2: Exploring Solutions

Purpose

To have small table discussion to generate responses and solutions to the issues surfaced in part 1. Each table will be assigned a theme/issue that was raised in Part 1.

Instructions

You will likely have a new group of students, so spend a couple minutes to do brief introductions and remind students of community agreement.

Depending on you're the topic of your table, you may want to provide context for the issue to help situate themselves.

You will have 20 minutes to explore solutions– using the guiding questions below, try to keep dialogue focused.

Guiding Questions

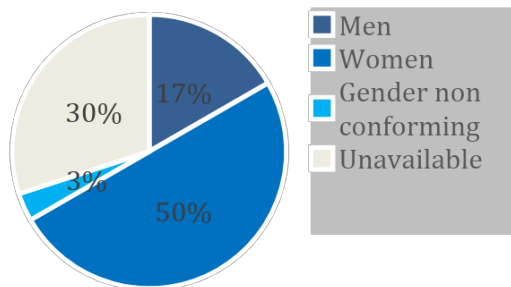
What are some things that need to be done to address this challenge or issue? Try thinking from an individual, community and societal perspective (provincial government).

What will be the most effective points to make this change?

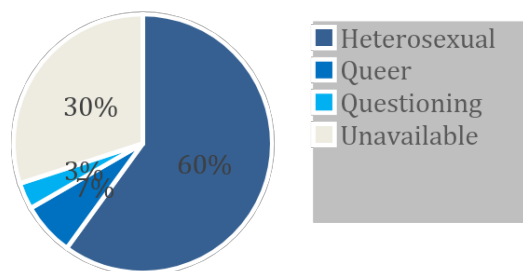
What would social and economic inclusion look like in regards to the theme you are working on?

Appendix B: Participant Demographics

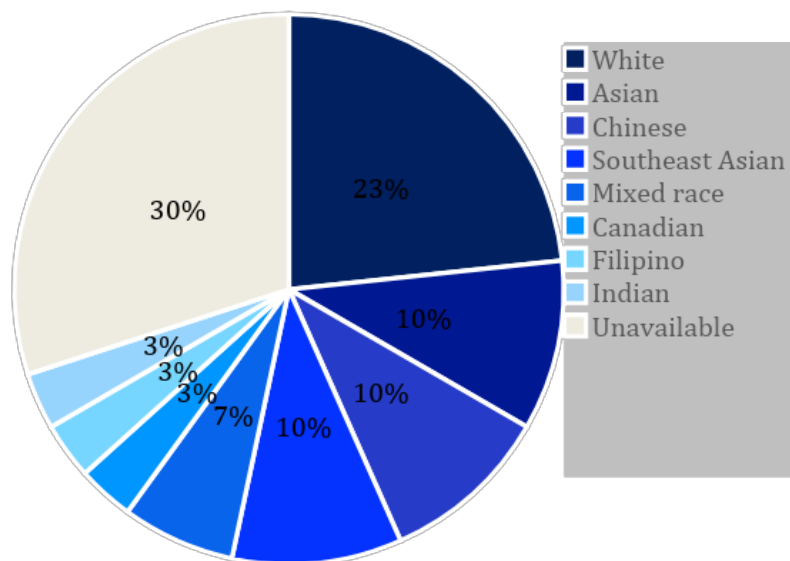
Gender



Sexual Orientation



Ethnicity



Housing

