

Final Report for CAUCE

Focused Tertiary Supports for Asian International Students in Continuing Education Programs amidst COVID-19

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Project objectives

This research project followed the objectives of the original proposal and sought to answer 2 questions:

- 1) To what extent do visibly Asian students report in-person and online experiences of racial microaggressions in continuing education programming at MacEwan University due to ongoing COVID-19 pandemic conditions?
- 2) In what ways could the current student supports at MacEwan University be enhanced to meet possibly elevated psychological distress experienced by international students, specifically visibly Asian individuals during and after COVID-19?

Summary of key literature

In the available literature, expressions of casting blame on the 'other' or identified outsiders of the visible majority, are widespread and enhanced, particularly during outbreaks of infectious diseases (Chan & Strabucchi, 2020; Gover et al., 2020; Misra et al., 2020). When COVID-19 was discovered to have originated in China, numerous verbal and physical expressions of hate, specifically against the Chinese and others of perceived Asian descent, became widespread (Choi & Kulkarni, 2020; Haynes, 2020; Misra et al., 2020; Tavernise & Opiel, 2020) even among countries renown for large immigrant demographics and multiculturalism approaches (Chan & Strabucchi, 2020; Dhanni & Franz, 2020; Srebnik, 2014).

The violence experienced among Asian and perceived Asian populations is well documented. For instance, in a national online 5-day quantitative survey conducted in the United States, over 40% of 1141 ethnically diverse residents admitted to willfully commit discriminatory action towards Asians based on COVID-19, encouraged by political rhetoric and misleading coverages in both print and social media (Dhanani & Franz, 2020; Gover et al., 2020; Litam, 2020). There were also 6 reported case studies where social media platforms contained video of recorded verbal and physical attacks against the visibly Asian, filmed and uploaded by bystanders (Gover et al., 2020).

Tragically, these behaviors were not isolated, but systematic and widespread amongst the public, increasing fears amongst the visibly Asian demographic (Chan & Strabucchi, 2020; Gover et al., 2020; Litam, 2020).

Anti-Asian sentiments were also prevalent in Canada with a rise of discriminatory incidents (Yao, 2022), yet these are primarily found in news reports as opposed to research studies. With focus on microaggressions, defined in this study as directly experiencing or witnessing negative behaviors such as "...slights, insults, invalidations, and offensive behaviors" (Litam, 2020, p. 146), we sought to investigate the experiences of international students in a Canadian post secondary environment. As these incidents are detrimental to the health and well-being of the targeted recipients (Williams, 2020), this study continues the commitment of our institution to enhancing student services to ensure a safe community for all.

Methodology

For this study, a mixed-methods experimental design was employed utilizing both surveys and focus groups for in-depth data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An email seeking voluntary participation in a 14-question Survey Monkey questionnaire was sent to the international student population at MacEwan University as a link within a monthly newsletter between the months of February and July 2022. At the beginning of the term in June and again in July, the participation of two cohorts of international students were also directly solicited. After 105 responses were received, the results were downloaded and analyzed. From the survey participants, 12 volunteers formed 2 focus groups of 6 members each. The research assistant facilitated 1 focus group in June and the second in August 2022. The 45-minute sessions were recorded with consent.

The survey asked 14 questions:

- 1) What program are you enrolled in? (open-ended)
- 2) What is your age category? (18-20, 21-23, 24-26, 27+)
- 3) Please identify your gender. (female, male, other)
- 4) What country are you from? (open-ended)
- 5) What is your ethnicity? (open-ended)
- 6) Have you personally experienced microaggressions or negative behaviours such as stares or comments because of COVID-19 during your time in Canada? (yes, not sure, no)
- 7) If you answered 'Yes', how often has this occurred? (1-2 times, 3-4 times, 5 or more times)
- 8) If you answered 'Yes', where did this occur? Check all that apply. (on campus, online, in the community)
- 9) Have you witnessed microaggressions or negative behaviours such as stares or comments because of COVID-19 during your time in Canada? (yes, not sure, no)
- 10) If you answered 'Yes', how often has this occurred? (1-2 times, 3-4 times, 5 or more times)

- 11) If you answered 'Yes', where did this occur? Check all that apply. (on campus, online, in the community)
- 12) Do you feel that this institution is supportive of their international students? (yes, not sure, no)
- 13) Are you aware of the student support services offered at this institution? (yes, not sure, no)
- 14) Would you be interested in joining a discussion group of 45 minutes to 1 hour in length to talk about any experiences of microaggressions you may have had or witnessed and to help improve this institution's experiences for international students?

The focus group involved 4 questions:

- 1) Have you ever experienced or witnessed a microaggression*, either in person or online at MacEwan University?
- 2) Have you ever experienced or witnessed a microaggression in the community?
- 3) Do you feel that MacEwan University has adequate student supports available for international students?
- 4) Do you have any suggestions on how MacEwan University could better support international students?

*The definition of this term was provided in their consent forms.

Key findings

The 105 survey participants consisted mostly of females with the majority above the age of 27, primarily from India, the Philippines, and other countries including Brazil, Chile, Japan, Mauritius, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. The international students identified studying in 1 of 12 different diploma, certificate, degree programs at the institution.

Regarding directly experiencing microaggressions in Canada, 9% stated 'yes', 17% were 'not sure', and 74% said 'no'. For those who answered 'yes', 80% stated that it happened 1-2 times, 13% experienced it 3-4 times, and 7% identified it occurring 5 or more times. These experiences primarily occurred in the community with 15% happening on campus. For indirect experiences, 10% witnessed microaggressions occurring more than once in the community, 14% were unsure, and 75% stated 'no'.

Lastly, the majority of the polled students were satisfied with the services and support provided by this post secondary institution, and most were aware of the on-campus support services available.

In the focus groups, both cohorts experienced and/or witnessed acts of microaggression: 2 students indicated direct experience with microaggression on campus and 7 in the greater community. With indirect experiences of microaggression, 2 students witnessed these acts on campus and 8 in the community. The focus group members expressed appreciation and value for the conducted research to further understand any issues that might affect their experiences on campus.

Overall, there was agreement among the participants of rude treatment based on their physical appearances. They also reported that microaggressions came mainly from Caucasians more than any other demographics via negative treatment and spoken

words. In one incident on campus, there was a declarative refusal to sharing an elevator. The participants said that while this was acceptable due to Covid-19 transmission concerns, the way it was conveyed was rude. In another incident in the community, a public bus driver refused to open the bus doors unless masks were worn, despite the relaxed restrictions not requiring such action. Lastly, a participant reported that a friend was told to return to their native country at their employment.

The pertinent information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Experiences of microaggressions (n = 105)

	n	%
Gender		
Female	78	74.29
Male	27	25.71
Other	0	0
Age		
18-20	9	8.57
21-23	12	11.43
24-26	34	32.38
27+	50	47.62
Countries of origin		
India	75	71.43
The Philippines	14	13.33
Other	16	15.24
Direct experience (DE)		
Yes	9	8.57
Unsure	18	17.14
No	78	74.29
Frequency of experience (DE)		
1-2 times	12	80.00
3-4 times	1	13.33
5+ times	1	6.67
Location (DE)		
on campus	2	13.33
online	0	0
community	13	86.67

Indirect experience (IE)		
Yes	10	10.31
Unsure	14	14.43
No	73	75.26
Frequency (IE)		
1-2 times	9	56.25
3-4 times	6	37.50
5+ times	1	6.25
Location (IE)		
On campus	2	13.33
Online	0	0
Community	15	86.67
MacEwan is supportive		
Yes	84	84.00
Unsure	13	13.00
No	3	3.00
Awareness of supports		
Yes	67	66.34
Unsure	24	23.76
No	10	9.90

Key impacts on continuing education and on the community

The findings of this study will help inform practices at MacEwan University to develop or expand programs to better serve the international student body. Specifically, the study results would be shared with Wellness and Psychological Support Services and the Office of Human Rights, Diversity and Equity. Further, the School of Continuing Education at MacEwan University currently offers a series called IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility) and is working on a series of micro-credentials entitled *Understanding Hate Crimes in Canada*. This study may lead to wider studies among other faculties to gauge their experiences. As students are members of the larger community, the education they receive not only affects their academic life, but also impacts their professional and personal development.

Limitations

There were several limitations in this study. First, the term 'visibly Asian' could be open to interpretation. Also, the students could have misunderstood the survey and/or focus group questions, impacting their responses. Focus group participants may have been subjected to the Hawthorne Effect and/or the social desirability bias, where one can alter the expression of their opinions, feeling pressures to contribute responses to

appear more reflective of their peers. There may have been some discomfort knowing that the discussion was audio recorded despite their consent and the principal researcher could experience confirmation bias, seeking to find correlation when there was little to no evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Lastly, the survey was a small one-time cross-sectional occurrence, so the results are only relevant to a current period and not generalizable to the greater population particularly as some international students were newcomers to Canada with limited interactions in their new surroundings.

Future Directions

The term 'rude' was apparent in the focus groups. In the future, a study of how various cultures define 'rudeness' could differentiate the behavior and actions of others as separate from microaggressions.

Conclusion

Although 'micro' means 'small', these aggressions, regardless of intentionality, are damaging to the targeted recipients, as well as to any witnesses. Further, anyone can be a recipient of microaggressions, depending on the social, political, and/or medical crises of the time (Williams, 2020). As such, surveys and focus groups should occur regularly to gauge experiences and to elicit suggestions with the goal of increasing student satisfaction and available services. Lastly, the onus should not be solely on the recipients of microaggressions, but rather on all parties to be aware of the impact of their behaviour, both on campus and in the greater community (Williams, 2020).

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